

ASIAN STUDIES
SOC. 191V

THE SANSEI

Meet the third generation
Japanese Americans, who face
a problem without precedent:
They're too good to be true

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A small boy who was in prison had to have surgery requiring general anesthesia. In his drugged dream, he thought he had died. He awoke looking into the smiling white face of a nurse, and he mistook her for an angel. "How good!" he thought-- "Heaven is integrated."

The imprisoned child was not a Negro civil rights demonstrator. The year was 1943, and he was a Nisei youth in a "relocation" camp in the Rockies. His people were then undergoing the most flagrant oppression any ethnic group of native Americans has known in our history. The Japanese Americans are the only minority we have officially declared non grata, deprived of property and placed in concentration camps.

That Nisei boy is now a successful S.F. businessman with two teenage Sansei sons-- one an Eagle Scout and champion swimming contender, the younger in the 12-member honors class at his large junior high here (of the 12, six are Orientals).

The American Sansei--third generation Japanese, born here of Nisei parents-- range from grade-school age to young parents in their late 30's, now raising their Yonsei children. All of us know the Sansei by sight, and cherish them for their quickness, their assured ease. But few Californians have any but the faintest notion how very special a group they are.

Sociologically, they are a collective miracle. Today, barely 20 years after their return to the Coast in 1945, they are universally liked and accepted, and their record is better than that ~~xx~~ of any group in our society, including the white majority.

Japanese Americans are at the top of the list for achievement, at the bottom of the list for delinquency and crime. In years of school completed, in grade-point average, in percentage of males in white collar jobs and in professional fields (here they more than double the white percentage)--even in years of life-expectancy--they lead the field.

A few years ago a wealthy British-born socialite in the Bay Area set up a university scholarship, to be awarded for all-around excellence. The first year it was won by a Japanese American youth. Surprised, the donor said, "Well, how nice." The second year it was by another J-A youth. "Well!" said the donor. After a third Sansei won it in the third year, the donor--his Anglo-Saxon pride battered--withdrew the offer.

His action would neither surprise nor daunt the Sansei. They, too, know something of tribal pride. But in seeking to explain what Prof. William Petersen of U.C., writing recently in the New York Times magazine, calls "this unprecedented success story," what emerges strongly in talking with both Sansei and Nisei is that highly

personal pride, the standing of the individual among his peers--the very Oriental idea of "face."

The values involved in face are ethical, not material. Unlike our concept of "status," it lies not in the outward signs of success, but in the discharge of obligation to specific groups--to family first, then to friends, then to even wider groups (classmates, school, on up to the Nation). Success--social or material--only extends the area of obligation, which can lead to such prodigies of heroism as the kamikaze pilots. "Loss of face," resulting from failure to meet acknowledged responsibilities, can lead to ritual suicide by hara-kiri.

For the U.S. Nisei, the Pearl Harbor attack was a traumatic cataclysm--a sudden, abysmal loss of face with their fellow citizens. Precisely because they were Americans, not Japanese, they did not contemplate mass hara-kiri; but it was their deep sense of face--the strong drive to repair their standing--which made it possible for them to overcome the wartime injustices without becoming embittered.

"There was nobody to hate," says a local Boy Scout leader, "Except Gen. DeWitt, and he hated our guts anyway." (Gen. John L. DeWitt signed the Exclusion Order barring persons of Japanese descent from the Coast area). The statement implies that other Americans might be willing to change their minds about the loyalty and worth of the Nisei. They were and they did--most of them long before the war was over due to the record of heroism racked up in Italy by the 442nd Infantry Battalion of Nisei volunteers.

Every member of the 442nd fought as if the future of his people in America hung on his personal gravery--as, in a way, it did. But the internees back home had their battle, too.

"We just tried harder," smiles Masao Satow, national president of the Japanese American Citizens League, "whenever we met some new form of prejudice." The community smarted under indignity, of course, but the abrasive action of their trials only sharpened their determination to win through.

