

Introduction

The Making of a Model Minority

Very early on the morning of December 7, 1941, Akira Otani was helping prepare the banners, flowers, and food for the gala reopening of his family's fish market in downtown Honolulu. But the festivities would have to wait—for years, it turned out—because the Japanese Imperial Navy had just bombed the United States into World War II. “I was scared. You know, I didn’t know what to do. Of course, the radio announcer was very excited and we looked toward Pearl Harbor, where there was nothing but black smoke; . . . you finally realize that it was war and we were being attacked. I started driving home, but I couldn’t drive because I shook so much. I was nervous and scared and—but I made it back home. . . . I wasn’t thinking about anything, just trying to get home.”¹

Soon after eight o’clock in the morning, radio announcers issued an urgent call for all members of the University of Hawai‘i Reserved Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) to report for duty. Akira Otani was one of several hundred undergraduates, many of them second-generation Japanese Americans, who donned uniforms and made their way to the armory on the campus in Manoa valley overlooking Honolulu. Amid frantic rumors that Japanese paratroopers had landed on St. Louis Heights, adjacent to the campus, Sergeant Bob Hogan issued each youngster an old Springfield

.30-06 rifle and a single clip with five rounds. The boys assembled in formation and marched off anticipating combat.

Few of these undergraduates had ever fired a weapon, and they clung to their rifles with excitement and terror. At 4:30 on that Sunday afternoon, when Governor Joseph B. Poindexter turned the territorial government over to General Walter Short, martial law was declared and the army assumed control. The ROTC was called in from the hills to form the Hawaii Territorial Guard (HTG) and was augmented by volunteers; by nightfall its thirty-five officers and 370 men were armed and dispatched to guard reservoirs, power plants, hospitals, and other critical areas, freeing regular army troops to defend against a possible invasion.

No one seemed concerned about the large numbers of Japanese Americans in the ROTC or the HTG. The fear of invasion was widespread; anyone willing to fight was embraced. The large community of Japanese Americans, including the immigrants (*issei*), their children (*nisei*), and a growing number of the third-generation (*sansei*), totaled about 160,000, the largest single ethnic group in the islands, comprising nearly 40 percent of the total population of Hawai'i.

Within two weeks of the attack, General Walter Short and Admiral Husband Kimmel, held responsible for the disaster at Pearl, were replaced by General Delos Emmons and Admiral Chester Nimitz. Emmons, who became commander of the army's Hawaiian Department and military governor of the territory, had serious reservations about the presence of so many armed *nisei*. And although they had been defending vital installations for a full month, presumably against sabotage from their own ethnic kind, the absence of incidents generated suspicion rather than trust or confidence. Worse, mounting anti-Japanese paranoia in the continental United States made it increasingly difficult to maintain racial peace in the Hawaiian Islands.

This book tells the story of Japanese Americans rejected by the U.S. government as unfit for war service who responded by volunteering to perform manual labor for one year. Most of the 169 members of the Varsity Victory Volunteers, also called the Triple V or the V-V-V, later went on to combat in the famed 442d Regimental Combat Team in Europe or as Japanese-language experts in the Military Intelligence Service.

The VVV was the leading wedge of a strategy that culminated in two related but distinct transformations in post-World War II America. The first was the establishment of a radically new multicultural democracy

in Hawai'i, liberated from the stranglehold of an entrenched white oligarchy. The second was the incorporation of Japanese American "success" into what has since become widely known as the "model minority" thesis.

The United States had centered its collective animus on Japan from the earliest years of the twentieth century until shortly after the end of World War II—a hostility returned from the western rim of the Pacific. In the decades leading up to World War II, the United States and Japan each made clear its determination to exclude, marginalize, and demonize the other as an enemy "race."² Japanese immigrants and their children in the United States were subjected to numerous acts of racism directed against them because of their ancestry.

Partly as a result of this history and their relative numbers in Hawai'i's population, Japanese Americans played a central role in the prosecution of the war and the creation of post-World War II Hawai'i. On the west coast of the United States, however, Japanese Americans numbered only about 120,000, much less than one percent of the population and easily scapegoated. Mass evictions and forced removal to inland concentration camps were the result.

Such draconian measures were not practicable in Hawai'i, where the Japanese community was older, much larger, and more solidly entrenched in the local society. Perhaps more to the point, Japanese Americans comprised more than one-half of the skilled labor force and so were indispensable to the general economic well-being of the territory, as well as to the successful prosecution of the war. Further, this was a relatively well educated work force.

