

Postwar Japanese Immigrants in the Vancouver Area –  
Adaptation Process through their Organizational Activities

Presentation at the Japan Studies Association of Canada (JSAC) 2006  
Annual Conference, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, B.C.

October 14, 2006

Tatsuo Kage  
Member of Greater Vancouver JCCA Nihon-go Committee

What we are discussing today are postwar immigrants after 1966, when the new immigration regulations were introduced. The postwar immigrants constitute approximately 20% of Japanese Canadian population of 85,000 (2001). About one third of the immigrants must have settled in the Vancouver area. At the early period of the 1960's and 1970's most of them were independent immigrants, relatively young with certain skills needed in Canada.

In my presentation I would like to address the question of immigrants' adaptation to the host society, in particular;

- 1) what were their relations with the existing Japanese Canadian community, and
- 2) what was the implication of organizational activities among themselves – did such activities make them isolated from the mainstream society, or help them adapt and integrate in the larger society?

Community's support for new arrivals

How did the existing Japanese Canadian community react to the arrival of new immigrants? In the Bulletin published by the Greater Vancouver Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association (JCCA), in the December 1966 issue, the formation of the JCCA New Immigrants Support Committee was reported:

"Recently the number of newly arrived skilled workers has gradually increased and there have been many cases of need for assistance from the Japanese Canadian community for finding employment or accommodation. Therefore, the JCCA (Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association) recently formed a new committee."

In the following issue of the Bulletin (January 1967) an announcement was published stating that since the number of new immigrants is increasing, "...if language assistance is required, the JCCA New Immigrants Committee will be able to provide assistance" and the names of committee members were listed. They were Japanese speaking Issei, bilingual Nisei and church ministers.

#### Community's Expectations

Toward the end of 1967 Mr. Kin-ichi Iwata of the Issei section of the JCCA published a statement mentioning expectations among the Nikkei people toward new immigrants:

"We Issei have long been looking forward to the arrival of new immigrants and finally our wishes have been fulfilled... We expect and pray that these new Issei who recently came to Canada would eventually take over the role which has been played by us Issei." (Bulletin, Japanese section, December 1967)

It is obvious that Issei people like Mr. Iwata were looking for the contribution of immigrants as new blood to the community.

How then did the Nisei people look at the new situation? I found an interesting statement by Mr. Harry Aoki, who is a Nisei musician and still active in the community. In reporting the conference on "Role of Cultural Minorities in Bilingual Society," Mr. Aoki made the following observations:

"The cultural emphasis [also] underlines the important role of our new immigrants, but it also shows that those who arrive with "Americanized" attitudes would need to seriously re-evaluate the rationale behind the trend to deliberately discard their natural heritage." (Bulletin, April 1972)

Mr. Aoki's comments reflect the expectations among the Nikkei people that newcomers would bring traditional Japanese culture with them to Canada, but coming from postwar Japan they did not quite meet these expectations and the Nikkei in Canada were both puzzled and disappointed.

### Immigrants facing a new environment

How did new immigrants adjust themselves in Canada and how did they view the Nikkei community? By the fall of 1969 there must have been about 300 newcomers in the Vancouver area and they began to organize themselves. In the Bulletin (Japanese section, March 1970) the formation of a "New Immigrants Society" was announced with an explanation for the purpose of the organization:

"We have to be aware that immigration from Japan was interrupted for many years, therefore, we notice some discrepancies in thinking and the point of view between us new arrivals and those who have been here for many decades. However, we have to adjust ourselves in the new environment as quickly as possible since we intend to stay here permanently... In other words, we should strive for bridging the gap between us and the longtime residents...It can not be done instantaneously due to the language barrier and the lack of familiarity with the new environment. These are the reasons why we wanted to form our own organization."

As seen from the above quoted explanation, new immigrants were wishing to join the Nikkei community and adapt themselves to the society at large, and the existing Japanese Canadian community was receptive to their wishes. It should be noted that for these purposes they wanted to form their own organization and it was understood as a preparatory step in the process of adaptation.

Even though the group was very active around 1970 there was a slack period of several years from around 1972 as the New Immigrants' Society became inactive.

Next I would like to touch on the founding of the Greater Vancouver Japanese Immigrants' Association in 1977.

The year 1977 was the centennial of the arrival of Japanese immigrants to Canada. A series of community events celebrating the centennial were held during that year. In the spring of the same the Greater Vancouver Japanese Immigrants' Association was founded with several people. Raishu Hirano, a caretaker of the previous society and Takeo Yamashiro, the executive director of Tonari Gumi, a service center for Japanese Canadians, were instrumental in the formation of the new association. Several of us, including Yuko Shibata and myself, also joined that effort as founding members.

The new association was aiming to assist and promote support and friendship among immigrants. As I served as the president of the Association for several years, my recollections are incorporated in this presentation along with the articles published in the monthly Kaiho Newsletter (1977-present.).

