

# Comparing Japanese New-comers into the U.S.A. in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the Present

Fumio OISHI

## Introduction

Why did "ISSEI", the first Japanese immigrants to the United States choose to go to Hawaii? What new environments or cultural gaps did they face in the U.S.? I will mention about the historical background of the ISSEI in America and compare it to its present day counterpart, the CHUZAIIN, as today's newly arrived Japanese immigrants are known. I will cover the employment conditions and environmental adaptations of both groups, and look at their attitudes towards their mother tongue and their children's education.

Everyone, in every society, belongs to one of two social ranks, those who rule and those who are ruled. I believe that one's social rank depends on his or her social status and how one exerts this status on others. In this sense, Hawaii became a society dominated by Anglo-Saxon values, which were well established once the state conceded to the Union in 1898. The ISSEI were confronted with a new set of social norms enforced by a people they didn't understand. They were also subjected to dissatisfactory living and working conditions. Through the non-fiction book, *The Shade Under the Plumeria Tree*, I will analyze the background of Japanese immigrants to Hawaii as well as the relationship between fear and racial discrimination.

## 1. Description of ISSEI in *The Shade Under the Plumeria Tree*

The book is set in Hawaii in the early 1900's and its main character is Kikuji Nonaka, a second generation Japanese(NISEI), born and raised on a Hawaiian sugar plantation, the son of plantation laborers. He fell in love with a wealthy white woman called Jade Parks whose family was wealthy landowners and the landlords of Kikuji Nakano's plantation. Although they loved each other, the social milieu of the times did not permit inter-racial marriages. Kikuji, well acquainted with racial

discrimination, didn't want to make the woman unhappy. He decided to try to forget her. At the end of the story both Kikuji and Jade die without ever having been united by marriage. Hawaiians believe that people's spirits sleep forever in peace under plumeria trees. This story depicts the sadness of those who obtain racial equality only through their death.

After a few decades of hard work on the plantation, Kikuji's family took their life savings and bought a coffee plantation. The Spaniards originally brought coffee to the islands in 1817 and Kona coffee is today Hawaii's large industry, but in Kikuji's time, it was still not a well understood crop and the Nonaka's encountered many setbacks. Kikuji's father urged his wife to sell the land and move with him to the presumably more profitable mainland. She refused, saying, "Wherever we go, it's not different. We farmers had better work hard soberly rather than trying to make a lucky hit. The steady people will win in the end."(p.6) Kikuji's father believed all that he had heard about job availability on the mainland and abandoned his wife and children in search of greener pastures. Once alone, Kikuji's mother gave up all hope of ever returning to Japan. She took root, raised her children and ran her business.

She was right to buy the land, most ISSEI chose not to buy property, preferring to save all their wages in order to return home with a worthwhile amount of money. At the same time, the Hawaiian land market was being cornered by wealthy Caucasians and prices were soaring. Mrs. Nonaka bought just at the right time.

Kikuji became a successful plantation owner. Even white landowners were rare back then, so it was extremely unusual that Kikuji, a NISEI, should have such success. Even though he was successful, Jade's parents would still not allow their marriage because of his racial background. They arranged a marriage for her in San Francisco and forced her to comply. When her husband died three years later, she returned home to see Kikuji. But he avoided her, knowing that their union in a bigoted society would only bring them both unhappiness. Jade later becomes incurably ill and when she hears that Kikuji has been killed in a car accident, she says that now she is not afraid to die because Kikuji is waiting for her in Heaven.

## **2. Historical background of ISSEI**

One hundred and fifty three Japanese men(the Gannen-mono) landed on Hawaii in 1868, seeking their fortune working the sugar plantations. It was the first time such a large group of workers had been hired by the Hawaiian government without the Japanese government's permission. The group failed miserably due to the poor living and labor conditions. Worker complaints made their way to Japanese officials who sent a representative to investigate. As the Hawaiian government did not have any control over the plantations and were unable to improve the situation, the Japanese

could do little besides taking most of the workers home with them.

The contracting of Japanese workers resumed seventeen years later, this time with the government's permission. The sugar industry has been Hawaii's main enterprise for over a hundred years but it depended much more on a human labor force then, than it does today. The Japanese workers were much needed, consequently, the Hawaiian government requested that an agreement be drawn up between the two countries. So the policy of KANYAKUIMIN, which called for officially contracted workers, was established in 1885.

