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Cover illustration Takabatake Kashō, “My skin was like Jade when I left my country”; Yamauchi Hideo, young hero of the “Song of the Mounted Bandit.” Reproduced with permission of Yayoi Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

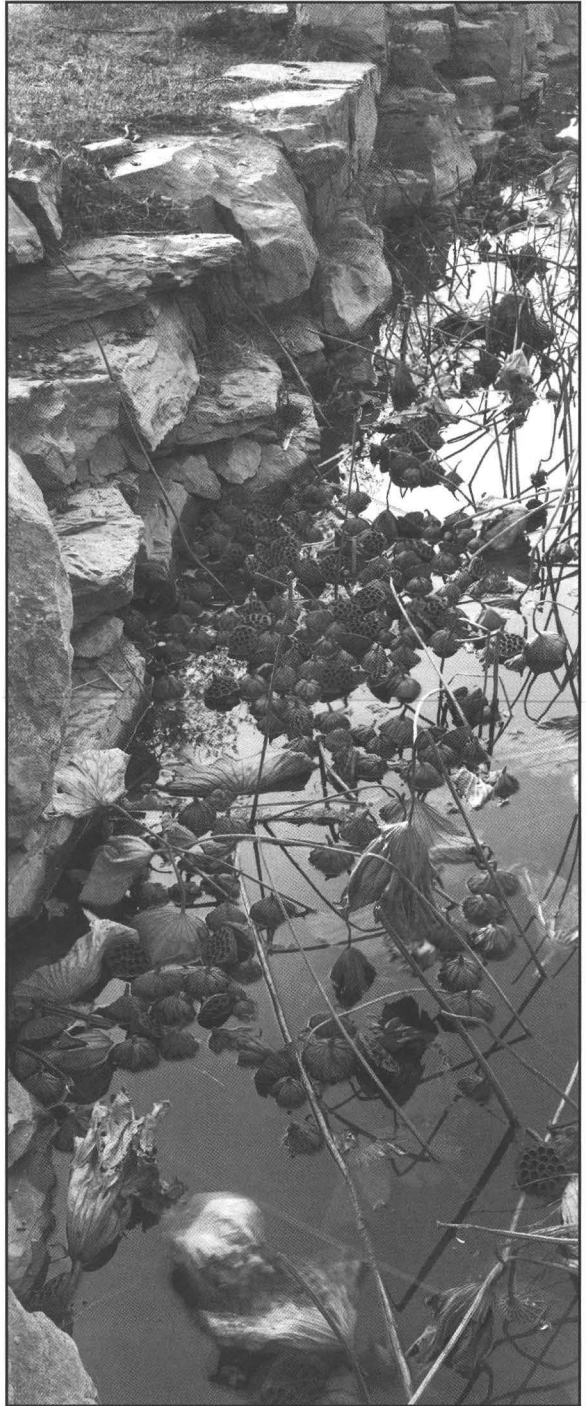
**Errata** In recent issues Yan Zhenqing’s 顏真卿 name was mistakenly given as 顏偵卿 due to a change of fonts. We apologise for this error.

In the previous issue of *East Asian History* (No.29), in the article “In Search of Smokers” by Xavier Paulès, the caption on Figure 4, page 120, should read “Occupation of the population of Cantonese adult males in 1928.”

The editor and editorial board of *East Asian History* would like to acknowledge the contribution that two colleagues have made to the creation and evolution of our journal over the years.

Professor Mark Elvin, who took up a position as Professor of Chinese History at The Australian National University in February 1990, was the inspiration behind and instigator of *East Asian History* in its present form. With his encouragement and support we redesigned *Papers on Far Eastern History* and re-launched it as *East Asian History* in 1991. Mark retired from the department in December 2005.

Helen Lo, who began work with us in September 1987, was the designer and editorial assistant of *East Asian History* from its inception until her retirement in June 2005. She was the artist behind the style of the journal and her contribution is sorely missed.



Lotus at the Garden of Perfect Brightness,  
*Lois Conner, 1998*

# RECONSTRUCTING LIFE IN THE YOUTH CORPS CAMPS OF MANCHURIA, 1938–45: RESISTANCE TO CONFORMITY

 *Ronald Suleski*

## *Introduction*

By the early 1930s, Japan was fully launched into its empire-building campaign on the Asian mainland. Having gained a foothold in southern Manchuria—the Kwantung Leased Territory (*Kantō chō* 廣東廳)—in 1905 as a result of its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, and having formalised its hold over Korea in 1910, Japan's Kwantung Army (*Katō gun* 廣東軍) occupied all of Manchuria in late 1931 and began moving into Chinese Inner Mongolia in 1933. What Japan gained in this extension of its empire was land. The region was rich in the minerals and fuels needed to build an industrial economy, in timber to support construction, and in animals providing both meat and pelts for warm winter clothing. It was also rich in the soils that could support a strong commercial agriculture, whether the crops were soybeans, kaoliang (*gaoliang* 高粱, a variety of sorghum), cotton or the opium poppy. The only way Japan could consolidate its control of this new territory and exploit its potential was by populating the region with loyal Japanese subjects.

Farmers from Japan's impoverished rural countryside were recruited by the Japanese government's Ministry of Development (*takumushō* 拓務省) to move to Manchuria and establish agricultural villages. Lured by the opportunity to acquire some of the abundant virgin land that lay waiting, beginning in the 1930s, thousands of young Japanese farming families began to move there. The civilian settlers were joined by youths from a para-military organization created in the Japanese countryside and also authorized by the Ministry that recruited teenaged farm boys, generally

For their assistance and excellent advice for improving this article, I wish to thank Jonghyun Lee, Rebecca Nedostup, Shao Dan, Yi Hyung Rang and an anonymous reader for *East Asian History*. The initial research for this article was supported by a grant from the Japan Foundation.

between the ages of 14 or 15 and 22, for three years of service in Manchuria. The organization recruiting the boys was known as the Manchuria Youth Corps (officially called the Youth Colonization Volunteer Corps for Manchuria-Mongolia, in Japanese *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun* 満蒙開拓青少年義勇軍). From its official founding in 1937 and the time its first units were sent to Manchuria in 1938 until its collapse in 1945, the Youth Corps recruited several thousand young people each year and sent them to Northeast China.

The Youth Corps had two broad goals. The first was espoused by the educator and writer Katō Kanji 加藤完治 (1884–1965). He advocated having the boys live simple lives of hard work and moral purity based



**Figure 1**

*Katō Kanji, who formulated the Youth Corps ideology, drawn by a Youth Corps member. From Ah, the Manchuria Youth Corps [Ah, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun], Tokyo: Ie no hikari kyōkai, 1973, p.15. Permission from Ie no hikari kyōkai to publish all the photographs used in this article is gratefully acknowledged*



**Figure 2**

*Lieutenant Colonel Tōmiya Kaneo, who recommended that Japanese in Manchuria be armed. From Ah, the Manchuria Youth Corps, p.16*

on the religious-nationalistic ideas he was popularizing as unique to the Japanese people and symbolic of how the Japanese were linked to their gods through service to the emperor. It was Katō who created the idea of the Youth Corps and who worked to have it deployed in Manchuria. In the empire-building fervor of the times, the idea was endorsed by the Japanese military—which supplied the second major goal of the Youth Corps, suggested by Lieutenant Colonel Tōmiya Kaneo 東宮鉄男 (1892–1937) of the Japanese Kwantung Army. Tōmiya was an advocate of arming the Japanese farmers who would populate the Manchurian frontier, and he believed the same should apply to the boys in the Youth Corps. He suggested that the boys could act as sentinels along Japan's Manchurian border with the Soviet Union by observing and reporting possible Russian activity as they labored in the fields. They would be issued with firearms and drilled.

The boys of the Youth Corps were the youngest subjects to be mobilised by the Japanese authorities as part of the expansion onto the Asian continent. They were relentlessly fed patriotic, nationalistic and religious ideas by the adults who were authority figures in their world: teachers, the cadres at the Youth Corps camps, and militant public nationalists like Katō and Tōmiya. After arriving in Manchuria, the youths experienced the stark differences between official propaganda and the reality of life in the region. Their daily lives in that new outpost of the Japanese empire were marred by conditions they had not expected to find. Being younger and less infected compromised the adult world, and being less willing to conform unquestioningly to the world the adults had created for them, they soon rebelled in overt ways against the adults who had misled them.

This article examines daily life in the Youth Corps camps in Manchuria during the 1930s and 1940s. It gives a teenager's view of what it was like to be a participant in Japan's empire-building effort in Manchuria, and it details the ways in which the boys resisted the propagandistic values imposed upon them.

