Seeing off and Welcoming Home Soldiers, as Seen from Historical Documentation Related to the Draft and Military Matters in the Showa Era

KIRA Yoshie

This paper draws upon historical documentation related to the draft and military matters, in an attempt to illustrate the state and military's policies with regard to hometown gatherings to see off and welcome home soldiers as well as to show how the soldiers were sent to the battlefront and how they returned, in the period from the Manchurian Incident through the Sino-Japanese War and the Asia-Pacific War.

At the time of the Manchurian Incident, the military put its efforts into cutting down on unnecessary expenses and abolishing old customs such as farewell gifts for newly enlisted soldiers and return gifts by discharged soldiers. Later, as the army began to mobilize a great number of soldiers with the start of the Chinese-Japanese War, grand send-off parties and pep-rallies and prayer sessions for eternal fortune began to be held. This was the beginning of the “Red Paper (enlist card) Festival.” As the war continued and the situation was prolonged, the military attempted, on grounds of preventing espionage, to simplify “farewell” ceremonies such as the grand send-off parties and pep-rallies for newly enlisted soldiers and, being particularly sensitive with regard to welcoming back repatriated soldiers, called for related parties to exercise self-restraint in giving ceremonies.

However, the situation regarding such “farewell” ceremonies changed completely with the Kwantung Army's Special Exercises in July 1941. On grounds of preventing espionage, the military instructed local authorities to carry out draft operations in top-secret. At the beginning, a lack of policy coordination in the military led to some confusion in the authorities but later, due to the military's strong insistence, send-off parties at shrines and schools, seeing people off at the train station, farewell parties, prayer session, and other ceremonies were restricted or forbidden and the draftees were forbidden to wear military uniform but had to leave for the battlefront in secret wearing civilian clothes. This signified the end of the “Red Paper Festival” and brought down the morale of the soldiers and the people, causing them to lose their fighting spirit. These policies themselves were contradictory to the pursuit of war.

Therefore, in order to disperse the feeling of misery at the home front and to boost morale, the military, after the outbreak of war between Japan and the US and the UK in December 1941, began to permit send-off and farewell parties and started to ease various regulations. In this way, the “Red Paper Festivals” were restored. Nevertheless, as the military continued to advance their plan for total enlistment, their most serious concern dealt with how to conduct services for the ever-growing number of war dead. By this time, such grand celebrations of “Red Paper Festivals” as might expose the military to the risk of espionage had completely disappeared.