

# The Intercultural Meanings of “Nikkei” in the Era of Global Capitalism: An Ethnographic Study in San Francisco’s Japantown

Sachiko Kotani

小谷 幸子

kosachiko@mrh.biglobe.ne.jp

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the term “Nikkei” has been used in association with the identities, experiences, and perspectives of Japanese emigrants and their descendants overseas. What is emphasized here is the elastic nature of this symbolic term which acknowledges and responds to the shifting and fluid contexts of social, political, and historical realities in which contemporary ethnic communities are situated.

Based on the perspective gained through ethnographic fieldwork in an urban neighborhood called San Francisco’s Japantown, this paper highlights how such current emphasis on “Nikkei” as a symbolic construction links, at the local arena, to the interethnic encounters and multicultural practices associated with the growing popularity of Japanese cultural commodity and capital in the current global market.

Here, I particularly focus on the episodes and life stories revolving around a second-generation Chinese American teenage anime artist whom I met in San Francisco’s Japantown. By tracing through her personal associations with and memories of San Francisco’s Japantown, I’m hoping to explore the multiple globalizing contexts in which Nikkei is being redefined.

## 2. Anime as a Transcultural Global Commodity

Anime has been increasingly recognized as a transnational commodity which has created diverse fan cultures and communities worldwide beyond the realm of Japanese national culture. In the case of the United States of America, it is said that the first anime-specific fan groups were started in the late 1970s (Anime USA 2003). With the introduction of series such as Sailor Moon and Pokemon, the 1980s saw the beginning of the mainstreamization

of anime. A new wave of anime on American mainstream media started in the 1990s, targeting late-teenage audiences and older adults rather than young children. This contributed to a dramatic increase and a wide variety in the audience, inducing a massive expansion and organization of anime fans today.

Anime fans have formed various groups and networks through online and offline meetings and conversations. They usually meet at local and regional conventions and in local fan clubs, in Internet chat rooms and through on-line anime games. Mailing lists, fanzines (amateur publications created by fans), and websites are also used for communication among fans. Fans use these networks to get their anime and exchange information while developing a special bond stemming from their shared interest in anime.

It is reported that contemporary American anime fans are an extremely diverse group of people, crossing every age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic boundary. Nonetheless, the typical image of an anime fan in the U.S. has been a male in his 20s or 30s. This image has been associated with previous discussions on anime fandom in which anime fans are often lumped into a single category. Particularly, while researchers and journalists have frequently talked about gender and sexuality issues in anime, less attention has been paid to the fact that anime fan communities are quite racially and linguistically mixed as a group.

### 3. Anime as a Tool to Preserve and Revitalize Japantown

San Francisco's Japantown (Nihonmachi) is known as one of the three existing Japantowns remaining in the United States. Since the late 1990's, community leaders in the area have been working toward preserving Japantown as a unique cultural and economic district to symbolize an appreciation of Nikkei heritage. The similar projects have been taking place simultaneously in the other two remaining Japantowns in Los Angeles and San Jose as well, under the California Japantown Preservation Pilot Project (Senate Bill 307). This historic legislation passed in 2001 to recognize the cultural significance of the Japantowns as ethnic neighborhoods to the diversity of the state. It provided grants to Los Angeles, San Jose and San

Francisco to promote the preservation of their Japantown neighborhoods. Subsequently, community representatives from California's three remaining Japantowns have worked together to secure funding from the state to preserve the Japantown legacy.

As the Nikkei community leaders stress the importance of economic development in this chain of Japantown preservation movements, it is observed that contemporary Japanese pop culture like Anime receives strategic attention as a potentially powerful tool to preserve and revitalize Japantown. In the case of San Francisco's Japantown, a variety of Anime-related events such as Anime costume parade and video screening are hosted or supported by local Japantown-based organizations, and Anime fans of diverse cultural backgrounds visit, shop, and gather in Japantown all year round.

#### 4. A Teenage Anime Artist, Meow

Meow is one of such anime fans who are drawn to San Francisco's Japantown. On December 4<sup>th</sup> 2004, I met her at an anime screening event held as part of San Francisco Japantown Year-End Festival. This screening event was organized by a San Francisco-based local multimedia company called project 760 productions, and sponsored by a local college anime club and such Japantown businesses as Kinokuniya Bookstore and Mikado Music & Laser.

In front of the screening room, there was a Yu-Gi-Oh trading card game tournament going on. I have been doing fieldwork in San Francisco's Japantown for the past few years, and this was my first visit to an anime screening. As I sheepishly entered the screening room, I saw a group of teenage boys and girls chatting and playing with each other around an artist booth set up in the back of the room. Among them, there was an Asian girl with long black hair dressed in an anime costume. That was Meow.

#### Video, 5 minutes (In the presentation)

She was a high-school senior. Born in Torrance, California, she identified herself as the first generation Chinese born in America. Her parents came from Hong Kong, and she has U.S. citizenship. In addition to English and a

little bit of Spanish, she spoke Mandarin, Kantonese and some Japanese.

For this year's annual Cherry Blossom festival held as one of the many centennial events, she was invited to teach how to draw Anime at the booth of the Japanese consulate. The local Chinese TV broadcasting company came to interview her, and this eventually led to significant changes in her parents' perception about Anime and their daughter's passion for it. Before her parents got to see their daughter on TV, according to Meow, they were not really interested or even sometimes ignorant about her dream to be a Manga-ka, Anime artist. Particularly, her mother had the negative image of Japan associated with the war-time imperial Japan. Meow was often told not to date with any Japanese boy. But once her parents started receiving calls from their Chinese speaking relatives about her appearance on TV, things started to change. Her father told Meow that he would support her if she wants to go to Japan to study to be a Mangaka after high school graduation. Her mother now helps her make her costume for conventions.

#### **4 .Ending Remarks**

As mentioned above, through the community effort to preserve San Francisco's Japantown as a vibrant symbolic locale for the Nikkei, Anime as contemporary Japanese cultural industry has found its physical location to provide San Francisco's diverse anime fans a community established across multiple borders. The dynamics of this new phenomenon provide an interesting platform to view the symbolic construction of Nikkei in the era of multicultural global capitalism.