

“Shin-Issei,” The New Face of Japanese Overseas Community in Los Angeles: an Ethnographical Examination

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Introduction

Today, it is very easy to find Japanese products, food, and culture outside of Japan, and to take them for granted. Seeing so many Japanese people and aspects of Japan abroad raises questions about what it means to be Japanese and what defines Japan. Considering these questions, this paper examines the Los Angeles region specifically, because there is a large Japanese immigrant presence, and Japanese culture, food, language, and pop-culture have flourished there. More than hundred years ago till now, Japanese people have immigrated to the United States and Los Angeles in particular for a variety of different purposes. The Japanese presence in Los Angeles today is in part due to a long history of older Japanese immigrants coming to settle in Los Angeles in the early 20th century. In the post-World War II era of the 1960's new waves of Japanese immigrants moved abroad, and to this day they continue to arrive. These immigrants were closely linked to transnational economic expansion of Japanese industries abroad, and many were sent as family units to establish or support international branches of large Japanese companies. In the Japanese language, these post-war first-generation New Japanese living in the United States are referred to as “Shin-Issei,” the new first generation.

This paper will examine what the contemporary Japanese community in Los Angeles looks like, its characteristics, and why they are labeled as new Japanese. In the context of immigration, the first-generation experience and distinguishing between old and contemporary immigrants are significant points. Despite all Japanese Americans coming from Japan, the purpose of each individual's immigration story differs widely, and in order to understand their purpose, backstories, and the challenges they faced, ethnographical research plays an important role. By hearing their stories many facets of the immigrant experience are revealed.

This study will first explain the value of ethnographical research, and the theoretical framework used to analyze modern immigration patterns that new Japanese immigrants fall under. Next, I will explain the comparative characteristics of old versus new Japanese immigrants, going into more detail on my observations of new Japanese immigrants, why they are in the United States, and what types of lives they lead. Thirdly, the paper will shift to an in-depth analysis of what the ethnic community specifically means to new Japanese immigrants and the significance in relation to immigration patterns. I use a brief comparative examination of recent Korean immigrants to highlight similarities in modern immigration patterns.

Applying ethnographic field research from observations and interactions within the new Japanese community in Los Angeles, this paper will conceptualize the new face of Japanese community outside Japan and demonstrate the importance of localized historical and ethnographic research to immigration studies.

Ethnographic Field Research Methodology

Simply put, ethnography is a study of culture, acquiring an understanding of the internal workings of a group of people, and then interpreting and presenting those findings for an audience external to that group. Maanen (2011) explains culture as:

In current fashionable form, culture refers to the knowledge members (“natives”) of a given group are through to more or less share, knowledge of the sort that is said to inform, embed, shape, and account for the routine and not-so-routine

activities of the members of the culture (p. 3).

In order to gain a deep understanding of a given culture, it is necessary for an ethnographer to undertake fieldwork to witness moments where aspects of culture are shown, and learn the significance for the individuals involved. By going inside the field research subject area, an ethnographical methodology provides a way for outsiders to learn how the subject appears from both macro and micro perspectives, how a community functions, how individual members live and identify themselves in relation to their group, and much more.

Thus, to understand what the ethnic community and enclave mean for new Japanese immigrants and visitors in the United States, it is important to observe the community as a whole and listen to members of the community first-hand. First-generation immigrants especially possess unique and distinct experiences and qualities based on their strong connections to motherland culture, so their views must be analyzed carefully. Examining existing immigration studies and applying supplemental ethnographical research, allows us to understand who the new Japanese people are and what their community looks like. Considering the new Japanese case in comparison to older immigration patterns, helps reveal important nuances of the community and how their case is exceptional in many ways. For my fieldwork, I sought to understand the individual stories, of what reasons drove them to come to Los Angeles, whether those reasons were fulfilled, and how they choose to live in the United States.

