

A Novel of Uchida Roan and its Colonialism: Ambitions of Establishing a Settlement in Mexico

NISHIHARA Daisuke

1

In this paper, I would like to examine colonialism as it appears in Uchida Roan's novel "Kure no nijyū hachi nichi," or "December twenty-eighth."⁽¹⁾ The protagonist Arikawa tries in vain to establish a settlement in Mexico. The work reflects various aspects of Japan's colonialism at its early stage, and my contention is to point out the "backwardness" of Japan's colonialism. Although characters in the story are enthusiastic about the idea of settlement, the concept of settlement is no more than that of immigration by the poor.

Today, Japan enjoys a huge trade surplus and is surely one of the richest nation in the world. In the early Meiji period, however, Japan was still merely an agricultural state which did not have any modern industry. Moreover, rapid population growth and a shortage of jobs forced many poor Japanese to seek to make a living in distant places. Some of them went to Hokkaido to open up new land, but some also emigrated to foreign countries. Hawaii, North America and Southeast Asia were the principal destinations. The fact that most Japanese immigrants became either laborers or prostitutes testifies to the backwardness of the nation.

When writer Natsume Sōseki saw Japanese prostitutes in Singapore on his way to London, he was extraordinarily ashamed of his compatriots' conduct and he wrote of his embarrassment in his diary in English.

In Singapore, I put up at a Japanese hotel. There I met a lot of Japanese women who are known technically as 'street-walkers.' Poor abandoned souls! They don't know what they are doing. Driven by penury, they seek

shelter in the distant parts of the world, to add ill-fame and infamy to their mother country.⁽²⁾

The act of emigration to foreign countries was certainly a shameful choice for ordinary Japanese. Neither highly educated people nor members of wealthy families would voluntarily go to other countries to become peasants or prostitutes. An official government report published in 1884 also deplored the existence of such poor overseas Japanese.⁽³⁾ It states that one thing Japan could take pride in before was that there were no needy people who went abroad to undertake slave-like work. The report goes on to the fact that Japan's reputation is being hurt and the nation is losing face.

After the Sino-Japanese war, which lasted from 1894 to 1895, Japan eagerly tried to become an Empire. This poor agricultural country adopted the idea of imperialism and attempted to be a great power in Asia. Thus, Japanese emigrants to other countries gradually came to be regarded as a part of the nation's expanding influence. The overseas Japanese, including prostitutes, came to be seen as pioneers rather than dropouts from their society.

Such changes in attitude toward overseas Japanese immigrants culminated in the foundation of the Colonization Society in 1893. The society was founded by Enomoto Takeaki, an influential politician, and it tried to promote immigration as a national project. The society sought places suitable for settlement and Mexico gradually became the main target of their efforts.

Soon after the foundation of the Colonization Society, Nemoto Tadashi visited Mexico, and in 1894 a more thorough inspection too, was undertaken by Hashiguchi Bunzo. It was on the twenty fourth of March in 1897 that the first group of thirty six settlers departed Yokohama port for Mexico. It was about one year before the publication of Uchida Roan's novel.

The settlers received a good send-off at the port, and they were full of hopes and ambitions. A newspaper reported their departure, and they were very excited about their new life. The settlement, in fact, ended in complete failure. Excessive hard work and difficult conditions harmed their health, the coffee they planted did not grow, and furthermore, they ran out of funds. Their enthusiasm was not rewarded at all.⁽⁴⁾

The novel, “Kure no nijyū hachi nichi,” reflects the enthusiasm of Japan’s expansion in those days. The protagonist Arikawa and his company try to establish a settlement in Mexico. The story first appeared in a magazine in March 1898, three years after the Sino-Japanese war, and received favorable judgments from most critics.

Their high evaluation, no doubt, derived from the story’s international background. The protagonist Arikawa’s youthful aspirations to establish an ideal colony in Mexico is both serious and ambitious. A critic argued that the story would touch the hearts of ambitious young Japanese because of the social issues relevant to the times with which it dealt.⁽⁵⁾ In other words, the story’s dealing with a plan to settle in Mexico, which was a real topic at that time.

