



Deja Vu: Japanese Immigrant Experiences (1885-1924) Bolstered and Foretold by Chinese Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the United States enacted a series of Asian exclusion laws, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act that disproportionately limited Japanese immigration. When comparing the two nationalities' path to elimination from American society, supposedly distinct due to the successive nature of their arrival, a notable pattern emerges. The geopolitical, economic, and moral arguments that led to Chinese exclusion initially presented first-generation Japanese immigrants (Issei), arriving in 1885, in a positive light. Yet, as this article argues, the Issei, eventually receiving criticism in the same three realms as the Chinese did, fell from favor following the very trajectory of their Asian predecessors, regardless of former goodwill. These comparably changing sentiments underscore the heavy influence that U.S. geopolitics and economy held over the nation's foreign policy, with politicians racializing the "immoral" Asian immigrants as a tool to garner support for legislations much more utilitarian than, in the public's eye, discriminatory.

INTRODUCTION

Initially arriving in the U.S. in 1885 as laborers hired to replace the legally excluded Chinese, the first-generation Japanese immigrants (Issei) elicited feelings akin to appreciation and acceptance among white American citizens. The Issei, therefore, became an Asian ethnic group heavily intertwined with American society.

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, whose brief admittance into the U.S. during the 1848 California Gold Rush conclusively ended in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Issei were backed geopolitically by Meiji Japan, an emerging global power. Furthermore, this wave of Japanese immigrants introduced new industries in agriculture and oriental bazaar ownership, challenging the derogatory notion of "coolie" labor that threatened to compete economically with laboring whites. Familiar with exclusionists' criticisms of Chinese immigrant morality, the Issei also endeavored to prove their superior moral compass by intentionally denouncing prostitution and conforming to societal norms. In effect, taking lessons from their Asian predecessors, the Issei better ingratiated themselves with locals and initially enjoyed a higher status than the Chinese did. Japanese immigrants seemingly discovered the right way for an Asian immigrant group to integrate into American society.

Yet the Issei's successful approach to immigration would not last. Four decades later, their perceived shortcomings in the eyes of Americans would eventually culminate in the 1924

Johnson-Reed Act, which would disproportionately limit Japanese entrance into the U.S. The once-thriving ethnic group, like the Chinese, was reduced to an excluded class in American life, clumped together with the rest of what U.S. citizens viewed as undesirable immigrants from the eastern hemisphere.

Why did the Issei, who once appeared unprecedentedly desirable to Americans, eventually experience the same opposition and humiliation as the Chinese immigrants before them? Drawing upon the Japanese immigrant narrative from 1885 to 1924, the Issei's fall from favor followed a similar trajectory as that of their Chinese counterparts. How the U.S. came to perceive the Chinese and Japanese boiled down to three factors: the Asian countries' respective geopolitical strength, the immigrants' economic utility to U.S. industries, and their collective displays of morality on American soil. While these elements initially presented Japanese immigrants in a more positive light when contrasted with the destitution and "menace" of Chinese people, ultimately, they became the sources of the Issei's exclusion.

Analysis of these three aspects will begin with a summary of Chinese immigrants' path to exclusion, foretelling the experiences of the subsequent Issei. Each section then contextualizes the favorable geopolitical, economic, and moral perceptions of Japanese immigrants and explores how sentiments toward the Issei worsened, as they did for the Chinese, leading to the Immigration Act of 1924. Upon



reflection, what happened to the Japanese immigrants evokes a feeling of immigration déjà vu.

CHINESE IMMIGRANTS' PATH TO EXCLUSION

The First and Second Opium Wars exposed the military inferiority of the Qing dynasty, as the Empire's consecutive warfare defeat resulted in the signing of "unequal treaties," whose terms largely benefited western powers such as the British Empire, U.S., and France. While the dynasty conceded to the entrance of foreign merchants through new trade ports per the 1858 Treaty of Tianjin, ten years later, the U.S., in return, renewed the Burlingame Treaty, giving Chinese citizens free immigration rights to the U.S.¹

At first, this established relationship painted a picture of mutual benefit that remained viable only if Americans reciprocated goodwill towards Chinese immigrants. U.S. foreign affairs officials were "reminded...that a total closure of the door at San Francisco might lead to a slam shut of the door at Shanghai."² Yet China's failure to modernize in the late 19th century, exacerbated by uncontrolled population growth, peasant rebellions, and natural disasters, exposed the truly one-sided partnership.³ Louisiana newspaper *The Progress* highlighted an "apparent determination of the great European powers to divide China among themselves," demonstrating in a humiliating manner the Qing's growing insignificance as a popular target for expansionism to western nations, and consequently, the devaluation of the "door at Shanghai."⁴ As such, the close timing of China's geopolitical decline with Chinese exclusion, strengthened by local anti-Asian sentiments, was no mere coincidence.

