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SURVEY AND SPECULATION

Toward a Japanese paradigm of settler-colonial urbanism?

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Abstract

The city of Sapporo, founded in 1869 by the Japanese government as a colonial headquarters in Hokkaido, developed as part of a global wave of settler-colonial urbanism. Like counterparts in North America and Australia, Sapporo facilitated economic, environmental and political transformations across Hokkaido that led to the displacement of Indigenous Ainu society by a soon overwhelming number of ethnically Japanese settlers. However, several historical factors distinguish Sapporo's settler-colonial urbanism from its peers, including the long history of relations between the Ainu and Japanese; the heavy role of the Japanese state in Sapporo; and the lack of mass relocations of the Ainu to reservations far from their traditional homes.

Many of the modern Western world's largest cities are settler-colonial urban spaces. Think of Chicago, Denver, Vancouver and other cities across the US and Canadian Wests, as well as Melbourne, Australia, Auckland, New Zealand and cities in other former British colonies.[1] As David Hugill has summarized, these urban spaces are characterized by three factors. First, unlike port cities that facilitated the extraction of natural resources and trade in goods, or administrative headquarters where a tiny imperial elite governed ethnically and racially distinct colonial populations, settler-colonial cities are built for a settler population that is demographically dominant and the focus of economic and political activity. Second, they are the site of enduring colonial relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples. There has generally been no process of decolonization in settler-colonial places. And finally, the particular forms of settler-colonial power that exist in cities tend to marginalize Indigenous people, or exclude them altogether, rendering them invisible to most urban residents – although today many settler-colonial cities are characterized by Indigenous resurgence.[2]

[1]I draw on J. Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783–1939* (Oxford, 2009), for this framing of Wests.

[2]D. Hugill, *Settler Colonial City: Racism and Inequality in Postwar Minneapolis* (Minneapolis, 2021). As one anonymous reviewer points out, the lack of a decolonization process holds truer in the United States than it does in New Zealand or parts of Canada. Compare (for instance) Senakw, a Squamish land development project on reclaimed reservation land in Vancouver, to the lack of comparable Indigenous-led development in US cities.

In recent years, the study of the settler-colonial city as a distinct form of imperial urbanism has flourished, emerging from the field of settler-colonial studies and the critiques of that framework by Indigenous scholars and critical urban geographers.[3] For the most part, however, this work remains premised upon histories of settler-colonialism in British and American imperial spaces.[4]

Here, I would like to suggest that Japan offers another model of settler-colonial urban development: the city of Sapporo, founded as the capital of Japan's first modern colony – the Indigenous Ainu territory now known as Hokkaido.[5] Sapporo's history reveals not only how ideas and practices of settler-colonial urbanism developed in a global context beyond the anglophone empires, but also how distinctive local conditions, especially the longer history of entanglement between Japanese and Ainu peoples, led to particular forms of settler-colonial urbanism in northern Japan.

A settler-colonial city

Sapporo, originally an Ainu name for a lucrative salmon fishing ground in the Ishikari region of central Hokkaido, was chosen as the site for the headquarters of

[3]For a thorough overview of recent trends, see M. Simpson and D. Hugill, 'The settler colonial city in three movements', *Progress in Human Geography*, 46 (2022), 1311–30. Regarding Indigenous resurgence, see the introduction to H. Dorries *et al.* (eds.), *Settler City Limits: Indigenous Resurgence and Colonial Violence in the Urban Prairie West* (Winnipeg, 2019).

[4]For an understanding of the anglophone imperial world as a coherent unit of historical and spatial development, see Belich, *Replenishing the Earth*. For an example of non-anglophone settler cities (albeit one within the British imperial world), see E. Gilad, 'Is settler colonial history urban history?', https://globalurbanhistory.com/2020/02/10/is-settler-colonial-history-urban-history/, accessed 15 Oct. 2023, as well as the case-studies in C. Elkins and S. Pedersen (eds.), *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* (London, 2005).

