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Sooudi, O.

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THE GOTHAM CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY HISTORY

Distant Islands: The Japanese American Community In New York City

July 30, 2019 · Gilded Age, Progressive Era, Reviews, Race & Ethnicity

Reviewed by Olga Souudi



Distant Islands: The Japanese American Community in New York

Daniel H. Inouye's *Distant Islands* is a richly detailed, extensive account of the lives of Japanese living in New York City between 1876 and the 1930s. Little scholarly work on the lives of Japanese in New York, and on the East Coast in general, exists, either historical or contemporary, and Inouye's book is a valuable contribution to this underexplored field.

Japan experienced large-scale emigration starting in 1885, when a convention between the Japanese and Hawaiian governments facilitated the migration of some 29,000 Japanese agricultural contract laborers to work

City, 1876-1930s

By Daniel H. Inouye

University Press of Colorado, 2018

386 pages

on sugar plantations. Indeed most Japanese who went to the Americas migrated as agricultural laborers to

the American West Coast or Hawai'i, or to Latin America.

Much fewer went to New York, and those who did were largely “nonemigrants” (*hi-imin* in Japanese), a Japanese government category dating from 1908 referring to non-laboring and transitory migrants who were often relatively highly educated. As Inouye’s study reveals, the Japanese population in New York was small yet extremely diverse, ranging from elite families that socialized and networked with American elites of European descent, to impoverished first-generation bachelor laborers who worked in Brooklyn Navy Yard or as domestics.

Analytically, Inouye’s book centers around one key question: why did shared ethnicity and culture not foster a strongly cohesive Japanese community in New York City between the 1870s and 1930s? Whereas dominant scholarly paradigms often assume the presence of a cohesive Japanese American community, rooted in either ethnic and cultural commonality, coupled with rampant anti-Japanese racism during this period; or in a materialist perspective about ethnically-based labor networks, Inouye contends that neither accurately reflects the historical reality on the ground. In New York, he argues, status and class were equally important factors as ethnicity, race, and culture in the fashioning of Japanese American social relations. Race mattered insofar as Japanese and other minorities dealt with widespread and systemic racism in American society across the socioeconomic spectrum. Several instances of legislation, such as a 1922 law forbidding the naturalization of Japanese as US citizens, deeply circumscribed possibilities for upward mobility and inclusion. Shared Japanese ethnicity linked individuals through language and work opportunities. However, status and class had a countering, tempering effect on the cohesive effects of shared ethnicity and culture, as did the resulting geographic dispersion of Japanese across the greater New York area. In fact,

the subtitle of the book notwithstanding, Inouye writes that there was “no single, identifiable Nikkei community in New York City” between the two world wars. Rather, there were several micro-communities of ethnic Japanese.

In contrast, on the Pacific Coast and western US, in cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and Denver, clear, ethnic Japanese communities formed. The literature on prewar mainland US *nikkei* demonstrates that these latter were primarily working-class laborers and small-scale businesspeople, and that they lived in either agricultural communities or urban, ethnic enclaves. In these contexts, ethnicity thus had a strongly cohesive effect, because of the relatively larger Japanese populations, systematic and highly visible forms of anti-Japanese and anti-Asian racism, and because while status and class differences existed among Japanese, these were not as pronounced as they were in New York. Furthermore, the transitory nature of many Japanese’s stays in the city at the time (which, interestingly, continues with Japanese today) contributed.

The author uses status and class as key concepts throughout the book to delineate a four-tiered Japanese community hierarchy in New York. Status is broken down into the components of prestige or reputation (somewhat akin to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital), and lifestyle, whereas class is primarily determined by economic capital. The distinction between status and class is important, because some Japanese had ample material resources, putting them in higher class positions, but lacked in cultural, social, and symbolic capital, which meant they could not achieve higher statuses.

Part I of the book examines each of these four tiers in turn, plus a fifth group of “floating” Japanese students. Chapter I provides historical context to Japanese migration to New York, which began with elites—first, the Tokugawa mission, an 1860 state visit to initiate trade with the United States, and the visit of the Oceanic Group, a group of six Japanese businessmen, in 1876. The latter represented the first Japanese business concerns in the US

outside of the Pacific Coast, and developed Japan's exports to the US of raw silk, cotton textiles, and porcelain.

