

Globalization and Localization: Social Welfare Policies in Interwar Japan

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Although there have been a number of studies of postwar welfare policies,¹ little has been written about Japan's social welfare policies during the first half of the twentieth century in English. This is regretful since Sheldon Garon's work stresses that the evolution of "Japanese-style" welfare through the efforts of the "state and its local allies" had "lasting effects" on postwar social programs. As he concludes in his book, *Molding Japanese Minds*, "rather than dwell on Japan's failure to adopt European welfare measures, we have here traced the development of an active, self-consciously 'Japanese' approach to the relief and prevention of poverty."² Mutsuko Takahashi 高橋睦子 also emphasizes continuities between pre-1945 and post-1945 social welfare policies, and by using the Japanese government's preferred term "welfare society" rather than "welfare state," highlights the placement of major responsibility for social welfare on families and communities throughout the twentieth century.³

Garon emphasizes the centrality of the district welfare commissioner system (*hōmen iin seido* 方面委員制度) in both pre-1945 and post-1945 social programs.⁴ In his view it was representative of modernized neighborly mutual assistance. Garon traces its origins to the Japanese scholar/government advisor Ogawa Shigejirō 小河滋次郎.⁵ But while Ogawa was indeed responsible for introducing it to Japan in Osaka, the district welfare commissioner system was in fact adopted from a European model. So were other aspects of the social policies introduced during the 1920s, culminating in passage of the Relief and Protection Law (*Kyūgo hō* 救護法) in 1929. While Garon's and other scholars' emphasis on continuities is not inappropriate, the focus here is first, on the influence of foreign models but then also, on their selection and adaptation in accordance with Japanese bureaucrats' aims and assumptions. More specifically, examination of Japanese bureaucrats' interpretation of the concept of social solidarity and their adaptation of Western models for the district welfare commissioner system and settlement work puts the development of Japanese social policies in a global context. This provides an excellent example of the processes of globalization and localization during the interwar period.

It is important to emphasize that Japanese bureaucrats concerned with social matters were themselves acutely aware of international trends. Indigenous processes of

1 For example, Goodman, et.al. 1998.

2 Garon 1997, p. 59.

3 Takahashi 1997.

4 The *hōmen iin* system is the predecessor of the present-day *Minsei iin* system.

5 Garon refers to the system as Ogawa's "brainchild." Garon 1997, p. 52.

industrialization and urbanization were creating increasing urban poverty and related social problems that called for new social policies, but at the same time awareness of developments in European and American social welfare also stimulated government officials to seek changes in Japan's handling of poor relief in order to be up-to-date with modern trends in governance. Japanese officials had been aware of the inadequacies of the 1874 Almsgiving Regulations (*Jukkyū Kisoku* 恤救規則) for more than two decades since the first industrial disputes erupted during the late 1880s and early 1890s. As early as 1890, in the very first session of the Diet, the government had submitted a bill that would have departed from the extreme restrictiveness of the existing regulations, extending relief to all, rather than only some, destitute people. In addition, although municipal governments would be responsible for administering relief programs, the bill attempted to expand the role of the state by imposing a uniform standard of relief throughout the country. At the time there were great discrepancies in relief-giving from one locality to another. However, the bill failed to win approval. Many opponents claimed that the legislation would not only be too costly, but also "rob the diligent of their wealth . . . [and] give it to the lazy and careless."⁶ Others argued that pauperism was not sufficiently serious yet to require a new relief law.⁷ R. P. Mason concluded in his study of the debate that this argument was the most effective in killing the bill.⁸

By the end of the decade, however, a major exposé by Yokoyama Gennosuke 横山源之助,⁹ along with a number of investigative newspaper stories and several government surveys, revealed the extent of urban poverty and stimulated two more attempts in 1897 and 1902 to introduce a new relief law. Officials concerned with social administration as well as private intellectuals and reformers began to study social problems and Western approaches to their solution. The 1897 bill, for example, was based on ideas of Gotō Shinpei 後藤新平, who became the Director-General of the Bureau of Health in the Home Ministry 内務省衛生局長 after returning from study in Germany. Gotō advocated a larger state role in handling social problems.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the two bills also failed to pass the Diet after again meeting objections relating to cost and expectations that more generous payments would create increased indolence and relief dependency.¹¹

