

The lessons Yoichi Hatta taught us

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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In a question-and-answer session on Taiwan-Japan relations at the legislature on Thursday last week, a Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) lawmaker raised concerns over escalating nationalism in Japan and expressed dismay at Taiwanese pro-Japanese sentiment.

The lawmaker said he wondered why a dam built by the Japanese could be praised as a legacy for decades, while Taiwanese turned a blind eye to many other infrastructure projects completed by the Taiwanese government.

The dam the legislator referred to is the Wushantou Reservoir in Greater Tainan, which was completed in 1930 during the Japanese colonial period by Yoichi Hatta, a Japanese engineer dubbed by locals as the “Father of the Chianan Irrigation System” because of his design and supervision of the reservoir.

Annual production of rice, sugar cane and other crops in the 150,000 hectare Chianan Plain increased dramatically after the completion of the project, which improved the lives of tens of thousands of households in the region.

Hatta, who hailed from Kanazawa in Japan and worked under the Office of the Governor-General, died on his way to the Philippines on May 8, 1942, when his ship was sunk by Allied bombers.

Wednesday marked the 71st anniversary of Hatta’s death and farmers in the south pay tribute to the pioneering engineer on this day every year in a ceremony to commemorate his contribution to the region.

Like his predecessors, the KMT lawmaker pondered the intriguing sentiment about the Japanese colonial period, which they assume is absurd because the colonial regime oppressed and exploited its colonies, just like every other colonial government in world history.

Some of them say Taiwanese were enslaved subconsciously and perhaps had a form of

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Stockholm syndrome, making them express sympathy toward the captors.

While the reason why more Taiwanese reminisce about the colonial period and have more empathy for the Japanese than people in other countries ruled by Japan in the early 20th century has been heatedly debated, using Hatta's case as an example of this phenomenon is out of line.

As an official of the colonial government, the engineer showed humility and led by example. Insisting on working and living with blue-collar Taiwanese workers, Hatta treated everyone the same way, regardless of their ethnicity or social class.

When he was forced to lay off workers due to a shortage of funding, Hatta surprised people by laying off those who had more skills, saying that they would find jobs more easily than the others.

The engineer also placed a priority on the working environment and workers' welfare, building dormitories, hospitals, schools and entertainment facilities at the construction site, which is now the Yoichi Hatta Memorial Park.

Taiwanese remember Hatta not only for his engineering achievements, but also his role as a respected leader.

Hatta was not a politician, but a professional. It is true that the Japanese colonial government oppressed Taiwanese, but it is also true that the regime was able to recognize Hatta's talent, put the man in the right place and empower him with authority.

If there is anything the story of Yoichi Hatta teaches us, it is an everlasting lesson for the government to have a vision for the future, the determination to make the country a better place and to be able to spot talented people. It is a lesson that civil servants should always put people's welfare and livelihoods above everything, and respect their jobs by bringing professionalism to the table.

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It is as simple as that.

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