The Japanese in Peru

History of Immigration, Settlement, and Racialization

by

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Peruvians of Japanese descent, though constituting only 0.3 percent of Peru’s population, were brought to the world’s attention by the election of Alberto Fujimori, the son of Japanese immigrants, as president, and today they are arguably one of the country’s most influential ethnic communities both economically and politically. While well integrated into Peruvian society, they remain a racial/ethnic minority and a close-knit community. Prominent but closed, the Japanese-Peruvian community has evolved through the processes of immigration, settlement, and racialization over the past century.

At the end of the nineteenth century in Japan, the rumor spread that a country called Peru somewhere on the opposite side of the earth was “full of gold.” This country, moreover, was a paradise with a mild climate, rich soil for farming, familiar dietary customs, and no epidemics, according to the advertisements of Japanese emigration companies (Konno and Fujisaki, 1984). A Japanese immigrant in Peru, now in her late 80s, told me, “I came here because I heard there was gold and no snow in this country.” Another, in his 90s, said that he had followed his uncle to Peru because “I wanted to become a farmer. Owning land was my dream.” With various dreams in mind, some 790 Japanese, all men between the ages of 20 and 45, left Japan in 1898 to work on Peru’s coastal plantations as contract laborers. Their purpose was simple: to earn and save money for the return home upon termination of their four-year contracts. The 25-yen monthly salary on Peru’s plantations was more than double the average salary in rural Japan (Suzuki, 1992). In four years’ time, then, they expected their savings to amount to 860 yen.

The history that followed is one of misery and hardship. Japanese immigration was simultaneously a form of exclusion from Japan. Rather than being simply voluntary labor migration for higher wages, it was shaped by a

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broader international context in which the sending country (Japan) and the receiving country (Peru) in addition to a third country (the United States) played a role. This article examines this context.

EMISSION FROM JAPAN

WHY DID THEY EMIIGRATE?

Japanese emigration to Peru was initially encouraged by the Japanese government. As soon as the Meiji government (1868–1911) had replaced the closed Tokugawa regime (1600–1868), Japan began to look outward, particularly to the West. Emigration began in 1868 as a form of contract migration to Hawaii under direct state sponsorship. Between 1868 and 1942, over 776,000 Japanese emigrated, primarily to North America (48.2 percent) and South America (31.6 percent) (JICA, 1994). Many of them were sent by the government, either directly or indirectly, or by private emigration companies working in close cooperation with the government. To encourage emigration, the government provided subsidies for emigrants and established a number of institutions: the Social Affairs Bureau (1921) within the Home Ministry in 1921, the Ministry of Overseas Affairs (Takumusho) in 1929, the Emigration Center in 1927, and the Emigration Cooperative Societies (Kaigai Iju Kumiai) in 1927 (Tigner, 1981).

Emigration was encouraged, above all, as a way to control Japan’s rapidly growing population (Idei, 1930; Yoshida, 1909; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1949; 1971). Although the population stayed stable at about 30 million during the Tokugawa period, it reached 38 million in 1888, 56 million in 1920, and 79 million in 1947, accompanied by rapid industrial development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1958). In hindsight, however, emigration did not solve Japan’s “population problem” (Crocker, 1931); the approximately 1 million emigrants sent abroad over 80 years constituted merely 2.5 percent of Japan’s population growth during the period, a negligible rate in comparison with the comparable figures for England (74.2 percent), Italy (46.8 percent), and Germany (14.6 percent) (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975). Moreover, while emigration was being encouraged, there was an influx of laborers from Japan’s newly acquired overseas colonies. Among them were 770,000 Koreans brought into Japan between 1917 and 1927 to meet the growing demand for manual laborers (though 570,000 Koreans also left Japan during the period) (Idei, 1930).

Emigration was more than a means of population reduction; in fact, it was an important part of the Meiji government’s policy of industrialization and
Westernization. The government viewed emigration as a vital tool for gaining economic benefits, particularly as a means to increase capital by way of remittances (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1971; Wakatsu and Suzuki, 1975). Although the total number of emigrants remained small, the economic role of emigration was significant. In 1933, remittances sent to Japan (98.6 million yen) constituted as much as 10 percent of Japan’s total trade surplus (Suzuki, 1992), and the Japanese immigrants in Brazil alone brought in US$3.8 million by traveling back to Japan (Wakatsu and Suzuki, 1975).

The government envisioned emigrants as promoting bilateral ties, thereby stimulating trade, tourism, and other commercial activities and helping secure resources and territorial expansion abroad (Wakatsu and Suzuki, 1975; Nihon Kaigai Kyokai, 1950). Citing the colonial history of prosperous European countries, Japanese statesmen and scholars often stressed that emigration and territorial expansion were critical to “the prosperity of the Japanese race” (Jiho Shinpo, January 4, 1896, cited in Wakatsuki, 1987). In his 1906 essay “Japanese Colonialism” (Nihon Shokumin-ron), Mironu Togo asserted the importance of Japan’s duty to expand abroad as the only Asian country capable of becoming a colonial power (Kumei, 1995), and according to Shigenobu Okuma in “The Expansion of the Yamato (Japanese) Race and Colonial Projects” (1908), “the most urgent task is to send emigrants (shokumin) . . . under the banner of the rising sun” (quoted in Wakatsu, 1987: 195). Emigration was correlated with colonialism: “Send millions of Japanese emigrants to California to construct New Japan” and “Build a country for the Japanese race in the Rockies” (quoted in Wakatsu, 1987: 192).

