

# The Transpacific Origins of the “Model Minority” Myth of Japanese Americans

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## Introduction

Construction of the “model minority” myth as it was affixed to Japanese Americans began soon after the first Japanese immigrants arrived to the United States. This impulse to tailor the image of *Nikkeijin*, or people of Japanese ancestry, into something more readily acceptable to mainstream American society was largely in reaction to bigoted treatment meted out by individuals and anti-Japanese organizations. This animosity was infamously codified into legal systems with Alien Land Laws, the first of which was passed in California in 1913. Social elites on both sides of the Pacific Ocean partnered to rework the image of Japanese in the United States, and the *modus operandi* for this endeavor was a series of reform campaigns that targeted and sought to modify immigrant ways of presenting and conducting themselves. Existing scholarship dovetails with my assertion that the “model minority” myth originated from the calculated efforts social elites, but points to the reactionary and controversial wartime activities of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and their partners as the beginning of efforts to recast this ethnic group into an ideal minority.<sup>1</sup> My argument, however, is

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, Ellen Wu focuses equally on the development of the “model minority” myth within Chinese American communities and Japanese American communities, but her basic arguments hold that the creation of the “model minority” myth began to take shape in the WWII era and in the immediate post war period.

that these efforts commenced decades earlier than the existing scholarship has previously cited, as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. As Ellen Wu has argued, the social and political crisis of internment was a catalyst for the Japanese American elite to take measures to form a society they envisioned would be better accepted by mainstream Americans. However, it was not the first such crisis to prompt elites to strategize a re-ordering of the ethnic enclave. My examination of the construction of the “model minority” myth for Japanese Americans dates to the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” of 1908, a diplomatic understanding between the United States and Japan aimed at stopping Japanese immigration to the United States. Central to this study is a group of elites known as the Japanese Association of America (JAA), who were greatly frustrated with the maltreatment of Japanese in the new country. This group fervently believed that the problem could be mitigated by altering the behavior of the immigrant population; to this end, they mobilized their influence within communities to curb what they considered immoral activities, promote permanent settlement over return migration, and to push for cultural assimilation along American cultural normative lines. Rather than necessarily stemming from a genuine desire to become “good Americans,” these campaigns were a way to combat the “yellow peril”<sup>2</sup> sentiment on the American West Coast. The JAA constructed a discourse about Japan and modernity within the ethnic communities which held that in addition to potentially affording better treatment for individuals, forming a settled community could elevate the image of Japan, especially if members lived as model residents in the United States. In this way, Japanese immigrants in the United States became unofficial ambassadors, physical embodiments

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<sup>2</sup> I use “yellow peril” in this article to denote interplay of popular attitudes toward Asians, in this case Japanese, characterized by fear and hostility that manifested in isolated confrontations as well as in public policy.

of Japanese modernity living within an American society that powerbrokers, such as the JAA and reformers in Japan, very much wanted to favorably impress.

In my analysis I have made use of a variety of primary and secondary source materials in English and Japanese. To ascertain the mindset of proponents of the JAA's various reform campaigns, I relied heavily on an under-studied Japanese-language book *Zaibei Nihonjin Shi* (History of Japanese People in the United States).<sup>3</sup> Written by the JAA, and printed in Japan in 1940, but never available for purchase, this book tells a history of Japanese living in the United States from the earliest castaways on mid nineteenth-century American steamers. To gauge the level of hostility Japanese faced in their new country, I turned to American newspaper articles and diplomatic records contemporaneous to my period of study.

Within the historiography of Japanese immigrants to the United States, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the struggles of laborers and the agency born of their everyday lived experiences. Japanese American history, like the history of many other minority groups in America, emerged in the 1970s as an academic response to tumultuous political and social movements and the traditional focus on powerful elites in historical scholarship. Hence, Japanese American history has, from its very origin, been a branch of social history—a study from the bottom up, focused on examining the plight of ordinary people. In the subfield of social history, the social elites were relegated to the analytical margins; as such, the ordinary people have tended to dominate the historiography of Japanese Americans. Studies that treat workers as primary historical subjects have been crucial in providing an understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Miyuki Jimura for providing me with assistance in understanding some of the passages of this document.

the early Japanese experience in the United States, and are correct to recognize the ways in which these intrepid souls carved out a space within a social territory that was often hostile. Taking as their sources memoirs, oral histories, and other individual accounts, these studies departed from traditional historical practices that had previously rendered non-elites as little more than a background of monolithic, one-dimensional groups defined by familiar tropes (e.g. agriculturalists, railroad laborers, miners, “picture brides”) against and upon which powerful elites historically acted.