Economically, California's taxation of Chinese immigrant workers in the 1850s under the Foreign Miners' Tax Act provided nearly half of the state's fiscal revenue.⁵ Because the Chinese contributed so many tax dollars to California's treasury, organizations like the *Sacramento Union* welcomed increased immigration. However, upon constructing the Transcontinental Railroad in 1863, a perverted perception of Chinese labor arose, sparking tensions among the working

1 Paul A. Kramer, "Imperial Openings: Civilization, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868-1910," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 3 (July 2015): 321, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43903096>.

2 Kramer, "Imperial Openings," 320.

3 Lillian M. Li, "Introduction: Food, Famine, and the Chinese State," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 41, no. 4 (August 1982): 687, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2055445>.

4 *The Progress*, "Washington News: The Hawaii Question," *The Progress* (Shreveport, La), January 1, 1898, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064460/1898-01-01/ed-1/seq-1/>.

5 Cheryl L. Cole, "Chinese Exclusion: The Capitalist Perspective of the Sacramento Union, 1850-1882," *California History* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25157813>.

class. Due to their efficiency and willingness to accept menial working conditions, the Chinese offered what was misogynistically described by the *Union* as "womanlike," or cheap yet good quality labor.⁶ With the post-Civil War economy in decline by the 1870s, exclusionists politicized this rising anti-Chinese animosity. In effect, the predominantly male Chinese workforce was met with protests along the Pacific Coast, spearheaded by the Workingmen's Party, blaming the "aliens" and their ignoble work for stealing employment opportunities of white citizens.⁷

Moreover, the cheapness of physical "coolie" labor intersected with a moral problem. To exclusionists, the immigrants also made enticingly inexpensive offers in their infamous prostitution and gambling industries, which lured and corrupted young customers of diverse racial backgrounds.⁸ Public distaste for the Chinese's vices only proliferated with the 1875 Page Law, which barred Chinese prostitutes and contract laborers from entry into the U.S. "[T]his stagnant pool of human immorality and crime spread its contaminating vapors over the surround blocks on either side," author B.E. Lloyd denounced.⁹

At the beginning of Japanese immigration to the U.S. in 1885, anti-Chinese agitators successfully stirred up waves of hatred by scapegoating the excluded Chinese immigrants. In contrast, the Issei appeared as geopolitically powerful and righteous godsends meant to aid the nation's economic recovery. The following analysis of Japanese immigration unraveled through a geopolitical, economic, and moral lens will demonstrate how unprecedented favor turned into familiar hostility, as if the Chinese immigrant experience merely replayed itself a few decades later in the stories of a different Asian ethnic group.

GEOPOLITICS

The Safety-Pins Preventing Warfare

The Issei initially received backing from U.S. authorities to immigrate because of Japan's dominance in geopolitical matters. When Japan, valuing Korea's natural resources, convenient location, and open trade policy, prevailed in the 1894 First Sino-Japanese War over Korea, the triumphant nation felt confident in its military strength. "Restless and aggressive," as described by American minister in Japan Edwin Dun, the Meiji government initiated the Russo-

6 Cole, "Chinese Exclusion," 14.

7 Josephine Fowler, "Historical Background," in *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919-1933* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 24, digital file.

8 Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, "Address to the People of the United States upon the Evil of Chinese Immigration" (address, Sacramento, CA, 1878).

9 B. E. Lloyd, *Lights and Shades in San Francisco* (San Francisco, CA: A. L. Bancroft & Company, 1876), 78-9.

Japanese War less than a decade after the Korean victory.¹⁰ Still managing to level the power of its adversaries—Russia, France, and Germany—who staged the Triple Intervention to prevent China from ceding the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan, the warring nation captured the attention of the U.S. The Treaty of Portsmouth, brokered by President Theodore Roosevelt, demonstrated clear inclinations toward Japan, who gained control over Korea and northeastern China and edged closer towards Russian soil through Sakhalin Island.¹¹

In effect, the U.S. juxtaposed China's weakness with the victor's emergence as a formidable geopolitical player. The Chinese-run newspaper in California, *Sai Gai Yat Bao*, was correct in pointing out, "The stronger the motherland, the better the treatment its emigrants would receive in the adopted country."¹² A notable example is Roosevelt's resolution of the 1906 San Francisco School Board Crisis when Japanese pupils were forced to attend segregated schools for Chinese immigrants. In response to the Board's order, the president wrote in a furious message addressed to his son, "The infernal fools in California, especially in San Francisco, insult the Japanese recklessly and in the event of war it will be the Nation as a whole which will pay the consequences."¹³ Relating the unjust treatment of the Issei to an inexcusable offense against the overseas superpower, Roosevelt cautioned against enraging Japan, given the weight of its decisive victories in two consecutive wars. In the eyes of American leaders like Roosevelt, Japanese immigrants symbolized the safety-pin in a grenade containing the highly explosive formula of international conflict. Thus, the diplomatic result of the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement, whereby the U.S. agreed to rescind the segregation plan in exchange for limited but continuous Japanese immigration, demonstrated the nation's willingness to compromise with a prominent geopolitical force.¹⁴

One reason behind such active evasion of war stemmed from the knowledge that the Japanese military rivaled that of many top-tier European nations. As *Harper's Weekly*

10 Payson J. Treat, "The Cause of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894," *Pacific Historical Review* 8, no. 2 (June 1939): 153, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3633390>.

