

Gendered Aspects of Japanese Issei Women Immigration to the United States, 1900-1920

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Part 1 Introduction and Background

Hovering over every immigrant case study are persistent themes of inequality, whether they be men or women, legal or illegal, Asian, European or Latin American. Some inequalities are unique to a particular ethnic or national minority or locked within a time frame. The first generation (issei) of Japanese men and women emigrants to the United States in the early 1900's left with high expectations. They trusted the go-abroad policies of the Meiji Japanese government who heralded the opening of Japan to the world. Some of this migration fever rhetoric originated from Japanese socialist publications which encouraged the emigrants to join their American workers as brothers in a new world order (Hisashi, 1977). On a national level, Japanese emigration also provided a temporary and fortuitous economic relief valve from the periodic unemployment and depressed economic conditions that plagued Japan in the late 1890's and early 1900's (Hisashi, 1977, Ichioka, Y., 1988).

Meiji-Taisho era Japanese women were also caught up in a new fervor as they witnessed revolutionary changes from the feudalistic times that their mothers knew. From 1868 to 1889, the first generation of Japanese feminists held open forums and published boldly for women suffrage and human rights, thus, challenging patriarchal dominance in daily and public life (Kaneko in Fujimura-Fanselow & Kameda, 1995). Japanese feminism also ran concurrent with the Popular Rights Movement in Japan (1874) which sought to establish

a national assembly form of government while its feminist colleagues campaigned for women's suffrage and equal rights. The second momentous change was the enactment of the 1889 Meiji Constitution, which among other things, allowed greater liberties to emigrate abroad. On the other hand, new domestic measures like the Police Security Regulations of 1900 banned Japanese women and minors from speaking in public and joining political organizations (Kaneko, In Fujimura-Fanselow, 1994). A third significant change was the Girls' High School Law of 1899 which promoted public education for Japanese women by establishing one higher school in each prefecture throughout the country. The primary goal was to create "good wives and wise mothers" (Kaneko, In Fujimura-Fanselow, 1994) as Meiji state policies increasingly shifted the state responsibilities for social welfare of the young, elderly and ill to the wives and families. So "the orthodox 'good wife' was one who pursued whatever employment and education would serve her family and society" (Nolte & Hastings, In Berstein, 1991, 171), regardless of privileged social class status.

Despite early feminist rallying in the late 1890's, the majority of Japanese women remained entrenched within the family structure with little legal, social or identity status outside the home until marriage. Japanese society was solidly built on the patriarchal "ie" family system with the father as head and mothers and female members as the backbone of household labor and enterprise. Labor efforts by Japanese women were most likely dismissed as household responsibilities and not duly recognized, but social change came on the heels of industrialization as Japanese women became economically active outside the home. By 1910, they composed one-third of the total industrialized labor force. Approximately 60% percent of working Japanese women labored in agriculture and forestry in the 1880-1940 pre and industrialization years (Odaka, In Hunter, 1993). The supply of surplus female agricultural workers helped to fill the

demand for industrial workers. Young daughters from poverty-stricken families were sold or contracted out to textile factories where 71.3% of the labor pool were women or they found work as house domestics. A typical work schedule for a female machine weaver-spinner was a 12-18 hour shift for low pay and harsh working and living conditions. In 1900, low income middle-age married women living in the cities toiled in 12 hour shifts doing piecework, such as matchbook assembly, on top of household responsibilities. (Uno, In Hunter, 1993).

From this societal backdrop, the first mass exodus of Japanese "picture brides" to the United States began in 1907 under the Gentlemen's Agreement and ended on March 1, 1920. Why did Issei women leave en masse? U.S. historian Ronald Takaki (1993) suggests an intersection of several factors: a sudden opening in U.S. immigration policy, the convenience and familiar custom of picture (photo) marriages, the shift of Japanese women working from inside to outside the home and also their willingness to travel abroad. The final factor was the labor need and marriage desires of Japanese male immigrants who had already emigrated. From individual perspectives, Shika Takaya, a picture bride enroute to America, summarized her fellow shipmates' motivation for leaving their homeland. More than half of the reasons relate to the gendered dilemmas* of the Meiji Japanese woman: (Nakano, 1990)

