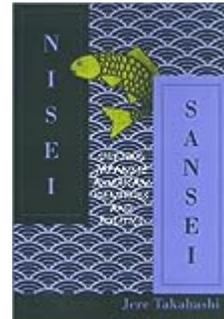




Jere Takahashi. *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics.* Philadelphia, Penn: Temple University Press, 1997. xii + 261 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56639-550-2.



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Individual Agency in Circumscribed Circumstances

It is fun to read a book in which new ideas and methods are used in fruitful and challenging ways. Though there are weaknesses in this analysis of Japanese American history, the core of the book – a thoughtful complication of the traditional generational assimilation model – is sound and opens important new directions for social and political analysis. The argument balances the active participation and innovation of individuals and groups with the structural limitations on Japanese American actions and identities, portraying the Japanese American community as dynamic and diverse.

Japanese began migrating to Hawai'i in the 1880s, and when Hawai'i became a territory of the United States at the turn of the century, Japanese began emigrating to North America by the tens of thousands. Migration was slowed by the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907, and effectively stopped by the 1924 Immigration Act. Anti-Asian agitation in the 1920s and 1930s made the economic position of the Japanese American community in the American west difficult, but it grew and prospered nonetheless. Rising tensions between Japan and the United States in the 1930s complicated the political position of the

Japanese American community. In spite of good faith efforts to demonstrate their loyalty to their adopted land, the Japanese of the western states were forced to leave their homes and were interned in concentration camps for most of the duration of World War II. After the war, Japanese Americans seemed to fade into political quiescence until the 1960s, when Asian American activism – in support of Ethnic Studies within the university and in opposition to racism and sexism in society – joined the civil rights, Black Power and Third World movements. Even the mainstream Japanese American community organizations, like the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), became active, lobbying in the 1950s and 1960s for the revision of Asian exclusion in the 1964 Immigration Act, in the 1970s for justice and redress for Iva Toguri ("Tokyo Rose"), and into the 1980s for apology and reparations for the wartime internment.

This political activism arose amidst increasing economic and social success for Japanese Americans, educational and professional attainment that earned them the moniker of the "model minority." Though most of the *Issei* (first generation immigrants) came as unskilled labor,

many became successful vegetable farmers, small businessmen, domestic servants, or skilled laborers. Their children, the *Nisei* (second generation), were better educated and, because their education was in the United States, more linguistically and culturally fluent. They began to move into professions and to inherit Issei businesses and farms, but they faced racial discrimination, and wartime internment interrupted their economic rise. After World War II, though much of the accumulated capital of the first generation had been lost in the internment, the second generation took advantage of their education and moved into professional and technical fields. They were socially accepted, even lionized as exemplars of multigenerational accumulation of cultural capital.

The focus of this study is on Japanese American identity and how it manifests as political action. Japanese American acquiescence in wartime internment and the emphasis on educational and economic success has created an impression of political apathy that is, in the opinion of Takahashi, undeserved. His thesis is that identity is a function of the intellectual and economic options available as well as the historical and personal experiences of the community. Takahashi places the experiences of individuals in the context of American racial ideology and economic shifts, as well as the United States-Japan and United States-Asia relationship. The aim of the book is to place the 1960s and 1970s political activism of Japanese Americans in a political and social context which is more realistic than reductionistic. The book is successful at giving the North American *Nisei* both individual personalities and collective directions, and explaining their political and identity development. The *Sansei* are less completely portrayed: the economic and political context is well developed, but the interviews and personal accounts that Takahashi uses are limited to such a small subset of the community that they raise more questions than answers.

The Introduction surveys prior scholarship on Japanese American identity and activism. The assimilation model, with its assumption that active civic participation requires loss of ethnic identification, has recently been supplemented by the idea that “voluntary organizations rooted in the traditional Japanese ethnic culture provide an important political resource” (p. 5). The “middleman minority” paradigm has been extremely useful in describing the economic position of Issei (as well as first generation immigrant petty bourgeoisie from other ethnicities), but does not explain either the transition to professional and technical employment nor the development of new political styles. The success of Japanese

Americans has spawned much scholarship intended to identify useful methods and models for the advancement of disadvantaged groups, but this scholarship tends to ignore the racial aspect of the Japanese American experience. Much scholarship has assumed generational uniformity: more recent studies have identified both some diversity within generations and instances of intergenerational alliance, though “much of this variation is explained by experiential differences and the different degree of structural assimilation” (p. 7). These various advances, though welcome, have yet to be re-integrated into a coherent narrative.