Chapter II examines the “dominant tier” or Japanese New York elites. These were primarily *kaishain*, high-ranking employees working temporarily at the New York offices of large Japanese trading companies, consular officials, some first-generation (*issei*) commercial importers, and a few medical doctors, namely Dr. Jokichi Takamine and his family. Inouye's accounts of individuals' and families' lives in this chapter are extremely rich in detail in terms of descriptions of their homes, their furnishings, personal anecdotes, and biographical details. What it shows is how these elite Japanese worked hard to be included in elite, white American circles by demonstrating their taste via conspicuous consumption, friendships with elite Americans, marriage, and higher education, especially of their children. These efforts were partially successful, as Japanese engaged in reproducing their wealth and elite status. The latter was based in a combination of *mibunsei*, social status categories dating from the feudal Tokugawa era and brought over from Japan; US-based class and status distinctions that Inouye describes as similar to those in German American communities; and “American values, ethics, and customs.” At the same time, racism against Japanese and those of Asian descent more generally limited the incorporation and acceptance of these Japanese into the upper echelons of New York society. One question that remained for the reader here, as in the next chapter, is why so many of these prominent migrants were medical doctors, given Japanese's exclusion from many work opportunities.

Chapter III considers the second tier, comprised of mid-size merchants and entrepreneurs who served those in the first tier, as well as lower-ranked doctors and medical researchers. Those in this tier might have had high economic capital, but relatively less status in relation to the first. It was also wide-ranging, as some doctors were prominent if they worked for major hospitals and research facilities, but had less status if they served more

working-class customers.

Chapter IV discusses the geographical and spatial dispersion of Japanese across the city, as well as the third and fourth tiers. These were comprised of working-class Japanese families and small businesses; and impoverished bachelor laborers and a few couples who were also laborers, respectively. These largely male laborers made up more than 60% of the New York Japanese population in the 1920s-30s. According to Inouye, the dispersion of Japanese into micro-communities along ethnic, class, and status lines, coupled with the overall small population (some 2,686 people of Japanese descent—*nikkei*—lived in New York state in 1920, mostly in the city), resulted in the absence of any Japantown area in the city where large numbers of Japanese congregated.

Chapter V, the final one of this section, deals with the population of Japanese students studying in New York City. Inouye describes them as “floating” and not belonging anywhere in the four-tiered hierarchy, because their futures were as yet undetermined. On the one hand, some students seemed to move between different tiers in the hierarchy, because they might go to more popular restaurants to eat out of a lack of funds, but also be invited home or patronized by more elite Japanese. On the other hand, these students seemed to have also been relatively socially isolated, primarily spending time with other Japanese students.

Part II of the book is much shorter, and deals with the “Community” (quotes in original text) role of religious ethnic-based organizations, namely Japanese Buddhist organizations (Chapter VI) and of three *Issei* Japanese Protestant Churches (Chapter 7). Although the Buddhist organizations had relatively less success, the churches managed to partially mitigate the perennial status and class cleavages that distinguished the Japanese community in New York. They were the only organizations that were able to bring all Japanese together, albeit in partial and temporary ways, with the exception of the children of

kaishain(272). Furthermore, Inouye shows, as historian Mitziko Sawada has also pointed out in her work on Japanese who migrated to New York City, that several Japanese migrants were compelled by the Christian faith and converted. Why this happened is not fully explored in the book, and it would have been useful to know more about why so many Japanese men were taken by Christianity. Based on the evidence provided, it seems possible that the faith enabled, by its proselytizing and inclusive nature, to provide Japanese a means of integration into American society and gave social and professional opportunities. Inouye notes that many Japanese who went to church and related events did so in order to socialize with co-ethnics and offered a wide range of Japanese, from bachelors to *Nisei*(second generation) children, to “cultivate ethnic-based social and cultural capital.” What were then the links between the structural and material opportunities offered by the church and the spiritual appeal of Christianity for Japanese?

The book’s strengths lie primarily in the novel interpretation of the nature of the Japanese population in the city as lacking cohesion due to the predominance of class and status differences, some of which were brought over from Japan and transmogrified in the New York context; as well as the detailed and rich stories, primarily of individuals and families, that Inouye carefully lays out. At the same time, some questions remain. First, Japan itself emerges as a somewhat essentialized and illegible cipher in the book. There are several generalizing remarks about family and tradition—such as Japanese values and their importance. These are referenced, but they still simplify and reify Japan. In one example about how Japanese students were welcomed into the homes of more established, elite members of the community in New York City and encouraged academically by them, Inouye writes that “these practices were consistent with traditional Japanese social customs and values, which prioritized the collective group and the larger community over the individual self and mere human existence.” What are Japanese values and traditions? The idea that these can be described as commonly shared among such a wide range of individuals, and that they can be simply termed as collectivist belies the

complexity and historicization needed to use these terms at all, and the fact that many of these Japanese migrants in the city were actually extremely “individualistic,” striking out on their own, far from home. As a result, Japan is simplified in the book. It would be interesting to consider what Japan is, exactly, in a migrant context. As scholars of diaspora and migration have pointed out, these discourses tend to reify and celebrate the homeland as a primordial point of origin, always just out of reach to those who left.

