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Frontier spirit and the making of the Japanese pioneer

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Abstract: This article analyses the origins of the so-called frontier spirit as the main feature of the Japanese pioneers who were the grass-roots agents of Japanese expansion into Asia. It argues that this narrative traces back to the government-sponsored cultivation program in Hokkaidō, where so-called *tondenhei* were employed as farmer-soldiers to open up the new frontier region as Japan's first colony. After the termination of the *tondenhei* program, the frontier spirit took on a life of its own. It was embraced by advocates of Japanese settler colonialism on the Asian continent as a vital element of the quintessential Japanese pioneer, capable of overcoming any hardships that might arise. Consequently, the iconic Japanese pioneer in Manchuria, who eventually fell victim to Japan's megalomaniac migration machine in Northeast China, can be seen as the reincarnation of their equally unfortunate predecessor, the *tondenhei* soldier.

Keywords: frontier spirit; Hokkaidō; Japanese migration to Manchuria; pioneer; *tondenhei*

1 Introduction

The periodical *Manshū Gurafu*, produced by the South Manchurian Railway Company to showcase the positive impact of Japanese influence on Manshūkoku (1932–1945), disseminated the iconic image of Japanese agricultural settlers cultivating the previously neglected open spaces of Northeast China, both within Japan and internationally. Through the use of black and white photographs taken by renowned photographers like Fuchikami Hakuyō (1889–1960), the magazine romanticized the lives of rural Japanese settlers and significantly contributed to their transformation into the archetype of Japanese pioneers who turned “the frontier” in Manchuria into a part of the new East Asian modernity.¹ These iconic Japanese pioneers were not

¹ Culver 2013: 120–133.

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only entrusted with opening up of the “frontier space” through hard labor, but were also seen as the embodiment of the specific “frontier spirit” necessary for the success of this endeavor.

This article analyses the origin of this frontier spirit and argues that the narrative of the Japanese pioneer as the grass-root agent of Japanese expansion into Asia, culminating in what Ruoff refers to as “the cult of the pioneer”² in the 1940s, can be traced back to the narrative created around the first modern Japanese colonists: the *tondenhei* cultivators of Hokkaidō. To elucidate the concept of the frontier spirit, which is a constitutive element of the cult of the pioneer, this article begins with a discussion of the concept of the “frontier” in Japan, followed by an examination of the role of so-called *tondenhei* in opening up the newly defined frontier region Hokkaidō. The central argument focuses on explaining the transformation process that elevated the propaganda developed for a small government-sponsored program of little success into an ideological concept. This concept eventually became an ideal for Japanese imperialists who extensively employed it in their promotion of emigration to Manchuria. In order to emphasize the military aspects of the frontier spirit, the pioneers are conceptualized as male soldiers, deliberately excluding an exploration of the contribution of women, which falls beyond the scope of this study.

2 Defining the frontier

In the Tokugawa era, the island now known as Hokkaidō was called Ezo or Ezochi, a term that loosely translates to “barbarian land”. The otherwise very accurate “Shōhō Map of Greater Japan” of 1644, the result of a mapping project commissioned by the *bakufu* to solidify Tokugawa’s control over Japanese provinces, provides only a crude outline of this peripheral territory, which was entirely missing on many other Japanese maps drawn before the mid-nineteenth century.³ In his study on the Japanese expansion into Ezochi from the late 16th to the early 19th century, Brett Walker argues that a formal claiming of the island only became necessary after the Meiji Restoration (1868), when Japan adopted the Western notion of diplomacy and international law that made formal demarcation of territorial borders meaningful.⁴ The pre-modern concept of foreign relations and international order, borrowed from China, operated not so much with the declaration of borders but with the notion of a “civilized center”, i.e., Japan in its premodern extension, and a “barbarian edge”, in

² Ruoff 2010: 4.

³ Walker 2001: 1.

