Settling: Migration as National Policy in the 1920s

In the 1920s, overseas emigration became of even greater importance to Japan as a nation. This was the result of a worsening domestic economy, allied to rising urban and agrarian unrest. At the same time, the prominence of Brazil as a destination was enhanced by moves in North America to exclude all Asian immigrants. In response, the Japanese government re-established direct control over the emigration business and, expanding on its moves from the end of the 1910s, attempted to create a more effective system for dispatching Japanese overseas. As a consequence, larger numbers of migrants than ever before made their way to Brazil, especially in the second half of the decade. Although it was to be the 1930s when a significant reaction was to emerge in Brazil against the Japanese presence, the sudden leap in numbers in the 1920s did cause a backlash among some Brazilians. In general, however, the Japanese expatriate community, as it expanded numerically and geographically, continued to enjoy both socio-economic opportunities and racial respect.

Emigration as national policy

The major domestic factors behind Japan’s greater focus on emigration in the 1920s were the twin problems of population growth and economic instability. The agricultural sector had been hard hit by the rice riots of 1918 in which urban consumers revolted against inflated prices of their most basic food. This led to imports of rice from Japan’s colonies in subsequent years and severe losses in income for Japanese farmers. Also, following a rash of speculative business
ventures during the world war, there was a shakeout in the Japanese industrial and commercial economy after 1918 as US and European enterprises returned to East Asia. This shakeout led to widespread unemployment and a pervasive sense of uncertainty in Japan which, in turn, boosted support for radical political ideologies. Since the 1900s, there had been persistent fears among the Japanese elite about the rise of socialism, and the creation of a Japan Communist Party in 1922 seemed in their eyes directly to threaten the existing socio-political system; this threat was heightened by the belief that Japanese communism was being orchestrated by the recently formed Soviet Union. The appearance of a communist neighbour and new levels of social disharmony within Japan made emigration more obviously than at any previous time a matter of national security. In this, the idea was not so much that emigration was the projection overseas of Japanese influence (the minzoku bochō ideology observed by some scholars after 1905); Japan in economic terms in the 1920s was too weak to make such an argument convincing. Rather, the aim was to paper over cracks within Japan. This point is worth remembering when one considers the attitudes of expatriate Japanese towards the homeland both at this time and in the 1930s as conditions deteriorated even further.

The link between emigration to Brazil and domestic security was obvious in a Japanese article from 1922. The author was an army captain, Harumi Kyōhei, and it appeared in the army ministry’s official study journal, Kaikōsha Kiji. The simple fact that the military felt the need to discuss this link indicates how serious Japan’s situation had already become by the early 1920s. Harumi began by explaining that Japan’s population of about 56 million was then increasing by an extra 600,000 people each year but that the total of all Japanese then overseas was just 580,000 (this made the October 1920 figure of 34,258 Japanese in Brazil roughly six per cent of all expatriates). In short, emigration from Japan to that point was nowhere near sufficient to alleviate the social pressure of population growth. In what was undoubtedly a widely held view, Captain Harumi asserted that Japanese society was already divided between the better off who were consumed by materialism and self-indulgence, and the poor who were turning to labour and tenant militancy in the face of economic stagnation and urban inflation. The obvious implication in 1922, therefore, was that Japan needed to send many more people overseas if it were to ease its problems at home.