Abstract: In contrast to the promise of "enlightened government" which its name implied, the Meiji government (1868–1912) initiated epoch-changing reforms whose cost was disproportionately heavy for the peasantry. Crushed by heavy taxation, and pushed out of their traditional occupations by the forces of industrialization, many Japanese took a leap of faith and looked for work away from their communities—first in frontier areas (such as Hokkaido), and later, abroad. The successive waves of people who left Japan and immigrated to Canada before WWII were anything but monolithic. Indeed, at the time Japanese migrants and their descendants were striving to carve spaces for themselves within different national entities, a process of formation and transformations of the Japanese national identity created a complex site of negotiations where multi-faceted identities (national, ethnic, racial, etc.) could, had to be reassessed and reconfigured. Caught between the competing demands of two nation-states and the exigencies of (re)building lives in hostile environments, Japanese immigrants to Canada navigated between existing categories with the hope to attain the "good life." This paper challenges the widely held assumption that all Japanese migrants never meant to stay abroad, and brings complexity to the standard, over-simplified narrative of migration between both countries. To the contrary, it shows how many of the original Japanese migrants actually embraced the possibility of permanent settlement in Canada. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, including Japanese-language ones, this paper thus provides a finer level of nuance to our understanding of the reconfiguration(s) of the Canadian Nikkei's collective identity.

The story of Japanese immigration to Canada is intimately linked to this country’s history of racism and exclusion. The episodes of the wartime internment and later forced displacement of the Nikkei\(^1\) population are undoubtedly amongst the most tragic events in Canadian history. Accordingly, in the 1970s and 1980s, the desire to address these tragedies in order to obtain some form of reparation and to redeem our country’s narrative, led to studies of Japanese immigration to Canada which de-problematized the emigration side of the equation, glossed over the immigrants' effort to build communities, and essentially prefigured the immigrants (and, up to a point, their descendants) as “just” victims—that is, as persons without agency whose fates were solely decided by their oppressors.\(^2\) The political process which culminated in the 1988

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\(^1\) The word Nikkei means “of Japanese descent”, but for the sake of brevity I take it to include both the first generation settlers and their descendants.

\(^2\) I have addressed this portrayal of the Japanese immigrants and the differences in the Japanese-language literature on the Japanese Canadians in Lachapelle Lemire, Daniel. "Historiography of the Japanese Canadians in the Context of the Japanese Diaspora." Master's research paper, McGill University, 2010. Other scholars have noted the "constructed" and political nature of pre-redress representations of the Japanese Canadians: Kirsten Emiko McAllister, *Terrain of Memory: A Japanese Canadian Memorial Project* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 7-8; Roy
redress allowed Japanese Canadians to attain a certain degree of closure which, combined with a postmodern concern for the silent masses, worked to free the Nikkei from the master narrative of victimization. While recent studies have offered new insight into the process of migration, much still needs to be done. This paper is part of my ongoing effort to address the question of the Japanese immigration to Canada. It argues that Japanese immigrants to Canada were more actively engaged in the process of identity negotiation through which they reinvented themselves than has previously been acknowledged. In order to demonstrate this, I suggest alternative ways of conceptualising outmigration, and I explore the relationship between the migrants’ multi-layered background, their expressions of agency, and their sense of collective identity.

SHATTERED SPACES – THE "PUSH AND PULL" FACTORS

The Meiji Restoration and the many reforms which followed allowed for a variety of social, political and economic changes, often subsumed under the title of “modernization”. From the 1870s onward, Japan shed most of its obvious feudal features, the pace of its industrialization increased, and the country’s economic integration within world markets became significant. Similar to other rapidly industrializing countries, factors such as attractive wages in urban areas, the overwhelming advantage of modern industries over traditional producers, and the social unrest that resulted from the period’s numerous upheavals—such as rising tenancy rates, bankruptcies due in part to the so-called “Matsukata deflation”, universal conscription, etc.—became powerful incentives towards migration. This was an avenue chosen by many younger children of families engaged in agriculture, as principles of primogeniture severely limited their capacity to start families of their own. The practice of dekasegi, or sojourning, had been relatively commonplace in pre-Meiji Japan: people would look for work in neighbouring towns, counties or domains, and the money which they earned would help their families or hometowns. This practice, however, took new proportions after the founding of the Meiji government in 1868. Indeed, the initial settlement efforts in Hokkaido (the major island north of Honshu over

