Japanese Emigration to the United States and Cross-cultural Identity Formation

Sydney Olmon

Hank Glassman

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Abstract: The first group of Issei in the United States left Japan from the beginning of the Meiji Period through the time of the Immigration Act of 1924. The experiences of these first generation Japanese Americans were extremely varied. Two examples of Issei from this period are Umeko Tsuda and Michiko Tanaka. Tsuda moved to the United States in 1871, and lived there from when she was six years old until she was seventeen. Tanaka moved to the United States in 1923 and remained there for the rest of her life. Tsuda returned to Japan with the goal of educating Japanese women and eventually established her own college for women. Tanaka started a large family of Japanese-Americans. Through comparing the lives of these two women, a greater understanding of Issei identity formation is established. The comparison of Tsuda and Tanaka is done largely through the lens of religion, as Tsuda was a Christian and Tanaka was a Buddhist, and religion played a large role in forming their opinions and identity. Though the experiences of both women were different, they both formed a Japanese-American identity that did not place one culture as inherently better than the other. The study of their lives in the United States and Japan shows general patterns of identity formation in Issei during that time period and demonstrates how the level of assimilation in a specific culture does not necessarily signify which culture the Issei feels more connected to.

The varying relationship between Japan and the United States has affected both countries immensely for over a century. From positive thoughts and actions such as the free sharing of knowledge and friendship to the negatives of racism, discrimination and war, Japan and the United States have long been concerned with the actions and opinions of each other. While the opinions of the countries about each other were forming and changing, immigrants began to flow from Japan into the United States. Through the lives of two case studies, that of Umeko Tsuda, who first traveled to the United States in 1871 and that of Michiko Tanaka who left Japan in 1923, it is possible to gain a greater understanding of the complex feelings and opinions first generation female Japanese immigrants had towards the United States and Japan.

Umeko Tsuda and Michiko Tanaka both traveled to the United States in their youth, though in different circumstances and to different ends. Tsuda was forced to go to the United States when she was seven to bring back knowledge of women’s education to Japan. Tsuda did this and eventually established an all women’s institution, Tsuda
College. In contrast, Tanaka went to the United States because she had been intrigued by the country for years and wanted to see what it was like there. She and her husband left for America with the intention of returning to Japan soon after, but neither of them ever returned. They worked on farms all over California and for a short while in Arkansas, and Michiko Tanaka eventually settled in Los Angeles. The assessment of their travels during different time periods and political climates and their entirely different moral background and experiences helps create a deeper understanding of the Issei experience in the United States.

The history of Japan’s encounters with the Western World begins around the time of the Azuchi-Momoyama period, which lasted from approximately 1573 to 1603. In 1543, a Portuguese ship landed in Japan due to a shipwreck and they found Japanese people to be more receptive to foreign ideas and trade than they thought Chinese people were. Soon many Japanese began to convert to Christianity and by 1580 there were about 150,000 Christians in Japan, most of them in Kyushu, since the Portuguese were based in Nagasaki. The most powerful military leader in Japan at the time, Toyotomi Hideyoshi became worried that daimyo converted to Christianity would not be loyal and thus took direct control of foreign relations in Kyushu. He forced priests out of the country and prohibited the spread of Christianity while allowing the merchants to remain for trading purposes.\footnote{Warren I. Cohen, \textit{East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 185-186.} After Hideyoshi’s death, Ieyasu took the position of power from Hideyoshi’s son and named himself Shogun in 1603. Many of the Christians in Japan were Hideyoshi’s supporters. Worries over the supposed lack of loyalty to the shogun that Christianity could inspire led Ieyasu to begin issuing anti-Christian edicts. In the early
1600s the Dutch and English arrived and thus the Portuguese were no longer necessary to retain trade with the west. In 1613 anti-Christian activity by the bakufu increased and they began to execute Christians. By 1640 the Dutch were the only European people allowed to trade in Japan and Christianity was outlawed.2

The arrival of Commodore Perry’s “Black Ships” in 1853 lead to the opening of Japan to the rest of the West for trade and to the rapid changes that subsequently occurred within the country. A man named Sen Tsuda witnessed Perry’s arrival and though it is not known if this is what sparked his interest, Tsuda began to study the West and soon attempted to learn Dutch and English despite the difficulty involved with doing so at the time. In 1862 he was hired by the Shogunate as an interpreter and eventually traveled to the United States in 1867. Though initially disappointed that both of his children were daughters, Tsuda decided while in the United States that they needed to be taught to read. At this time, intellectuals sent abroad were impressed with the level of education women received in the West and advised the Meiji government that Japan needed to educate Japanese women. This lead the Meiji government to send girls abroad to the United States to learn and bring knowledge gained there back to teach the women of Japan. Sen Tsuda volunteered his daughter, Ume, to join this mission and thus, she and four other girls left Japan in 1871 when Ume was only six years old.3

After arriving in San Francisco, the young girls traveled east to Washington D.C., where they all lived together for the next year. Two of the girls returned to Japan within that first year for personal reasons. Tsuda was eventually placed in the care of the

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2 Cohen, *East Asia at the Center*, 197-199.
Lanmans. Charles Lanman was a writer who worked at the Japanese Legation who enjoyed art and fishing while Adeline Lanman was an educated woman involved in charity. In 1873 Tsuda decided on her own that she wished to be baptized and the Lanmans had her baptized in a non-sectarian church.\(^4\) Tsuda’s baptism and devotion to Christianity became an important aspect of herself for the remainder of her life. The Lanmans were Tsuda’s parents throughout her eleven years in the United States and they were the ones who truly shaped her. They not only instilled in her Christian morals, but also gave her an extraordinary education and a sense of duty to Japan and to the mission she was sent to the United States to accomplish.