Indeed, the terms “emigrants” (imin) and “colonists” (shokumin or kaitakumin) were frequently used interchangeably or combined (ishokumin) until well into the 1930s. Emigration assumed a particularly strong national character during the 1910s and 1920, when migratory flows were directed to less desirable countries (e.g., South America) after Japanese immigration to the United States ended and emigration was promoted in the name of the nation.

Finally, emigration was regarded as a way of dealing with the “problem” of poor farmers. The transformation of traditional agriculture brought about by industrialization, coupled with the monetary policy failure of 1881, left as many as 1 million peasant households out of work (Wakatsu and Suzuki, 1975; Tsuchida, 1998). Emigration, as the government viewed it, would provide those excess farmers with job opportunities (Idei, 1930) and “civilize those low-class citizens” by providing them with the opportunity to acquire advanced Western labor discipline and ethics (quoted in Wakatsu and Suzuki, 1975: 75). Eliminating those “low-class laborers” would benefit the country, since “their poverty would pose a national threat” (Muto, 1963,
quoted in Wakatsuki, 1987: 177). Thus, an emigration policy officially promulgated to control population growth was a vital part of Japan’s “modernization” policy.

WHO WAS THE EMIGRANT?

Throughout the history of Japanese emigration, emigrants shared several characteristics. Demographically, they were largely males between the ages of 20 and 45, a population targeted both by employers (e.g., plantation owners) and by Japanese emigration companies. Many were second and later sons, often lacking the right to inherit family properties (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975). Because of primogeniture and ancestor worship, the eldest son usually became successor of the household, daughters married without sharing the inheritance, and younger sons, single or married, migrated to the city and sometimes abroad while still young (Maeyama, 1994).

Regionally, emigrants came from the relatively poor and predominantly agricultural southwestern parts of Japan. The majority, or 99 percent, were farmers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1958) and poor without much formal education or training (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975; Irie, 1951). Among the pre–World War II emigrants, almost half originated from just four prefectures—Hiroshima, Okinawa, Kumamoto, and Fukuoka (JICA, 1994). One reason for this regional concentration was economic; rapid industrialization worsened the already overcrowded conditions of many small-scale farmers, particularly in poorer rural areas. Another factor was the long tradition of emigration that prevailed in these poorer rural areas, with years of experience in sending emigrants to the city or abroad (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975). The establishment of networks through prior emigration was also crucial, as personal networks reduced the costs associated with movements and settlement (Nihon Kaigai Kyokai, 1950; Massey and Garcia, 1987). In Peru, in particular, these personal networks played an important role. After the Peruvian government prohibited new waves of Japanese immigrants in 1927, the only way Japanese could immigrate to Peru was by invitation of family members already resident in the country. Finally, regional concentration was also a result of recruitment policy; both the Japanese government and the emigration companies tried to recruit workers from certain prefectures and villages to reduce the cost of recruitment and ease the emigrants’ adaptation to the host country (Kodama, 1989).

Okinawa, in particular, was an important sending prefecture throughout Japanese emigration history. Of the emigrants who left prior to 1926, 11 percent were from Okinawa, and this proportion increased to 15 percent between 1926 and 1941 (JICA, 1994). Okinawa was and still is Japan’s poorest
prefecture, and its weak economy and shortage of revenues made it dependent on the central government as “a permanent burden on the national treasury” (Kerr, 1959: 402). Emigration, encouraged by the Okinawan prefec-
tural government, quickly became a way of coping with this situation. After
the decline of sugar prices in the 1920s (a blow to Okinawa’s vital industry),
emigration flows accelerated to both mainland Japan and abroad, primarily
to Hawaii, the United States, Brazil, and Peru (Tomiyama, 1990).

Because of the way it was induced, emigration came to carry a negative connotation for the Japanese public. Emigration was a form of exclusion, and emigrants were considered “abandoned people” (kimin) “pushed out” by the
government to feed the rest of the population. This image persists even
today. (Kimin also refers to “social outcasts” and “lower-class people” in
general, such as day laborers and untouchables.) The chasm between Japa-
nese immigrant (emigrant) communities and more recent arrivals from
Japan, such as businessmen, students, and other professionals, is also indica-
tive of this status difference.

IMMIGRATION TO PERU:
CONTEXT OF INCORPORATION

Peru emerged as a destination as a result of yet another form of exclusion. Although the United States was not directly involved in Japanese immig-
ration to Peru, it nonetheless played an influential role in inducing this migra-
tion by shutting its doors to Japanese immigration by a 1907 “gentlemen’s
agreement.” Prior to the agreement, the United States and Hawaii had been
the primary destinations for Japanese emigration and had been preferred
because of their higher wages. Denied access to these traditional and more
profitable destinations, Japanese emigration companies had to seek others,
and subsequent migratory flows were directed to South America. Japanese
emigration to South America, reaching its peak in the 1910s, was directly
correlated with diminishing flows to North America.