### *The Youth Corps Camps in Manchuria*

It must have been with a mixture of awe and apprehension that the Youth Corps boys caught their first glimpse of the Asian mainland. Those who arrived in winter often saw for the first time large chunks of floating ice that thudded against the sides of their ships, and some startled boys thought they must be the tips of dangerous icebergs. As the ships drew closer to the mainland the hills near the Korean coast appeared, a dull, mud-brown color, lightly dusted with dry snow. Those who arrived in the summer months quickly realised that the air in Manchuria was much less humid than in Japan.



<sup>1</sup> Comments on the trip from Japan to the camps in Manchukuo can be found in Furuta Kōzō, *Kōya no seishun* [Youth in the wilderness] (Hiroshima: Ie no hikari kyōkai, 1979), pp.40–51; Kami Shoichirō, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun* [The Manchuria Youth Corps] (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1973), pp.71–3; Shinoda Jisaku, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa hōkoku* [A report on sanitary conditions at the Boli Camp of the Manchuria Youth Corps] (Keijō: Keijō teigoku daigaku tairiku bunka kenkyūkai, 1942), p.43; Morimoto Shigeru, *Ah, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun* [Ah, the Manchuria Youth Corps] (Tokyo: Ie no hikari kyōkai, 1973), p.118–22. The population statistics cited here are from Kawamura Kiyoshi, *Manshūkoku kakuken jijō* [Conditions in the prefectures of Manchukuo] (Shinkyō: Manshū jijō annai jō), 1940, pp.423 and 419 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> On the founding of the Nenjiang camp, see *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun* [The Manchuria Youth Corps] (Tokyo: Tokyo Asahi Shinbunsha, 1939), pp.38–40. The role of the Youth Corps as part of the Manchuria colonization plan is discussed in Gōda Ichidō, *Kaitakudan kaimetsu: Hokuman nōmin kyū-sai kiroku kara* [Destruction of the colonizers: accounts taken from the relief activities for North Manchurian farmers] (Sapporo: Hokkaidō Shinbunsha, 1999), pp.182–203.

Most ships carrying Youth Corps boys left the shores of western Japan at Niigata and traveled across the Sea of Japan to land at the northern Korean port of Chonchin (清津), though some ships landed at Korean ports farther south or took the longer route around Korea and landed at the City of Dairen, on the tip of the Kwantung Leased Territory. Once ashore, the boys were put aboard passenger trains for the journey to their camps in the interior of the Northeast. In contrast to the fanfare which had marked their departure from Japan, at the port cities of the Asian mainland welcoming speeches were short, and the delegations of well-wishers (if there were any at all) were much smaller. There seemed to be an air of seriousness and purposefulness which complemented the sense of adventure, and of mission, held by the boys. Their life of labor and service to the Emperor and the nation in the outlying reaches of Japan's newly expanding empire was about to begin.

Though they alighted first at one of the large cities of the region (Mukden 沈陽, Shinkyō 新京, or Harbin 哈爾濱) the stations at which the youths finally left their trains were those of medium or small sized towns, usually with a population of 30,000 or less, which had grown up as local market centers where Chinese regional administrative offices had been located. But the camps were still farther into the wilderness. At cities like Boli 勃利 (with a population of 22,931 in 1940) in Sanjiang province 三江省, or Tielin 鐵驪 (with its population of only 6,098 in 1940) in Binjiang province 濱江省, the boys were put aboard dusty buses or on the backs of open trucks for a two or three-hour ride over bumpy roads to the site of the Youth Corps camp. From the time they disembarked on the continent to the time of their arrival at the camps was easily a journey of thirteen hours or more.<sup>1</sup>

By 1941, the Youth Corps had 94 camps located throughout the region. Most of them were in north Manchuria, situated near the eastern or north-eastern borders. In 1938, the year the Youth Corps began sending units to the mainland, there were five large camps, known administratively as Large Training Centers (*daikunrenjō* 大訓練所). These had over 3,000 boys each and often had as many as 70 to 100 barracks buildings at the camp-site. The majority of boys went to one of the five major camps for their three years of service in Manchuria, so the names of the camps (Nenjiang 嫩江, Ning'an 寧安, Boli 勃利, Tielin 鐵驪 and Sunwu 孫吳—the Youth Corps boys usually pronounced the camp names in Japanese: Nonkō, Nin'an, Botsuri, Tetsuri and Songo) were well known to all Youth Corps members.<sup>2</sup> Also in 1938, two Special Training Centers were set up, one just outside the city of Harbin and the other north of Mukden near the city of Changtu 昌圖. Each developed its own special characteristics. The Harbin camp was a sprawling affair where leadership training was given to youths who wanted to become cadres for Japanese civilian colonists in the region, and it had facilities to teach skills such as vegetable and meat processing, baking, the production of *miso* paste and soy sauce, wood

working and weaving. The Changtu camp, which had originally been a Chinese army barracks, was used specifically to give military-type training to the boys. Both of the special camps also served as processing and reception centers.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of Youth Corps camps were small-sized installations, administratively called Small Training Centers (*kōkunrenjō* 小訓練所), which had between 200 and 300 boys each. Most of the small-sized camps were devoted to agricultural work, teaching the youths the rudiments of farming and raising livestock. About half were organized in imitation of the larger camps, with barracks in neat rows surrounded by fields. Boys who graduated from those camps would have to set up new agricultural villages in some other locality at the end of their period of service. Some of the small-sized camps, however, were themselves designated as the site of future agricultural villages for Japanese colonists or for graduates of the Youth Corps camps; when their period of service was completed, the boys could continue working the same fields as colonists if they desired.

A special category of small-sized Youth Corps camps was the Self-Patrolled Railway Village (*tetsudō jikeison* 鉄道自警村), operated in co-operation with the South Manchuria Railway Company. These villages were located in the countryside at critical points along the region's rail network, and as part of their duties in such camps the youths patrolled sections of the tracks to protect against possible sabotage. After three years of service they could elect to remain living in the village if they wished. There were ten Self-Patrolled Railway Villages in Manchuria in 1939, with an average of 300 boys each.<sup>4</sup>

Land for the Youth Corps camps was purchased from its Chinese owners by the Manchuria Colonization Company (*Manshū takushoku kaisha* 満州拓殖会社), a semi-official company established in 1937 to acquire Chinese land for the use of Japanese colonizers. In some cases the land was virtually expropriated by the Japanese and the Chinese peasants were forced to move off it. At other times the price paid for the land by the Japanese company was far below its market value. A result of these practices was that when the Youth Corps groups moved into an area to construct a camp, the Chinese population in the surrounding villages and on nearby land were not positively disposed to their new Japanese neighbors. In principle the boys were supposed to build the camps entirely by themselves, but in practice Chinese laborers were hired in the initial stages to construct barracks and other buildings. Chinese laborers were used less frequently after the basic camps had been set up, and the teenagers themselves undertook some of the construction work.<sup>5</sup>

Boys were usually assigned to the same camp for their entire period of service in Manchuria and also remained members of the same unit that had been formed in Japan before their departure for the continent. The pivotal unit in the Youth Corps organization was the company (*chūtai*

<sup>3</sup> On the Harbin and Changtu camps, see Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.122–3; *Man-Mō kaitaku Harubin kunrenjō*; *Manshū kaitaku seinen gi'yūtai Harubin kunrenjō yōran* [A guide to the colonists' and Youth Corps Training Center at Harbin] (n.p.: Manshū takushoku kaisha, 1940), pp.3–8; Furuta, *Kōya no seishun*, p.90. On the large training centers, see Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.128–9 and *Manshū seinen imin no kan* [A guidebook for young Manchurian colonists] (n.p.: Takumushō, 1938), pp.20–1.

<sup>4</sup> Information on the small-sized camps and on the self-patrolled railway villages can be found in Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.130–2; also see *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23. The system is also reviewed in *Shashinshū, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun* [A photo collection of the Manchuria Youth Corps] (Tokyo: Ie no hikari kyokai, 1975), pp.152–5. The self-patrolled villages did not always use that title as part of their name and were often referred to only as small training centers. Interview with former members of the Chuifen Self-Patrolled Railway Village, 20 May 1979.

<sup>5</sup> The sometimes problematic relationship between the Youth Corps and surrounding Chinese communities is explored in Ronald Suleski, "Northeast China Under Japanese Control: The Role of the Manchuria Youth Corps, 1934–1945," *Modern China* 7.3 (July 1981): 351–77. A discussion of analytical issues in the colonization movement can be found in Kevin McDowell, "Japan in Manchuria: Agricultural Emigration in the Japanese Empire, 1932–1945," *Eras* online journal (2003), retrieved 28 November 2005, from <<http://www.arts.monash.edu.au>>. Some of the early camp sites are mentioned in Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.123–4 and 128; *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23. On purchasing entire villages or commandeering Chinese labor, see Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.130–1, and the incidents mentioned in Yamada Shōji, *Kindai minshū no kiroku: Manshū imin* [A record of the people in modern times: the Manchurian colonizers] (Tokyo: Shinjinbutsu Ōraisha, 1978), p.452ff. The use of Chinese labor for doing repairs in camps is mentioned in Furuta, *Kōya no seishun*, p.132.