The workers came in hordes, anticipating the benefits of a hard days work at a fair wage and under adequate conditions. They were sorely disappointed. Their promised wage of \$15.00 a month, a considerable amount by Japanese standards, was halved by meal charges. They also found prices to be much higher than they'd expected. Their hopes of returning home rich men in a few quick years faded quickly.

The living conditions were also very unsatisfactory. In the book, *Yamato Damashii and Seijoki*, it is stated that large amounts of people lived in the same hut with no bath or kitchen facilities. Available medical care was next to nothing. If ill, a worker was not only unpaid but was also refused treatment. And when a doctor did come to see a patient, he rarely diagnosed anything but laziness as the cause of sickness. The doctors were paid by the landowners and generally sided with them. Very few workers were granted sick leave, and if they missed work, were prodded by a foreman's whip to return. If a worker complained, he was severely punished. KANYAKUIMIN continued up to 1894. Over a nine year period, a total of 23,340 men and 5,799 women went to Hawaii under the agreement.

Private company recruiters have managed the contracting and sending of Japanese to Hawaii since the end of KANYAKUIMIN in 1899. When Hawaii joined the U.S. union in 1898, all labor contracts arranged by the Hawaiian government became void and thus many Japanese laborers were no longer bonded by contract terms. Many such workers moved to the mainland. As the U.S. government had prohibited Chinese immigration in 1882, there was a great need to increase the American labor force. Railroad construction was underway and farms needed tending so a new cheap labor force was necessary. The Japanese filled that need but were soon victims of the anti-Asian sentiment which had begun with the Chinese and continued with the Japanese.

In the book, *Politics of Prejudice*, it is stated, "the anti-Japanese campaign was renewed but it was mainly a tail to the anti-Chinese kite. In 1900, in San Francisco, the mecca of movement, the first large-scale protest against the Japanese in California took place. In public, Mayor James Duval Phelan stated: "The Japanese are starting the same tide of immigration which we thought we had checked twenty years ago•••

The Chinese and Japanese are not bona fide citizens. They are not the stuff of which American citizens can be made...Personally we have nothing against Japanese, but as they will not assimilate with us and their social life is so different from ours, let them keep at a respectful distance."(p.21)

But then a surprising historical incident made the Japanese situation even more uncomfortable and that was the Japanese-Russian War. The Japanese defeated the Russians in 1905. Immediately after the war, Americans praised the Japanese victory. Some railroad stations were named after Japanese generals in order to commemorate the win but the admiration was short-lived.

Americans soon began to realize that the Japanese-Russian War was the first time Asians had defeated a white nation. Feeling threatened by this fact, they began to call the Japanese "The Yellow Peril". Some people believed that Japan was plotting with other Asian countries to be spies for their government and anti-Asian sentiment grew. As a result, Japanese immigration to the U.S., from Hawaii, Mexico or Canada was prohibited by the U.S. government in 1907.

### **3. Prejudice and discrimination toward Asians' ISSEI & NISEI**

The term "melting-pot" is often used to describe American society. The term refers to the fact that this country is mixture of many cultures and races which blend together to form one diverse society. Ideally such a melting-pot would produce equality amongst its members but this is not always the case. The new Asian population received less than equal treatment. There are three contributing factors to this treatment. The first involves timing. When Asians first arrived to America in 1850, 230 years had already passed since the first Europeans arrived on the Mayflower. They had already constructed a social framework based on their own cultural norms and values. The Asian cultures were different than Europeans' so the Japanese were at a disadvantage.

Another factor which hindered the Asians acceptance into the American culture was their physical appearance. The first settlers here were from Ireland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Russia. Though from different countries, they all resembled each other physically. While individually they may have had difficulties adjusting to their new environment, their children, once their American education was completed, assimilated easily into the melting-pot. But the Asian second generation did not blend in so quickly even after their American education. The Asians looked, acted and dressed differently than their European counterparts, which spurred their rejection.

Also, we must consider the fact that the Japanese were further set back by language barriers. Most first generation Asians were relegated to blue collar work

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due to their lack of English. This reflected on them and their children. These three factors, the historical timing of their arrival, their physical appearance and their working class status, all helped create an inferior image in the eyes of the ruling class. Life was not easy for these new-comers.