⁴ Walker 2001: 228.

this case the land of the Ainu.⁵ During the Tokugawa period, Ezochi was managed by the Matsumae *daimyō* as a middle ground where trade transactions as well as cultural interaction took place.⁶

The definition of Hokkaidō as the island whose shores constituted Japan's northern border gained importance after the official integration of the territory into the newly formed state of the Meiji era. The previously ambiguous region was redefined as the northernmost territory of modern Japan that had to be developed as soon as possible to be integrated into the new nation state. The “opening up” of the territory, now known as Hokkaidō meaning “North Sea Circuit,” became a crucial aspect of state formation, economic development, and technically the first modern colonial project of the Japanese state. Despite the prevailing approach to view Japan's early modern period in proto-national terms,⁷ Howell argues that state formation already began in early modern Japan with the Tokugawa *bakufu* drawing clear physical borders for themselves as well as claiming an effective central power over a clearly defined territory.⁸ An important tool in this process was the definition of ethnicity. Whereas ethnic labels like “Ainu” or “Wajin/Japanese” would have been anachronistic and misleading to people in northern Japan before the middle of the 15th century, the Matsumae, as local agents of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, made significant efforts to establish and maintain a clear distinction between “Japanese” and “Ainu” throughout the Edo period, thus defining a cultural frontier before the modern prefecture of Hokkaidō became the northern frontier of modern Japan and the Ainu were renamed “former aborigines” (*kyū dojin*) in 1878.⁹ The conscious creation of a modern nation-state, however, is usually seen as part of the modernization process in the Meiji period.¹⁰ Boyle even suggests that instead of an artificial separation of nation building and imperialistic expansion, it makes more sense to discuss the development of Japanese territorial expansion as a continuum. He refers to the presentation of national and imperial as analytically separate as a “narrative created by the demands of national history, in which national is that which is left when empire is gone”.¹¹ The integration of Okinawa and Hokkaidō were thus internal colonization processes.

The institutional agent for Hokkaidō's internal colonization was the Kaitakushi, the Hokkaidō Development Agency established in Sapporo in July 1869. In the first ten years of its operation, the Kaitakushi heavily relied on foreign advisors, the majority of them from the United States. The most well-known among them was

⁵ Arano 2005.

⁶ Walker 2001: 5–9.

⁷ Boyle 2016: 67.

⁸ Howell 1994: 71–73.

⁹ Howell 1994: 79, 91.

¹⁰ Gluck 1985.

¹¹ Boyle 2016: 68.

Horace Capron (1804–1885), who had been asked to take over his advisory position in the Kaitakushi by its later director, Kuroda Kiyotaka (1840–1900), whom he had met in the United States. Like other American advisors for the Kaitakushi, he was seen as competent for the job because he represented a nation that had colonized new parts of its territory and successfully conquered the “frontier.” Although his practical contributions to the colonization of Hokkaidō are controversial, Capron is positively evaluated as an American model of the “frontier spirit.”¹² In an assessment of the work of the Kaitakushi, he elaborated: “It may truthfully be said that the work of this Department [i.e., the Kaitakushi] exclusively under American direction, has resulted in literally enlarging the boundaries of the Japanese Empire to the extent of the domain of this great Island of Yesso or Hokkaido”¹³

Capron here referred first and foremost to the cartographic inclusion of the territory, a process that had already begun when the Matsumae substantiated their claim to the resources they extracted from Ezo by mapping the territory as under their authority. However, the general lack of institutional concern demonstrated by the Tokugawa *bakufu* left the territory both inside and outside Japan throughout the entire span of Tokugawa rule.¹⁴ This ambiguous character of Ezo had been no problem in Tokugawa Japan due to the absence of an expansionist ideology, but when Meiji Japan adopted the Western notion of empire and started imperialist projects of its own, the concept of clearly defined borders took on a new significance.

3 Opening up the frontier region

When Ezo was renamed Hokkaidō and officially integrated into the Japanese territory, there was hardly any Japanese presence on the island. Therefore, one of the first challenges for its Development Agency was to find settlers to put into practice the opening-up of the territory and settling the frontier to defend the northern border of Japan. Creating permanent communities of Japanese settlers would transform the frontier into a valuable asset, and the group entrusted with this endeavor in Japan’s collective memory were the so called *tondenhei*, which translates roughly into farmer-soldiers.¹⁵ Ivings calls the *tondenhei* system “the pet project of Kuroda

12 Mieczkowski/Mieczkowski 1974.

13 Capron 1884 as cited in Boyle 2016: 72.

14 Boyle 2016: 73–74, Walker 2001: 39–43.

15 *Tonden* (屯田) is originally a Chinese concept of military-agricultural colonies. During the second century BCE, Chinese soldiers were instrumentalized after campaigns of military expansion to settle the land they conquered as farmers, thereby claiming the territory for the Chinese emperor. The Japanese word *tondenhei* uses the *tonden* concept in combination with the character *hei* (兵)—soldier—as the label for Hokkaidō settlers who participated in a specific program for the agricultural development of the island by farmer-soldiers.