While Umeko Tsuda was in the United States, her family in Japan became Christians as well and was pleased to hear of her conversion. When she returned to Japan in 1882 she and her family shared the same western religion, which helped her adjust more easily to her home life. In a letter to Mrs. Lanman on November 23, 1882 soon after she arrived in Japan, Tsuda expressed her happiness that family shared her religion, “I thank God for all His blessings…it is so lovely to have a Christian home to come to. Before every meal grace is said and after breakfast we have a chapter read in Japanese, verse by verse all around, then hymn and prayer.”\(^5\) This expresses the comfort that practicing Christianity gave Tsuda. Despite her difficulty in understanding Japanese at the time, she was able to connect with her family through religion. Though her understanding of Japanese culture and society was limited when she first came back from the United States and she had difficulty adjusting to life back in Japan, her family did not

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expect her to completely return to the Japanese way of life. They gave her western comforts in her room, such as furniture, and allowed her a certain amount of freedom that she would have not had if she had grown up in Japan. Though she was conflicted during her first few years back in Japan, she was a bit more comfortable than she would have been otherwise if her family had not been Christian or willing to give her some of the objects and freedom she had in her home in the United States.

In 1995, the Assistant Professor of American Studies and History at Yale University, Brain Masaharu Hayashi released a book on Japanese American Protestantism in the United States within the Issei and Nisei communities. Issei and Nisei Protestants are thought to have been at the forefront of cultural assimilation within the United States. Within Hayashi’s book, cultural assimilation is defined as “changes in the immigrants’ cultural attributes, such as dress and religion to those of the host society.”6 It is believed that Protestants assimilated more quickly and willingly into American society than other groups because of their religion. After his research on specific Protestant Japanese American communities, though, Hayashi’s main argument is that, “[Japanese American] Protestants were often highly nationalistic in their sentiments toward Japan and far less positive about American culture than had been assumed.”7 Though the study focuses largely on immigrants after Umeko Tsuda’s time in the United States, Tsuda’s experience confirms this conclusion.

Umeko Tsuda spent all of her formative years in the United States, lived with an American family, and was a Christian, but she never felt that she was an American.

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7 Ibid., 6.
Despite her fondness for the home she grew up in, Tsuda always felt that she was a Japanese person. Once her first stay in the United States was over, Tsuda had difficulty readjusting to Japanese culture but in a letter to Mrs. Lanman on June 23, 1883 she wrote, “…I never want to become an American citizen…I never could be contented to live in America though my stay was very delightful…Whatever comes, my place is here.”

Mrs. Lanman must have been worried about Tsuda’s troubles with learning Japanese and becoming used to the Japanese culture and written of these worries to Tsuda repeatedly because in 1882 and 1883 Tsuda wrote numerous letters confirming her desire to stay in Japan and her feelings of connectedness with the Japanese people. Tsuda was one of the most Americanized Japanese people at that time and she had a clear love for the United States yet her loyalty was to Japan, showing that even though she was completely assimilated into the American culture she clearly thought of herself as Japanese.

At the time of Umeko Tsuda’s return to Japan, Christianity was no longer outlawed and there were many missionaries actively working to convert people to Christianity. Tsuda wanted them to be successful and on July 29, 1884 she despairingly wrote, “What are a handful of Christians, among the vast crowds of unbelievers! The time may come, and we hope it is near, when we shall be the majority, and we shall triumph, and yet that time seems very far off.” She believed that Japan would be better off if its people were Christians. Though she wished for Japan to become a Christian country she did not like the way the majority of the missionaries behaved in Japan and the lack of respect they held for the country and its citizens. Throughout her letters to Mrs. Lanman, Tsuda continually complained about the majority of the missionaries

8 Furuki, *Attic Letters*, 82.
9 Ibid., 168.
around her and in April 1883 she wrote, “The missionaries are so stuck up and know so little of Japanese ways, and they sit and criticize, and write dreadful things about Japan…forgetting that everything depends on habit and how one must grow accustomed to different ways of living, both perhaps equally good.”

In 1883 Tsuda was still unable to speak Japanese well and the English speakers around her were largely missionaries. Even though most of the people that she was able to speak with were missionaries she preferred to not associate herself with them because of their lack of regard for the Japanese culture. They shared the same religion, language, and knowledge of American culture but Tsuda found them off-putting since they thought of themselves as inherently superior to the Japanese. Tsuda’s unique position between the two countries allowed her to see the societies from the middle and though she was assimilated into American culture, she thought both cultures had their merits.

In 1885 it was decided that the Imperial Court would wear foreign clothing in an attempt to further westernize and advance Japan. Umeko Tsuda was entirely against this decision and wrote about it to Mrs. Lanman, “…no one regrets it more than I do…I think the men dressing in foreign dress is well enough, but the women! and Japanese dress is so nice. They are throwing away the good of their native land together with the evil.” The proposition to change to foreign clothing was made by Itō Hirobumi, who Tsuda lived with for months and liked despite her discomfort with his tendency to get drunk and her suspicions of him being unfaithful to his wife. Tsuda believed deeply that the Japanese people needed to adopt western ideas and certain values but she also believed in the conservation of aspects of Japan that she believed were positive. She did not want Japan

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11 Ibid., 254.
to lose its culture and heritage while transforming into a more westernized nation. When comparing Japan and the United States she said that “one who had seen neither one country or the other, and who could be an impartial judge, would be in favor of one as much as the other.”12 Tsuda felt strongly that both countries had their own admirable qualities and that Japan should not throw out all things that made the country unique.