11 United States Department of State, "The Treaty of Portsmouth and the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905," Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/portsmouth-treaty>.

12 Joan S. Wang, "The Double Burdens of Immigrant Nationalism: The Relationship between Chinese and Japanese in the American West, 1880s-1920s," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40543330>.

13 Theodore Roosevelt, "Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Kermit Roosevelt," Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University, <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o280819>.

14 Wang, "The Double," 36.

summarized, "Japan is at this moment the strongest naval power in the Pacific... In a word, rich as we are, and poor as she is, we could not afford to go to war with Japan, for in the Philippines, in Hawaii, and on our Pacific Coast, we are vulnerable."¹⁵ Adverse actions toward the Issei—the constituents of a formidable geopolitical opponent—would mean an open and potentially humiliating display of U.S. weakness on the world stage.

Moreover, the local portrayal of Japan's stance against discrimination reinforced its widely acknowledged strength. Secretary of State Elihu Root observed, "[The Japanese] are particularly sensitive about everything which questions that equality; one-tenth of the insults which have been visited upon Chinese by the people of the United States would lead to immediate war."¹⁶ Noting that China allowed its immigrants to endure greater injustices without retaliation, Root implied a geopolitical reality: China, in the midst of internal chaos, lacked the short temper of the "awakened" Japan, whose abundant territories in the Pacific and threatening geopolitical power gave it the backbone to show indignation towards U.S. policy.

Interestingly, the U.S. would turn down Japan's request for a racial equality clause in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, unveiling a changed attitude of dismissiveness.¹⁷ When the Asian nation's newfound status as a global power played out, its geopolitical significance would come to experience a similar process of delegitimization, like the "door at Shanghai" did in the eyes of American leaders.

A Forced Weakening

The defensive reactions of America and its allies to Japan's momentary weakness were reminders that the outlook of a permanently strong and accepted Asian military power remained out of reach. Though the U.S., unwilling to engage in war, prioritized appeasing Japan through good treatment of the Issei, the western power kept vigilant of the possibility that such an amicable relationship could turn malevolent if circumstances left the countries with no choice but direct confrontation. In fact, Roosevelt's comment regarding the Russo-Japanese War encapsulated the thought processes of many anti-Japanese politicians when sealing the deal on Japanese exclusion: "The Japs interest me and I like them. I am perfectly well aware that if they win out it may possibly

15 Stanford M. Lyman, "The 'Yellow Peril' Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 700, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20020056>.

16 Akira Iriye, *Pacific Estrangement: Japanese and American Expansion, 1897-1911* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 157.

17 Tarik Merida, "A Japanese Anomaly: Theodore Roosevelt and Japan's Racial Identity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, no. 20 (October 15, 2020): 10, <https://apjif.org/2020/20/Merida.html>.

mean a struggle between them and us.”¹⁸A decade later, the German Empire’s collapse, the Russian Revolution’s onset, and the economic decline in France and England meant that the U.S. and Japan existed as the remaining rivals on the world stage.¹⁹ As such, the hypothetical conflict became a reality. The Issei’s position would no longer be safely fixed in the grenade, for conflict with Japan became the optimal move for American geopolitics.

Meanwhile, further unpleasant sentiments against Japan began to fester during World War I. Providing what the rest of the Allied Powers perceived as minimal naval support past the Indian Ocean, Japanese troops’ “continued presence in Shan[do]ng [gave] occasion to the various foreign powers for suspicion of Japan’s motives in China.”²⁰At the turn of the 1920s, Japanese imperialism began to lose its initial gleam of peaceful cooperation and became a self-serving threat to its allies. Even more, undesirable Japanese expansionism into China aroused “yellow peril” literature (“Put a huge roof over the Japanese Empire, and you have a national Japanese detective agency... Their spying has been done long ago about this country”), propagating paranoia around the Issei’s nationalist intentions on American soil.²¹

Therefore, the 1922 Washington Conference, wherein nine nations gathered to organize affairs in the Pacific and East Asia, became the golden opportunity for the U.S. to place checks on the worrisome relationship. The meeting reached three important conclusions—the Four, Five, and Nine-Power Treaties.²² Interestingly, records of the Conference regarded said outcome as “clinch[ing] an issue which was already apparent without its decision,” emphasizing the predictability of Japan’s downfall as a first-rate nation.²³ The country’s terminated alliance with Britain (the Four-Power Treaty) and reduced naval tonnage allowance (the Five-Power Treaty) were thus merely official announcements to the world of the long-determined Japanese defeat. Consolidating Japan’s new state of wretchedness was the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake that took hundred-thousands of lives and cost the country tremendous economic damages.²⁴

From serving as both a welcomed ally and intimidating superpower, Japan eventually became too unpredictable—

18 Theodore Roosevelt, “Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Cecil Spring Rice,” Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University, <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o267973>.