Kiyotaka”¹⁶ when Kuroda served as the head of the Kaitakushi from 1874 to 1882. The original proposal for government support of the *tendenhei* system is dated November 1873, when Kuroda was still the agency’s vice-director.¹⁷ The proposal emphasized the necessity for a military presence to deter Russian encroachment in the northern territories as well as the need to open up the new lands for agriculture. The petition suggested a “*tenden* system” through which *shizoku*¹⁸ from “Aomori, Sakata, Miyagi etc.” would migrate to Hokkaidō to perform the desired combination of developing and guarding the new territory. This *tendenhei* system would kill two birds with one stone as it offered the *shizoku* an adequate gainful employment as well as reducing the overall costs of the endeavor. The rationale behind this argument was that constructing separate military bases and agricultural settlements would be more expensive than combining military and agricultural functions. Additionally, the *tendenhei* system was seen as a means to prevent possible social problems arising from disenfranchised former samurai.¹⁹ However, as David Howell’s research on early Hokkaidō colonists with samurai backgrounds has revealed, many of them were compelled to migrate to Hokkaidō after losing their fiefdoms in the aftermath of the Meiji Restoration. They were not particularly enthusiastic about becoming farmers but were primarily concerned about losing their privileged status by joining resettlement support programs that provided agricultural colonists with the bare necessities for a start into their new life.²⁰ Therefore, to make the resettlement attractive as well as to ensure settlers’ survival in Hokkaidō’s harsh climate, transportation to the settlements, housing, farm tools, and, most importantly, staple food for the first three years in the new communities were provided. These three years also constituted the period of active military service that each *tenden*-soldier had to fulfill, followed by two years as a reservist before completing their duty in the program and returning to civilian life. The promise of retaining the land allocated to each settler household for cultivation and agricultural development was considered an additional incentive that ideally would attract a significant number of former *shizoku* to embark on a new life in Hokkaidō.

But, contrary to the narrative of a movement of brave former samurai who were drafted by the Kaitakushi as a vanguard of settlers in the early decades of Hokkaidō’s colonization, the history of the early Japanese immigration into Hokkaidō is more complex. Only a few hundred farmer-soldier households of samurai origin resettled

16 Ivings 2020: 193.

17 Itō 1992: 42.

18 New class created after the abolition of the Tokugawa hierarchy consisting of former samurai retainers of feudal lords. *Shizoku* were ranked above the commers, the *heimin*, but below the *kazoku*, the newly created Meiji nobility of former feudal lords and court nobles.

19 Uehara 1914: 6–20.

20 Howell 1983.

under the jurisdiction of the Kaitakushi after the introduction of the *tondenhei* system in 1875 and 1876.²¹ The majority of the earliest Japanese settlers did not participate in this scheme but were recruited by private settlement companies, investors, groups, or individuals who purchased land in Hokkaidō to be rented out to settler households. One of the better-known settlement companies was the Kai-shinkai (開進社), which received support from Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883). During its few years of existence from 1879 to 1882, the company, with a capital of 2 million Yen, pursued a plan to clear 100,000 *chōbu*²² of land within 15 years by selling shares for 5 *chōbu* to each participating household, preferably former samurai who wanted to move to Hokkaidō. However, since most *shizoku* settlers did not have sufficient experience with agriculture and the company quickly encountered financial troubles, the business failed and was discontinued after the early death of its president and founder, Iwahashi Tetsusuke (1835–1882). Several other companies or groups operated similar schemes, but the usual result of their mostly overambitious but unrealistic plans was often hardship or even failure.²³

The bulk of the 7,337 *tondenhei* households, consisting of approximately 40,000 people, relocated to Hokkaidō from 1884 to 1899 under the auspices of the Army Ministry and the Hokkaidō Prefectural Government, as the Kaitakushi was dissolved in 1882. Its former director and initiator of the *tondenhei* scheme, Kuroda Kiyotaka, moved on in his political career in Tokyo, even though it was his misappropriation of Kaitakushi assets that had caused the scandal contributing to the dissolution of the agency. The official requirement of samurai origin for the *tondenhei* was removed in 1890, and eventually, about 70 % of their total number were commoners.²⁴ The approximately 40,000 individuals resettled under the *tondenhei* scheme until its dissolution in 1904 constitute only a small percentage (3.55 %) of the 1,124,669 individuals officially recorded as the overall population of Hokkaidō in 1904, according to Hokkaidō Prefectural Office statistics.²⁵

Considering this relatively small number of *tondenhei*, their contribution to the agricultural and economic development of Hokkaidō is negligible. Similarly, they did not repel a Russian invasion, albeit some were called to the arms right after the abolition of the scheme as a background reserve in the Japanese-Russian War of 1904/5. However, that war took place in Northeast China and the Korean peninsula at a time when the Japanese “frontier” had shifted from Hokkaidō to the Asian continent. An unbiased assessment of the impact of *tondenhei* on defending Japan’s

²¹ Enomoto 1981: 224.

