Introduction

Jon Davidann, Paul F. Hooper, and Eileen H. Tamura

Hawai‘i has been a Pacific crossroads for centuries.¹ Good winds and skilled navigators brought Marquesans and Tahitians to Hawai‘i long ago. In the period of contact with westerners Hawai‘i became an economic crossroads. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the next, Europeans and Americans engaged in fur trader and whaler reprovisioning, and traders arrived for sandalwood, selling it to China until the forests were gone.² Thereafter, in what would become the most profitable of all these enterprises, they grew sugarcane and sold it in the huge American market. By the mid-nineteenth century, Hawai‘i’s location in the middle of the Pacific had made it a strategic crossroads for nations seeking global power. As the Native Hawaiian population declined, American expatriates involved in Hawai‘i’s plantation economy exerted increasingly greater economic and political influence. In 1893, with the help of U.S. Marines, they overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy, an illegal act that was followed five years later by another, when the U.S. government annexed the islands.³ In 1900, two years after annexation, the U.S. Congress passed the Organic Act, which created an American territorial government.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hawai‘i became a crossroads in other ways. The growing sugar industry led recruiters to search worldwide for plantation laborers. First to arrive were the Chinese, then the Portuguese, followed by the Japanese, Puerto Ricans, Koreans, Spaniards, and Filipinos. As a result of this large migration of workers who arrived during a period of seven decades, Hawai‘i has been a place in which non-Europeans constitute a majority. Today it is the only U.S. state with an Asian-Polynesian majority.

Within this unique mix, the Nikkei—ethnic Japanese, including immigrants and their children—had emerged by the early years of the twentieth century as the largest single ethnic group. Taking advantage of existing opportunities, in particular public education and the relative absence of rigid class barriers, they overcame most of the usual limitations on immigrant groups and formed the core of
what would become the Islands’ middle class. In turn, their entry into the middle class served as the foundation for the rise of the Nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans—to political, professional, and socioeconomic prominence in the years after World War II. As Japan’s largest and most significant emigrant group, Hawai‘i’s Japanese Americans provided Japan, which had become an important international power after World War I, with a welcome opportunity to expand international and intercultural contacts during the 1920s and 1930s, a time of far fewer such options than the present. For these reasons the Crossroads Conference, which focused on Hawai‘i’s role in the emergence of Japanese cultural and political internationalism during the interwar period, was conceived and held.

The roots of this conference involved the convergence of several different activities. Most important, the University of Hawai‘i’s Center for Japanese Studies, as part of its ongoing search for new information and interpretations, under the direction of Sharon Minichiello and her predecessors, developed a tradition of organizing and funding (with the support of various outside sources) academic conferences concerning Japan. By chance, she happened on a discussion in 1999 with Paul Hooper of the University’s Department of American Studies and George Oshiro of Tokyo’s Oberin University, then a Visiting Colleague in the Department of American Studies, who were collaborating on a book concerning the Institute of Pacific Relations and Japanese–American relations. The idea of a related conference emerged from this discussion. As a result, they formed a steering committee composed of Jim Cartwright, Paul Hooper, Sharon Minichiello, George Oshiro, Chieko Tachihata, and Eileen Tamura that met regularly to develop the conceptual framework for the conference under Center sponsorship. Subsequent publicity generated scholarly interest from many parts of the Pacific Region and, following the submission and review of proposed papers, the conference was held on August 8–10, 2001, with Professor Minichiello serving as chair and numerous observers as well as participants and discussants in attendance. After the conference, the Center approved a subvention for the publication of the proceedings and the University of Hawai‘i Press expressed interest in publishing the manuscript. Robert Huey, Minichiello’s successor as Center director, continued the pledge of institutional support for the publication of the conference proceedings, and Jon Davidann of Hawai‘i Pacific University assumed the editorial duties. The result is the present volume, a partnership of a diverse range of scholars. Paul Hooper and Jon Davidann are the only contributors who are not of Japanese ethnicity. The majority of the contributors live outside the United States. Most live in Japan, while others reside in Australia, and a few live in Hawai‘i. The very strong international flavor of the project has resulted in a book that has a broad perspective on events taking place in the Islands.
Some additional historical background is necessary in order to clarify the context for the chapters that follow. The key development in this regard came in the middle of the nineteenth century after the demise of the sandalwood trade and the fur and whaling re provisioning service and the subsequent search for new sources of income. Its roots were in the American Civil War. This struggle ended Southern sugar exports to the rest of the nation and sparked the growth of Island sugar production, an activity that had been of some earlier importance. With the development of large plantations on all of the major islands, the building of an impressive irrigation system to water the crop, the establishment of an array of milling and supply companies, and the creation of mainland transportation and refining arrangements, the industry grew to substantial export proportions. The new industry received a crucial boost in the 1870s with the signing of a reciprocity treaty with the United States, which allowed duty-free trade between the two countries and thus guaranteed Hawaiian sugar a highly favorable place in the vast American market, and also with the simultaneous entrance into the local sugar industry of Claus Spreckels, an entrepreneur who brought experience in the Euro-American sugar industries and substantial capital investment to the local industry. The end result was the growth of an industry that came to dominate the local economy—and to a large extent society—until well into the second half of the next century.