Peru was the first South American country to receive Japanese immi-
grants. The contract labor agreement was a result of the diplomatic relation-
ship established with Peru in 1873 (the first between Japan and any South
American country) and of the personal relationship between Augusto
Leguia, the manager of a sugar manufacturing company and later president
of Peru, and Teikichi Tanaka, an emigration agent for the Morioka Emigra-
tion Company (Gardiner, 1975; Normano and Gerbi, 1943). High labor
demand for plantations also contributed to the initiation of Japanese immi-
grantion to Peru (see Fig. 1).
In the late nineteenth century, after the Pacific War with Chile (1879–1883), Peru entered a phase of rapid economic growth as a result of economic expansion in Western Europe and the subsequent increase in demand for raw materials. The rush of European capital brought the “agricultural revolution” to the Peruvian coast (Fukumoto, 1997). Production of cotton increased from less than 5,000 tons in 1891 to 24,000 tons in 1913 (Masuda and Yanagida, 1999). Exports of agricultural products, particularly of sugarcane, cotton, and guano, also increased—from 14,000 soles in 1900–1904 to 150,000 soles in 1940–1943 (Fukumoto, 1997). This required armies of cheap labor, but it posed a problem. Peru’s plantations had long depended on slave labor, but slavery was abolished in 1854. The “coolie” trade, which brought over 87,000 Chinese indentured laborers, was abolished in 1874. An alternative was to bring indigenous populations from Peru’s interior, but this failed because of peasants’ attachment to their lands and the extremely harsh labor conditions (Normano and Gerbi, 1943; Masuda and Yanagida, 1999). The other alternative was to rely on immigration.

The Peruvian state, dominated by people of European descent, had always considered European immigration desirable. In 1892, one statesman observed that it was necessary to “improve our race” by incorporating European immigrants; Indians, blacks, and Asians were considered “inferior races”
Since achieving its independence in 1821 through the efforts of criollos (South American–born descendants of Europeans), Peru has been practically dominated by whites constituting roughly 10 percent of the population; the majority of the indigenous population (47 percent of the population today), the mestizos (40 percent), and the small population of Asians and blacks (3 percent) were not part of the independence movement and always fell below whites in Peru’s racial hierarchy. This hierarchy has remained fundamentally unchanged to this day.

In an attempt to attract European immigrants, the Peruvian government implemented various laws to give them incentives; the “white preference laws” of 1873 and 1906 subsidized European and U.S. immigrants exclusively, and special labor recruitment programs targeted the Irish (in 1851) and the Spanish (in 1860) (Suzuki, 1992; Vasquez, 1970). Yet, because Europeans often preferred to immigrate to other countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, these efforts largely failed. Relative to these countries, Peru was politically unstable because of its long history of military regimes and was considered economically undesirable, with lower standards of living. The economic and political dominance of the latifundistas also posed obstacles for immigrants, leaving them little opportunity to cultivate and own land (Vasquez, 1970). In fact, several European governments, notably that of Italy, strongly advised their citizens against emigrating to Peru (Tigner, 1978).

Faced with the “national crisis of labor shortages,” the Peruvian government, under pressure from plantation owners, turned its eyes to the Orient. It reluctantly acknowledged the need to allow Japanese immigration, hoping that this would encourage European immigration. The Tokyo Keizai Shimbun (quoted in Rippy, 1949: 52) described the situation as follows:

The government of Peru welcomes white workers and is not any too fond of yellow laborers, but business in this country is not sufficiently developed to appeal to white labor. It will, therefore, be obliged to depend upon Far Eastern immigrants. If the Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs and the emigration companies put forth all their efforts, this country will become a second Hawaii.

Peru did not become a second Hawaii, but it nonetheless led the way by redirecting Japanese immigration flows from North America to the South.

Japanese immigrants in Peru were incorporated as indentured laborers in its transition from a slave economy to capitalism. During roughly the same period, Indian and Chinese indentured laborers were similarly substituted for African slaves in the Americas; this succession, Van der Veer (1995) argues, was effective in undercutting African workers’ ability to bargain. As did their African and Chinese predecessors in Peru, Japanese immigrants responded
to the harsh working conditions and discriminatory treatment on the plantations by rebelling, protesting, and running away, and many of them even died there. Even after slavery and the “coolie” trade officially ended, colonial-style work relations persisted in Peru well into the late twentieth century. The plantation owners, mostly Italians, English, or Peruvians of European ancestry, generally mistreated Japanese immigrants, whipping them occasionally, delaying payments, and violating other conditions stipulated in their contracts (Irie, 1951).

Contrary to what the job advertisements stated, work conditions were so harsh, the climate and dietary conditions so different, and tropical diseases so prevalent that 150 out of 790 immigrants in the first group perished in epidemics before their four-year contracts expired (Irie, 1951). On one plantation, Casa Blanca, only 30 out of 226 Japanese immigrants were fit to work after three months (Peru Shimpo, 1975). By 1909 the death toll had increased to 7.6 percent, or 481 out of 6,292 migrants who were sent by emigration companies (Irie, 1951). Many others fell sick and fled the plantations. Even as they acknowledged these problems, emigration companies failed to step in and, in fact, continued to send emigrants to Peru (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975).

Upon fleeing or terminating their contracts, the majority did not return to Japan despite their intentions; within the first ten years after immigration, just 6 percent returned home, having been unable to save enough money (Peru Shimpo, 1975). Another 4 percent left for other countries such as Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, and the United States (Peru Shimpo, 1975). Some remained in Peru’s rural areas. Yet, farming opportunities beyond contract plantation work were limited for Japanese immigrants, arable lands belonged to the colonists, and the preestablished Spanish-controlled land system denied Japanese access to new lands. The decree of May 1910 clearly stipulated that “the colonists in the Sierra mountain region can only be Peruvians or Europeans” (Gardiner, 1975). Consequently, the majority of Japanese immigrants headed for urban centers such as Lima and its neighboring port city, Callao.

