

## *The Canadian Sansei*

Tomoko Makabe

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By Midge Ayukawa, *Victoria*

THE UNIQUE PAST of the Japanese Canadian ethnic community, one of the smallest groups in Canada, meant an extremely abrupt Canadianization for the Sansei (third generation). According to Tomoko Makabe, the Sansei "have long lost their connectedness to each other and to their community" (175). In *The Canadian Sansei*, Makabe attributes this, as well as the greater than 90 per cent rate of marriages outside the Japanese community, to the expulsion of the Japanese from the West Coast, their internment during the Second World War, and their subsequent scattering across Canada. For over twenty years, the author, a post-Second World War immigrant from Japan who received her PhD from the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto, has studied the Japanese in Canada.

Makabe's first book, *Picture Brides: Japanese Women in Canada* (1983), was an impressive in-depth study of five women based on oral interviews and research of home villages. Her PhD dissertation on the Nisei (second generation, the Canadian-born) and this book lack the quality of *Picture Brides*. Perhaps as a postwar immigrant and "outsider," she has difficulties in understanding the prewar upbringing of the Nisei and the circumstances that formulated their later behaviour.

*The Canadian Sansei* is a sociological study based on interviews conducted in 1992 and 1993 with sixty-

four Sansei (thirty-six men and twenty-eight women) randomly drawn from over 600 referrals. Although Sansei were born as early as 1925 and as late as 1975, Makabe's subjects were between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-two; that is, they were born between 1940 and 1968. Her interviewees included people whose parents had not spent their whole lives in Canada; those who had one parent born or educated in Japan; and parents who had spent about a decade in Japan after having been "repatriated" in 1946. With 600 subjects to choose from, Makabe should have been more selective and chosen those whose parents had spent their whole lives in Canada.

Makabe claims that the Nisei were "acculturated to Canadian society" (20). But my doctoral dissertation research and personal experience refute this. Even among Nisei who spent all their formative years in Canada there are variations in attitudes, depending, in part, on the decade in which they were born, the communities in which they grew up, and the degree to which their Issei parents accepted mainstream customs. Many Nisei were intentionally inculcated with Japanese culture and morals so that they might survive the racist atmosphere of the day, when young men and their fathers were forced to work at menial labouring jobs or seek work within the Japanese community. In the latter case, a thorough knowledge of Japanese language and customs was a necessity. Moreover, parents felt that pride in their

Japanese heritage would help their children survive the impact of racial slurs and discrimination in movie houses and other public places.

This pride of heritage that was instilled in the Nisei was obviously inherent in the way they raised their children, the Sansei. This is clearly indicated in statements such as: "I felt that I'm better than the next guy, just because I'm Japanese. That is the way I was brought up. My sense of pride comes from [the fact] that I try to do things harder and better than others" (96).

Makabe's statement that the wartime expulsion from the West Coast had destroyed the communities and had led to the abrupt "Canadianization" of the third generation is valid. The Japanese community was destroyed, and the Issei (first generation, the immigrants) who had controlled the former communities were too old to start again and had lost their power bases. The Nisei were now the nurturers, the leaders. They had the education, the English language skills, and the drive to establish themselves in a new locale. They were no longer restricted to ethnic communities, and all professions were finally within their reach.

Many Nisei moved into the suburbs, the growth of which was rampant in the postwar years. Makabe states:

Although [the Nisei] interact freely with non-Japanese colleagues and neighbours, they have not yet opted for extensive social participation outside the ethnic-group boundary ... nor have they achieved intimate social contact with the white middle class they emulate; they do not get invited to their homes for dinner ... [n]or do they feel at ease in inviting

white folks to their homes for social evenings. (122)

As a Nisei who raised five children in a suburban neighbourhood, and who, along with many other Nisei, did have close social and working relationships with the mainstream community, I must challenge Makabe's statement.

Some of the Sansei claimed that they had never encountered racism and had never felt different from White Canadians. To say that they had never been conscious of being "different" may be overstatement or denial. There can be no doubt that they realized it early in their childhood. Certainly *my* children did. However, it was not as traumatic an experience for them as it had been for their parents because the hatred that was prevalent in the prewar days was absent. Perhaps more sensitive questioning may have brought this out.

Makabe refers to the part of the 1988 redress settlement that consisted of a \$12-million fund to "rebuild the community." It has been a daunting task. As Makabe notes, "the lack of interest fostered by the vigorous pursuit of assimilation over the decades makes such efforts extremely strenuous, if not futile," and "the ethnic cultural heritage [needs] to be fostered and reshaped by fellow Canadians at large" (179-80). Nevertheless, it is necessary that this be done, since there is no doubt that the Sansei and their offspring will seek information on their "lost" heritage as they mature. In fact, the young twenty-five-year-old who said, "I'm Canadian, I wouldn't consider myself to be a Japanese Canadian ... I have no Japanese-Canadian friends to associate with. My boy-friend doesn't notice that I'm Japanese," has already done so. I happen to know she travelled to Japan and was most impressed.