

NEGOTIATING THE BOUNDARIES OF RACE AND CLASS:

Meiji Diplomatic Responses to North American Categories of Exclusion

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WHEN NAKAHARA HADATARO, a young labour emigrant from the coal-mining region of Chikujō-gun in Fukuoka-ken, obtained his passport permitting him to travel to North America in 1906, he also received an official notice from the governor of his prefecture admonishing him not to forget that he was a subject of the Japanese Empire and to avoid leaving anyone in any foreign nation to which he travelled with a “shameful impression” of Japan. His only purpose in “traveling ten thousand miles across the rough waves to a distant foreign land,” the notice instructed him, was to work hard and to earn enough to ensure the welfare of his family in Japan.¹ Like others categorized as *dekasegi* labourers by the Meiji government, Nakahara was also instructed to be honest with his employer, to avoid any impulse to be rude or to gamble, to obey the laws of any country he visited, and to look after his health while he was abroad.²

¹ United States, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, series A, Subject Correspondence files, part 1, Asian Immigration and Exclusion, 1906-13, microfiche no. A8555 (30 reels) (US Immigration Bureau); Report of Marcus Braun, US Immigrant Inspector, 12 February 1907 (Braun Report), exhibits; Notice from governor of Fukuoka-ken to Nakahara Hadataro, Tsuiki-machi, Chikujō-gun, 27 November 1906 (translated by the author).

² Braun Report, exhibits; Notice from governor of Fukuoka-ken to Nakahara Hadataro, Tsuiki-machi, Chikujō-gun, 27 November 1906. The notice offered six specific proscriptions:

1. Remember that you are a citizen of the Japanese Empire and do not leave a shameful impression in a foreign country;
2. Control yourself and avoid the temptation to neglect your work or to gamble, drink, etc.;
3. Be honest with your employer and avoid any impulse to be rude or aggressive;
4. Be friendly with your colleagues and avoid being drawn into any fights or arguments;
5. Working hard and saving your money should be your main concerns; do not fritter your money away as soon as you accumulate a little;
6. Be careful about your health and maintain your physical well-being.

Other prefectural governors sent similar notices to emigrants. For example, a notice issued on 3 October 1893 by Nabeshima Miki, the governor of Hiroshima-ken, to an emigrant going to Hawaii, is similar except that it refers specifically to Hawaii and omits the admonitions not

Acutely conscious of the way Japanese were perceived in North America at a time when both Canada and the United States were engaged in parallel efforts to racialize their borders, Meiji leaders were particularly concerned that Japanese emigrants not create an impression that might undermine Japan's status as a modern and civilized nation equal to those of Europe and North America. Meiji officials were firmly convinced that the tremendous effort Japan had made, since the start of the Meiji era in 1868, to restructure its economic, social, and political institutions based on Western models set the country apart from other Asian nations. Britain's rescission of its unequal treaty with Japan in 1894 and Japan's victories in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 were proof – in their view – of the progress Japan had made and demonstrated that Japanese subjects should, in principle, be treated in the same way as were citizens of any Western nation when they were travelling abroad. In 1902, for example, the lawyer retained by the Meiji government to represent Japan's interests before the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration articulated Japan's position as follows: "As a people the Japanese have made great strides in civilization; or rather, they have always been a civilized people, but have improved their civilization ... they have adopted the methods of European powers; their course in the last few years has been one of extraordinary and gratifying progress; they are accredited to all civilized powers."³

Meiji government leaders had viewed the abolition of historical class and caste categories as a crucial element in redefining Japan as a modern, non-feudal nation. The same was true of their 1884 decision to relax the bar that had existed until then on labour emigration. Old assumptions about the meaning of class and caste differences persisted, however, with the result that labour emigrants often appeared to Meiji diplomats to pose a threat to Japan's image as a modern, civilized nation. Drawn largely from rural areas that had yet to embrace new cultural forms imported from the West and that were familiar to those living in larger cities, labour emigrants were often unacquainted with Western ways. Meiji diplomats thus worried that these emigrants were not sufficiently "modern." Also relevant, however, is the fact that they perceived their

to forget that he is a subject of the Japanese Empire and not to leave a shameful impression. See Yukiko Kimura, *Issei: Japanese Immigrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 5. *Dekasegi* is written with the characters *de* (to go out) and *kasegi* (to labour or work for one's living). It was used to refer both to itinerant labourers in Japan and to emigrant labourers who went abroad during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

³ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, 1902* (Ottawa: S.E. Dawson, Printer to the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1902); Edward VII, sessional paper no. 54, A.1902, 402, "Address of Mr. R. Cassidy, K.C., on Behalf of the Japanese."

own emigrants as deriving, at least in part, from what were historically Japan's lower classes. As early as 1891, for example, the Japanese consul in San Francisco had warned his government that "the continuation of the mass migration of lower class Japanese ... will undoubtedly create a grave situation in the relationship between Japanese and Americans in this country which, sooner or later, will adversely affect the honor and reputation not only of the Japanese in this country but also of those in Japan."⁴

The Meiji government endeavoured to address this perceived problem in a variety of ways, developing a range of strategies and arguments intended to counter what it feared would be negative perceptions of Japanese emigrants among North Americans and monitoring the historical class status of those to whom passports were issued.⁵ Embedded in the remarks of Meiji diplomats and other Japanese leaders was the persistent notion that those who were the object of prejudice were themselves primarily responsible for it. Partly an extension of traditional class attitudes towards what were historically Japan's lower classes, and partly a consequence of accepting Western culture as the model of "civilization," Meiji officials criticized not white racism but, rather, the appearance and behaviour of Japanese emigrants, which they claimed gave rise to that prejudice.⁶ The notion that the emigrants them-

⁴ Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa, *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980), 14-15, quoting Official Dispatch No. 6 from Chosul Chinda Sutemi to Foreign Minister Aoki Shuzo, 25 April 1891. Others have also noted the Meiji government's concern about the appearance and character of its emigrants. See, for example, Mitziko Sawada, "Culprits and Gentlemen: Meiji Japan's Restrictions of Emigrants to the United States, 1891-1909," *Pacific Historical Review* 60, no. 3 (1991): 339-359, noting the Meiji government's concern that "the character of the Japanese abroad will be taken as an index of the character of the nation at home" and its fear that those emigrating were not "the right kind of people."

⁵ Although historical class categories were abolished in Japan in the 1870s, the persistence and continued resonance of such social classifications in the minds of Meiji officials is reflected in the official practice, which continued into the twentieth century, of recording the historic occupation of the bearer's family on passports. See, for example, US Immigration Bureau, US Ambassador O'Brien, Tokyo, Japan, to US Department of State, Washington, DC, 9 March 1908. See also P.A. Jay, US Embassy, Tokyo, Japan, notes regarding the conference with Mr. Ishii, Foreign Office, Tokyo, Japan, enclosed with Dispatch No. 231 from Ambassador O'Brien, Tokyo, Japan, to US Department of State, Washington, DC, 10 March 1908. See also Yamato Ichihashi, *Japanese in the United States: A Critical Study of the Problems of the Japanese Immigrants and Their Children* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1932), which notes that occupations listed on Japanese passports were not so much intended to indicate what occupations their holders intended to pursue once they arrived in North America as they were to "indicate from what classes the Japanese immigrants were drawn" (67).

⁶ See, for example, Donald Teruo Hata, Jr., "Undesirables: Unsavory Elements among the Japanese in America Prior to 1893 and Their Influence on the first Anti-Japanese Movement in California" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1970), 127, citing circular from foreign ministry to prefectural governors of Kanagawa, Hyogo, Osaka, Nagasaki, and Niigata,

selves were the primary cause of anti-Japanese prejudice in the North American West, and that class-based differences between “lower-class” Japanese and upper-class Japanese, which they believed themselves to be, explained white racism, informed the attitudes of Japanese leaders for a number of decades. As late as 1914, for example, Kahei Otani, a former member of the House of Peers, blamed anti-Asian prejudice solely on those Japanese in North America whom he characterized as lower class:

Only the lowest section of the Japanese are being discriminated against or excluded in America. The more respectable classes of Japanese are well treated and respected by Americans. It is a striking illustration of this fact that there has been no anti-Japanese movement in Chicago or New York. In California and other Pacific coast states only has unfriendliness been shown toward our people. This is because many Japanese in those regions are unworthy.⁷

What Meiji officials did not immediately realize was the extent to which anti-Japanese elements understood and would be able to use for their own purposes both Meiji government concerns that their own labour emigrants did not adequately represent a newly modernized Japan and the class-based distinction Meiji officials drew between themselves and *dekasegi* labourers.⁸ In 1893, for example, Vancouver’s *Daily News-Advertiser* embraced precisely this distinction when it told its readers that “lower class Japanese are by no means . . . desirable settlers . . . [t]hey stand in a wholly different position from that occupied by the intelligent Japanese of the middle and higher classes.”⁹ A report prepared by US immigration commissioner W.M. Rice in 1899 likewise accepted

15 September 1891, Nihon Gaimushō, *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho* (order directing prefectural governors to restrict contract-based labour emigration and to notify emigrants that they should be careful about their appearance so as not to become the object of criticism when they were abroad).

⁷ Kahei Otani, “America and Japan Always Friends,” in *Japan’s Message to America: A Symposium by Representative Japanese on Japan and American-Japanese Relations*, ed. Naoshi Masaoka (Tokyo: 1914), 62–63. Baron Kondo Rempei, a peer and president of the *Nippon Yusen Kaisha*, similarly declared that “the Japanese who go to America generally belong to the lower classes. When they suddenly make their appearance in America, it is no wonder that they do things the Americans do not like” (37).

⁸ Wilson and Hosokawa, *East to America*, 114–15, quoting Official Dispatch No. 6 from Chosul Chinda Sutemi to Foreign Minister Aoki Shuzo, 25 April 1891, reporting that “some publishers of local newspapers have also sensed the trend of public opinion and begun placing in their newspapers rather exaggerated accounts of the recent arrivals of lower class Japanese at this port.”

⁹ Patricia E. Roy, J.L. Granatstein, Masako Iino, and Hiroko Takamura, *Mutual Hostages: Canadians and Japanese during the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 4, quoting *Shokumin kyokai hokoku* [*Reports of the Colonization Society*], 1893–1903.

the contention of Meiji officials that Japan's "immigrating class" was drawn "largely from the lower order."¹⁰ In 1902, the Canadian Royal Commission appointed to investigate Chinese and Japanese immigration incorporated the Rice Report into its own findings. Questions it posed to witnesses addressed areas such as from what classes Chinese and Japanese immigrants were being drawn, "their condition before coming," and their "habits and standard of living in their own country."¹¹ US witnesses invited to appear before the Royal Commission included San Francisco immigration inspector R. Ecclestone, who described Japanese immigrants then arriving in San Francisco as members of "the very lowest class" in Japan. In turn, T.M. Crawford of Portland, Oregon, testified that Japanese immigrants arriving in Oregon were also drawn from "the worst class of the Japanese."¹²

Determined to defend Japan's status as a civilized nation equal to those of the West, the Meiji government was particularly concerned that its citizens not become the object of legislation similar to that found in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was first passed by the United States in 1882.¹³ Meiji consular officials warned their government that failure to restrict the emigration of Japanese they deemed low class threatened to bring down upon Japanese immigrants the same kinds of exclusionary laws that had been imposed on Chinese migrants – laws they attributed not to white racism but to the Chinese themselves (in much the same way that they attributed anti-Japanese prejudice to their own purportedly lower-class migrants). In 1884, for example, the Japanese consul in New York harshly – and unfairly – criticized not the US Congress but Chinese immigrants themselves for the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act:

In seeking ... an answer to the question of why these undesirable Japanese began to arrive suddenly in increasing numbers since two years ago, I have come to a conclusion that these Japanese labourers

¹⁰ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, 1902*, Supplemental Report of W.M. Rice, US Commissioner on Immigration, to Commissioner-General on Immigration, Washington, DC, 2 May 1899 (the Rice Report), 424. Rice added that "a wide line of demarcation exists between this [immigrating] class and the better people."

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 387. Crawford also claimed that the class from which Japanese immigrants were drawn "may be called the coolie class" and described it as a "low type and an ignorant class."

¹³ In January 1907, for example, the Japanese consul general in Hawaii called on F.P. Sargent, US Commissioner General of Immigration, to assure him that "the general policy of his government was opposed to settlement of the mainland of any considerable number of Japanese labourers, such government wishing to avoid conditions regarding Japanese of a character similar to those which had, in 1882 and 1884, brought about the laws excluding the Chinese labourers." See US Immigration Bureau, F.P. Sargent, US Commissioner General of Immigration, to the President of the United States, 2 January 1907.

must have been recruited in Japan and brought to this country to replace the Chinese labourers whose passage to this country was stopped in 1882. It is indeed the ignominious conduct and behaviour of indigent Chinese of inferior character, however, that brought upon the Chinese as a whole the contempt of the Westerners and resulted in an enactment of the legislature to exclude them from the country as in the case of the United States.¹⁴

Newspaper accounts in the North American press that equated Japanese and Chinese exacerbated the fears of Meiji officials that North Americans would fail to distinguish between Japanese and Chinese, the latter being the object both of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States and, after 1885, the head tax in British Columbia.¹⁵

In an effort to persuade North Americans to differentiate between Japanese and Chinese on the one hand, and among Japanese on the other, the Meiji government developed what was essentially a two-pronged argument to counter anti-Japanese prejudice in North America. Rather than attacking racism in the North American West directly, Japanese consular officials invoked historical class differences and appealed to North Americans to distinguish between themselves and the “low-class” migrants whom they regarded as the real object of white hostility. They argued, in effect, that it was not the fact that Japanese labour migrants were Japanese that gave rise to the prejudice against them but, rather, the fact that they were purportedly drawn from what were historically Japan’s lower classes. Having drawn that distinction based on traditional notions of class difference, consular officials then went on to argue that,

¹⁴ Official Dispatch No. 14, Takahashi Shinkichi, Consul of Japan, New York City, to Yoshida Kiyonari, Foreign Minister, February 13, 1884, *Nihon Gaikō Bunsō* 18, 104-11, as quoted in Hata, “Undesirables,” 33.

¹⁵ See, for example, the *San Francisco Call*, 6 May 1892 (declaring that Japanese emigrants were “little better than Chinamen in regard to customs, uses and habits”). Other historians have also noted Meiji diplomats’ concerns that North Americans would fail to distinguish Japanese and Chinese in ways they considered significant. Eiichiro Azuma, in *Between Two Empires: Race, History and Transnationalism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37-38, analyzes arguments to this effect within the context of California. Patricia Roy, in *A White Man’s Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989), 98, argues that efforts made by Japanese diplomats to convince British Columbians that “Japanese were of a ‘different class’ than the Chinese” helped to preserve the impression that the two groups should be treated differently under Canadian law. In this article I seek to contribute to that discussion by considering how internally contradictory elements in these and other arguments advanced by Meiji diplomats ultimately undermined their efforts to favourably position Japanese subjects in North America. I also note the Meiji government’s preoccupation not just with the urban-rural divide but also with the historical class differences that it believed existed between itself and *dekasegi* labourers.

even though Japanese emigrant labourers were of low-class status relative to those like themselves, these same emigrants – as subjects of a modern, imperial nation – were higher in status than were those from nations like China, which had not made the same commitment to modernization as had Japan. Rather than reject anti-Asian prejudice out of hand, in other words, Meiji officials attempted to bridge the racial divide by recasting anti-Japanese sentiment in terms they regarded as more acceptable, invoking both historical class distinctions and Japan's place in what they viewed as a hierarchy of nations based on the relative "progress" each had made towards becoming a modern, industrial nation.¹⁶

The dual nature of the Meiji government's response to white racism is clearly apparent in remarks made by Shimizu Seizaburo, Japanese consul in Vancouver, during his visit to the coal-mining community of Cumberland on Vancouver Island in 1899. Even as Shimizu urged white Canadians not to discriminate against Japanese labourers working in the coal mines in Cumberland, he was at pains to distinguish himself from the coal miners whose working conditions he had come to inspect. "It is generally the lower class of my countrymen who immigrate into this country," Shimizu told a reporter while he was in Cumberland, "and it is hardly fair to judge all of us from a single type."¹⁷ Although Shimizu was willing to concede that white prejudice against Japanese labour migrants who worked in the mines was essentially justified, he also argued that the miners whom he characterized as lower class relative to himself were of a higher status than were migrant labourers from other countries. Shimizu pointed, in particular, to the eight years of compulsory education required in Japan, a policy instituted early in the Meiji period as part of Japan's quest to reconstruct itself as a modern and "civilized" nation as measured by Western standards. Given the focus on education in Japan, he told the reporter, even its lowest classes of labourers were literate, in contrast to those from other countries, particularly China. Canada's upper classes, Shimizu declared, had recognized Japan's achievements, and he had been "gratified to learn

¹⁶ Akira Iriye, in "Minds across the Pacific: Japan in American Writing (1853-1883)," *Papers on Japan from Seminars at Harvard University*, vol. 1, ed. Albert Craig and J.K. Fairbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, East Asian Research Center, June 1961), states that "history was conceived of in terms of progress, and all societies were given status in the scale of civilization in accordance with the degree of progress they had achieved" (28).