<sup>6</sup> During the early years of the Youth Corps, boys were often assigned to one of the larger camps for a year, then transferred to a smaller camp for the remaining two years of service; but that system was discontinued in April 1941 and boys were assigned to the same camp for all three years. In addition, the status of some camps was changed around 1941 so that there were 12 camps designated as large training centers, 36 small-sized camps and 5 special camps as of 1941, besides the 10 self-patrolled railway villages, but it appears that the original 5 major camps continued to handle the majority of boys. These administrative reorganizations are discussed, with some useful charts, in Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitakuseishōnengiyūgun*, p.122–30 and *Shashinshū, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.152–4. The use of the company as the main reference point is illustrated by comments made in *Man-Mō kaitaku Harubin kunrenjō*, p.3; *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, pp.20–1; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.41. It was also confirmed during my interview with the former Chuifen group, 20 May 1979.

中隊) with about 300 boys. Each company was commanded by an adult cadre, perhaps a former school teacher or a member of the military reservist's association in Japan, who had signed a contract to work for the Youth Corps camps and was given a regular salary. The company was subdivided into platoons (*shōtai* 小隊) with about 60 boys; platoon commanders were slightly older youths. The lowest-level group was the squad (*ban* 班) with fifteen to twenty boys. Battalions (*daitai* 大隊), formed in the major camps with perhaps 1800 boys, were largely administrative entities, and they were less important organizationally than the company. Companies were assigned as units to the camps; each company had its own name or number designation, and the barracks of each company were grouped together. The basic identification of all boys tended to be first with the camp to which they were assigned, and then with their company.<sup>6</sup>

As they stepped off the buses or jumped down from the trucks that had brought them there, the boys surveyed the camp that was to be their new home. Most of the Youth Corps camps were built on fairly flat, open ground unsheltered by trees or hills, though some had orchards or were near low, rolling hills. The camp buildings, usually of a grayish white or earth-khaki color, were grouped in neat rows off the main road and inside the camp entrance. Each camp had similar buildings: the administrative headquarters, a classroom building where perhaps the medical clinic and infirmary were also located, a cookhouse with mess hall attached, a bath house with deep tubs which could handle about twenty boys at a time, and various sheds and barns for tractors, plows, livestock and so on. Larger camps, like the Special Training Center at Harbin, had a greater number of specialised buildings such as a bakery, a small foundry and a grinding mill. The buildings at all camps were usually one or two-storey structures which hugged the ground and rarely had any special ornamentation other than a wooden signboard near the entrance with the name of the unit or the building's designation written in bold black characters.

Located somewhere on every campsite was a small shrine dedicated to the Sun Goddess (*Amaterasu-ōmikami* 天照大神), who is considered the most important of the Shinto deities. During the 1930s and 1940s, Japanese colonists built similar shrines throughout Asia whenever they founded a new community. The Shinto deities (*kami* 神) were considered symbols of the uniqueness of the Japanese race, because they belonged to the Japanese and to no other people and they represented a direct link between the Japanese and the divine. Moreover, the shrines meant that the deities would protect the Japanese in their mission of colonizing Manchuria. Youth Corps camps observed the annual ritual cycle centered on their shrine, just as did local communities in Japan, in which each shrine had its annual and/or seasonal festival (*matsuri* 祭り) complete with festive atmosphere, booths selling candies and treats, and exhibitions of martial

arts, traditional drama or calligraphy. Some units in fact enshrined a local deity brought from their home in Japan, thus reinforcing the ties between the new community and the gods, and between Manchuria and Japan. The close linking of religious and nationalistic thinking was common in Japan in the pre-war period, and the shrine at each Youth Corps camp in Manchuria was perhaps the most physical representation of that phenomenon.

Shortly after their arrival at the camp, boys would be assigned to the barracks where much of their time would be spent. The barracks were very basic, simply constructed buildings, but they provided shelter from the often severe weather of the region and, although Spartan in every respect, they were as good as the buildings the boys had known at home in Japan. The barracks were long narrow buildings of one storey with doors at each end, and were constructed upon a basic wood-beam frame with walls of pressed and dried mud bricks. The mud bricks were inexpensive to manufacture and could be made by the youths themselves, but they were in need of constant attention because of the extreme climatic conditions of the region. In the freezing winter months, for example, the mud became as hard as fired clay bricks, and they would contract just enough to allow gusts of frigid air to blow into the barracks. In the rainy season they absorbed much moisture, resulting in a dampness that could not be driven out until the hot dry season of July or August, when parts of the surface were prone to flake. Still, the walls could be made thick to guard against the Siberian winds and the mud bricks were the same as those used by Chinese peasants in the area.

The windows in the barracks, which were placed every few feet along the walls, were not very large and usually consisted of a set, one part of glass panes, the second part a frame covered with oiled paper, similar to the system of double windows common in Siberia. At one time or another all the boys must have cursed the ceilings, which never adequately served their purpose. To reduce drafts and preserve heat inside the barracks in winter, a roll of wire mesh was often strung horizontally overhead under the rafters and rolls of paper were pasted onto it. In the long winter months the paper was only moderately effective against winds and did not absorb or retain heat. It rarely seemed to stick properly, was continually peeling off in places, and was totally ineffective against rain, which would leak through the roof and quickly soak the paper. It was no fun, as many boys discovered, to wake up in the rainy season and see a sagging ceiling with drops of water falling through in several places.

All of the barracks in Manchuria used a type of heating patterned after the heated floors (*ondol* 溫突) of Korean homes or the heated sleeping platform (*kang* 炕) widely used in north and northeast China. Inside each barracks, two low platforms, about six feet in width and made of mud

<sup>7</sup> A description and comments on the Youth Corps barracks, and on problems associated with them, can be found in Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa hōkoku*, pp.48–9; Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.123–4; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.74–6; *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23; Furuta, *Kōya no seishun*, p.50; *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.44; Interview with H.K., 29 March 1979.

bricks or normal fired bricks, ran along the entire length of both walls. Under the platforms were flues and at the end of the barracks were fire pits or ovens. The heat from the flames in the fire pit circulated down the length of the platforms through the flues and was released through a chimney at the opposite end. The platforms were the sleeping and living spaces of the boys within the barracks, so the floor proper was only a narrow strip of packed earth down the center of the barracks, while most of the space in each barracks was devoted to the low platforms on which, according to Japanese and Korean custom, shoes would never be worn and one sat cross-legged.

At their very best, the heated platforms were cozy and reassuringly warm even in the depths of winter. While the air in the barracks remained comfortably cool, sitting on the warm platform, perhaps wrapped in a blanket, kept the boys adequately warm. Falling asleep against the gentle warmth of the platform was a pleasant experience, and a relatively small amount of fuel could provide enough heat for an entire barracks. The bricks which formed the floor of the platform were covered with oiled paper and then with straw mats, roughly similar to the mats or woven *tatami* mats the boys had slept on in Japan.<sup>7</sup>

### *A Life of Adventure*

<sup>8</sup> A detailed discussion of problems connected with wells is found in Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa hōkoku*, p.38; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.76; *Takuyū* [Colonist's companion], (Takazaki City: Gunma Prefecture Tetsuri takuyūkai, 1970), pp.37–8.

The routine discomforts of life in the camps were taken by the boys in their stride. After all, no one had thought life in the interior of Northeast China would be easy, and hard work and fairly primitive living conditions were expected by those who volunteered for the Youth Corps. Among the minor discomforts, the boys got accustomed to the strange-tasting water—usually the result of improperly constructed wells where surface water sometimes drained back into the well or bacteria formed on the ropes used to draw up the buckets of water. Whenever possible, metal pumps were installed and the taste of the water improved dramatically. Cadres expected that the boys would experience diarrhea or intestinal upsets until their bodies got used to the underground water in the region.<sup>8</sup>

It is almost a standing rule at many institutions that the food served by the institution's kitchen is routinely criticized and never complimented. Such was very much the case with the Youth Corps, where the boys had many negative things to say about the food which nourished them. Many of them, or course, had to adjust to an unfamiliar diet or to a limited menu that quickly became monotonous. Youths who had grown up in the southern areas of the Japanese islands, perhaps in the Kyoto-Osaka areas, and who were used to eating white rice with their meals, found it hard to adjust to rice mixed with sorghum or dried chestnuts,

although boys from the northern part of Japan were familiar with the practice of mixing other grains or cereals with rice in order to add to its bulk. The boys delighted in a mild *miso* soup, but more often than not what they were served was a sour soup into which some potatoes or various sprouts had been thrown. Some boys found the soups so unpalatable that they tried to improve on them by experimenting with wild grasses and plants which they found in the fields. The results were usually not very good—often a rather bitter soup followed by intestinal pains.

