

# A Fundamental View of Japanese-Americans

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日系アメリカ人についての基本的概観

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## I. INTRODUCTION

"The land of freedom" and "the land of chance" are the well-known nicknames for the United States, and people from all over the world came to this country as immigrants. The United States is certainly a nation of immigrants, however, some immigrants have found the doors to this country were less opened than others and the path ahead strewn with obstacles. Until recently, or possibly until today, the great American ideal of justice and equality for all people did not seem to apply to those who differed radically in race or in cultural background from the European immigrants. This limitation, of course, has been a grave injustice to those who were excluded.

In the past several years, civil rights movements in the United States have awakened the racial minority groups who were excluded in the European immigrants group to the question of the validity of "assimilation" to those so-called a majority group. Such minority groups responded to this in various ways such as: some groups tried to lose their special background and heritage and become members of the majority group, some groups tried to separate from the majority and keep their culture and heritage, and others tried to stay in the middle of them. Japanese-Americans chose the first approach.

Japanese-Americans worked very hard to secure respectable positions in white American society (the majority group). They have preserved only the part of their culture, endured adversity without complaint, and attained a good education and occupational standing. Yet, to many whites, they still represent a "yellow peril", and are not accepted completely on a personal basis. Since Japanese-Americans have overconformed to the point of accepting white prejudice against Blacks and Chicanos, they are looked on with contempt by other minorities, as if they were white. To Asians, Japanese-Americans are simply "Americans", without qualification. Japanese Americans can identify themselves neither with white Americans, who do not fully accept them, nor with other minorities, who share the same problems, and are much worse off economically. This identity crisis is compounded by their image as "quiet Americans". Japanese immigrants ("Issei") brought with them the traditional Japanese value of diligence, compliance to social order, and self-control. The second generation ("Nisei") were inculcated with these virtues by their parents ("Issei"). However, the third generation ("Sansei") who were mainly born during World War II in the U.S. have opposed their parents ("Nisei") attitude.

The generation gap between Nisei and Sansei (also Yonsei, the fourth generation) evolves from the issue of

assimilation versus ethnic identity. Nisei (second generation) are attacked for not actively protesting prejudice. In the mind of the Nisei, harmony is the ultimate virtue. However, to the Sansei, harmony, and specifically harmony at any cost, is not universally valid. The Sansei and the Yonsei can accept harmony, but not at the expense of incarceration, arbitrary abrogation of democratic rights and denigration of human dignity. Thus, a Japanese American Yonsei, Donald Feruo Hata Jr., describes:

The last decade has witnessed a surge of works which attempt to erase the volumes of pre-1945 literature which dealt with Japanese-American (Nikkei) primarily in terms of how, where, and why they constituted a menace to American society. In contrast to the villainous or subversive image which stereotyped them before they proved their loyalty in blood and suffering during World War II, contemporary writers now hail them as Asian Haratio Angers, members of a model minority. In the words of Japanese-American community leaders, they have now "arrived." But the recent works do damage to the entire story by their well-intentioned, but nonetheless misguided attempt to compensate for the past history of injustice by focusing only on the tale of recent economic success and social acceptance.

It is perhaps natural that middle-class Japanese-Americans wish to forget the fact that they were not always easily accepted. When the unpleasantities of the past are mentioned, they quickly dismiss them by saying that "such topics best be forgotten." The decision by many older Japanese-Americans to avoid embarrassing themselves and their white sympathizers by forgetting the unpleasantities of the past is unacceptable to this writer. (Hata: 1978: 1-2)

Although some Sansei and Yonsei are facing the identity crisis, the majority of the Sansei and Yonsei are still "quiet." The influence of traditional culture traits, and discrimination by dominant whites is still prevalent in the Sansei and Yonsei mentality. Many researchers describe the Sansei and Yonsei as accepting the idea of the "melting pot." This will be a crisis. They will face the identity crisis in the future as well as some Sansei and Yonsei who have recognized the identity crisis: "Who are we, what are our origins, what is our place in American society and what is our future?"

In this paper, the writer wants to present several different kinds of information which might be helpful for such Sansei and Yonsei Japanese-Americans who were facing the identity problems as well as the rest of the people in the United States who try to understand them.