Miki, "Constructing a Redress Identity: History, Memory and Community Formation," in Redress: Inside the Japanese Canadian Call for Justice (Vancouver: Raincoast, 2004), 241-67. Regarding the representation of Japanese immigrants as “just” victims in the pre-redress historiography (with Toyo Takata’s Nikkei Legacy as a notable exception), it becomes abundantly evident when compared to the wide array of studies which explore the many facets of pre-war Japanese American society. As such, the tell-tale sign that the Canadian Nikkei’s victimization was played up and their expressions of agency toned down is the relative absence of representations of Japanese Canadian agents.


4 I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship program, and thank the Department of History and Classical Studies at McGill University for a timely travel grant which allowed me to spend many weeks in British Columbia for research. In addition, Simon Vickers and Aretha Heenan are to be commended for their excellent editorial skills. Many thanks to both of you. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Matthew Penney for the very (very!) good questions he raised and the kind suggestions he gave me to improve the text.

which the Japanese authorities had had, until then, only very limited control) were state-sponsored, much in the same way that Tokyo later pushed for the colonization of Taiwan, Korea and Manchukuo. These early settlers began a process which I refer to as “incremental chain migration”, through which migrants eventually found their way to North America. I would like to turn to the prefecture of Hiroshima, widely known as a “migrants’ prefecture”, as a case study.

At the height of the Matsukata deflation, between 1884 and 1887, tenancy rates in Hiroshima Prefecture increased by 4% and reached 36.3%. Meanwhile, rapid coastal industrialization forcibly displaced local populations that lived off fishing and the culture of oysters. Since the larger cities could not absorb all would-be migrant workers, many embraced the chance to settle in Hokkaido. Aki County, one of the hardest hit, thus became a major source of migrants to the far-off island. When settlers in Hokkaido achieved some measure of success, their stories enticed relatives and friends to migrate as well: between 1882 and 1884 alone, 1457 people found their way from Aki County to Hokkaido, turning Aki into the second largest source of settlers at the national level. This process of chain migration—a relatively straightforward and well-known phenomenon—became instrumental in the making of an international outmigration from Japan. What I call “incremental chain migration” is the way in which relatives and acquaintances of migrants followed in their predecessors’ footsteps by leaving their hometowns, while establishing new migratory “frontiers” as opportunities manifested themselves. Indeed, statistics indicate direct links between the settlers of Hokkaido, the migrants who went to Hawaii, and those who later went to Queensland (Australia) or North America: many migrants came from the same county, such as Aki and Saeki, and often from the same village.

It therefore seems legitimate to identify the same root cause of economic hardship as the primary factor that led people to the decision to leave Japan and work abroad: one village would hit hard times, and a large number of able-bodied males would leave to look for jobs elsewhere. This is, in fact, a mainstay in the historiography. But a closer look at the migrants themselves, I argue, may shed light onto their motivations and, by extension, lead to a much needed discussion of the migrants’ sense of their own collective identity. Full recognition of the migrants as agents is necessary to prevent their reduction to economic refugees, as this over-amplifies the tragic nature of the reception that awaited them in Hawaii, Australia, and North America, and transforms their story into one of pure victimization by assuming that they blindly jumped out the frying pan of poverty and into the fire of exclusion.