In *Distant Islands*, Japan is in fact produced in New York City in new ways. As an imaginary construct that was ever-present, a point of origin, a site of longing, and shared identification, it is actually what seems to hold these migrants together, and to tie the author, too, to this story. On the one hand, this has a depoliticizing and dehistoricizing effect that contrasts sharply with the hierarchies on the ground, in the daily lives of migrants in New York. On the other hand, it points to the importance of imaginaries in migration and diasporas. What makes this a community is thus this imaginary dimension. Throughout the book, in the words of migrants and the author, we perceive a longing and wish that Japan—in language, ritual, in food, in values, in shared identities expressed materially and in signs—was something solid, essential, and timeless binding these people together. Indeed, the very conceptualization of the nation as having a timeless core, characterized by particular, ethnicized values, aesthetics, philosophies, uninfluenced by historical change or international contact, was an aspect of modern nation-state making in Japan, as cultural historians and anthropologists have shown.

Second, related to the above, more historical contextualization about what was happening in Japan in this same period, especially the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, would have been useful to present a fuller, more multidimensional picture of what it meant for Japanese to try and make it in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. Inouye frequently points out Japan’s rapid modernization and growing sense of arrival on the world stage over the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The country quickly moved from being seen as

a developmentally, economically, socially, and racially inferior to the US and several Western European countries to a major contender on the geopolitical stage. While there may be something to celebrate about this, it's important to note that this was also part and parcel of ultranationalist discourse and imperialism during the interwar period, which the author does not explicitly mention or engage with. Japan's global arrival also meant positioning itself as a colonizing power in East and Southeast Asia, through violence, exploitation, and its own race-based discourses about superiority over other Asian peoples.

The opportunity to engage with these issues emerges, for instance, when discussing the life of Rev. Pastor Earnst Atsushi Ohori, founder of the Japanese Christian Association (aka Shudokai) in 1909, one of three Japanese churches in the city during the period in question. The author describes the feelings of Ohori in reaction to hearing a speech by a *kaishain* as a young man: "The speech stirred a patriotic sensibility in the young Ohori... He would do his part to contribute to the industrialization and commercialization of Japan and thereby help protect his nation from the domination of Western imperialists." Ohori may have actually felt this way—this information is part of the historical record—but what is missing is a contextualization of these nationalist sentiments, which appear throughout the book primarily as examples of Japan rising on the global stage, vis-à-vis the US and Western European powers. These sentiments have a richer and more politically higher-stakes meaning in relation to rising extreme Japanese nationalism and imperialism at the time.

Similarly, some of the J-NYC elites had close connections to the higher echelons of Japanese government. For instance, Prince Konoe: a prep school classmate of the Takami sons, Konoe's father and grandfather were presidents of the Japanese House of Peers, and the former served as prime minister in 1937-39 and 1940-41. Since the author's argument centers around the inequalities and hierarchy within the Japanese community in NYC based on status and class, *and* the inequalities due to race-based discrimination against

Japanese in the US at the time, it seems ever more relevant to note this aspect of migrants' history and arrival here. That is, how do race and migration intersect with changing geopolitical contexts to express new forms identity, alliances, and arrival that differ across location, and link here with over there, New York with Japan?

Overall, *Distant Islands* is a rich and enjoyable read, bringing to life individual stories of Japanese in New York City that are as yet largely unknown. It offers, furthermore, a counterpoint to studies of Japanese Americans on the Pacific Coast, as well as of Japanese immigration to other parts of the Americas. What Inouye successfully sustains throughout is a tension between the often imaginary, yet no less powerful promise of shared ethnicity and culture as a source of solidarity, comfort, and shared identification for migrants far from home, and the equally, perhaps more powerful effects of distinction, hierarchy, and inequality instantiated in everyday ways through class and status.

Olga Sooudi is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam.