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Research Paper

Nisei Week was created in nineteen thirty-four as a way to drum up business in Little Tokyo. Women in kimonos would cater to white patrons and teach them about Japanese culture (Kurashige, 47). However, according to a study done by Jiyoung Park, Yukiko Uchida, and Shinobu Kitayama Japanese are more interdependent as opposed to independent Americans (275). This interdependence led to the event becoming a time for the community to grow closer together and, due to the focus of the event, also became a way to celebrate Japanese culture. Nisei Week became a way of celebrating Japanese culture, promoting ethnic unity, and inviting and welcoming outsiders to Little Tokyo to learn about Japanese culture and boost the economy.

The Japanese community in America were isolated from the rest of white America due to societal expectations, racist and unjust laws, and, for some, a lack of understanding of the English language. This led to the older generation, or the Issei, clustering together whenever they could. In the case of the Japanese in Los Angeles, California, this was called Little Tokyo. The isolation and the cultural history of the Japanese community greatly influenced the events featured in Nisei Week with activities that were Japanese in style. However, due to the Nisei influence and the desire to attract white patrons, these activities were American with events including beauty pageants and parades (Komai). Now, almost eighty years later, Nisei Week still celebrates Japanese culture with activities such as flower and bonsai arrangement demonstrations, and *ondo* dances or communal dances performed in a circle around the musicians (Komai; Niiya). This proves the resiliency and importance of Japanese culture in the Japanese American community. The Issei used the events of Nisei Week as a chance to reinforce the importance of learning Japanese culture to their children, the Nisei. Due to the language barrier between white America and many of the Issei, the Nisei were the bridge between the two worlds and were therefore expected to act as guides and teachers to the visitors to Nisei Week. This meant that they were expected to know a lot about their heritage and culture. As a result of this expectation, the Nisei were much closer to their parents than their white counterparts. With the creation of Nisei Week, the Nisei now had another reason to learn more about Japanese culture. Because of Nisei Week, the Nisei were taught the basic steps of the *ondo* and the customs, folklore, and history of Japan (Kurashige, 43). However, due to their bicultural nature, they also “believe[d] themselves to be unique… [Because] their generation combines the best of both cultures” (Connor, 163). It is here, with the Nisei learning their heritage, that we can see the clustering of a generation and of an ethnic group. Although the Issei value their culture, the pressure of Nisei Week reinforced that importance and acted as a glue for the community and the Nisei generation, pulling the Japanese American community together. In addition to the events that were more Japanese in nature, the more American style events also provided a sense of community. One of the beauty pageant queens noted that “Nisei Week opened doors for [her]; Nisei Week gave [her] a sense of community” (Posey, 158). She was able to grow closer to her community and have more opportunities through the beauty pageants, which are more American than Japanese. Even after the internment, which became a part of the Japanese American narrative, the desire to celebrate and accept the identity of Japanese American led to the re-creation of Nisei Week. According to Kurashige, even those of the community who were against ethnic communities supported the renewal of Nisei Week (10). This emphasizes the importance of Nisei Week and the unifying effect it had and still has on the Japanese American community. Activists who were against the “Nisei ‘old guard’” eventually agreed to use Nisei Week as a way for the community to come together (Kurashige, 11). Nisei Week is also important because it was a way of bridging the gap between the Issei and the Nisei generations. The Nisei viewed this event as a way to “prove to the immigrant ‘old guard’ that they were now an ‘asset’ rather than a ‘burden’” (qtd. In Kurashige, 26). Nisei Week helped to bring the two generations closer together. Before the conception of such an event, the Nisei were reluctant to be associated with the Issei (Kurashige, 27). Nisei Week has allowed the Japanese American community to express their stories and portray the grand narrative of the Japanese American community (Nakano, 226). By naming the event after their children, the Nisei, the Issei demonstrated their faith in their children who, as American citizens, had more opportunities and were able to better the community in ways that the Issei could not. As time went on, there was less of an emphasis on the American aspect of the Japanese American community, according to Chris Komai, a writer who has been involved with Little Tokyo for four decades. This makes Nisei Week, more than it ever has been in the past, a way to celebrate the culture and heritage of the Nikkei or a Japanese emigrant of descendant of one. It is now a way to experience Japan without actually going there, according to Connie Kang, a writer for the *L.A. Times*.