[5]For discussions of Hokkaido as a settler-colonial space, see S.X. Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism: Malthusianism and Transpacific Migration, 1868–1961* (Cambridge, 2019); and M.M. Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation State* (New York, 2012). In the Japanese-language research on Ainu and Hokkaido history, the concept is relatively new: see M. Sakata, 'Review of Richard Siddle, *Ainu tsūshi: 'Ezo' kara senjūminzoku e*, transl. M. Winchester [Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2021]', *Aynu teetawanoankur kanpinuye*, 2 (2022), 237–45; and M. Tokutomi, 'Ainu to setorā koroniarizumu: Indian shi to Ainu shi no hikaku', *Aynu teetawanoankur kanpinuye*, 4 (2024), 161–79. The work of Ainu anthropologist Ishiwara Mai is also relevant. A sample of her work, along with that of numerous anglophone scholars, appears in T. Grunow *et al.*, 'Hokkaidō 150: settler-colonialism and Indigeneity in modern Japan and beyond', *Critical Asian Studies*, 51 (2019), 597–636. She has also edited a volume of Ainu perspectives on the 150th anniversary of the naming of Hokkaido: M. Ishihara, *Ainu kara mita Hokkaidō 150-nen* (Sapporo, 2021). For other parts of the Japanese empire, see J. Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea 1876–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); and P. Duara, 'Between empire and nation: Japanese settler colonialism in Manchukuo', in Elkins and Pedersen (eds.), *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, 59–78. For a study of Japanese settler-colonial urbanism, see E. O'Dwyer, *Significant Soil: Settler Colonialism and Japan's Urban Empire in Manchuria* (Cambridge, MA, 2015). To date, there have been few studies of Okinawa (Ryukyu) as a settler-colonial space in the years following its formal annexation by the Japanese state in 1879, and no studies of the capital Naha as a settler-colonial city. In part, this is because Okinawa – unlike Hokkaido – was *not* a destination for millions of Japanese settlers. Okinawa remains to this day a majority Okinawan prefecture. For an overview of Okinawa's place alongside Hokkaido, Taiwan and Korea in the Japanese empire, see J. Uchida and T. Asano, 'Japan and its margins: Hokkaido, Okinawa, Korea and Taiwan from the Meiji to the postwar period', in L. Hein (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2023), 87–137.

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the Kaitakushi (Hokkaido Colonial Agency), a Japanese government ministry created in 1869 to facilitate the widespread settlement of Hokkaido by Japanese settlers.[6] Over the next 30 years, the city ballooned in size, paralleling the explosive pace of settlement in the region: between 1869 and 1900, the city's population grew from just a handful to about 50,000 people, while the settler population of Hokkaido increased from 60,000 to about two million people.

In addition to administrative functions, Sapporo was home to a number of experimental institutions of colonial science and technology. These included an agricultural college and testing grounds, industrial facilities, one of Japan's first railways, schools and hospitals. Foreign men and women, mostly from the United States, were hired to bring their expertise to Hokkaido, which they and their Japanese employers described as Japan's version of the American West: a frontier for homesteaders and fortune-seekers. Based in Sapporo, those foreigners helped turn the city into an incubator of colonial knowledge, which eventually found its way to Japan's later colonial cities in Taiwan, Korea and Manchukuo.[7]

The Ainu population of pre-1869 Sapporo had shrunk considerably, as earlier decades of economic and ecological disruption had forced most local Ainu communities out of the Sapporo area or led to widespread death by epidemic disease. They were not particularly welcome after 1869, either, although there were neither formal restrictions on Ainu movement or habitation nor any recorded efforts to remove the Ainu from Sapporo. Indeed, many nearby Ainu were recruited to the city to build its early infrastructure. Generally, though, Japanese policy was one of neglect, at least until the turn of the century. The colonial authorities banned traditional Ainu cultural and economic practices, particularly traditional fishing methods, which continued to disrupt and displace Ainu communities. But in the Ishikari area, at least, these policies did not meaningfully affect the presence of Ainu communities, which had already been upended by Tokugawa-era economic and environmental transformations.[8] In place of the government, foreign missionaries became the primary agents in facilitating Ainu movement to and from Sapporo, where schools and medical facilities catering to the Ainu attracted a small but steady stream.[9] Nevertheless, these communities never became large and important within the city, with most Ainu remaining in more rural areas of the region or in the coastal fishing towns. Over time, the association of the Ainu with 'rural' (and therefore

[6]The Kaitakushi, as it was generally known by its English-speaking employees during the 1870s, is often translated as the Hokkaido Development Commission or Hokkaido Colonization Office. The first term is a more literal translation of the word 'kaitaku', which means 'to reclaim land for agriculture', but this term obscures the particular colonial relationship between the central government and Hokkaido. Hence, I prefer 'Colonial Agency'.