There was one aspect of Japanese culture, though, that Umeko Tsuda loathed, and that was women’s rights. She occasionally lamented the role of women when she lived in the United States, but once back in Japan she was horrified to see how subservient the women were in Japan. In 1883 Tsuda wrote, “…when I returned to Japan, and saw the difference between Japan and America, how could I help not wanting to do something for the women of Japan?...in blind ignorance, she does everything – a most respectful, obedient and dutiful way must be hers to her husband.”13 Tsuda believed that women would not be so deferential if they were more intelligent, properly educated, and had Christian morals. Her growing up in the United States coupled with her upbringing with the forward thinking Lanmans led her to be appalled by the status of women in Japan. She did not believe that Japanese women were worse than American women, but rather that they needed the training to become successful members of society in their own right, rather than relying on their husband’s status. She was especially upset about the women in the upper class, since she found them to be especially restricted in their activities and deferential. One of the few wives in the upper class was actually Tsuda’s close friend, Sutematsu Yamakawa, who was one of the four other girls who went to the United States with her. After the three girls who stayed in the United States as planned returned to

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13 Ibid., 86.
Japan were unable to access the jobs they originally thought they would be employed at, both Sutematsu and their other friend, Shige Nagai, got married within a year of their return. Sutematsu married Ōyama Iwao, the general of the Imperial Japanese Army. Tsuda had mixed feelings about her friends’ marriages, since the mission they were sent to the United States to complete now fell entirely on Tsuda’s shoulders. She later displayed further unhappiness when talking about Sutematsu’s married life writing that, “…she is almost like a regular Japanese wife. She obeys Mr. Oyama like a child, and asks his permission to go out anywhere – to see Shige even. She doesn’t go out any at all…Such a life is killing to me.”¹⁴ Eventually, Sutematsu did more for women’s education, and made some enemies in the upper class in the process, but Tsuda was pleased with her actions that took advantage of her capabilities. Tsuda decided that Japanese women could rise in society through education, not through attempting to make these women act like American women. She believed that if women were intelligent enough they would have the means to become successful on their own without relying on men. Though Tsuda was never truly a feminist, she spent her entire life training to educate women and then educating Japanese women.

Umeko Tsuda’s life experiences show a different aspect of Hayashi’s arguments that the assimilation of Protestants does not mean that these people were entirely devoted to the United States. Hayashi further states that, “the religion often simply reinforced, rather than initiated, cultural change. More significantly, evangelical Protestantism, instead of weakening homeland ties, fostered a strong cultural and political identification

with Japan."¹⁵ Tsuda was already in the United States to learn as much as possible about the country before returning to Japan and her religion led her to have stronger ties with American people and to feel that Japanese people should also convert to Christianity. The religion is not what caused her to assimilate, but an aspect of her assimilation. Her devotion to Christianity did not make her less devoted to Japan itself. Tsuda was often uncomfortable in her first years back in Japan because of the cultural differences but she strongly believed that she needed to stay in Japan. Part of this is attributable to her being a hard worker and it is often stated that she had a “Protestant work ethic.” If this is truly part of the reason that she was a hard worker, then that Protestant work ethic is what held her in Japan essentially unwaveringly throughout her difficult adjustment period and to her attempts to improve Japanese life for the Japanese people themselves.

When Tsuda went to Japan, the countries were still learning about each other. Though the Iwakura was unable to accomplish its main goal, which was the dissolution of the unequal treaties, they were still able to learn from western powers and adapt these lessons for Japanese society. This created an immigrant community that stayed in the United States to learn and generally returned to Japan with what they learned to better their home country. In The Issei: The World of the First Generation of Japanese Immigrants 1885-1924, Yuji Ichioka separates early periods of Japanese immigration into two categories, one is from 1885 to 1907 and the second is from 1908 to 1924. He states that immigrants leaving Japan temporarily to work abroad with the goal of eventually returning home characterize the 1885 to 1907 category.¹⁶ Though this term is for a later

¹⁵ Hayashi, Japanese Brethren, 152.
time period and is generally applied to laborers rather than scholars, the temporary nature
of Tsuda’s time abroad reflects this earlier pattern of immigration. The second period,
from 1908-1924 is defined by immigrants beginning to stay in the United States
permanently as the laborer community began to settle on agricultural land and take up
farming. Michiko Tanaka is a part of this second category of immigrants from Japan as
she came in 1923 and became a farmer in California, as per the pattern defined by
Ichioaka. After leaving Japan and through at least 1981, Michiko never returned to Japan
and had almost no contact with her Japanese family at all.

By the time Michiko Tanaka came to the United States, hostilities between the
countries had risen. Sucheng Chan divided these hostilities in the book, *Asian Americans:
An Interpretive History* into seven categories. These categories are prejudice, economic
discrimination, political disenfranchisement, physical violence, immigration exclusion,
social segregation, and incarceration. All of these had been targeted at the Asian
American community except internment before Tanaka came to the United States. A
large difference that Chan states between Asian immigrant prejudice and the prejudice
against other races was that they lacked political power since they were the right of
naturalization was denied to them. Though Tsuda had faced some racism in the United
States, the institutionalized racism against Japanese people was not as strong at that time.
This racism was also much more prevalent in western states because that is where most
Asian Americans were concentrated. When Tanaka came to the United States in 1923,
she stepped into a world that had been infused with racism against Asian Americans for

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19 Ibid., 61.
many years. Soon after her arrival, the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed and Asian immigration into the United States was completely outlawed and remained illegal until the abolishment of the quota system with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The fact that immigrants from Asia were not allowed into the United States displays the extreme hostility felt toward the Asian American community at the time of Tanaka’s arrival.