Because Hawai'i was the command post of the Pacific war, it would have been disastrous to implement repressive policies that could have imprisoned the large Japanese American community. The effort to do so would have consumed enormous amounts of precious resources and labor precisely when Japanese troops were advancing rapidly across the Pacific. Worst of all, this strategy might well have turned one-third of the population into disgruntled residents or enemy sympathizers. Resolving the "Japanese question," then, soon became the single most important issue for wartime Hawai'i.³

This resolution was to be no mean feat; there was pressure from President Franklin Roosevelt and his aides to lock up all Japanese Americans, and Hawai'i's military governor sometimes had to circumvent orders to avoid doing just that. At the same time, the army and civilian leaders had to maintain enough discipline over the Japanese American population

to placate the rising tide of anti-Japanese hostility, not only from the white, or *haole*, community but from the Chinese, Filipinos, and Koreans, whose ancestral homelands were being ravaged by Japanese invaders.

It was clear to both military and civilian leaders in Hawai'i that a workable system of racial justice was required and that careful consideration had to be given to the nature of race relations and the "place" Japanese Americans would occupy after the end of hostilities. Thus, the VVV became a crucial weapon in the strategy to reposition the Japanese American community into the Hawai'i body politic. The heroics of the war veterans became the next phase in the rehabilitation of this ethnic group.

I HAD FOUR main reasons for writing this book. First, the VVV men offer uncommon stories of seemingly ordinary lives. I began with oral history interviews of the former VVV men, focusing on their year of voluntary labor, but soon delved into their experiences of childhood in the 1920s and adolescence in the 1930s that provided the context for their actions during World War II and their postwar lives. Much of this book is based upon these oral histories.⁴

Second, this work examines the context in which *nisei* males lived and the ways in which they thought, felt, and acted in the several decades before and during World War II. These young men elected to take an unusual initiative in the face of hostile action from their own society. In this sense, the book is a case study of cultures in conflict and will help, I hope, to call into question simplistic notions of ethnic culture, identity, and acculturation. The issue of identity is an important one that has been enriched by critical research even as it has been confused by oversimplified generalizing; I hope to help ground this discussion with more attention to historical detail.⁵

Third, through a detailed examination of the formation of the VVV, I wish to challenge a number of commonly held assumptions about the nature of and reasons for the upward mobility of the *nisei*, particularly in Hawai'i. Every important commentary on modern Hawai'i and the role of Japanese Americans in its formation highlights the racism directed against this group before World War II, their leadership in developing a radically new and "democratic" postwar society, their seemingly unexpected and explosive mobility in the 1950s, and their rise to prominence—some suggest control—in contemporary Hawai'i.

Fourth, I want, through the VVV, to suggest that World War II was the incubation period for the contemporary model-minority myth. Born in the 1950s and popularized in subsequent decades, this myth pointed to Asian Americans in general and Japanese Americans in particular as oppressed minorities that had successfully transcended racism in U.S. society. The message, usually unstated, was that other minorities still mired in poverty had only themselves or their own cultures to blame.

A version of this success-story mythology operated in Hawai'i through the last half of the twentieth century. The local interpretation highlighted nisei success and added the bright promise of a "new" society in which racial harmony would prevail in an economy of plenty and an egalitarian milieu. Since the 1970s, however, there have been powerful protests for group rights, especially from Native Hawaiians and Filipinos, whose numbers and demands have increased over the years. In this context, a more thorough review of the making of postwar race relations is an important agenda item.

We need periodic reminding that our core beliefs about our own history and culture play important roles in contemporary discussions of politics, race relations, gender, and class. As Christopher Lasch has suggested:

The political culture of modern societies consists largely of an implicit argument about the past, and it is the job of historical criticism to make that argument explicit and to point out the political consequences that follow from any given reading of the past. For a variety of reasons—professional caution, political indifference or despair, doubts about their ability to make themselves understood by a broader public, the embarrassment of taking ideas seriously—historians have retreated from their role as social critics.⁶

With Lasch, I believe that historians must address the contemporary political consequences of their interpretations of the past. To accomplish this task, I wish to examine the ways in which the nisei past has been used.

The extraordinary ethnic success story of the nisei is usually explained as the result, primarily, of a confluence of strong cultural values, including hard work, education, patience, dedication, and sacrifice, along with the nisei's military accomplishments in World War II and the rise of a Democratic Party.⁷ But there were other important forces at work, including nisei emigration from an already modernizing nation, the mixed class backgrounds of their immigrant parents, the complex nature

of the ethnic community in the 1920s and 1930s, the significant roles of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen Union in organizing agricultural labor, and the ways in which the larger society developed a “place” for the nisei during and after World War II. Just as important was the long-term postwar economic boom in the United States; Japan’s dramatic transition from despised enemy to client ally had an enormous impact on nisei mobility. I also want to demonstrate the need for more careful thinking about inherited or transmitted cultural values. Thus, the book examines the issei and vague notions of “cultural baggage” brought with them from Japan.⁸

By the 1950s, the Japanese Americans’ success in Hawai‘i and on the mainland had become a topic for social scientists pondering America’s prolonged failure to integrate its people of color, especially African Americans, who were leading a revitalized civil rights drive. Thus, the nisei became a key component of a collective metaphor for the U.S. success story. In such accounts, the Japanese American experience was re-configured into a larger Asian American framework and revisioned as the American dream of an oppressed minority group’s transcending hardship to achieve middle-class status through its own efforts (without disturbing the status quo, not coincidentally).