In the Introduction, Takahashi introduces two ideas that will form the foundation of his analysis: Omi and Winant’s “racial formation”, which requires an analysis of race both as structural and as identity, external and internal; and Karl Mannheim’s concepts of “generational location, actuality, and units” (p. 10), which suggests that meaningful discussion of generations requires analysis of context, and that “competing groups within a generation often emerge during periods of significant historical and structural change” (p. 11). The book attempts to describe the “interplay between personal life and social structure” (p. 12) through a combination of historical study and field research. The field research interviews by the author are all dated early 1978 and are supplemented by oral histories, other researchers’ interviews and published personal accounts to extend the discussion of personal agency back to the 1920s. The result promises to be a significantly improved and integrated understanding of Japanese American history.

Chapter One, “The Issei Legacy” describes the experience of the first generation of immigrants, up to the early 1920s. The sojourner model with which Japanese began coming to the United States soon transformed into a settlement model due to a rise in demand for cheap labor, particularly in California agriculture. Though very successful as small farmers, racism against Japanese kept land rents high and resulted in legal limitations on property and business ownership. Racism also closed the door to free immigration from Japan: the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement limited Japanese immigration to relatives of Japanese already in the United States; the 1924 Immigration Act, based on national origin distributions in 1890, limited Japanese immigration to a few hundred people per year. Naturalization of Issei was prohibited, but the *Nisei*, born in America, were citizens, which mitigated, slightly, the effects of anti-Japanese legislation. “Under these circumstances,” Takahashi writes, “the Issei had little choice but to adopt a cautious and conserva-

tive style in dealing with race relations” (p. 24). Ethnic associations—including religious, regional and business groups, but most importantly the Japanese Association of America—used public relations strategies to counter anti-Japanese rhetoric, promoted mutual understanding, and advocated sole citizenship for Nisei, shifting the emphasis of Japanese Language schools, and “unobtrusive and compliant” (p. 26) relations with white Americans. The Issei used the legal system, and sometimes quite strong arguments, against racist behavior, but were rarely successful, leading to concern about the second generation. Most Issei promoted education as a means of advancement, though there was disagreement about the direction of that education, particularly about whether the Nisei would remain within the Issei economy or be able to make their way in professional and white-collar careers despite racial barriers. The relationship between Issei and Nisei was tense over issues of cultural heritage and language. The legacy of the Issei was economic success tempered by their racial position.

Chapter Two, “Grant Avenue Blues”, is an efficient survey of the social and economic conditions for Nisei and *Kibei* (Nisei sent to Japan for middle or high school) up to 1942. In spite of the greater education and acculturation of Nisei, they were highly dependent on the businesses and property of Issei for employment. Some tried to go back to Japan, or to Japanese colonial possessions, to work in their chosen professions, but Japanese bias against their American upbringing made that difficult. Nisei used education both to improve their prospects and to delay their return to the ethnic economy. Higher education was frequently segregated, and many Nisei reported that as the first time they experienced personal experiences with racism as well as the beginning of their strong ethnic identity. This is a theme which will recur: childhood is often a time of relative racial openness, and distance from the community, but high school or college experience will move the Nisei and Sansei to greater ethnic identification. There was a clear gap in values and behavior between Issei and Nisei, but Takahashi also points out a gap within the Nisei generation based on age: younger Nisei were more fully acculturated, which is attributed to mass media exposure, but their recognition of racial limits on their success created a rise in both delinquency and ethnic organization participation. Because of the prevailing racial ideology, Nisei were forced to remain closely tied to the Issei economy, which many resented.

Chapter Three, “Lower the Anchor,” describes the diverse political styles developed by the Nisei as “responses

to racial subjugation before World War II...: 1) the establishment of a cultural bridge between America and Japan; 2) the identification with American life; 3) the concern of ‘progressive’ social change; and 4) alienation from American society” (p. 48). Biographical studies of Nisei leaders and activists provide powerful evidence of activism and restrictions in political life. The center of the discussion is the founding and development of the Japanese American Citizens League, which marks the transition of mainstream Japanese American politics from the “cultural bridge” model to the “Americanization” model. These styles both “reflected the perspective of the older and more privileged segment of the second generation” (p. 53), which also formed the early leadership of the JACL; these Nisei worked closely with Issei leadership, and maintained their “emphasis on legal and legislative change and public relations work” (p. 57). Younger Nisei and *Kibei*, though, also participated in progressive and labor movements, founding the Young Democratic Club and engaging in aggressive political behavior. They articulated a critique of racism and fascism that provided platforms for dissent from mainstream Japanese American politics on both domestic and international issues. *Kibei*, because of their Japanese education and experience, had some difficulty working with mainstream Nisei, and many became more alienated than engaged, forming their own organizations which emphasized cultural identity rather than political activism. The splits in the Nisei “generation” drew on trends in white society, but reflected both the inherited methods of the first generation and distinctly Nisei experiences.