The importance of the development of the sugar industry with respect to connections between Japan and Hawai’i centers on the need for field and mill labor and the subsequent recruitment of large numbers of Japanese workers. Initially, Native Hawaiians had provided the labor, but epidemics of infectious diseases to which they had little or no immunity killed thousands. As noted earlier, laborers from a number of countries were recruited to fill the plantations’ labor needs. Among them, the Japanese were the most numerous.

There are good reasons for the success of the recruitment of Japanese laborers, and they begin with the changes that came in 1868 with Japan’s Meiji Restoration. As part of their effort to transform Japan from a feudal agricultural society into a modern industrial economy, Japan’s leaders imposed a new tax system on farmers that brought financial ruin to many of them and made emigration an attractive option. An initial attempt in 1868 to bring laborers from Japan—known as *gannen-mono* or “first-year men,” as they came during the first year of the Meiji era—was not successful, but the confluence of interests in the 1880s led to the subsequent arrival in the next four decades of some 180,000 men and women, until the 1924 Immigration Act put an end to all Japanese migration. While many of these sojourners returned to Japan and others migrated to the West Coast of the United States,
with the net effect that less than half of the original arrivals eventually settled in Hawai‘i, nonetheless by 1900 the Japanese had become the largest ethnic group in the Islands. Augmented by a substantial birth rate, they grew to constitute over 40 percent of Hawai‘i’s total population by the second decade of the twentieth century and remained the numerically dominant group until well after World War II. As Japan’s largest emigrant community, they were also of special interest and concern to Tokyo.

Most, but not all, Japanese sojourners arrived in the Islands contractually tied to three years’ labor at a designated sugar plantation until annexation prohibited the practice, and most subsequent migrants arrived with generally similar obligations. However, a significant part of these arrangements was the freedom to leave the designated employer once the contract had been fulfilled, and over the years, growing numbers did so. Among those who did leave the plantation but remained in Hawai‘i, some resettled in rural areas, while others moved to the towns. Eager to improve their economic conditions, the immigrants embarked on a variety of occupations. They grew vegetables and flowers, or became rice or coffee farmers, fishermen, mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, or shopkeepers. In the towns, they joined the few Japanese doctors, ministers, and other professionals who had migrated outside of the contract system.

As there was a relatively small middle class in Hawai‘i at the time, the Japanese faced fewer barriers than most immigrant groups elsewhere and were thus able to establish themselves in their new occupations rather quickly. Their offspring, the Nisei, who were American citizens by birth, took enthusiastic advantage of their right to public education and prepared themselves in a variety of fields. In the years before World War II, some became dentists, doctors, and nurses, and a few were able to push through hiring barriers to become engineers and lawyers; but most who sought professional employment went into teaching. Unlike the situation on the U.S. West Coast, the public school system in Hawai‘i willingly hired Japanese Americans, and it was primarily through the teaching profession that the Nisei during this period found a channel into the middle class.