Tanaka was born in 1904 into a well-off family that owned a sugar store in Hiroshima City. She went to a Buddhist school when she was young and Buddhism formed the ideology she would believe in for the rest of her life. Michiko Tanaka’s parents did not approve of her marriage to Saburo Tanaka, who was only a hired hand but Michiko married Saburo because he and his father had already traveled to the United States, not because he had qualities she valued in him as a husband. In a book transcribed by her daughter, Akemi Kikumura, Tanaka said, “I had consented to marriage with [Saburo] because I had the dream of seeing America. I didn’t care for him much…he didn’t have much education…but I wanted to see America and [Saburo] was a good way to get there.”20 Her principal reason for marrying Saburo Tanaka was because she believed that through him, she would be able to visit the United States and they left Japan together in 1923. Though they had intended to stay in the United States for a short while, neither of them ever returned to Japan. They both worked in California picking fruits and vegetables but, largely through Saburo’s gambling addiction and their large number of children, they were unable to make it out of poverty. The entire family went to an

internment camp in Arkansas during World War II but returned to California afterwards
and Michiko eventually settled in Los Angeles.

Buddhism was important in forming Tanaka’s philosophy and impacted most
aspects of her life. When giving her daughter advice within *Through Harsh Winters* she
says, “You cannot depend on another person to always be there for you: That’s why you
must have religion. But just because you have religion, everything is not good. *Kamisama*
lets people know about life through suffering. If everything was good, people would not
understand life.”²¹ The last chapter of *Through Harsh Winters* is advice that Tanaka
wished to impart on her daughter and a majority of that advice is based in Buddhism and
Buddhist ideals. Like Michiko Tanaka, many of the Japanese immigrants in the United
States were Buddhist. In 2010, the book *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* was released,
which depicts the experiences of many Issei Buddhists with the objective of showing the
immigrant experience through the immigrants who brought their religion with them
rather than through those who converted to Christianity. The goal of *Issei Buddhism in
the Americas* is to present the transmission of Buddhism as a further extension of
Buddhism’s movement eastwards from India to Japan, and then eventually to the United
States, and in doing so, “retelling American religious history from the perspective of
those for whom Asia, rather than Europe, constituted the homeland.”²² Michiko Tanaka’s
story adds a different type of experience than those mentioned in *Issei Buddhism in the
Americas* while also confirming arguments made in the book.

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Duncan Ryūken Williams and Tomoe Moriya (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), x.
One of the earliest functions of Buddhist temples that is mentioned in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* is their purpose in community formation and how they were not only religious sites but, “they became centers of social and cultural life that addressed the practical needs of a growing and increasingly more settled community [and this] set the stage for a dynamic process of identity formation, both religious and national.”

Michiko Tanaka and her family moved up and down California doing various jobs, largely agricultural ones for many years. The work was exhausting; with her hardships being compounded because her husband gambled their money away and because she eventually had thirteen children, who she took care of largely alone. In these early years of her time in the United States, Buddhist temples are rarely mentioned. Despite her devotion to Buddhism, it appears that she was already so overwhelmed by the amount of work she had to do everyday that she was unable to go to the temple, or her other issues took precedent so it did not have a large impact in her life. Despite the Buddhist temples emphasizing community building inside the internment camps, Tanaka did not once mention any type of Buddhist infrastructure. When describing her time at the internment camp in Arkansas, she only mentioned how she did not have to worry about money for food and shelter at the time and how her husband was a great performer in the talent shows. Even in her seventies, when she did not have to work anymore, “[her] weekdays were spent either knitting a blanket for one of her children, reading a book on health or religion, or listening to the Japanese radio station, and waiting for her children to come and visit. An occasional trip to Little Tokyo to purchase groceries and chat with friends

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broke the monotony of her daily routine."25 For Michiko, at least, it appears that the community function of Buddhist temples was not incredibly important and she had close ties with the Japanese community without it. She was a devoted follower of Buddhism but she did not need the structure of the temple to satisfy her religious needs and it is possible there were other Issei like her.

A point made in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* that is particularly apt in relation to the story of the Tanakas is how, “racism…was as much a factor in Issei wanting to find pride in being Japanese…as Japanese military ideology and propaganda.”26 Tanaka does not mention the Japanese government in *Through Harsh Winters* and seems to have formed her opinions on Japan and the United States entirely through looking fondly back on Japan as it were a completely separate life from her current one and comparing it with her experiences in the United States. There seems to have been almost no influence from Japanese military ideology or propaganda and it appears as if she was uninterested in Japan’s military exploits. The impetus for the Tanaka family’s attempts to hold on to their Japanese ancestry came from forces within the United States rather than from Japan. As is described in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*, Japanese people faced extreme racism for many years, “were excluded from the mainstream society, denied naturalization, forbidden to possess or lease land for more than two years, and segregated into ethnic enclaves along the West Coast.”27 For years, Michiko Tanaka rarely interacted with anyone other than Japanese immigrants, and she looked at white people as a separate entity that were entirely different from the Japanese. Her husband, Saburo, spoke with

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27 Ibid., 147.
Caucasians for work, but Michiko and her children almost never had any interactions with Caucasians at all.\textsuperscript{28} Since Japanese people were kept largely apart from mainstream society, they lived within Japanese communities, and were thus closer to their Japanese roots than they would have been otherwise.