19 Wang, “The Double,” 41.

20 Washington Conference (Kew, UK: National Archives, 1921), 22, http://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FO_262_1548.

21 Lyman, “The ‘Yellow,’” 698-99.

22 Washington Conference, 58.

23 Ibid.

24 Earthquake Casualties to Earthquake, Yokohama (Kew, UK: National Archives, 1924), 20, http://www.archivesdirect.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FO_262_1612

and therefore too dangerous—in the eyes of western nations. The limited immigration quota set by the Johnson-Reed Act thus demonstrated a disregard for compromise, which had been present in the Gentlemen’s Agreement. Killing two birds with one stone, the U.S. pragmatically contained Japan’s strength while appeasing local calls for exclusion.

ECONOMICS

The Starter-Motor for the American Economy

In the eyes of Americans, the first wave of Japanese immigrants arrived with an entirely clean slate. The Issei flocked to the U.S. for two main economic reasons: they were “pushed” by the “Matsukata Deflation,” a period of a severe downturn in the Japanese economy that mostly impacted working-class farmers, and they were “pulled” by the wishes of Hawaiian sugar plantation owners, who needed replacement labor for the drastic loss of cheap, Chinese labor.²⁵

Near the end of the 19th century, plantation workers relocated to the West in response to its growing agricultural economy. Unbeknown to the Issei, their relocation to remote, rural environments—in contrast to Chinese immigration to cities—proved beneficial for them to not only abandon their sojourning plans and settle down in family units but also to “[draw] less attention from white labor organizations whose main focus was largely urban and concentrated on making Chinese exclusion permanent.”²⁶

As skillful farmers (agriculture, according to a *Sacramento Daily Record* writer, was Japan’s “prime industry”), the new inhabitants of the developing West taught enthusiastic locals advanced methods of irrigation, pulverization, and cultivation.²⁷ When assessing the economic impacts of Japanese immigration, American economist Harry Millis stated, “[I]n the adopted country, agriculture has carried with it station in life and has given opportunity for the application of the best developed arts possessed by the race.”²⁸ As such, white citizens fostered a sense of appreciation—unfounded

25 Steven J. Ericson, “The ‘Matsukata Deflation’ Reconsidered: Financial Stabilization and Japanese Exports in a Global Depression, 1881–85,” *The Society for Japanese Studies* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24242624>; Fowler, “Historical Background,” 27.

26 Catherine Lee, “Where the Danger Lies: Race, Gender, and Chinese and Japanese Exclusion in the United States, 1870-1924,” *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 2 (June 2010): 256, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40783393>.

27 H. Latham, “Modes of Agriculture: Decrease of Productiveness and the Causes: Methods of Cultivation and Use of Fertilizers in Japan — Instructive Lessons to Follow,” *Sacramento Daily Record-Union* (Sacramento, CA), January 1, 1885, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014381/1885-01-01/ed-1/seq-11/>.

28 Harry A. Millis, “Some of the Economic Aspects of Japanese Immigration,” *The American Economic Review* 5, no. 4 (December 1915): 798, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1809630>.

in attitudes towards the Chinese—for the Issei's fresh technical knowledge and "racial advantages" in farming. The new immigrants' agricultural success shone through in *The Bryan Daily Eagle's* statistics, which estimated the total value of Japanese-owned farms to be roughly \$31 million, three times greater than that of Chinese farms.²⁹

Many immigrant families formed in the West with the subsequent influx of Japanese women into the U.S., mainly as "picture-brides" (arranged marriages through intermediaries who connected bachelors with bachelorettes using photographs).³⁰ Influential newspaper editor Abiko Kyutaro was satisfied with this outcome, as he reasoned that the women, making up 60 percent of workers in Japan's local industries, would serve as efficient co-agriculturists by their husbands' sides.³¹ Additionally, as sociologist Catherine Lee notes, "The Japanese family served the economic development needs of the growing nation," for the very process of raising the Issei's children (Nisei) stimulated economic activity within the scarcely populated West.³² In effect, a prominent Minnesota union advocate declared, "What clearer evidence is needed than this that the wealth of every nation is built up from the blood and tears of its toilers, especially of its toiling women!"³³