SETTLEMENT IN PERU: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

SOJOURNING AS URBAN MIDDLEMAN MERCHANTS

In 1909, ten years after the initial immigration, there were 493 Japanese in Lima (Fukumoto, 1997). Upon arriving in cities with little capital, limited
command of the language, and few personal contacts, Japanese immigrants became street vendors or domestic servants. Major industries were dominated by Europeans and Peruvians of European descent, because the Peruvian government permitted only Europeans to develop them (Vasquez, 1970). The immigrants observed the prevalence of foreign-owned stores, and as they amassed capital they established their own.

The host society’s efforts to undermine immigrants’ economic activities often resulted in their concentration in certain occupations (Bonacich, 1973). Just as Japanese immigrants in San Francisco and Buenos Aires were concentrated in the laundry business, so in Lima they started out as barbers. Barber shops required relatively little capital and skills and thus were easy for immigrants to start. The first Japanese-owned barber shop was opened in 1904, and within two years the number had jumped to 15 (Peru Shimpo, 1975). After the Japanese Barbers’ Association was established in 1907 as the first formal Japanese association, the number of Japanese-owned barber shops further increased. In 1914, 80 out of the 110 barber shops in Lima were owned by Japanese (72.7 percent), and by 1924 their share had increased to 73.9 percent (130 out of 176) (Peru Shimpo, 1975; Irie, 1951).

Gradually, Japanese immigrants expanded their businesses to other areas, notably small grocery stores, clothing stores, and restaurants, and established their status as a “successful middleman minority” (Gardiner, 1975). In 1930, 45 percent of Japanese immigrants were owners of small businesses, mostly in food-related enterprises (60 percent) such as grocery stores (20 percent) and cafés (11 percent), followed by barber shops (9 percent). They soon came to dominate certain sectors; by the late 1930s, three out of every four small coffee, candy, or refreshment shops were run by the Japanese (Alegria and Saco, 1942). Almost a quarter of the mechanical, watchmaking, and repair shops in Lima were Japanese, as were 42 out of 53 machine shops, 92 out of 192 restaurants, and 78 out of 114 bakeries (Morimoto, 1992). Among public market vendors and street peddlers, Japanese represented some 20 percent of the total, while Peruvians constituted 55 percent and Chinese 12 percent (Normano and Gerbi, 1943).

This high concentration in small businesses reflected, apart from a lack of alternatives, the immigrants’ desire to save as much money as possible before returning home. Unlike an industrial plant, a small business can be liquidated easily. Another reason for their success as merchants was the immigrants’ sojourning mentality. First, it encouraged them to be thrifty, relying on cheap or nonwage family labor (Bonacich, 1973). Their limited contact with the outside world helped them to save instead of spending money on social and cultural activities, and most of them used their stores for living quarters (Peru Shimpo, 1975). Second, it helped cultivate a sense of ethnic solidarity, since
they had little reason to assimilate, and this solidarity proved convenient for their businesses. In addition to the availability of cheap labor, their economic ties with Japan permitted access to Japanese producers of low-cost goods (Tigner, 1978), and numerous “ethnic” associations helped their businesses flourish. Above all, tanomoshi groups, small rotating-credit unions, played a key role in financing and expanding their businesses (Morimoto, 1979). By 1915 there were over 40 such groups, some of which later grew into formal financial institutions, immigrants often being unfamiliar with and denied access to Peruvian banks. These trust-based groups helped foster communal solidarity and a sense of ethnic identity and continued to be important half a century later, when Japanese-Peruvians, for the most part, still engaged in small businesses.

The immigrants’ ethnic solidarity was further reinforced by increasing hostility from the outside world. Middleman minorities throughout the world face increasing discrimination as they become economically successful (Zenner, 1991), and discrimination, in turn, reinforces their sojourning mentality. This dilemma lies in the nature of being middlemen, who feel alien in the very country where they exert economic influence (Bonacich, 1973). As resentment against them grew, it took on a racial tone. The Japanese merchants came to be known as chinos de la esquina (street-corner Chinese) and began to face animosity from the host society.

BECOMING A RACIAL MINORITY

The Japanese immigrants’ success led to their “racialization,” which, in turn, accelerated discrimination. The anti-Japanese movement produced various discriminatory measures against immigrants and eventually exploded in the racial riot of 1940.

Exclusionary measures. Resentment against the Japanese first surged among Peruvian workers. In 1917, Lima’s central labor union established the Anti-Asian Association and appealed to the president to abolish “yellow immigration” through its newspaper La Hoja Amarilla (The Yellow Page) (Suzuki, 1992). A series of discriminatory measures followed, mostly aimed at curtailing further Japanese immigration. The first such measure was the abolition of contract migration in 1923. The pretext for this was that a large number of Japanese immigrants had fled the plantations, but the truth was that demand for plantation labor had declined (Peru Shimpo, 1975). The end of contract migration made future Japanese immigration possible only by invitation by family members already residing in Peru. A 1936 decree restricted Japanese reentry into Peru (Peru Shimpo, 1975) and practically
halted Japanese immigration by limiting the number of qualified immigrants to 16,000 per nation (the number of Japanese in the country—20,385 in 1930—already exceeded the quota) and forbidding immigration of “racial groups.” Although this term was left undefined, it clearly targeted Asiatic and particularly Japanese immigrants (Peru Shimpo, 1975; Tigner, 1978). (Chinese immigration was similarly restricted; a 1909 agreement limited Chinese immigration to families of those resident in Peru, and two additional protocols [in 1932 and 1934] brought it to halt [Tigner, 1978]. Also, between 1923 and 1944, regulations were imposed on Chinese emigration and reentry [Wong, 1994].)