This study focuses on Los Angeles, a very interesting focal point for Japanese immigration studies. According to the U.S. Census 2017 estimates (in LA Almanac, 2018), Los Angeles County's population was 14% Asian, of which 141,059 (8.4% of Asian category) were Japanese. Yamashita (in Pooch, 2016) categorizes Los Angeles as a prototype of a modern global city, with immigration from Asia and Latin America tying it directly to processes of globalization. Los Angeles has a long history of immigration which allows us to observe and understand how Japanese immigration has changed over time due to historical context. In this manner, it is possible to see many differences, both in reasons for immigration and how their immigrant experiences are played out in new lifestyles and choices. The Sawtelle neighborhood in Los Angeles was the primary location where I used qualitative ethnographical field research to observe how the new Japanese community presents itself and what happens within it. In Los Angeles, this neighborhood is known as "Little Osaka." In central Los Angeles, there is the more historical Little Tokyo Japantown. Both Japanese communities, Little Tokyo and the Sawtelle Japantown contain Japanese ethnic markets, cultural centers, services, and offer educational services related to Japanese culture and Japanese language, etc. However, the difference between Little Tokyo and Sawtelle is that the Sawtelle area reflects much more contemporary Japanese culture compared to Little Tokyo, which generally reflects the long history of first wave Japanese immigrants that arrived in the early 1900's. For example, the Japanese American museum in Little Tokyo is an important symbolic historical site that represents and seeks to educate about the time periods that span early Japanese immigration to the United States; their stories and struggles, especially amid and after World War II, and the stories of Japanese individuals and communities that arose in the area throughout its history.

As a graduate student in Los Angeles, I spent four years living near the Sawtelle Japantown, and I was considered a member of this new Japanese community, visiting many times for work and meeting many individuals and families that shared their stories with me. Beyond interacting with the community at large, in-person interviews and interactions provided me with personal accounts of individual New Japanese immigrants. I met many people who were related to Japan, ranging widely from children, young millennial students, middle-age working parents, and elderly individuals, all with different purposes and affiliations to Japan, such as school, work, interest, heritage and non-heritage. Despite all interviewees being related to Japan, each individual possessed different values and ways of thinking about Japan. Most of these individuals were contacted through snowball sampling, also known as chain or network sampling, the most common form of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). This research is draws from data collected from 2013–2015, and several brief visits in 2019. Being from Japan and speaking Japanese helped me learn immensely, as most of the new Japanese I met were first generation immigrants who preferred to speak Japanese over English, many having limited English language ability. Having face-to-face interviews helped ground my

research and develop a deeper understanding for more in-depth study of their lifestyles, experiences, and motivations.

Theoretical Framework: Modern Immigration Considerations

Before going into detail about new Japanese immigrants, it is first helpful to consider the context of their experiences. The theoretical frameworks of older immigration studies, such as those related to the original pre-war Japanese immigrants, are less applicable to modern immigration patterns, and these should first be introduced. To start, the traditional economic push and pull theory posits that people migrate to a new host country for specific reasons. This can be from push factors that force people to leave their homeland, or pull factors that attract them to seek a better way of life abroad. For instance, these can include the pursuit of a better standard of living or specific economic opportunities, to escape political or religious persecution, etc. However, modern waves of migration have changed dramatically, and it has become even less valid to summarize groups of immigrants to a single historical event, type of immigration pattern, or experience. New Japanese immigrants in Sawtelle evidence new lifestyles and personal motivations that have arisen in contemporary immigration: cultural purposes, specialized field opportunities, the pursuit of aspirations and dreams such as to be singers, dancers, actors, fluent in English, and so forth. Clearly, compared to the first Japanese immigrants, these contemporary Japanese migrants are different and this phenomenon can also be applied to other countries where older waves of immigrants left their motherland primarily due to poor historical economic or social conditions. In this consideration, patterns of contemporary immigration no longer fit those applied decades or centuries ago. As it has become easier to travel, and conditions in many countries have improved, newer generations of immigrants have more varied reasons for going abroad, linked more closely to personal interests and ambitions than macro national concerns.