Though the Tanakas lived in the United States for many years almost all acquaintances Michiko Tanaka mentions are Japanese immigrants. She rarely mentions meetings with white people, and thus her description of them makes it seem as if they were largely foreign to her. When talking about her initial experiences in the United States she states that, “After my initial encounter of hakujin (white) farmers in overalls, I rarely saw another hakujin. From morning to night it was just farming – no white faces.”\textsuperscript{29} She stayed within the Japanese farming community and only occasionally saw a white person while in California. She continued to live largely in Japanese communities for the rest of her life, with the exception of her life in Arkansas after being released from the internment camp.

After two years in the internment camp in Arkansas, the Tanakas were allowed to leave as long as they promised to grow food for the war effort. While in Little Rock, they were successful and managed to save $20,000. They became friends with many white people in the area and one white friend would even come to their house every Christmas and give each of their children one-hundred dollars. When speaking of the family’s relations with the white people in Little Rock, Michiko said that, “No hakujin (white) was that kind in California. There was also Mr. Manning, the wealthiest man in Little Rock, who cried when we left…Another hakujin, Mr. Kern, said he would give us 10 to 20

\textsuperscript{28} Kikumura, \textit{Harsh Winters}, 96.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 28.
The Tanakas were able to get along very well with white people once out of California and were successful financially in Little Rock as well. It seems that once they became such a small minority in Little Rock rather than in California, there was less established racism toward their group and the people around them did not feel threatened by their presence. Since the Tanaka family was able to get along so well in Arkansas, it seems strange that they wanted to return to California at all but Michiko believed that, “Looking at the children’s future, we knew we had to return to California. If we stayed, the girls would have ended up marrying either *kurombo* (blacks) or *hakujin*. Papa and I decided that we couldn’t just think about ourselves – with this money we must return.” Michiko and Saburo both believed that their children had to marry Japanese people, and decided to give up living in Little Rock, even though they were much more successful there, so their children could marry other Japanese people. Michiko and Saburo initially came to the United States with the intention of making money and returning to Japan. Though they had the opportunity in Little Rock to come closer to achieving their goal and making money, they decided that marriage was more important and moved back to California.

In contrast, marriage never interfered with Umeko Tsuda’s plans to teach. Nearly three months after her return to Japan in 1883, Tsuda wrote to Mrs. Lanman about marriage and said that, “in Japan it is impossible to remain unmarried and yet be independent, respected, and have friends.” Both of her friends, Sutematsu and Shige got married soon after they returned to Japan and thus it was a common topic in Tsuda’s

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31 Ibid., 54.
32 Furuki, *Attic Letters*, 44.
early letters to Mrs. Lanman. From Tsuda’s impatience over the question of marriage, it appears that Tsuda was often questioned about her possible suitors and who to use as a go-between for her own marriage. In June 1883, Tsuda finally wrote, “Please don’t write marriage to me again – not once. I am so sick of the subject, sick of hearing about it and discussing it. I am not going to marry unless I want to… I want to have my school, and never marry, though I do not say I shall never do so.”³³ Tsuda most desired to work and to not have anything to do with marriage, though she felt the pressure of the necessity of marriage. Tsuda eventually established her school as she wished and never got married. Though both her American and Japanese family and urged her to get married, Tsuda remained single her entire life and did not compromise her work for marriage as the Tanaka family did. The Tanakas were accepted in Little Rock but gave up living there despite how much they liked so their children would marry ethnically Japanese people.

Eventually, Michiko Tanaka settled in Los Angeles. The necessity of staying within ethnic enclaves came largely from segregation, but there were other factors involved as well such as the desire for children to remain within the Japanese communities in the United States. This desire could also have been influenced by the general lack of equal interaction with people of other races due to their tendency to stay within the enclaves and also formed as a reaction to the racism they targeted at them from Caucasians. A final important factor in the necessity of these enclaves was the language barrier, as Michiko Tanaka was not fluent in English and most likely felt more comfortable in the Japanese community since they spoke the same language.

³³ Furuki, Attic Letters, 75.
Racism not only created these ethnic enclaves, but it also led to Issei becoming proud of their Japanese heritage in response. Saburo Tanaka was particularly insistent on making sure that his children were knowledgeable about Japanese culture, and lectured them every night during dinner on various aspects of Japanese traditions, values, or etiquette. When reflecting on these times with her father, Kikumura writes, “Emphasizing Japanese traditional patterns and imparting a sense of pride about being Japanese were useful mechanisms to cope with racism, but it also generated a sense of alienation.”34 It was incredibly important for Saburo Tanaka, as an Issei, to teach his children about the culture they came from, particularly because they were being discriminated against for looking different. He believed that because of where they came from, his children would never be accepted as Americans, and thus needed to learn about Japanese culture. Though he found this necessary, some of his children felt that this education made it more difficult for them to fit into American society and made them feel as if they did not belong in the United States. Furthermore, he would tell his children that, “Japanese were superior in their morals, values, and intelligence, yet they could see for themselves, in their schools, and community, that America had relegated the Japanese Americans to a second-class status.”35 For the Nisei, what they were taught at home and what they witnessed in their daily lives was different and overall, they felt their Japanese heritage appeared to be something that held them back from becoming a regular part of American society. Though the Nisei felt this way, the Issei believed that their children should know about the culture their family came from, especially since they were being discriminated against because of that culture.