Given this history of aborted attempts to alter the government's relief policies, both Japanese and Western specialists regard the establishment of the Social Bureau (*Shakaikyoku* 社会局) in the Home Ministry and similarly named social bureaus in Tokyo, Osaka and other major cities during the early 1920s as a watershed in the history of Japanese welfare policies. This was the first time that the term "*shakai*" was used for a government agency, suggesting new attitudes toward the poor.¹² Previously, the term had been avoided because of its association with socialism. Rather than blaming poverty on individual failings, these officials acknowledged that many of the poor, "through no fault

6 Horikoshi Kansuke, quoted in Mason 1965, p. 17.

7 Mason 1965, p. 18.

8 Ibid.

9 Yokoyama 1899.

10 Kinzley 1988, pp. 18–23.

11 Taikakai 1971, pp. 348–349; Ikeda 1986, pp. 314–20.

12 Ishida 1983, p. 178.

of their own and no matter how hard they work, cannot survive.”¹³ The name of the new bureau also indicated the Japanese government’s or society’s acceptance of responsibility for caring for the poor, in contrast to previous reliance on families, local governments and private charities, including the imperial family.¹⁴ In addition, the shift to use of the term “social work” (*shakai jigyo* 社会事業) rather than “relief” (*kyūsai* 救済) or “charity” (*jizen* 慈善) signalled a new emphasis on schemes to prevent poverty instead of focusing only on its amelioration.¹⁵ This shift in terminology was reflected in a change in the name of a semi-government supported journal from *Shakai to kyūsai* to *Shakai jigyo* in 1920.

Yamaguchi Tadashi 山口正, who wrote a history of social work developments in 1938, dated the shift to around 1917. In his periodization, with which recent historians also agree, “charity” characterized Meiji relief policies until the end of the 1890s (Meiji 30). Yamaguchi noted that they differed little from Tokugawa approaches to poverty in their focus on individual relief. His second “relief period” extended from the late 1890s to around the end of the First World War. While policies of this period exhibited some “modern” characteristics in programs that attempted to raise a “social defence” against poverty, they still had “*kinseiteki*” characteristics.¹⁶ In other words, Tokugawa features continued, such as the view of poverty being the result of individual failings. According to Yamaguchi, during the third period, the “social work period” beginning around 1917, social policies developed a new character, for they adopted the concept of “social solidarity” (*shakai rentai* 社会連帯) as their basic principle. Moreover, policies were different from those of the “relief period” in their aim of furthering the public welfare and their attempt to prevent poverty actively and on a mass, rather than individual scale.¹⁷

Nevertheless, certain assumptions and objectives of the new social policies were retentions from the past and influenced the selection and modification of Western models. Beginning with broad concepts, this is evident if we examine statements regarding the concept of social solidarity. In 1922, for example, the first Director of the Social Bureau, Tago Kazutami 田子一民, wrote that social work was based on social solidarity and acknowledged that the concept derived from French theory. Specifically, the views of Léon Bourgeois were frequently referred to by Tago and others writing about social work matters. However, while the French theory laid responsibility for the poor on society, Tago’s social solidarity was not based on civic equality, but rather on an organic concept of society. This aimed at solidarity for the national good and did not recognize the poor’s right to live or their legal right to relief.¹⁸

Similarly, the initiator of the district welfare commissioner system in Osaka, Ogawa Shigejirō, mixed Confucian ethics and Buddhist concepts with his understanding of modern European social work.¹⁹ A moralistic approach to social welfare remained in

13 Ōno Rokuichirō, a proponent of British-style relief policies, quoted in Garon 1997, p. 50; for a similar statement, see Yamazaki 1931, pp. 6–7.

14 Yamazaki 1931, p. 11; Yasui 1933, p. 23.

15 Ishida 1983, pp. 178, 196.

16 Yamaguchi 1938, p. 136.

17 Ibid., p. 137.

18 Ikeda 1986, p. 481; Ishida 1989, p. 260.

19 Yoshida 1990.

an emphasis on self-help, edification (*kyōka* 教化), and spiritual improvement, and on instilling of a sense of duties, obligations, and self-reliance rather than dependency on others.