Legal restrictions extended to the realm of citizenship even among Peruvian-born children (thus Peruvian citizens) of Japanese immigrants. One year after the 1936 immigration law was introduced, the Peruvian government added another restrictive clause, prohibiting registration of any alien offspring born in Peru prior to 1936 (Barnhart, 1962; Suzuki, 1992). Thereafter, Japanese who had not registered the births of their children before 1936 were unable to do so. Not having proof of birth in Peru implied a denial of Peruvian citizenship. Moreover, a 1940 act introduced further restrictions on citizenship: second-generation immigrants who left Peru for their parents’ homeland to live, study, or undergo military training during their minority automatically lost their Peruvian citizenship. (This clause applied only to persons born in Peru of foreigners from jus sanguinis [blood-based citizenship] countries such as Japan [Barnhart, 1962].) Although the word “Japanese” nowhere appeared, these measures implicitly targeted the Japanese. That Japanese immigrants occasionally sent their children to Japan for their education was viewed as an act of betrayal and a sign of anti-Peruvian militancy.

Discriminatory measures also restricted economic activities. Although the Japanese were not the sole target, these measures were implicitly aimed at breaking the Japanese “monopoly” over various retail businesses in Lima (Normano and Gerbi, 1943). The most notorious was the “80 Percent Law” of 1932, which required that at least 80 percent of the employees in every business enterprise be Peruvian. The 1936 decree further restricted Japanese businesses by making it illegal to transfer business ownership (Peru Shimpo, 1975). In addition, the Japanese-Peruvian Commerce Treaty of 1928 was annulled in 1934, and imports of Japanese textiles were regulated (Normano and Gerbi, 1943). Funds in the hands of Japanese were frozen, while some Japanese-owned shops were expropriated and Japanese-held land leases were transferred to native Peruvians (Titiev, 1951).

Hostilities eventually extended into the realm of “culture,” with resentment being translated into the attachment to the Japanese of negative cultural
attributes. The Japanese, it was argued, were well suited to hard plantation work because, like all “Asian immigrants,” they were accustomed to working as semislaves (Vasquez, 1970). Since their standard of living was “as low as that of highland Indians” (Beals, 1935), they were “happy with the little they got” (Vasquez, 1970: 82). As Japanese immigrants became successful middleman merchants, their success was attributed to their “cunning,” “shrewdness,” and “stinginess.” La Crónica, an anti-Japanese newspaper, remarked in 1937: “They are dishonest and aggressive when it comes to money and they break laws. So, there is no way we can compete with Japanese merchants” (quoted in Peru Shimpo, 1975: 107). Alegria and Saco (1942: 83) argued in a foreign policy journal that stinginess was the secret of Japanese success: “They never go out to shows or events. Any clothing will do if it is clean. Their lives are dedicated to their work.” The former senator and anti-Japanese advocate Seoane (1943) also explained that the Japanese were successful because “Japanese barbers lived frugally, paid little rent, and charged less for a haircut than the Peruvian.” Such negative cultural characteristics were noted not only by Peruvian authorities but also by journalists and (pseudo-) historians (Nakamoto, 1988).

Since the Japanese were “racially” and “culturally” different, they were “naturally” unfit to adapt to Peruvian society: so went the argument in the lower house for the 1903 Japanese Exclusion Act. Pointing to the high Japanese death toll on the plantations, Peruvian officials concluded that they could not adapt to Peru and therefore should return to Japan immediately (Suzuki, 1992). In explaining “the Asiatic labor problem” in the context of increasing Japanese immigration to Peru, a congressman explicitly referred to the Japanese as “an alien race dissimilar in habits, morals, and process of thought” (in the American Review of Reviews, 1907: 622–623). Seoane (1943: 675) also pointed to the Japanese’s “obscure cultural practices,” describing the tanomoshi as “a strange procedure to obtain capital” and picture brides as “strange Japanese marriage practices.” He went on: “When there are no marriageable Japanese women available, young Japanese bachelors find their wives through ‘sweet-heart ships’ which bring Japanese girls in groups of 50 to 100 who smilingly greet their husbands even without having met them before” (674).

Such cultural characteristics were described as not only negative and different but also dangerous and threatening. First, it was suggested that rather than contributing to the Peruvian economy, the Japanese drained resources. According to a Peruvian statesman, they “earn, save, and send money home” (Alegria and Saco, 1942). Compared with the “Anglo-Saxon powers” (referring to white Europeans in general) who “sent immense capital to Peru to develop mines and factories, the Japanese solely sent labor, not capital”
(Alegria and Saco, 1942). “Unlike Anglo-Saxon immigrants, not a single Japanese name has endeared itself to Peruvian national feeling and not a Japanese is known but for his mercantile activities” (Normano and Gerbi, 1943).

