

Guns and Grass: The Militarization of Fuji's Common Lands

Presentation delivered at IASC annual meeting, June 2013

Andrew Bernstein
Associate Professor of History
Lewis and Clark College

***DRAFT: NOT FOR CITATION**

Many think of Fuji as a picturesque and peaceful symbol of Japan, and yet the U.S. and Japanese militaries currently use thousands of hectares of its lower slopes for training grounds and target ranges. In this presentation I will explain how the militarization of Fuji took shape in the years leading up to World War II and in the Cold War that immediately followed. On one level, this is a familiar story of those with more power imposing their will on those with less. But while Fuji was drafted to serve the nation—and after World War II, the U.S.-led battle against communism—people living at the base of the volcano also worked to incorporate the Japanese and then U.S. militaries into an ecosystem shaped by traditional common land practices. By highlighting the agency of those who asserted their common land rights, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about the ways in which militarized landscapes are fashioned not only by the goals of military and bureaucratic elites but also by the needs and desires of those who live in or nearby them.

The barracks, training grounds, and target ranges now used by the Japanese and U.S. militaries at the base of Mt. Fuji are grouped into two sites, the North Fuji Maneuver Area and the East Fuji Maneuver Area. Conveniently located only a couple hours' drive

from Tokyo, they consist in large part of grasslands that, together with the adjoining woodlands, offer a terrain well suited for military training.

These grasslands would not exist were it not for centuries-old land use patterns that developed in response to the area's geological limits. Because the porous volcanic material comprising Fuji's northern and eastern slopes retains little to no water, much of the area is unsuitable for cultivation. So for hundreds of years locals used the land communally for a variety of other purposes. From the woodlands they gathered fuel, construction materials, and edible nuts and plants. They also burned the grasslands each spring to maintain them *as* grasslands,¹ which they did in part to provide material for thatched roofs and to stimulate the growth of edible herbs. The grasslands' most important function, however, was to provide hay for horses.² Raising horses was central to the economy of the area during the rule of the Tokugawa shogunate from 1600 to 1868 and continued to be an economic mainstay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when locals rented the horses to pull horse-drawn rail carriages in addition to using them for agricultural work.³

During the Tokugawa period, access to the commons at Fuji and elsewhere in Japan was determined by locally negotiated common land use rights, in Japanese known as "iriai" rights. But while the shogunate recognized them to be legally binding, these rights were thrown into question in the decade following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when rebellious young samurai ousted Japan's last shogun from power in the name of

¹ Butchōji Gorō, *Fuji ni tatsu hito: iriai tōsō, Takamura Fujiyoshi no han seki* (Sakurashi, Chiba: Chōkōsha Shuppan, 2000), 8-9.

² Ibid.

³ Fujiyoshida Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Fujiyoshida shishi*, vol. 3 (Fujiyoshidashi: Fujiyoshidashi, 1999), 332-341.

restoring the prestige of the imperial household. The new regime worked to build an emperor-centered nation-state that could stave off and eventually compete with the Western powers, and that meant instituting a host of reforms to modernize the country. One of the government's first orders of business was to implement reforms concerning the taxation and registration of land, the aim being a market-based system of land ownership and exchange that generated predictable tax revenues for the state. In the process, the government made it difficult for communities to register their iriai lands as lands *owned* and not just *used* in common. Officials also chose to register as state property those common lands for which adequate documentation of iriai rights was unavailable. Of course, it was the government that determined what documentation was adequate or not, so in the 1870s, vast tracts of iriai land ended up falling into the hands of the state.⁴

While the Meiji government made it difficult for communities to establish common ownership of iriai lands, it nevertheless recognized their customary entry into and use of them. In fact, the Meiji Civil Code (1898) explicitly stated that iriai rights had legal standing and could function "according to local custom," meaning that groups of traditional iriai rights-holders could continue to access their commons regardless of who owned them.⁵ Not surprisingly, trying to implement modern property rights while retaining customary use rights created situations ripe for conflict, and in fact, the government worked to undermine the iriai rights it claimed to respect. In 1916 Japan's Supreme Court dealt an especially significant blow to iriai groups who claimed usufruct

⁴ Margaret McKean, "Defining and Dividing Property Rights in the Japanese Commons" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, Winnipeg, Canada, September 1991), 14-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

on state lands, ruling that any common lands the early Meiji government had registered as state property no longer had iriai rights attached to them.⁶ But as we shall see, if iriai groups put up enough of a fight, or if iriai practices on land registered as state property did not interfere with state goals, officials tried to reach some kind of accommodation—all the while claiming they were not formally recognizing iriai rights as *rights*, but simply showing respect for iriai *customs*.