## II. JAPANESE-AMERICANS' HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

### 1 Historical Background

Japan is one of the few nations never conquered by a foreign power and the home of the longest reigning imperial dynasty. This has a great influence on Japanese ways of thinking and culture. The Japanese immigrants (Issei) had experienced direct contact in their childhood with the feudal culture of the Tokugawa (1600-1867) through their parents and grandparents. The following era, Meiji (1868-1911) saw many great changes, but in ways that allowed, even encouraged, the continuation of the old social order and its supporting values, so that, in many ways, the new era did not radically differ from the past. It is in Tokugawa culture that we find the sources for the identities of the Issei and the succeeding generations of Japanese-Americans. Here, the writer introduces a brief i) history of Japan and ii) the history of the initial contact of America and Japan.

#### i) History of Japan

Although Japan was apparently populated as early as 30,000 BC, it was not until the 5th or 4th

millennium that the first clearly recognizable culture emerged in the area. It was the Jomon, a Neolithic people who were an admixture of various strains from the Asian continent and the South Pacific. About 250 BC, the Jomon was replaced by the more advanced, but still Neolithic, Yayoi culture. By the 3rd century AD, a fairly advanced civilization had already been established in the Kyushu region of central Japan; within the next century, the country was united under the Yamato court. In the early 7th century, Prince Shotoku introduced a bureaucratic central government on the Chinese model into Japan inaugurating a great cultural and political flowering. By the mid-9th century, the great aristocratic Fujiwara clan began to monopolize high government offices; from the 9th to the 12th century, while the Fujiwara dominated the court, land began to pass into private hands, leading to the creation of giant nontaxpaying estates controlled by great aristocrats who maintained independent military forces. In 1159 one of these new military families, the Taira, seized control of the court. Thirty years later, the Taira were in turn overthrown by another military family, the Minamoto, who retained the court at Kyoto but established their own military government at Kamakura. In 1333 the emperor Daigo II took advantage of dissension among the various Minamoto military vassals and temporarily re-established direct Imperial rule. But five years later the Ashikaga family again established the *bafaku*, or military government. The military governors, who under the Minamoto had authority only over security matters, now saw their power increased to include many of the civil functions formerly exercised by the officials still appointed by the court. As a result power gravitated into the provinces and warfare soon erupted between daimyo or local military governors. The Ashikaga was overthrown in 1573; the Tokugawa family finally emerged as the leading daimyo in 1600 and re-established the *bakufu* three years later. Under the feudal rule of the Tokugawa, great cultural and economic changes were wrought in Japan. The introduction of Western technology in the mid-19th century upset the delicate balance by which the Tokugawa maintained its power, the 1868 Meiji Restoration restored direct Imperial rule to the country, abolishing feudal privileges and creating a modern central state. Defeated in World War II (1945), Japan emerged from the ruins of the war as one of the major economic powers in the world. (quoted from *Encyclopedia Britannica*)

## ii) History of the Initial Contact of America and Japan

The records show that relations between the United States and Japan were formalized for the first time on March 31, 1954, with the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa. Article One of the Treaty reads:

There shall be a perfect, permanent and universal peace, and a sincere and cordial amity, between the United States of America on the one part and the Empire of Japan on the other, and between their peoples, respectively, without exception of persons or places.

Before the Treaty of Kanagawa was formalized, Commodore Perry had made his first visit to Japan on July 8, 1853. He visited Japan to deliver a letter from President Fillmore of the United States to the Japanese Emperor to open this country. At that time, Japan had been keeping their door closed to the Western countries except Holland and Portugal.

In 1856, Townsend Harris, the first American Consul General, arrived in Japan to negotiate a full commercial treaty. This he concluded two years later, and the European powers soon made similar treaties with Japan.

## 2 Cultural Background

As the writer mentioned earlier, the long duration of the Tokugawa (Edo) era had a great influence on the Japanese immigrants' ways of thinking and cultures. In this section, the writer tries to represent i) social structure, ii) religion in the Tokugawa era, iii) traditional Japanese personality, iv) racial pride through the Tokugawa

and Meiji eras, which must have been kept in Japanese-Americans' society, and v) modern Japanese language.

i) Social Structure in Tokugawa era.