Second, it was argued that the Japanese posed a threat to the Peruvian economy. This view became widespread especially in the 1930s after *La Prensa* waged a fierce campaign against “Japanese infiltration” (Gerbi, 1943; Suzuki, 1992). During the campaign, one editor of the paper insisted that the foods and drinks sold by the Japanese were poisonous. Nationalism was mobilized against this alleged danger; white Peruvians made statements such as “Even the manufacturing of *chicha*, an exclusively national drink of Peru, is now in the hands of the Japanese” (Zegarra 1941, quoted in Normano and Gerbi, 1943: 99).

Third, it was asserted that the Japanese posed a threat to Peru’s racial and national integration. According to former Foreign Minister Ulloa, Asiatics were “unsuited” to this “European” country and a “menace” to the “racial homogeneity of the Peruvian people” (Normano and Gerbi, 1943: 114) even though descendants of Europeans were clearly a numerical minority. Moreover, since they did not assimilate quickly into Peru’s European culture, the Japanese were considered a cultural threat. “Unlike well-assimilated Italians, Japanese did not speak Spanish or practice Catholicism” (*La Prensa*, quoted in Normano and Gerbi, 1943: 122). They did not even attempt to become integrated into Peruvian society; they participated in rotating-credit unions instead of depositing their savings in Peruvian banks, and not a single Japanese was listed among the foreign borrowers from the Banco Industrial, the major Peruvian bank, in 1941 (cited in Titiev, 1951; Seoane, 1943). *La Prensa* (quoted in Alegria and Saco, 1942: 84) also criticized the Japanese for their “closed and secretive” community:

In the Japanese schools in Lima, the child is taught that his primary allegiance is to Japan. These boys speak Japanese better than Spanish and feel themselves bound in no way to the country of their birth. The Japanese flag waves in the school below the Emperor’s portrait. The Japanese schools are always surrounded by high walls that prevent the passer-by from seeing within.

It was argued, moreover, that students in Japanese schools swore allegiance to Emperor Hirohito every day (Ulloa, cited in Normano and Gerbi, 1943: 123) and that the only social activities they engaged in were “the meetings of their Japanese societies and for their national festivity, the birthday of the Emperor” (Alegria and Saco, 1942: 83).

Japanese endogamy further stirred criticism. Unlike the Chinese, who came to Peru without wives and “mingled freely with natives,” the Japanese
were overwhelmingly endogamous (Normano and Gerbi, 1943). Peruvian marriage records for 1939 show that Japanese were the only national group that registered more endogamous marriages than mixed marriages to native Peruvians. According to Normano and Gerbi (1943), only 79 Chinese children were born of Chinese parents, as against 268 born of a Chinese father and a Peruvian mother. In contrast, out of 25 marriages involving Japanese men, 6 were to Japanese women and 19 were to “Peruvian-born Japanese.” Although the validity of these figures was questionable, since most Japanese were reluctant to register their marriages with the Peruvian authorities, their rates of endogamy were nevertheless high enough to be criticized as a sign of “disloyalty” to Peru.

In part, Japanese immigrants’ resistance to assimilation was due to their sojourning orientation; since they planned to return to Japan, they had little reason to develop lasting relationships with members of the surrounding host society (Bonacich, 1973). Also, it was a form of self-defense in a hostile environment (Nakamoto, 1988). One reason Japanese immigrants became small-business owners was that institutional barriers prevented them from establishing large businesses and engaging in agriculture on their own land. Similarly, the Japanese had to construct their own school in Lima because there were too few schools to accommodate even Peruvian nationals (Titiev, 1951). Regardless of their motivations, however, Japanese resistance to assimilation resulted in reinforcing the anti-Japanese movement in Peru. The cycle was self-perpetuating: attachment to the homeland was enhanced by host hostility and at the same time increased host hostility by being interpreted as a sign of disloyalty (Bonacich, 1973).

*Discrimination in context.* The series of anti-Japanese measures just described emerged at a time of a growing Japanese presence in terms of both demographic and economic influence. Between 1918 and 1930 the Japanese population in Peru grew from 9,890 to 20,385, faster than any other foreign group (Peru Shimpo, 1975). By 1925 the Japanese had become the largest foreign group in Peru, surpassing the Chinese and the Italians, who had been partially absorbed through intermarriage (Gerbi, 1943). Their presence was particularly noticeable because of their high concentration in cities; 87 percent were concentrated in Lima, constituting 32 percent of all foreign residents in the metropolitan area (Peru Shimpo, 1975). Perceiving this as a threat, native white Peruvians frequently exaggerated the size of the Japanese population. Although the 1940 census counted 25,000 Japanese citizens (Normano and Gerbi, 1943), Seoane (1943: 674) declared that there were over 50,000 Japanese, including “Peruvian-born Japs.” According to the 1933 *Enciclopedia Italiana*, Peru was “saturated with Japanese workmen.
and peasants,” although in reality the Japanese made up far less than 1 percent of Peru’s population (1933, vol. 17, p. 19, cited in Normano and Gerbi, 1943: 75).

Animosities against the Japanese further increased in the context of a growing trade imbalance between Peru and Japan. As a result of the rapid expansion of the cotton trade, Japan’s bilateral trade surplus increased from US$3.3 million in 1913 to US$74 million in 1937 and US$87 million in 1940 (Rippy, 1949). Adding remittances, as much as 113 million yen was drained out of Peru between 1916 and 1935 (Suzuki, 1992). Beals (1935) warned of this “threat” in an article entitled “Japan Invades Latin America.” Such criticisms intensified in the 1930s as Peru sank in the midst of a worldwide economic depression. Political instability following the end of Leguía’s 11-year-long dictatorial rule (1919–1930) further aggravated anti-Japanese sentiment.

