From Japanese Subjects to Chinese Nationals: Overseas Taiwanese and their Repatriation from South China and Southeast Asia

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Room 9, FAMES Building

Between 1937 and 1945, Japanese military and colonial authorities mobilized thousands of Taiwanese subjects—ethnic Han and aborigines—overseas to aid Japan's occupation of South China and Southeast Asia. Taiwanese men initially served as "civilian employees of the military" and later as "volunteer soldiers"; Taiwanese women were enlisted as nurses and "comfort women." Celebrated in the Japanese media as "model colonial subjects" during the Sino-Japanese and Pacific wars, the overseas Taiwanese faced severe persecution at the hands of the Allied Powers following Japan's defeat in August 1945. Although Taiwanese subjects legally reverted to "Chinese nationals" under Chinese Nationalist (KMT) rule, those stationed in South China and Southeast Asia were first detained in Allied-controlled internment camps.

Recent studies have begun to explore the post-war BC war crimes trials of Taiwanese accused as Japanese "collaborators" in torturing Allied POWs. Yet the lived-experience of Taiwanese repatriation has been largely neglected in histories of post-war Asia. This presentation focuses on the regional case studies of Hainan (the southernmost island of mainland China) and the Dutch Indies to illuminate the contentious and varied nature of Taiwanese repatriation. In addition to using Chinese-language archives in Taiwan and Fujian to examine post-war KMT policies toward the overseas Taiwanese, I also draw on transcribed Taiwanese oral histories and memoirs.

Seiji Shirane is Assistant Professor of History at the City University of New York. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University and specializes in the Japanese empire, Sino-Japanese relations, and Taiwanese history. A 2015-16 SSRC-JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Tokyo's Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, he is working on his book titled, Empire's Southern Gateway: Colonial Taiwan in Japan's Imperial Expansion into South China and Southeast Asia, 1895-1945.