¹⁷ "Japanese Consul in Cumberland, What He Thinks of the Alien Bill, Our City and Other Things," *Weekly News*, Cumberland (British Columbia), 4 March 1899.

[that] all classes of Canadians [were] unanimous in the opinion that Japanese labourers [were] far ahead of Chinese.”¹⁸

Shimizu also repeatedly emphasized Japan’s progress in remaking itself as an industrial nation, contrasting it with China’s failure to adopt “modern” institutions. It was Japan’s success in this regard, Shimizu argued, that made its citizens better labour migrants than those from China. Others associated with the Japanese consulate in Vancouver had made similar arguments. In 1897, for example, K. Takahashi, a self-described Japanese Canadian who was one of four hundred Japanese immigrants then living in British Columbia, had also contrasted Japan with China to argue against the proposed extension of the head tax to Japanese, defending Japan’s lower classes against those of China and characterizing social conditions in China in extremely negative terms, thus revealing his own deeply held biases:

In China they have a large, floating population that have no home, no citizenship, but live, simply live, from day to day, upon the dregs and refuse of the street, and are ever pining even for slavery abroad rather than continue their native life under the incessant pressure of hunger and inhumanity.

With these people, frugality verging upon starvation is inevitable. And low living becomes a habit. Japan, however, is not China, and is absolutely free from those execrable features so characteristic of the latter. Not only that, but even what is commonly known in the great cities of Europe and America as the “pauper class” is an unknown quantity and practically has never existed in Japan. In other words, even the lowest class of people in Japan have no opportunity to become habituated to what may be termed a “low standard of living.”¹⁹

The disingenuous nature of the advocates of the head tax, Takahashi declared, was evident in their failure to distinguish Japanese and Chinese. In his view this was a deliberate tactic used by exclusionists to enflame anti-Japanese sentiment.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid. Ironically, notwithstanding Shimizu’s insistence that Canadians generally preferred Japanese to Chinese labourers, newspaper accounts suggest that anti-Asian prejudice could cut both ways. In a 26 April 1893 article, for example, Cumberland’s *Weekly News* stated that, although some Japanese labourers did well, “in the main they are not steady workers like the Chinese.”

¹⁹ K.T. Takahashi, *The Anti-Japanese Petition: Appeal in Protest Against a Threatened Persecution* (Montreal: Gazette Printing Company, 1897), 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 14. (“Their tactics have always been to speak of ‘Chinese and Japanese’ in one breath and one phrase, as if the two were one and same people with identical traits and characters.”)

Arguing against proposed exclusionary measures in 1899, Shimizu also invoked imperial politics, pointing to Canada's status as a British dominion and contrasting its subordinate role within the British Empire with Japan's own position as an imperial power that had begun to acquire colonies of its own. Should British Columbia adopt anti-Japanese legislation, he reminded Canadians, his own government retained the option of appealing to the "Imperial authorities" to which the province was subject. Great Britain, he noted, had recognized Japan as a nation equal in status when it rescinded its unequal treaty with it in 1894.²¹ Canada, as a dominion that remained subject to British imperial authority, he argued, was thus precluded from treating Japan as less than equal. Shimizu also pointed to Japan's 1895 victory over China as evidence that Japan was both the equal of European nations and superior to China. "Japan made wonderful progress before that," he declared, "but the Chinese war demonstrated to other peoples that we have taken our place among the great nations of the world, and our government is determined to uphold that honour." Given Japan's achievements, Shimizu concluded, it "would be an insult to our national dignity" to exclude Japanese from Canada in the same way that Chinese – who, in his view, had not made equivalent progress – had been excluded.²² Shimizu had made much the same point in a letter to Sir Wilfrid Laurier one year earlier: "It is unfair and unjust to legislate, or even attempt to legislate, discriminately against the subject[s] of the country which I have the honour to represent here, whose progress in civilization has excited the admiration of the world, and who has been internationally recognized as the equal of any country, in the same way as against the Chinese."²³