During this period of economic and political instability in the 1930s, Peru experienced a wave of nationalism. The Great Depression and Leguía’s mishandling of the country’s finances galvanized the forces of the left. The nationalists attributed Peru’s growing economic and societal problems to the penetration of foreign capital, which had increased to US$400 million in the mid-1930s (Connell, 1995). Indeed, the United States, Peru’s major creditor, controlled most of its largest corporations, while the British dominated its principal railways, petroleum, mining, agriculture, manufacturing, and trade. Italians controlled 50 percent of Peru’s banking, Germans controlled nearly half the sugar production, and the Japanese predominated in the retail trades and in cotton production (Fortune, January 1938, pp. 124–126, quoted in Connell, 1995). The growing nationalist sentiment further aggravated the anti-Japanese movement (Gerbi, 1943).

Animosities against the Japanese in the Americas were intensified by the increasing Japanese presence on the continents and Japan’s military aggression in Asia during the 1930s. The United States viewed these expanding interests with uneasiness and, particularly through the Pan-American Conferences held between 1920 and 1940, encouraged Latin American countries to take measures against them (Rippy, 1949; Peru Shimpo, 1975; Connell, 1995). Having banned Japanese immigration in 1907, the United States had annulled Asians’ right to naturalize in 1917. The subsequent National Origins Act of 1924, intended to limit increasing immigration from southern and eastern Europe, also targeted the Japanese, whose economic success was viewed as a threat especially in the context of recession (Kumei, 1995). Following the lead of the United States, Central and South American countries introduced similar acts of exclusion. In Guatemala, Panama, Venezuela, and Paraguay, these laws excluded any “nonwhite race” (Rippy, 1949).
Argentina, which stated its preference for European immigrants in its constitution, also allowed no Japanese immigrants (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975). Likewise, Brazil, home to the largest Japanese population on the continent, passed anti-Japanese immigration legislation in 1923 (later blocked by the parliament by a small margin). It went on to enact the “2 Percent Law” in 1934, restricting Japanese immigration by setting immigrant quotas at 2 percent of each national group (Wakatsuki and Suzuki, 1975).

U.S. involvement spurred draconian discriminatory measures, particularly during World War II, in Peru. As an ally of the United States, Peru annulled its diplomatic relations with Japan as soon as the former went to war with Japan in 1941. This made the Japanese in Peru de facto enemy aliens, and anti-Japanese measures escalated with aid from the United States. Thereafter, all community institutions were disbanded, and Japanese-language publications and meetings of more than three persons were prohibited as spying (Peru Shimpo, 1975). Japanese-owned businesses were either expropriated or subjected to forced sale to the highest bidder, Japanese-owned deposits in Peruvian banks were frozen (Thompson, 1974), and land leases to Japanese (as well as Germans and Italians) were canceled by a 1942 law enacted jointly with the United States (Gerbi, 1943). The freedom of Japanese to travel outside their home communities was also restricted.

All these actions culminated in the deportation of 1,800 Japanese to U.S. detention camps. Mostly community and business leaders, these Japanese were blacklisted by the U.S. embassy in Peru, “kidnapped” by the Peruvian police, and shipped to Crystal City, Texas, together with 500 or so Japanese from other Latin American countries (Connell, 1995; Emmerson, 1978). Among the 11 Latin American countries, Peru was the major contributor to the Japanese deportation program. Home to 75 percent of people of Japanese origin on the Pacific side of South America and most aggressive in its efforts to eliminate them from its land, Peru quickly became the target of the United States, whose intention was to deport from Peru all 30,000 Japanese, both first-generation immigrants and the Peruvian-born second generation, regardless of citizenship (Connell, 1995). The program, justified in the name of national security to eliminate “dangerous enemy aliens,” was carried out in order to exchange them for U.S. soldiers detained by the Japanese army (Connell, 1995). The deportation program succeeded in debilitating the already damaged Japanese community institutions.

As hostility against the Japanese escalated in Peru, so did the process of racialization. “After all,” remarked Seoane (1943: 674), “even Peruvian-born children of Japanese immigrants were in reality ‘Japs’ in their spirit, their organization, will, and customs.” The Japanese were perceived as dangerous and problematic to Peru, as Guevara (1939) argued in his book The Biggest
National Problems. Moreover, they were considered racially inferior. The use of the concept of race aggravated and simultaneously justified a variety of discriminatory measures. This notion of racial difference and inferiority filtered through to the Peruvian public and ultimately exploded in a riot.

In May 1940 a mob of student-led protesters looted Japanese businesses and residences in downtown Lima one after another. During an entire day of looting, over 600 establishments—almost all Japanese businesses in Lima—were damaged (Peru Shimpo, 1975); dozens were injured and one Japanese was killed. The police failed to step in. The damage amounted to more than US$1.6 million (Gardiner, 1975; Peru Shimpo, 1975). In its extent and damage, this was the worst rioting in Peruvian history. Moreover, it was the first racially motivated riot to target a specific population. According to Peruvian officials, the rioters were mostly lower-class people acting out of envy of Japanese economic success (Connell, 1995). Whatever their motives, the riot became a symbol of racial hatred.