It is with the benefit of insights gained from progressive histories that I wish to once again direct scholarly gaze on a classic locus of power: social elites. A study of these pillars of the immigrant community will inform the corpus of literature on Japanese in the United States in the *fin-de-siècle* and the early decades of the twentieth century by offering an analysis of elite beliefs channelled through the JAA. Despite much scholarly attention given to laborers and non-elite immigrants, the world and life of “the people” is, in reality, inextricable from a complex interplay with the superstructure of power. Any discussion of the routine lives of laborers cannot be complete unless this web of relationships and reciprocal influences is also investigated. Herein lies the need for resuscitating the place of social elites in narratives of social history, even more so when dealing with the construction of the “model minority” myth. The elites were in a position to conduct a dialog with the American public at large, as well as with counterparts in Japan, and were thus representatives of the community. The JAA organized lifestyle campaigns with the purpose of molding Japanese immigrants into a community more acceptable to the dominant culture; clearly, this group painstakingly constructed the terms on which they entered into conversation with outsiders. It is difficult to quantify the success of the JAA’s efforts, but I believe there is value in a study that analyzes the concepts of “home” and “belonging” and “modernity” within the Japanese immigrant community and beyond. This work contributes to the

nascent body of scholarship on the “model minority” myth by offering a historical account of its construction by Japanese social elites both in Japan and the United States. I take into account the intertwined nature of Japan’s national history and international affairs including the quest of Japan to achieve social respectability vis-à-vis Western powers and also for Japanese nationals to be accorded dignified treatment within the United States. This kind of scholarship mandates a conflation of international history, Japanese history, and American ethnic history. In this way, the present work responds to the call raised by Eiichiro Azuma to consider the positionality of Nikkeijin (though in this article I am looking mainly at Japanese immigrants), and is also in accordance with a recent trend within the social sciences that seeks to dissolve the artificial boundaries of national history, and redefine the narrative of nation-states, and their people, in more transnational contexts.

In this article, I will discuss the American “yellow peril” rhetoric and the resulting United States-Japan diplomatic crisis, as well as the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” between America and Japan regarding emigration from the latter. Finally, I will present a transformation of the JAA from a detached advocacy group to an organization with a tangible presence in the lives of everyday Japanese immigrants in the post-“Gentlemen’s Agreement” era. At the heart of this analysis is an examination of the JAA’s efforts to harness the indomitable patriotism of Japanese in America in order to advance assimilation and moral reform campaigns. In particular, the bodies of women were the focus of many reformist activities, and this article will demonstrate how Japanese social elites partnered with organizations in Japan and the United States to better align immigrant women’s domestic practices with a Western ideal in the face of calls to prohibit Japanese “picture brides,” and with American organizations to eliminate prostitution. I conclude with an examination of the unravelling of the “Gentlemen’s Agreement”

through the Immigration Act of 1924, and hypotheses regarding the impact that this had on Japanese communities in the United States.

### **Initial Forays into the United States**

The JAA credits the Japanese immigrants of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, mostly students who came to study in American universities, with establishing a meaningful connection to their new home in the United States. These early migrants were offered boarding in American households where they were exposed to “righteous living” by the ideological descendants of Puritan settlers.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding that these households were mere boarders’ lodgings, the JAA drew an ideological connection to these American paragons of the “Protestant work ethic” by arguing that having simply been in this milieu boded well for the developing young adults, most of whom were hosted by “faithful and pious Christian” families who could impart sincere moral teachings to the Japanese students.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, because these students had demonstrated academic ability and endured many obstacles to enter American schools, the character of the students was outstanding. They thrived in their new environment and excelled in academic performance and moral conduct.<sup>6</sup> Having been exposed to American culture, and in many instances, embracing it by converting to Christianity, their resolve to remain in the country became even stronger. Still, the resistance that these individuals encountered was a continual reminder of their status as an Other. It cannot be assumed, however,

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<sup>4</sup> Zaibei Nihonjin Kai, *Zaibei Nihonjin Shi* (Tokyo: 1940), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

that these elites were ready to abandon their Japanese identity completely. After all, the JAA considered itself the “brain and bone [framework] of Japanese society in the United States actively involved in the front lines of [Japan’s] overseas development.”<sup>7</sup> The JAA’s desire for immigrants to “fit in” to United States society was a conflation of respect for American culture as well as a desire to reflect well on their country of birth.

The early comers to the United States were promising youth who often shared a sense of mission to expand the reaches of Japan and to build a new national image, triggered by the formidable legacy of the Meiji Restoration. Each of these individuals “bathed” in the lively culture of the new land and contributed to building an international image of a “modern” Japan while becoming leaders within the ethnic enclaves in America.<sup>8</sup> According to the JAA, the earliest Japanese residents in the United States had made a favorable impression; it was the subsequent deluge of economically motivated workers that blighted this early image of the empire and its emigrants.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Unskilled Workers Enter the Equation**

Labor contractors often brought Japanese agricultural workers to the United States, and most Japanese laborers went to Hawaiian sugar plantations or to farms in California. These agricultural laborers were mostly peasants from the Japanese countryside who relied on contractors to pay their passage and to loan them start-up funds for a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 32.

new life abroad. These immigrants were often mistreated due to their vulnerability, and were in an unequal power dynamic with contractors who often exerted great control and influence in their respective recruiting areas within Japan.