I believe that racism is yielded by fear. The earlier settled whites were afraid that the new-comers would upset their established society. In *Politics of Prejudice*, we see the then prevalent argument as to why the Japanese needed to be excluded:

1. We cannot assimilate Japanese without injury to ourselves.
2. No large community of foreigners, so cocky, without such distinct racial, social, and religious prejudices, can abide long in this country without serious friction.
3. We cannot compete with a people having a low standard of civilization, living and wages.
4. It should be against public policy to permit our women to intermarry with Asians.
5. We cannot extend citizenship to Asians.

As the above statement mentions, the Anglos were fearful of injury. More concisely, they feared being forced to change their established social norms by the incoming Asians. They assumed that if the Asians outnumbered them, they would have to relinquish their position to them. The Anglos were reluctant to lose the benefits of their social status and leadership to the new-comers. Nervous and worried, the Europeans severely ostracized the Asians, a situation which has lessened over the years but has yet to be completely eradicated from American society.

#### **4. Comparison between ISSEI and CHUZAIIN**

One of the most significant differences between the ISSEI, the first Japanese settlers in this country and today's incoming Japanese workers, the CHUZAIIN, is the circumstance which allows their coming to the U.S.. The ISSEI came as unmarried physical laborers. CHUZAIIN is a term that refers to those who are sent by their companies to an American branch office for a certain period of time, usually two to three years. In order to be chosen as CHUZAIIN, certain qualifications must be met.

One consideration is a person's marital status. Thought to be more stable, responsible and conservative than single people, in most cases, married men are eligible to become CHUZAIIN. Another requirement is job-specific experience and the knowledge of a foreign language. Unlike the ISSEI, the CHUZAIIN are white-collar workers. The change in their job status is due to Japan's transition from an agricultural society to an industrialized one. As Japan's economic situation developed, so did the caliber of its workers. The following graph from *Equity and Poverty Under Rapid Economic Growth* demonstrates the rise of Japan's buying power as the transition took place.

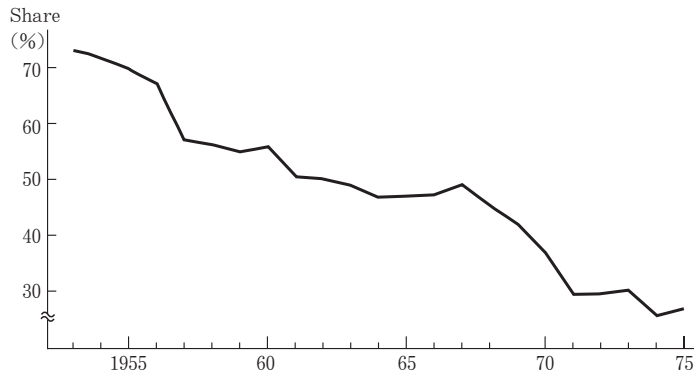


Fig. 1 SHARE OF AGRICULTURAL INCOME IN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Source: FHES

The same book states that "In the mid-1950's, the urban wage was not so high as to act as an incentive to reduce agricultural work in order to get non-agricultural income. In the late 1950's, young workers became scarce and wages in the non-agricultural sector rose significantly. This gave job opportunities for non-agricultural work to medium-sized farming households. In this process, nearly all the surplus labor of the agricultural households found jobs in non-agricultural firms, and urban-rural income differences tended to decrease. After the mid-1960's, the labor shortage became more acute, and many factories relocated in local cities in order to seek employees. At the same time, the use of labor-saving technology spread throughout Japanese agriculture. These changed circumstances resulted in nuclear family members, such as the household head or wife, in medium or large-scale farming households taking non-agricultural jobs. Agricultural production has been maintained by aged family members, where present, or by the Sunday work of household heads". (pp.35-36)

Present Japanese economy depends more and more on foreign trade all the time. The machinery industry has grown particularly fast in the past few decades. In *Industrial Growth, Trade and Dynamic Patterns in the Japanese Economy*, it says, "Machinery which comprised 22% of total exported goods in 1957, grew to 64% in 1978. In no other country does machinery exceed 60% of exported goods. The share of machinery exported is between 40% and 50% at best in most industrialized countries. The composition of Japanese exports has thus undergone a major transformation. Especially noteworthy is the sharp rise in automobile exports. In 1957, automobiles accounted for a negligible 0.8% of annual exported goods but they grew to 15.9% in 1978. The Japanese drive to catch up with the West thus found its most spectacular expression in the growth of machinery industry."(p.64)