The essential argument for the Hawai‘i case begins with an immigrant issei generation beset by “overt racial oppression, imposed poverty, and social rejection,” followed by a nisei generation that “not only inherited a world of limited opportunity, but had to confront the catastrophe of a war which seemed to spell doom for their way of life.” In the end, however, “rather than succumbing to fatalism or racial bitterness,” Japanese Americans poured their energies into positive futures for their children, believing that “if one worked hard, then material, social, and spiritual well-being would be possible for the coming generation.”⁹

Since so much of this model-minority argument rests upon a particular interpretation of history—especially on the crucial role of the nisei—my hope is that this book extends previous efforts to provide an alternative interpretation.¹⁰ It may be ironic, however, that the VVV should serve as a vehicle for a challenge to the model-minority thesis, since so many of the men did, in fact, return to occupy important positions and to do well.

The VVV is assuredly not a typical group of Japanese Americans, if any ever existed; the men of the VVV are a fascinating collection of individuals whose accounts tell of considerable diversity within a single ethnic group. Their stories encourage us to question our assumptions

about assimilation—especially the notion that it is a linear process proceeding from ignorant or stubborn retention of ethnic culture to enlightened or inevitable assimilation into “mainstream America.” To explore the possibility that there may be a variety of ways of “becoming American” and considerable diversity in preserving ethnic culture, we need to look to interpretations more nuanced and capable of reflecting the multiple ways in which ethnic groups were treated and struggled to get ahead.¹¹

At this book’s core are oral histories, documentary materials, and a historical analysis that relies on the concept of hegemony to illuminate the mechanisms that drew Japanese Americans into the existing civil society and class structure in Hawai‘i from the 1920s into the 1940s.¹² Robert Cox has noted that hegemony may be defined, broadly, as “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of state and non-state entities.”¹³

The concept of hegemony is important here because pre–World War II Hawai‘i is often miscast, at one extreme, as an incipient melting-pot democracy working out its flaws or, at the other, as a semi-feudal kingdom or neocolonial dependency in the grip of an all-powerful white oligarchy. Interestingly, both interpretations encourage us to see World War II as a major historical divide between a repressive past and a democratic present.¹⁴ In fact, the political and cultural contexts were more fluid and accessible to influence and manipulation from various avenues than previously assumed, and the history of the VVV helps illustrate this point.

It is certainly true that several dozen haole males controlled the forces of production and the direct apparatuses of state power in pre–World War II Hawai‘i, such as the legislature, courts, and police systems. But they were also keenly involved in establishing a broad structure, including schools, financial institutions, and the various media, directed toward an integrated system of beliefs and codes that would sustain their power.

In Hawaii’s form of capitalist democracy, where the haole elite was numerically small and sharply demarcated from the rest of society, it was particularly important to have the large majority of indigenous Native Hawaiians and immigrant Asian laborers accept the “values and understandings” that made up the “order” in that society. Otherwise, the social cost of maintaining stability through state power, largely in police and military form, would have been prohibitive, as well as run counter to standard beliefs about American democracy. As a result, pre–World

War II Hawai'i was beset with many struggles among groups contending for hegemonic supremacy or counterhegemonic influence.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the major corporate holding companies, collectively designated the "Big Five" or "Merchant Street," dominated among competing forces. The U.S. military, by the 1920s, rapidly became a powerful and influential collaborator-rival. By the late 1930s, a fledgling multiracial/multiethnic labor union, the International Longshoremens and Warehousemens Union, became a third force. From the 1890s and throughout the twentieth century, the large and increasingly important Japanese community was the fourth. The subjects of this particular study were not aware of the crucial roles allotted them in this period, but, as the first generation of American-born Japanese, they were widely appreciated as critical to the perpetuation of *haole*, Big Five hegemony or to its challenge.

These Japanese American stories will be of interest to those concerned with questions of immigration, ethnicity, acculturation, and the many facets of becoming and being an "American," particularly those interested in the experiences of Asian Americans. In at least one arena, there is now considerable information—the World War II exploits of Japanese American GIs. In general, however, there is not a great deal of critical work on the *nisei*.¹⁵

We have heard much too little from within the Japanese American community. We do not know much about their family histories, their educational backgrounds, their cultural perceptions, their religious sentiments, their reflections on triumphs or failures, or their dreams and aspirations as children. As I have already indicated, our major works on the Japanese experience in Hawai'i are informed by a persistent justification of the status quo and hence are ill-equipped to deal with problematic areas. Indeed, the best sources for some sense of *nisei* men's lives are to be found in short stories, novels, and plays.¹⁶

I started this project by doing what I thought would be simple oral histories of perhaps one dozen men who had participated in an unusual patriotic endeavor in 1942. By the end, I had conducted some fifty interviews and spent considerable time with the men of the VVV at meetings and reunions in the 1980s and 1990s. And while we did not become especially close, I have learned to respect them for the lives they have fashioned, and I hope that the following chapters do some justice to their lifetimes of effort.

