

Grace Thorson

JAPANESE GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES
Community Analysis Report No. 3
March 1943

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

From time to time the question arises as to the significance of the various Japanese groups and organizations in the United States. Does membership in a Kenjinkai indicate subversion, or is the organization simply a social group? What about the officers of such organizations? What is the difference between Buddhism and Shinto?

A few of the more important groups and associations are discussed here in order to provide a factual background for understanding these Japanese groups.

CONTENTS

I. SOCIAL

Kenjinkai or Prefectural Associations
Junior Kenjinkai
Nihonjinkai or Japanese Associations
Seinenkai or Young People's Societies
Fujinkai or Women's Societies

II. ECONOMIC

Japanese Chambers of Commerce
Hotel Associations
California Farmers' Association
Japanese Labor Association
Ko or Tonomoshi Credit Clubs

III. RELIGIOUS

Buddhism
Shinshu (Hongwanji)
Zen
Nichiren
Odaishi

Shinto

Seicho No Iye

IV. MILITARY-NATIONALISTIC

Budokai
Heimusha Kai and Patriotic Contribution Societies
Veterans' Societies
Japanese Language Schools

I. SOCIAL

Many Japanese associations are primarily social in nature, made up of people with common interests who meet from time to time for the sake of sociability. Such associations are also often mutual aid societies so that any member in need, financial or otherwise, may receive assistance from the society. Japanese social groups are very numerous, so that only some of the more important ones are mentioned here.

Kenjinkai or Prefectural Associations

The older Japanese, when they arrived in this country, mingled most readily with other Japanese from their own home prefectures or provinces. As was almost inevitable, when there were a fair number of people from one prefecture or one area, they formed a Prefectural Association, or Kenjinkai. These societies meet from time to time for sociability and at New Year's usually celebrate with a large banquet. Members of the group help out fellow members in distress. So far as the older people are concerned, the Kenjinkai is simply a mutual interest and friendship society, with no particular nationalistic connotations. The more important of the Kenjinkai are as follows:

Fukuoka
Hiroshima
Kumamoto
Tohoku
Yamaguchi

Junior Kenjinkai

Occasionally Junior Kenjinkai are formed, made up of Japanese-Americans whose parents are from the same ken or prefecture. Whereas with the older people the Kenjinkai is simply a common interest group, when a group of young people become members of a Junior Kenjinkai their motives are of a somewhat different nature, since a Junior Kenjinkai is an artificially built up common interest group which can serve only to maintain ties with Japan. The Junior Kenjinkai thus falls into a somewhat different class from that of the ordinary Kenjinkai, and young people who actively belong to such groups tend to look to Japan for their cultural values.

Nihonjinkai or Japanese Association

Practically all of the older Japanese in Hawaii and the West Coast belong to one or another Nihonjinkai. The Japanese Consul when dealing with matters concerning Japanese nationals in this country usually did so through some officer of the local Nihonjinkai. Similarly, when a prominent visitor from Japan came to this country hospitality was customarily shown to him locally through officers of the Nihonjinkai. However, membership in the Society is not in itself an indication of anything more than mutual interest with other Japanese nationals who have settled in this country. Just as the Kenjinkai is a social group on a small prefectural scale, the

Nihonjinkai is a mutual interest association using as its base all those of Japanese ancestry, or, more specifically, those of Japanese nationality. The officers of the Nihonjinkai are usually men of substance in the community who are old residents and have the respect of the older people. While they may be actively pro-Japanese in point of view, they are not necessarily so.

Seinenkai or Young People's Societies

In itself, membership in a Young People's Society does not mean much, since there are all kinds. For instance, there are Buddhist young people's societies such as the Chikaranokai, which are not very different in function from Y.M.C.A. groups. On the other hand, a young people's society with "Dai Nippon" (Great Japan) as part of its title might be looked upon with some suspicion.

Fujinkai or Women's Societies

As with the Seinenkai, there are several varieties of Fujinkai. Most of the older Japanese women belong to some Fujinkai, which is partly social and partly civic in function. They are often associated with religious groups and sponsored by the local Buddhist priest.

II. ECONOMIC

A number of mutual interest societies have been formed along occupational lines among the Japanese in this country, just as they have been organized among other ethnic groups. The Kenjinkai and Nihonjinkai in their mutual aid aspects, are economic groups. Other associations more purely economic in nature are given here.