In addition, the increased attention to preventive measures reveals a heightened concern to utilize social policy as a means of maintaining social order and political stability. The nationwide rice riots of 1918 and a wave of labor unrest and union-organizing activity since the First World War suggested the potential power of new mass movements.²⁰ Home Ministry officials were concerned to prevent poverty as a way to prevent not only conventional crime, but also the spread of “dangerous thoughts” like socialism and anarchism that the Bolshevik and German revolutions had stimulated. Yamaguchi in his history, for example, attributed the development of modern social work to the emergence of numerous economic problems and social movements of the 1910s and 1920s. He devoted several pages to summarizing these developments, including not only the rice riots and left wing ideologies, but also the postwar recession, the universal male suffrage movement and democratic ideas, and the Kantō earthquake.²¹

These multiple concerns and objectives are revealed in the Western models selected for emulation and in the modifications Japanese officials made to the Western models. Again, it must be highlighted that such selection took place with a broad and detailed knowledge of social work and social policies in Europe and the United States. Both government officials and private social work theorists and activists constantly examined and reported on Western ideas, policies and institutions.

Localizing foreign models: the district welfare commissioner system

Given the strong influence of German models on government institutions during the middle and late Meiji period, it is not surprising that they also influenced social policy in the 1920s. Moreover, Germany had become an acknowledged leader in modern social policy by the beginning of the twentieth century.²²

A prime example of German influence is what was known as the Elberfeld system, the model for the district welfare commissioner system that Japanese officials regarded as the heart of social work programs introduced during the 1920s and that became established nationwide in 1936. The so-called Elberfeld system of relief was named after the city where it was codified in 1853, and from which it spread to most German cities by 1914. It was introduced outside of Germany as well, notably in a number of local areas in England.²³

Looking at its main elements, we can see why it appealed to Home Ministry bureaucrats, why they adopted Germany's nineteenth century model rather than the system of the contemporary Weimar Republic. The Elberfeld system's slogan of “individualization” meant individualized assistance, which, in turn, involved an emphasis on working on

20 The *Naimushōshi* (History of the Home Ministry) attributes the establishment of the Shakaikyoku to the rice riots. Taikakai 1971, p. 337.

21 Yamaguchi 1938, pp. 128–132.

22 Steinmetz 1993, p. 4; Mommsen 1981, p. 1.

23 Hay 1981, p. 115.

personal rather than social factors and on promoting a sense of individual responsibility among the poor as the way to resolve problems of poverty.²⁴ While establishment of the Social Bureau in the Home Ministry and ‘social work’ by Japanese social affairs bureaucrats symbolized a shift to state acceptance of some responsibility for poor relief, social programs introduced during the 1920s and in the new Relief and Protection Law of 1929 quite severely restricted the eligibility of recipients and maintained a moralistic approach. Still fearful that overgiving would encourage laziness, the new law provided relief only to those who were unable to work because of age (either too young or too old), illness, or some mental or physical disability.

Unlike Weimar Germany, Japan did not introduce any national unemployment insurance program at this time. And continuing an emphasis on the obligation of families to support their relatives, even those who met the criterion of incapacity to work could not receive relief if they had a family member capable of supporting them. Edification programs aimed to train citizens in autonomy (*jichikunren* 自治訓練), by which was meant self-help, self-reliance, and community-based mutual aid. According to one contributor to *Shakai jigyō*, the main function of the district welfare commissioners was edification work.²⁵

The other slogan of ‘decentralization’ in the Elberfeld system pointed to reliance on local volunteers from the middle classes to make decisions on requests for aid. Through “friendly visits” they could base decisions on familiarity with local conditions and could monitor the behavior of relief recipients.²⁶ This use of local middle class people, such as doctors, teachers and shopkeepers, suited Japanese officials’ desire to keep social work based in the community. They noted the system’s similarities with the “beautiful” spirit of Japan’s *gonin-gumi* 五人組 system,²⁷ the Tokugawa neighborhood groups that provided mutual aid and joint security (as well as being collectively responsible for taxes and crimes within the group).

At the same time the district welfare commissioner system extended the surveillance capacities of the state and, in the Foucauldian sense, the state’s ability to discipline the poor. But this could be accomplished without the central administration of the state becoming actively involved in social work. Reporting on the district welfare commissioner system in 1921, the Tokyo Social Bureau expressed its preference for relief projects being conducted by “benevolent” local people rather than professional social workers. It stressed the advantages of using local residents because they had a “thorough knowledge of the community.” The Bureau also expected the commissioners to “guide” the poor in all aspects of life, which by relieving their anxieties would create “a safety valve to lighten social problems.”²⁸

District welfare commissioners gained detailed knowledge for the Home Ministry about poor families’ social as well as economic situation by filling out a card for each of the households that they visited. On it they recorded information about religious affiliation,

