

Is Japanese America Ignorant of Its History?

Playwright Frank Chin Says The Nikkei Story Still Couched in Inaccuracies

●Editor's Note—It's hard to put a handle on Chinese American writer Frank Chin. The creator of such critically-acclaimed dramatic studies of the Chinese American as "Chicken Coop Chinaman" and "The Year of the Dragon," Chin, who now calls the Echo Park district of Los Angeles home, pulls no punches and is abrasive. He was involved in the planning of what were the first and to date, most successful "Day of Remembrance" programs observing the signing in 1942 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the infamous Executive Order 9066. But since we printed Chin's analysis of the Los Angeles hearings of the Commission on War-time Relocation and Internment of Civilians in the summer of 1981 (in which he characterized the commissioners, the Nikkei who testified at the hearings and the press covering the hearings as "A Circus of Freaks") Chin has been the target of attacks, both verbal and physical, by Japanese Americans hurt and angered by his ideas. Most asked, "What business does a Chinese American have commenting on a Japanese American issue?" But most of the questions posed by Chin have been solid, well-documented and troubling. He has now emerged as the most feared critic of the wartime leadership of the Japanese American Citizens League, witnessed by the fact that many of those who posed as leaders of the Nikkei during WWII have spent the better part of two years trying to answer Chin's charges that the JACL betrayed Japanese America. Further, he has coordinated and distilled new research on the camps which has unearthed, among other positive revelations, materials that show Nikkei history has been revised and suppressed by special interest groups both inside and outside the community. For example, Chin has been largely responsible for bringing to the community the true width and breadth of Japanese American resistance to the evacuation and internment in his writings on the Heart Mountain draft resisters and other Nikkei who sought to take the government to court to test Japanese American citizenship rights and the constitutionality of the camps—an aspect of the period which has been given short shrift by the pop histories commissioned by special interests within the community. So, who is Chin—ego-centric mad monk of Asian American literature, an idealistic and dedicated artist, or a little of both? Decide for yourself.

During the war, deep into the third year of camp, the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee held meetings in one mass hall after another, organizing resistance to the draft, to create a test case (to test the legality-constitutionality of the U.S. government's internment of Japanese America). At first the Heart Mountain Sentinel ignored the Fair Play Committee. During BH1 Hosokawa's time as editor of the Sentinel, the Fair Play Committee made no news at all. In January and February when the Fair Play Committee was most active in distributing handouts and holding meetings, they were non-existent in the camp newspaper. The first hint of the resistance appears in a column signed by a John Kitasako wagging his finger at troublemakers and anti-Americans trying to talk Nisei out of volunteering for the draft.

The only Japanese American writer of any kind, creative or journalistic, who gave the resistance its due in his writing was James Omura, editorialist for the Rocky Shimpō out of Denver.

When the arrest of 53 of the 63 draft resisters made news in Cheyenne, Wyoming then nationally, Japanese American journalists at the JACL's Pacific Citizen, and Heart Mountain Sentinel suddenly discovered a pocket of organized resistance. They didn't characterize it as organized resistance but as a confused group of misguided young dupes of agitators and troublemakers. In camp they felt they had popular sentiment of the internees on their side. But everything in print by Nikkei was a dump on them, except for the news and editorials of the Rocky Shimpō.

In the 40 years since the evacuation and isolation of Japanese Americans in out of the way indoctrination programs behind barbed wire, the JACL histories of Japanese America by Budd Fukei and Bill Hosokawa have written the resistance out of existence, and established as a historical fact that Japanese America entered and endured camp without protest or resistance. The Nisei sociologists who had been assistants to the camp anthropologists and sociologists, explain the lack of protest and resistance to obvious wrongs and humiliations as the result of passive Japanese culture inherited from the Issei. Chopless, gutless scholars who've failed everywhere else and settled for careers of faking it in Asian American Studies departments and programs elaborated on the JACL

anomaly of Nisei recognizing the constitutional wrong and the racism behind it, and not raising a protest or resistance in the courts, or in public, or at all.

And the poets and playwrights, fictioneers and lyricists sentimentalize, flesh out and legitimize the omission of resistance from history.

