

6 The Study: Return

Moral mobility Return in the Japanese community in Brazil 1908-1955

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' (*kokyo ni nishiki wo kazaru*), as the well-known saying goes.

Such an attitude, common to many migrant populations, was criticised by various migrant elites, especially editors of immigrant newspapers and leaders of immigration organisations, in the 1920s. They held that the immigrants' 'sojourner mentality' (*dekasegi konjo*) 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 'loving 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'.¹

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 ichiu*' (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 superior Brazilians with Japanese blood and tradition.

However, as Getúlio Vargas took over the presidency of Brazil in 1937, the New State (*o 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, Shungoro 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 *Seisyu 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.² 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' (*minzoku-teki jun ijuu*), in which the migrants were no longer required to assimilate and would thus remain 'pure' Japanese.³ *Seisyu Shimpo* published a series of editorials in 1941 advocating a 'glorious retreat' from Latin America to Asia 'under the Japanese flag'.⁴

This imperialist concept of return acquired strong currency in the immigrant community. Ando Zempati, the editor of a literary journal in the late 1930s in São Paulo, recalled that 'this feverish desire was so influential that majority of the people expected to re-migrate to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere even after Japan's unconditional surrender'.⁵ Curiously, the migrants' extreme willingness for global mobility and imperial return was hardly appreciated by their homeland government. This was indeed a peculiar perception among the migrants who were caught up between cosmopolitan ideals, imperialist ideology and the emotional difficulties in the foreign land. The imagined collective return from Brazil to Japan's Asian Empire was their particular ideological response to the changing political conditions.

The cult of return

After its defeat in World War Two in 1945, Japan had to transform itself from an imperialist empire with an expanding territory, into a small nation-state. This radical change in regime would have logically required a corresponding transformation in the subjectivities of its citizens, both in Japan and overseas. However, with regard to the Japanese community in Brazil, this process was slow, marked by a series of reactionary incidents.

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 campaigns to inform the community about the defeat in the late 1940s, members of the *Shindo Renmei* (League of the Ways of the Emperor's Subjects), by far the most influential 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 rumours went that the 'victorious' Japanese government would soon come to rescue them from Brazil. Numerous tricksters swindled large amounts of money from the immigrants by persuading them to sell off 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 *Sakuragumi Teishin-tai* (Sakura Volunteer Army), was formed as a 'cult of 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 and even a collective hunger strike, only to be scorned 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-torn 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 prism through which we can delineate how migrants' sense of duty, as overseas imperial or national subjects; their sentiment for the homeland; and their ambivalence towards the foreign soil, intersected in a complex manner.

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Fig. 1
A street demonstration organised by Sakura Volunteer Army in the Praça da Sé, São Paulo on 3 February 1955. The banners read, 'Ethnic Return' and 'Total Repatriation of 400,000 Compatriots'. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Japanese Immigration in Brazil, São Paulo.

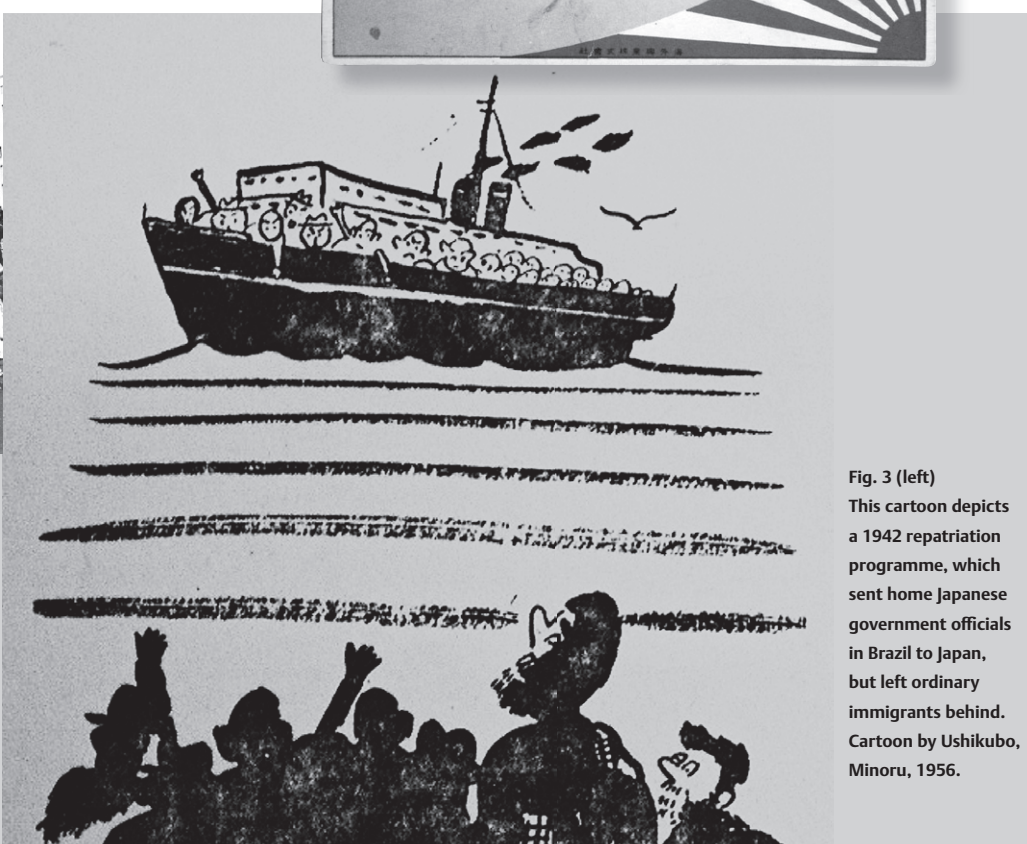


Fig. 2 (below)
A postcard published by the Overseas Development Company (Kaigai Kogyo Kabushiki Kaisha) between the late 1920s and the early 1930s. Image courtesy of the Museum of the Japanese Immigration in Brazil, São Paulo.

Fig. 3 (left)
This cartoon depicts a 1942 repatriation programme, which sent home Japanese government officials in Brazil to Japan, but left ordinary immigrants behind. Cartoon by Ushikubo, Minoru, 1956.