On many occasions, when the same unappetizing food could no longer be eaten in silence, the boys would remark that “This food isn’t fit for human beings!”—a phrase redolent around the world. A variant of that expression held that the food was fit only for the spirits of the dead: “The food we get is fit only for the souls of the departed. Unfortunately there are no deceased Buddhas here, only us.”<sup>9</sup>

At times, however, the food situation could be very good. Most of the boys were fond of well-prepared fish, and fish abounded in the cold, clear streams and lakes of Manchuria. An afternoon’s worth of fishing often ended with a meal of broiled, salted fish for the boys of some lucky company. Many Youth Corps camps had their own pigs which could be slaughtered for pork, as well as ducks and chickens. Game birds or wild rabbits could be hunted. Some camps had cows for milk, or sheep which could provide meat. Even better, summer was marked with an abundance of fruit and vegetables which grew easily in the fertile soil. A few camps had orchards to grow the juicy apples much appreciated in Northeast China and Korea. Most camps devoted some of their land to cabbage, asparagus, beets and green beans. In the heat of summer the area produced succulent tomatoes, watermelons and cantaloupes. Certain camps even brought in crops of grapes which were dried to produce ginseng, or raisins. Youth Corps officials tried to ensure that the main meal of the day contained 3,250 calories per boy, and the photographs taken at Youth Corps camps in the 1930s and 1940s uniformly show robust, healthy-looking youths.<sup>10</sup>

### *Rituals in Daily Life*

Days began early in the Youth Corps camps. Reveille was at 5.00 am in the summer months (slightly later in the winter, when the sun rose later) and the morning assembly was scheduled for 5.30 am. The morning assembly was the wellspring for the *esprit de corps* of the Youth Corps. With its rituals, chants and songs, it symbolised the religious nationalism of the Corps’ major founder, Katō Kanji, and it reinforced the sense of mission and national service which the boys were taught to feel. The boys and the camp cadres assembled by company, facing east toward the home

<sup>9</sup> For comments critical of the camp food, see Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitakuseishōnen giyūgun*, p.122–5; Furuta, *Kōya no seishun*, p.48; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.76.

<sup>10</sup> Positive comments about the available foods can be found in *Man-Mō kaitaku Harubin kunrenjō*, pp.13–8; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnengiyūgun*, pp.76–7; *Takuyū*, pp.96–9. The planned calories for the major meal are given in *Man-Mō kaitaku Harubin kunrenjō*, p.22.

<sup>11</sup> In spite of the reference to Manchukuo (the puppet state set up by Japan in 1931 in Northeast China) in the Youth Corps daily ritual, the Youth Corps' purpose was to build the broader Japanese empire, then referred to as Man-Mō [Manchuria and Mongolia], meaning Chinese Inner Mongolia, a purpose clearly revealed in the Japanese name of the Youth Corps, *Man-Mō kaitaku* (Manchuria-Mongolia colonization). An account of the morning assembly observed in 1942 at the Boli camp in Manchukuo is given in Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa bōkoku*, p.45. Also see Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.58–60. In spite of the importance of the morning assembly, it was sometimes cancelled so that the boys could begin their daily chores (see Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.138), and some boys complained that their cadres did not attend the morning ceremony although the boys were required to do so (see Yamada, *Kindai minshū no kiroku*, pp.475–7). On the role of Katō Kanji, see Nakamura Tsutomu, *Katō Kanji no seikai* [Katō Kanji's world] (Tokyo: Fuji Shuppan, 1984). Also see Thomas R. Havens, *Farm and Nation in Modern Japan: Agrarian Nationalism, 1870–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp.275–94.

islands and the Emperor. They bowed twice, clapped twice and bowed again, in a simple ritual which was also the basic form of Shinto worship carried out hundreds of times daily at every Shinto shrine in Japan. As the flag was raised the national anthem, *kimigayo* (君が代), was sung and then an officer of the camp read the Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo* 教育勅語), a document issued by the Meiji emperor in 1890 exhorting the people to work for the good of the state. During the 1930s and 1940s the Imperial Rescript on Education was used to reinforce the right-wing nationalism pushed by the nation's leading ideologues. It was read every morning in schools throughout Japan while the students stood to attention, silently facing a portrait of the Emperor.

After the reading, the boys followed a cadre in repeating in unison what might be called the motto of the Youth Corps, a series of five short phrases intended to be a guide for daily life. The motto was: "I resolve to do well, to be interested, to be happy, to understand clearly" (*Appare* 天晴れ, *Anaomoshiro* あな面白, *Anatanoshi* あな手伸し, *Anasayake* あな明け, *Oke* おけ). The motto was followed by the recitation of the General Orders of the Youth Corps (*Giyūtai kōryō* 義勇隊綱領), which contained the basic oath of allegiance to the nation and the Emperor. It read: "As with one heart we pledge to pursue the grand scheme of the Sun Goddess, and vow to the gods that we will dedicate ourselves to the sacred task of building Manchukuo and will follow the imperial dictates of the revered Emperor."

There followed a cheer that is still used today when veterans of the Youth Corps gather to recall old times. It is composed of the word *iyasaka* 彌榮, which could be translated as "ever-increasing prosperity" or "greater glory." The cheer in Japanese went: "*tenno beika* 天皇陛下 (revered Emperor) *Iyasaka*, *Iyasaka*, *I-ya-sa-ka*," with both hands raised above the head each time "*iyasaka*" was chanted, then slowly raised as the final "*iyasaka*" was recited in a drawn-out cheer. Another set of two bows, two claps and one bow, followed by one more bow and the formal "good morning" (*ōbayō gozaimasu* お早うございます) which was said in unison often concluded the prescribed portion of the morning assembly. Sometimes the youths would sing a few military or colonists' songs before being dismissed.

The morning assembly reinforced the values that the adult world had imposed on the boys, and it gave a rationale for why the government wanted them to be in Manchuria. Adults who saw the boys responding in unison as they had been taught were well satisfied. A team of Japanese medical researchers wrote of being impressed with the eagerness of the young fifteen-year-olds raising their cheers of "*iyasaka*" while the morning sun shone on the fresh earth and the Japanese flag high atop its pole whipped in the breeze.<sup>11</sup>

Following the early reveille and the morning assembly, breakfast was at 7.00 am, followed by the morning work period from 7.30 to 11.30 am. A long lunch break was observed from 12 noon to 3.00 pm, particularly in summer followed by the afternoon work period from 3.00 to 6.30 pm. Supper was from 6.30 to 7.50 pm and lights-out was at 9.00 pm. A brief evening assembly might be called around 8.00 pm, though the evening hours were for taking baths or writing letters home.<sup>12</sup>

By far the greatest amount of time was spent in the fields, doing the practical work of growing the crops that would eventually make each camp self-sufficient in food. Each boy was assigned about two *chōbu* 町歩 of land (about four and a half acres), which was worked from the first thaws of April to the heavy frosts of October. Other types of outdoor work included tending the livestock or fowls raised in most camps, or assisting in construction or repair work. Standing guard around the perimeters of the camp was another duty which the boys took their turn at performing (see Figure 4 overleaf). In general, the outdoor practical work in the fields easily accounted for at least eighteen and up to more than 26 hours of activity in each officially declared 36-hour, 6-day week.<sup>13</sup>

It was expected that, in addition to their practical work in the fields, the boys would also spend a number of hours each week devoted to academic study as a way of continuing their formal education. Each camp had a number of teachers assigned to it, called instructors (*shidōin* 指導員), who conducted the classes. Subjects taught included junior and senior high-school level history, geography, mathematics, social studies, Japanese language literature and calligraphy, and agricultural theory. Academic subjects accounted for almost fourteen hours per week. Most of the boys had entered the Youth Corps while in the beginning grades of junior high school (according to the pre-war educational system, at age fourteen or fifteen the boys had just graduated from lower middle school). After the war some Youth Corps veterans had difficulty finding jobs because of their low level of formal education, prompting the Japanese government in 1952 to grant the equivalent of a high school diploma to all of those who had spent a full three years in the Youth Corps.

**Figure 3**

*Youth Corps boys farming on the plains of Manchuria. From Shashinshū Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun [Photo Album, the Manchuria Youth Corps], Tokyo: Ie no hikari kyōkai, 1975, p.66*



<sup>12</sup> The typical schedule is outlined in Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa hōkoku*, pp.45–6. Also see Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.225–6; *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.95–110. Boys took their baths, in groups in the large *ofuro* tubs, two or three times per week.