²² 1 *chōbu* = 0.992 hectare

²³ Enomoto 1981: 222; Takakura 1957.

²⁴ Ivings 2020: 196.

²⁵ Prefectural Office of Hokkaidō 2023.

northern border physically, economically, and militarily would, therefore, conclude that the scheme was a failure. Indeed, it was the ordinary settlers, without the generous official support provided to the *tondeihei* in the form of housing, farm tools, and provisions for the first three years of service, who formed the backbone of the gradually but steadily evolving agriculture and husbandry on the island. Convicts brought in en masse to the government prison system in Hokkaidō built the roads and railroad tracks, which could be utilized as infrastructure to transport troops and heavy weapons in the event of an attack on Japan's northern border.²⁶ *Tondenhei* settlements were not even established at strategically important points where the farmer-soldiers could have served as "border guards," but instead, they were clustered together in a few inland locations. Many inhabitants of *tondenhei* settlements abandoned their agricultural communities when they realized the challenges of farming in the continental climate of the north, even with government assistance. Instead, they sought employment in urban areas where the industrial development of Hokkaidō provided white-collar jobs.

4 Creating the frontier spirit

Nevertheless, the narrative of Hokkaidō's integration into Japanese civilization includes the recurring theme of the heroic role played by the *tondenhei* in safeguarding the northern territory for the nation. A *tondenhei* museum in the outskirts of Sapporo, the Hokkaidō Development Village (*Hokkaidō kaitaku mura*) preserves not only the material history of the conquest of the north, but also immortalizes the brave soldiers who brought their families to the borderland to cultivate the wilderness.²⁷ Descendants of the former *tondenhei* actively maintain the memory of their ancestors' heroic endeavors through an organization of hobby historians. Their website *tondenhei.org* not only lists the name of all 7,337 participants of the *tondenhei* scheme, but also promotes their own journal, aptly named *Tonden*, featuring articles researching the history and historical impact of the farmer-soldiers. The presence of the *tondenhei* as the original guardians of the northern frontier in the medial space of museums, popular history journals, and websites suggests a different perspective from the earlier mentioned acknowledgment of the scheme's ultimate failure.

If their contribution to the expansion and development of Japanese territory cannot be convincingly measured in material or economic terms, there must be another form of contribution that justifies the high esteem in which the *tondenhei* are held to this day. Arguably, this contribution is encapsulated in the English motto

26 Jolliffe 2019.

27 Mason 2012: 31–32.

chosen by the hobby historians for their website: “that’s Frontier Spirit”.²⁸ This particular spirit was defined in a document consisting of 20 paragraphs, known as the *Decree for tondenhei and their Families* (*Tondenhei oyobi kazoku kyōrei* 屯田兵及家族教令), which was distributed to all new participants of the *tondenhei* program from 1890 onwards and sent to all *tondenhei* settlements. This document aimed to establish the spiritual foundation of their communities. It conceptualized the drafted men as warriors serving their country, particularly the Tenno. They were part of a military hierarchy where their military duties took precedence over everything else. Consequently, they were provided with uniforms, boots, and weapons that needed to be properly maintained and were not to be used for any purpose other than military tasks. Simultaneously, they were expected to cultivate the land assigned to them in a manner that would make the communities independent of government support as soon as possible. The importance of working together as a community, helping one another, and practicing frugality and thrift were emphasized. The desired model community of *tondenhei* aimed to educate the next generation in the selfless military spirit of service to their country.²⁹ A compilation of documents from the settlement of Ainonai, today a suburb of Kitami City, published in 1938 with a preface dated June 1936, demonstrates the significance attached to the *Decree* in the settlements. The editor of the compilation, Kawahara Tsuruzō, himself a former farmer-soldier who arrived in Ainonai in 1898, was subsequently drafted, along with 200 men from the settlement, to fight in the Russo-Japanese war. After returning to Japan, he worked in administrative positions in the prefectural office of Hokkaidō before returning to Ainonai, where he served as the mayor from September 1933 to September 1945.³⁰ During his tenure, he oversaw the compilation of documents relating to the *tondenhei* era in Ainonai. Before reprinting the complete text of the *Decree* in the compilation, he provided an explanation of the revered status accorded to the *Decree*:

It is difficult to express in a few words the essence of the *tondenhei* spirit. However, there is a precious document that I keep in a place of honor in my house and recite every morning and evening: the complete text of the ‘*Decree for tondenhei and their families*’. This document serves as our enduring talisman, encapsulating the profound essence of our 40-year immigration history—a vibrant dream that must never fade from memory. I consider this material to be a unique treasure, and we must always remember the principles outlined in it.

Yet, this precious material is not only about the spirit of leadership in the past. This great spirit of leadership holds value in the present as well because I believe it is the best way to guide the villagers into the future. It is a cherished spiritual asset that should be kept alive in the hearts of our children and grandchildren, transcending the boundaries of time—past, present, and

28 Hokkaidō tonden kurabu 2023.

29 Itō 1992: 372–378.

30 Yanai 2021.

future—by passing it on to future generations. Together with the like-minded present villagers, we review and reassure ourselves, engaging in thorough discussions and research about that era.³¹

The year of the *Decree*'s publication coincides with the implementation of the Meiji Constitution and the signing of the Imperial Rescript on Education. These two documents are significant components of Japan's imperial ideology that dominated the decades following 1890. However, at the time of their publication, the initial enthusiasm for Hokkaidō's development as the Japanese northern frontier had diminished, and therefore also commoners were made officially eligible to fill the ranks of the *tendenhei*. In this context, the *Decree* served as an important document not only to professionalize the recruitment of volunteers for *tendenhei* settlements and the management of their villages under the jurisdiction of the Hokkaidō Prefectural Office but also to emphasize the official ideology of the scheme. However, the explicit reminder to *tendenhei* settlers that they served the emperor and played a specific role as guardians of the north, with their everyday behavior expected to be of superior standard, raises questions about the prevalence of socially deviant behavior among the *tendenhei*. If one of the 20 paragraphs explicitly prohibits gambling (§17), it is safe to assume that gambling was seen as a potential problem among the model pioneers in the settlements.³² Iving cites several newspaper articles from 1875 to 1901 that reported unruly behavior, riots, or even crimes committed by *tendenhei*.³³

The *Decree* was written by Koizumi Masayasu (1855–1917) on behalf of Nagayama Takeshirō (1837–1904), the second director of the Hokkaidō Prefectural Office. While not as famous as Kuroda Kiyotaka, who is usually credited with inventing the *tendenhei* scheme, Nagayama was the bureaucrat who realized the large-scale resettlement program.³⁴ He had been involved in the program since the early 1870s under the Kaitakushi. After the agency's dissolution, he remained in charge of the program, first moving to the Army Ministry and then pursuing a career in the newly established Hokkaidō Prefectural Office until he became its director. While Kuroda's 1873 petition for establishing a *tendenhei* scheme describes it at a macro-level (national and even international relevance, contribution to addressing the issue of disenfranchised *shizoku*, etc.), the Nagayama-Koizumi *Decree* of 1890 focuses on the micro-level perspective of living in a *tendenhei* settlement.

The *Decree for tendenhei and their Families*, as its name suggests, assumes that individual farmer-soldiers bring along their spouses and, if applicable, children; single men were not eligible for the program. Spouses were not only expected to

31 Ainanai tendenkai 1938: 2–3, translation by the author.

32 Itō 1992: 377.

33 Iving 2020: 202 footnote 33.

34 Kajita 2012: 45–46.

contribute to the clearing and agricultural tasks of the settlements, but they were also officially obliged to take over farming duties entirely whenever the male settlers performed their military duties. In contrast to the vaguely formulated *tondenhei* vision in Kuroda's petition, the *Decree* is very specific, not only demanding a Confucian family morality and a strong community spirit but also making specific provisions for personal hygiene and reducing expenses for banquets, weddings, and funerals. The personal space of *tondenhei* settlement inhabitants was regulated to the extent that anyone other than the farmer-soldiers themselves was forbidden to touch *tondenhei* weapons and uniforms, and the farmer-soldiers were explicitly prohibited from wearing their military boots for any tasks other than military ones. Although the *Decree* invokes the special responsibility of the *tondenhei* vis-à-vis the Tenno and their country, certain parts of the text resemble the house rules of a youth hostel rather than the foundation of heroic frontier spirit: regularly cleaning the house and toilet (§18), attending monthly sermon meetings (§15), and abandoning past bad habits (§19).