Additionally, Nisei Week was also created as a way to stimulate the economy of Little Tokyo. The Issei were worried about the lack of interest in the shops of Little Tokyo and even believed that the Nisei viewed goods bought outside of Little Tokyo as superior in quality and less expensive. The Issei believed that the Nisei were embarrassed to wear clothing with Japanese labels (qtd. In Kurashige, 24). Because the laws at the time eventually banned immigration from Japan, the Issei expected the Nisei to be their main consumers. However, the Nisei seemed uninterested in Little Tokyo shops (Kurashige, 24). All this worry eventually sparked the conception of Nisei Week. In order to convince the Nisei to buy in Little Tokyo, the Issei opened up Nisei Week with a slew of advertisements directed at the Nisei. In addition to these advertisements, shopkeepers also provided a way to interact with and engage in the activities. Admission required a receipt from a shop in Little Tokyo and in order to vote in the beauty pageants, one had to buy merchandise in Little Tokyo (Kurashige, 43-44). In the revival of Nisei Week after World War Two, the organizers continued this practice. According to one of the internees who returned to Little Tokyo after the war, she told everyone who came into her family’s store to vote for her favourite candidate for the Nisei Week Beauty Queen Pageant (qtd. In Revival of Nisei Week). The newspapers would hype the Beauty Queen Race before the actual event in order to increase sales. Shop owners would try to capitalize on the excitement by promising to hire Nisei workers during Nisei Week. Prior to Nisei Week, the Nisei generation found employment difficult due to many white shops refusing to hire them and many Japanese businesses also refusing due to their lack of Japanese language skills (Kurashige, 44). Even after World War Two, the practice of buying merchandise in order to vote for the Nisei Queen was seen in the revival festival (niseiweek.org). The advocates of Nisei Week also argued that by buying in Little Tokyo, the community itself will become closer and will not need to rely on banks in Japan or the banks in America (qtd. In Kurashige, 45). In addition to Nisei consumers, the Issei also hoped to attract the rest of America. They played up the appeal of Japanese culture by dressing the Nisei women in kimonos and offering lessons in tea ceremonies and bonsai arrangement. This lured in some famous people such as Charlie Chaplin who greatly admired Japanese culture. He praised Nisei Week as a celebration of Japanese culture (Kurashige, 47). The rest of America was fascinated by the authentic Japanese experience. In order to cater to a more diverse range of people, the Issei created an advertisement designed to attract white tourists. Japanese women would dress up and lead around groups of white patrons and aid them in buying merchandise. The advertisement portrayed Nisei Week as a “’night of adventure’” (qtd. In Kurashige, 47). In order to further boost the economy, the organizers of Nisei Week started selling fashions that would appeal to American consumers rather than Nisei consumers. They decided to market Little Tokyo as a “’shopper’s paradise’” (qtd. In Kurashige, 48). Even today, Nisei Week is used as a way to boost the economy of Little Tokyo. In nineteen ninety-three, Nisei Week featured three *mikoshi* or portable shrines brought from Japan just for Nisei Week (Kang, *L.A. Times*). By exposing white Americans to Japanese culture, the Japanese American community also was able to reinforce the American nature of their children, the Nisei. The Nisei were constantly being questioned about their Americanism and their right to be in America. By attracting white Americans to Little Tokyo and exposing them to Japanese people and Japanese culture, the Japanese American community was able to break down barriers and reinforce the Americanness of the Nisei (Komai, Discovernikkei.org). It is only through Nisei Week that the Japanese American community was able to attract white tourists and simultaneously boost the economy and break down barriers between the Japanese American community and white America. The fact that the Japanese American community decided to revive Nisei Week proves the importance and effectiveness of it in the community.

In conclusion, Nisei Week may have initially been created only as a way to boost the economy of Little Tokyo, but it has grown and come to reflect the culture and act as a celebration of not only Japanese culture but also Japanese American culture. Some of the events were American in nature but with a Japanese twist on them. Nisei Week demonstrates the resiliency of the Japanese American spirit and it is clear that this festival not only fosters a love and appreciation of Japanese culture but also acts as the glue that brings the community together. Nisei Week attracted outside visitors, stimulated the economy, and celebrated Japanese American heritage.

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