"I believe we all go to American for one of the following reasons:

1. Hopes of becoming rich
2. Curiosity of this civilized country called America
3. Fear of mother-in-law in Japan*
4. Sexual anxiety in those who have passed marriage-age*
5. Dreams of an idyllic, romantic life in the new land
6. Lack of ability to support self*
7. Filial obedience: sacrificing self to obey parents' wishes"* p. 26

Part 2 Japanese Issei Women as Workers and Spouses

The participation of Japanese female immigrant laborers can be traced to the earliest stages of Japanese emigration. The first migration of 30,000 predominately male Japanese to the United States occurred in Hawaii in the 1885-1905. after a series of rural depressions in Japan left many families without property and livelihood. (Ichioka, 1988). Hawaiian planters and immigration policies increasingly favored the concept of a *laborer family* as the optimum way to stabilize their unskilled plantation workers, especially in light of anti-Asian actions in the continental U.S. to ban the flow of Asian laborers (Petersen, 1971). In the late 1880's, Hawaiian government policies allowed up to 40% of the three-year sugar cane plantation contract laborers to be women. Japanese female laborers usually filled half of that quota. Takaki (1993) reports that thousands more Japanese women also left through private labor contracts negotiated between Hawaiian and Japanese labor brokers as well as women engaged in prostitution.

The first significant mass migration of over 60,000 Japanese women to the continental United States commenced in 1907 with the Gentlemen's Agreement which banned Japanese contract workers. However, concessions were made to allow family members of settled Japanese to emigrate. So "summoned visas" were granted to the Japanese wives, children or parents of Japanese immigrants until 1920 when passports for picture brides were abandoned. Issei men who ranged in ages from 29-45 still outnumbered females, but the percentage of women grew from 4% of the total Japanese immigrants in 1900 to 13% in 1910 or about 5,581 women, Ichioka (1988) reports. In 1920 35% were issei women (Okihiro & Meyers, 1996, 103). Various sources differ, but it is estimated that in 1920, 22,193 to 24,125 of the 110,010 Japanese Issei immigrants were mostly married women. According to Nakano (1986), Japanese women

made up 40% of the Japanese emigration between 1907-1923. In the larger picture of U.S. immigration, combined figures of Japanese male and female immigrants still only constituted .021% of the total California population and .01% of the total U.S. immigrant population in 1920 (Swain-Thomas, 1962, In Nakano, 1990, Takaki, 1989).

In comparison to working issei women and women in Japan, American females comprised only 17% of the workforce, married women even less so. In the 1890-1900 period, only 5-6% of married U.S. women worked, which jumped to 11% in 1910 and later dropped to 9% in 1920 (Beeghley, 1995). "These persons were mainly poor, African American and immigrant women who could not live, because they were impoverished and discriminated against, according to traditional [U.S.] gender-role norms" (Beeghley, 1995, 230).

Contrary to expectations of domestic bliss and protection, issei women were often lured under false (and desperate) pretenses of financial security reported by their issei husbands which necessitated wives to seek outside employment. According to Ichioka (1988), Japanese immigration authorities banned the passage of a spouse until the wages of the issei husband matched governmental standards. As a result, few Japanese wives emigrated in the pre-1907 period, because the majority of issei men worked for such low wages. However this requirement was eased in the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement if the issei man could show a savings of \$800 five months prior to the sea passage of their spouses (Ichioka, 1988, Nakano, 1990). Thus, a customary safeguard for departing Japanese wives was unfortunately eliminated. Once these women arrived, their chances for return were financially slim as well as geographically difficult.