24 Steinmetz 1993, p. 158.

25 Makino 1929, p. 17.

26 Steinmetz 1993, p. 158.

27 Naimushō Shakaikyoku Shakaibuchō Moriya Hideo. Moriya 1926, p. 22.

28 *Tōkyō-shi Shakaikyoku nenpō* 1921, pp. 272–273.

accommodation, employment, the relief recipient's mental and/or physical condition, and the household's income and expenditures. The card also included the names of relatives to whom the head of household had an obligation to support and sources of income from family members not living at home. The survey of social conditions conducted in this process was regarded as the most important activity of the commissioners by one head of the Social Section in the Home Ministry's Social Bureau, Moriya Hideo. In Moriya's view, not only would such reports help to prevent and correct social defects, but they would also help to prevent the outbreak of disorder.²⁹

Relief in the Elberfeld system was intended to be temporary rather than ongoing in order to encourage self-reliance and to counter indolence and welfare dependency.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, this had been a major concern of Japanese bureaucrats involved in relief work since the Meiji period. The Relief and Protection Law of 1929 allowed payment of relief for only 15 days, with the possibility of one extension. In addition to discouraging laziness, there were obvious cost-savings in this system. One writer noted that when the Elberfeld system had been adopted in Glasgow in the early nineteenth century, the cost of relief had been reduced to one-fifth of previous expenditures.³¹ This appealed to Japanese officials facing increasing demands for relief in a decade of economic stagnation, the disaster of the Kantō earthquake, and the financial crisis of 1927, which was followed by the depression. In fact, although comparison with British welfare expenditures indicated that many poor Japanese were not receiving sufficient relief, Japanese officials also boasted that their adoption of the Elberfeld system rather than the British model of poor relief was more efficient and responsible from a budgetary point of view.

The Elberfeld system became the explicit model for the district welfare commissioner system in Japan, but there were a few modifications to the model that reflect the particular Japanese situation and highlight the assumptions and objectives of Japanese social policy. In Germany there was resistance to allowing women to act as district welfare commissioners, but middle class women were eventually recruited as friendly visitors when the Elberfeld system's requirement of a high visitor-to-pauper ratio made it difficult to recruit enough men for the job.³² In Japan, however, this concession was rarely made despite arguments made by the pioneer social work theorist Unno Kōtoku and others.³³ Unno pointed to Germany's use of women as district welfare commissioners and argued that practical social work was an area inherently suited to women because of its emotional, not just intellectual nature. He went even further to argue not only for women's suitability, but also for women's superiority in social work, drawing support from the writings of German and American experts on social work.³⁴ Women also, in his view, had the abilities to work with families for the protection of children.³⁵ Nevertheless, in 1928 only six local

29 Moriya 1926, p. 22.

30 Steinmetz 1993, p. 158.

31 Makino 1929, p. 18.

32 Steinmetz 1993, pp. 167–168.

33 The March 1929 issue of *Shakai jigyō* had a special feature section with articles arguing for more female social workers.

34 Unno 1928, pp. 60–63.

35 Unno 1929, p. 79.

governments appointed women as commissioners, Osaka having the most with 19 women commissioners.³⁶

Another characteristic Japanese implementation of the Elberfeld system, at least throughout the 1920s, was the establishment of district welfare commissioners in only select parts of the cities. The case of Osaka in particular reveals the importance of the system's political objectives. District commissioners were not established in all districts, but in those requiring the most surveillance after the rice riots had occurred.³⁷ This is another indication that fear of social and political disorder strongly motivated Home Ministry bureaucrats' promotion of social policies during the late 1910s and 1920s.

Localizing foreign models: the settlement house

While the somewhat modified Elberfeld system constituted the core of relief work, the use of a variety of other Western models as well demonstrates Japanese bureaucrats' desire to select and adapt those considered most suitable to their perception of Japan's traditions and needs. The establishment of settlement houses drew upon non-German models, in this case Toynbee Hall in London and Hull House in Chicago. Like the Elberfeld system, settlement houses drew upon benevolent local notables from the middle classes to guide and educate the poor. In the words of Unno Kōtoku, "people with better opportunities (big brothers) with the spirit of neighborhood settle in a poorer district (little brothers)."³⁸

As the Tokyo Social Affairs Bureau explained in its 1925 annual report:

The rapid growth of Tokyo City has been accompanied by evils that threaten its citizens. In order to remedy and prevent social evils, we are planning to provide a venue where the benevolent and the lower classes can meet and improve.³⁹

