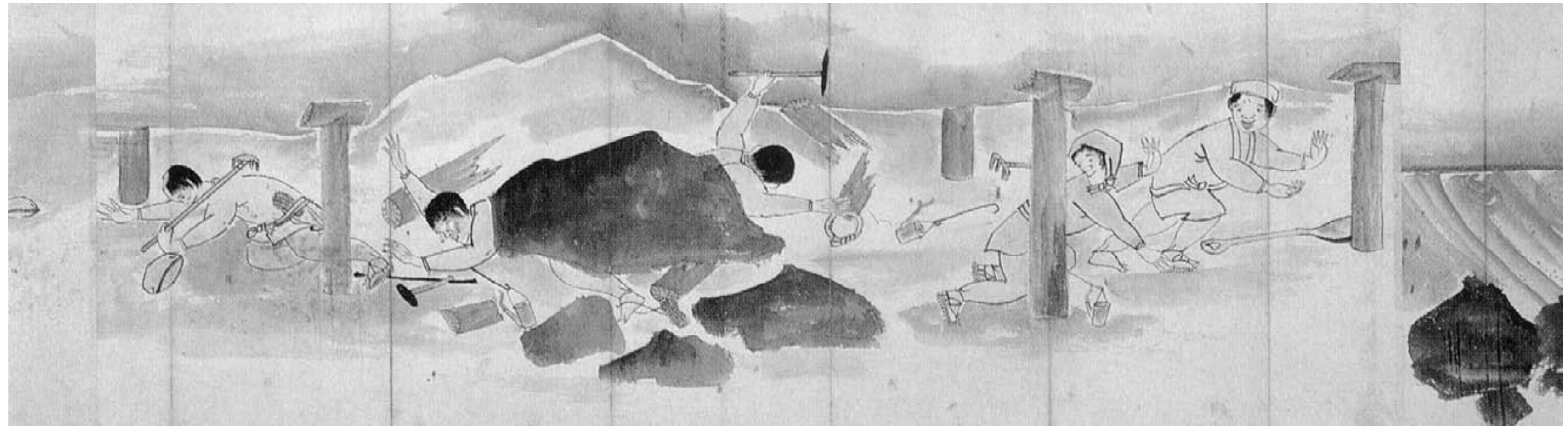
Blurring the boundaries: prisons and settler society in Hokkaido

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.



An accident in the Horonai coalmines
Hokkaidō kaitaku kinenkan. 1989.

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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 colonization 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 impoverished peasants and former samurai failed to meet politicians' expectations; a larger work force was needed to accelerate colonization.

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 authority. The 1877 Satsuma rebellion alone produced 43,000 political arrests that resulted in the sentencing of 27,000 individuals to imprisonment and forced labour. 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 colonization. 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 1881 and 1894. Kabato, Sorachi and Kushiro were the central prisons; Abashiri and Tokachi served as branch institutions. Each central prison held a particular inmate population: political convicts were mainly held in Kabato, felons were sent to Sorachi, and prisoners originating from the military and police went to Kushiro.

Prison in society, society in prison

The construction of prisons and other 'delicate' institutions provokes ambivalent sentiments among residents of neighbouring communities. A closer look at the interaction of prisons with their environment often reveals complex relationships between social spaces meant to be separate. Indeed, the example of early modern Hokkaido illustrates how the presence of prisons stimulated fruitful socio-economic exchange between the local society and the prison population.

Immediately after their establishment, the prisons were actually running local politics. When the first two penal institutions opened in 1881 and 1882, the directors of the Kabato prison in Tsukigata and the Sorachi prison in Ichikishiri (present-day Mikasa) exerted broad political influence in their regions. Tsukigata Kiyoshi, director of the Kabato prison, served as chief of Kabato, Uryū and Kamigawa counties, and from 1882 he was chief of the local police and postal service. Tsukigata's importance was reflected in how the local population addressed him: *tengoku-sama* (Mr prison director) or *tengoku kakka* (his excellency, the prison director). Thanks to its director's various posts the prison was equipped with unique communication technologies and served as a regional hub for communication between Hokkaido and Tokyo. Instructions from the Ministry of the Interior to the surrounding settler society, for example, were transmitted through the prison.

Almost 500 inmates were transferred to Kabato two months after its inauguration, followed by another 500 one year later. Kabato prison already employed 140 people, but that would not be enough. A wave of political arrests in mainland Japan rapidly increased inmate numbers during the following years, which brought new immigrants, especially from Northern Honshu, but also from Kagoshima, in search of employment as prison personnel. In addition to employment, local villagers also benefited from prison services. In both Kabato and Sorachi prisons doctors received inmates in the morning and residents of surrounding villages in the afternoon. In the absence of a primary school building, the children of prison personnel were taught in 'classrooms' within the prison until 1886.

As a local political personality, Sorachi prison director Watanabe Koreaki was deeply involved in the region's development. After the prison's establishment in 1882, 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 (Shigematsu 1970:227). 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.

Hokkaido prisons Hokkaidō kaitaku kinenkan. 1989.

This development of local infrastructure through the prisons actually increased the attractiveness and economic potential of the respective locations. Kushiro prison in Shibecha also attracted modern technology to eastern Hokkaido, where U.S. agricultural methods enabled rice cultivation for the first time in that northern region. Because of its many agricultural activities, locals saw the prison as a place for agricultural testing, and since convicts were clearing land that was immediately sold to settler societies and distributed to new settlers, the prisons attracted still more newcomers.

The influx of immigrants increased demand for skilled craftsmen. Prisoners were trained to fabricate furniture for private households. As craftsmen, they were not confined to prison workshops, but also worked in the houses of their clients. The prison labour force was not only tapped by local residents. Local businessmen employed convicts in their factories, such as Tsuchida Masajirō, who, in 1889, took over a carpentry workshop, a tailor studio, a vat factory and a shoe factory previously owned by the Kabato prison. To keep production costs low, Tsuchida successfully applied for permission to hire prisoners (ASHK 1993: 389).

As a result of this mingling of convicts and locals, various goods and materials found their way into and out of the prisons. In 1882 the Kabato prison began making soybean paste (miso) and soy sauce in its brewery, eventually producing enough to cover prison consumption and, in some years, to sell surpluses to merchants in the surrounding region or in the cities of Sapporo and Otaru. In addition to these official economic exchanges, prisoners also traded with community members working alongside them. In the Horonai coal mines, for example, convicts secretly produced rice wine (*sake*) in their subterranean workplace.

Banning prisoners from community life

Although welcomed 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 prisons were largely stripped of their local autonomy. Moreover, it became economically possible to forego 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 sliver 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 prison walls. By blurring 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. <

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