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6 The Japanese military invasion of China’s northern territories, which began in 1931, was accompanied by policies of industrial and agricultural development which were sustained by migration of Japanese civilians in the area. The Japanese also created a puppet-state, Manchukuo, to facilitate the region’s administration and to keep a semblance of non-intervention.
9 Kodama, Nihon iminshi, 15.
The traditional narrative of the Japanese outmigration and their reception abroad is quite straightforward. It is clear that better economic prospects heavily factored into the decision to migrate for a vast majority of dekasegi—after all, workers in Hawaii or the North American west coast did earn many times more the income of people in the same trades in Japan. And a growing number of studies have allowed us to better understand how migrants were pushed to the margins of receiving societies by the racist attitudes of exclusionists. Early descriptions of Japanese migrants, who were often, but not always, lumped together with the Chinese and other "Orientals", frequently alluded to their supposed inability to assimilate (miscegenation was not looked upon favourably by both sides of the racial divide), their “peaceful penetration” of the country (the Japanese supposedly had unnaturally high birth rates), the fact that they constituted an economic threat to Canada, due to their alleged low standard of living (they represented “unfair” competition) and their perceived unwillingness to reinvest their earnings in Canada (substantial amounts were sent to Japan as remittances to families). The federal government moved in 1907-1908 to quiet the rising opposition to Asian immigration from a vocal and increasingly violent segment of white society in British Columbia by negotiating what became known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement. Through these negotiations, Japan voluntarily reduced the number of passports it issued to male migrants, but essentially left open the possibility for wives and children to reunite with their husbands and fathers in Canada. This resulted in a sharp rise in the number of Japanese women who immigrated to Canada as “picture brides” and led to a more permanent type of settlement through the (re)creation of nuclear families in a hostile environment.

The fact that the Nikkei eventually did sink their roots and establish communities in Hawaii and beyond thus reads like an “accident”, the unintended consequence of the original migrants’ exclusion: whereas the exclusionists believed that the Japanese presence would eventually disappear as the established migrants, mostly single men, died without being "replaced" by newcomers after 1908, the sudden influx of women provided an opportunity for the original settlers to create a self-reproducing, stable immigrant society. In the end, this view ignores the signs that point to the Japanese migrants’ search for something more than simple economic prosperity. As historians, however, we must not fail to see beyond this narrative of victimization, which was cemented as the Japanese Canadians were fighting a political battle for redress, and whose coherence depended on hiding the immigrants’ successes and expressions of agency. This was accomplished by assigning a so-called “dekasegi mentality” to the original migrants, describing them as only interested in making a quick fortune with the ultimate goal of returning home. This is ironic, as such a representation of the Nikkei migrants is in fact the result of the internalization of one of their exclusionist contemporaries’ major critiques.

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11 For example, see Young, Charles H., and Helen R. Y. Reid. *The Japanese Canadians*. Edited by H.A. Innis. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1938. In this study, one of the earliest of its kind, the authors (who are relatively sympathetic to the Nikkei population) enumerate these criticisms, acknowledge their potency, and attempt to demonstrate how facts do not entirely support these stereotypical representations of the Japanese Canadians.

12 Japanese customs and laws allowed for two people to marry by proxy. In the case of a male migrant, their family or a go-between would typically send a picture and description of a potential wife, on the basis of which he would make his decision. Upon marriage, the wife would go abroad to meet her husband, or he would go to Japan and bring her back to wherever he was working.
The dekasegi model does not accurately portray the complexity of Japanese migration. To be sure, the earliest migrants to Hawaii, and many who came after, did fit the dekasegi model: they responded to newspaper advertisements asking specifically for dekasegi (as opposed to long-term immigrants), they were hired on short-term contracts (typically three years), and Japanese authorities also categorized them as dekasegi through legislation and exhortations.\(^\text{13}\) Many families depended on the dekasegi’s remittances, and the official discourse emphasized the advanced skills that the migrants would bring back to Japan—their going abroad was, in fact, the first step towards the fulfilment of their patriotic duty, which also required their returning home. And yet, statements such as “nearly all [immigrants] came to Canada with no other thought than to make enough money to return to the ancestral village” are not supported by the available data.\(^\text{14}\) For example, whereas half of the migrants to Hawaii were the heads of their households (who would have been pressured to return), and half of all migrants returned to Japan after their three year contract had expired, we know for certain that many migrants elected to stay abroad at the end of their contract. Granted, the money they sent or brought back was often used to buy land, build a house, repay debts in Japan. However, sending money home to help family members, a hometown, or the land of one’s forebears is not incompatible with the establishment of permanent roots abroad—it is in fact one of the common features of diasporas everywhere.\(^\text{15}\) Simply keeping ties with the “old country” does not make one a sojourner.