Now I will briefly look into the activities of the Immigrants' Association. In short, immigrants have shown their strong desire to learn. The Immigrants' Association undertook various activities soon after its establishment. They can be divided in three areas:

1) orientation; 2) community development; and 3) co-operation with other JC organizations.

#### Orientation

During a period of 20 years, monthly law classes in the Japanese language were held, co-sponsored with People's Law School, covering various topics such as immigration law, applying for Canadian citizenship, criminal law, writing a will, separation and divorce, filing income tax return, employment standards, buying a house, etc.

Another area of orientation is related to mental health and social adaptation. The association has been very active in these areas, particularly after a grant of \$25,000 from the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation was received in 1991. The program was co-sponsored with Tonari Gumi, a service organization. During a period of five years we implemented a comprehensive program of mental health with consultation sessions and a series of public lectures.

By organizing their own association and being involved with these activities, do immigrants isolate themselves from the rest of the community?

Even though most lectures and workshops have been conducted in Japanese, we can see that activities help immigrants to understand and adapt to life in Canada through learning about laws, social and health services.

Working with other Japanese Canadian organizations such as the JCCA and Tonari Gumi, immigrants were able to learn how an organization should be run, the procedure of meetings, fundraisings, etc. Getting involved with volunteer activities, we had many occasions to meet people of different background outside our workplace or home environment.

### Community Development

The Association encourages other groups to commence specific activities, for example, retired immigrants, businessmen, and women of intermarriage.

In the 1980's retired immigrants arrived. The Association looked after the launching of Ohfu-Kai (桜楓会), a retired immigrants group in 1984. In the course of time, however, close relations between the Association and this group was lost. It is natural when new members increased who did not know the circumstances of the beginning of the group. It may be compared to our familiar experiences where a child grows up, leaves home and stands on his/her own feet.

The same could be said about the establishment of the "Kiyu-Kai" (企友会) in 1987, a network of immigrants who were interested in business in Canada. It was launched under the leadership of Mr. Peter Kubotani, who had served as the president of the Japanese Immigrants' Association in the 1980's.

### Increase of international marriages

A new trend appeared from the beginning of the 1990's when the retired immigration program was terminated. Instead, Japanese women in their 20's and 30's arrived here who had married Canadians or permanent residents. As a result, more women have arrive than men as immigrants in recent years. Targeting these women, a series of inter-marriage workshops was conducted

together with the JCCA Human Rights Committee as co-host for several years (1997-2002) with Ms. Mariko Kage as the co-ordinator and Dr. Fumitaka Noda, a Japanese psychiatrist, as an advisor.

Even though the Association initiated this group activity, later the members of the group decided to make it an independent organization. Again, this is another success story demonstrating the way in which the Japanese Immigrants' Association actively worked to create a community group by encouraging individual members to take the initiative.

What is "Community Development"?

Looking back at such past activities - building relationship with various groups and individuals, we note that the Association has actually been engaging in "community development." "Community development" simply means assistance activities to help fulfill and improve people's lives by building ties with the wider society. Our activities in educational and group development have been successful to the extent that they meet a need among the members of the Japanese Canadian community, and because we strived to fully respect individual rights and spontaneity.

Co-operation with other Japanese Canadian organizations

Even though the immigrants as a whole were hardly involved with the Redress movement of the 1980's, they actively participated in the post-redress community events organized by the NAJC, such as the Homecoming'92 Japanese-Canadian Conference held at Hotel Vancouver. At this largest post-war gathering for Japanese-Canadians, a panel was organized to share experiences as immigrants. It was a rare and worthwhile opportunity for immigrant representatives from all over Canada to get together.

Changes of the times

For almost three decades, the Immigrants' Association has served the community, but we should accept changes of the times, including the form and style of community activities. The Board of the Immigrants' Association, therefore, decided to close its doors as at the end of 2005 and to continue its work as a Japanese speaking committee of the Greater Vancouver JCCA.

After 28 years of existence the circle was closed. As stated at the beginning of this article, in the 1960's the JCCA extended welcome and gave support to newcomers. Under this new arrangement, the former members of the Association will continue to provide services to immigrants and the community at large.

-----

Reference:

Tatsuo Kage, "Post-War Japanese Immigrants and their Involvement in the Community," *Nikkei Images* (National Nikkei Museum and Heritage Centre Newsletter), Vol. 11, No. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 12-19.

Ditto, "When Postwar Immigrants Arrived," *JCCA Bulletin* (June 2006), pp. 1, 14-15.

Ditto, "Nikkei iju no rekishi 125 nen" (125 Year History of Japanese Immigration), *Soritsu 25 shuunen kinenshi* (The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Anthology) (Vancouver, Greater Vancouver Japanese Immigrants' Association, 2002), pp.14-41.

End of file