Japanese Chamber of Commerce

Most large cities of the West Coast and in Hawaii have their Japanese Chambers of Commerce, which function more or less like other chambers of commerce. As a rule, they serve the interests of the local business men of Japanese ancestry, being primarily local and economic in function.

Hotel Associations

In places such as Seattle, where many Japanese owned or managed hotels, there were organized Japanese associations of hotel managers. These also served primarily economic ends.

California Farmers' Association

This and other farmer organizations have been organized primarily for mutual aid among farmers of Japanese ancestry. They correspond in general aims to hotel associations and other occupational groups. The farmers' associations tend to be patterned along more Japanese lines than some of the others, simply because the farmers on the whole are less well adapted to American ways than are the Japanese in cities.

Japanese Labor Association

This is one of the few Leftist organizations among Japanese in this country. In general, it may be said that anyone who belongs to it is definitely American rather than Japanese in his attitudes, because to join such an association is to incur the disapproval of the average Japanese family in this country. It is, as its name indicates, a workers' labor group.

Ko or Tanomoshi Credit Clubs

Cooperative credit clubs of one sort or another are very common in Japan and China and have been retained among the Japanese in Hawaii and the West Coast. They are called variously ko, tanomoshi, or mujin, and are made up as a rule of 20 or 30 people in a community. The group comes into existence when one person borrows a sum of money. Each member of the newly formed group gives an equal part. If the man needs \$200, 20 people may each give \$10. Then at subsequent meetings every month or so the debtor pays into the club part of his debt, say \$10, plus interest, and other members also \$10. Then by a system of bidding or drawing lots, a member other than the debtor "wins" the pot of \$200 plus the debtor's interest. When everyone has received the pot once, several of the members have made a profit, the original borrower has been tided over an emergency, and the group has had a series of social gatherings.

III. RELIGIOUS

The Japanese, when they came to America, felt the need almost immediately for some religious organization in order to look after the problems of life and death such as funerals and memorial services. In the early days informal prayer meeting groups were established, and it was not long before most immigrant communities had full-fledged priests and churches. Japanese religious groups in the United States are many, but the main ones are indicated in the following broad categories.

Buddhism

Japanese Buddhism, like Protestant Christianity, consists of a number of sects or denominations. The most popular of the Buddhist sects, both in Japan and in this country, is that of Shinshu.

Shinshu (Hongwanji) is a special form of Buddhism in which the followers have faith in a savior, known as Amida. To live a good life and to have faith in Amida is the best road to the Western Paradise. Most of the Japanese in this country, and many of the American born as well, are members of the Shinshu Buddhist Church. On the whole, it is safe to say that a person in good standing in this church is probably also a law-abiding resident. The younger people who are members of young people's Buddhist societies are for the most part also good citizens, and their activities resemble those of young people's Christian societies.

Shinshu has two main divisions, popularly known as Nishi Hongwanji and Higashi Hongwanji (i.e., West and East Hongwanji), the one most common in this country is Higoshi Hongwanji.

Some other Buddhist sects which are fairly common, but which do not approach Shinshu in popularity, are as follows:

Zen A sect in which the followers attain enlightenment through their own efforts of spiritual and physical self-discipline, rather than depending upon a savior as in Shinshu.

Nichiren A sect the followers of which tend on the whole to be rather ardent in their beliefs. Nichiren (1222-1282 A.D.), the founder of this sect some centuries ago, was himself rather a nationalist, and some of the Nichiren people in Japan today are notable for their nationalistic attitudes. This, however, is no guarantee that a Nichiren follower in this country would be a Japanese nationalist.

Odaishi This is a popular form of the Shingon sect founded by Kobo Daishi (died 816 A.D.) a famous teacher and religious leader. In this country older Japanese frequently form a little group of Odaishi followers who meet together for prayer and sociability once a month. Odaishi priests often act as faith healers and most of the devotees are older men and women who have faith in Odaishi's healing powers. Tanomoshi with monthly payments of a dollar or so more or less on a lottery basis are often associated with Daishi and similar regular meeting groups.

Shinto

The first thing to know about Shinto is that there are several different kinds. There is first of all the nationalistic "emperor-worshipping" type of State Shinto, secondly there are a series of Shinto sects which in actual practice are much the same as some of the ordinary Buddhist sects, and finally there are innumerable popular Shinto deities of nature which are believed in and celebrated by the masses. One of the most popular of these deities is Inari, god of good crops and prosperity, who is often represented by a fox messenger. Observances in honor of Inari are in Japan and in this country rather similar in nature to those in honor of the Buddhist Odaishi.