Meanwhile, the Issei that remained in the city did not resort to traditional, labor-intensive work, instead earning a living with their entrepreneurial abilities. On top of running laundromats, restaurants, boarding houses, and Oriental bazaars, some immigrants, like the Sumida Bros, owned department stores, while others created Japanese daily newspapers with a large readership. As Chester Rowell, contemporary leader of the California progressive movement, summarized, "In business [the Japanese] do not confine themselves to their own people," these unconventional jobs enabled intimate interaction with white customers, contradicting the stereotypical image of Asian labor.³⁴ Furthermore, when bazaar owners

introduced "Japanese Curios," whose advertisements took up full-page newspaper spreads, to American society, white entrepreneurs followed suit and marketed Japanese goods, making a significant profit.³⁵ According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, locals were intrigued, even thankful, of the Issei's unique economic contributions that created instead of diminished job opportunities: "The objections raised against the Chinese... cannot be alleged against the Japanese... They have brought... new industries among us."³⁶

While Japanese families and entrepreneurs served as the starter motors for both rural and urban economies, these mechanisms would eventually tarnish and warrant the replacements of white residents. At the start of the 1910s, the theorized economic benefits of immigrant labor diverged drastically from expectations when put into practice.

Plucked Roots, Feared Successes

Little by little, the economic reasons for supporting the Issei began to collapse as the discourse around Japanese families and businesses turned negative. Leading exclusionist V.S. McClatchy articulated his reasons for opposing Japanese labor: "[They] possess superior advantages in economic competition, partly because of racial characteristics, thrift, industry, low standards of living, willingness to work long hours without expensive pleasures, the women working as men."³⁷ Reversion to the same racialized argument (that undignified labor threatened white employment) used to criticize the Chinese demonstrated the ease at which public sentiment, heavily influenced by political rhetoric, radically shifted. Most notably, due to the growing population of the West, picture-brides, once portrayed as savior-like laborers, became negatively equated with their male counterparts, for Japanese and white-owned farms now stood in fierce competition with each other.

A second reason behind the worsening portrayal of women involved land ownership. Since the Nisei, born on U.S. soil, were guaranteed citizenship—and therefore legal property rights—societal fear of Japanese families "invading" rural areas that "rightfully belonged" to white people led to the derogatory myth of Issei women's abnormally high fecundity. California Senator James Phelan demagogued, "[S]o long as women are admitted from Japan, so prolific are they, that even with an exclusion law, we shall have the economic evil

³⁵ Five Mile Beach Journal, "R. W. Ryan's Japanese Bazaar," Five Mile Beach Journal (Wildwood, NJ), July 11, 1906, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90063040/1906-07-11/ed-1/seq-3/>.

³⁶ Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 3.

³⁷ V. S. McClatchy, *Japanese Immigration and Colonization* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 14, digital file.

²⁹ The Bryan Daily Eagle, "Chinese and Japanese in Agriculture: Statistics of Farming Interests in the United States," *The Bryan Daily Eagle* (Bryan, TX), November 2, 1914, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86088651/1914-11-02/ed-1/seq-4/>.

³⁰ Lee, "Where the Danger," 260.

³¹ Yuji Ichioka, "Amerika Nadeshiko: Japanese Immigrant Women in the United States, 1900-1924," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (May 1980): 341, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3638905>.

³² Lee, "Where the Danger," 261-2.

³³ Will Maupin's Weekly, "Workers of Japan: Wealth of the Nation Built on Blood and Toil of Women Toilers," *Will Maupin's Weekly* (Lincoln, NE), August 25, 1911, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/2017270207/1911-08-25/ed-1/seq-8/>.

³⁴ Chester H. Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese Immigrants—A Comparison," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 34, no. 2 (September 1909): 228, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1011204>.

of their presence for a great many generations.”³⁸ Although the Japanese Agricultural Association calculated that only 430,000 out of the 100 million acres of California farms were owned by the Nisei, propaganda of the Japanese “devouring the land” blamed women for giving birth to the problematic second generation.³⁹ Ironically, the original stimulants to the U.S. economy now created a pressing economic threat to white property.

Consequently, the passage of the 1920 Alien Land Law in California and ten predominantly western states, banning first-and-second-generation Asian immigrants from owning and leasing agricultural land, represented the start of anti-Japanese agitators’ many legal victories.⁴⁰ Local desire to remain economically superior to the immigrants meant stripping away their roots, only beginning to firmly plant in U.S. soil, and making them mere tenants of their previous homes.