5 Politicizing the frontier spirit

The discrepancy between ideal and reality, however, did not diminish the conceptualizing of the *tondenhei* as model settlers whose frontier spirit created modern Hokkaidō. Iving compiled figures from Uehara's 1914 history of the *tondenhei* program to assess its contribution to the agricultural development of Hokkaidō. The sobering conclusion of the analysis is that their share of agricultural production was usually less than 10 %. The most productive region of Hokkaidō in terms of agriculture in the 1920s had no *tondenhei* settlements at all. Most settlements suffered from the flight of farmer-soldiers, and the land provided for the cultivation by *tondenhei* was often rented out to tenants by the communities due to a lack of *tondenhei* labor.³⁵

The preface to the compilation of documents from the *tondenhei* settlement of Ainonai, dated "tondenhei memorial day" in June 1936, laments the declining numbers of farmer-soldier families. However, it also makes the optimistic prediction that the unique frontier spirit of the remaining families will carry on the endeavor into the future.³⁶ Rather than presenting the history of the glorious past of a pioneer community, the compilation mainly focuses on the financial problems the Ainonai community faced in managing its land and assets in the early 20th century. The documents contained within show the settlement's determined efforts in the late

35 Ivings 2020: 206–210.

36 Ainonai tondenkai 1938: 2.

1920s to protest against administrative measures by the prefectoral government that integrated the *tondenhei* community into the nearby town to ensure its financial survival. One justification for the request to remain independent is the hardship the community endured when all its 200 able-bodied men were called to serve in the Japanese-Russian War immediately after the *tondenhei* scheme had been discontinued, which they did without hesitation. Even in these difficult circumstances, when farming had to be carried out by women and the elderly, the community survived due to its high morale. Once again, it is not the material reality but the image of an unbroken spirit in overcoming hardship that constitutes the core of the *tondenhei* narrative. The chosen date for the preface of the Ainonai compilation is not coincidental. The “*tondenhei* memorial day” was a newly created propaganda instrument in the push to make emigration of Japanese farmers to Manshūkoku a national policy after a phase of trial settlements on the continent that consciously used the image of the heroic *tondenhei* to send reservists as *busō imin*, a modern term for farmer-soldiers, to the new frontier in China’s northeast.

This latest and most consequential development, i.e., the mobilization of farmers to emigrate to Manchuria, is best understood when contextualized within the “century of Japanese emigration” that started with emigration to Hokkaidō right after the Meiji Restoration and continued until the 1950s and 1960s with organized emigration of Japanese settlers to South America. The frontier spirit, first developed in the *tondenhei* project in Hokkaidō, was very much informed by the US-American narrative of conquering “the frontier”, i.e. the American West in the 19th century.³⁷ It is no coincidence that the Kaitakushi relied heavily on American advisors who were employed based on their assumed expertise with the American “frontier”.³⁸ The most prominent, and presumably the most hapless, of these experts was the aforementioned Horace Capron. Initially hired to instill the developers of Hokkaidō with the American frontier spirit, he is remembered for attempting to transplant American schemes of large-scale farming, as well as American crops and animal husbandry, to the climatically different Hokkaidō. His own records about his time at the Kaitakushi assess his deployment as a failure and often highlight constant disputes with what he perceived as money-squandering Japanese bureaucrats.³⁹

However, neither the failure to replicate the American “frontier spirit” in the early years of the opening of Hokkaidō nor the less-than-ideal development of the *tondenhei* scheme prevented the utilization of the narrative of modern Japanese pioneers ready to open up “new frontiers” for the Japanese empire. In his study on the development and the consequences of the idea of overpopulation as one of the

³⁷ Lu 2019: 22–23.

³⁸ Hennessey 2019.

³⁹ Harrison 1951.

most pressing problems of the modern Japanese state, Sidney Lu connects the intellectual discussion about the Malthusian trap in Japan to the development of Japanese settler colonialism. He identifies the beginning of Japanese colonial studies in the years following the Russo-Japanese war,⁴⁰ which coincided with the end of the government-sponsored *tondenhei* scheme. After its discontinuation, the figure of the *tondenhei* became part of the newly emerging cult of the Japanese pioneer.