A man who has been a priest in one of the shrines of the nationalistic Shinto, such as, for instance, the Sun Goddess or Daijingu Shrine in San Francisco or Seattle, might fairly be regarded as being definitely interested in promoting a Japanese war victory, even because of his trips to and training in Japan, be strongly pro-Japanese. Older people who are simply members of the sects are not to be regarded in this way. On the other hand, older people who are simply members of some of the ordinary Shinto sects and followers of popular deities such as Inari, are to be looked upon in much the same light as members of Buddhist sects or followers of Odaishi. The two commonest Shinto sects are Tenrikyo and Konkokyo, both of which stress ritual and faith healing.

Seicho No Iye

Seicho No Iye is a sect combining Buddhist and Christian beliefs. One of the sacred books of the sect for instance, contains references to Gautama Buddha and Mary Baker Eddy. Seicho No Iye teachers stress happiness and health and maintain that by the proper attitude one can overcome any illness. This sect gained quite a following in California in the 1930's and most of its adherents are older people. It should be looked upon in the same light as some of the ordinary Buddhist and Shinto sects.

* * *

On the whole it may be said that most of the older Japanese, the Issei, belong to one or another of the above religious groups. It is to be expected that the law-abiding Issei would do so. Religious priests, on the other hand, may be and often are conscious Japanese nationalists; this is especially true of Shinto priests, even sect Shinto priests.

Younger people born in this country are less likely to be members of Japanese religious groups, though Shinshu Buddhism in a rather Americanized form, remains quite popular. The Shinto sects, however, are not Americanized and the ritual remains Japanese, so that Japanese-Americans who are active members of such religious groups may be regarded as less assimilated to American life than those who belong to the Shinshu sect or those who are Christians.

IV. MILITARY-NATIONALISTIC

There are a number of societies which have been formed on the West Coast and in Hawaii of a military and nationalistic nature. Some of these, such as the Budokai, are made up pretty exclusively of people who are Japanese in culture and loyalty, whereas others, such as the Heimusha Kai, are simply organizations which were formed in connection with raising money for the China war and, as explained below, are of a somewhat different type.

Budokai Or Japanese Spirit Association

The Budokai, where it is found, is usually organized by persons who were educated in Japan and who are interested in maintaining the Japanese spirit among young people in this country. The Budokai, for instance, sponsors such Japanese things as Judo and Kendo classes (Japanese wrestling and fencing). In general, it may be assumed that anyone who is a member of such a society, or who has been an active participant in Judo and Kendo exercises, is rather on the Japanese side of the fence. Teachers of Judo, for instance, stress its spiritual value, and young people who participate are often those who feel more akin to Japan than to the United States.

Heimusha Kai and Patriotic Contribution Societies

These societies functioned before the war primarily as a means of raising money for sending overseas to aid Japan in the China war. They also sponsored the making of consolation bags (imombukuro) for Japanese soldiers. The organizers of such societies may be regarded as Japanese nationalists. However, ordinary contributors, and even prominent residents who were on Boards of Trustees of such societies, are not necessarily to be regarded in the same light as the organizers. There was strong social pressure placed upon older Japanese residents in most communities to contribute their share when contributions were taken, in much the same way as pressure has been put upon individual Chinese in this country to send money to China.

Veterans' Societies

Many of the early Japanese immigrants were men who had served in the Russo-Japanese War and who came to this country to seek their fortunes. Most such men automatically became veterans of the Japanese Army and are likely to be members of some veterans' organization. In itself, such membership is not very significant. However, there are certain military societies, one of which goes under the name of Hinomaru, which are probably more strongly nationalistic in character. Officers of such societies, in contrast to passive members, may be regarded as actively interested in a Japanese victory.

Japanese Language Schools

The Japanese, soon after they arrived in the United States, established language schools for their children. (The Chinese, Norwegians, and other ethnic groups in this country have done the same.) On the West Coast and in Hawaii these language schools were supported locally by the Japanese communities. Before the war, children attended an hour a day after public school but, as a rule, when children reached high school age they rebelled against this extra schooling and ceased to attend.

The active sponsors of the language schools, and especially the language school teachers themselves, may be regarded as being Japanese in sympathy and point of view, just as are the sponsors of Budokai and the Judo clubs. On the other hand, parents who sent their children to school, and especially the children themselves, are not, simply because of this fact, to be regarded as anti-American. The parents wanted their children to know something of the Japanese language and culture; the children attended partly because of parental pressure and partly because some knowledge of Japanese was (and is) an economic asset.