Globalization and transnationalism are two connected subjects that play important roles in order to conceptualize and explain modern immigrant experiences, such as those of the new Japanese community. Globalization refers to the process that encompasses growing international flows, including political, economic, social, and cultural values simultaneously. The rapid growth of communication and information technologies provides easy and instantaneous access for new immigrants to connect with their motherland. Information, news, and media can be shared internationally very easily and casually. Additionally, the affordability and relative ease of international travel and shipping allows people to visit their motherland frequently and stay connected with family and friend networks there. Giddens (1990) explains globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa,” a notion that is directly applicable to the Japanese community in Los Angeles (p. 64). Adding to globalization theory, Kearny connects transnationalism as “[Overlapping] globalization but typically has a more limited purview. Where global processes are largely decentered from specific national territories and take place in global space, transnational processes are anchored in and transcend one or more nation-state.” (1995, p. 218). More granularly, the transnational term was “originally widely used to describe corporate structures with established organizational bases in more than one state, has also been applied to movements and linkages of people, ideas, goods, beliefs, values, and capital across national borders” (Adachi, 2006, p. 3). In a comparative study, Li (2009) applied transnationalism and globalization to Chinese immigrant groups of the San Gabriel community outside Los Angeles, finding that whereas traditional immigration patterns led toward immigrant assimilation into their host society, transnational migrants keep close ties to both their origin and destination countries. Li (2009) posited that there are three dimensions to transnationalism, economic, political, and sociocultural. Economic aspects include remittances to relatives in the homeland, individual and large corporate transactions and flows of capital. Political transnationalism relates to citizenship, governmental and organizational flows that cross national boundaries. Lastly, sociocultural transnationalism is the area most relevant to this research area, the notions of belonging, identity, and how immigrants choose to live in relation to their motherland and new homeland. Transnationalism allows us to perceive how immigrant lives can simultaneously coexist and transition between two different nations, their motherland and new country, and how globalization influences their sense of self-identification as well.

Old Japanese Settlement in the United States

Before examining new Japanese, it's instructive to briefly compare their situation to that of the old, earlier waves of Japanese immigration in the United States. Because of the rich history of Japanese migration to the United States in Hawaii and the West Coast, California in particular, there is a diverse history of Japanese immigration extending back over the past century. In the early 1900's Japanese arrived to the United States primarily as manual laborers, meant to replace earlier Chinese immigrant laborers, and many found their own successes in West Coast agriculture. In Japanese, these original Japanese immigrants are referred to as "issei," or first generation of Japanese coming to America. However, the U.S. government ended Japanese immigration with the Immigration Act of 1924. Because all significant Japanese immigration ended at the same period, Japanese Americans became unique in that their generational divides all follow the same periods. Japanese terms for generations, "issei, nisei, sansei, yonsei..." or first, second, third, fourth, become significant because they imply both generational and historical context. These Japanese words are widely used within the Japanese American community, usually in reference to their cultural and ethnic identity. For the early generations, prejudice, racism, and fear of "yellow peril" created tightly bound ethnic solidarity in small communities and Japantowns. As a result of negative mainstream sentiment and bans on further immigration, Japanese Americans became largely stranded and disconnected from their homeland, and also segregated from mainstream America (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). During World War II, Japanese Americans, made up mostly of the first three generations, were suspected as traitors to America and sent to internment camps. Yet, at the same time youths were conscripted to serve in the American army, and many volunteered in an effort to prove their loyalty to their new homeland. Their struggles and persecution within America has become a salient part of their history (Nishi & Kim, 1964). Today, many descendants of the original Japanese American communities are already transitioning to the fifth generation and are increasingly assimilating toward mainstream American culture and lifestyle.

