

Setting Sun: Popular Culture Images of the Japanese and Japanese Americans¹ and Public Policy

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The negative, stereotypical depictions of the Japanese and Japanese Americans in American popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century were of great importance in the promulgation of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, the internment of Japanese Americans following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The American public had been adequately prepared to accept inaccurate representations of Japanese and Japanese Americans; therefore, there was little public outcry against these actions.

In order to reach this conclusion, it was necessary to research American social and cultural history, popular fiction, movies, magazines and newspapers which characterized the Japanese and Japanese Americans. The research revealed uniformly negative portrayals which may have been crucial factors in the public policy decisions which affected them.

Shintara Ishihara, the author of *The Japan That Can Say No*, has accused the United States of racial prejudice against the Japanese. The idea of "Japan-bashing" is not new within United States society. By the end of the nineteenth century, negative images of the Japanese and Japanese Americans were firmly in place. How the images of the Japanese and Japanese Americans were reinforced in the popular culture during the two greatest periods of anti-Japanese agitation, post World War I and after Pearl Harbor, and the affect on public policy will be examined in this paper.

In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese immigration until 1892 and prohibited naturalization of those Chinese already in

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the United States. Although the act singled out the Chinese, it did not prohibit the immigration of other Asians. Unaffected, the Japanese continued as before the Chinese Exclusion Act. The only exceptions were those implemented by the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907 between the United States and Japan in which Japan voluntarily limited Japanese immigration. Because of their small numbers, the Japanese were initially no threat to United States society and because they were in general farmers and small businessmen, they did not threaten the laboring class. They possessed all the attributes that Euro-Americans wanted in immigrants: hard working, intelligent and law-abiding. Yet, according to their detractors, they were racially unassimilable and hopelessly alien in their religion and culture. They were loyal only to imperialist Japan; they were dangerously efficient economic competitors. Also, they had low standards of living, a high birth rate, and "vile" habits. But Henry A. Millis in *The Japanese Problem in the United States* (1915) defined the problem as one of "cockiness."

Those who begin in an inferior economic position should remain in it . . . The Japanese have pride in their race and are anxious to be regarded as equal to any other race. They are neither cringing nor servile.²

And, Congressman Richmond P. Hobson accused the Japanese immigrants of being "soldiers organized into companies, regiments and brigades."³

These negative characteristics combined with the 1905 defeat of Russia by Japan, which shattered the legend of European racial invincibility and tore aside the veil of prestige that draped European civilizations,⁴ induced Dennis Kearney, of Chinese exclusion fame, and others to begin agitation against the Japanese. Also in 1905, an Asian Exclusion League was formed which targeted the Japanese. Later in the year inflammatory articles appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* with the headlines designed to provoke anti-Japanese emotion: "*BROWN MEN ARE AN EVIL IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS*," "*JAPANESE A MENACE TO AMERICAN WOMEN*," "*BROWN ASIATICS STEAL BRAINS OF WHITES*."

The California legislature following the anti-Japanese trend introduced between 1905 and 1911 approximately twenty pieces of legislature condemning the Japanese. One particular piece of legislation offered in 1910 forbade Japanese the use and ownership of power engines, the employment of Euro-American females, the inheritance of land, and raised the standard fishing fee of \$10.00 per year to \$100.00.⁵

In 1913, the California legislature passed the Alien Land (Webb-Heney) Act which restricted landownership to those eligible for

citizenship. Japanese were denied the right to purchase land and could lease agricultural property for a period of only three years. This was not because the Japanese ruined valuable land; quite the contrary, it was because they took land which was considered valueless by Euro-Americans and consistently produced larger yields on smaller acreage. This type of anti-Japanese legislation extended to every state with a significant Japanese population.⁶

In 1922 the post-World War I United States Supreme Court condemned the Japanese as undesirable in the Takao Ozawa decision which declared that foreign born Japanese should be kept in a permanent alien state. Many times the Japanese were defeated in the courts. Court battles do not attract headlines but are as detrimental as other forms of injustice. Harry Kitano points out in *Japanese-Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture*, that there “never were any equivalents to the Chinese massacres, or the ‘zoot-suit’ riots against the Mexicans during World War II, or to the many Negro lynchings in the South.”⁷ On the other hand, Herman Masako has documented several instances of anti-Japanese violence. The Japanese were targets of racial violence in 1909 in Berkeley, California, where Japanese residents were assaulted by Euro-American bigots. And, again in 1921 “several hundred white men rounded up fifty-eight Japanese laborers in Turlock, California, and boarded them on a train with a warning never to return.”⁸

These acts of terrorism continued sporadically throughout the 1920s and 1930s perhaps because during the period following World War I “racism went over the top”⁹ with an increase in anti-Japanese sentiment. Historian Roger Daniels lists several reasons why anti-Japanese sentiments became prevalent at this time. Among the reasons was a disenchantment with things foreign. This disenchantment was caused by the success of Bolshevism in Russia and rising domestic radicalism. In an effort to explain the growing radicalism, two very influential books were published: Lothrop Stoddard’s *Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (1920) and Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1926).