Starting in roughly 1890, a significant increase in Japanese immigration caught the attention of American officials, and prompted regulation. One event in particular was heavily reported by newspapers and helped to brand Japanese immigration as a flood of undesirables into the country. Two steamships, the *Remus* and the *Pemptos*, docked in Pacific harbors in 1891 carrying a large number of Japanese passengers. American newspapers were quick to characterize the immigrants as “low-class and densely ignorant.”<sup>10</sup> The elites in the Japanese immigrant community in the United States were keenly aware of the impression their “remarkably provincial” fellows were making in the host country, and this served as a catalyst for the formation of organizations such as the JAA to combat this view.<sup>11</sup>

The most common characterizations of these Japanese immigrants were that they were “inassimilable,” and that they were a detriment to the American labor force. The rising numbers of Japanese in the United States, both through immigration and birth rate, were also a concern for many, leading to fears that they would eventually gain control of territory through population increase. Compounding the alarm of so many exclusionists was the persistent argument that Japanese could not be “true” Americans because traditional Japanese values, such as loyalty to the motherland and the emperor, would be taught in immigrants’ homes and in the ethnic

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<sup>10</sup> Mitziko Sawada, *Tokyo Life New York Dreams: Urban Japanese Visions of America, 1890-1924* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Zaibei Nihonjin Kai, p. 47.



schools that many Japanese children attended to supplement their American education. These were some of the beliefs regarding Japan and the Japanese people that the JAA would assiduously try to counter by advocating a discourse of adaptability and conformity rooted in concern for protecting the image of Japan and Japanese in the eyes of the host society.

### **The Diplomatic Crisis**

The considerable, and growing, anti-Japanese agitation in California and other Western states (such as Washington, Idaho, Oregon, and Utah) put the Japanese government on the defensive. Japan had recently gained increased political status in Asia through decisive military victories over the Chinese (in the First Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895) and Russians (in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905), and international headlines recounting poor treatment of Japanese immigrants in the United States were an embarrassment to the government in Tokyo. It was considered paramount to Japan's international aspirations to be treated with respect and to be able to maintain a strong image vis-à-vis the industrial superpowers of the world, such as the United States and Great Britain.

In 1906, when a devastating earthquake in California made school buildings scarce, the San Francisco School Board ordered the segregation of Japanese and Japanese American school children. The intention of this decision was to leave the best of the remaining facilities for white children. With this move, the diplomatic tensions between the United States and Japan became palpable. On the American side, President Theodore Roosevelt had been watching the crisis unfold and was extremely interested in reaching an amicable compromise with Japan that would quiet the exclusionists on the West Coast and avert a larger diplomatic problem with an up-and-coming naval power. Japan had been observing the rancor over Japanese laborers in the United States with mounting concern. An outright ban on Japanese immigration, as had been enacted against

the Chinese in 1882, would be a hindrance to the Japanese government's efforts to secure a more equal footing with industrialized Western powers, and therefore would not be acceptable. The Japanese government was resolved to take measures that would prevent actions such as this and protect the image of its nationals in the world arena. The JAA were determined to do their part to support these efforts, both to improve their status and treatment in their country of residence and to safeguard the perception of their homeland, thereby demonstrating their worthiness to join American society.<sup>12</sup>

### **The “Gentlemen’s Agreement” and the Ascendancy of the JAA**

It was evident that mass entry of unskilled Japanese workers was the main point of contention in California, and both the Japanese and American governments had a vested interest in satisfactorily resolving this conflict. The diplomatic agreement reached between the United States and Japan in 1908, dubbed the “Gentleman’s Agreement,” was an informal accord in which Japan agreed to monitor and restrict the emigration of its own nationals to the United States. In return, the American government agreed not to place an official restriction on Japanese immigration. The main alteration in the emigration policy of Japan was the creation of two categories of visas; one for skilled laborers and another for unskilled laborers, with the quota for unskilled visas set very low.

The terms of the “Gentleman’s Agreement” necessitated a Japanese governmental presence on American soil to monitor the influx of its nationals as well as to track and verify the legitimacy of these people. With a sophisticated organization already in place on the West Coast, the JAA was in a position to provide the necessary

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

oversight. By 1907, the JAA was operating at two levels and was partially under the aegis of the local Japanese consulates. The central body of the JAA was comprised of regional offices organized around the consulate in a particular city, and below these were the local JAA branches.

Beginning in 1909, the Japanese consulate delegated administrative authority to the JAA's central bodies, which in turn authorized the local municipal branches to act as proxies. The JAA was permitted to oversee consulate transactions including processing marriage and divorce applications, requests for travel back to Japan, and paperwork to summon the spouses and other family members of legal residents. Most importantly, the JAA was also charged with the task of checking the legitimacy of visas and issuing residency certificates to individuals determined to have lawfully entered the United States. The JAA went one step further, however, by taking photographs and gathering demographic information concerning occupation, financial status and family connections of residents.<sup>13</sup> This data was used in tracking individuals and was shared among local associations in a self-policing effort to curb vice, and by extension, combat Americans' "yellow peril" fears.

