JAPANESE AMERICANS

The Evolution of a Subculture

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instance, a typical occasion, particularly before World War II, was family dinner.

All family members are present. The Issei mother announces that she has made a very simple dinner (kan-tan no mo no), but the children understand that she would say this even if she had been cooking for days beforehand. Her disclaimer is especially loud if there are visitors present, but there are seldom visitors, and almost never non-Japanese guests. The food is a mixture of Japanese and American dishes. The main dish is thinly sliced meat cooked with mixed vegetables, but yesterday's leftover spaghetti is also available as a filler. The parents drink tea or water, and the children drink milk. The food is simple but ample and includes large quantities of rice and Japanese pickles. Purchased desserts are rare and reserved for special occasions.

Father is served first, then sons in descending order of age, sisters, and finally mother. Conversation is carried on quietly among the children, but rarely between the parents or between parents and children, except when direct questions are asked. The children attempt to ignore the slurping noise father makes when he drinks his soup, but they find it intolerably embarrassing on the rare occasions when non-Issei guests are present.

First words of praise come from the parents when the eldest son finishes his first bowl of rice and is given another. All family members are then urged to finish everything and ask for seconds. The girls, who are counting calories, suffer in silence or talk to each other about the dangers of overeating. The boys compete with each other and against father to see how many bowls of rice each can eat. Several Nisei have told us that the only words of praise they can remember ever receiving from their parents concerned their eating. It is no wonder that many of this generation grew up overweight.

Discipline is carried on throughout the meal—sister spills milk and is firmly warned against sloppy, lower-class behavior. Brother can’t finish his vegetables and is told about the people in Japan who are starving and would like to have what he has. He finally manages to wash down his food with desperate gulps of water because the alternatives are another stern lecture or staying at the table until he finishes. Occasionally the good conduct of other Japanese children is introduced to serve as an example to follow.

Dinner ends (o-go-chi-so-sa-ma) as it has started (i-ta-da-ki-ma-su).

Father makes unilateral decisions as to who is finished and when dinner is formally over, and at last everyone is excused.

Sunday Outing

Although family dinner was for most Japanese children not an unmixed pleasure, the Sunday outings were almost always happy occasions. These outings sometimes included friends and neighbors, and inevitably included dressing up in Sunday clothes. This usually meant, for boys, one good wool suit, worn whether the temperature was 40° or 100°. Sunday outings usually were public—going to the zoo or playground and using public transportation.

In these public appearances, discipline was even more important. Brother, if he fell and bruised himself, might find sympathy, but would be told firmly not to cry or make a public spectacle. Sister might be bumped by a Caucasian. She would be told in Japanese to watch where she was going and to apologize to the American. If the children started to run and shout, they would be told not to act up so much, and if verbal commands proved ineffective, a quick, hard slap from Father was a grim reminder. Mother, usually so sympathetic and lenient, also became different in public; her technique was a hard pinch, and it also worked well. Firm, disapproving looks were also clearly understood.

Sunday included a treat—an ice-cream cone or some other delicacy that had to be purchased, not homemade. Children soon learned that they had some freedom of choice, but only from among the five-cent, not the ten-cent, items. The limitations of the family budget were made quite clear. The children made every effort to conform to this and to all other strictures—to be polite, quiet, modest, and, most important, obedient. The whole family derived a great deal of pleasure from overhearing the harased American parents of a shouting, demanding brood of children remark enviously about “the wonderful Japanese children over there.”

Problem solving

How to solve problems—whether to call on others or to handle them within the family—is an important item in family life. Here, the paternalistic structure of the Japanese family was often deceptive. In many cases, the father was simply unavailable except for major disciplinary issues, and many everyday problems were handled by the mother. In some families, both parents were unavailable, either because they worked, or because a language barrier made communication too difficult. Then, older brothers or sisters might function as arbitrators or confidants. In some families, certain kinds of problems were either repressed or referred. For example, financial problems might be brought up with parents, problems about sex and maturation might be discussed with older siblings and the peer group, occupational-educational matters were referred to the public-school teacher, while problems concerning self and identity were simply repressed.

The most distinctive characteristic of Japanese family interaction was, and still remains, the absence of prolonged verbal exchanges. Although some of the common strategies to gain support through manipulation or cajoling were present, very few problems were resolved through open discussion between parents and children. Instead, arguments were one-sided, and most Nisei can remember the phrase da matte oore (Keep quiet) that concluded them. Verbalization, talking out, and mutual discussion were actively discouraged.

The pattern of nonverbalization was probably set very early and often arose from the characteristic use of “prescriptive” rather than “motivational” statements. By this we mean that an Issel would say, “Here are your eggs; eat them,” in contrast to the more typical American motivational question that would set off a verbal exchange. The American mother says, “Johnny, do you want eggs? How do you want them? Oh, please, you know eggs are good for you. If you love me you’ll eat eggs,” and finally, with rising anger, “Here are your eggs; eat them.” As exasperating as these exchanges might be at the level of the breakfast table, they provide a footing for future discussion of more serious problems. Such a foundation is not available in many Japanese families.

The more serious family problems—illness, delinquency, and so forth—often required help from outside sources. These sources were almost always—following the interdependent community structure—the extended family, fellow Ken members, or professionals from within the ethnic community. The Issel family used outside specialists very seldom, and when obliged to, preferred a Japanese to a ha-kur-jin (white man). In general, the community was adequate to deal with most problems. A Nisei remembers how an instance of delinquency was handled in the 1930s:

I knew these two brothers who were pretty wild. They would get drunk ... were always fighting, always in trouble and were uncontrollable. Finally, their father came to talk to my father and other Japanese families in the neighborhood: ... all agreed that these boys would hurt the reputation of the other Japanese and provide poor models for the younger boys ... so even though the brothers were already young adults and out of high school, they were sent back to Japan in 1937. As far as I know, they never came back to the United States.14

Kitano, private interviews.