Successfully defending the West, exclusionists advanced towards urban areas, where a racist environment had “sprouted in the rich soil that had nourished anti-Chinese attitudes shortly before.”⁴¹ In fact, upon their arrival to the U.S., Japanese laborers viewed analogously to the menacing Chinese, were immediately excluded from labor unions.⁴² With the odds stacked against them, Issei entrepreneurs still managed to thrive economically since the family-oriented structure of immigrant small businesses allowed for optimal efficiency and trust.⁴³ According to the California Labor Commissioner, Japanese service establishments experienced visible growth in the 1920s—businesses in Stockton increased from 54 to 250 within ten years, with

38 James D. Phelan to Robert Lansing, “Letter from James Phelan to the Secretary of State,” July 24, 1919.

39 Imperial Valley press, “Orientals Never Lose Allegiance to Japan,” Imperial Valley Press (El Centro, CA), July 14, 1920, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92070146/1920-07-14/ed-1/seq-1/>; The Daily Gate City, “Bryan Arrives in California,” The Daily Gate City (Keokuk, IA), April 28, 1913, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025182/1913-04-28/ed-1/seq-1/>.

40 Dudley O. McGovney, “The Anti-Japanese Land Laws of California and Ten Other States,” California Law Review 35, no. 1 (March 1947): 7-8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3477374>.

41 Robert F. Heizer and Alan F. Almquist, *The Other Californians: Prejudice and Discrimination under Spain, Mexico, and the United States to 1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 178.

42 Lesley Solomon, “Japanese Exclusion and the American Labor Movement: 1900 to 1924,” *Education about Asia* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 2, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/japanese-exclusion-and-the-american-labor-movement-1900-to-1924/>.

43 Joseph Hraba, *American Ethnicity* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1979), 323.

some bazaars earning \$17,000 annually.⁴⁴ Yet, not realizing the legitimate benefits of hiring family members, humiliated Americans saw the Issei’s “innate” ability to thrive in any given industry juxtaposing local entrepreneurs, laborers, and WWI veterans’ struggle to find employment.⁴⁵

In response, nationalist sentiments perverted the image of the Issei’s newfound economic status. *Organized Labor* described how “the sniveling Japanese... swarm[ed] along the streets and cringingly offer[ed] his paltry services for a suit of clothes and a front seat in our public schools,” implying that Japanese businessmen would always be perceived as misfits pretending, through undeserving success, to belong to a white-only, middle-class society.⁴⁶ Viewing the thriving industries with suspicion and the Issei entrepreneurs with disgust, exclusionists perpetuated white economic supremacy by popularizing prejudiced reasons for opposing Japanese-owned industries.

As such, Issei’s business success became an unforeseen problem, stunting the economic potential of the prioritized locals. A few years into the second decade, the prospect of Japanese immigrants improving the U.S. economy was crushed by exclusion.

MORALITY

Assimilating for Survival

On top of geopolitical and economic factors, morality was a third scale used to evaluate the Issei. Taking lessons from their Chinese predecessors, the Japanese recognized U.S. citizens’ intolerance towards the sexual immorality of immigrant women. As such, Inoue Orio, head of the Temperance Bureau of the Japanese Association in North America, stated, “We must... stop doing things despised by Americans...eliminate all prostitutes and procurers, and build our character that Americans will respect...If we keep our chastity and fight in the cause of justice, [they] cannot exclude us.”⁴⁷ Orio’s impressive awareness foreshadowed the immigrants’ intentional demonstration of moral superiority when dealing with the prostitution problem. According to the Census, the ratio of Japanese men to women was roughly seven to one in 1910 and quickly decreased to two to one in 1920 (among

44 Yamato Ichihashi, *Japanese in the United States: A Critical Study of the Problems of the Japanese Immigrants and Their Children* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1932), 126, 117, http://www.migration.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/CHS_325-252_Ic3.

45 Solomon, “Japanese Exclusion,” 1; Doug Blair, “The 1920 Anti-Japanese Crusade and Congressional Hearings,” The Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Japanese_restriction.htm#note13.

46 *Organized Labor*, “Editorial,” *Organized Labor* (San Francisco, CA), March 17, 1900.

47 Inoue Orio, “Sha-shini okeru kakuseigun no shori” [Victory of Purity Forces in Seattle], *Kakusei*, June 1913, 262-33.

more than 100,000 Japanese).⁴⁸ In comparison, there were still nine Chinese men to every woman in 1880, only two years before their exclusion.⁴⁹ With the Meiji government's support of picture-brides, the Issei's gender ratio appealed to former anti-Chinese agitators. The immigrants were thus off to a stronger start than their predecessors, for Issei women not only served economic purposes in the West but also resolved concerns of the revivification of a perceived immoral industry.