Tisa Chang, artistic director and founder of the Pan Asian Repertory Theater in New York, used her series of camp plays last year to reiterate the racist JACL clichés of passive Issei, chicken Nisei and heroic Sixties' Sansei, in the New York Times (March 12, 1982). She said, "The older generations just don't talk about the camps... The people in this (Sansei) generation are more courageous. They want to analyze and examine their past. They say, 'Why weren't there strikes? Why weren't there thousands and thousands of lawsuits?'"

Were Tisa Chang a responsible Asian American artist, she would have done a little analysis herself, before repeating white lies as Asian American truth. At Heart Mountain and other camps there were strikes. Strikes of kitchen workers, garbage workers and hospital workers. And of course, there were several known and lesser sung cases making for the courts. Each of these cases, from Hirabayashi to the Heart Mountain 63 to the loneliest resister in the world from Jerome was offered to the courts in the time honored tradition of a petition for redress of grievances.

The resisters knew they presented themselves before their people as targets of the JACL's well-oiled and government-fueled machinery of social ostracism, when they stood against the draft to take the camps to court and thereby force a government "clarification of our Constitutional rights, review of the record of its past unjustified and discriminatory acts, and the remedy and rectification of the injustices committed and being committed on us during evacuation, its attendant pauperization of our people and the detention without cause of loyal citizens." So wrote a young man from jail in Caspar, Wyoming on May 4, 1944.

The letter was published in full in the Cheyenne Eagle, and chopped up and ridiculed in a Larry Tajiri editorial in the Pacific Citi-

zen. Tajiri argued against the Heart Mountain draft resisters with the straight JACL party line: Good publicity was more important than good law. Test cases drove America's journalists and wordsmiths to make bad publicity. Bad publicity would make Nisei less acceptable to whites and mess up the relocation and dispersal program that would result in ultimate assimilation.

The threat of bad publicity posed by resistance and test cases, in the JACL's eyes, and the words of Mike Masaoka, Min Yasui, Larry Tajiri and Saburo Kido in print and reports to the government and the FBI in the JACL's name, was "irresponsible," "wrongheaded," and "seditious." The resisters were dupes of activists, not true Americans. Win or lose, the Heart Mountain resisters were henceforth pariahs in Japanese America.

And Japanese America never spoke of them again. The Issei, who backed their sons' resistance to the draft and encouraged them to stand for their rights in the courts, are celebrated for their big bucks today. And nobody knows of their stand against the JACL, their place in the organization of the largest Nisei resistance movement to rise in any camp, other than Tule Lake.

Some were deeply taken by the JACL's fear of bad publicity. Some Nisei, those in the camp high school writing essays on democracy and the Nisei, feared bad publicity would provoke whites to slaughter Japanese inside the camps. To this day, Japanese American writers have not addressed the obvious flaws and pettiness of the JACL's argument for good publicity over good law.

As Masaoka never considered protest and resistance in the courts as a JACL option when the orders were posted and hooted over the radio, the JACL never considered a publicity campaign based on the truth, as a response to whites making bad publicity of Nisei test cases. For some reason the JACL then, now and forever has claimed superior knowledge of public relations and media handling, but has never conceived, waged or won a media campaign. Their only success has been of the selling of the 442nd

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Chin: "JACL Nisei" Rejected The Issei to Prove "Americanism"

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to Japanese America. Over the years, the JACL and their literary byproducts in Japanese American journalism, poetry, drama, fiction and public thinking have pitted the 442nd's indubitable, unredoubtable loyalty and patriotism against the resisters who, if they had not been stopped, would have ruined the good impression America had of the 442nd.

Today the resister who wrote those brave words from jail and had them sent to the newspaper in Chicago, Cheyenne, Denver, the wire services, the Pacific Citizen and the Rocky Shimpō doesn't want his name publically associated with the resistance he had spoken for, 40 years ago. The social ostracism he had predicted, has taken its toll. Many of the resisters are convinced that Japanese America has abandoned them. One of them offered me money not to mention his name.

One former resister from Jerome sought me out. Being known for dogging the JACL down has its advantages. I asked him why he wanted to talk to me. He said he didn't like hearing the Sansei say the Nisei were too chicken to resist.