Holders of iriai rights near Fuji were zealous in controlling access to their commons, as Japan's military discovered when it began entrenching itself in the region early in the twentieth century. During the 1890s the army trained occasionally in what is now the East Fuji Maneuver Area, but when it sought to build its first permanent barracks in 1908, it encountered stiff resistance from local residents, many of whom not only possessed iriai rights but ownership rights as well.⁷ They were won over only after the army promised them the right to collect 1) artillery shells, which could be sold for scrap metal; and 2) the manure produced by army horses, which could be used for fertilizer.⁸ In 1909 villagers also signed a contract with the army stipulating that military exercises would not hinder climbers from accessing Fuji during the summer months and that soldiers would keep out of cultivated fields and avoid damaging stands of trees.⁹ Despite taking precautions, it was impossible to keep artillery fire from inflicting a certain amount of damage on trees and fields, so in 1912 the army signed a 10-year contract with local village officials, property owners, and iriai rights-holders to pay compensation for

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Gotenba Shishi Hensan Iinkai, ed., *Gotenba shishi*, vol. 9 (Gotenbashi: Gotenbashi, 1983), 143-145.

⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁹ Ibid.

harm done to land in the area, whether public or private.¹⁰ By doing so, the army in effect purchased its own, limited form of iriai rights, making it a fellow although technically temporary stakeholder in the common lands.

Of course, it was not just any iriai rights-holder; this was the army, after all. But at no point could it simply ignore the wishes of iriai groups—even in the run up to World War II, when the military was at its most powerful. From the nineteen-teens on, the army tried to buy as much privately held land as possible in the East Fuji Maneuver Area, but while locals were happy to rent iriai access to the military, they did not want to part with ownership rights, and they commanded a high price for the parcels they were willing to sell.¹¹ Looking to find more space to test new equipment, the army therefore set its sights on what is now the North Fuji Maneuver Area, much of which was under the management of the Onshirin Kumiai, an association representing the iriai rights-holders of eleven nearby villages. When the army approached the association in 1936 to purchase access to the commons, its members resisted. In response, the military police barged into the homes of association leaders, threatening to send young men conscripted from their villages to the most dangerous front lines in China. Literally under the gun, they eventually agreed to transfer their land to the army, but only after stipulating in writing that association members could continue to use the resources of their common lands and that they, like residents near the East Fuji Maneuver Area, had the right to collect spent ordinance and horse manure as well. The army agreed, promising to respect

¹⁰ Ibid., 181-182.

¹¹ Ibid., 182-183.

iriai customs so long as they did not interfere with military operations.¹²

The arrangements made between iriai groups and the military lasted until the end of World War II, but after Japan's defeat, officials in Tokyo informed local iriai rights-holders that their contract with the military was defunct, and for a brief time, communities near the maneuver areas thought the commons would return to peaceful purposes under their control. They quickly learned that the U.S. military had other plans. Not only did it take over both the north and east Fuji maneuver areas, it also expanded them while at the same time restricting local access far more than the imperial army ever had.¹³ Each time locals complained to officials at the prefectural level or in Tokyo, they were told that the Americans were in control, so nothing could be done.¹⁴ Softening the blow somewhat was the money spent locally by soldiers.¹⁵

Once Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952, the bargaining position of iriai rights-holders improved a bit. The U.S. Japan-Security Treaty put into effect that year guaranteed American forces uninterrupted use of facilities in Japan, including the Fuji maneuver areas, so the government continued to use its treaty obligations to the U.S. to deflect local demands. But in response to pressure from iriai groups, it did arrange for greater access to the maneuver areas so locals could cut grass, collect wood, and even cultivate certain plots of land. It also reached agreements with different communities to

¹² Hōjō Hiroshi, *Yamanashiken iriai tōsōshi* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō, 1998), 166-168.

¹³ Fujiyoshida Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Fujiyoshida shishi*, vol. 7 (Fujiyoshidashi: Fujiyoshidashi, 1995), 405; Gotenba Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Gotenba shishi*, 604-610, 637-638; and Hōjō, *Yamanashiken iriachi tōsōshi*, 170-172.

¹⁴ Gotenba Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Gotenba shishi*, 612.