Such a boom in foreign trade resulted in opening of many U.S. branch offices of Japanese mother companies, consequently many CHUZAIIN have been sent to the U.S.. While in the U.S. it is now wealth which makes CHUZAIIN possible, it was poverty which spawned the ISSEI. In the times of ISSEI, Japanese agriculture was primitive. Crops were subject to the whims of nature and famine was not uncommon. Japan's rural areas were especially dependent on agriculture and many farmers were forced to seek employment in the cities. As Japan had yet to be industrialized, there was not much work to be found even in the largest of Japanese cities so many of these farm laborers left the urban areas to go directly to the United States.

The hard times that induced the ISSEI to flee their country in search of prosperity in sharp contrast to Japan's present economy. Today's CHUZAIIN do not come here to escape poverty but instead view the two to three year period as a stepping stone to career stability. Japanese seldom disobey a company assignment because, unlike Americans, once hired, they tend to stay with the same company until retirement. SHUSHIN KOYOSEI, as the prevalent retirement policy is known, discourages workers from making career changes.

Companies adhering to SHUSHIN KOYOSEI promise promotion to loyal employees. The longer employees stay with one company, the better their positions become as do their fringe benefits and pension plans. Japanese companies look kindly upon long-time employee, so very few workers would refuse a transfer to an American branch office. The policy of SHUSHIN KOYOSEI has been inspiring employee loyalty for many years but its feasibility has been on the wane since the end of World War II. Japanese industry is gradually adapting itself to western standards of modernization.

One case in point is the Japanese Railroad Company. Formerly owned by the government, it was run by federal employees whose positions were considered the most stable available in Japan. When the railroad was bought by the private sector, a few hundred workers were laid off, a fact which shocked all of Japan and shattered the image of life-long job security. In fact, in the last few decades, many large Japanese companies have been forced to lay-off scores of workers and in some cases go bankrupt.

Many economists now believe that unless adapted to the western market, the life-span of an average Japanese company is today a mere ten years. Companies are no longer able to guarantee thirty to forty years of employment and it is most likely that, with time, the system of SHUSHIN KOYOSEI will completely disappear, but such radical changes are slow-coming, despite the sudden Americanization of the country.

Even today we see university graduates who seek a position not for the content of their work but for the name and reputation of the company. They rely on the

security of SHUSHIN KOYOSEI to better their lot in life and thus, still pledge loyalty to their employers.

Transfer to a foreign branch is considered a promotion in itself and another one is promised upon return to Japan. The new knowledge and skills learnt in a foreign country also foster a global view and understanding of other cultural values which in turn paves the way for more culturally sensitive foreign trade. So the CHUZAIIN are sent to the United States not only to conduct business, but to also broaden their understanding of cultural differences. In *Contemporary Industrial Relations in Japan*, it is stated, "An integral part of the Japanese employment system is continuing education and training. Employees of large firms are expected to work for the same company until they retire, and employers expect to receive a return on their investment in the human capital of these workers in whom they have made a substantial training investment."(p.76)

The modern Japanese white-collar worker is highly trained and expected to continue learning within the company. For example, many companies provide optional English classes to their employees free of charge. The CHUZAIIN are well educated and in respected corporate position while their predecessors, the ISSEI, were humble, often illiterate, physical laborers.

The stature of today's Japanese workers in the United States has been greatly influenced by America's changing perception of minorities. The American civil right movement of the 1960's eased the assimilation of minorities into the prevailing social structure. In *Multicultural Education*, it says "During the 1960's, Afro-Americans started a quest for their rights that was unprecedented in the U.S.A.. A major goal of civil rights movement of the 1960's was to eliminate discrimination in public accommodations, housing, employment, and education."(p.4) This movement helped create laws which prohibited racial discrimination in housing, employment, education, and helped the Japanese extricate themselves from the strictures of a lower class existence in this country.

The fact that the Japanese had traditionally worked for white plantation owners coupled with a lack of understanding of Asian culture by the white majority, led to a depreciation of Japanese workers. But technological inventions, such as the airplane, and satellite television, soon made the world a smaller place.