Chapter Four, “Constructive Cooperation” attempts to answer the question “why a people would affirm their loyalty to America and emphasize their American identity at a time when their rights and dignity were being blatantly violated” (p. 85) by the evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The answer, according to Takahashi, is “the restrictive context” (p. 85) of racism and nationalism, which severely punished dissent and resistance, and which seemed like it might reward demonstrations of loyalty. The JACL, because of its position as liaison between the community and the US military, became even more important: its decision to pursue “constructive cooperation” rather than resistance or negotiation, was intended as a powerful demonstration of Japanese American respect for law and as leverage to “enable them to secure all of their rights in the future” (p. 88). In order to avoid charges of communism, Nisei progressives accepted the internment as well, rather than squander by resistance Ameri-

can resources necessary for the fight against fascism. The registration process within the camps, including the infamous Questions 27 and 28 (willingness to serve in the US military and sole allegiance to the United States), was a harsh test of the loyalty and identity of Japanese Americans. Though the majority answered these questions in the affirmative, “the negative sanctions placed on resistance to registration and the limiting circumstances of the camps led the majority of the internees to conclude that they had little choice but to state their loyalty” (p. 98), which suggests that their behavior was a function of racial and political limits; there was also considerable resistance in the form of qualified or negative answers. Resistance to the internment and to registration was frequently punished, by isolation of dissenters at the Tule Lake camp, by the threat of deportation, by denial of resettlement in non-restricted regions. The “‘disloyals’ who were segregated at Tule Lake ... were largely Kibei from agricultural, Buddhist, non-college-educated backgrounds” (p. 102) while the vast majority of Nisei were “compelled ... to accept without question the Americanization process to which they were subjected” (p. 102). The internment nearly eliminated the economic power of the Issei, and the need to work with white authorities privileged the English-educated Nisei. Takahashi draws parallels between the development of the JACL and the NAACP, in that they were both supported by white authority in an environment of racial subjugation, and that their continued support and success depended on their adopting non-radical methods and ideas. The open use of coercion to limit the political field makes this chapter the starkest proof of the book’s central thesis.

Chapter Five, “Making Do,” chronicles the beginnings of the economic shift that drew Nisei out of labor and shop keeping and into professional and white-collar careers. The shift was partly caused by the internment and other anti-Japanese activity, which stripped property and businesses from Issei. It was also caused by the post-war economic boom, which created demand for professional and technical employees. Takahashi characterizes the boom as being a function of government priorities – the Cold War and welfare state – as well as the shift towards electronics and automation in industry. The career shift subtly bypassed some issues of race, and Japanese Americans “have experienced both mobility and differential treatment concurrently” (p. 118). There was substantial uncertainty in the early years after the war about whether Japanese Americans would be able to use their education outside of the crumbling “ethnic economy.” However, “the occupational shifts for each of the his-

torical generations within the Japanese community, as well as for units within the Nisei generation, parallel major shifts in the larger economy. Moreover, the median educational level for each cohort correlates with its occupational distribution” (p. 125). The success of educated Nisei in the post-war economy, though certainly connected with values of education shared between the white and Japanese middle-class communities, contrasts sharply with the experience of pre-war Nisei, and suggests changes in the racial structure of society. The tendency for Nisei to study “practical” fields in the pre-war years remained through the 1970s, creating an underrepresentation in the social sciences, in spite of proportional overrepresentation in higher education. Politically, the JACL maintained a legal and public relations approach to anti-Japanese discrimination, though it was able to use the ideology of the Cold War as leverage more effectively than it used the political environment before the war. The community was beginning to experience the benefits of economic growth and citizenship that it should have had before the war.

Chapter Six, “More than ‘Conservative,’” may be the best of the book. It uses the biographies of two Nisei who came of age just after the war to explore the social and economic changes of those years, as well as the complex and diverse political ideas that informed Japanese American activism. Takahashi carefully places their experiences in historical and economic context. Though there are only two profiles, they are of people of significantly different origins and histories, and with very different ideas. Both place a high value on ethnicity, but neither sees it as being deterministic. Both believe in law and are optimistic “that racial equality can be attained within the existing institutional structures” (p. 151). The Civil Rights movement helped to clarify and articulate both their views on race and activism, though in very different directions. The two subjects defy political categories or racial stereotypes, drawing on both personal experience and available ideologies in creative ways.