As the drive toward assimilation took on an increasingly desperate tone in the face of mounting anti-Japanese hostility in the United States, the JAA began to consider the moral fiber of certificate applicants. No longer was it sufficient just to have orderly immigration paperwork issued from Japan, now the petitioner must also live a life of integrity. It was at this juncture that the JAA began to implore rank and file laborers to demonstrate to their American

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<sup>13</sup> Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 163.

hosts that Japanese immigrants were worthy of equal legal treatment by adopting mainstream cultural practices.

### **Like “Human Bullets”**

When masses of unskilled Japanese workers came to American shores, already-established elite Japanese residents retained a position of leadership within the Japanese immigrant communities in areas such as “industrial management, organization, and proper guidance of thought.”<sup>14</sup> The JAA claimed that it was this quality of leadership which “set the Japanese population apart” from other immigrant groups with large numbers of migrant workers but in which more skilled or educated members were largely absent, thus imbuing the Japanese minority in the United States with “an entirely different appearance.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite the presence of diverse social elements, the settlers were surrounded by adversity and received little aid from their country of origin. Ineligible for American citizenship, disadvantaged in some states by land ownership bans and a myriad of other legal prohibitions, and reliant on distant Japan to intervene in instances of unjust treatment, their situation was untenable. Thus, the Japanese immigrant community painstakingly negotiated a space for themselves in between two nation states.<sup>16</sup> From the outset, the JAA believed that the nascent Japanese communities were at a

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<sup>14</sup> Zaibei Nihonjin Kai, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Eiichiro Azuma in his excellent monograph, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America*, masterfully describes the positionality of Japanese in the United States as “in-between” peoples.

disadvantage within “an existing society [where mainstream whites] boasts their power and superiority.”<sup>17</sup> The JAA believed that in relation to this dominant group, Japanese immigrants “thoughtlessly” mingled, scattered, rarely congregated, and allowed themselves to become engulfed within the mainstream society, seldom making forays into the larger entity that surrounded them.<sup>18</sup> Alarmed by this, the JAA sought to create a cohesive society of Japanese in America. On a political level, average Japanese laborers “created a society that had extremely few political and legal links [to Japanese society].”<sup>19</sup> As such, these sojourners “fought against mental anxiety” in not having direct support from either country, and were forced to “[overcome] thousands of new experiences, and [to proceed] as if they were human bullets.”<sup>20</sup> What ties existed to the homeland were the travels and correspondence of a small number of Japanese on either side of the Pacific Ocean. The JAA believed that suffering of individual immigrants could be lessened, and that bannings together could strengthen the relative position of the entire group. With political connections to the homeland, the educated and economically advantaged JAA felt they were in a position to lead their fellow patriots to creating a respectable minority in the United States.

The JAA considered the Japanese immigrants of the United States to be important cultural brokers between the two nation states. They felt that the Japanese residents of the United States had much to offer both nations. From their vantage point, the Japanese in

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<sup>17</sup> *Zaibei Nihonjin Kai*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

America were well suited to provide needed labor and were “peerless pioneers of industry” who could facilitate transpacific trade in terms of American dealings with Asia.<sup>21</sup> The people, they believed, also represented a source of assistance to the mother country’s international relations as “a pioneer group full of combative spirit to advance Japan’s overseas development, a group of forerunners to introduce Japan abroad, and also people of great sincerity.”<sup>22</sup> These objectives were part of a JAA platform to showcase a “modern” Japan to the broader world, act promptly to smooth bilateral relations when necessary, and encourage greater understanding between the two nations. In terms of cultural sharing and transpacific friendship, tens of thousands of second generation Japanese had been born in the United States, comprising a domestic cadre of Nikkeijin to “serve an important role by representing a unique contribution to the future of both countries.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the JAA felt that Japanese immigrants could be most useful to Japan by remaining in the United States and making inroads into the society of this world power.

However, the capacity of this group to live up to this potential was limited by the position of Japanese in the new country. Nikkeijin could only aid their homeland in gaining the friendship of the United States if they consciously formed immigrant communities and worked toward these purposes. Organization and a shared vision could achieve what individuals could not; it would allow these patriots to be useful to Japan. Moreover, the JAA knew that assimilation was key to gaining the trust of Americans, and the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

United States would only enter into a close friendship with a nation it could relate to. In this sense, the Japanese immigrants were an element in forming a relationship between the United States and Japan.

### **Building a Unique, Settled, Community**

A formidable challenge for the JAA throughout its most active decades was to communicate the idea of “ethnic community” to workers in remote locations. Laborers routinely ventured out individually or in small groups to various farms to harvest crops or work in mines or on large-scale infrastructure, and seldom had contact with other Japanese immigrants beyond those in their immediate working vicinity. Rather than have these workers engage in seasonal migrations, the JAA desired to see these Japanese laborers settle, acquire land, have families, and build settlements.