Taiwan, Japan's first oversea colony awarded in the Treaty of Shimonoseki that concluded the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, and the Korean peninsula, annexed by Japan in 1910, could have been the first testing grounds for a Malthusian-inspired emigration conducted with Japanese pioneers. However, both locations did not meet the requirements for a true pioneer project. They were already inhabited by a cultured local elite and had a relatively high population density, thus they did not qualify as "terrae nullii" waiting to be opened up and developed by Japanese pioneers.⁴¹ Even Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834–1901), a staunch supporter of colonial expansion through *shishi* (men with noble goals), advocated for Japanese mass migration to Taiwan shortly after its acquisition as a colony,⁴² but the island never became the target of a large-scale emigration project.⁴³ Japanese individuals who resettled to Taiwan in colonial times did so as administrators, merchants, or entrepreneurs. The same applies to the several hundred thousand Japanese civilians who emigrated to the Korean peninsula under Japanese rule. They often became part of the local business elite, and if they engaged in agriculture, it was typically as landlords employing Korean tenants.⁴⁴

Emigration of impoverished Japanese individuals from rural areas seeking a better life overseas between the late 19th century and the mid-1920s often occurred through broker schemes that brought them to Hawaii, Brazil, and, until the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, to the USA to work on plantations under sometimes deplorable conditions.⁴⁵ Similar to the thousands of young Japanese women who were sold or deceived into prostitution in Japanese settlements in Taiwan, Korea, and Northeast China,⁴⁶ they did not qualify as embodiments of the noble frontier spirit of brave subjects of the emperor opening up uninhabited land for Japanese expansion.

It was not until the expansion of Japanese influence into northeast China, into so-called Manchuria, and the establishment of the supposedly independent state of *Manshūkoku* under Japanese direction, that the utopia of a prosperous life for

⁴⁰ Lu 2019: 132.

⁴¹ Lu 2019: 6–7.

⁴² Fukuzawa 1970 [1961]: 264–265.

⁴³ Hirano/Veracini/Roy 2018: 10.

⁴⁴ Uchida 2005.

⁴⁵ Reichl 1995: 37–39; Moriyama 1985.

⁴⁶ Mihalopoulos 1994; Driscoll 2010.

Japanese pioneers in the service of Japanese culture and the Japanese emperor was revived from its Hokkaidō origin. The most prevalent narrative regarding the origins of the idea of populating the vast emptiness of northeast China with Japanese pioneers tells of the collaboration of two men from different professional backgrounds who joined forces to realize the concept of creating Japanese agricultural settlements in the Manchurian expanse. One of them, Tomiya Kaneo (1892–1937), a subordinate of Ishiwara Kanji (1889–1949) in the general staff of the Kantō Army, drafted the initial proposal for the settlement of Japanese peasants in Manchuria, earning him the moniker “Father of Manchuria Settlers”. To bring his idea to fruition, he teamed up in June 1932 with the agricultural teacher Katō Kanji (1884–1965), who advocated a form of nostalgic agrarian nationalism.⁴⁷ In the utopia envisioned by these two individuals, young people from Japan’s purportedly overpopulated regions would lead a self-sufficient pioneer life as independent farmers in communities consisting of 200–300 households. In order to gain the support of the Kantō Army, which was crucial for the practical implementation of their idea, Tomiya emphasized the function of the settlements as food production sites for the army and as outposts to secure Japanese influence in the region beyond the cities and military garrisons. Katō Kanji viewed the settlements as a means to realize his vision of a return to the essence of simple Japanese life in the countryside, untainted by the decadence of urban areas.

The first attempts to implement the deployment of Japanese agrarian settlers to the allegedly unclaimed rural territories in newly established Manshūkoku owe much to the narrative of the frontier spirit and the cult of the Japanese pioneers developing this frontier created around the Hokkaidō *tondenhei* scheme. Uehara Tetsusaburō (1883–1972), an agricultural scientist from the Imperial University of Hokkaidō and the author of the 1914 history of the Hokkaidō *tondenhei*, was involved in planning the settling of the Manchurian frontier with Japanese pioneers when he participated in a conference in Mukden in late January 1932. The conference was hosted by the Kantō Army, which had also invited scientists to assess the opportunities and risks associated with the settlement of Japanese immigrants in Manchuria.⁴⁸ Drawing on his expertise in the development of Hokkaidō, Uehara proposed government support for the development of northeast China based on the *tondenhei* model, which involved recruiting volunteers with a military background who would be resettled in agricultural communities of a few hundred households at the frontier to open up the land and spread Japanese civilization in the border region.