Shimizu's approach was an extension of an argument made by his predecessor, Nosse Tatsugoro, in response to efforts by members of the BC legislature to persuade the Dominion government to raise the

²¹ In *The Anti-Japanese Petition*, Takahashi argued that the revision of the unequal treaties had made Japan "co-equal of the most civilized nations of Europe and America, by reason of their having conceded to her demands in ratifying the revised treaties of 1894. Hence Japan, as a power, should receive, and is entitled to, all the international courtesies as observed by the civilized nations of the world" (6). American and Canadian officials both realized just how important the issue of equal status was to Japan. See, for example, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, 1902*, 220, testimony of Alexander R. Milne, C.R., Collector of Customs for Victoria, British Columbia.

²² "Japanese Consul in Cumberland," *Weekly News* (Cumberland), 4 March 1899.

²³ Canada, Fourth Session of the Tenth Parliament of the Dominion of Canada, Session 1907-1908, *Sessional Papers* 18, 7-8, Edward VII, Sessional Paper No. 74b, A. 1909 (hereafter Sessional Paper No. 74b), S. Shimizu, Japanese Consul, Vancouver, BC, to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 14 March 1898.

head tax, which applied to Chinese immigrants, to \$500 per person and to extend it to Japanese immigrants.²⁴ Like Shimizu, Nosse had also urged Canadians to draw a distinction between Chinese and Japanese immigrants. The failure to distinguish the two, Nosse declared, “was a mistake which only extreme ignorance could make.”²⁵ The Chinese who came to Canada were, in his words, “the lowest on the scale,” and Chinese immigration, as organized by the Six Companies, amounted to little more than a “species of slavery.”²⁶ In an apparent effort to invoke white stereotypes of Chinese in order to position Japanese migrants more favourably, Nosse also argued that the low status of Chinese immigrants was demonstrated by the fact that “they smoke opium; they start gambling dens; they are unclean; they never assimilated with the population; [and] they take all they earn to China.” In contrast, Nosse declared, Japanese immigrants were representatives of a “modern, civilized” nation and “highly civilized people.” Nosse also pointed to the growing presence of women within Japanese immigrant communities as evidence both of stability and the civilized nature of Japanese immigrant society. A majority of the eight hundred Japanese then living in British Columbia were Christians, Nosse claimed, and at least sixty of that number were women who were also wives: “they are clean and frugal; they set up the family; they open churches.”²⁷ In short, it was Japan’s successful quest for modernity, together with the willingness of Japanese immigrants to embrace what Meiji officials identified as markers of Western civilization such as Christianity, that Nosse argued were evidence that they were more desirable immigrants than the Chinese. In 1903, Nosse would extend this argument further still to insist that Chinese immigrants themselves recognized that difference, claiming that after China’s 1895 defeat in the Sino-Japanese War some Chinese in North America assumed Western dress and pretended to be Japanese.²⁸

²⁴ Sessional Paper No. 74b, S. Shimizu, Japanese Consul, Vancouver, BC, to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 14 March 1898 (proposing that the poll tax be extended to Japanese and that it be raised to five hundred dollars). For a general description of the poll tax imposed on Chinese, see *Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Methods by Which Oriental Labourers Have Been Induced to Come to Canada, 1908*, W.L. MacKenzie King, C.M.G., Commissioner. (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1908), 61.

²⁵ “Nosse in Montreal: Japanese Consul Gives His Opinion on British Columbia and Oriental Immigration,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 March 1897.

²⁶ For a description of the Six Companies and their role in facilitating Chinese immigration, see Wilson and Hosokawa, *East to America*, 103–05.

²⁷ “Nosse in Montreal,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 March 1897. Although some Japanese immigrants converted to Christianity, especially in later decades, Nosse appears to have exaggerated the percentage of such conversions in 1897 for rhetorical effect.

²⁸ Sessional Paper No. 74b, Nosse to Laurier, 3 February 1903, 97.