The JAA encouraged wives to immigrate hoping that this would promote the creation of families, and by extension, communities. Japanese emigration law stipulated that farmers and businessmen were permitted to send for wives while unskilled laborers were not. Because of this, itinerant men were encouraged to become settled agriculturists in order to take advantage of the opportunity to bring Japanese wives to the United States and make families in their adopted homes. Once reclassified as agriculturalists, these men could send for their relatives in Japan, or make arrangements to sponsor a “picture bride.” Incidentally, farming also enhanced the likelihood that the immigrant would remain in the United States, making it doubly attractive in the eyes of the JAA. It was believed that the development of kinship networks in the United States would further incentivize permanent settlement and investment of money into the local economy, thus countering the claim that the presence of Japanese was a detriment to general economic health as well as to the livelihood of the native workforce. Establishing families also promoted vested interests in and

contribution to local communities, which presented a more acceptable image of Japanese immigrants, and Japan generally, than single, male, itinerant laborers.

From the earliest days of Japanese immigration, Christian organizations had assisted these newcomers to the United States; yet it was the more established segments of Japanese society—the skilled and educated elites—who had the most exposure to, and enjoyed the most aid from, American Christian organizations. The participation of elite Japanese in Christian organizations demonstrates the appreciation this group had for mainstream American culture. The activities they chose to pursue in partnership with these groups, however, speak to their commitment to improving the image of the Japanese community in the United States, and their continuing desire to protect the image of the homeland through activities in their new country of residence.

In time, Japanese elites rose to lofty ranks within some Christian organizations, and were also active in the formation of new religious associations. Among the most important of these early groups was the Gospel Society, which gradually developed as a central meeting place for Japanese students in San Francisco. The Gospel Society operated a boarding house for newly arrived immigrants and performed various services for newcomers such as providing assistance with job placement. This religious organization was of paramount importance in training the first cohort of JAA leaders as well as in constructing the ideals of the kinds of communities these leaders envisioned; notably, one which showed deference to the dominant Christian culture.<sup>24</sup> It was for building this kind of exemplary diasporic community that the JAA hoped to enlist rank and file laborers.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



While certain members of the Japanese elite did genuinely admire American culture, there can be no doubt that adoption of American cultural norms was also seen as a means to gain acceptance. Likewise, it is clear that in addition to the desire to improve the situation of the Japanese American immigrant community, these efforts were intended to project the desired image of the homeland to members of the host society. And while these efforts were directly motivated by the circumstances of immigrants' daily lives in the United States, their love of their homeland and concern over its international image was clearly also a motivation for many of their choices and actions.

### **The Question of Japanese Women in the United States**

The behavior and perception of Japanese women in the United States were of particular concern to Japanese leaders and the educated classes on both sides of the Pacific. American officials uniformly viewed women arriving from Japan with suspicion. American policy makers and immigration officials especially disapproved of the practice of marriage by proxy such as in the case of "picture brides." The underlying suspicion was that these women were entering the country ostensibly to become brides but were in fact destined for brothels. One illustration of this distaste for proxy marriages can be found in a newspaper article reporting that immigration officials were denying landing permission even to Japanese women who made the journey lawfully, which declared, "Henceforth, when a little brown man would marry a maid from Japan he will not take chances with Japanese romances—He'll adopt the American plan."<sup>25</sup>

At issue in this debate were the transpacific marriages between male Japanese immigrants in the United States and so-called

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<sup>25</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 27, 1905.

Japanese “picture brides.” This practice was a twist on the Japanese custom of employing a marriage broker to arrange a suitable match, and the procedure for arranging these marriages was fairly straightforward. The man would send a his demographic information to a marriage broker in Japan, and the agent would match his information with that of a Japanese woman whose parents had also registered her with the broker. In most cases geographic background, lineage, and socioeconomic status were carefully matched. In lieu of meeting face to face, as in a formal visitation (this was customary before the wedding ceremony) the two parties exchanged photographs and letters via post. The crux of American suspicion of “picture brides” was ignorance of Japanese wedding practices. After both sides agreed to the marriage, the woman would go to the local magistrate in Japan with paperwork from the broker to register the marriage and be officially entered into her husband’s family registry. This registration was the only legal requirement for marriage in Japan—after this; the couple was legally united in the eyes of the Japanese government, even if they had never met.

Immigration officials began to require that a husband and his “picture bride” wife remarry according to American law upon her arrival before she would be allowed to enter the United States.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese consul lodged a protest, but the United States Commissioner-General of Immigration supported a ruling, that held that “picture marriages” would not be recognized.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the JAA’s efforts in cooperation with various religious organizations did not win the important contest in the arena of public opinion surrounding Japanese women in the United States and working to reform the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 8, 1905.

popular opinion of Japanese women became a crucial element in the quest to craft a favorable image of Japanese.