¹⁵ Butchōji Gorō, *Fuji ni tatsu hito*, 61-62.

provide limited compensation for damage to their commons.¹⁶

In 1958, the U.S. formally transferred control of the Fuji maneuver areas back to Japan, and in 1959, the bulk of U.S. troops in the Fuji region were relocated to Okinawa. Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—thus called because the new constitution written by the U.S. Occupation authorities forbade Japan from going to war—took over regular management of the maneuver areas, with the U.S. military continuing to use them intermittently. Given the new balance of power, local iriai groups stepped up pressure on the Japanese government, arguing that SDF occupation of the maneuver areas was illegitimate unless the military entered into formal, long-term contracts. Because much of their commons was registered as private property, communities near the East Maneuver Area had enough leverage to negotiate relatively quickly a 10-year rental agreement with the SDF in 1959.¹⁷ The North Maneuver Area, consisting of lands mainly registered in the name of Yamanashi prefecture or the state, was a different story. Throughout the 1960s the Japanese military reached temporary deals with iriai rights-holders, but conflict was ongoing, and sometimes erupted in dramatic protests. The most high-profile demonstration took place in 1965, when local iriai groups dissatisfied with payments offered by the government built protest huts in the North Fuji Maneuver Area and effectively brought SDF artillery practice to a halt for the entire summer.¹⁸ The standoff intensified in early October, when a U.S. artillery regiment decided to fire “Little John” rockets from the East Maneuver Area to the North Maneuver Area. Police tried to clear the impact zone of protestors, but they were unsuccessful, and the commander of

¹⁶ Butchōji Gorō, *Fuji ni tatsu hito*, 146; and Gotenba Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Gotenba shishi*, 642-43, 657.

¹⁷ Gotenba Shishi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Gotenba shishi*, 661-666.

¹⁸ Butchōji Gorō, *Fuji ni tatsu hito*, 159.

the artillery regiment refused to back down. In the end, the rocket test went forward; luckily no one was injured.¹⁹

This incident quickly became a national focal point for left-wing activists. Highlighting the fact that the Little John rockets could potentially carry nuclear payloads, they tried to turn what was basically a conflict over common land rights into a central front of their ideological battle against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Many locals, in contrast, did not want to see the maneuver areas demilitarized. Their aim was to strike as good a deal as possible with the Japanese government and to make the SDF a responsible stakeholder in the commons.²⁰ And in this they ultimately succeeded. To tamp down the protests, the SDF vowed to work with local iriai groups and municipalities to negotiate higher payments to compensate for interference with iriai practices. Finally, in 1973, iriai rights-holders from the 11 villages adjoining the North Fuji Maneuver Area concluded a 5-year renewable contract with the SDF similar to the one signed with communities in the East Maneuver Area in 1959. The North Maneuver Area contract required the government only to respect iriai “customs” rather than iriai “rights,” but it was different from prior agreements in that it also required the government to provide 13 billion yen (close to 50 million dollars at the time) for “initiatives to stabilize the livelihoods” of local iriai rights-holders. Billions of more yen were promised for the “protection of natural resources.”²¹

Since the early 1970s, the SDF has renewed its agreements with iriai rights-holders on similar terms, providing capital for their communities. During this same period,

¹⁹ Ibid., 160.

²⁰ Ibid, 163; and Robert Trumbull, “U.S. Warned that Japanese Left Wing Seeks to Exploit Missile Tests on Mt. Fuji,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1965.

²¹ Butchōji Gorō, *Fuji ni tatsu hito*, 318-319, 320.

however, radical changes to the economy and material conditions of the Japanese countryside rendered many of the iriai practices that were at the heart of village life earlier in the twentieth century either peripheral or obsolete. So today, when thousands of locals gather each spring to burn the grasslands, their primary aim is not to feed horses or stimulate the growth of edible herbs, but to assert the iriai claims that in turn allow them to collect fees from the government. Meanwhile, the SDF is happy that locals maintain the grasslands because that is the terrain they need for their training.

Early in the twentieth century, locals fought to transform the parasitic actions of the Japanese military into symbiotic ones—by claiming, for example, the right to imperial horse manure. Today local groups and the military are in as symbiotic embrace as ever, but now iriai practices are aimed not at drawing daily sustenance from the land, but at perpetuating a terrain for goals both military and economic. Incidentally, these practices have also make life possible for locals that I have not yet mentioned but probably have more at stake than any others in the continued maintenance of the grasslands: butterflies. A number of butterfly species that have gone extinct in other parts of Japan due to habitat loss would vanish here too were it not for the annual burnings of the grasslands, which stimulate the growth of the plants the butterfly larvae need to survive.²² This is not to say the militarization of Fuji has necessarily generated, on balance, more positive ecological consequences than negative ones. But it does demonstrate, as other scholars have noted in their own studies of warfare and the environment, that dedicating a landscape to military purposes is not all bad for all species.²³ Often it benefits or even saves them—

²² Interview with Watanabe Michihito, August 31, 2007.

²³ See, for example, Richard P. Tucker, “The Impact of Warfare on the Natural World: A Historical Survey,” in *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of*

and in the case of the Fuji maneuver areas, unlike such places as the Korean DMZ or Colorado's Rocky Flats, this has occurred not because civilians have been excluded from the landscape, but because they have worked, in symbiotic fashion, to maintain their place it.

War, ed. Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2004), 35-37.