Immigrant Parents

Most of the Japanese immigrants in Hawai'i left their homeland during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), a period of enormous change. In this period, Japan was transformed from a semi-feudal collection of several hundred domains into the mightiest empire in Asia, poised to do battle with European and American nations that had become industrial and political powers long before. In the process of modernizing, more than one million Japanese left to become part of a diaspora that stretched from Korea and the Sakhalin Islands in North-east Asia south into the Pacific and eastward across both Americas. Well over 100,000 settled in North America, while approximately 200,000 went to Hawai'i. The issei parents of the 169 nisei who became members of the Varsity Victory Volunteers in 1942 were part of this large population movement.

THE IMMIGRANT PARENTS of the VVV men were a diverse lot. A few were Christians, converted in Japan or shortly after arrival in Hawai'i. Most were Buddhists, including two Buddhist priests who traced their lineages back many generations in that calling. The parents came from families that included merchants, farmers, and fishermen. Like other issei, most came from prefectures like Yamaguchi and Hiroshima in southwest Honshu or Fukuoka and Kumamoto in northern Kyushu.

Most of the VVV parents arrived in Hawai'i as young men and women, although a few had accompanied their own parents as very young children. Except in a few instances, VVV members knew little about their parents. Many lamented that lack, feeling that they should have acquired more family history before it was too late.¹

This discussion of the issei families of the VVV begins with an overview of Meiji Japan's culture and politics, not only to contextualize individual histories but also to challenge some of the prevailing assumptions that undergird academic and popular accounts of Japanese American history. Indeed, it will be useful, for this purpose, to go back even further to take brief stock of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868). Contemporary Japanese American success stories—versions of model-minority myths—depend principally upon notions of cultural values purportedly rooted in traditional Japan. These invariably include hard work, patience, education, fatalism, passivity, honesty, and willingness to sacrifice for the family. However, as recent research on the Meiji Era discloses and stories about the VVV parents suggest, these values were by no means universally respected or upheld in Japan.

This chapter also suggests that the issei began life in Hawai'i with advantages not shared by other immigrants and that they enjoyed some social mobility from the very earliest years of settlement. Unlike other groups, such as the Chinese and Filipinos, they arrived with families or the means and mechanisms to establish families and communities. Their numbers included professionals and entrepreneurs with sufficient capital to create new businesses and to hire other Japanese, thus creating their own community economies. Even under Tokugawa feudalism, Japan had a fairly advanced system of education for commoners, and Meiji reforms included steadily increasing levels of compulsory schooling. As a result, many issei arrived with more formal education than even their European counterparts of the same era. The issei came from a nation rapidly modernizing and seeking a place among the international powers. Japan's relative position in the world thus assured the issei of a homeland able and sometimes willing to stand up for the rights of its subjects.

Finally, it will be useful to provide a conceptual framework by dealing directly with notions of specific values, the cultural baggage brought from Japan. These values are often presumed to have been transmitted from the issei to the nisei. They include *enryo* (restraint), *gaman* (en-

during adversity), *shikata ga nai* (fatalism), an emphasis on education (*kyoiku*), spiritual values (*shushin*), for the sake of the children (*kodomo no tame ni*), and national chauvinism (*yamato damashi*). These were indeed values espoused by many Japanese and Japanese Americans. They have, however, become stereotypically associated with this ethnic group and imbued with nearly mystical powers to explain the ability of Japanese Americans to “make it” in American society.²

This particular constellation of values explicitly celebrates a strategy of ethnocentric pride, patience, and passivity on the part of an entire ethnic group. Unfortunately, the use of these values to explain Japanese American upward mobility obscures more than it illuminates. Worse, this variant of the model-minority myth is sometimes invoked to indict racial and ethnic minority groups such as African Americans or Latinos or Native Americans who have been less successful in socioeconomic terms.³ Linking the success of Japanese Americans to their cultural values creates a context in which an ethnic group finds pride in its cultural heritage, usually by asserting common ties with the culture into which it worked to assimilate. This line of thinking validates the essential fairness of the status quo. Meanwhile, by implication, the “less successful” groups have only themselves or their cultural values to blame for their lack of achievement. The dangers of the model-minority myth have been apparent for decades. As Amy Tachiki noted in “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America”:

Asian Americans are perpetuating racism in the United States as they allow white Americans to hold up the “successful” Oriental image before other minority groups as the model to emulate. White America justifies the blacks’ position by showing that other non-whites—yellow people—have been able to ‘adapt’ to the system. . . . Unfortunately, the yellow power movement is fighting a well-developed racism in Asian Americans who project their own frustrated attempts to gain white acceptance onto the black people. They nurse their own feelings of inferiority and insecurity by holding themselves as superior to the blacks. (11–12)

In Hawai‘i, “blacks” today include not only African Americans but Native Hawaiians, other Pacific Islander peoples, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos—most of the “brown” populations.