<sup>13</sup> Comments on outdoor work are given in *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23; Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.134. Besides their regular work, the boys had to take turns on kitchen patrol duty which they got about once a month. See *ibid.*, p.187. Also see *Shashinshū, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.156–7.



**Figure 4**

*Standing guard in snowy Manchuria*, Photo Album, the Manchuria Youth Corps, p.102

One of the academic subjects studied was the Chinese language, which Japanese propaganda at the time insisted on calling Manchurian (*Manshūgo* 満州語). A native Chinese speaker was hired at each camp to teach the Chinese language, but as a rule the boys spent only one or two hours per week studying Chinese. They did not concentrate on grammar, but only on vocabulary and basic conversation. The short amount of time given over to Chinese language study accounts for the fact that after three years most of the youths could still speak only halting, broken Chinese, and it belies the image some Youth Corps veterans reported to me in the 1970s of regular and friendly co-operation between the Japanese and Chinese in Manchukuo. The boys spent most of their time within the camps or working in the fields in the company of their fellow Japanese.

Finally, about five hours each week were devoted to military training and physical exercise, including judo and kendo. Military training was supervised by NCOs from the Japanese Kwantung Army who were temporarily assigned to the

<sup>14</sup> Academic subjects, also including military drill and Chinese language study, are mentioned in Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.134; *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23; *Sbashinsbū, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.157. The predecessor of the Youth Corps also had its boys study Russian. See Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.12; Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.30. Comments on outdoor work are given in *Manshū seinen imin no kan*, p.23; Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.134. School teachers from Japan took jobs at the Youth Corps camps in Manchuria. See Louise Young,

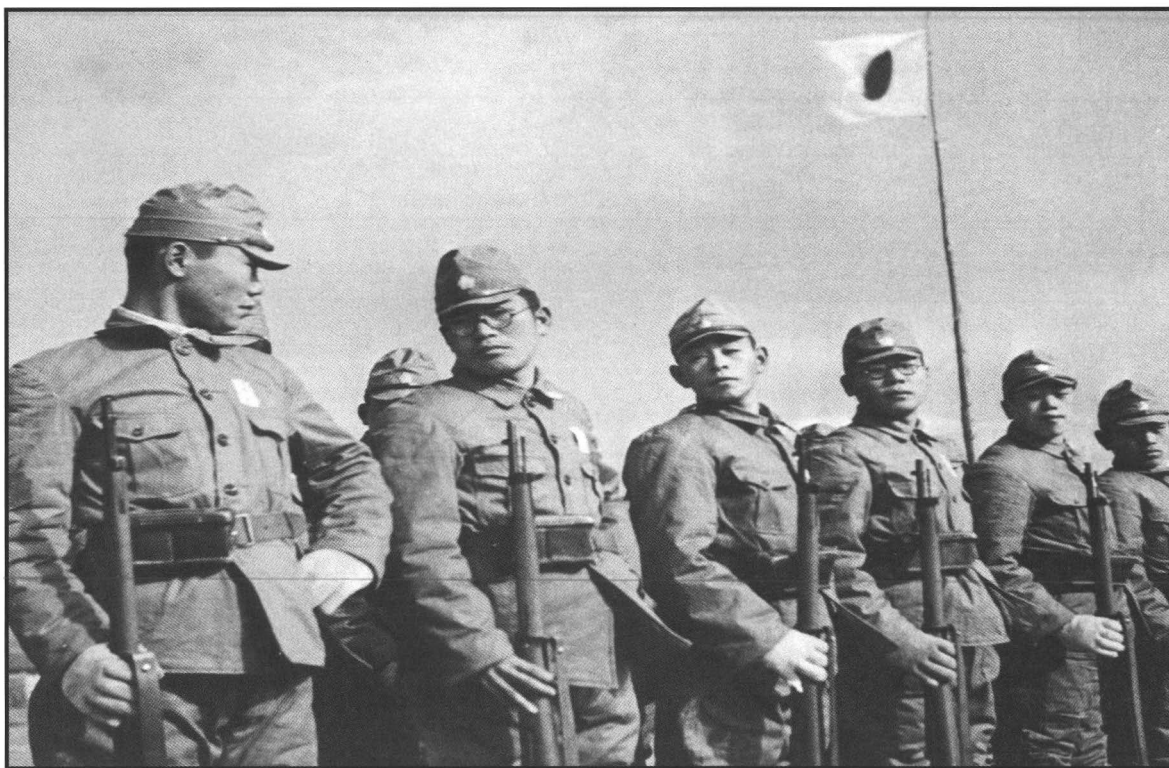
Youth Corps camps. The adults expected that most of the boys would react positively to the military training, and it appears that most of the boys were indeed interested in the marching and military drill and thought it great fun. It not only made them feel like real soldiers, but it increased their sense of adventure at being sentinels along the border with Russia.<sup>14</sup>

*/Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), p.381. Some camps had to supplement the pocket money allowance by issuing 2 yen worth of coupons per month per boy, with which they

could buy soap, towels, pens, a toothbrush and so on (at 5 sen apiece) from the camp store. See Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, p.137. Also interview with T.Y., 15 April 1979.

**Figure 5**

*Armed Youth Corps boys in military drill formation, Photo Album, the Manchuria Youth Corps, p. 77*



### *The Life of Woe*

Life in the Youth Corps camp was difficult for many of the boys. They struggled to become accustomed to the sub-zero temperatures and biting winds of the Manchurian winters, so different from their homes in the Japanese islands. Daily they longed for their faraway parents and siblings. Some boys found they could not cope with the demands of life in the camps, and many found there was no one to turn to for guidance and mature understanding in times of personal crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Sobbing quietly at night because of homesickness, not uncommon in the camps, was perhaps only to be expected from boys who found themselves far from home in an alien and demanding environment. But many youths who could not surmount their feelings of loneliness and bewilderment towards their new situation began to exhibit pathological behavior. The simplest response was to socially and emotionally withdraw from the camp by refusing to speak to the other boys or refusing to participate in

<sup>15</sup> Temperatures prevailing at the Boli and Harbin camps are discussed respectively in Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsurikunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa bōkoku*, p.51 and *Man-Mō kaitaku Harubinkunrenjō*, p.10. I am grateful to nine former members of the Chuifen Self-patrolled Railway Village, plus one member from the Boli camp, for their recollections of many aspects of camp life. Some of them felt the adjustment to differing conditions in Manchukuo had not been hard to make, yet all were quick to point out in detail the many contrasts between their homes in Niigata Prefecture and their camp in Manchukuo. Interviews, 20 May 1979. Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seisbōnen giyūgun*, pp.84-5; Morimoto, *Ab, Man-/OVER*

/Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun, pp.140, 146–7; Takuyni, pp.34–6.

<sup>16</sup> The problem of homesickness and reactions to it are discussed in Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.84–9.

<sup>17</sup> The cases are listed in Yamada, *Kindai minsbū no kiroku*, p.471–9. They may, of course, have been due to negligence rather than homesickness.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.472. See the discussion in Kami, *Man-Mō kaitakuseishōnen giyūgun*, pp.85–7. The case of Koyama is in Yamada, *Kindai minsbū no kiroku*, p.470.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp.478, 482. Comments on boys forming gangs and causing fights within the camps are found in Morimoto, *Ab. Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.165–75.

the camp's work routine. Some boys managed to facilitate such behavior by developing a mild anemia-like sickness which led camp doctors to authorize them to spend time quietly in the camp clinic or alone in the barracks during the working day. The psychological basis of the boys' loss of energy and appetite was realised when they failed to respond to treatment of any kind.<sup>16</sup>

Boys who succumbed to depression and homesickness usually lost all interest in the camp routine and participated in daily activities with a listlessness or casualness that might have been the cause of some of the accidents which took place in the camps. Several of the Youth Corps camps reported accidents involving the careless use of tractors or trucks, or inattention to firearm safety which resulted in injury. In one case a fire leapt out of control at the Harbin camp in March 1940 and burnt down a barracks.<sup>17</sup>

Some boys, unable to communicate with their friends in the camp, would walk into the flat open fields to stand staring off into the horizon. In the fields where no one could hear them some talked or yelled into the wind. Some youths grabbed wooden hoe handles and lashed out at the countryside, beating the soil in the fields or hacking at the trees planted near the camp. In one case a boy set fire to the dry grasses on the plains, then stood screaming at the flames as they spread along the ground. In September 1940, a seventeen-year-old named Koyama Zaburō 小山三郎 at the Jishan 吉山 Self-Patrolled Railway Village in Mudanjiang province 牡丹江省 asked to be discharged from the Youth Corps, and when his request was denied he set fire to an equipment shed in angry protest. The most serious case of a youth trying to destroy his environment was reported in August 1939 when a nineteen-year-old at the Nenjiang camp in Bei'an 北安 province tried to poison his comrades by arsenic in their food. He gave 203 boys food poisoning.<sup>18</sup>