Although the author Uchida Roan never visited Mexico, descriptions of Mexico’s geography, industry, and products are seen throughout the story. Many Mexican place names also appear in “Kure no nijyū hachi nichi,” such as, Santiago, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Acapulco, Soconusco, Tabasco and Puebla. The names of Spanish conquerors such as Christobal de Oñate, Juan de Oñate and the famous Hernán Cortés also appear. The protagonist Arikawa’s favorite book is *The Conquest of Mexico* by William Hickling Prescott.⁽⁶⁾

What I want to point out here is that Arikawa and his company’s plan to set up a farm in Mexico was idealistic. In former times, almost all Japanese farmers abroad were poor farmers who could not sustain their lives in their mother country. The main reason for their immigration was purely economical. In the novel, however, the purpose of the band of ambitious young men to open up the Mexican jungle for farming was not for money. They were motivated by their own idealism.

Arikawa and his company’s enthusiasm to go abroad to establish a new colony is deeply correlated to Japan’s early imperialism. In 1895 Taiwan was ceded to Japan by China, and immigrating to a colony had gradually become an honorable undertaking which a man could put everything into. The former shadowy image of poor immigrants was replaced by an enthusiasm for expanding

overseas. In reading the novel we see the characters' desire to devote themselves to something heroic.

Praise of manliness is an important aspect of "Kure no nijyū hachi nichi." After the Meiji Restoration, ambitious university students were concerned to show off their masculinity and they openly expressed their desire to assume a position of eminence in society. During the early Meiji period and into the 1890s, career choices had been gradually expanding, but immigration had always been completely left out of consideration. It was after the foundation of the Colonization Society in 1893 that educated individuals became interested in careers in the colonies. Thus, Uchida Roan's novel, stressing the manliness of its characters and their bond of friendship, both tightly bound up with ambition and social success in Meiji Japan, also displays the colonies as a place where an ambitious man could honorably strive for success.

3

The growing interest in going abroad at the time is usually called "shyokumin netsu," or colonization fever. The settlement in Mexico in 1897 and Uchida Roan's novel "Kure no nijyū hachi nichi" were indisputably a part of the trend. The cession of Taiwan in 1895 also promoted the movement. Japan's imperialism was beginning to make its appearance.

However, Japan's so-called imperialism could not possibly be compared with that of the British Empire. The end of the 19th century was the high time of imperialism, during which the novel I am discussing was written. There are many kinds of definition of imperialism, but an economical model is usually applied to explain various situations at the turn of the century.

The model is that the rapid development of capitalism brought about excessive accumulation of funds and industrialized nations had to seek their own colonies to invest the surplus capital. Merciless exploitation of the natives in the colonies ensued.

Applying this theory to Japan's case, we see again the way in which Japan's "colonialism" and "imperialism" differ from that of the Western countries. First of all, Japan's capitalism had just started, and industries were not yet fully developed. Owners of companies tried to cover their shortage of funds by the introduction of

foreign capital. There was hardly any accumulation of surplus capital that could be invested abroad.

In addition, there was large scale surplus labor in Japan. The country's population was exploding, and the unemployment rate was very high. From 1883 until 1906, the population increased from 37 million to 46 million. It was feared that Japan was going to suffer from overpopulation. The need for establishing new colonies was advocated because of this serious problem.

Let me quote an essay from the magazine "Shyokumin Jiho" No.98, which correctly criticizes the motivation behind Japan's colonization fever. Kamahara Koji argues:

Advocates of urgent colonization, one and all, never fail to mention overpopulation. Those who consider that the necessity for colonization derives from overpopulation and that overpopulation is the only motivation for colonization, seem not to be few in number. There can be, however, no greater misunderstanding than this.