Meiji society was especially volatile, and recent research makes it clear that no simple set of cultural values could explain the experiences of the Japanese people, even in Japan itself. Translating simplistic notions di-

rectly to the overseas issei experience is even more problematic. Some of these interpretations have been appropriated from the historic and social scientific arenas into social policy and psychotherapeutic fields, and the potential for mischief is considerable.⁴

During the Tokugawa period, “Japan” was comprised of several hundred feudal domains. There was a central Tokugawa Shogunate to which individuals and groups owed varying degrees of allegiance. But there was only a minimal, albeit growing, sense of a national entity. In 1868, the Tokugawa regime was dismantled and a new nation-state formed. By the end of the Meiji emperor’s reign in 1912, Japan had become one of the great powers of the world. Its major goal was embodied in the slogan *fukoku kyohei*, wealthy nation and powerful military.

This process of “modernization” generated countervailing forces that ranged from former samurai on the Right to newly empowered commoners and disgruntled former samurai on the Left. The result, as Carol Gluck has demonstrated, was a society in which nearly every important value was deeply contested. In such a setting the establishment of an effective ideological or cultural orthodoxy was hardly a foregone conclusion, even late in the Meiji period.⁵ The immigrants, then, could not have left Japan with a set of rigid orthodoxies. Instead, they bore a variety of perspectives and complex sets of values as they set out for new worlds and new homes.

Themselves cut off from familiar terrain—geographic, familial, cultural, and political—the issei were hard-pressed to transmit significant elements of their heritages to their children. How, for example, were they to inculcate respect for ancestors or the *ie*, the family itself, in the absence of temples, landmarks, or even gravesites? In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, news from Japan arrived in Hawai‘i slowly and intermittently; letters from relatives were rare. There was the occasional appearance of recent immigrants who brought news from the region, but these newcomers were not always from the same villages or even the same prefectures; the community turned to newspapers as a primary means of communication. As a result, Japanese-language newspapers quickly assumed considerable importance. They contained reports from Japan, as well as information about and advocacy of immigrant issues in Hawai‘i, advertisements, and general social news.⁶

The young nation the issei left behind has become the object of intense scrutiny both in Japan and in the West, especially among U.S.

scholars. Research on the Meiji period in the last few decades has produced a wealth of information and insights. The literature on Japanese Americans, including the Japanese in Hawai'i, however, ignores this scholarship and too often assumes an "orientalist" view, depicting Meiji Japan as an exoticized and timeless society.⁷

One widely used text on the Japanese in Hawai'i, for example, asserts that "the stabilization of the Issei community also meant a perpetuation of the more fundamental cultural values and beliefs of the immigrant. Many of these values were the formal tenets of Buddhism and the extensive *Bushido* ethic—self-sacrifice, hard work, getting an education, and the attitude of *shikata ga nai* (it cannot be helped)."⁸ These values are not, in fact, intrinsic to either Buddhism or Bushido (code of the samurai); more important, there is no reason to privilege them over other values in the complex and shifting cultural baggage the issei brought to America.⁹

Similarly, there is the assertion that Japanese immigrants arrived in America and Hawai'i with "a presumption of inequality," naturally accepting social conformity and a lowly place in the plantation economy and in the general society.¹⁰

Yet while Japanese tradition did emphasize hierarchy, Japan has a venerable history of social protest and mavericks, including many willing to be imprisoned or executed for their actions. The issei left a country with a rich heritage of rebellion—a fact widely acknowledged among students of Japanese history.¹¹ Numerous commoner revolts and protests in Japan, especially during the Tokugawa and Meiji periods—five to six thousand separate incidents between 1600 and 1912, or as many as twenty per year—suggest that the regard for hierarchical status and "knowing one's place" did not always govern behavior. Individuals, villages, or entire regions joined illegal demonstrations and protests against samurai or official abuse.¹²

The Meiji Era, the culture in which the issei were reared, blended elements derived from the preceding Tokugawa period with new ideas from the West. Some of these Western ideas were distinctly modern, including the concept of human rights in the form of democratic self-awareness, an awakening individualism, and self-consciousness—especially among those who had direct contact with the West or with Christianity. Finally, and perhaps most significant, was the new system of capitalism—materialism, utilitarianism, and a market economy—that developed to contest older feudal values. Irokawa Daikichi suggests, therefore,

that the transition between old and new could “be found in the decline of Confucian ethics and of the ideals of bushido.”¹³

The *kanyaku imin* were government-contract laborers whose arrival (1885-93) preceded that of the VVV parents by about a decade. These laborers established the foundations of the Japanese community in Hawai‘i. Many were in their thirties when they arrived, born in the last decades of the Tokugawas, which were characterized by dynamic changes, some propelled by internal stresses and others created by the intrusion of the Western powers, especially the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry from the United States in 1853-54.