New Japanese

It wasn't until the Immigration Act of 1964 repealed immigration quota restrictions that new Japanese immigrants were able to come to the United States in number. In Japanese language terminology, the members of the first generation of these new Japanese immigrants are called "shin-issei," and their American born second generation children are "shin-nisei." Like older Japanese immigrants they use the same generations terms, but the prefix "shin" means new in Japanese. Because of the dramatic time difference from the initial wave of Japanese immigration at the turn of the 1900's and 1960's the terms "old" and "new" are used to distinguish the two groups. During the 1960's the Japanese economy grew drastically and many Japanese companies started to expand internationally. Setting up their branches outside of Japan was extremely important to capture the international market (Adachi, 2006). Globalization and a strong economy were the two major factors driving this growth. For instance, from the 1950's to the 1960's Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles County doubled from 36,761 to 77,314 (Nishi & Kim, 1964). Many of these new immigrants settled into established Japanese communities like that of Little Tokyo, in central Los Angeles. New Japanese immigrants preferred to live near ethnic centers due to the convenience of interacting within their language and culture group, and many who came as part of Japanese corporate expansions were afforded accommodations and an ethnic community centered around their workplace. Despite experiencing mainstream acceptance compared to the original pre-war immigrants, I found that most new Japanese still prefer to interact within their own ethnic community. many of the contemporary new Japanese immigrants display the characteristics of cultural migrants. They are youths who leave Japan seeking to pursue aspirations in art, modeling, media, and entertainment industries in U.S. pop-culture capitals such as New York and Los Angeles. Los Angeles is quite popular due to its central proximity to the United States media and pop-culture industries. Furthermore, it contains iconic name-brand neighborhoods like Hollywood, and Beverley Hills, schools like UCLA and USC, and famous sports teams. Some new Japanese cultural migrants simply seek to capture their own notions of the "American lifestyle" they see in American and Japanese pop-culture. These cultural migrants are characteristic of contemporary migrants, who are drawn from a highly networked global society, where media has largely

shaped their views and desires to live abroad.

Not surprisingly, many of the cultural migrants I met found their American dream not entirely what they expected. For instance, despite attending community college and learning English, many felt uncomfortable operating within mainstream America, preferring to associate and stay largely within shin-issei centered communities, speaking in Japanese, and interacting as they would in Japan. From my interviews, I found that New Japanese do not have to assimilate fully to be American and in fact most choose to self-identify simply as Japanese living in the States, rather than Japanese American, or American. For contemporary new migrants like new Japanese, rather than choosing to assimilate to their host society, they tend to live within a diaspora community of their motherland, eating the same foods, and displaying the same culture and social norms similar to their motherland, rather than adapting to host society culture. This is a critical point in order to understand contemporary immigrants, who have strong transnational and globalized ties between their motherland and host country. Goodman, Peach, Takenaka & White (2005) explains such new Japanese communities outside Japan as:

The encapsulation and isolation of Japanese migrants within their host cities and countries. The creation of a series of Japanese cultural and social landscapes in cities in various parts of the world enables migrants to remain within a Japanese social milieu, operating according to rules and expectations that are familiar from Tokyo, Nagoya or Osaka (p. 9).

Based on ethnographical observation of the Sawtelle Japantown, it can be argued that the ethnic community is essential for the maintenance of a Japanese identity outside Japan.