Many boys were disillusioned with the environment of the Youth Corps camps into which the adult world had lured them, and they felt compelled to rebel and lash out against the adult-imposed values and routines that had been thrust upon them. Many camps experienced incidents of petty theft, cruelty, violence and even suicide. For example, a group of youths, all 21 years old, formed a ring of thieves at the Daling 大嶺 Self-Patrolled Railway Village in Mudanjiang province in 1940. They took items including blankets, overshoes and supplies of soybean cake which they sold to Chinese peasants in the neighboring village in order to earn a little pocket money. In May 1940, another group of youths, at the Harbin camp claimed they had no sinister motives when they were accused of stealing bags of wheat from the camp and selling them to Chinese peasants. Their leader, eighteen-year-old Sue Inao 須恵稲夫, explained that they needed some money to give one of their friends who was about to leave the camp a farewell party.<sup>19</sup>

The authorities had endorsed the idea that the Youth Corps camps should be organized and run just like the Japanese army, and so the camps took on the highly defined hierarchical structure that was present in the Japanese military at the time. Each camp had a number of administrative and supervisory cadres who performed duties similar to those undertaken in the headquarters of a military base. They included the camp commander and his assistant commanders, the chief administrative officer, the training officer and the health officer. Directly under them were the special instructors who were responsible for particular areas of the camp's program and provided instruction in academic subjects, agricultural methods, raising livestock and so on. Each camp had at least one doctor and nurse. These cadres were hired by the Manchuria Colonization Company and received a regular salary, half from the Company and half from the government of Manchukuo. One of the large camps with 3,000 boys might have as many as 70 cadres assigned to the headquarters.<sup>20</sup>

All of the boys were under the authority of these cadres, who played the role of disciplinarian-teacher and non-commissioned officer. The cadre with whom the youths had the most frequent contact was their company commander (*chūtaijō* 中隊長). Each company of 300 boys had its own company commander, who had two or three assistants and was responsible for supervising all aspects of the company's activities. The company commander was a male adult, not an older boy, and performed both a practical and a symbolic role as leader and guide of the unit. While the platoon or squad commanders were older boys, the company commander was a regular cadre who represented the authority of the Youth Corps when dealing with the teenagers, meaning that youths who wanted to lash out at the injustices of the adult world frequently turned on their company commander. In August 1939, for instance, about five boys at the Nenjiang camp expressed their general frustration at the hard work, the unappetizing food and the authority of their company commander by going on a rampage and breaking glass window and door panes in their barracks. When the company commander appeared on the scene and ordered them to stop, they threw stones at him, injuring him.<sup>21</sup>

In the case of an incident that occurred at the Sanjingzi 三井子 Small Training Center in Bei'an province, it appears that a bad situation involving both cadres and boys had deteriorated to a point where little could be done short of radical action to ameliorate the problems. The camp was relatively small, with only 270 boys, so the boys and the cadres were in frequent daily contact. On New Year's Day 1940, some 25 youths between the ages of seventeen and twenty attacked the cadre barracks with kendo training swords. They began by breaking the glass in the windows and beating on the walls, then they started to beat the cadres, one so severely that he was hospitalised for two months. Explaining the reasons for their actions, the boys listed 23 counts against the cadre, including charges that

<sup>20</sup> Comments on the numbers of cadres and their functions can be found in *ibid.*, p.129; *Man-mō kaitaku Harubin kurenjō*, p.6; Shinoda, *Manshū kaitaku seinen giyūtai Botsuri kunrenjō ni okeru eisei chōsa bōkoku*, p.46.

<sup>21</sup> Yamada, *Kindai minshū no kiroku*, p.472; a similar case is in *ibid.*, pp.472–3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp.475–7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp.483–4.

<sup>24</sup> See Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.85–6; Yamada, *Kindai minshū no kiroku*, p.472. A list of some of the common injuries that befell the boys is in Sakuramoto Tomio, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun* [The Manchurian Youth Corps] (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1987), pp.242–3.

he did not respond to requests for more boots and winter clothing, and that he beat youths who performed tasks poorly, such as failing to wash his clothing in the manner he desired. Perhaps what made the boys most angry was the behavior of some cadres who drank until late at night, then failed to appear at the morning assembly, even though the boys were required to assemble in the sub-zero temperatures for the daily ritual.<sup>22</sup>

With the idea that it would force the boys in their charge to excel, some cadres appear to have become excessively strict with them. Their actions—justified, no doubt, by sincerely held beliefs—proved too much for some of their charges who reacted violently. In one case, 28 youths in the Bajiazi 八家子 camp in Mudanjiang province attacked and seriously injured one of their instructors, complaining of his cruelty.<sup>23</sup>

Suicide, which sometimes occurred in the Youth Corps camps, was the final act of desperation of boys who were overwhelmed by an environment with which they could no longer cope. Problems with homesickness, a completely new environment or the pressures of living in the Youth Corps were some of the reasons leading to suicide. No study has been done on the number of suicides or attempted suicides among Youth Corps boys, so the frequency of such incidents and the reasons behind them are open to speculation. By August 1939, about one year after the Youth Corps had swung into full operation, six cases of attempted suicide had been reported. One suicide which has been recorded took place in September 1939, when a nineteen-year-old youth in the Sunwu camp killed himself with a rifle. Before his fatal act he wrote a note in his own blood accusing his company commander of putting too much pressure on him to become a model member of the Youth Corps, a pressure the boy could no longer tolerate.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Changtu Incident, May 1939*

Conduct among the boys in each Youth Corps camp was governed by the system of seniority that was then practised within the Japanese military. As mentioned above, this was the code imposed by Katō and Tōmiya and the other adults who endorsed the Youth Corps and its mission. Within the Youth Corps, seniority was based on the date each company entered its camp in Manchuria. The first company to enter each camp was the most senior unit, with the most recent arrivals being considered the most junior. Unfortunately, as was often observed in the Youth Corps camps, especially the larger camps where a number of companies each having

arrived at a different time were grouped together, the seniority system was applied according to the strictest and harshest interpretation, causing it to become a system of unreasonable privilege for the seniors and cruel bullying toward the juniors. It was the cause of many fights and other problematic behavior in the Youth Corps camps.

Junior boys in each camp were easy to spot because their uniforms were still a fresh khaki color, while those of the older youths gradually became a whitish-gray from laundering. Generally speaking, the lighter the color of the cotton uniform, the more senior the boy and his company. The seniority system became such an obsession in some camps that when a new company arrived, no one was personally interested in welcoming the new boys; instead the older boys were eager to assert their seniority over their newly arrived juniors. Some new units were greeted on their first night in camp by swaggering boys from a company which had only arrived a few months earlier who were determined to display their seniority. Younger boys were called “pebbles” (*tsubute* つぶて) by the older ones, which in context meant they could be kicked about or thrown as the older youths desired. It was expected that the junior boys would always show respect to their seniors, but some senior boys interpreted the system to mean they could exercise complete freedom over the juniors and their belongings. For example, some seniors took whatever they wanted from the junior boys, including boots, caps, overshoes and records, which they would say they were “borrowing,” though without permission from the owners of the items.<sup>25</sup>

Naturally junior boys resented those seniors who took advantage of them, and tried to minimize contact with them. The senior boys reacted by increasing their bullying and looking for fights with the juniors. The fights that sometimes developed between boys from a junior and senior unit could quickly escalate into fierce confrontations as tempers flared and insults and threats were exchanged. As soon as one boy grabbed a wooden pole or knife, the other boys would also reach for weapons, forcing the cadres to use all their powers of persuasion and authority to keep them apart. In the midst of heated arguments and actual fights, boys sometimes fired rifles at their adversaries. Injuries from such fights, especially knife wounds and serious bruises, were common.<sup>26</sup>

Since all the boys in a single company were considered basically equal according to the seniority system, rivalries usually expressed themselves as rivalries between companies. One way for a junior company to take revenge against a senior one was to beat the senior unit in an athletic competition. Athletic events and competitions were very much encouraged

<sup>25</sup> Comments on the seniority system are in Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, p.87; Morimoto, *Ab, Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.160–6. Interview with T.S., 20 May 1979.

<sup>26</sup> Descriptions of some fights, threats and bullying are given in Furuta, *Kōya no seishun*, pp.55–66. An incident at the Harbin camp in January 1940 involving a knife attack is recorded in Yamada, *Kindai minshū no kiroku*, p.475. A discussion of this problem is in *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun to Shinano kyōikukai* [The Manchuria Youth Corps and the Shinano Educational Society] (Tokyo: Ōtsuki Shoten, 2000), p.44–6.

