Where Did Little Tokyo Go?: The New York Japanese Before World War II

Inouye, Daniel H. *Distant Islands: The Japanese American Community in New York City, 1876–1930s*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2018. xxi + 363 pp. $49 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60732-792-9.

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Why is there no Little Tokyo in New York City? Unlike Chinatown, the Japanese population of less than four thousand co-ethnics was too small to create a visible ethnic enclave in a city of over seven million by the end of the 1930s. For Daniel Inouye, however, that answer is insufficient. Instead, he finds that a Little Tokyo did not emerge in the city prior to World War II because internal divisions kept the Japanese socially and spatially apart. In the absence of overt discrimination, Inouye asserts that the New York Japanese had "little necessity to unite along ethnic or racial lines during the first three decades of the twentieth century" (11).

To understand why New York Japanese remained divided, Inouye analyzes the status and class differences that limited their social interaction and created separate, isolated clusters of Japanese residencies. He utilizes insights from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, on the one hand; and Japanese historians like Herbert Ooms, Daniel Botsman, Hitomi Tonomura, and Naohiro Asao, on the other, to explore New York Japanese's "status." "Prestige" (or "reputation") and "lifestyle" are the two key components to status. In determining the "prestige" required for different status groups, Inouye considers occupation, institutional affiliations and their ranking order, family lineage, professional achievements, and community service. For "lifestyle," he examines "material consumption, recreational activities, vacations or holidays, and deportment" (7). Conducting over thirty oral interviews from the late 1990s through 2013, Inouye also gathered evidence from a wide variety of local sources in both English and Japanese languages, including private papers, memoirs, U.S. Census materials, and local city and county records to make a compelling case.

Inouye finds that four different status tiers kept the New York Japanese apart. Chapter One begins at the top with the elites after explaining how the first Japanese arrived in New York City with their ideas of "status." These Japanese were consular officials, company executives, and employees (*kaishain*) who worked for the large conglomerates (*zaibatsu*) like Mitsui, Sumitomo, and Mitsubishi, and comprised nearly a quarter of the Japanese population. Since most of them stayed only five to seven years, Inouye's detailed probing of these elites in Chapter Two is confined to college-educated immigrant professionals, particularly Jokichi Takamine and Toyohiko Takami, whose professional achievement, community service, and conspicuous consumption placed them at the top. Chapter Three looks at the second tier where a

number of mid-sized merchants whose occupations, while respectable, kept them out of the first tier even though some had greater wealth than those at the top. Kyujirō Fuchigami, for instance, was quite wealthy, but his business operating a nursery classified him a mere "farmer" in the eyes of the New York Japanese. Chapter Four considers Tier Three, which was occupied by the working-class Japanese, small business owners, and a handful of professionals whose only clients were other Japanese; and Tier Four, which contained the immigrant bachelors who were over 60 percent of the New York Japanese population. They engaged in manual labor-type work, such as domestic and restaurant services that, in turn, conferred upon them neither prestige nor the finances for an extravagant lifestyle. Small-time coffee merchants such as Riuzo Yamasaki were pegged at this lower tier. And finally, Chapter Five looks at the students and locates their social and spatial sphere outside of the tiered hierarchy because their status was not yet determined. Inouye focuses on those who attended Rutgers, Columbia, and New York universities, and their social organizations such as the Tōzai Club.

In the second part of *Distant Islands*, Inouye examines two key, potentially unifying community organizations—the Buddhist Church (Chapter Six) and three Protestant churches (Chapter Seven). He finds that both institutions emphasized common ethnic ties that could have minimized status and class differences among parishioners to bring together in a centrally located Little Tokyo. The Buddhists' emphasis upon individual enlightenment at the expense of "community service," and their late entry into New York City, negated any ethnocentric efforts on their part. The three Christian churches too, while engaging in social welfare and other community service, failed to overcome the status differences that some of their members clung to despite its negative effect on intra-church social relations. Hence, the churches and temple, in Inouye's eyes, are credited only with "creating the *semblance* [emphasis retained] of a socially interconnected Japanese ethnic and cultural community in New York City" (215).

Distant Islands is important for Asian American studies. Inouye provides us with an excellent way to get at status/class differences among Asian Americans in general and Japanese Americans in particular. His very detailed portrait of some of the key Japanese leaders in New York City, placing them within that four-tier status hierarchy, carries us beyond the mere socioeconomic classification of them as "immigrants" (laborers) and "non-immigrants" (merchants, professionals, and students), as they appear in Mitziko Sawada, *Tokyo Life, New York Dreams*.[1] Inouye's argument that those differences were the primary reason that New York Japanese did not interact with one another to create a Little Tokyo in the Big Apple is convincing.

However, *Distant Islands* is not without flaws. The main problem is its exclusive focus on permanent residents. Inouye misses the *kaishain* or those company executives who comprised nearly a quarter of the Japanese population in New York City and gave that community its distinguishing feature. That oversight causes him to miss some of those company records available at the National Archives, the University of Tokyo, and elsewhere. The book also is marred by an uncritical usage of the generational terms, *issei* and *nisei*, and a failure to even discuss the 1911 U.S. Commercial Treaty with Japan, which made those residents more like their Chinese American neighbors than German Americans in Philadelphia.

NOTE

1 Mitziko Sawada, *Tokyo Life, New York Dreams: Urban Japanese Visions of America, 1890–1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).