Especially in the West LA. Sawtelle area, Japanese businesses have strong globalized and transnational atmosphere, displaying the same types of advertisements, services, products, and brands found in Japan. These supermarkets and businesses cater directly to the needs of the new Japanese within this community, and it is common to find Japanese employees speaking Japanese, and advertisements and storefronts with signs in Japanese. One can obtain information from Japan very easily by interacting with others in the new Japanese community, reading Japanese language newspapers, watching live Japanese TV shows, etc. Rapid globalization and the modern information-based society plays a strong role in how the new Japanese community is able to preserve and maintain a contemporary Japanese culture, despite living abroad in Los Angeles for extended periods of time. In a different way, new Japanese can say that they are living in the United States, but they obtain live information from Japan through news, media, and communications with family and friends, so they can also feel that Japan is still close and relevant to them. As mentioned, new Japanese are mostly from middle class backgrounds, and have both the desire and means to travel back to Japan on a yearly basis or even more frequently. Most shin-issei parents I met expressed a desire for their shin-nisei children to speak Japanese and have long-distance relationships with their grandparents in Japan. I found that the ability to maintain such international ties with relative ease was a core part of shin-issei ethnic attachment and self-identification as Japanese over American. Because they are not forced to assimilate into the American mainstream, they mostly choose to identify simply as Japanese living abroad, even those who have lived for multiple decades in the United States.

It is important to recognize that the old Japanese communities established more than hundred years ago migrated by ship and were largely cut off from Japan, and it was economically and technologically inconceivable to maintain such strong ties to their homeland during that time period. These groups did seek to preserve the Japanese culture they knew, but in many ways their conception of Japan was frozen in time from when they departed for America. Some new Japanese mentioned how old Japanese immigrants are now in their fourth, fifth, and sixth generations in America, and they do not speak Japanese or operate in Japanese cultural norms, evidencing divisions between new and old Japanese immigrants. Clearly, having been prohibitively cut off from replenishment of their ethnic community by immigration laws, and assimilating towards the American mainstream old Japanese immigrant culture has diverged drastically from that of Japan.

Koreans in Los Angeles

As a brief comparative example, Los Angeles' Koreatown neighborhood offers a glimpse of another contemporary ethnic community that can be studied to further understand modern immigration patterns and ethnic communities. Examining both Koreatown and the Sawtelle Japantown illustrates the importance of the ethnic community to its constituents. In the 1970's Korean immigration to the United States grew rapidly, and by the early 1980's Korean grew to become a major ethnic immigrant group in the United States, Los Angeles in particular. According to 2017 U.S. Census estimates (in LA Almanac, 2018) Koreans made up 13.95% of the Los Angeles County Asian population, comparatively Japanese accounted for 8.4%. Koreatown offers more than a superficial image of Korea, it's an immersive community experience where Korean culture, language, foods, and goods are pervasive. Colin (2015), having lived in both Koreatown and Seoul, Korea, states, "You could live an entire life in Koreatown ignoring that you were otherwise surrounded by the rest of Los Angeles and the United States of America. Indeed, some of Koreatown's older residents have managed to do just that for decades" (p. 17). This powerful statement is critical in order to understand the uniqueness of contemporary immigrant communities in Los Angeles. The size and recent makeup of the Los Angeles Koreatown, which is much larger than either Little Osaka or Little Tokyo, is essential to it being able to better support its constituent community. Still, both areas provide important resources and homeland information to their respective immigrant communities.