<sup>27</sup> Apparently these were rivalries between platoons. Yamada, *Kindai minsbū no kiroku*, pp.479–80.

<sup>28</sup> A number of formerly secret police and court records from Manchukuo concerning the incident have been made public by Japanese scholars and form the basis for this reconstruction of the incident. It is covered in detail in Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.101–17 and Yamada, *Kindai minsbū no kiroku*, pp.465–70. The version given here generally follows Kami's account. It is also discussed in Sakuramoto, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.229–32.

<sup>29</sup> On the first confrontation, see Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen giyūgun*, pp.103–4.

by Youth Corps officials as part of the physical health and recreation program of the Corps, and many boys found opportunities to challenge their seniors during these events. Rather than purely recreational activities, athletic events often became arenas in which companies played out their ongoing rivalry, and some sporting events were followed by fights that resulted in injuries. In an incident in March 1940 at the Chengjisihan 成吉思汗 (Chingghis Khan) Self-Patrolled Railway Village in Xing'an East province 興安東省, twelve youths were injured in a fight which broke out during a sports event because of rivalries between various units.<sup>27</sup>

Athletic competitions were held in all the camps, fostered by the Kwantung Army officers who regularly stopped by to give physical training. Physical power and athletic ability demonstrated a type of youthful beauty that was appreciated both by the boys and by the adults supervising them. It was part of the ritual of being a male and serving the country. It might have been expected that the intense rivalry promoted by athletic competitions within the world of the seniority system would set the stage for the violent outburst of emotions that took place in the Changtu Incident of May 1939. This incident, which was sparked by an athletic contest and ended in several deaths, resulted in a trial. At the trial the boys showed that they were rebelling against the world of adult values that had been forced on them, by trying to protect their friends within the camp. The incident took place at the Changtu Special Training Camp, a camp of about 3,000 boys that was also used as a reception center. Behind all the violence was the intense rivalry between two companies in particular, the senior 22nd Company (which had arrived at the camp in 1938) and the junior 11th Company (which had arrived a year later, in 1939). Their mutual antagonism came to a head because of an athletic competition held on the 5 May 1939 to mark the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival (*duanwujie* 端午節).<sup>28</sup>

As the day-long competition was nearing its completion, the senior 22nd Company was ahead in points—until the final relay race run by cadres of each company, which resulted in a victory for the junior 11th Company and placed them a few points ahead of the senior unit. The junior unit claimed victory and received the victor's pennant. After the ceremonies were over, however, the adult officer in charge of training decided that the points won by the cadres in the final relay race should not be counted as part of the total score, meaning that the senior 22nd Company should be recognized as the winner of the competition. The following day a number of youths from the senior unit visited the barracks of the junior unit to ask for the victor's flag; the junior boys claimed they had won the flag fairly and refused to hand it over. The situation escalated into a major confrontation.<sup>29</sup>

A group from the senior unit decided they would capture the flag and take it into their barracks, so around 9.00 pm that evening (6 May), armed with wooden training swords and knives, they began their attack on the

barracks of the 11th Company by throwing stones and bricks through the windows and at the walls of the building. The boys of the junior company also grabbed wooden training swords and knives and launched a counter-attack. As the juniors emerged yelling from their barracks, hurling stones at their attackers, the outnumbered seniors began a retreat, pursued by the junior boys. Cadres of both companies managed to stop the fighting only after the seniors had withdrawn into their barracks.

When news of the raid and the counter-attack reached the camp commander and administrative cadres, their remarks—which the junior boys soon learned of—tended to favor the senior 22nd Company which had been declared the winner by the final decision. Angered by what they felt to be favoritism on the part of the camp commander towards the 22nd Company simply because it was the senior unit, 150 junior boys besieged his office the following morning (7 May) asking that a fair decision be made. By that time, boys on both sides of the dispute were prepared to continue the argument by whatever means necessary. Some junior boys were threatened by a group of seniors yelling, “You won the first round, but we’re going to even up the score.”<sup>30</sup>

The junior boys decided to take the matter into their own hands by making a raid on the senior boys’ barracks to show the seniors that they could no longer bully boys in the junior unit. That evening (7 May) a number of boys from the junior 11th Company, saying they were going on guard duty, withdrew a number of rounds of live ammunition from the camp armory. The following morning (8 May) the boys awoke at 4.00 am to prepare for their raid. The attackers, 170 boys from the junior company, armed themselves with wooden training swords, bayonets and rifles, and divided themselves into two units to silently surround the barracks of the 22nd Company.

A rifle shot signaled the beginning of the raid, and the boys rushed towards the senior unit’s barracks throwing rocks and bricks at the walls and through the windows, while stalks of kaoliang that had been placed near the western entrance to the barracks were doused with gasoline and set alight.<sup>31</sup> The boys of the 22nd Company awoke in a confused panic amid the sounds of yelling, rifle shots and the breaking of glass. Realising what was happening, a company cadre opened a window and began shouting at the junior boys to stop their attack. He could hardly make himself heard over the clamor and yelling outside; then a bullet whizzed by a few inches above his head. As soon as he pulled away from the window and turned around, one of the senior youths came running to report that two other seniors, seventeen-year-old Washimi Sadao 鷺見定雄 and seventeen-year-old Fuwa Genkichi 不波源吉 had died from bullet wounds to the head. Hearing the report, then turning to see flames leaping up the western side of the barracks, the cadre saw that the situation was already out of hand and the lives of his boys were in danger. He told his squad

<sup>30</sup> Loosely translated from the account in *ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>31</sup> The attack is vividly described in *ibid.*, pp.106–8. Also see Yamada, *Kindai minshū no kiroku*, pp.469–70.



<sup>32</sup> Details on the charges filed, taken from official records, are given in Kami, *Man-Mō kaitaku seishōnen gi'yūgun*, pp.109–10, 116.

commanders to give the order that those boys who had ammunition were authorized to return the rifle fire.

Several boys in the 22nd Company ran to the shattered windows and began to fire at their attackers. The first to be hit, some of the junior boys who had set the stalks of kaoliang on fire, were wounded in the arms and thighs. Two others, who were carrying more stalks to add to the fire, received serious wounds. One was shot in the chest and died instantly. The second boy, sixteen-year-old Oka Ichimin 岡一民, was wounded in the right arm and abdomen. He fell to the ground screaming and was taken away for medical treatment. The arm wound was treated easily enough, but the injuries to the intestinal area were more serious, and the emergency operation Oka underwent could not save his life. He died shortly after 9.00 am that morning.

On hearing the screams and gunfire, cadres from the camp headquarters and the commanders of both companies began running among the junior boys yelling at them to stop their attack. Somewhat frightened by the nonsense tone of the angry cadres, the boys of the 11th Company began handing over their weapons and obeyed an order to return to their barracks to await further instructions. The dead and wounded were carried to the camp medical clinic, and by the time the confrontation had ended it was still not quite 5.00 am. The raid had lasted 55 minutes.

The camp cadres, fearing that fighting might break out again once the boys learned the extent of their comrade's injuries, made a call for help to the Japanese military authorities in the area, and that morning at around 9.30 am, just after Oka died, a detachment of over 70 men from the Manchukuo Army (probably Chinese enlisted men under the command of Japanese officers) arrived at the camp and deployed their machine guns near both the junior and senior boys' barracks. A number of Japanese military police officers also arrived.

Interrogation of the boys about the incident started that afternoon under the direction of the military police. Over 200 boys were questioned, and of that number 125 were taken into custody. When indictments were handed down, 37 boys—seventeen of them from the junior 11th Company—were ordered to stand trial. The charges brought against them were all serious: rioting, arson, murder and causing grievous bodily harm.<sup>32</sup>

The trial began in September 1939 and lasted two months. After it had been going for over a month, Katō Kanji himself decided to attend, saying he would act as a defense witness for the accused youths. In fact, he was working to reassert the values he had espoused for the Youth Corps, the values of childlike innocence and acceptance of adult authority for the sake of building the empire. Those values had been openly challenged by the boys' actions. Everyone must have known from the start that Katō's courtroom presence would be dramatic. Alternately speaking in a stern, clear voice and almost breaking into open sobs, he presented his views

of the incident. "Of course," he noted, "there are many inadequacies in the camps here in Manchukuo, and because we have not been able to overcome them, an incident of this sort was able to erupt." Speaking as if inspired, and bringing a complete silence to the courtroom, Katō said the boys on trial were his students and were trying sincerely to follow his teachings. "If they are found guilty," he told the hushed courtroom, "then I ask that you punish me instead."<sup>33</sup>

Katō's stunning performance brought tears to the eyes of the boys and the lawyers, and touched off the scene that brought the trial proceedings to a close. One of the boys on trial rose to speak and said, "I was to blame for this incident, and I request full punishment for the crime." Quickly a second boy rose and said, "That's not so. I'm the one responsible. Give me the death sentence but let the others go, and help them." He was followed by another boy and then another, until all of the accused boys had claimed full responsibility for the incident, requested the death penalty for themselves, and asked that the other boys be set free. The adults in the courtroom felt that the youths were expressing the values of self-sacrifice for the greater good that they and Katō had been teaching; but it is equally likely that they were rising in order to protect their friends in the camp from adult retribution. The boys had no power in the face of adult authority, but this form of resistance towards adult manipulation proved very effective.

