To return or not to return, this was never a straightforward question for Japanese immigrants in Brazil. ‘Return’ is not only driven by economic considerations, but is also a moral act conditioned by migrants’ complex relations with the state, the community, and their families. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, intellectuals from the Japanese immigrant community in Brazil debated the moral meanings of their mobility and immobility. The debates were shaped by and reflective of the radically changing political conditions and the collective sense of the self.

Koji Sasaki

The desire for return as a ‘backward’ mentality

Japanese migration to Brazil began in 1908 through the initiative of a private agency, the Imperial Emigration Company. During the period 1908 to 1941, more than 188,000 Japanese were shipped to Brazil, where most peasant immigrants worked in coffee plantations in the state of São Paulo. They saw their work in Brazil as temporary and expected to return to Japan after earning some money, ‘to return to the homeland dressed in brocade’ (koko ni nishiki wo kazaru), as the well-known saying goes.

Such an attitude, common to many migrant populations, was criticized by various migrant elites, especially editors of immigrant newspapers and leaders of immigration organisations, in the 1920s. They held that the immigrants’ ‘sojourner mentality’ (sakuhin kokyo) was detrimental to agricultural development and insisted that the Japanese in Brazil should settle permanently. At that time, new immigrant colonies, meant to facilitate long-term settlement, were being built in the hinterland of São Paulo state. The educated settlers widely propagated the motto of ‘living the soil, settling permanently’. Paradoxically, the advocacy for permanent settlement was closely related to an emerging imperial cosmopolitanism of the Taishō era (1912-1926). The immigrant newspaper editorials, for example, stressed that the immigrants should see themselves as pioneers in the mission of Japan’s overseas development, declaring that ‘there is no reason why being a Japanese requires living and dying in Japan’.

Imagined re-migration to the empire

Political conditions in Japan went through a decisive shift in the 1930s. After the ‘Manchuria Incident’ in 1931, when Japan annexed a large part of northeast China, Japan was soon engulfed by militarism. As news about Japan’s invasion of Southern Pacific countries reached the immigrants in Brazil, they enthusiastically embraced the imperial ideology of ‘Hakko ichi’ (the whole world under one roof). They were even more determined to settle in Brazil, but decided to educate their children in the Japanese language, aiming to turn the next generation into a Japanese nation.

However, as Getúlio Vargas took over the presidency of Brazil in 1930, the New State (Jo Estado Novo) implemented a series of policies aimed at national unification, which imposed severe constraints on the activities of foreigners. Education and publication in the Japanese language were prohibited, and the Japanese immigrants were put in a state of great anxiety. Unsurprisingly, this triggered the immigrants’ desire to return to Japan once again. A 1938 survey of a rural region of São Paulo carried out by an immigration officer, Shungaro Wako, showed that as many as 85 per cent of the immigrants hoped to return to Japan.

This anxiety about the new state of Brazil, the resumed desire for return, and the advances of the Japanese imperialism, collectively resulted in a new notion of return. Rokuro Koyama, the editor of Seisyū Shimpo, the leading Japanese newspaper in Brazil, argued that the Japanese in Brazil should ‘re-migrate’ to the Southeast Asian region under the control of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. According to Koyama, before Japan’s expansion to the Chinese continent, the Japanese were forced to engage in what he called a ‘hybrid migration’ (konko ijuu), wherein emigrants had to assimilate themselves to the culture of the destination country. The new geopolitical condition, he argued, allowed for an ‘ethnically pure migration’ (minkokubeki ijuu), in which the migrants were no longer required to assimilate and would thus remain ‘pure’ Japanese.

Seisyū Shimpo published a series of editorials in 1941 advocating a ‘glorious retreat’ from Latin America to Asia ‘under the Japanese flag’.

The cult of return

In the late 1940s, many Japanese immigrants in Brazil still believed that Japan had won, or was winning the war. As lines of communication were broken during the war, it took a few years for the immigrants in rural plantations to receive full information. The ‘convictionists’ who believed in Japan’s victory, gained great popularity by persistently rejecting the news of Japan’s defeat. When the members of the ‘recognitionist’ movement organised protests to inform the community about the defeat in the late 1940s, members of the Shindo Kaiki Undo (League of the Ways of the Emperor’s Subjects), by far the most influential of the convictionist group, organised terrorist attacks and killed many recognitionist leaders.

It was against the same background that various rumours about return emerged in São Paulo in the early 1950s. Exploiting ordinary migrants’ lingering desire to return, the rumors went that the Japanese government would soon come to rescue them from Brazil. Numerous tricksters swindled large amounts of money from the immigrants by persuading them to invest their properties in a rush, to be ready for the ‘repatriation ships’ that would arrive anytime to send them back to Japan.

During this tremendous turmoil and confusion, the Sakure-ni Teitai-ni (Sakura Volunteer Army), was formed as a ‘cult for return’ in 1953. Although the agenda of the group was fundamentally driven by a desperate desire to return to Japan, they presented their proposals as highly political projects. The leaders urged Japanese immigrants to participate in the ‘UN forces’ in the Korean War, but at the same time to ‘fight with communists to liberate Taiwan’. They also advocated ‘forced repatriation of all Japanese immigrants in Brazil’. They organised street demonstrations in São Paulo, but the protesters were soon to be silenced by the general public due to its deeply contradictory agenda. In 1955, the frustrated members attacked the Japanese Consulate in São Paulo, injuring several officials.

The Japanese migrants’ desire for return faded away by the late 1950s as they learned that their war-born homeland could no longer welcome them. The history of the debates about mobility in the Japanese community in Brazil reveals how the migrants responded to the shifts in the larger political conditions by formulating possible strategies of settlement, return and re-migration. The discourse of return constitutes a political agenda. In 1955, the frustrated members attacked the Japanese Consulate in São Paulo, injuring several officials.

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References