Both Grant and Stoddard believed that Bolshevism under Semitic leadership combined with Asian members from some unnamed country would overwhelm Western Europe and eventually the United States. To prevent this, territorial “dikes” should be established which would maintain ethnics of color in certain geographical regions. The conclusion drawn by Grant and Stoddard was that the major Asian nation which would join the Bolsheviks to invade European territories would be Japan.

The negative characteristics of the Japanese established by Europeans and Euro-Americans (unassimilability, low standard of living,

high birthrate) plus the fear of invasion equalled "the Yellow Peril." Oddly, a German autocrat, Kaiser Wilhelm II, is credited with coining the catch phrase that articulated the fear of an inundation of Western nations by Asians. He used the expression "Yellow Peril" (*gelbe gefahr*) to stir the fear of Russians about the possibility of a new Mongol invasion from the East.¹⁰ These negative images of the Japanese were present in all phases of the popular culture.

Popular literature was one of the many vehicles which promoted agitation against the Japanese. The primary stereotypes of the Japanese and Japanese Americans in this "Yellow Peril" literature can be classified as follows: the comical servant, sinister villains, the asexual detective, militaristic despots and docile hordes of followers of the emperor.

One of the works of fiction which combined many of these stereotypes is Jack London's short story, "The Unparalleled Invasion." This work envisions a fictionalized world of the future [1976] in which China under the leadership of Japan and using Japan's Western technology menaces the world. China is threatening the world not with her use of the Japanese technology but with "the fecundity of her loins." To check this menace, the Western nations resort to germ warfare to wipe out the Chinese nation.

In "The Unparalleled Invasion" the Japanese militarize China in order to make it a threat to the West. In 1909, Homer Lea had published *The Valor of Innocence* (reissued following Pearl Harbor) which chided the United States for lacking sufficient preparation to fight the soon to be Japanese military machine. The book relates in great detail an approaching war with Japan seizing the Philippines and landing on the Pacific Coast. *The Valor of Innocence* quickly became very popular among both scholars and the general public. Fiction and non-fiction similar to "The Unparalleled Invasion" and *The Valor of Innocence*, the works of Grant and Stoddard, and an anti-Japanese West coast press established the negative images of the Japanese in the second decade of the twentieth century.

One of the primary contributors to the negative image of the Japanese in popular fiction during the 1920s was Wallace Irwin. Irwin, the creator of Mr. Togo, the Japanese house boy whose "diaries" were serialized in *Colliers* beginning in 1907, stereotyped the Japanese as bucktoothed, bespectacled, wily, arrogant, unscrupulous, dishonest, and verbose. Carey McWilliams makes clear in *Prejudice. Japanese Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* that

it was Irwin who invented the stereotyped speech of the Japanese-American . . . It was Irwin who coined all the funny parodies on the use of Japanese honorifics, such as "Honorable Sir," and the "so sorry, please."

Thereafter people saw, not the Japanese immigrants,
but the stereotype “Jap.”¹¹

As a result of his Mr. Togo stories, Irwin was considered an expert on the Japanese. “Consequently, he was sent by the *Saturday Evening Post* to California in 1919 to investigate the ‘Japanese question.’”¹² From this investigation he produced an anti-Japanese novel, *The Seed of the Sun* (1921), in which the Japanese farmers dispassionately force their wives and children to labor in the fields. The Japanese farmers work long hours existing only on a bowl of rice so that they can wrest land from the Euro-American farmers. They are following the dictates of the Japanese Emperor who has charged them with the task of subjugating the Americans by acquiring their land and intermarrying with their women. According to an official dispatch addressed to the Japanese settlers:

They cannot check our peaceful progress in this land or in any other where our divine Emperor has sent us to toil in his name. If they build laws to wall themselves about and exclude us, we will tear down those laws or dig under them. In America we are already inside, and we shall remain for the glory of the Emperor.

Small as we are in numbers here, let us see to it that our race shall increase . . . While the Emperor permitted it, it was well that you brought wives from the homeland—young wives, and fertile. And now it is more important that we marry into this American stock. Prove your race equality in the blood of your children. Choose white women if you can. Where this is not practicable, marry negroes [sic], Indians, Hawaiians.