Interviewed in Montreal at a time when there were very few Japanese migrants in eastern Canada, Nosse apparently felt no need to call attention to any distinction he might otherwise have drawn among Japanese based on historical class distinctions. In addition to urging North Americans generally to distinguish between Japanese and Chinese migrants, Nosse also adopted several rhetorical strategies specific to Canada. In particular, he underscored Canada's status as a British dominion, contrasting its subordinate role within the British Empire with Japan's position as an imperial nation. Because Britain had recognized Japan as an equal, Nosse argued, Canada had no justifiable basis for discriminating against Japanese subjects:

Now why should we be discriminated against? England was the first to recognize Japan as a modern, civilized nation. England gave to Japan, in the new treaty, which was made with her two years ago, the benefit of the most favored nation clause. We are in the East what England is in Europe ... Canada is the greatest colony in the British Empire. Why should this colony discriminate against that people the progress and civilization of which England was the first to recognize. Thirty years ago I would not have complained if an attempt had been made to keep us out. We had no status then in the civilized world; but to discriminate against us now is most unfair.²⁹

Meiji diplomats, in short, argued against white racism in North America not by attacking it directly but by endeavouring to recast it in terms of class difference and drawing on the language of modernity. By distinguishing between modern Japan and "tradition-bound" China, Meiji officials sought to explain anti-Asian prejudice not on the basis of race but on the basis of "backwardness" or the failure to modernize, whether on the part of individuals or on the part of entire nations. Meiji officials undermined their own contention that race should not be regarded as a meaningful basis upon which to determine admissibility to Canada and the United States, however, by invoking race in other contexts to argue for the inclusion of Japanese. Aware that Canada was actively recruiting European immigrants to populate its western provinces, for example, Meiji diplomats argued that immigrants from northern Japan were racially better adapted to conditions in the Canadian Prairies than were European immigrants. In 1897, Nosse declared that "Canada needs a thrifty, hardy population, which Japan can supply." Japanese from northern Japan, he argued, were especially well suited to

²⁹ "Nosse in Montreal," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 March 1897.

settle Canada's northwest because, having lived where they had had to deal both with harsh weather and tidal waves, they had acquired the appropriate physical characteristics. In Nosse's words, they were "hardy; they have strong bodies and a high stature; and they are accustomed to hardship ... [t]hey are thrifty; they are strong; they are peaceable; and they can endure both cold and heat."³⁰ Japanese were racially better suited to Canada, Nosse argued, than Europeans from more temperate climes who had not had to endure equivalent hardships.

Astute observers of the complex relationship between Canada and the United States, Meiji officials also devised arguments tailored to political conditions in North America not directly related to their own objectives. Meiji officials in both Canada and the United States, for example, emphasized the transient nature of *dekasegi* migrants to argue that they did not pose a threat to the dominant society because they did not intend to establish permanent homes – an argument that would later be turned against them by exclusionists in both Canada and the United States to justify the denial of citizenship rights because it allowed them to suggest that Japanese immigrants did not have the same stake in North American society as did European immigrants. Meiji government officials in Canada, however, added another component to this argument in an effort to position the United States as a negative example that Canada should not emulate. Comparing *dekasegi* labourers to the Africans who had been brought to the Americas to provide slave labour and who settled permanently in the United States, Meiji officials argued that, because *dekasegi* labourers had no interest in remaining in Canada, this would avoid the development of a "race" question like that which plagued the United States. In much the same way that Nosse had invoked negative white stereotypes of Chinese in order to position Japanese immigrants in a more favourable light, the lawyer hired by the Meiji government to represent its interests before the 1902 Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration invoked negative stereotypes of African Americans to suggest that, by hiring Japanese *dekasegi* labourers Canada, could avoid mistakes made by the United States:

Now, it is said that it is important to consider whether we are not laying up for ourselves a race question. In the United States there is the race question with the negro in that country. The reason of that is the negro settles down on the land; they are a prolific people, and

³⁰ Ibid.

their numbers are growing more rapidly than those of the white people alongside of them. But the very thing that is charged against the oriental is the very thing that may be alluded to as preventing any such thing in this country. I grant you if they came here and settled on the land with their families, and increased, it would be a serious matter for the white man; but they come here and give us the advantage of their labour at a reasonable rate; the results of their labours are left with us; but that they go back to their country again seems to me to be a great advantage instead of a disadvantage.³¹