34 Kikumura, Harsh Winters, 93.
35 Ibid., 93.
Though Saburo Tanaka’s teachings to his children focused on the superiority of the Japanese way of life in general, the aspect of Japanese society that Michiko Tsuda most wanted to impart on her children was devotion to Buddhism. “A person who has religion will walk the road of Buddha’s teachings: he will find happiness…Death is the greatest event of one’s life. But even death is not frightful if you believe in [Buddha].”

Buddhism was instrumental in creating her world view and though she did not go to temple, she still prayed everyday and told her children about the benefits of being Buddhist. The identity issues that come with being a Buddhist as explained in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas* are that, “Buddhists in America faced serious obstacles to really feeling at ‘home’ in a nation that seemed to assert the normalcy and superiority of one particular race (Anglo white) and one particular religion (Christianity, especially Protestantism).”

The children of Michiko and Saburo Tanaka went to American schools and lived their entire lives in the United States and they undoubtedly wanted to fit in with other American school children but the focus on Japanese values in their upbringing caused them to feel that other Americans would not accept them. The imparting of knowledge of the family’s culture was done not only through the regular avenue of a parent teaching his or her daughters his or her beliefs. The Tanakas also wanted their children to understand where their family came from and the racism they faced from the outside reinforced their need to show the superiority of their own culture in contrast.

An important part of Michiko Tanaka’s relationship with Buddhism is not covered in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*, which is how the teachings of Buddhism comforted her when facing adversity while in the United States. *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*

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37 Williams and Moriya, *Issei Buddhism*, xii.
*Americas* focuses on the community aspect and institutions of Buddhism rather than the individual’s religion itself and thus does not often mention how the actual teachings of Buddhism itself affected the practitioners. This, though, was the most important part of Michiko Tanaka’s practice of Buddhism since her active life seems to have made it difficult for her to become involved in going to temple often and becoming a part of that community. When Tanaka was a young girl in Japan, she told a lady that she did not remember ever doing anything wrong and the lady then told her that she was not enlightened. At the time, Tanaka thought that the lady was making fun of her, but she later realized that she was foolish in saying she had never done anything wrong as you accumulate sin everyday even from things as small as accidentally killing bugs. Though Tanaka went to temple as a child, she did not understand the teachings of Buddhism.

Tanaka had a comfortable upbringing in Japan and said; “I never knew poverty when I was young. It was only after coming to America that I experienced suffering and began to understand life.”39 Tanaka did not suffer when she lived in Japan and because of that, believed she did not have the understanding of life that she gained through her experiences in the United States. It is possible that Tanaka is somewhat grateful for her suffering in the United States because she was thus able to gain her understanding of life.

Tanaka’s life in the United States was difficult and it appears that the longer she lived in the United States, the higher importance she placed on Buddhism. As a religion that emphasizes the inevitability of suffering, it helped Tanaka overcome issues with suffering in her own life. When talking about her mother’s faith, Kikumura wrote, “[Michiko Tanaka] recognized suffering as a learning process…a way of understanding

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39 Ibid., 19.
and improving life. Fatalism helped her to accept life’s events and conditions.” By believing that her hardships were all fate, Tanaka was able to make herself feel better through saying that tragedies like the deaths of two of her sons and her daughters’ illnesses were all predetermined. This helps her feel less guilty about her children’s difficult upbringing. All throughout Through Harsh Winters, Tanaka mentions how she suffered and how the suffering made her a better person. She told her daughter that, “Suffering teaches us many important lessons in life…A person must collect suffering each day like a special treasure…Rejoice in suffering because it is then that you begin to understand life.” Tanaka suffered greatly during her time in the United States and through the belief that suffering made her stronger; it gains a purpose. She can then believe that it was a good idea for her to come to the United States because without that move, she would have never truly learned the Buddhist teachings she had been told about as a child. The fact that Buddhism accepts suffering as an inevitability in life means it can be used as a coping mechanism to deal with the hardships Issei had to go through in the United States and to justify leaving Japan.

Issei and Nisei are planted between Japan and the United States, often not feeling like true members of one society or the other. Some of the Japanese immigrants felt they had to become Americanized, “especially the second-generation population, eagerly tried to assimilate into American culture. At the same time, strong emotional ties with the mother country…were a natural strategy for maintaining pride and integrity among Japanese Americans.” The difficulty in attempting to become Americanized while also

41 Ibid., 81.
42 Williams and Moriya, Issei Buddhism, 148.
retaining ethnic identity is an issue many ethnic groups in the United States share. Michiko Tanaka never went back to Japan and was not particularly willing to return since she felt that she had failed in the United States and was afraid of leaving and facing her family. Though her life in the United States was not easy, Tanaka decided to become a United States citizen in 1980.

The comparison of Tsuda’s and Tanaka’s experiences in the United States leads to greater understanding of the lives of Issei from the 1870. The passage of time had a major influence on the difference of the experiences of Tusda and Tanaka in the United States. Tsuda’s life in the United States was representative of the time when Japan was attempting to learn from the other countries and did not yet have a large influence. By the time Tanaka left Japan, though, Japan was starting to be seen as a powerful country that was a potential threat to others. The change in politics and perceived power created a completely different dichotomy than that of Tsuda’s time period.