This man says standing up for his rights wasn't worth it. This is not to mean, this man repudiates his resistance. He says if he had it to do all over again, he would do it. Even knowing that after being stripped and probed in front of five cops and entertained by officers offhandedly remarking, "Why wait, let's just kill him now," for

a week after being picked up hitchhiking in violation of the curfew, after being picked up as a troublemaker after the gang-fight-cum-riot at Santa Anita and held in Arcadia City Jail and then sent to Tule Lake, after humiliation in Montana after rejoining his family in Jerome, where he resisted the draft, he would be sent to the federal pen at Texarkana and there jumped and beaten naked by 20 or 30 inmates while the guard yelled "Kill that Jap!" and put in the hole for five days for attacking 20 or 30 inmates for no reason at all. He would do it again, no matter, at the end it wouldn't be worth it.

"It," I think, is Japanese America's recognition—if not appreciation—of the significance of the Nisei resistance he added his number to. Without qualification, sidetrips, hems or other haws, an estimated 1500 to 2000 Nisei were activists in the resistance movement. They saw the camps as wrong and acted as if they were wrong. They cooperated with evacuation physically and protested in the courts. The JACL, in characterizing itself as the heroic defenders of Japanese American interests, portrays the resisters as moral traitors, as threats to the very lives of individual Japanese Americans, dispersed to all-white towns in the Midwest and the East where, in Sab Kido's immortal words of Nisei pride, all the Nisei wanted to do was "disappear and be forgotten."

When Mike Masaoka chants the JACL litany justifying betrayal,

he is not speaking of the illegality of the camps and the law or "legal good." The "good" of the "greatest good for the greatest number" is a good not achievable through the law. The "good" is acceptance and assimilation by the most white racist of the white racists. The camps are wrong, illegal, unconstitutional, the JACL recognizes all that, and condescendingly "understands" the resisters' reasons for resisting, but characterizes resistance as the actions of the demented, stupid, unhealthy, confused and frustrated. The resisters do not perceive "the greatest good." The camps are wrong the JACL said but... and this a big but... But Nisei tolerance and acceptance of the wrong will prove their loyalty to America in white eyes. Camp is the chance to prove Nisei loyalty once and for all. The JACL is looking beyond the law, beyond the constitutional issues to the religious vistas of Nisei heaven on earth. "Better Americans in a Greater America" through applied anthropology and sociology, was what the JACL wanted Nisei to give America.

The JACL, Bill Hosokawa's books make clear, was treating the problem of Nisei acceptance and assimilation, not defending the honor and rights of Japanese America in the courts. The entire effort of the JACL was the creation of good publicity, not redressing legalized white racism.

It seems no accident that the JACL, by Mike Masaoka's own floundering admission stopped all efforts to stand up against the wrongs posed by the orders and

the execution of the evacuation and internment in their publicity campaign. Their only success has been in selling themselves as the voice and guts of Japanese America.

Their success has hinged on generating and maintaining panic inside Japanese America. Mike Masaoka convinced Nisei the Army had a contingency plan, if Japanese America did not cooperate. The plan was to round up all Nikkei in 12 or 24 hours with tanks and bayonets.

There was no such plan.

The Army had an emergency plan. In case of an emergency, such as an attack by Imperial Japanese forces, the Army was ready to begin the evacuation of the Nikkei inside of 24 hours. No tanks. No bayonets. No accomplishment of the impossible within 12 or 24 hours. Masaoka cites as his one proof of the existence of the plan, Karl Bendetsen's speech before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, made in late 1942, after the Nikkei were shut away in camps. Bendetsen's speech makes no mention of such a "contingency plan," nor does he use or imply the words "guns" or "tanks" in connection with the evacuation.

The JACL sold "war hysteria" and sold it hard. The further away from the West Coast Nisei were, the more they believed the JACL's tales of war hysteria. The Nisei who resisted individually and as part of an organized movement did not see war hysteria. Wartime hysteria existed in the headlines and only in the

headlines. They did not fear broken windows, night riders, shots out of the dark, mob violence or any of the horrors the JACL say threatened Nikkei well-being.

Most of the resisters come from the farm. The farms they come from are in those areas of California painted in history as the most redneck racist and intolerant of "Japs." The resisters who spent all their lives there, never feared their neighbors stopping by to lynch them. They suffered rejection, the cold shoulder but not hysteria. Most of the resisters had some judo, kendo or sumo, high school athletics and a high school student government awe for the U.S. Constitution and American democracy. Most had acquired knowledge of the heroic tradition in Japanese myth and literature, during childhood, through stories told by their mothers or movies shown in the Japanese language school, on weekends, and their martial arts.