The relocation camps became centers of strategy for rehabilitation. There and in later JACL-sponsored conferences, they stressed education as the key to opportunity here and decided that their best future lay in the sciences and in business. An unprecedentedly high percentage of Nisei gained college degrees--but very few were in the liberal arts or social sciences.

When they returned to The City after the way, their one time ghetto (in the blocks near Fillmore and Geary) had been largely preempted. (Many did not return; San Francisco's present J-A population of about 11,000 is much less than the pre-war figure.) They were forced to disperse throughout city and suburbs--a fact which accelerated their acculturation (just as, conversely, the persistence of Chinatown has maintained the ethnic difference of the Chinese-Americans.) And they stopped speaking Japanese at home--the first ethnic minority to lose their native language in a single generation. But language is the umbilical cord to a culture (particularly so with Japanese, where whole societal attitudes are embodied in set idiomatic phrases). The Sansei experienced an abrupt cut-off from the tradition which made possible their parents' success and their own.

They now face a strange and serious problem, without precedent here: the problem of a non-conforming excellence.

The young of every other minority group have shown a pattern of escape from the ghetto whereby their academic records rise to meet the U.S. white middle-class standard or even as their delinquency rate drops to meet it. But in the Los Angeles

area, where Dr. Harry Kitano of UCLA has studied them, the Sansei in high school are exactly reversing this pattern: as their Americanization increases (measured by "popularity" club memberships, student body offices, etc.), their scholastic level is falling and their delinquency rate rising to white American levels.

Yoritada Wada, who recently resigned from the California Youth Authority, insists that the L.A. pattern is not typical of northern California and that, if anything, acculturation of the Sansei is "slowing down" in the valley communities. But Phil Nakamura, a street worker for the Neighborhood Youth Corps, links delinquency among local Orientals with affluence--with "success" American-style. "They think they have it made," he says, "and then they relax their standards."

But with complete Americanization, CAN the high standards be maintained? And with complete acceptance, with no abrasive prejudice to overcome, is not a switch to American values inevitable--just as oysters cannot produce a pearl without the irritant grain of sand?

San Francisco's Sansei youth--particularly those active in the Junior JACL--are sharply aware of their problem--and genuinely wish to keep "the best of both cultures." But translating this fine phrase into a course of action is not easy. The Sansei find it hard to identify their own "Japaneseness."

At this point, it would seem to be solely biological. They are simply American youngsters with dark hair and skin and the epicanthic fold ("slant eyes"). Not even their looks are any longer completely distinguishing: Nisei parents themselves can't tell young Japanese Americans from their Chinese counterparts. But there is one sure clue: if you hear young people speaking an Oriental language, they are Chinese.

Scarcely a single Sansei can speak any but a few words of Japanese (for which they feel guilty, although it was none of their own doing--and many now study the language at special schools or college). To all of them, ~~K~~ Japan is a land more exotic than England or France. Their own "in" humor--since they have no trouble pronouncing the l's and r's of their native American--is of the "rots of ruck" variety, and they talk gaily of going to "Jaytown" to eat "Jay food."

But even this apparent put-down of their ethnic background shows a preoccupation with it. And the truth is that the J-A youth--boys particularly--still tend to clan together in their social life. S.F. Boy Scout Troop 12, which Commissioner Kay Hori is now leading on a trip to Japan (they made their first visit in 1962) is 100 percent Japanese--although any of its members could join an integrated troop. Fred Hoshiyama, director of the three Outer City YMCA branches, says that the only Japanese who come to the Y (which is integrated) are the sons and daughters of consular or business Japanese, here for a few years only, who want to Americanize rapidly.

Probably the most senior of local Sansei are the children of the pioneer Hayashi family of Berkeley. Dr. Donald (eye specialist) and contractor Paul are twins, 37 years old. Their sister, two years older, personifies a kind of acculturation rare to date among local Japanese--she is a divorced mother who works (as a medical secretary). Between them they have nine Yonsei children, the oldest the sister's 15-year-old son, who plays basketball in a Japanese church league (he's six feet two). Paul (MIT '51) lives in Orinda with his Sansei wife and three boys. They attend a Japanese Methodist congregation in Berkeley, and the two oldest boys are ferried back and forth to a Berkeley all-Japanese Little League. "I want my boys to know the Japanese people," Hayashi says, "but I do also take them to Indian Guides, a Y program in Orinda."