Large-scale plans for sending farmer-soldiers to the frontier in northeast Asia were initially rejected due to the opposition from the Minister of Finance. However,

⁴⁷ Havens 1970.

⁴⁸ Kimijima 1976: 114–116.

in August 1932, a test program for 500 settlers was initiated. Volunteers were largely drafted through the Imperial Military Reserve Association and relocated to the first Japanese agricultural settlement in Manchuria, named Iyasaka. The relocation process was made possible with significant support from the Kantō Army, which expelled the former Chinese inhabitants of the village, provided essential supplies for the settlers' survival, and defended them against their understandably hostile new neighbors. Unlike the Hokkaidō *tondenhei*, who could only participate in the relocation scheme if they brought their family along, the Japanese farmer-soldiers in northeast China were single men enticed into the adventure of conquering the Manchurian frontier as a patriotic duty. However, when they realized the harsh and perilous nature of life in the settlement, about a third of them chose to return to Japan.⁴⁹

In these initial years of small-scale officially sponsored Japanese migration to Manchuria from 1932 to 1935, the term *tondenhei* was quickly replaced by the more modern-sounding term *bussō imin* (paramilitary settlers).⁵⁰ However, the intimate connection of the two concepts is evident in many respects. The justification for using the *tondenhei* scheme as a blueprint for sending Japanese paramilitary settlers to the new frontier in Manchuria is best exemplified in the conclusion of the book *Hokkaidō tondenhei to Manshū* (Manchuria and the farmer-soldiers of Hokkaidō), published in 1932 by the Imperial Military Reserve Association. The book lists twelve reasons for the success of the *tondenhei* project in Hokkaidō that must be taken into consideration for Manchuria, and all of them describe the specific frontier spirit necessary to accomplish the project: determination, adherence to rules, discipline, fighting spirit, perseverance, obedience, the readiness for military training, comradeship, community spirit, and although this requirement was quickly removed for paramilitary settlers in Manchuria, the willingness to bring one's family along.⁵¹

6 Conclusions

When Japan embraced the Western concept of empire and embarked on its own imperialist endeavors in the second half of the 19th century, the notion of clearly defined borders gained a renewed significance. The establishment of Japan's borders, which included the integration of Okinawa in the south and Hokkaidō in the north, was achieved through an internal colonization scheme as part of the nation-building process during the Meiji era. The pioneers who conquered the new

⁴⁹ Kobayashi 1977: 73.

⁵⁰ Kuwajima 1979: 17.

⁵¹ Taga 1932: 65.

territories for the emperor, driven by a distinct frontier spirit, embodied the epitome of Japan's new imperialism.

In reality, the Japanese pioneer emerged as a sometimes-reluctant participant in a job-creation scheme for disenfranchised former samurai following the Meiji Restoration. This scheme simultaneously aimed to send them, as potential trouble-makers, to the outskirts of Japan. The colonization of the previously marginalized island of Hokkaidō transformed the region into a “frontier” that was swiftly redefined as a valuable asset to be developed. Under American influence, the concept of “frontier spirit” was discovered as the defining quality of pioneers at the grass-roots level of Japanese territorial expansion. Through the implementation of the *tondenhei* scheme, it was elevated into an esteemed ideal applicable to all Japanese in theory.

However, when the *tondenhei* program came to an end, the frontier spirit took on a life of its own, detached from the tangible reality of the hardships and numerous failures that the program had produced during its official existence. Advocates of Japanese settler colonialism seized upon the archetype of the pioneer to fuel their aspirations of opening up new frontiers on the Asian continent. While skeptics questioned the viability of establishing permanent agricultural settlements for Japanese pioneers in the wilderness of Northeast Asia, proponents of mass migration of Japanese farmers to Manchuria resurrected the frontier spirit of the *tondenhei*, believing it would ensure the success of their endeavor, much like the opening up of Hokkaidō.

The subsequent Japanese pioneers, caught up in the “migration machine” to bring “millions to Manchuria,” eventually became “victims of empire.”⁵² They are essentially the reincarnation of the equally unfortunate *tondenhei* soldier, whose image has endured to this day in the reverence bestowed upon these Japanese heroes of modernization.

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⁵² The terms in quotation marks are borrowed from Louis Young seminal study on Japanese mass migration to Manchuria from 1998.

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