The entire courtroom was moved by the scene, and it surely affected the final disposition of the case. Of the 37 boys indicted, 32 were found not guilty as charged and those found guilty received lighter sentences than originally anticipated. The sentences ranged from four months to three years in prison. But a quiet campaign on behalf of the boys undertaken by some government officials in Tokyo successfully had the sentences commuted, so that by the end of the year all the boys had been released from prison and reassigned to other Youth Corps camps in Manchuria.<sup>34</sup>

## *Conclusion*

The boys of the Manchuria Youth Corps were among the youngest members of the Japanese population to be mobilised during the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly they were the youngest to be officially sent to an outpost of the empire and to live a military, regimented life there. Much of the ideological underpinning of the existence of the Corps was provided by Katō Kanji, the nationalistic writer whose influence was probably at its peak in the 1930s. His teachings, stressing the idea of a simple, honest life of rural labor performed in service to the Emperor and the nation, provided a religious-nationalistic rationale for mobilising the boys and sending them to live along the newest borders of the empire. His funda-

<sup>33</sup> Katō went to the trial accompanied by the head of the Manchuria Colonization Company. The quotes here are paraphrases taken from the account in *ibid.*, p.110–12, which also mentions some other useful sources for studying the trial.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, pp.112–4. Kami makes the point that the accused boys were never reintegrated into the Youth Corps organization, but were shunted between camps until their period of service was finished. Many then joined the Japanese army. This is not an unusual way for institutions to deal with problem members, but it could also show that the authorities realised the boys had acted in court to protect each other and therefore, not wishing them to foment a similar action at another camp, kept transferring them between camps.

mentalist nationalism, which he said had been blessed by the Shinto *kami*, struck just the right chord of jingoism in 1930s Japan, a country dominated by a military establishment not subject to control by civilian leaders and intent on continental expansion. For the boys, Katō was like a teacher, a representative of the adult world who told them of the adventures to be had in Manchuria and the joys of serving in a great cause. The records available to us indicate that none of the boys in the rural villages ever heard a dissenting adult view of this positive picture.

In the Youth Corps camps, Katō's form of patriotism was expressed through the morning assembly, with its combination of group singing and Boy Scout-like pledges of commitment and loyalty that opened each day. It was illustrated also in the Shinto shrines erected at each camp, set up just as they were in the villages back home, where sedate ceremonies marked the national and religious cycle of holidays. Although after the war Katō admitted girls into his training programs, his pre-war and wartime efforts were devoted to training boys. Within each camp, the boys lived in an all-male, hierarchically structured community. Their behavior was like that of groups of boys anywhere, and included hazing, bullying, establishing social ranking, group pranks, physical threats and occasional fights.

On the one hand, the youthful energy and enthusiasm of the boys allowed them to take in their stride some of the discomforts and difficulties of life in the camps. Their grumbling about the food and the often uncomfortable barracks was usually good-natured, and such problems were accepted as part of the adventure of living in the Youth Corps. Most of the boys enjoyed military drill, carrying rifles, and the feeling—promoted by Tōmiya Kaneo—that they were acting as sentinels helping to protect the border with the Soviet Union. Tōmiya's position as a military officer, plus the authorization of the Youth Corps by the government's Ministry of Development, made the boys feel they were playing an official role in creating Japan's new empire.

On the other hand, because the boys were young, some aspects of their adventure were harder for them to deal with. Homesickness, for example, was especially difficult for many of them. They had left home with little exposure to the world beyond their villages, never having been separated from their families. Once abroad, they knew they would not be able to see their families again until the end of their three years service. What began as simple homesickness sometimes turned into very problematic outbursts that could endanger both the boys and their camps. The seniority system, which was strong in Japanese society to begin with and was treated almost as a sacred practice within the Japanese military at the time, promoted hazing that easily expanded into outright physical attacks in the Youth Corps camps of

Manchuria. Bullying of one sort or another was probably the most common form of abuse and was found in all of the camps.

The pressures that were brought to bear on the Youth Corps boys in their daily lives boiled over in the Changtu Incident of May 1939 and the subsequent trial. The intense bonding between friends and fellow company members was placed in a context in which an athletic competition took on an overwhelming significance, and the pervasive sense of hierarchical ranking pitted the two companies against each other. The crucial roles of the adult camp commander and the older authority figures supervising all aspects of camp life seen at every step of the incident: from the importance accorded of boys to rumors that the camp commander favored one group over the other (which was the piece of news that precipitated the attack), to the final dispersal of the attacking units by cadres issuing orders to desist.

At the trial, the youths defended each other in what appears to be a struggle between them and the adults who were manipulating them. One by one the leaders of the incident rose to ask that their friends be released so that they themselves could take responsibility. But Katō was also present at the trial. He had to be, since the very ideas he was espousing were under serious strain, being challenged by the boys who had experienced injustices as a result of his system of values. The appearance of the great man himself tempered the anger of the other adults present, especially the judges, and allowed them to act with leniency toward the boys. While the youths at the trial were only trying to protect their friends, Katō was defending them in order to affirm the values of his ideology. His form of nationalistic evangelism helped to turn the trial from issues of unit discipline to a patriotic, teary-eyed emotion. The judges were able to deal with the incident in a way that allowed both the Youth Corps program and its role in the empire-building campaign to continue. The judgments meted out to the boys were not harsh and were suspended relatively quickly. The trial was soon forgotten.

Over 86,000 Japanese farm boys spent their teenage years in the Youth Corps camps of Manchuria in the years between 1938 and 1945, surrounded by their comrades on the windswept plains. For the majority, their role as colonizers ended in 1945 with the defeat of Japan. Those who survived the chaotic autumn of 1945 and avoided being taken prisoner by the advancing Soviet tank units, joined the other Japanese stragglers heading toward southern Manchuria for the sea voyage back to Japan

When former members of the first began to speak about their experiences after the war, it was to mourn departed comrades, to recall the adventures of their youth and to reaffirm for themselves, and for their children and grandchildren, the value of what they had tried to do in Manchuria. I attended some of their reunions in the late 1970s and early

1980s. I saw them singing old songs and, after an afternoon of drinking sake and talking about the past, sobbingly recall those who had perished. Beginning in the late 1970s, Japanese scholars were uncovering old military police and medical reports that revealed the other side of life in the camps, the side of disruptive behavior and worrisome incidents. The interviews I conducted in 1979 with former Youth Corps members showed this situation clearly; they were anxious to convince me of the value of what they had tried to do in Manchuria, though some also acknowledged that daily reality was not the same as the officially sanctioned picture and they told me about troubling episodes. Since that time, the Japanese scholars and educators who have examined the Youth Corps phenomenon have been open to seeing it as an abusive movement that militarized young farm boys—in some cases the rifles they were issued were taller than they were—to be part of Japan's imperialistic land-grab on the Asian mainland. One can now find Japanese-language publications portraying the Youth Corps as an exploitative campaign launched by adults in the government and the military to manipulate young males from farming villages.

The role of these teenagers as participants in Japan's policies to create its empire on the Asian continent has generally been ignored by Japanese scholars, and very little English-language literature is available on the subject. The boys of the Youth Corps were forced into their role by the world of adult authority, and the adults demanded conformity to the generally accepted values of their society at that time. The adults expected that the boys would be passive or willing recipients of the ideas given to them. The youths were not victims; they were resisters who struggled against what they perceived as their unfair circumstances. When faced with the confusing situation they found in Manchuria—confusing because the realities of daily life were so different from what they had been led to expect by the nationalistic propaganda then suffusing the media—the boys rebelled against the adult-imposed values in whatever ways they could. In order to rebel, they called upon inner strength that they, perhaps, did not realise they possessed. Often this strength was generated through their bonds with their Youth Corps fellows. As this paper argues, their expressions of frustration and opposition to the situation forced on them by adults was a pervasive feature of daily life in the Youth Corps camps of Manchuria.

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