Activities at the hall focused on spiritual and economic education, for example, providing seminars for women on housework and seminars on current affairs to give a "correct" understanding of the times to poor people who lacked education.⁴⁰

Yasui Seiichirō, a director of the Tokyo Social Bureau, noted the influence of English settlement houses and American community centres, but nevertheless distinguished Japanese settlement halls from those models. In his book on social issues and social work, which sold so well that it was reprinted seven times between 1933 and 1935, he explained that because its "fundamental spirit" was neighborhood aid, settlement work was closer to the Elberfeld system. He went on to note the similarities and differences from the English and American models. Many activities in Japanese settlement halls were similar to those in American community centres, but "the difference is that ours is for poor people." Settlement work in Japan was therefore "specifically Japanese," influenced by English settlement houses and American community centres, but "based on the intrinsically

³⁶ Unno 1928, p. 67.

³⁷ Ikeda 1986, p. 515.

³⁸ Unno 1927, p. 300.

³⁹ *Tōkyō-shi Shakaiyoku nenpō* 1925, p. 404.

⁴⁰ *Tōkyō-shi Shakaiyoku nenpō* 1930/1931, pp. 157, 163–166.

Japanese spirit.”⁴¹

Yasui pointed out that in some respects, settlement halls in Japan were closer to American models than the original Toynbee Hall. For example, despite his emphasis on neighborhood aid, he noted that many were public institutions run by paid workers, rather than privately run settlement houses like Toynbee Hall that utilized middle class volunteers. Moreover, he stated that they were not necessarily about personal contact between members of the middle class and poor people, as in Toynbee Hall, but rather for improvement of the lower working classes as well as the poor. This was reflected in the fact that they were not always built in poor districts and were often called “citizens halls” (*shiminkan* 市民館). Yasui suggested that the American model had been more influential because many Japanese settlement workers had studied in the U.S., and quite a few American settlement managers had come to Japan. In addition, since the American model was a more recent one than the English one, it was more in keeping with the times.⁴² This reflects Japanese government officials’ desire to be modern and up-to-date in their policies.

The greater involvement of state workers in settlement work in Japan than in England reflected its basic aim, namely “the intellectual and spiritual improvement of paupers (*saimin* 細民) and the proletarian mass.” Some writers, such as Yoshida Genjirō 吉田源治郎, argued that settlement work should mainly be targeted at the proletariat, that is, the urban working classes, rather than the poor, because the working proletariat had the motivation and ability to work. The poor, in contrast, had physical, psychological or moral defects that rendered them unable or unwilling to work. Yoshida therefore argued that settlement work should emphasize educational/edification activities and encourage formation of cooperatives.⁴³ This, in turn, was expected to contribute to the solution of the “thought problem,” which, in Yasui’s view, had its source in the economic situation of the poor.⁴⁴ We can see here the intertwining of social and political issues in the minds of government officials. These social problems were domestic problems, acknowledged to have their cause in indigenous economic and social processes, rather than being the result of “dangerous” foreign thought. However, if not solved, poverty would render the poor susceptible to dangerous thought.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, although government bureaucrats attributed growing problems of urban poverty to domestic sources and sought a “Japanese” solution to the problems, they actively sought out Western models for their countermeasures. Advocates of new social policies, embodied in the Relief and Protection Law of 1929, pointed to international

41 The book was actually co-written with three other government officials: Fukuyama Seiichi, a part-time worker for the Home Ministry Social Bureau; Isomura Eiichi, a section chief at the Tokyo City Town Planning Division; and Ōnoki Katsuhiko, Research Manager in the Tokyo City Social Bureau. This may explain some inconsistencies in the book. Yasui 1933, p. 302.

42 Yasui 1933, pp. 303–305.

43 Yoshida 1930, p. 39; Tanikawa 1930, pp. 68–70.

44 Yasui 1933, pp. 4, 297.

trends and Western models for shaping methods of prevention and relief. At the same time, Japanese social policy-makers did not feel constrained to follow a single foreign model or any foreign model in its entirety, and in fact, quite the opposite, they often emphasized the differences between the Japanese and many Western approaches to social work. Consequently, borrowing institutions and practices from more advanced Western countries, Japanese officials consciously aimed to develop a welfare system that was modern and up-to-date, yet still based on what they referred to as Japan's "beautiful customs"—the family system and community-based mutual aid.

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