Do not fear that our race shall be lost in such a mingling of blood. The blood of Japan is immortal . . . Even unto the tenth generation Japanese with blond hair and blue eyes will still be Japanese, quick with the one God-given virtue—loyalty to empire and the Emperor.¹³

The Japanese are in the United States with a mandate from the Emperor to subvert United States society and democratic institutions.

Another popular novel of this period is Peter B. Kyne’s *The Pride of Palomar* (1921). Kyne tells the story of a Japanese potato baron, Okada, and his machinations to acquire prime agricultural land in California. The Japanese are depicted as coming in shiploads and those that are already present are breeding so rapidly that they might soon overtake the Euro-American population of California. The

Japanese, who are characterized as subhuman, should be denied citizenship as they are "unwanted, different . . . and the purveyors of half-truths."¹⁴ Here, again, the Japanese are depicted as rapacious, scheming and untrustworthy with no sense of fair play and, above all, no affection for their wives.

Overall Kyne follows the standard formulae of the time in presenting the Japanese as unassimilable, treacherous and acquisitive. Kyne, similar to Wallace Irwin, was influential among national leaders. He "is credited with having inspired a symposium on the "yellow peril" that drew such participants as Edna Ferber, Rupert Hughes, the presidents of Yale and Harvard, and two state governors."¹⁵

Gene Stratton-Porter, the third writer which will be considered from this period, was a very popular writer of books for young people. Her book, *Her Father's Daughter*, was number eight on the best seller list for 1921. The novel describes the activities of older Japanese citizens who are sent to United States high schools as students to absorb the best of Western technology and education as part of a long range program of world domination. The Euro-American teenage protagonists must thwart and expose the mission of the Japanese.

All three books follow the basic reasoning of Grant and Stratton that the world's people of color will unite and attempt to defeat the European or European derived peoples. Somehow Japan will be the nation which will coalesce the different groups into one. Therefore, the United States must not be lulled into a false sense of security for the growing menace of Japan should and must be checked.

Popular literature was not the only medium responsible for shaping the image of the Japanese during this period. Movies also contributed to the presentation of the Japanese as a growing danger within United States society. One of the earliest examples of the anti-Japanese cinema is the 1916 production of *Pearl of the Army*, in which "peerless, fearless Pearl White saves the Panama Canal from Oriental spies."¹⁶ Perhaps the most offensive movie from this period is *Patria* from the International Film Service Corporation which was part of the Hearst conglomerate.

Patria was not only anti-Japanese but also anti-Mexican. The ten-part serial showed the efforts of the Japanese to invade the United States with the support of Mexico. The movie was so lurid in its presentation of the Japanese that in 1916 President Wilson requested the withdrawal of the movie for its biased content that was intended to increase animosity toward the Japanese.

A third movie exhibited by the American Legion throughout California at this time was titled *Shadows of the West*. All the charges ever made against the Japanese were in this film.

The film showed a mysterious room fitted with wireless apparatus by which a head Japanese ticked out prices which controlled a state-wide vegetable mar-

ket; spies darted in and out of the scenes; Japanese were shown dumping vegetables into the harbor to maintain high prices; two white girls were abducted by a group of Japanese men only to be rescued at the last moment by a squad of American Legionnaires.¹⁷

Other movies of similar types were popular through out the nineteen-twenties.

All of these activities, movies, books and sensational journalistic articles led to the March 15, 1924 passing of the Immigration Exclusion Act which stated that all immigrants “ineligible for citizenship” were denied admission to the United States. This act limited all immigration to the United States, but *prohibited* all immigration from Japan.

With the exclusion of the Japanese from the United States, the problem of the Yellow Peril was apparently solved. But by 1930, Japan was a real competitor in the world market; California apparently felt threatened to the extent that again anti-Japanese measures were introduced into the state legislature. But California was not alone in the growing anti-Japanese posture. In 1934 mobs attacked the Japanese in Arizona and the Hearst press, again, began to editorialize against “inequitable Oriental competition sapping the economic life of America and retarding economic recovery.”¹⁸

The anti-Japanese agitation continued into the late 1930s with the publication of a very inflammatory book, Solomon Cruso’s *The Last of the Japs and the Jews* (1931). Again set in the future, Japan has disappeared completely and all United States’ Jews have perished proving their loyalty and patriotism. Turkey, China and India, overpopulated Asian nations, are now the superpowers.