Common female jobs were in U.S. fisheries boarding homes, domestic service, but the bulk was in agricultural labor alongside their husbands and children. In Hawaii, typical female plantation workers earned an average of 55 cents a day versus male wages of 78 cents for 10-12 hours of segmented labor which meant that women

were excluded from performing higher paid physical tasks. In addition, 25 cents of the monthly earnings were put into savings managed by labor contractors. Intimidation and fear prodded issei women to endure harsh conditions: (Takaki, 1989)

“We had to work in the cane fields, cutting cane, being afraid, not knowing the language. When any haole (white person) or Portuguese luna (overseers who rode horses, carrying whips) came, we got frightened and thought that we had to work harder or get fired.” p. 135

The Japanese “picture brides” also found double oppression as a dutiful spouse married to a “Meiji man”, who was both a taskmaster and husband. In California, one describes her routine of rising at 4 AM before her husband, putting in a full day of meal preparation, child care, picking and boxing produce until late night. Then, “I did miscellaneous chores until about midnight. However tired I was, the ‘Meiji man’ wouldn’t let me sleep before him” (Takaki, 1989, 191).

Abusive living and working conditions and incompatibility were often cited reasons for considering divorce. Oppression in whatever form took its toil on both spouses: (Wakatsuki-Houston, 1985)

“She told of a young picture bride who was very disappointed when she met her husband. He had sent a picture of a much younger and handsomer friend of his to her in Japan. She refused to bed with him and tied her legs together with a sash every night. Frustrated by her defiance, the rejected husband tried to subjugate her by cutting off her long black-hair. She committed seppuku (suicide by slitting the throat). He then threw himself over a cliff to his own death.” p. 35

Freedom for Japanese women to leave America was dependent on their husbands and families in Japan to financially support such a move. Japanese marriages were not individual matters, but collective social institutions arranged by consenting families of similar social and economic status and community matchmakers. Marriages were legalized by entering the names and property under the husband's family register. Thereafter, the legal responsibility and welfare of issei wives, who were typically ten or more years younger than their spouses became entrusted to their husbands as heads of single households. In Japan, it is highly likely that marital problems would be counseled by extended family members. In the United States, this family support system was absent nor were local welfare rights accessible to them as foreigners or because their English was insufficient. So issei women had no one who could mediate the authority of a willful husband. Age and generational differences were at often at fault. "Despite changes in ideas and practices in Japan, the [issei] men clung to archaic notions which they had learned from their fathers in the 19th Century, about absolute subordinate role of the wife" (Ichioka, 1988, 172).

A Japanese divorce would have been difficult in all respects without an economic livelihood and was a social stigma in Japan and the United States. Still some Issei wives opted for desertions as soon as they arrived or ran away with new-found lovers or with their children. If a wife's adultery were the cause of divorce, this would be a punishable criminal offense under Japanese law of that time and entered in public family records (Kaneko, In Fujimura-Fanselow, 1994). Legal recourse was difficult. Once issei women arrived in the U.S. and had families to care for, their lives seemed decided. In most cases, a stoic "shigatanai" (It can't be helped) attitude was taken by issei women. However it was not necessarily a passive resignation, but a resolution to persevere and work actively for the family's welfare.

Two-thirds of issei families in California devoted themselves to some aspect of agriculture, first through contract labor, then, tenant farming, and finally to property rights placed in the names of their American citizen children. This was possible through a loophole in the 1913 Alien Land laws which prevented foreigners from owning and leasing land more than three years. In 1920, Japanese male immigrants still outnumbered females, but half of the Japanese farmers, one-tenth of the farm workers and one-third of city dwellers were married according to one report by occupation (Chan, 1991). Unmarried farmers, therefore, had no chance to secure property in California through American-born offspring. Nonetheless moderate economic success was achieved. By 1917, 8,000 Japanese tenant farmers were producing 90% of California's celery, asparagus, onions, strawberries and other fruits for America at a time of need during World War I.