In effect, Japanese immigrants, endeavoring to assimilate on foreign soil, broke the mold of an "amoral race," leading Rowell to assess, "Pinned down to an objective judgment of the races as such, the Californian would doubtless place the Japanese in the higher rank. [The Californian] judges the Chinese by their coolie class and regards them as an inferior race."⁵⁰ Not only did Japan first exhibit the unprecedented geopolitical power of an Eastern nation, but its constituents also took on more "European traits," like standing firmly against prostitution, that contradicted racial stereotypes. Therefore, the social status of the Issei exceeded that of their Asian counterparts, particularly the Chinese.

Embracing this perceived superiority, Japanese immigrants began to conform to societal norms, "adopt[ing] American clothing at once, and American customs very quickly... They develop[ed] a civic sense, public spirit, and... leadership."⁵¹ Abandoning the feared "Oriental look," the Issei displayed moral character through their self-presentation, which resulted in compliments from white citizens, now possessing heightened tolerance for a racially heterogeneous society—albeit one in which individuals adhered to one dominant custom. Additionally, "[t]he women themselves [were] under less social ostracism than the women of the corresponding class of other races, and they appear[ed] also to be less personally degraded," demonstrating the Issei's successful attempt at dispelling local prejudices that remained from Chinese immigration towards the "deviant" sexual tendencies of Asian female immigrants.⁵²

With the Issei's "Americanized" appearances and mannerisms well-received, their daily habits also proved favorable to locals. In the fish cannery labor camps of the West Coast, where various Asian ethnic groups merged, the Japanese adopted American diets to distance themselves from their rice-eating counterparts. Labor contractor Tadashichi Tanaka "prohibited miso soup, soy sauce, and...rice from being served in the camps, instead creating strange menus featuring quasi-American dishes such as dumpling soups

with bacon, potatoes, and onions, plus pancakes with soybeans and bacon as side dishes."⁵³ Symbolically, such unpalatable, discordant flavor combinations represented the underlying discomfort experienced by the Issei as they sacrificed significant parts of their culture to satisfy white supremacists, who viewed assimilation as the prerequisite to potential inclusion into the U.S.

Conscious that they would be subject to scrutiny, Japanese immigrants elicited auspicious responses from white citizens when challenging the notion that Asians could not exist "correctly" or "morally" on American soil. Yet the exchange of estrangement from Japanese culture for acceptance into the U.S. soon proved inadequate in the face of determined exclusionists.

"Absolute" Immorality

By 1924, the Issei's perceived good morality had been perverted, this time by unsatisfactory business practices, official reexaminations of picture-bride ethics, and increased Japanese gambling activity. While the immigrants garnered public appreciation for their assimilation efforts, they were allegedly deficient in workplace morality. Instances of deception, like when a Japanese bazaar owner tricked a Portland citizen into buying "nicked saucers," caused author Frederic Haskin of *Los Angeles Herald* to relate, "He makes an excellent first impression.... He assumes honesty, but just when one feels sure of him he proves a disappointment."⁵⁴ Though the truthfulness of said story remains unverified, initial distrust of the Issei among white citizens pushed the business owners' reputations onto unstable ground, presenting a prime opportunity for anti-Japanese agitators to formulate compelling arguments for exclusion.

The Issei's alleged disloyalty marked another blow to their moral standing. Analyzing the immigrants' work habits, Rowell recounted, "Japanese grape-pickers agree to pick a crop at a certain price. When the work is half done, there comes a chance to get a higher price elsewhere and they all decamp... The Japanese [do] not recognize a contract as a moral obligation, and the American, therefore, assumes that he has no sense of any moral obligation."⁵⁵ Ironically, the Issei's immoral tendencies to violate labor agreements contrasted with the widely-recognized ability of the Chinese to abide by theirs ("The Chinese will keep a contract; the Japanese will not").⁵⁶ Regardless of the Issei's promising societal impressions, the progressive leader's emphatic

53 Kazuo Ito, *Issei: A History of Japanese Immigrants in North America*, trans. Shinichiro Nakamura and Jean S. Gerard (Seattle, WA: Executive Committee for Publication, 1973), 293-4.

54 Frederic J. Haskin, "Japanese in Portland," *Los Angeles Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), May 23, 1908, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042462/1908-05-23/ed-1/seq-4/>.

55 Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese," 225-6.

56 Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese," 225.

48 United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920* (New York, NY: Norman Ross Publishing, 2000); Ichihashi, *Japanese in the United*, 122.

49 United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census*.

50 Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese," 223.

51 Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese," 227.

52 Rowell, "Chinese and Japanese," 228.

portrayal of the immigrants' greed and selfishness appeared grave enough offenses that warranted a complete rejection of their sound morality.