Meiji diplomats also attempted to negotiate a more favourable set of conditions for Japanese migrants abroad by invoking Canadian fears that the United States might seek to incorporate parts of British Columbia into its own West.³² Nosse's argument that the head tax should not be extended to Japanese, for example, included the point that it would not be genuinely "Canadian" to pass a head tax because the proposal was, "to a great extent, fathered by men who are not even British subjects." "Do you know," Nosse asked, "that in [British Columbia's] Kootenay district and the Fraser river district the country is flooded with Americans, who want all for themselves, and who would prevent any other people from participating in benefits which are all the time increasing in value?"³³ Takahashi had likewise invoked Canadian stereotypes of Americans to bolster his own argument against extending the head tax to Japanese. It was the Americans and not the Japanese, he insisted, who posed the greatest threat to Canadian interests. Not only that, but they were also the more transient:

The real and most serious enemy to the bread-winners of British Columbia are to day [sic] as it had always been, those predatory aliens other than Japanese who freely cross and recross the boundary line and carry all their earnings away into the American side. When prospects are better and wages rise on our side they promptly come swarming in and at once make themselves the competitors of the sons and daughters of our soil. As promptly they depart when the tide changes, leaving our own workers poorer by what they take away with them.³⁴

³¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, 1902*, "Address of Mr. R. Cassidy, K.C., on Behalf of the Japanese."

³² For a general discussion of Canadian fears of US expansionism, see Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

³³ "Nosse in Montreal," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 28 March 1897.

³⁴ Takahashi, *The Anti-Japanese Petition*, 13.

On the one hand, Takahashi appealed to Canada's vision of itself as distinct from the United States and as embodying the virtues of British society, arguing that anti-Japanese legislation would "be an act of undignified petulance toward a friendly power – an act unworthy of British fair play and Canadian dignity." Canada, he suggested, was principled in ways that the United States was not. On the other hand, he held the United States up as a positive example that Canada should seek to emulate. Despite the fact that there were several thousand Japanese immigrants in the United States, he wrote in 1897, that country had passed no laws excluding Japanese. Surely, Takahashi declared, the fact that the United States "had longer and larger experience with the Japanese, but ... ha[d] not found any cause to object to the latter's immigration" made it clear that there was no reason to extend the head tax to Japanese. British Columbians, he argued, had no reason to find fault with the Japanese when the Americans had not done so.³⁵

CONCLUSION

By the late nineteenth century, efforts to racialize the boundaries of both the United States and Canada had resulted in a complex, cross-Pacific dialogue about the meaning of race and class in which Meiji diplomats, Japanese migrants, anti-Japanese exclusionists, and both the US and Canadian governments participated. Meiji diplomats, in particular, attempted to counter the arguments of exclusionists by turning the language of race back on North Americans. Their efforts were undermined to a significant degree, however, by persistent traditional social and cultural biases rooted in Japan's own historical experience, which persuaded them that white racism was partly explained by the historical class status of their own emigrants. Rather than attack white racism directly, Meiji consular officials urged North Americans to distinguish between themselves and the "low-class" labour migrants whom they regarded as the real object of white hostility. Efforts by Meiji officials to maintain traditional class distinctions in order to preserve their own status within a Japanese cultural context, ironically, led them to equivocate and to avoid the direct challenges they might otherwise have made to white racism. The contradictory nature of their arguments, together with their willingness to condone both historical class-based and anti-Chinese prejudice, ultimately weakened the position of Japanese emigrants abroad and aided in the reproduction of Japanese as

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

an excludable category by allowing anti-Japanese exclusionists to turn Meiji officials' own arguments against them.

Although some rhetorical strategies invoked by Meiji diplomats applied to both Canada and the United States, certain elements of their arguments against exclusionary legislation were tailored specifically to Canada. Meiji officials, for example, invoked Canada's subordinate status within the larger British Empire and issues arising out of political tensions in North America, including Canadian fears of American expansionism, in an effort to favourably position Japanese subjects and to counter the racist claims of anti-Japanese exclusionists. Neither side relied simply on a static set of arguments. Rather, both sides seized on the rhetorical claims of their opponents across the Pacific in crafting their own arguments regarding the question of where racial boundaries should be drawn. Although the arguments developed by both sides contained major elements of chauvinism and racism, they were not just simple expressions of race or class bias but far more complicated formulations that sought to appropriate and incorporate their opponents' perspectives so as to render their own positions irrefutable.