The role of issei women in family enterprises and as double income providers was instrumental in the survival of the issei generation. From 1920 U.S. census data, it was estimated that over 20% of Japanese women aged ten years and over were gainfully employed. Researchers consider this figure extremely low considering the incidence of families in agriculture and poor data collection. However

TABLE A

Occupation*	Females (total #)	Per cent	Males (total #)	Per cent
Agriculture	1,797	34.0	23,860	45.4
Domestics	1,409	26.6	10,363	19.7
Service, clerical	951	18.0	119,796	1.5, .02
Manufacturing	378	7.1	6,732	14.2
Trade	369	7.0	4,510	8.6
Professional service	145	2.7	1,150	2.2
TOTAL EMPLOYED	5,289		52,614	

*Nakano, 1986, 70-73. Note: Not all occupations are listed.

the 1920 census data also reveals the similarity of occupations indicated by both Japanese men and women, namely in agriculture, service and the trades. (See Table A, excerpts from Nakano, 1986, 70-73). Nakano surmised that the majority of issei families worked for the same employers in parallel labor or engaged in shared family enterprises as in agriculture. This was indeed a successful tactic used by issei families to booster their income as well as bond the members in a common effort. While children and women worked in the fields, the fathers could truck the produce to desirable markets allowing them to abandon tenant farming and strike out on their own. Overall, co-dependency in family labor and enterprises provided the turning point in issei successes.

The issuance of picture bride passports was terminated on March 1, 1920 when the Japanese Government unilaterally agreed to cease the emigration of picture brides due to prolonged anti-Asian prejudice. The next section will discuss important issues surrounding these events.

Part 3 Gendered Representations of Inequalities, Racism and Accomplishment

The crucial role that Japanese issei women played as economic partners, wives and mothers was ironically heightened by the thoroughness of nativist acts. Because Asian men could not legally marry other American women, own property as aliens, and were paid indentured wages, the arrival of Japanese picture brides and subsequent American-born offspring was the turning point in escaping discrimination and establishing permanent residence. Nonetheless issei women experienced extreme physical and mental hardship as immigrants and as Japanese females. Beeghey (1996) outlines four indicators of traditional gender role inequalities which characterized Japanese and also American women of that time:

1. High proportion of women who did not work for pay
2. Voluntary part time employment
3. Economic dependence of women on men
4. Men's opposition to performing household tasks

As seen in the case history, these features were also institutionalized in a stratified and patriarchal Japanese society that issei women had left behind, only to find the impoverishment and oppression continued. For the sake of economic survival, wives were resigned to take on triple shifts, (Gee, 1976)

“I started at 5:00 pm to prepare supper for five to six persons, and then I began my evening work. The difficult ironing remained.’ Women blouses in those days were made from silk or lace, with collars, and long sleeves and lots of frills. I could only finish two in one hour, ironing them with great care. Hence I worked usually until 12:00 to 1:00 AM. But it was not just me--all the women who worked the laundry business probably did the same thing.” p. 363

Exclusionist attacks denigrated Japanese women immigrants. Cora Woodbridge, who served in the California state legislature, dismissed the issei women as “a beast of burden up to her time of birth of her child and within a day or two at the most, resumes her task and continues it from twelve to sixteen hours a day,” (Daniels, 1952, 85-86). If issei women had given birth in Japan, a 21 day rest was customarily taken after delivery in the wife's parents' home (Gee, 1978, Nakano, 1990), but survival concerns for the family's welfare taxed issei women to the limit.

In proportion to the gradual economic progress made by issei couples, organized California exclusionists, (such as the Anti-Asian Exclusion League, Native Sons of the Golden West, San Francisco

Chronicle & the Hearst newspaper, notable state politicians), intensified two-pronged attacks at both issei spouses for their purported "fecundity." The loophole in the alien land laws was the actual spur for these distorted charges, claiming that 15,211 Japanese women were annually giving birth to 4,378 children. This inflamed public opinions as if the yellow peril" (invasion of Asians) was imminent and thus, they would steal jobs from American laborers. According to Daniels (1962), by using a valid measurement of long term birthrates, the actual Japanese birth rate would have fallen "somewhat below the contemporary immigrant groups from Europe and only slightly above the rather low native-white birth rate in the twenties and thirties" (p.89). Still the popular press inflated anti-Asian sentiments with headlines like "Japanese Women a Menace to American Women,"(Jacobs, Landau, 1971, 16). Another ploy by California exclusionists was a guardianship clause which would prevent the issei parents of nisei (second generation) American children from acting as guardians of property that was placed in minors' names. This was later struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court as an infringement of an American (nisei) citizen's rights to property ownership according to the Fourteenth Amendment and a matter for federal jurisdiction, not for states to legislate (Daniels, 1962). Another California exclusionist target was the picture bride marriage. Japanese women were depicted as deviously participating in sham marriages in order to bring in female laborers since male Asian workers were banned in 1907. However these marriages were legal and culturally acceptable according to Japanese standards where community matchmakers and families of similar social standing arranged marriages. When prospective grooms could not return to Japan, the exchange of photos was a realistic and convenient practice.