The JACL leadership and spokesmen were old Nisei, college graduates, city dwellers, involved with the running of Japanese American newspapers as propaganda and proselytizing in the guise of journalism, and other forms of "public relations." They were demonstrative Christians and had an exaggerated belief in their "eloquence" and "public speaking." They emphasized style over content; flash over fact; effects over reality. They possessed all the fruit of Issei labor, were the first realizations of the Issei vision, and rejected the Issei as legal and moral aliens. The proof of their Americanism was the cultural and moral incompatibility of the American aggressive, individualistic Nisei with the Japanese, passive, anti-individualistic, authoritarian Issei. That by

refusing to go to court, refusing to stand for the test cases or challenge the obnoxious orders, the JACL was being more passive than the Issei who had been in court challenging discriminatory laws every year 'til outbreak of the war, never occurred to the "first son" generation of Nisei.

The resisters are mostly younger, "second son" Nisei. They maintain in their resistance a cultural and historically continuity with the Issei to defend their U.S. citizenship in the courts, instead of breaking that continuity with slavish obedience and outrageous lying.

The Nisei of the age of Second Sons who resisted the draft and took the camps to court, went to jail and were pardoned by Presidential Proclamation on Christmas Eve of 1947, or won appeal to a higher court, or were given sentences that showed the court's contempt for the charges and conviction (one cent fines and one-year suspended) are not young men anymore.

Their stand and achievements are unrecognized in Japanese America. Asian American Studies departments and programs, the Sansei the resisters believe will apply their reading, writing and arithmetic to sorting out the fact from fantasy of their history far from digging up the past are covering it over with a new generation of JACL rhetoric. The new rhetoric posits the Nikkei as a race of pathological victims who were culturally incapable of complaint, protest or resistance to authoritarian abuse. Japanese

American scholars from the University of Washington to UCLA defend the JACL betrayal as the action of helpless victims, and argue that to characterize JACL betrayal and treachery as betrayal and treachery would distract from the real evil wrongdoer, the government. They reject the obvious: that if the government was wrong, the JACL was wrong and racist; that the government wrong defines, not exculpates the JACL's betrayal. The vigorous efforts of the Asian American Studies establishment to suppress the JACL betrayal, necessitates their concomitant suppression of the Nikkei resistance. Thus the JACL betrayal of 1942 not only has grown but reproduced itself in the Sansei.

Any recognition of the resistance as a resistance movement inside the camps, would dash the JACL's claim to being the sole representative of Nisei interests, and undermine the basic premise of their claim to successfully leading Japanese America to sacrifice their rights to prove their loyalty. For the sake of the JACL good rep, they have led Japanese America to sacrifice more than their rights, but their parents, their honor, and their history. The names of the resisters and their numbers are missing from today's history of Japanese America. And today, no one seems to care.

If I can make the JACL look good, I will. That is my offer to the JACL, in the hope they will lead me to the facts and papers that justify their actions during

the war. As part of my effort to get all the facts, I keep laying my cards on the table, showing them what I have and where I got it. Everything I have from JACL files, WRA, FBI, the various intelligence organs thus far, proves the JACL buddied up to Naval Intelligence and started sinking, at least since January 1941, asked for segregation of the Issei, Kibei and "agitating Nisei," created the infamous loyalty oath, rigged the leave clearance interview questions, asked for and maintained the camps as indoctrination programs, militated against the test cases and the resistance and lied every step of the way.

Here and there I show my face, and my cards, and beg the JACL to prove me wrong. John Tateishi, Mike Masaoka, Min Yasui, have fired their best shots and have only added more proof of the JACL's betrayal, treachery and stupendous contempt for Japanese America.

I'm interested in how Japanese America came to bury itself under the mountain of JACL "publicity" and suppress the resistance. Perhaps you can help me. If you haven't been yourself a target.

The research continues but the sources are spread out, concealed and skittish.

Any advice you can give me in pulling the many threads of this tale together will be greatly appreciated. Write me in care of this paper.

—Frank Chin