### **Learning Western Domesticity**

The perception of Japan and Japanese emigrants abroad—the focus of great concern for elites in Japan as well as their counterparts within the JAA—extended into the modest homes of working class immigrants in tangible and highly visible ways. Eiichi Shibusawa, Japan’s leading entrepreneur and founder of the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce and partner of the JAA, was instrumental in facilitating some of the farthest-reaching reforms for individual families. On a visit to the American West Coast, Shibusawa was particularly discouraged when he toured an immigrant community and found “the old undesirable customs of the Japanese peasantry” still the norm in the new country.<sup>28</sup> Knowing that these behaviors were not impressing their American neighbors (because they were seen as the crude customs of an alien people) Shibusawa returned to Japan and founded the Japan Emigration Society (JES). This organization offered programs aimed at educating emigrants about the customs of American life before they boarded a steamship to the United States.<sup>29</sup> The Japanese government lent support to these programs in the form of an annual subsidy processed through the Japanese Foreign Ministry, and the society also received contributions from wealthy Japanese benefactors concerned with their country’s image abroad.

The Japanese reformers knew that the women who would have the most bearing on outside perceptions of Japanese were wives and mothers. Because of the large number of “picture brides” leaving

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<sup>28</sup> Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

for the United States, the JES partnered with the JAA to provide, free of charge, classes which emphasized women's duties within the home.<sup>30</sup> The importance of these future wives and mothers to the perception of the Japanese community was foremost in the minds of both the JAA and the JES, as evidenced by language in a 1916 guide for *Issei*, or first-generation, women compiled by the JAA.<sup>31</sup> In this guide, women were reminded that they were "obliged to demonstrate the virtue of Japanese women and compel Americans to admit them as first-rate women in the world."<sup>32</sup> The responsibilities these women were charged with in the host country went beyond the typical duties expected by Japanese culture of creating a home of "comfort" and "a place of relaxation" for her husband. In the United States, the *Issei* wife would also have to run a moral household, discourage "unsavory conduct, foul speech, gambling, drinking, and smoking."<sup>33</sup> The importance of this vigilance was to uphold the good image and national honor of Japan and prevent future generations of *Nikkeijin* from inheriting the vices of their fathers.<sup>34</sup>

Christian organizations in the United States operated both by Americans and Japanese took up the cause of eliminating prostitution. This problem had long been a rallying call for action among Japanese elites in the United States. As early as 1882, they had been trying to prevent prostitution by getting to the heart of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Japanese prostitution problem—human trafficking. The Japanese prostitutes in the United States were transported by rings of pimps, sailors, and merchants, who lured these women, often under false pretense, and delivered them into the hands of brothel owners upon reaching the United States.<sup>35</sup>

In the era of the “Gentlemen’s Agreement” of 1908, efforts in conjunction with local law-enforcement officers proved successful from the outset. In Fresno, California, the local JAA chapter formed a close alliance with the Japanese Methodist Church to eliminate prostitution from the city. They especially focused on the seedy red light district with the demeaning sobriquet “China Alley.” Through this effort, some less prominent figures in the Japanese prostitution matrix such as prostitutes and pimps were periodically arrested. Ultimately, Fresno’s most notorious brothel operator was placed under arrest and eventually deported as an undesirable alien in 1914.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Japanese men who soiled the reputation of their countrywomen were a target of JAA reform activities.

### **Adopting Cultural Trappings of American Life**

The shibboleth of *gaimenteki doka*, or adopting the outward appearance and customs of a native, became a major campaign of the JAA. This campaign was manifested in many ways, including recommending Westernized sartorial choices and maintaining neighborhood appearance to encouraging proper behavior within personal interactions. The proponents of this method of fitting in believed that all Japanese living in the United States, regardless of sex or age, should wear Western clothing. This was partially to

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<sup>35</sup> Zaibei Nihonjin Kai, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Ichioka, 179.

distinguish them from the Chinese, who infamously preferred their traditional dress and were ridiculed by Americans for it.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the JAA entreated Japanese residents to return some of their earnings to the local community by purchasing American-made items. The purpose of this was to counter fears that the Japanese immigrant population was damaging the economy while at the same time demonstrating the Japanese capacity to adapt to the dominant culture. More importantly, contributing to the local economy conveyed a sense of affinity to the United States, which was seen by the JAA as a prerequisite to immigrants' permanent settlement and assimilation into American society.

The JAA also promoted the idea that living spaces and furnishings should fit American standards, and in public spaces within Japanese neighbourhoods, markers of foreignness such as large signs in Japanese were removed when possible. Social interaction was also directed along the lines of American cultural norms. Wives were directed to walk alongside their husbands rather than behind them (as was typical in Japan at that time) in order to negate the image of gross marital inequality in Japanese society. A JAA campaign also encouraged immigrants to celebrate American holidays in lieu of Japanese ones, and to pay respect to the larger Christian culture by not working on Sunday.<sup>38</sup> With these exhortations, the JAA hoped that reformed behavior of Japanese would engender feelings of approval in American neighbors.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

### **Settling Down and Handling Money Wisely**

Many leaders who comprised the core of the JAA had read about American culture and politics before emigrating and thus might have felt that they could appeal to an intrinsic sense of American justice and equality to evoke better treatment. To this end, the JAA believed that if Japanese immigrants demonstrated their earnestness to assimilate into American culture, Americans would respond positively and discriminatory legal practices would end. Assimilation was both an ideological and practical goal for the JAA, given that the Japanese (like other immigrant groups) were judged en masse by the American public. The JAA condemned the self-interested ways in which individual workers accrued money in preparation for the journey home, as well as their reluctance to forge a Japanese community. The JAA felt that this characterization of Japanese immigrants' "sole aim" as working to accumulate resources for the return to Japan exacerbated nativist sentiment that the Japanese had a deleterious effect on local economies where large numbers of Japanese had settled.<sup>39</sup>

In 1911, the JAA embarked on a major campaign to combat return migration by attempting to popularize the idea of permanent settlement among Japanese residents. They invited prominent speakers from Japan with a pro-settlement agenda to address large groups of migrant workers in an attempt to persuade them to sink permanent roots in the United States.<sup>40</sup> The JAA enlisted the help of two prominent Japanese nationals; Inazo Nitobe and Saburo Shimada, both of whom went on extensive lecture tours to spread the message of permanent settlement. Nitobe was an eminent intellectual

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<sup>39</sup> *Zaibei Nihonjin Kai*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ichioka*, 186.

and educator who boasted an American education, while Shimada was a member of the Japanese Diet and a well-known Christian.<sup>41</sup> The JAA hoped that these carefully selected modern men would impress Americans and inspire Japanese immigrants. In extending invitations to Nitobe and Shimada to address Japanese living in America, the JAA was fostering broadened meaning of “home” in the Japanese immigrant community—one that *discouraged* return migration. Moreover, there was an explicit intention to support the growth of authentic “Japanese American” communities. The blueprint for these settlements was one they hoped would be palatable to Americans, Japanese immigrants, and Japanese still in the homeland, so that all three groups might imagine that the formation of a Japanese American community was possible.

The JAA advocated permanent settlement over financially-motivated temporary immigration for the Japanese residing in their jurisdictions because in such a numerically small immigrant group, fortunes of all Japanese, regardless of socioeconomic status, were linked. Disseminating information about methods of assimilation and attempting to ignite a desire to be accepted into American society among the laborers absorbed much of the energy of the JAA. Fiscal responsibility was a pivotal component of the image of virtuous living the JAA envisioned for Japanese immigrants in the United States. One implication of this exhortation to spend wisely was that laborers were expected to view the stint of working in the host country as a window to building a permanent life in America, rather than as a brief hiatus from responsibility or a stepping-stone to an aggrandized life in Japan. To this end, the JAA set clear expectations on ways in which money was not to be handled.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



One example of how financial prudence and morality were encouraged was the anti-gambling campaign devised by local JAA chapters in cooperation with both Buddhist and Japanese Christian organizations in 1908. This campaign was comprised of multiple stages, consisting at first of general discouragement and then later the shaming individual repeat offenders. In the first phase, posters were displayed in places frequented by Japanese immigrants, and anti-gambling representatives even stood at the entrance of gaming halls to discourage Japanese from entering. The second phase sought to shame habitual gamblers to reform, and entailed releasing the personal information of gamblers to the immigrant newspapers and forwarding the disgraceful publications to relatives back home in Japan. Gaming addicts who might hope to escape from their sordid past by moving to another state were often horrified to learn that the local JAA chapters had a tight communication network with each other and contacts in Japan, and that blacklists were quickly shared. Beyond these social ramifications, the incorrigible gambler could have his claim for a residency certificate rejected by the local JAA office.<sup>42</sup>

Once the campaign was established, the JAA formed special local committees to manage existing efforts to curb the social ill of gambling and charged them with pursuing three additional objectives. First, the committees were to encourage members of the Japanese community to observe their neighbors and inform the local JAA organization of gambling activities. Second, the committees were to order all hotels, boarding houses, labor camps, stores, and other places patronized by Japanese immigrants to expel known gamblers. The committees also shared information about culprits with local American authorities when it was felt that an individual was beyond

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

the reprimand of the community. The general practice was for gamblers to be picked up by police and questioned for information, which could be potentially damaging to the gambling house operators. If the individual was cooperative, he was released to begin anew in society. Last, the committees were charged with finding alternative, wholesome ways for Japanese laborers to entertain themselves and creating facilities to host these alternative activities.<sup>43</sup> Building a wholesome community and at the same time effecting total social isolation of miscreants were the goals. The lack of wholesome community centers was seen as one of the contributing factors of Japanese turning to vice. An established, moral community would facilitate permanent settlement and correct living. Americans' "yellow peril" fears were cited as the primary reason the lifestyle campaigns were needed.