Even without the language link, this perpetuation of Japanese community can provide that peer-group incentive to excellence which has been strong in the J-A tradition.

But the tradition survives in other ways, too. Dental surgeon Peter Domoto, 28, a cousin of the Hayashis, is the first Sansei to have played varsity football at UC (guard, '57-'59). In high school, on his own, he joined the Presbyterian church. Now he's active in the Protestant Young Life movement, meets weekly with a group of 50 ElCerrito High youngsters, none of them Japanese. With Domoto, the ethical bent has taken the form of service in a totally integrated society.

He and his Sansei wife have a boy and a girl. Does he hope they will find Yonsei mates? "We feel it's a very live option with them," he says--exhibiting adroitness with the young.

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Intermarriage--particularly into the Caucasian majority--will probably prove to be the Great Leveler in the Americanization of the Sansei and Yonsei generations. So far it is not prevalent, and occurs mainly among the girls, who seem socially more mobile than the boys. (Even in Chinese-Japanese marriages here, it is usually the girl who is Japanese). And it takes place, too, among those in atypical occupations.

George Nagata, young violinist with the S.F. Symphony, married the daughter of the art department chairman at University of Pacific, where he was a student. S.I. Hayakawa, the noted semanticist, is married to a Caucasian, has no contact with the Japanese community, advocates total assimilation.

Howard Imazeki, an editor of Hokubei Mainichi, local Japanese daily, also believes the Japanese should merge "into the mainstream." He teaches Japanese at UC Extension, but none of his four adult children can speak the language. Neither of his two married daughters, however, chose a Caucasian, and certainly he himself is at the center of his ethnic community.

Mobility would also seem to be more common among those who are like the American majority in another way--those without professional qualifications. One filling station just off Fillmore employs three Sansei in their mid-twenties. All are married to Caucasian girls, and one of them has three sisters, all of whom also married Caucasians.

Since anti-Japanese discrimination scarcely exists here now, the preservation of a sense of ethnic community is the main task of the JACL and its Junior auxiliary. The organization is preparing a full history of the Japanese in America, in cooperation with UCLA, and it sponsors scholarships for which competition is keen. There are 1600 local JACL members.

The Junior JACL convention this year will be held at San Diego, with the theme "Youth and Its Identity." No subject could be more appropriate, or--for the Sansei--more poignant.

Unquestionably, their collective superiority has somehow been linked with their "Japaneseness." But should they try to hold onto it? And if so, how can they?

Must they inevitably melt into the pot and become like the rest of us--variously great and small, good and bad, but mostly that ~~passably~~ passable, fallible, likeable, middling creature beloved to his fellows as The Average American?

"Sei" is a Japanese word-ending which means "generations." These, then, are the categories of Americans of Japanese descent.

ISSEI: The immigrants--first generation. After the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, they could not be naturalized until it was rescinded in 1954. As aliens, there were some 500 kinds of urban jobs requiring a license they could not hold; neither were they permitted to own agricultural land here.

NISEI: The second-generation group, born here of Issei parents. They had to assume adult roles in early life, substituting legally for their parents. They bore the full brunt of wartime injustices, and at the same time they raised their achievement levels above those of native-born white Americans.

KIBEI: Nisei or Sansei who were sent back to Japan for a crucial part of their education--usually in their late teens. Not a large group, but important in the cultural tradition.

SANSEI: The third generation--born in in the U.S. of U.S.-born parents. These are today's Japanese American youth. The challenge facing them: how to maintain the high standards of their "Japaneseness" while at the same time they extend their Americanization?

YONSEI (or Sisei): The children of the Sansei. A few hundred have been born. Their achievement levels will be the final evidence of the degree to which the Sansei succeeded. Their children--unless assimilation is by then total--will be called the Gosei.

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