Further complicating this neat depiction of Japanese migration is the fact that the official position regarding emigrants was far from monolithic. Rather, the evidence suggests the opposite: some promoters of emigration had actually hoped that the Japanese emigrants would stay and prosper abroad. For example, in a 1893 letter to Doi Tsumoru, the manager of the first group of fifty dekasegi to Queensland, Kobayashi Naotaro, wrote: “As for the reason why we limit outmigration to farmers, we must have settlers help solve our overpopulation problem, build a new Japan [Shin Nihon] on other shores, open markets for our industries, and spread the Japanese race in other countries as we prepare for the future competition between races.”\(^\text{16}\) We could discuss Kobayashi’s assumptions regarding cultural traits, allegiance to a state, and “race”, but it is besides the point at this juncture. The point is that he promoted permanent emigration as a solution for many of Japan’s woes. What should be emphasised is how the very purpose of outmigration was not determined—rather, it was open to negotiation. This is most explicit in the way that women took part in the process of migration.

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\(^\text{13}\) Interestingly, many of the calls for sojourners appeared as advertisement in the same newspapers which reported the problems faced by dekasegi, such as mistreatment, fraud, and anti-Oriental, anti-Japanese agitation in Hawaii and elsewhere. It could thus be contended that those who found the incentive to migrate in newspapers also had an idea of the kind of hardships they would suffer. For a discussion on the Japanese authorities’ discourse regarding dekasegi, see Dresner, Jonathan. “Instructions to emigrant laborers, 1885-1894: ‘Return in Triumph’ or ‘Wander on the Verge of Starvation.’” In Japanese Diasporas: Unsung Pasts, Conflicting Presents, and Uncertain Futures, edited by Nobuko Adachi, 52-68. London: Routledge, 2006.


\(^\text{15}\) Robin Cohen, Global Diasporas: An Introduction, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 26. It should be noted that the same thing occurred after the terrible tsunami wreaked havoc in Japan in March 2011, as the Nikkei community in Montreal and other cities worldwide raised funds to assist the Japanese people in affected areas.

Women as Dekasegi, Picture Brides, and More

Relatively little is known about the first Japanese women who emigrated, as the vast majority of writings were by men and about men. Furthermore, these writings tend to focus on the conditions in which some of them came to North America as prostitutes, and how both the local communities and the Japanese elites confronted this problem. While the case of prostitution should be explored, a closer look at female migrants can lead to a better understanding of the greater reality of Japanese migration abroad.\(^{17}\)

Initially, about 80% of migrants were men, and only married women could accompany them.\(^ {18}\) Nevertheless, the women who were present played a fundamental role in the creation of Japanese communities abroad. In 1887, villages were ordered to refuse applications from women who were more than four months pregnant, and in 1891 pregnant women were excluded completely.\(^ {19}\) It is safe to assume that these directives originated in part from employers’ complaints regarding the lower productivity of pregnant women or those busy with childcare. But they also indicate that a number of women and their husbands were contemplating the possibility of raising their children in Hawaii, even if only temporarily. By remaining in Hawaii or moving on to the North American west coast, the process of incremental chain migration which they sustained thus led to the development of bona fide Japanese communities—not what we would expect from “just” dekasegi migrants.