[7]I discuss aspects of this in M. Thornton, 'A capitol orchard: botanical networks and the creation of a Japanese "neo-Europe"', *American Historical Review*, 122 (2022), 573–99. See also B. Walker, 'Meiji modernization, scientific agriculture, and the destruction of Japan's Hokkaido wolf', *Environmental History*, 9 (2004), 248–74.

[8]For an overview of these policies, see D. Howell, 'The Meiji state and the logic of Ainu protection', in H. Hardacre with A. Kern (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan* (Leiden, 1997), 612–34.

[9]The most prominent was John Batchelor, who adopted an Ainu girl, Yaeko, and operated a hospital for Ainu in Sapporo. See J. Batchelor, *Sea-Girt Yezo: Glimpses at Missionary Work in North Japan* (London, 1902), for an account of his time there.

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'traditional' or 'backward') places justified increasingly harsh assimilationist polices, particularly the Hokkaido Former Aborigine Protection Law of 1899, which sought to stamp out Ainu culture and 'guide' the Ainu into the modernity of Japanese citizenship.

Despite this history of displacement and exclusion, Sapporo – largely by virtue of its position as colonial Hokkaido's political headquarters – became an important site of Ainu activism. Ainu politics in the early twentieth century was dominated by a relatively conservative group of men who promoted assimilation in hopes of securing a modicum of prosperity and security for their communities. The Ainu Association of Hokkaido, founded in Sapporo in 1930, exemplified this trend. After World War II, however, more radical activist groups asserted different visions of Ainu identity and sovereignty, bringing protests and even violence to the sites and symbols of colonial oppression.[10] The most notable example, perhaps, has been the ongoing demands that Hokkaido University – the descendant of the agricultural college founded in Sapporo's early years – acknowledge its role in grave robbing and other desecrations of Ainu communities in the name of ethnographic research projects. The university has created an ossuary to house the remains of hundreds and thousands of Ainu whose identities are unknown, a poignant and bitter symbol of the colonial inequalities at the heart of the city.[11]

Sapporo in the settler-colonial world

In many respects, then, the modern history of Sapporo reflects patterns seen in settler-colonial cities elsewhere, and illustrates the conscious efforts of Sapporo's officials to adapt models of settler-colonial urbanism from other parts of the world. In this, they were quite successful: as one American observer put it in 1921, Hokkaido was 'strikingly different from the rest of Japan', resembling Wisconsin and New England in its crops, climate and frontier society.[12] The framework of settler-colonial urbanism underscores the importance of understanding Sapporo's history not just as a local history, confined by the city's municipal borders, but rather as a history of how cities, and the people and institutions within them, have broad, transformative effects across wider regions, and draw upon a global hinterland of people, ideas and technologies to produce those effects.

At the same time, Japan's version of settler-colonialism was not simply a copy of what was happening in other empires. The particular historical configurations that produced Sapporo distinguish its settler-colonial urbanism from those of other places. One difference is the much longer history of relations between Ainu and *wajin* (ethnic Japanese). Ainu society developed in large part through contact with *wajin* society over the course of hundreds of years, and the social and political changes that led to the displacement of Ainu in the Sapporo area were not the result

[10]For a discussion of post-war Ainu history, see the latter chapters of R. Siddle, *Race, Resistance, and the Ainu of Japan* (London, 1997). Regarding recent changes to Japanese government Ainu policy, see M. Winchester, 'On the dawn of a new national Ainu policy: the "Ainu as a situation" today', *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 7 (2009).

[11]M. Roellinghoff, 'Osteo-hermeneutics: Ainu racialization, de-indigenization, and bone theft in Japanese Hokkaido', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 10 (2020), 295–310.

[12]W.D. Jones, 'Hokkaido, the northland of Japan', *Geographical Review*, 11 (1921), 16–30.