It was also the decade of the thirties when an unusual fictionalized Japanese appeared, Mr. Moto. Earl Derr Biggers, the creator of Charlie Chan, had died. Publishers searching for another Asian detective commissioned John P. Marquand, the winner of the 1937 Pulitzer Prize for *The Late George Apley*, to create such a character; Marquand created Mr. Moto.

In 1937, the efficient, patriotic, humble Japanese secret agent, Mr. Moto, was introduced. Mr. Moto “is an intriguing figure in American popular culture of the late 1930s, representing a rational antidote to the entirely negative stereotype of the subhuman monkey men and militarists—capable of killing for his country as well as dying for it, but desiring to do neither.”¹⁹ In the physical characterization of Mr. Moto, however, little had changed. He recalls an earlier character, Mr. Togo. Similar to Mr. Togo, Mr. Moto (played in the movies by Hungarian-born Peter Lorre) is a small, bespectacled, tricky, arrogant martial arts expert. He is extremely verbose in impeccable English in contrast to Charlie Chan’s pidgin English; but Mr. Moto remained essentially inscrutable. During World War II, the

Mr. Moto series went into hiatus only to return in 1965 with Henry Silva as Mr. Moto. However, Silva's Mr. Moto in *The Return of Mr. Moto* was so atrocious that Mr. Moto has not been seen since.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent declaration of war on Japan, the United States' public had been adequately prepared to view the Japanese as subhuman militarists. Therefore, the government had few detractors in its relocation of thousands of Japanese Americans. The relocation was an easily accomplished task in view of the decades of anti-Japanese propaganda.

The propagandists of the United States and its Western Allies continued the perpetuation of negative images of the Japanese, routinely using images of animals, reptiles and insects to convey the nature of the Japanese. It is understandable that propaganda of the coarsest kind would be directed against the enemy during wartime, but the depiction of the Japanese was monstrous. While the image of the "good" Germans was kept separate from the image of the Nazis, no such separation was allowed the Japanese.

The overriding image of the Japanese was animal: "monkeys, baboons, gorillas, dogs, mice, rats, vipers and rattlesnakes, cockroaches, vermin . . ." ²⁰ with the additional images of lesser men, primitive children and madmen. Songs, movies, cartoons and a wide variety of academic and popular writing contributed to the images.

Movies with the advantage of appealing to more senses were the most insidious form of propaganda masquerading as entertainment. "The American public was to be taught that . . . the Japanese people were equally to blame for tolerating and cooperating with its leaders . . . It was the government who outlined for Hollywood the six basic patterns for pictures related to the war . . ." ²¹ Therefore, all Japanese and Japanese Americans on the screen became synonymous with treachery, imperviousness to pain and a disregard for human life in movies such as *Wake Island* (1942), *Secret Agent of Japan* (1942), *Little Tokyo, USA* (1942), and *Across the Pacific* (1942). But "the most terrifying and incendiary product Hollywood ever would produce dealing with the Japanese" ²² was *The Purple Heart* (1944). The movie was a presumed expose of military Japan's uncivilized and vengeful trial and execution of eight captured American pilots. Its main purpose was to "depict for the American audience the savagery . . . sadism [and] sub-human quality of the enemy." ²³ Later movies produced during the war years continued the portrayal of the Japanese as cruel and inhuman or emphasized the alleged fifth-column aspects of the Japanese in the United States.

Movies were not the only medium engaged in the anti-Japanese campaign. In cartoons the bucktoothed Japanese became a standard feature. Bugs Bunny was recruited in the campaign against the Japanese in "Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips."

Song writers raced to see which tune would be first on the charts. A seemingly unending variation on the theme was produced: "A Jap is a Sap," "The Japs Haven't Got a Chinaman's Chance," "Mow the Japs Down," "We're Gonna Find a Fellow Who Is Yellow and Beat Him Red, White, and Blue," and "Oh, You Little Son of an Oriental."²⁴

These attitudes carried over into the language with the creation of new slang terms. John Dower writes in *War Without Mercy* (1986) that many references to the Japanese were simply initials, "the LYBs, the little yellowbellies." Other terms were used including "slants," "squints," "slopes," and "gooks."

Editorial cartoons intensified the imagery of the Japanese as simian. While Hitler was consistently depicted as human, the Japanese were pictured swinging from trees or as "Louseous Japanicas," a pernicious vermin which had to be exterminated. When all else fails as in a *Chicago Tribune* (1941) editorial cartoon, the Japanese were portrayed as a danger to Euro-American women. The cartoon "evoked . . . the sexual fears underlying Yellow Peril and anti-'colored' sentiments . . . in the poster of a Japanese soldier carrying off a naked white woman."²⁵

Consequently, the use of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki faced little public outcry. Again popular culture images had been used to justify public policy. The decades between the end of World War II and the 1980s were concerned with rebuilding Japan and concomitantly the images of the Japanese and Japanese-Americans. The new image of Japanese-Americans, and indeed all Asians was the "model minority."