While the details and life experiences of Umeko Tsuda and Michiko Tanaka are entirely different, those experiences were profoundly influenced by a series of common traits. The major overarching themes in their lives were that religion was an important anchor for both of them, they both eventually identified with the country they settled in despite the location of their upbringing and, they were friends almost entirely with people who were connected to the country they grew up in. The major difference between them is the role of women in society, but there is a connection in that these beliefs come from the country of their origin, and were possibly intensified through living in a society that represents the opposite of those beliefs. Despite the difference between Tsuda and
Tanaka, the overlap in both cases shows that their reactions to living in a new country were actually quite similar in many ways.

Religion was an important part of both Tsuda’s and Tanaka’s identity formation and level of assimilation. Tsuda was a Christian, and was thus able to connect more easily with other Christians and Western ideology. Her time in Japan was marked by her Christian beliefs and her letters to Mrs. Lanman were filled with references to her religion. In contrast, Tanaka was a devout Buddhist and often spoke of the benefits of Buddhist ideology. Their separate religions represent their abilities to adapt to the environments they were placed in. Through being a Christian, Tsuda was able to connect more easily with the Lanmans and her family back in Japan, but because of her upbringing in the United States, she was never able to fully assimilate back into Japanese life. Tanaka’s Buddhism helped her cope with the suffering she experienced in the United States, but it also emphasized the gap between her and the average American citizen. For Tsuda and Tanaka, their religion was an aspect of their integration, or lack of, into the country they lived their adult lives in. Despite this, they both identified with their country of their adulthood as the one they felt a part of. Though the mainstream religion was different in the countries they settled in, they used the religion from their country of origin to comfort them while in their new environment. Both Tsuda and Tanaka retained the religion of the region they grew up in and retained the ideology from that region rather than switching to the country that they both eventually felt more connected to.

Tsuda showed an acceptance of her mixed background and used it effectively throughout her life. Through she was occasionally doubtful, Tsuda was able to do as originally asked of her and educate Japanese women. Throughout her letters to Mrs.
Lanman, Tsuda considered herself a Japanese person despite the difficulty she had in relearning the Japanese way of life. In a letter on November 23, 1882, she wrote, “In spite of my bringing up and my long stay of ten years in America and my American ways entirely, it is not one half as strange or as hard for me to do Japanese ways as for an American [and] if ever I return to America, your ways may seem difficult.” This comment was made before she realized the how challenging it would be for her to assimilate back into Japanese society, but she continued to believe these sentiments for the rest of her life. Since she was born a Japanese person, Tsuda believed that was the dominant factor in creating her identity. This shows how despite her religion, she thought of herself as a Japanese person, though one with an American upbringing. In ‘For the Sake of our Japanese Brethren’, Hayashi writes that just because people have seemingly assimilated into American culture, it does not mean that they consider themselves fully American. Tsuda clearly believed that despite her American ideals, her identity as a Japanese person was most important.

Michiko Tanaka’s issues with her identity are also complicated due to her life in the United States and Japan. She was born in Japan, yet her children had never visited the country she came from. Once Tanaka left, she never returned, and through that undoubtedly lost some of her connection to her home country. Despite this, Tanaka’s cultural understanding and ideals came from her life in Japan and from being a Buddhist just as Tsuda’s philosophy came from her home with the Lanmans and Christianity. Though her mindset was more connected to Japanese society than mainstream American society, Tanaka eventually became an American citizen. When she was interned in

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Arkansas, different groups of Japanese immigrants talked about their futures in the United States and Tanaka said, “There were two factions in camp: one who said they would stay in America, and another who said they wanted to return to Japan...I didn’t want to return to Japan. America was my home. I know I made the right decision.”

Tanaka held onto Japanese practices and ideology but that did not mean that she wanted to leave the United States. She clearly considered the United States her home, and though her lack English skills and religion would seem to imply that she considered herself a Japanese person, she felt she did not belong in Japan anymore. A reason that she did not want to return to Japan was because of shame she felt from “failing” in the United States by not becoming a wealthy and successful person. Beyond this shame, though, Tanaka had formed roots in the United States and began to feel as if she should be a part of her new country even if she did not share the mainstream American culture. When Kikumura asked her mother why she wanted to become an American citizen she replied by saying that, “I have to protect myself...America will be facing hard times. They won’t be helping foreigners. I’ve been here since 1923 – 57 years! I have 11 children...22 grandchildren. All American citizens! I should be entitled to citizenship but I’m still considered a foreigner.”

Once Tanaka became older and had spent most of her life in the United States she believed that she was as much an American as her children and grandchildren and was entitled to citizenship. Tanaka retained her Japanese value system and cultural ideals but in 1980 she became an American citizen and was no less of an American citizen that a person who had been born and raised in the United States.

44 Kikumura, Harsh Winters, 53.
Michiko Tanaka’s desire to become an American citizen after living most of her life in the United States is one that many Issei shared. When writing about the naturalization of Issei in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki gives multiple examples of elderly Issei becoming Americans and states that, “Elderly Issei, forced to be ‘strangers’ in America, were eager to become citizens in their adopted country. By 1965, some 46,000 immigrant Japanese had taken their citizenship oath.” After living in the United States for decades without the same rights as other immigrant communities, Issei jumped at becoming American citizens once they were able to do so, no matter how old they were and Michiko Tanaka did this same thing. Despite all of the hardship she faced in the United States, she still believed that she was and American and deserved to have all of the rights of an American. Tsuda was born a Japanese citizen but had a largely American ideology, yet she did not want to become an American citizen. Ideology does not always correlate with which country a cross-cultural person feels a part of. This is an emotional connection that is not necessarily tied down to specifics of worldview and assimilation.