As for the “picture brides”, the information available does not allow us to draw a clear line as to whether or not they intended to remain abroad permanently. In fact, the available data indicates that many women who came to Canada as pictures brides did so primarily because their husbands were already there. Whereas is it difficult to determine to what extent they had a hand in the decision to stay or return to Japan, the fact that some picture brides married second-generation men suggests that they likely expected to remain in Canada.

The many articles and guides which were published to sell the idea of emigration to the Japanese public provide further insight into the lives of female migrants. Many of these documents offered prospective migrants vivid images of an idealized “America” which promised economic independence, enhanced status, and a chance at a better education. In a very insightful study, Miyamoto Natsuki demonstrates how women were targeted from two specific standpoints.\(^ {20}\) Male-centered, conservative authors such as Shimanuki Hyōdayū promoted

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\(^{17}\) There are records of actual cases of human trafficking, including women sold into sexual slavery, between Japan and North America in the around the turn of the twentieth century (see, for example, Ichioka, Yuji. *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924*. New York: Free Press, 1988.) What I want to briefly explore here, in spite (or perhaps, because) of the lack of hard evidence, is the case of those women who actually chose to migrate to North America.

\(^{18}\) Hiroshima Prefecture, *Hiroshima-ken ijūshi: Tsūshi-hen* [History of Hiroshima Prefecture Migration: Narrative] (Hiroshima: Daiichi Hōki Shuppan Kabushigaiisha, 1993), 82-85. There are documented instances of women who emigrated after fraudulently declaring a married status, but these were undoubtedly exceptions rather than the norm. Many checks at the village, county and prefectural levels prevented the unauthorized emigration of unmarried women. See Hiroshima Prefecture, *Hiroshima-ken ijūshi: Shiryō-hen* [History of Hiroshima Prefecture Migration: Sources] (Hiroshima: Daiichi Hōki Shuppan Kabushigaiisha, 1991), 27-28.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 28.

\(^{20}\) Miyamoto Natsuki. “Meiji no tobei netsu to josei tachi no ‘Amerika’-zō: Tobei shuppanbutsu kara mita Nihonjin imin joseishi no hitokōsatsu” [America-fever in Meiji Japan and Women’s Representation of ‘America’:
women’s emigration in order to reproduce traditional female roles in North America. The homes that women kept offered their husbands respite from the harsh exterior world and dampened men’s excesses of gambling, alcohol, and prostitution. On the other hand, more progressive authors, such as Katayama Sen, emphasized the freedom from oppressive customs that awaited women in America. Women were tempted with dreams of better education, careers, and a marriage born out of love and mutual respect. In most cases, authors insisted that the Japanese communities’ future in North America depended on the Nisei, the second-generation Japanese, who would hold full citizenship rights. Born as equals to white North Americans, at least in theory, the Nisei would thus be in a unique position to contribute to their communities’ development. Regardless of the reality of these depictions, it is clear that would-be emigrants, particularly women, were encouraged to have dreams of a better life in America.

Complicating History, One Dream at a Time

What brought Japanese migrants to Canada? Wages were certainly better on the North American mainland than in Hawaii or Hokkaido, but I agree with Masako Iino, who believes that “the migrants had to have dreams. It could not be just for money.”

We must also consider the importance of yobiyose, that is, the practice of calling over family members and friends, as this is how many sons, brothers and wives found their way to Canada. Additionally, scholars have shown how some Nikkei hoped to become bridges between the Japanese and North Americans, while social outcasts sought to escape their status and reinvent themselves as “normal” Japanese. Another often overlooked factor in motivating emigration and consolidating communities is religion. Arimoto Masao’s 1995 study has shown very intriguing correlations between the Jōdō Shinshū religion, the Buddhist True Pure Land sect, and migration. On the one hand, areas such as Aki County which consistently provided important numbers of migrants to Hokkaido, Hawaii and North America, had large concentrations of Shinshū followers. According to Arimoto, Shinshū’s prohibition of mabiki, that is, infanticide, led to the formation of large families whose male children had no real option but to migrate in order to make a living. On the other hand, the Shinshū ethos, and the importance it places on hard work and thriftiness, made the religion’s followers especially well-adapted to the demands and circumstances of migration: believers spent little, saved much, and sent home large sums that enticed others to follow in their footsteps.

