Blurring the boundaries: prisons and settler society in Hokkaido

During the second half of the 19th century five high security prisons were established on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. What impact did they have on the settler communities in these northern territories? Close proximity between convicts and free citizens usually does not sit well among the latter, but the peculiar socio-economic aspects of confinement on Hokkaido spurred both inmates and locals to permeate prison walls for mutual benefit.

**Hokkaido** did not exist as a political entity before the Meiji period (1868-1912). Only the southernmost part of Ezo, as the Japanese called these northern territories, was politically incorporated into the Tokugawa state. Against the backdrop of modern nation-building and fear of a Russian invasion, the incorporation of Ezo into the Japanese state became a priority for the early Meiji authorities. In 1869 Ezo was renamed Hokkaido and the colonisation of the island formally began. Recruitment of a labour force from mainland Japan was an indispensable precondition for the agricultural development of these vast and largely unsettled lands. Yet the initial recruitment of unprepared peasants and samurai failed to meet politicians’ expectations; a larger work force was needed to accelerate colonisation.

While peasantry and former aristocracy engaged in modest settlement activities in northern Japan, southern Japan experienced political unrest owing to local elites’ resistance to the new Meiji government’s political and social agenda. Saotome Rebellion alone produced 43,000 political arrests that resulted in the death of 37 individuals. The consequences of imprisonment and forced labour were dire.

The existing system of town gaols was unprepared for such a large number of convicts. Inspired by Western reformist ideas on prisons and punishment, Meiji authorities ordered the establishment of Japan’s first modern prison in the northern prefecture of Miyagi. In 1879, a cluster of central prisons on Hokkaido was also suggested.

Hokkaido was seen as the perfect place for prisons, as prison labour could accelerate colonisation. In addition, Hokkaido was far away from the political hot spot of Kyushu and therefore perceived as an ideal place for isolating ‘politically dangerous elements’ from mainland Japan. A third incentive was the hope that, once released, former inmates would stay in Hokkaido and contribute to an increase in the population. Five prisons were thus established on Hokkaido between 1878 and 1894. Kabato, Sorachi and Kussharo were the central prisons; Abashiri and Tokachi served as local prisons.

This development of local infrastructure for the agricultural development of the island formally began. Recruiters went to Kushiro. In the absence of a primary school building, the children of prison personnel were taught in ‘classrooms’ for private households. As craftsmen, they were not confined to prison workshops, but also worked in the homes of their clients. The prison labour force deeply involved in the region’s development. After the prison’s establishment in 1884, drilling revealed the poor quality of the local ground water. Watanabe immediately contacted the Ministry of the Interior to request the construction of a pipe to provide the village with potable water. When the Ministry rejected his request, Watanabe himself initiated exploration and discovered an adequate source. The construction of the water pipe was later approved, and in 1888 Ichikishiri became the first place in Hokkaido and the second in Japan (after Yokohama) with a modern water pipe (Shipematu 1970:27). Prisoners then constructed a dam and reservoir to irrigate the fields of neighbouring communities. By that time 2,832 people were residing in Ichikishiri; 1,630 of them were inmates.

**Banning prisoners from community life**

Although working in the beginning, the permeable character of Hokkaido’s prisons eventually became problematic, both on the macro and micro levels of society. In 1886 policies shifted and prisoners were largely stripped of their local autonomy. Moreover, it became economically possible to forgo the support of prisons in everyday settler life. It was therefore easy to marginalize convict labour and, from 1886 onwards, prisoners were mainly employed in coal and sulphur mines and road construction.

The segregation of prisoners from everyday community life contributed to a gradual shift in the settler population’s perception of convicts. Newspaper editors eagerly picked up stories of (mostly unsuccessful) escape attempts, constructing an image of ‘dangerous roughs’ who, once escaped from prison, would attack settlers. Influenced by such mass media, settlers indeed became afraid of prisoners. As the influx of mostly male job-seeking immigrants was accompanied by the establishment of morally ambiguous recreational sites such as bathing houses and sake bars, locals began to blame the prisons for ‘moral decay’. Politicians and residents also worried that the label ‘prison island’ created a general perception of Hokkaido that would deter immigration. Against this backdrop, popular campaigns achieved the implementation of a regulation prohibiting released convicts from settling on the island in 1894, marking the end of an era in relations between prisons and surrounding settler communities.

Large-scale interaction of prisons and society on Hokkaido lasted for only five years, but studying this slice of Japanese prison history is insightful. Confinement appears to have been a secondary function of early Hokkaido prisons; rather than being mere disciplinary institutions, prisons served as socio-economic hubs and linked metropolitan elites with settler societies on the nation’s periphery. Further, the exchange was not one-sided: both the prison populations and neighbouring communities took advantage of people, goods and knowledge permeating prisons. The permeable character of institutional boundaries both groups shaped each other’s environment. Tending to local economic needs, rather than trying to apply theoretical models through national policies, determined the structure and function of the prisons and the societies that surrounded them.

**References**


**Pia Vogler** is pursuing postgraduate studies at the University of Geneva, preparing an anthropological thesis on another aspect of confinement, the (nocturne) agency of young Burmese refugees in Thai refugee camps.

**An accident in the Horonai coalmines**

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