Unfortunately coined terms, such as picture brides which originated from a Japanese travel magazine, (Hisashi, 1977), tended to perpetuate idyllic stereotypes that young issei women wanted to

believe and disguised the harsh reality they were to face. Some issei men compounded the misrepresentation by sending younger photos of themselves, images which the women upon arrival searched for in vain.

The biggest legal obstacle for issei couples was a denial of naturalization rights. The legal basis for this was based on the U.S. vs Takao Ozawa case. Ozawa petitioned for U.S. citizenship from 1914 and was finally denied by the Supreme Court in 1922. Parts of the Supreme Court decision read: (Daniels, 1962)

“Including the period of his residence in Hawaii, applicant has continuously resided in the U.S. for twenty years. He was a graduate of the Berkeley, California High School, had been nearly three years a student in the University of California, had educated his children in American schools; his family had attended American churches, and he had maintained the use of English in his home. That he is well-qualified by character and education for citizenship is conceded...” p. 98

Nonetheless, the justices accepted racialized arguments that Japanese (later applied to Chinese, Korean, Southeast Asians) were not “free white persons” nor freed blacks who were eligible for citizenship at the creation of the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, *Japanese issei did not qualify* (Daniels, 1962, Jacobs, et al, 1971, Petersen, 1971).

It is highly doubtful that any Japanese immigrant woman could have pleaded for naturalization, because even American born women were viewed as second class citizens. Between 1890-1919, American feminist women were spearheading their own battles for constitutional rights which resulted in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919. Prior to the feminist movement, western women were

also under the “cover of her husband” until the mid to late 1800’s as Japanese women were. American women could not own property nor be party to contracts without the permission of their husbands and could not serve on juries until the Nineteenth Amendment (Lister, 1997, 67). Moreover, any American women who married an ineligible alien, i.e. Chinese or Japanese, risked almost total loss of her citizenship according to the Cable Act of 1922 (Chan, 1991, Hing, 1993).

Finally in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Public Law, racial grounds for immigration were dropped in favor of national quotas and in one small clause, naturalization rights were finally granted to Japanese immigrants.

Part 4 Concluding Remarks

The survival and success of the Japanese immigrant family hinged heavily on the substantial migration of Japanese women in the thirteen year period from 1907 to 1920. This becomes more apparent when compared to the difficulties of Chinese male immigrants to form families after Chinese men and women laborers were summarily banned in the 1875 Page Law (Chan, 1991). Thus, the migration of Japanese women precipitated significant shifts from temporary to permanent U.S. residence, from bachelor status to stable married life, from indentured workers to co-dependent family enterprises and viable communities. Eventually their American nisei children were instrumental in allowing their parents to triumph over racialized legislation and prejudice of that period. In many ways, the quality of issei women’s lives was only a transfer from an old world patriarchal dependency to a new world one, but their contributions tipped the scales where it mattered the most.

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Abstract:

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Many excellent papers have researched the history of the first generation of Japanese Americans, often called issei. However, the majority are written under the assumption that the migrant abroad is male which serves to underrepresent the role of female migrants. This historical case study highlights a more gendered portrayal of co-dependency between Issei women and men in their fight to survive in the early 1900's migration from Japan to the western regions of the United States. The contents cover relevant cross-cultural features of issei women migration, marriage, labor and also structural inequalities that the first generation of Japanese Americans faced.

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