

# The Four Immigrants Manga

## *A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904–1924*

By Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama

Translated, with introduction and notes,  
by Frederik L. Schodt

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 1999

152 PAGES, NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Japanese immigration to the United States peaked after the turn of the century, as annexation of Hawaii brought a large Japanese community within American borders. Anti-Asian agitation in the West led to the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement restricting Japanese immigration to family reunification, and that was cut to a few hundred people per year in 1924. Nonetheless, many Japanese immigrants endured this discrimination, and their descendants became a permanent part of the American social fabric.



The most articulate and accessible literary expressions of Japanese American experience have come from the *Nisei* (second generation) and *Sansei* (third generation). The translation and republication of Kiyama's groundbreaking artwork brings a fresh and accessible *Issei* (first-generation) voice back to life. Written in 1926 and published (by Kiyama) in 1931, the series of fifty-two twelve-panel comic strips chronicles the experience of four young Japanese men loosely based on Kiyama and his friends.

The comics were intended for publication in a Japanese American newspaper, and were bilingual: most of the characters spoke Japanese, but their interactions with non-Japanese were in English, and they frequently mixed English words into their Japanese. Schodt's translation maintains the distinction by typesetting the translated Japanese and preserving the original hand lettering for English. As Schodt points out in his introduction (p. 17), this means that everyone but the Japanese seem to be speaking poor English, but it is natural for immigrants' first language to be fluent and the second language to sound awkward, even when spoken by locals. This reversal is rarely depicted, even in immigrant literature. The translation is good, though the idiomatic nature of the writing means that many of the jokes have to be explained in notes. The notes and introduction also contain clear explanations of the historical context and specifics mentioned in the text. The only oddity is the frequent use of italics; this might be Schodt's



Page 31, Episode 1: Arrival in San Francisco.

way of indicating underlining in the original (Japanese uses dots next to vertically written characters), but it is not explained.

Kiyama's narrative covers four men over two decades, so there is great selectivity; there are also limitations of form, particularly the need to have some humor in each sequence. The first half of the book takes place between their 1904 "Arrival in San Francisco" and the 1906 San Francisco Segregation Incident, and it concentrates on the problems of adjustment and employment. The longest series in the entire book is the misadventures of the newly arrived "Schoolboys" working domestic jobs while they study English: the communication problems, lack of previous domestic experience, and cultural differences provide rich fodder for humor. When two of them give up and try farm work, one of their employers tries to replace her servant by accosting various Asians on the street, including a Chinese cook and the Japanese Consul (Episode 11: "Mistaken Identity").

The second half is more episodic, but there is one unifying thread: the difficulty of Japanese establishing families in the United States. Two of the characters marry "Picture Brides," marriages arranged by relatives in Japan in which the partners never meet in

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## Research Centre for Translation

Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT., Hong Kong

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Page 109, Episode 40: Picture Brides.

person until the bride crosses the Pacific. Some dishonesty, both in the pictures and in self-descriptions, was not uncommon, with predictable comic effect. One of the characters joins the American military to fight in World War I, in hopes of gaining citizenship, but is disappointed. Finally, the two characters still without spouses return to Japan to seek marriage, hoping to return before the 1924 Immigration Act goes into effect.

This would be an excellent source text for Asian American or immigration history courses, and would also work well in high school or college social studies and U.S. history courses. Several of the episodes could be used without the rest of the book, to illustrate specific issues or events like the Segregation Incident and the Alien Land Laws. The comic-book format makes it tempting to suggest using it with younger students, but much of the story would be too sophisticated for elementary school students.

The net effect of the comics is charming, sometimes awkward and dated, but revealing and very human. Since these stories are at least partly autobiographical, they are clearly sympathetic, but they are not self-pitying or one-sided. The tension between Japanese identity and American life, the complexity of community relations and the continuing connections between the immigrants and their hometowns and native land, are constant themes. It is a good, if selective, review of the Issei experience in North America in a very accessible form. ■

**JONATHAN F. DRESNER** is an Assistant Professor of History at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His dissertation was on the effects of Japanese overseas emigration on source communities and high-emigration regions.