Both Michiko Tanaka and Umeko Tsuda made friends largely within their ethnic communities within the larger country they lived in. Tanaka stayed within the Japanese American community in the United States while Tsuda was largely a part of the community of foreigners. Tsuda had more interactions with everyday Japanese people than Tanaka did with average Americans, but all of Tsuda’s close friends were from the United States. Through their experiences together, Umeko, Sutematsu, and Shige were close friends and remained so for the rest of their lives. When Tsuda first returned to

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Japan one of the people she went out with most often was Clara Whitney, who was the daughter of a man from the United States who was working in Japan. Another close friend of hers was Alice Bacon, who was Sutematsu’s sister in the United States. Alice Bacon came to Japan often, wrote articles with Tsuda, and helped her establish Tsuda’s school together. Tsuda’s closest friend was Anna C. Hartshorne. Hartshorne was a friend from Bryn Mawr College, who also came to Japan and helped establish Tsuda’s school. Tanaka and Tsuda remained within groups connected to their lives in their previous culture for many reasons, one of the most important being the language barrier. There is also a cultural reasoning for these associations, where Tsuda was close with people who had connections to both the United States and Japan while Tanaka stayed within the Japanese American community. A large part of this is likely because people tend to make friends with those who they can share similar experiences and interests, rather than a specific aspect of assimilation in either society. Tsuda and Tanaka were in positions that a small minority of people shared. They lived in countries that they did not initially understand thus made friends with the people they shared this confused identity with.

Tsuda and Tanaka differed on their views of the role of women in society. Tsuda was a strong supporter of women’s education and worked her entire life to raise the status of women in Japan. Despite the fact that Tanaka was born much later than Tsuda, her position on the role of women was more traditional than Tsuda’s. Tanaka’s advice to her daughter was that, “The most important thing to remember for a woman is her role to marry and raise children. To be happy is to have a good husband and fine children.”

Thoughts of this variety are exactly the ones that upset Tsuda when she was in Japan, and

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47 Kikumura, *Harsh Winters*, 76.
were the ideas that she wished to change in Japanese society. Tsuda never married and never had children. In turn, Tanaka would most likely disapprove of Tsuda’s solitary lifestyle. Tsuda only wanted to marry for love, while Tanaka married her husband as a way to get to the United States, but she was never disloyal and supported him completely. This difference in opinion most likely came from their entirely different upbringings, as a Christian couple in Georgetown raised Tsuda, while Tanaka was raised by her Buddhist parents in Hiroshima. Overall, Tsuda’s and Tanaka’s differing opinions show the importance of the formative years of a person’s life. Since the Lanmans raised Tsuda, the ideals from them remained with her for the rest of her life, no matter what other experiences she had. Tanaka was raised in Japan and despite whatever racism she encountered in the United States, her connections with the ideals of her home country only became stronger. Though they both ultimately felt they belonged in the country they lived their adult lives in, their time as children shaped their opinions for the rest of their lives.

The stories of Tsuda and Tanaka exhibit how the levels of assimilation do not necessarily correspond to nationalistic feeling. As Hayashi argues in his book on Protestantism in the Issei and Nisei communities, the fact that Japanese Protestants shared their religion with mainstream Americans did not mean they were more receptive to assimilation; the religions of Tsuda and Tanaka did not dictate which country they felt tied to. Tsuda was closer culturally to American society while Tanaka was closer to Japanese, but they both identified with the country they resided in for their adult lives. As expressed in *Issei Buddhism in the Americas*, just because someone emphasizes better qualities of their country of origin does not necessarily mean they do not wish to be a part
of their new country. Sen Tanaka emphasized the greatness of Japan because the family faced discrimination. The Tanakas eventually became American citizens, but that did not mean that they wished to throw away all aspects of Japanese culture they brought with them. Despite becoming Americans, they wanted their children to know their own heritage. For Issei, it was important to create an identity that merged both cultures, rather than entirely erasing the culture from their country of origin. Tsuda also did not prefer either Japanese or American society. She saw benefits in both and took part in both American and Japanese customs in her daily life. Tanaka and Tsuda may have lamented certain aspects of the country they settled in, but they both felt they were a part of the new country rather than their original one, while also retaining cultural beliefs from the country they grew up in. Assimilation is connected to identity formation but it does not necessarily define an immigrant’s beliefs, as the level of assimilation did not dictate which country either Tsuda or Tanaka felt more a part of.

Tanaka and Tsuda were often confused about their identity due to their roots in both the United States and Japan. Eventually, both Tsuda and Tanaka formed an identity that spanned both countries. For Tanaka, this was though becoming an American citizen. She could not speak English well and her ideals were not necessarily those of mainstream Americans, but she became a citizen of the United States with the same rights as natural born citizens and took pride in that fact. Tsuda was conflicted about her identity as well as she was born a Japanese citizen, but lived all of her formative years in the United States. It was thus difficult for her to feel as if she was either an American or a Japanese person. Though her identity was conflicted, Tsuda was able to view Japan and the United States from a unique perspective during this tumultuous time period in Japanese history.
She had clear opinions on the benefits of both societies. The connections Tsuda and Tanaka felt to both countries were initially difficult for both of them, but they moved towards a merged identity. Neither of them felt that either Japan or the United States was inherently better than the other. Though their lives could hardly be more different, Tsuda and Tanaka ultimately felt comfortable as people who had qualities from both countries. They were both able to leave their mark on their new countries though education and having children, and through that left a lasting influence of merged Japanese and American identity in both the United States and Japan.
Works Cited