Criticism of Japanese virtue geared not only towards the professional setting but also towards immigrant families, as exclusionists attacked the nature of a remaining Japanese custom—picture-brides. While arranged marriage became the main impetus to households forming in the West (70 percent of all Japanese wives arriving in San Francisco between 1910 and 1913 had never seen their husbands in person), lawmakers refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Issei's matrimonial relationships.⁵⁷ Commissioner General of Immigration Daniel Keefe elucidated: "As these 'proxy' or 'photographs' marriages would not, of course, be recognized as valid in any of the states of this country, the men... are required to meet [women] at a seaport and go through a ceremony of marriage legal in the United States."⁵⁸ Even so, the perceived unnatural formation of Japanese families led to the 1921 Ladies' Agreement, blocking the entry of picture-brides and reinforcing the cut-throat intolerance of Americans towards perceived dangerous Asian practices.⁵⁹ The immigrants' tarnished morality cascaded into their private lives, soon destroying the social status they once took the most pride in.

Despite virtually outlawed gambling activities in the early 20th century, young Japanese immigrants became attracted to the riveting lottery game, Fan-Tan during their downtime. Liang Qichao, Minister of Justice and Finance of the ROC, reported that the Issei, spending \$10,000 annually, were the pillars of these Chinese-owned businesses on the West Coast.⁶⁰ Quickly, this "backward custom" and disregard for U.S. law, which caused the Issei's frequent arrests, became a primary concern for leaders like George Shima, president of the Japanese Association of America: "The most serious ill is the epidemic of Chinese gambling that has poisoned our general populace of America."⁶¹ A *Hawaiian Star* columnist specified, "[B]y far the worst feature of the gambling mania is when it makes its way among the children of the community."⁶² As in the case against Chinese prostitution,

57 Karen Akiyama, "From Prostitutes to Picture Brides: The Immigration of Japanese Women to the United States, 1884-1919" (working paper, Women's Legal History, Georgetown University, Washington, June 9, 1986), 20, <http://hdl.handle.net/10822/1051096>; Ichihashi, *Japanese in the United*, 293.

58 Ichihashi, *Japanese in the United*, 293.

59 Akiyama, "From Prostitutes," 34.

60 Wang, "The Double," 49, 33.

61 Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47, digital file.

62 The *Hawaiian Star*, "A Grave Danger," The *Hawaiian Star* (Honolulu, HI), April 21, 1903, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015415/1903-08-21/ed-1/seq-4/>.

children symbolized the nation's purity, and exposure to the underground practice, stripping their innocence, signaled immorality. To their detriment, the Issei were associated with the dishonorable Chinese.

Still fighting for inclusion, Japanese communities reignited the dwindling anti-Chinese gambling campaign a decade after its initiation in 1908. These organized efforts, however, did not yield satisfactory outcomes, for the Issei's Fan-Tan addiction decreased overall morale.⁶³ To worsen their image, Japanese crime rings like the Tokyo and Toyo Club began to surface, obliterating the Chinese monopoly of the gambling industry while delegitimizing the Issei's method of playing the victim ("Chinese fattened themselves by squeezing dumb Japanese laborers").⁶⁴ Interethnic conflicts could only be resolved by involving local police, reaffirming perceptions that the immigrants' "inherent" violence threatened white morality.⁶⁵

At the dawn of the exclusion, mountainous criticism of the Issei's immoral business, matrimonial, and social tendencies composed an irrefutable argument for the Johnson-Reed Act's passage.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, Japanese immigrants, attacked by exclusionists for geopolitical, economic, and moral reasons like those used against the Chinese, were perhaps fated in their elimination from American society. Yet such an outcome did not seem obvious in 1885, when the Issei exhibited attributes of an "immigration anomaly," standing out as the superior ethnic group while the Chinese faced discrimination for coming from a weakened China, threatening white labor, and possessing unchangeably bad morals. To the disappointment of proponents of immigration, the Japanese lost the geopolitical backing of their home country when it was stripped of its momentary status as a global superpower. After establishing family farms and profitable industries in the West, the Issei's success was criticized for hindering white citizens' economic opportunities. The Japanese's denunciation of prostitution and conformity to American customs proved meaningless, as exclusionists nitpicked evidence of the immigrants' flawed morality.

At a glance, this consecutive enactment of Asian exclusion laws might appear to be an outdated image of American racism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, beneath the surface, geopolitical and economic concerns, delineating the exacerbated sentiments towards the Issei and their Chinese predecessors, held the ultimate influence over U.S. foreign policy. Prioritizing local interests, the government placed checks on Japan's growing power. This astute warfare strategy lent itself to eliminating Japanese immigrants, who also conveniently lost their utility to the American economy.

63 Wang, "The Double," 49.

64 Azuma, *Between Two Empires*, 60, 49.

65 Wang, "The Double," 49.

Until Congress repealed all exclusion laws during WWII, the Issei's narrative, evoking a feeling of déjà vu when given the context of the Chinese, underscores how the contemporary climate of American politics racialized Asian immigrants—as exemplified by the morality argument—to stir up support for a cause much more utilitarian than that which met the public eye.

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