The studying of social structure in the Tokugawa era gives us some hints to understand Japanese Americans' way of thinking. To avoid social mobility, the feudal lord of Japan, Tokugawa, widened the gaps between each class, and within each social position, inserted a still more minutely graded ranking system, all linked by lord-retainer or master-servant relationships. Tokugawa rigidly defined the social position of each individual and made it virtually impossible to climb into a higher status. Thus farmers had to spend their lives as farmers, merchants had to stay as merchants, and so forth.

Each individual was responsible to some particular individual higher than himself in the social hierarchy. He was related to others outside by virtue of his overlord's relation to them. The Japanese individual learned that if he stayed in his proper station in life, he was safe and secure. The price of survival was constant vigilance, meticulous conformity to the numerous codes, and cultivation of a smiling face—or at least absence of a smiling face—or at least absence of expression regardless of real emotion. However, social control by espionage alone was not so effective. In order to institute this value system, Tokugawa made use of the deeply ingrained ethical and religious systems of "Confucianism" and Buddhism (included "Shintoism").

ii) Religions in Tokugawa era.

At least until the end of the Tokugawa era, each family had both a miniature Shinto shrine and a Buddhist altar in the inner part of the house, and ancestral mortuary tablets were placed on or beside the Buddhist altar. Each village, town, or city also had its own local Shinto shrine or shrines and Buddhist temples like churches in the United States. In Japan, most people participated in both Shintoism and Buddhism simultaneously, so-called "dual adherent" or "plural belonging." Besides Shintoism and Buddhism, Confucianism, which is fairly similar to both Shintoism and Buddhism, but is not exactly a religion, had a very important religious function during the Tokugawa era. The following are brief descriptions of them:

a) Confucianism

For Confucius, Heaven was not a divine tyrant, but the embodiment of a system of legality. Heaven did not act independently, but followed a universal law, the so-called "Tao." Just as the sun, moon, and stars move in the heavens in accordance with law, so man should conduct himself on earth in accordance with universal law, not against it. The ruler should not intervene actively in day-to-day policy, but should act only by setting an example, like Heaven.

A second theme of the Confucian system was the notion of patriarchy, and the family as the unit for social action. At the head of the family stood the eldest male adult, the patriarch. Within the family there were a number of ties, all of them one-sided: father to son (the son must obey the father unconditionally and had no rights of his own); husband to wife (the wife had no rights); elder to younger brother.

The state was simply an extension of the family. The final link, which was the only one extending beyond the family, was the association of the ruler with the family, a replica of the relationship between father and son. The smooth functioning of this whole system was assured by everyone adhering to the prescribed rites governing every important action.

As an ethical system, Confucianism taught benevolence, propriety and wisdom, and emphasized obedience to parents. Its primary emphasis concerned the problems of behavior and of man's obligations in social and familial relations, which related it to the ethics of the "samurai" class. The whole Confucian practice of moral self-cultivation was an attempt to attain unity with the universe.

#### b) Buddhism and Shintoism

Buddhist doctrine also stresses selflessness, the dissolution of self in infinity, the destruction of ego. The greatest obstacle to the emancipation and deliverance of the mind proclaimed by the Buddha was the Self.

Man in the natural state, rightfully and of necessity cherished the immediately felt qualities of his parents, of those dear to him, and of himself and of natural objects to which he devoted his attention. But since all these things were transitory, man inevitably had to suffer and be unable to obtain peace of mind. To these suffering individuals, Buddha offered salvation, stating that the conventional pattern of referring all things to a Self had no real basis in the process of existence.

For the Buddha, the self had two components: one was a distinct, unique element, distinguishing one person from any other person; the other an aesthetically immediate, emotionally moving, indeterminate and hence indescribable, "field" component. The first component was transitory, and mortal; the desire for its immortality, was a source of suffering, selfishness and evil. The second, aesthetic field component of the self was unchanging and immortal. Because it was present not only in all persons, but in all aesthetic objects throughout the entire cosmos, if men cherished it, instead of making them selfish, it would give them a compassionate fellow-feeling for all creatures.