Thus, members of the JAA, as resolute Japanese subjects expressing a duty to the motherland, turned their efforts to supporting the government's aims in the era of the "Gentlemen's Agreement." However, their long-standing beliefs about the important positionality of Japanese in the United States compelled them to direct their newly acquired authority towards aiding these various reform campaigns. They framed these reform campaigns along patriotic lines, a fundamental unifying element in a group with the "utmost devotion to think about their home country. . . .[whose] sincerity burn[ed] uninterruptedly."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>44</sup> *Zaibei Nihonjin Kai*, 666.

### **The End of Japanese Immigration**

The JAA's influence ultimately waned when the "Gentlemen's Agreement" was undermined by United States Congressional action. From the end of the 1910s, some diplomats and others with extensive knowledge of American public opinion considered the tacit diplomatic agreement to have been a failed policy. In 1924, displeased with the Japanese government's handling of the pact, the American legislature barred Japanese immigration as part of an omnibus immigration reform bill. The consequences for the JAA were severe.

The 1924 Immigration Act included a provision that no person "ineligible for citizenship" would be allowed to immigrate to the United States. Many acquainted with the Japanese situation considered the measure to be specifically aimed at Japanese, especially in light of the 1922 decision by the United States Supreme Court. In *Ozawa v. the United States*, the Supreme Court ruled that Japanese were not eligible to become citizens. Thus, this legislation abrogated the "Gentlemen's Agreement."

The disappointment the Japanese immigrant community felt over the 1924 legislation was both moral and structural in nature. The crestfallen Japanese social elites felt that their efforts had been in vain in the face of this latest institutionalized humiliation. The implications of this legislation for the JAA were direct. Divested of official duties, the JAA could not carry out its campaigns as effectively as before. Yet, by this date, permanent settlement and varying degrees of assimilation had eclipsed return migration as the standard experience of Japanese in the United States.

This article has attempted to illustrate that the JAA, in cooperation with partners in Japan, sought to shape public dialog among Japanese immigrants to assimilate to American life, while not forsaking, and indeed advocating for, the "homeland" of Japan. The focus of these discourses on assimilation was often on changing the ways in which individual Japanese in the United States behaved in public and appeared to non-Japanese neighbors, always with the goal

of gaining approval and acceptance by mainstream American society. These self-reform policies of the JAA and the JES served as a template for the better-known efforts of the Japanese American Citizen's League (JACL) to mold Nikkeijin into a "model minority" in the internment and post war years.

### **Conclusion**

By the 1980s, Japanese-Americans enjoyed the status of a "model" minority in the popular imagination of the United States. Pursuant to this stereotype, traits like diligence, scholastic achievement, fiscal responsibility, trustworthiness and loyalty were projected onto Nikkeijin. The JAA's introspective practices for combating racist and discriminatory treatment in the era of the "Gentlemen's Agreement" hinged on the transformation of scorned individuals into a collective that was acceptable to mainstream society. This tendency to turn inward and seek to alter their essence in the face of hostility became a template for subsequent community leaders beleaguered by hostility. Decisions of the JACL to cooperate with the United States government during World War II to facilitate the orderly internment of over 110,000 people, petition for a military draft of internees, and denounce Nikkeijin draft resisters echo the JAA's earlier practice of resorting to self-censorship in untenable situations. The many, and varied, efforts of individuals and organizations such as the JAA, as well as decades of striving to conform to the American cultural aesthetic, fostered the perception of Japanese Americans as ideal minority citizens. Demonstrating a commitment to making a "home" in the United States was a constant feature of the discourse that elites packaged for consumption for both their own community and members of the larger mainstream American society. Moreover, the antecedents of this are perceptible even in the earliest rhetoric of the JAA.

Though few in number, elites were key in directing the intercourse of the Japanese immigrant community, yet the change

they affected has gone largely unnoticed by historians. Members of the JAA were vexed at American indifference to social stratification within the Japanese immigrant community and insistence on treating the Japanese population in the United States as a monolithic. Elites would only be able to enjoy their position if they succeeded in elevating all Japanese immigrants, as well as their country of origin, in the imagination of the American public. Emboldened by the authority delegated to them by the Japanese consulate in the era of the “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” the JAA facilitated a discourse about “home” which championed a narrowly defined ideal of the consummate patriot as one who reflected well on Japan by demonstrating willingness to adapt to an American way of life. These factors influenced decisions to forego return to Japan in order to make a life in the United States, and create a community for subsequent generations. Modes of constructing the image of the Japanese immigrant exemplar included campaigns to discourage immoral activities such as gambling and prostitution as well as drives to encourage permanent settlement and prudent fiscal management, a Western-style household and sartorial choices in accordance with practices of the dominant American culture, the new “home” for these Japanese immigrants.

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