These technological advances have drawn many countries into a political and economical inter-dependence and an international economic market has been the result. The notion of the world as a global village is felt more strongly today than it ever has before. It implies that every country must respect other cultures and it is this attitude which has eased the way for the CHUZAIIN.

In this sense, today's Japanese new-comers are treated better and are accepted



into the U.S. mainstream more readily than the ISSEI ever were. Without local community acceptance, the Japanese would not be able to run their American branch offices successfully. The attitudinal conditions which govern newly-arrived minorities have a strong influence on their social participation and in this way the Japanese's situation has improved greatly.

There is one similarity that the ISSEI and the CHUZAIIN share and that is the education of their children. As both groups planned or are planning to return to Japan after the expiration of their contracts, the Japanese education of their children has always been maintained along with the student's American education. Both ISSEI and the CHUZAIIN are not only enthusiastic about the study of the Japanese language but they also give first priority to their children's education in general. According to *The Education of Asian and Pacific Americans*, "For the NISEI(second generation) and their parents, education was seen as the best means of "earning acceptability" and financial success. ISSEI parents made great sacrifices to provide education and college degrees for their NISEI children."(p.17)

The CHUZAIIN are especially concerned about their children's education because they know that, back in Japan, their children's future will be largely determined by the quality of their education. In fact, hundreds of private Japanese schools now exist in the United States and are run with great success. To cite one such school as an example, we turn to the magazine *Come to America* which states, "In 1983 in Tennessee, a weekend school for CHUZAIIN's children was established by local Japanese firms, Nissan Motor, Toshiba, and Bridgestone to catch up with Japanese educational curriculum. The class is held by using facilities of Tennessee State University on Saturdays. The teachers are volunteers from CHUZAIIN of the three local companies. In proportion to increasing local Japanese branch offices, the number of students reached over hundreds in 1988, and then increased to over two hundred in 1989. When the number of students exceeds two hundred, the school is eligible to request Japanese Ministry of Education to invite a responsible person from Japan. Accordingly, a Mr. Uematsu was sent to the school as principal. Now, the school has one principal and 14 teachers (10 teachers are regular university students who came from Japan to study at American institutions, and 4 teachers are CHUZAIIN). Some students come to the school by a chartered bus. It takes 260 miles driving from different states. Both teachers and students spend a lot of time and energy to maintain the class."(p.26)

The above quote demonstrates the eagerness with which the CHUZAIIN approach their children's education as did the ISSEI. Both groups give their children the best education within their means in order to facilitate their readaption into the Japanese school system. To this end, the improvement of fluency in their mother tongue and

excellence in subjects based on the Japanese education curriculum has been heavily stressed by both groups.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the first Japanese immigrants came to the United States in the wake of the prohibition of Chinese laborers in 1882. They came to work in agriculture, mining and railroad construction. Their jobs, shunned by most Americans, were dirty ones with low wages. They came mainly to work hard and save money until their contract term expired, hoping to return to Japan with a substantial sum of money. As Japan depended, at that time, on primitive agricultural techniques, most of the ISSEI had struggled with famine in their homeland. It was this poverty that caused the ISSEI to seek employment in other countries.

In contrast, the CHUZAIIN are not primarily motivated by monetary gain. Unlike the ISSEI, they are well prepared for their stay in the United States and financially sponsored by their employers. The twentieth century has seen Japan make enormous strides in economic wealth as well as securing their position in the worldwide political structure. Due to this progress, more and more branches of Japanese businesses will be established in this country over the next few decades. I predict that proportionally there will be an increasing amount of friction between the Japanese and local Americans, as was seen with the ISSEI.

There exists a characteristic tragedy common to Asian immigration to the United States. As long as both the Chinese and Japanese new-comers were low in number, mainstream America accepted them as their helpers. But once their numbers increased, Americans have begun to feel threatened by their presence and have passed laws to limit Asian entrance into this country.

With this pattern in mind, I believe that if Japanese firms wish to continue sending CHUZAIIN to this country and hope to foster a good relationship with Americans, they will have to be sensitive to local acceptance. In order to avoid the rejection felt by the ISSEI, modern Japan needs to be flexible in adapting to the American way of life and aware of the prevailing cultural values which dictate life in this country. Only through a heightened sensitivity will the Japanese be able to firmly establish themselves in the United States, thus enabling a working relationship profitable to all involved.

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