However, by 1990, a cover story of *Fortune* magazine was entitled "Fear and Loathing of Japan." The article stated, "suddenly the Japanese have become the people it is okay to hate . . . Japan bashing has been going on for a decade or so, but lately the intensity has reached stunning proportions . . ."²⁶ Out of this allegedly new Japan-bashing seemingly comes new stereotypes.

The new stereotypes of the Japanese and Japanese Americans are simply the old ones rewritten. The media is once again touting the Japanese as acquiring large tracts of prime United States' real estate while ignoring larger purchases by the British (who have been the largest investors in the United States), Canadians, West Germans, the Hong Kong Chinese, and the Dutch. Japanese businessmen are accused in the media of "white slavery" and a television movie picks up the theme: *Girls of the White Orchid* (1981) starring Jennifer Jason Leigh and Ann Jillian. *Black Rain* (1989), a motion picture starring Michael Douglas, is accused by *Newsweek* of Asia-bashing.

Reality has intruded into the ideal state of the "model minority," thus conflicting with the reality of life in the United States. A reality

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in which Vincent Chin is murdered in Detroit because he is mistaken for a Japanese; anti-Asian violence in San Marino, California, and in Texas; a bucktoothed, bespectacled Japanese soldier in the rock duo Milli-Vanilli's "Don't Forget My Number" music video or on a recent television program "The Nasty Boys," the Japanese arms dealer is referred to as the "cat eater." And John McLaughlin using the derogatory epithet "Jap" on his PBS program "The McLaughlin Group."²⁷

Just as every institution was used to uphold, justify and legislate the enslavement of Africans in the United States, so too were similar efforts exerted to oppress and circumscribe the Japanese and Japanese Americans. Inflammatory characterizations in academic writing, popular fiction, movies, magazines and newspapers contributed to the overall images of the Japanese and Japanese Americans as unassimilable and undesirable aliens. With the creation of these images, anti-Japanese governmental action could be warranted. Intense periods of anti-Japanese propaganda were followed by equally intense periods of governmental activity. Public policy decisions based on these cultural images have been used to justify the denial of land ownership, the Asian Exclusion Act, the internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry as enemy aliens and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Close examination of the periods of heightened anti-Japanese agitation suggests a connection between the development of negative stereotypes and public policy. Therefore, it is difficult not to conclude that in order to manipulate the American public, unsavory images of a group are, first, widely disseminated. Soon afterward, there is a great public outcry against that group, which initiates public policy decisions.

NOTES

¹No distinction is made here between Japanese and Japanese American as no such distinction was made by the American government, or within American society.

²Henry A. Millis. *The Japanese Problem in the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915), 247.

³Carey McWilliams. *Prejudice. Japanese-Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), 32.

⁴Lothrop Stoddard. *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1920), 154.

⁵Harry H. L. Kitano. *Japanese-Americans. The Evolution of a Subculture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 26.

⁶Louisiana, 1921; New Mexico, 1922; Idaho, Montana and Oregon, 1923 and Kansas, 1925.

⁷Kitano, 26.

⁸Herman Masako. *The Japanese in America. 1843-1973*. (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1974), 10, 15.

⁹Roger Daniels. *The Politics of Prejudice. The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle of Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1977), 67.

¹⁰Robert A. Wilson, and Bill Hosokawa. *East to America. A History of the Japanese in the United States* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1980), 135.

¹¹McWilliams, 44.

¹²Elaine H. Kim. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 3.

¹³Wallace Irwin. *Seed of the Sun* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921), 233.

¹⁴Peter B. Kyne. *The Pride of Palomar* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1921), 206.

¹⁵Kim, 4.

¹⁶Bernard F. Dick. *The Star-Spangled Screen. The American World War II Film* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1985), 230.

¹⁷McWilliams, 60.

¹⁸McWilliams, 70.

¹⁹John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 344.

²⁰Dower, 81.

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²¹ Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939-1952* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 40.

²²Eugene Franklin Wong. *On Visual Media Racism. Asians in the American Motion Pictures* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 156.

²³Wong, 157.

²⁴Dower, 81, 162.

²⁵Dower, 189.

²⁶Lee Smith, "Fear and Loathing of Japan," *Fortune* (February 26, 1990): 51.

²⁷"The McLaughlin Group," PBS Television, broadcast in St. Louis, MO, on February 25, 1990.