Like Los Angeles' new Korean community, new Japanese are not lacking in class resources, many are educated, from middle class backgrounds, and have some English ability. Yet, they lack social capital or networks that can help enable their success in comparison with established mainstream American families. The ethnic community therefore is a niche in which they can leverage social and cultural capital tied to their backgrounds as recent immigrants. Within the Koreatown ethnic community, the Korean immigrant entrepreneurship pattern focuses on small-scale shops providing services that support and are dependent on their surrounding community. Such patterns develop co-dependence between business owners and their communities, developing ethnic interactions, attachment, and solidarity, and resulting in a more tightly knit community. Koreatown and the Sawtelle Japantown are not just about consumer goods and services, they have also become key sociocultural gathering points. However, it should be noted that there are side-effects to reliance and dependence within the ethnic community. Min & Bozorgmehr (2000) point out that pervasive Korean entrepreneurship and middle-man business patterns led to many inter-group conflicts with other racial groups, such as during the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Globalization and transnationalism are also readily apparent in the form and function of modern ethnic communities. Min & Bozorgmehr (2000) noted that "In the post-1965 era, the ethnic media have played an important role in integrating geographically dispersed immigrants by keeping them informed of what is going on in the home country and in the local community (p. 719)." Like Korean media consumed by new immigrants in Koreatown, Japanese media content is almost always created from the motherland and broadcast abroad. Importantly, it is not a recreation or replacement for ethnic culture, but the same media that informs modern culture in their motherland, creating invaluable linkages to ethnic communities abroad. Media linkages are also bi-directional though, and cultural migrants inspired by American media can be seen in both Los Angeles' Koreatown and the Sawtelle Japantown. Colin (2015) explains how contemporary Koreans who have never lived in the United States "... don't need to dream to come to California, the California dreams has come to them" (p.18). In major Korean cities like Seoul, one can find strong consumerism for American branded goods, clothing that names Los Angeles and its neighborhoods, schools, and sports teams. These goods are extremely popular, but they only offer a superficial level of transnational cultural exchange, based solely on pop culture imagery that appeals to Korean youths. Akin to the new Japanese cultural migrants I met, whose imagery of the American lifestyle was not quite what they found for themselves in America, directional transnational ties can have varied levels of authenticity and meaningfulness. Yet, for new Korean and Japanese immigrants who have pre-existing strong connections to their homeland, these ties have significant depth and effects in their lives abroad.

Conclusion

In immigration studies, it is important to consider the contextual time differences in waves of immigrant groups, comparing historical, political, economic and social background factors specific to that time period. Older immigration studies have focused on assimilation, adaptation, and acculturation from an immigrant's motherland toward the mainstream of their new host country. It was previously thought that these processes were inevitable and essential toward economic and social success in an immigrant's new homeland. Perhaps at the macro generational level, this still holds truth, but contemporary migration patterns are quite different. Looking at the new waves of Japanese immigration and differentiating between old and new arrivals, this study evidences how modern information based societies, globalization, and transnationalism have significantly disrupted old presumptions about immigration patterns. For instance, new Japanese migrants are substantially different from pre-World War II Japanese immigrants in terms of their education, economic background, and acceptance in American society. Socioeconomically, new Japanese immigrants are well educated, middle-class individuals and do not seek wealth or to escape poverty as they once did in the early 1900's. At a high level, new Japanese immigrants are characterized by higher class and ethnic resources than their predecessors and they maintain strong ties to Japan, communicating with and traveling to and from their motherland frequently. Most new Japanese I met did not label themselves as Americans or even Japanese Americans, despite living in America many years, preferring to take labels such as "Japanese living in America." I posit that modern globalization and transnationalism allows them to maintain a Japanese identity and provides opportunities for them to largely bypass assimilation, should they choose to do so. These processes are readily apparent in the ethnic community, where they have physical manifestations in businesses and community services, and also in non-physical ethnic support networks, information sharing, and relationships that span international boundaries. Similarly, Min & Bozorgmehr (2000) found that ethnic business and the ethnic community provide opportunity structure, and group resources which helped new immigrants create a new pattern of belongingness after arriving to the United States. Transnationalism is key to understanding identity and whether modern groups of immigrants actually disconnect from their motherland or choose to live between multiple countries simultaneously.

This study first examined the old and new Japanese communities and briefly touched on the Korean ethnic community as a comparative example. This phenomenon can further be applied in detail to differences in old vs new immigrant groups like Chinese and Koreans in particular, as Li (2009) and Min & Bozorgmehr (2000) have respectively shown. Where ethnic groups like East Asians have a long history of immigration to the United States, depending on the historical economic and social differences, first wave immigrants may provide and create a foundation for immigrants to assimilate to the new life in the United States. Later on, new waves of immigrants can supplant or form their own communities with greater ease, based on the help of established community resources this can result in a chain network. For further research, the adaptation and recreation of old versus new immigrant patterns and comparative studies can be applied to other ethnic groups and communities to explore the effects and significance of contextual historical factors.

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