Western nations have recently suffered from serious overproduction due to industrialization, and they have had trouble finding outlets for their products. Furthermore, years of peace and industrialization have brought about a great accumulation of capital. They do not know where to direct this surplus production and capital. They are desperately seeking new customers and targets for profitable investment. Thus, in the end, they have come to attempt the acquisition of colonies.

In the case of our country, Japan, however, the situation is completely different. Japan's industry has not yet developed sufficiently. Thus, we need not worry about overproduction. Moreover, capital is in short supply.⁽⁷⁾

In this essay, Kamahara criticises the prevalent notion that the purpose of acquiring colonies is to solve Japan's overpopulation problem. He regards the Western nations' present circumstances as a desirable standard and then deplors Japan's "underdeveloped" colonialism.

If we examine Uchida Roan's "Kure no nijyū hachi nichī" from this point of view, the imperfectness and irrationality of Arikawa's project of colonization is obvious. First and foremost, he is attempting to be a farmer instead of an owner of big plantation. The protagonist neither intends to invest his own capital in Mexico nor does he try to gain profit by his act of colonization. He does not have the slightest intention to exploit the labor of the natives. Arikawa's image of colonization is closer to that of the immigration which was practiced by poorer peasants.

Secondly, there is no necessity for Arikawa to move all the way to Mexico. Since Arikawa as well as his companions are highly educated, they belong to a comparatively higher class and they do not have to choose to be immigrants. Besides, Arikawa owns a large amount of property in Japan and he does not have to work at all.

Thus, Arikawa's wife Okichi's opposition to his plan makes complete sense. She tells her husband in the story that since he has property, he can live in comfort and there is no necessity for him to go all the way to the Mexican jungle. At the end of the story, the protagonist abandons his plan to settle in Mexico.

The colonialism in "Kure no nijyū hachi nichī" can be described as a strange combination of the traditional image of immigration by the poor and the new colonization fever. Rapid development of Japan during the Meiji era changed the nation from a developing county to an empire (or so it was thought in Japan at the time). At the early stage of colonialism, however, during which time the novel was published, the idea of immigration being undertaken by the poor was still strong, and the new conception of colonization had yet to become common. Arikawa's plan comprises a strange amalgam of agricultural immigration and grand imperialism.

The colonization fever at the end of the 19th century is the background of "Kure no nijyū hachi nichī." The novel tells us two important things. One is that the act of settling abroad or colonization came to attract the interest of even intellectuals and that it was no longer an altogether shadowy business. Benjamin Disraeli once wrote in his novel, *Tancred or the New Crusade*, "The East is a

career.”⁽⁸⁾ Similarly, colonialism had become a career in Japan. The novel’s stress on ambition and masculinity also clarifies this point.

The second is the “underdevelopment” of Japan’s colonialism as compared to that of the West. Emigration by the poor was almost the only image of colonization and the new image of imperialist colonization based on highly developed capitalism had not yet been established. In these senses, Uchida Roan’s “Kure no nijyū hachi nichi” is an extremely interesting piece of work.

NOTES

- (1) This paper was read under the same title at the Seventh Annual Ph.D Kenkyukai Conference held at International House of Japan (Tokyo) on 26 June 1995.
- (2) *Sōseki Zenshū* vol.13 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1966), p.28.
- (3) *Kōgyō Iken* vol.4 (1884), section 11. The Japanese translation is mine.
- (4) Ueno Hisashi, *Mexico Enomoto shokumin*, (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1994), pp.48–64.
- (5) *Hansei Zasshi* (April 1898), p.72.
- (6) Prescott’s works were often cited in Meiji Novels as a kind of bible of ambitious young men.
- (7) Kamahara Kōji, “Shyokumin no dōki,” *Shyokumin Jihō* No.98 (August 1902). Japanese translations by Nishihara.
- (8) The Earl of Beaconsfield, K.G. (Benjamin Disraeli), *Tancred or the New Crusade* (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1924), p.141.