Shintoism had a great similarity with Buddhism in its aspect. However, in Shintoism "Kami" (God) referred to both mythological and human figures as well as natural objects. There are two types of Shinto, one was based on the family or the Japanese clan system and the other was based on the close relationship of an individual god with a charismatic figure, such as a shaman or a medicine man.

Except above minor dissimilarity between Buddhism and Shintoism, both religions shared common aspects. Both religions emphasized "on" (blessings or favours handed down, not only by invisible beings but also by social and political superiors. Deity in some form dispensed "on" (blessings) and it was obligatory of the recipient to repay the blessings. The religious actions for Shintoism or Buddhism were repayments for a God's blessings on weak and helpless men.

#### iii) Traditional Japanese Personality

The social structure and the religions in Tokugawa make it possible to predict the characteristics of a traditional Japanese personality—"quiet" and "patient." This projects the stereotypical image of Japanese-Americans, especially the "Nisei" who were called "Quiet Americans." Thus Japanese were traditionally required to hide their emotions by such social structures and religions in Tokugawa era. This concept, strong self-control, by behaving as a "quiet" and "patient" American, was expanded to cover other situations. That is, to say, how to behave toward white men, what to do in ambiguous situations, and how to cover moments of embarrassment, or anxiety in the United States were considered in such concepts.

#### iv) Traditional Racial Pride of Japanese

The perfect keeping of the independence through its history and strong unification of its society during the Tokugawa and the Meiji eras cultivated strong nationalism among Japanese. Japanese were proud of their race and culture, and enjoyed a sense of superiority over others. Even when they discovered an advanced material civilization in the West in the beginning of the Meiji era, they still believed in the superiority of their own spiritual culture. At first overwhelmed by the Western world's great power, Japan caught up with the West in an amazingly short time. Then, feeling a sense of rejection over unequal treatment, Japan appointed itself a champion of non-white Asians. In this role, it boldly tried to win a place in the company of white imperialists. This became much more explicit movement, after the victories of China-Japan War and Russia-Japan War.

As for the color of the skin, Japanese never described themselves as "yellow", although the social perception of

the West has been that orientals belong to a so-called yellow race. Among Japanese, there has been a tradition which valued whiteness. White skin has been considered as an essential characteristic of feminine beauty in Japan since recorded time. Thus, for an example, in "The Tale of Genji" (an old Japanese story), a beautiful lady "Naiji" was described as a very white skinned lady.

Those Japanese traditional prides, the great nationalism and the rejection of the yellow skin concept, had a very strong influence on the Japanese-Americans' ways of thinking concerning racism in the United States.

#### v) Modern Japanese language

The description of modern Japanese doesn't have a direct relationship to the understanding of Japanese-Americans' ways of thinking or cultures, but the writer thinks it might be helpful to think the causes of stereotypical things to the the Japanese immigrants. In this section, some characteristics of modern Japanese are briefly mentioned.

Japanese is the language of more than 120,000,000 peoples on the island of Japan, and it has several dialects, however, the speakers of each dialect can communicate with others without much problem.

a) Phonological characteristics—Japanese is a polysyllabic language, and the structure of the syllable is rather simple; syllables are ordinarily open (i.e., they consist of one consonant and one vowel that is either short or long). Japanese has five vowels /a, i, u, e, o/ and eighteen consonants /p, t, k, b, d, g, t, s, ch, s, sh, z, j, m, n, h, y, w/. Some sounds such as /f, v, r, l/ in English are missing in Japanese, and this caused such bad jokes as "fled lice." Japanese has pitch accets, and this gives a monotonous impression on hearers.

b) Grammar—Nouns have neither number nor gender and take no article. The structure of a phrase is based on S + O + V (v.s. S + V + O in English) and the use of various kinds of markers.

c) Writing System—Japanese used both Chinese characters (however, they are pronounced differently) and Japanese letters, hirakana and katakana.

### III. JAPANESE IMMIGRATION AND AFFLICTION

#### 1 History of the Immigration

1868—The first emigration to Hawaii consisted of 148 Japanese contract laborers.