Considering the History of Female Japanese Immigrants through Publications on Immigration to America]. Imin kenkyū nenpō, no. 11 (2005): 61-79.

21 Masako Iino, in discussion with the author, November 2011.

22 Interviews with early immigrants to Canada have revealed such trends. For example, see Tanemura Ichitaō, interview by Shimpo Mitsuru, 25 August 1971, interview C, transcript, University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, [Japanese Canadian Collection, box 14, folder 1].


footsteps. But most crucially, it is likely that believers hoped to attain their religious ideal through migration: the realization of their "pure land" on the American continent.  

What each of these examples show is that many people saw migration as a way to create or recreate themselves according to an ideal, a certain conception of the good life. This points to migration as a deliberately initiated transformative process, a site where collective identities could be negotiated. Whether they wanted to be recognized as "full" Japanese, live their lives as devout Buddhists, or become nationals of some foreign country, migration provided the original settlers with a chance to start with a clean slate. Of course, economic circumstances and historical contingencies were undoubtedly factors in their choice to move to a specific country or place. For example, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 discouraged some migrants en route to the United States from settling in the area; they elected to move on to Canada instead. In addition, the sheer differences in demographics and levels of opportunity must have played a role in drawing a majority of highly educated individuals and better capitalized entrepreneurs to the United States rather than to Canada. Such realities required that migrants revise their plans and act accordingly; arguably, Canada was not the final destination that some migrants had envisioned at the time of their departures. Nevertheless, faced with the dislocation of their traditional lives because of harsh economic and social conditions in Japan, and because of—or perhaps, despite—the unwelcoming attitudes of white exclusionists, we can affirm that the Japanese immigrants who settled in Canada, most of them in British Columbia, did so as a result of their own active and conscious decision making.

A discussion such as this one is a perilous exercise, especially since the majority of actors left no diaries, memoirs or even letters. I am aware that while my desire to see the silent masses emerge from obscurity is legitimate and well-intentioned, I must be wary of ascribing them with erroneous thoughts and aspirations. Nevertheless, the literature of European migration to North America has provided us with too many examples of people who (re)discovered themselves through the process of migration to simply dismiss the possibility that the Nikkei could have done the same. Why would the Japanese migrants not also be interested in permanent settlement? Why must their decision to build stable communities in foreign countries be written off as the unplanned result of racist exclusion? Certainly, some of them wished to escape economic hardship and social upheaval in Japan but ultimately wanted to retire in the localities in which they were born. Those who did choose to live abroad, and their offspring who recognized Canada as their homeland, did so because they somehow believed that there was the good (or at least better) life. They embraced difference.

The original immigrants' choices necessarily had an impact on how they perceived themselves in relation to other Japanese, believers of other faiths, the white majority, etc. The full extent of this impact is difficult, if impossible, to assess, as each individual must have had unique experiences which conditioned his or her own sense of identity. What is possible to say, though, is that this particular revaluation of their collective identity was made possible because of, and through, the Japanese migrants’ decision to move and stay abroad. Although it is important to continue to emphasise the unjust exclusion of the Nikkei and the smashing of their community within the Canadian narrative, reducing the Japanese Canadians’ ancestors to “just”

25 Ibid., 400-401.
27 See, for example, Nakamura Sugizô, interview by Shimpo Mitsuru, May 1971, interview C, transcript, University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, [Japanese Canadian Collection, box 14, folder 1].
dekasegi or “accidental settlers” does not do justice to their dreams, their hard work, and their legacy. We should celebrate the courage of those pioneers who made the decision to venture beyond the hill—and stay there.
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