Many future issei were in their teens in the 1870s when their villages were disrupted by the official change and social turbulence that followed the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Among the most important of the new regulations were the imposition of universal conscription and education, as well as a revolutionary land tax. The new government degraded traditional respect for Buddhism and installed a new state Shinto system with a powerful emperor symbol. Committed to modern forms of political and economic development, the Meiji oligarchy pursued an aggressive foreign policy to compete with Western imperialist nations. The end result was a destabilized society for which relatively large-scale emigration became, after initial reluctance, an important safety valve for political and social pressures. This, then, was the society into which most issei had been socialized before emigration.¹⁴

In their headlong rush to join the Western powers, the Meiji oligarchs set in motion a wide variety of new dynamics. One of the most important was to promote nationalism and draw upon the productive forces of commoners, especially merchants, who had been dominated by the samurai during the previous millennium. The oligarchs used a combination of education, reform, and repression aimed at maintaining control of the society even as they deliberately destroyed barriers. For example, they extended voting rights to commoners but only to males with substantial means. And they financed modernization by extracting more taxes from the farming population while simultaneously abolishing the samurai class. Further, the new “right” to participate in universal conscription reflected the diminished power of the samurai but cost many peasant families the labor and earning power of their young males. These policies elicited a growing number of serious popular movements to expand the franchise and protect the interests of rural areas in the national arena.¹⁵

Among the traditional practices that encouraged the Japanese to leave for Hawai'i was that of seeking wage employment beyond the village; the practice, termed *dekasegi*, evolved during the Tokugawa period and flourished during the early years of the Meiji Era. As natural disasters, famines, and the collapse of traditional industries created large-scale unemployment, this search for cash took workers to the next village, the nearest city, or a distant nation. But long-term structural changes also eroded traditional practices that had enabled peasants to survive difficult times. Perhaps the most drastic was the imposition of the land tax on which the new government relied for its income: 80.5 percent of total revenues in 1875–79 and 85.6 percent in 1882–92.¹⁶ The combination of structural change and short-term catastrophe created significant incentives for emigration. But the assumption that poverty drove emigration does not suffice.

Many areas of Japan suffered as much as or more than the southwestern prefectures from which the Hawai'i immigrants had come, rendering any direct correlation between poverty levels and emigration problematic. It appears more likely that the principal labor recruiter for the Hawaiian kingdom, Robert Walker Irwin, influenced Meiji leaders to favor the southwestern regional areas, including Yamaguchi-Hiroshima and Fukuoka in the initial period.¹⁷

Hiroshima became the most generous of the prefectures in the export of *dekaseginin*, who hoped to return with capital to begin a better life, often by buying back land they had been forced to sell. When researchers tabulated figures for *kanyaku imin* who left Hiroshima for Hawai'i between 1885 and 1892, they discovered a total of 8,325 individuals, including 6,771 males and 1,554 females (just about 19 percent, or the one in five mandated by the Japanese government). The total number of *kanyaku imin* from Japan was 29,069. Hiroshima had provided 28.6 percent of that group.¹⁸

Among the more enticing cultural values is *kodomo no tame ni*—for the sake of the children. It is asserted that the issei were unusually devoted to their children, that they were selfless in their dedication to the next generation. That value, it is claimed, provided the collective ethnic fuel that eventually propelled the group to success. Not all agree.

In a panel discussion among third-generation sansei, Michael Yoshii recalled that, in the 1970s, “we were idealizing Issei and putting them up on a pedestal. We were creating this myth of who they were and what they struggled through.”¹⁹ It is important to keep this issue in balance;

I am not suggesting that the issei did not care for their children or were not concerned for the future of the group, simply that they ought not be romanticized. In addition, values like effort, patriarchy, diligence, honesty and fear of bringing shame (*haji*) to the family, community, and race, all reportedly informed nisei lives in that California community.

Another defining characteristic of most depictions of issei society is intense patriarchy. As Eileen Tamura put it: “The patriarch controlled the family’s property and the lives of its members; his word was law.”²⁰ Indeed, the term “Meiji man” is sometimes invoked as shorthand to suggest the domineering, stubborn, noncommunicative, and self-indulgent husband and father. These characteristics are attributed to “traditional” Japanese culture. But research on women in Japanese history, and especially during the Meiji years, suggests a rich variety of conditions that should caution us against oversimplification.