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of settler-colonialism, but rather of a different economic paradigm centred on an extractive, yet seasonal, fishing industry and of a political regime that had a deep interest in maintaining the ethnic and political *difference* between the two populations, even as it sought to assert greater power over the Ainu from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. This political power, however, was couched in a language of 'benevolence' and 'protection'. Tokugawa officials tried to 'protect' the Ainu from the extractions of commercial fishing merchants even as they asserted their own power, often violently, over Ainu communities.[13]

A second difference was the concentration of central state power in Sapporo, making the city more relevant, for better and for worse, to Ainu society and politics, compared to similar cities in the Anglo-American settler-colonial world. Even if Sapporo did not become home to many or most Ainu, it represented the highly centralized structure of the colonial state in Hokkaido, which in turn reflected the high degree of centralization of political authority within Japan more generally. The Japanese colonial state quickly and effectively controlled Hokkaido's physical, political and social infrastructure, leaving few spaces for Ainu autonomy.

A third difference is that the Ainu – unlike many Native American tribes, for instance – were never relocated en masse to reservations far from their original homes. They were not seen as a military threat. After 1869, they were (at least legally) full subjects of the Japanese emperor. Even though they were stripped of their land and, in many cases, forced to assimilate into Japanese society, there has been little discussion of reclaiming full sovereignty; no broken treaties; no question of autonomous territories within the nation-state framework of Japan.

What do these differences suggest about the distinctive form of settler-colonial urbanism in Japan? At a very basic level, it reminds us of the value of history – as a particularistic study – to complicate and refine general theories, particularly when those theories are produced in the anglophone academy using a limited number of Western case-studies as their base. It also suggests that recent arguments about the importance of white supremacy and racial capitalism as drivers of settler-colonialism may not hold true in all settler-colonial contexts.[14] This is not to say racialized discourse did not exist in colonial Hokkaido, but rather that a white-centred framework of racialized colonialism may not explain the particular racial dynamics between non-white Japanese and non-white Ainu.

At the same time, the similarities between Sapporo and Western patterns of settler-colonial urbanism illustrate how older forms of interaction between different ethnic groups, however unequal they may have been, gave way to a paradigm of settler-colonial power relations that resembled and reinforced a global paradigm in the nineteenth century.[15] This convergence, as well as the particular paths leading to it, underscores the value of taking a global perspective to the historical question of how the settler-colonial city became so prominent a feature of the modern urban world.

[13]D. Howell, *Capitalism from Within: Economy, Society, and the State in a Japanese Fishery* (Berkeley, 1995); D. Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Berkeley, 2005); and B. Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590–1800* (Berkeley, 2001).

[14]Simpson and Hugill, 'The settler colonial city', 1314–15.

[15]Regarding aspects of convergence in global modernity, see C. Gluck, 'The end of elsewhere: writing modernity now', *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), 676–87.

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In the end, dominant theories of settler colonialism *help* us understand what was happening in nineteenth-century Hokkaido, but they are not *sufficient* for us to understand those processes. We see in the late nineteenth century the slow replacement of earlier models of economic and social relations between the Ainu and mainland Japanese by a settler-colonial model, one centred on Sapporo. But these older practices – rooted in various ideological and economic structures, such as the notion of 'benevolence' toward the Ainu or their work in the commercial fishing industry – did not disappear completely. And Sapporo was therefore not quite the same as its counterparts in North America or Australia. The convergence of local and global patterns made Sapporo a distinctive settler-colonial city, one that, alongside cases from other non-anglophone contexts, perhaps allows us to develop more inclusive and truly *global* paradigms of settler-colonial urbanism.

Certainly, for understanding Japan's later imperial cities, it is worth thinking about whether and how Sapporo (and Hokkaido more generally) served as a model. Colonial officials trained in Sapporo replicated their home institutions in Taiwan and Manchuria, although unlike at Sapporo Japanese colonial cities in the later empire were built atop pre-existing cities and towns. This fact underscores the importance of tracing genealogies of urban form and function rather than supposing an unchanging model of Japanese colonial urbanism. But the threads connecting those places to Hokkaido exist and are worth exploring to understand that Japan's imperial urbanism was the product of influences from Japan, from its early colonies and from around the world. Given this heterogeneity, should we call all of these disparate cities where Japanese sought to migrate and colonize settler-colonial? Perhaps not. But it seems worthwhile to include Japan in a global conversation about which urban spaces serve as templates for 'settler-colonial cities' and explore how this framework for understanding cities around the world gained its power not because it emerged from one particular historical context, but rather because it was refined and reinforced through a global convergence of colonial encounters.

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