Chapter Seven, “Divided by Color,” places the third generation in the context of the 1960s and 1970s, in which continued economic growth permitted conventional and successful careers, but in which cultural and racial unrest permitted a minority within the community to define themselves by their active racial and political consciousness. The Sansei activists, following the example of other Third World activists, rejected the gradualism and optimism of their predecessors in favor of radical and confrontational action. The economic position of Japanese Americans continued the thrust of the 1950s

and 1960s: high levels of education, increasing professionalization and urbanization, and sharp drops in agricultural and manual labor. But “adjusted for state of residence, in addition to such variables as occupational prestige, age, education, and weeks worked ... Japanese American males and females earned 88 and 58 percent, respectively, of the income earned by majority males” (p. 159). The rise of the Asian American Movement is an important part of the political history of the Japanese American community. The recognition of common experiences and position within society that permitted the formation of political and intellectual structures across ethnic lines was aided by the breakdown of traditional neighborhoods (abetted by internment) and the decline of identification with countries of origin. Takahashi describes it as a rise of “nationalism” in the same sense that the term is used within the Black Power movement, made possible by the creation of space for alternative identities inherent in the turmoil of the late 1960s and 1970s. The Asian American women’s movement became a powerful force, both within the women’s movement and within the Asian American movement, without losing its internal coherence. The non-political majority still operated within restrictive racial structures, but the activist Sansei, freed from the restrictions of pre-war racism or Cold War ideology, could question the existing Japanese American identity and image, and inquire more freely into what directions it might go.

Chapter Eight, “From Our Own Point of View,” seems to be the weakest in the book. Takahashi admits that his interview subjects are neither typical nor entirely members of the third generation (both have one Nisei and one Issei parent). The biographies are quite different, though, and worth reading: as with the earlier sketches, the individuals are complex, presenting a formidable challenge to simplistic political categories. There is a clear association between higher education and radicalization, a notable continuity with Nisei pre-war experiences that is also consistent with the historical moment. The initial rejection of the moderate methods of earlier generations gives way to personal moderation, long-term perspectives and traditional, rather than radical, activism often within established organizations like the JAACL. The dominant racial idea in America, cultural pluralism, became the conclusion of these subjects, though they do not believe that true racial equality and freedom have yet been reached.

The book has a number of errors. On page sixteen, Takahashi writes that the Issei “knew they could earn the equivalent of two Japanese yen for every dollar earned

in America.” This is the exchange rate: more important is the fact that wages for unskilled Japanese labor in Hawai’i and North America were five to ten times higher than the wages for skilled labor in Japan. Most of the errors appear to be simple editorial lapses. On page seventeen, Takahashi writes that “Issei farm workers were concentrated in the intensive crops....” which should almost certainly read “labor intensive crops”, for which Japanese agriculture is well known and at which Japanese farmers would have been highly skilled. On page 83, Takahashi writes of the Kibei, “Certainly there were many who were able to cross over into Nisei circles without experiencing major difficulties, but they were few in number,” which leaves unanswered the question of the magnitude of this mobility. The index leaves something to be desired, lacking references to several of the Japanese language terms used in the text; the terms are defined in endnotes, rather than in the text, which could be confusing to readers not already familiar with the subject. The decision to omit a bibliography is also distressing, as the book draws very heavily on other scholars’ analyses, but it is often hard to find the exact reference combing through notes.

More troubling are the limitations of subject and source. The complete neglect of the Hawai’ian Japanese American community is unfortunately common in Asian American studies, which developed in North America and prefers to study the tensions and conflicts of North American racial politics rather than the subtler ethnic discourse of Hawai’i. Internment was not imposed on the Hawai’ian community, because they occupied a very different position – more numerous, relatively speaking, and much better integrated – so the community did not suffer the displacement, economic loss or generational transition forced on the continental community by internment. The biographical discussion of Sansei is limited to two individuals, who are both Nisei and Sansei by birth; more troubling is the fact that both are progressive activists, so the political and racial thought of the larger community is not portrayed with the kind of depth, humanity or complexity that characterizes the earlier chapters. There is also a subtle teleology in the biographical sketches, which become more approving as the subjects come closer to our present understanding of race and racism. Though many of the individuals profiled are female, outside of Chapter Seven there is almost no discussion of gender’s relationship to political style, social or economic context or family structures. This may seem like carping, but an analysis that seeks to define the limits of discourse and identity should not ignore something as substantial as the exclusion of half the community from

active political participation.

In spite of these complaints, the value of this book is unmistakable. The complex relationship between races, between immigration and economics, between political action, political style and dominant ideologies, are all strongly and convincingly drawn out and articulated. Personal experience, biography and interview, both illustrate important points and frustrate simplistic conclusions. The text is accessible at a number of levels, speak-

ing clearly enough for undergraduates, but with the kind of sophistication and substance that makes it a rewarding experience for any scholar with interest in ethnicity and race.

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