In Japan itself, well into the 1920s and 1930s, considerable economic production took place in relatively small units, including the household, especially in rural, small-town, or suburban areas. There, merchants and artisans shared child-rearing responsibilities and girls were valued for their real economic contributions. It seems, in fact, that the petite bourgeoisie and peasant classes from which the immigrants came were far more egalitarian toward women than were former samurai or aristocratic circles in Japan.

It seems clear, then, that a syndrome of pride, passivity, patience, patriarchy, and far-sighted reliance on education could not have reigned uncontested among the issei. There was little pride in the fact that the immigrant society suffered major social ills—including alcohol, prostitution, and gambling—which were hardly eradicated. There was a broad pattern of activist reform and resistance to real and imagined problems or affronts, from individual acts of spontaneous revenge or lonely despair to carefully planned labor strikes against formidable obstacles. In all of this, the issei were following a durable peasant tradition that dates far back in Japanese history.

The imposition of compulsory schooling in 1872 is often touted as one of the Meiji government’s outstanding success stories and evidence of the traditionally high value placed on education. There is little debate about the impressive gains in schooling—indeed, the Japanese were among the most educated of any immigrant group in the United States in the early twentieth century. As one study of high school education on the island of Maui in the 1920s and 1930s revealed: “Most of the chil-

dren brought from Japan (*yobiyose*) have completed elementary school or better so have the confidence to do well in spite of the language difference in Hawai'i." ²¹

But the new Meiji policy was complex and certainly not monolithic. The issei schooled from the 1860s to the 1890s did not emerge from a single mold. As Mark Lincicome has pointed out, there were fierce debates over the very goals of education and the methods to pursue them. ²² And beyond this disagreement over ends and means, compulsory education itself was not always welcome—suggesting, for one thing, that there never was a traditional, uncontested value on education in the abstract. For example, parents in numerous localities in the early Meiji period resisted schooling by refusing to enroll their children, by keeping them out of the classrooms on certain days or in certain periods critical to household production, or by burning and razing elementary schools when they were seen as inimical to peasant interests. ²³

In Hawai'i, the issei were regularly criticized for keeping their children home to celebrate important Japanese holidays, such as *tenchosetsu*, the emperor's birthday. In the most compelling example, the school system was forced to accommodate coffee farmers, most of whom were Japanese. In the district of Kona on the Big Island, Hawai'i, harvesting the ripe bright-red coffee beans called "cherries" took place in the fall, after summer vacation had ended and while school was in session. But harvesting the beans was extremely labor intensive, and the nisei children were required to help as soon as they could walk. During the weeks of intensive work, not a single family member could be spared, and the issei consistently rejected official demands to release their children to their schools. The school system eventually gave in and, as a result, for many years all Kona school children enjoyed their "summer" vacation in late fall, during the harvest season.

Many nisei, especially women, were forced to take jobs after completing the eighth grade. That they lamented this necessity provides evidence, according to Eileen Tamura, of the value Japanese placed on education. In 1918, nisei boys were six times more likely than nisei girls to attend high school. By the mid 1920s, boys were twice as likely. It was only in 1941 that girls achieved parity. This suggests strongly that Japanese families forced their female children into the job market when their wages, however meager, were deemed necessary for the family unit. When conditions permitted, when clerical jobs became available to the Japanese, and when there was sufficient societal pressure exerted, the

girls continued their education into high school.²⁴ Both boys and girls stayed in school longer after the Japanese American community's economic base became more stable. Girls stayed in school longer, that is, even as older Japanese values weakened.²⁵

Discussions of the cultural baggage maintained and transmitted by the issei is often obscured by lack of reference to the national mission that lies behind and beneath the seemingly benign "values." In Meiji Japan, the oligarchs had a clear mission—to unify a feudal and fragmented set of peoples into a modern nation-state. In the United States, some issei attempted to manipulate these same values to remain part of the "Japanese world order." This immigrant impulse should not, however, be identified with the thrust from Tokyo that sought to capitalize on the issei presence in order to move the national Japanese agenda forward. Anti-Japanese forces in the United States seized on the confluence of these separate but related streams and constructed a seamless and sinister web of a "yellow peril" for domestic consumption. At the same time, Japanese immigrants understood that Tokyo was using them and complained, in a characteristically Japanese play on words, that they were more *kimin* (abandoned people) than *imin* (immigrants) in the eyes of their own government. Yuji Ichioka, in his *Issei*, has pointed out that this sense of rejection by both Japan and the United States forced the issei to place their destinies in the hands of the nisei, who were U.S. citizens by birth. The difference between the generations, then, became pivotal.