1869—The first group of immigrants to arrive in the United States and settled in Gold Hill, California, and set up the Makamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony.

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Chinese laborers were involved in the anti-Chinese movements

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1885—Japan allowed Japanese nationals to emigrate to Hawaii, and 1859, Japanese arrived.

1906—San Francisco School Segregation ruling, pupils of oriental origin were barred from attending San Francisco public schools.

1907—Gentleman's Agreement with Japan was established. Japan voluntarily agreed to limit immigration in return for equal treatment of Japanese in America. Japanese pupils returned to the San Francisco public schools.

1914—Anti-Japanese campaign became subdued since Japan was an ally of the United States in World War I.

1915—The Hearst newspapers launched an anti-Japanese series with a piece entitled "Japan Plants to Invade and Conquer U.S..."

1922—Congress passed the Cable Act, which provided that "...any woman citizen who marries an alien

ineligible to citizenship shall cease to be a citizen of the U.S." This meant that a Nisei or a Caucasian woman who married an Issei lost her citizenship.

1924—The Immigration Exclusion Act limited all immigration to the United States, but denied all immigration from Japan.

1930—The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) held its first convention.

1941—Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. (December 7)

1942—Presidential Executive order 9066 was signed. This order started the evacuation of all Japanese-Americans on the West Coast to relocation camps.

1943—A combat unit, 442nd, was made up of entirely Japanese-Americans.

1945—World War II ended by dropping of A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

1949—Japanese American Evacuation Claim Act—evacuees could file for monetary losses due to the relocation.

1973—Persons of Japanese ancestry are eligible for Social Security benefit credits for period of internment during World War II.

1974—Hawaii elected first Japanese American governor, Goeroge Akiyoshi.

1976—President Ford signed proclamation retracting Executive Order 9066 (1942) from the record.

## 2 Prejudice and Stereotype

The prejudice and stereotype which the Japanese Americans generated were quite positive. Although there was considerable anti-Chinese sentiment in California, this sentiment was not transferred to the Japanese immigrants of the late 19th century. The Sacramento Bee in 1893 referred to Japanese as "more docile and obedient than the Chinese."

Inevitably, as the anti-Chinese movement waned, and Japanese immigration numbers rose, whites' wrath turned to the Japanese. The new and highly negative stereotypes, "Japs" images, were to circulate in the white community throughout the first forty years of the twentieth century, and result in the passage of the 1924 Immigration Law which excluded Oriental immigrants from the United States. Four major stereotypes were presented: highly un-American, inferior citizens, sexually aggressive, and part of an international menace.

## IV. CONCLUSION

According to the Census of 1970, 591,290 Japanese Americans are living in the United States, and it is the fourteenth largest ethnic group in the country. They are constituting less than half of one percent of the total population, but they provide several numbers of politicians, several hundreds of scholars, doctors and lawyers in this country. Japanese are also one of the most highly educated ethnic groups. They are a well-accepted minority group to the Caucasian group (Japanese Americans prefer this word rather than Whites) by accepting the concepts of "melting-pot", however, they had a great struggle in their history.

## 附 記

本稿は、筆者が1980年11月20日、米国カンザス大学大学院言語教育研究科で発表した "Japanese-American" の内容に加筆校正したものである。

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## 要 約

移民の国であるアメリカには、「自由の国」そして「チャンスのある国」に憧れた数多くの日本人が移民しているが、その歴史には多くの紆余曲折があったことが最近の少数民族の人権運動の活発化によって知られるようになってきた。つい最近になって、ようやくアメリカ政府が第二次世界大戦中の日系人の強制収容に対して謝罪し、賠償金を支払ったことなどは、そうした日系人の人権運動の成果の典型と言えるであろう。

今日、アメリカの日系人は多数の社会的評価の高い人々を輩出し、確固たる地位を築いているが、そうした成功の背景には、日本人という民族集団のもつ独特の歴史、文化、社会的な影響が貢献していることが言える。しかし、一方では、未だに日系人は偏見などの苦悩から開放されてないことも事実である。

本稿では、そのようなアメリカにおける日系人の民族的な確立に至る諸要素を概観してみた。