CONSEQUENCES OF RACIALIZATION: JAPANESE-PERUVIANS TODAY

The 1940 riot had significant and somewhat paradoxical consequences for the Japanese in Peru. It was a turning point, prompting the immigrants to reflect upon their community. For the first time, they recognized the need to open up to and become integrated into Peruvian society. Having lost much of their property, they had to start again from the beginning and give up any idea of returning home, at least any time soon. In addition, Japan’s defeat in World War II made it impossible to return to their devastated, poverty-stricken country, particularly to Okinawa, which was severely damaged by the ground battle there. Thus, the riot set a new direction for the Japanese immigrants and their community.

Paradoxically, however, it also reinforced their communal solidarity. As the “most traumatic event in Nikkei history” (Fukumoto, 1997: 521), Japanese-Peruvians continue to talk about it to this day and use it to express anger toward other Peruvians and to legitimize their “difference” from them. Those who experienced the event vividly remember the looting of their stores and their having hidden in nearby houses. Even those who did not experience it directly mention the riot whenever they talk about their history, discrimination, and suffering. A second-generation Japanese-Peruvian in his 50s asked me angrily, “Do you think you can trust those people who once attacked us and confiscated all of our properties?” According to a Japanese-Peruvian community leader, in a community-sponsored essay contest for children in

The riot was also a significant event for Japanese-Peruvians in reinforcing their fear of “outsiders.” Even 60 years later, Japanese-Peruvians continue to live in fear of a recurrence and try to maintain a low profile. Most of them did not support Fujimori during his first presidential election in 1990 for fear that his poor performance if elected might lead to another riot. It was the nation’s majority—the poorer indigenous and mestizo populations—who saw hope and change in this nonwhite candidate. Among ruling-class white Peruvians, his emergence as the first nonwhite presidential candidate created a considerable backlash. Some Japanese-Peruvians reported that their businesses were attacked during the election campaign; others were denied entry to exclusive discos and clubs (for whites) on racial grounds. Similarly, whenever there were anti-Fujimori protests on Lima’s streets in the 1990s, Japanese-Peruvians feared a second riot. As a legacy of discrimination, the riot provides them with a renewed sense of community with a distinct history.

The significance of the 1940 riot indeed reflects the salience of race in organizing Peruvian society. Although racial labels—“mestizo,” “Indian,” “white,” “Negro,” or “Asian”—have been eliminated from official documents such as the census and personal identification forms, the Peruvian government’s “race-blind policy” has not significantly diminished the salience of race or altered the racial order, with numerically few whites on top, the numerical majority of Indians at the bottom, and others in between.

Today, Japanese-Peruvians continue to be treated primarily in racial terms—as “Asians,” “Orientals,” or “Chinese.” A third-generation native of Lima recalled how he was bothered by his schoolmates: “They yelled at me, ‘chino, chino cochino’ (Chinese, dirty Chinese). I knew I looked different, but I hated it when others called me Chinese.” As a racial minority, Japanese-Peruvians are also treated as foreigners. They are often asked about Japan, about which they know nothing. When they travel, they are frequently treated as Japanese tourists, and when they travel to other South American countries they often impress natives with their command of Spanish. At the same time, they are immediately associated with (former) President Fujimori. Although he had no personal ties with the Japanese-Peruvian community, he quickly became “representative” of all Japanese-Peruvians (as well as Japanese in general) as the most famous “Chino” in Peru. In a way, the fact that he was elected president assured them of being accepted as full-fledged members of Peruvian society. As one second-generation Japanese-Peruvian said, “After Fujimori was elected, we felt we were finally accepted in this country. We didn’t vote for him [in 1990], so Peruvians themselves voted for this son of Japanese. They were saying that you are Peruvians just like us and you have
all the rights, including the right to govern the country.” Yet, they were also aware that whenever his opponents criticized him, the issue of national membership and, particularly, doubts about his “Peruvianess” came up (e.g., whether he was truly born in Peru). In criticizing the Fujimori government, a prominent (white) journalist occasionally made remarks such as “We should recover Peru for Peruvians.”

Japanese-Peruvians are distinguished by their physical appearance, which often stands out in a mostly Indian-mestizo country, and have been treated positively or negatively depending on the economic and political situation (see Lesser, 1999). Although Japanese-Peruvians perceive little racial discrimination today, their history of immigration and settlement as a racial minority has had a significant impact on the creation and maintenance of what is often described as a thriving and simultaneously a closed major racial ethnic community in Peru. Their racialization has increased as they have become economically successful; in a country where the majority of the population are poor Indian-mestizos, economically advantaged Japanese-Peruvians have a reason to want to remain a distinct racial minority.

NOTES

1. Yet, imin meant a “laborer”; according to the Encyclopedia of Japanese Diplomatic History, it referred to “people and their families who voyaged to countries other than China and Korea for the purpose of labor” (quoted in Kamei, 1995: 13).
2. See, for example, Nihon o Suteta Nihonjin (The Japanese Who Abandoned Japan) (Ishidoya, 1991), Suterareta Nihonjin (Abandoned Japanese) (Fujisaki, 1986), and Dominika Imin wa Kinin Datta (Japanese Immigrants to the Dominican Republic Were Abandoned People) (Konno and Takahashi, 1993).

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