While a diverse lot, the issei who arrived in Hawai'i during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth might be characterized in the following ways: Most of the men and many women were at least minimally literate as a result of widespread basic schooling by the end of the Tokugawa era and universal primary education in the early Meiji period;²⁶ they were pressed to provide remittances to families beset by debt and growing tenancy; they were being indoctrinated into a radical movement of emperor worship and national chauvinism that emphasized racial superiority, especially to other Asians and peoples of color; the majority, sugar workers, lived monotonous and often brutish lives; gambling, alcohol, and prostitution were common; they turned to religion for comfort and meaning, especially in Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, which had been severely repressed in their home areas in the early 1870s, and in Christianity, which proclaimed an entirely new vision of ultimate loyalty; and they had some experience in, and a long

tradition of, resistance to authority, whether local or regional, samurai or bureaucrat.

Japanese Americans had long been the only ethnic group in the world to count membership in terms of generational distance from the geographic homeland. In recent years, more immigrants from Asia have been employing versions of this concept. (Asian immigrants who arrived as young children, after liberalization of anti-Asian immigration laws in 1965, are sometimes referred to as the “1.5” generation to distinguish them from their immigrant parents and the generation born in the United States.)²⁷ But it was the Japanese American community that invented and maintained this model, and in this sense Japanese Americans claim a unique position in the looming discourse on Asian diasporas and the specific question of the meaning of emigrant societies to national identity issues within Asia.²⁸

The meanings imputed to geogenerational categories are important in Japanese American historiography. Much of the literature relies on this paradigm, and most Japanese Americans assume the categories to be transparently meaningful. This may not be the case. Thus, for one example, the *issei* are usually described as the first generation of Japanese who settled in America—the immigrants. But they may also be interpreted as the first generation *away* from their homeland, Japan. The *nisei* then become the second-generation removed, and so forth.

To date, the Japanese American community, historically stereotyped and victimized like other Asian immigrants as incorrigibly “alien,” has argued that the *issei* be viewed as immigrants making a fundamental break away from Japan and into the United States. Hence, recent literature downplays the sojourner mentality taken for granted by earlier generations of scholars. For the *issei* themselves, the concept may also have affirmed their ongoing relationship with Japan. The notion of immigrants as the first generation removed from but still bound to Japan enables us to appreciate the close ties they maintained with the homeland through language, culture, and politics. Examining *issei* political activity from this perspective allows us to see, for example, elements of their national chauvinism directed against other Asians in the United States, an issue which has not yet received the attention it deserves; finally, their grandchildren, the acculturated third generation, reflect on family and community experiences and the significance of their immigrant grandparents and their ethnic culture.²⁹

To understand why the Japanese so carefully crafted this geogenerational schema, we need to look beyond traditional values or the formation of Japanese American identity. The Japanese immigrant experience was unique. European immigrants, even the southern and eastern Europeans who were targeted for immigration restrictions in 1924, arrived over a much longer period of time. Some families arrived in stages as circumstances and finances allowed. The long duration of a group's and even a family's immigration resists the historian's attempt to organize these immigrants' experiences in terms of discrete generations.

Immigrants from Asian countries, notably China and the Philippines, were subject to restrictions and conditions that severely inhibited family formation. Chinese laborers suffered intolerable gender imbalances into the mid-twentieth century, and Filipinos recruited after the Spanish-American War of 1898 were overwhelmingly male.³⁰

Predominantly male societies of all nationalities were characterized by cheap labor, prostitution, substance abuse, and gambling. Meiji leaders were acutely aware of the racism directed against earlier Chinese immigrants and the propensity of the U.S. press and leadership to justify ill treatment as the consequence of social deviance on the part of the newcomers. The Japanese government, since its earliest contacts with the modern West in the mid-nineteenth century, had spent several decades modifying Japanese behavior to convince European and U.S. leaders that Japan belonged among the world's powers. It soon employed the same strategy with its issei communities. One immediate result was a policy that encouraged or required the inclusion of wives among the immigrants to ensure the development of relatively stable communities. (In the first boat that bore contract laborers to Hawai'i, the *City of Tokio*, for example, of 944 Japanese immigrants, 199—nearly 20 percent—were women. Perhaps more impressive, nearly one-half of the group belonged to a nuclear family, as couples, as children, or, in the case of seven individuals, as siblings of one of the spouses.)³¹

In the Immigration Convention of 1886 between Hawai'i and Japan, articles 6 and 7 guaranteed Japanese interpreters and physicians for the immigrant laborers. Equally important, there was a separate agreement that approximately 30 percent of the immigrants be women.³² In spite of these precautions, by the early 1890s both official and unofficial reports noted widespread gambling and prostitution among the Japanese in Hawai'i and on the West Coast, where none of the Hawai'i agreements applied.³³ But the Meiji government, much more powerful than