None of this is to suggest that the route to economic improvement was free of difficulties for the Nikkei. Racial discrimination existed in various forms: unequal wages, the effort to abolish Japanese-language schools, obstacles to becoming American citizens, notions of Asian inferiority and the “yellow peril” and, however well-intentioned, a rather pervasive paternalism among those more friendly toward the group.

Given that the Nikkei comprised Hawai‘i’s largest and most visible ethnic group, the dominant force in the Islands’ emerging middle class, and Japan’s most important overseas community at the same time that Japan itself was emerging as an increasingly nationalistic and sensitive world power, it is no surprise that
the Hawai‘i–Japan connection grew ever stronger during the early years of the twentieth century. Japan was concerned from the outset of the Meiji era involvement with global affairs that its image abroad not be sullied by poor treatment of its emigrants, as had been—and continued to be—the case with China, and was concerned that the emigrants themselves bring their homeland no dishonor. These are the reasons Japan sought formal oversight of the immigrants via treaty at the end of the nineteenth century (a unique occurrence in the history of Hawaiian and American immigration), maintained a major Counsel General presence in Hawai‘i from the outset of the immigration era, encouraged the establishment of both Buddhist and Christian temples and churches, and supported the development of Japanese-language schools. In turn, the Nikkei community, especially the Issei—first generation—looked to Japan’s remarkable achievements with growing pride.

The relationship became troubled after the turn of the century due to tensions relative to such developments as strident anti-Japanese sentiment on the U.S. West Coast and the subsequent Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907–8, the failure of the Paris Peace Conference (at Versailles) to adopt a racial equality statement, the inferior position accorded Japan at the 1921–22 Washington Disarmament Conference, the drives toward Americanization in Hawai‘i and on the mainland, the total ban on Japanese immigration to the United States in 1924, and the subsequent military buildup by both countries in the Pacific. Adding to these tensions, at least from Japan’s perspective, was the fact the United States appeared not to treat these issues as seriously as did Japan, seeming only to be concerned with what they took to be Japanese aggression in Asia. The Japanese argued that its expansion was essentially a matter of gaining access to the resources required by any major power and thus not that different from the practices of the other industrial powers. Compounding these divisions, there were few options outside of formal diplomatic channels for exploring possible settlements, and these declined to nearly none with Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933. Hence, in Japan in particular, fear of a conflict threatening all post-Meiji progress grew.

Under these circumstances, Japan welcomed the opportunities Hawai‘i presented for expanded contacts, and Hawai‘i, home to a large and mostly sympathetic Nikkei community as well as then in the midst of a substantial internationalist movement and rather more understanding of Japanese concerns than the remainder of the country, was similarly responsive. Local educational institutions such as the University of Hawai‘i and Mid-Pacific Institute had become involved with Asia and also provided an audience and outlet as well as an interchange mechanism. Private international activism was at an all-time high through such organizations as the YMCA, the Pan-Pacific Union, the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association, and the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR). Through its influential international
conferences, the last group was conducting an ongoing private diplomacy program—“conference diplomacy” to use its term—that was arguably the only informal diplomatic channel of consequence left to Japan following its withdrawal from the League. Nor were contacts limited to the relatively small number of elite figures who participated in these institutional activities. Businessmen traveled between Japan and Hawai‘i conducting a substantial trade. College students from each locale began studying in the other. Hence, Hawai‘i proffered the best opportunity for Japan to explain itself to America generally, as Hawai‘i was the American community truly concerned with maintaining good Japanese relations, something many from throughout the Islands endeavored to promote up to the time of the outbreak of hostilities at Pearl Harbor.

Needless to say, these hopes were shattered on December 7, 1941, but the Japan–Hawai‘i connection that underlaid them remains important, informative, and above all compelling. Its further exploration is the rationale for the Crossroads Conference and this book of proceedings.¹⁰

Notes

1. Historians of the American West have explored a concept similar to the crossroads concept used in this book. They have studied the problems of boundaries and borderlands in the context of the American government’s wars against Native Americans and also the expansion of pioneers to the West. They have exposed the clash of cultures and a middle ground in Indian–white relations, which are in some ways similar to the concept of a Pacific Community discussed in this volume. See Richard White, The Middle Ground (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Patricia Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987) explores the intersections of race, Indian–white relations, gender, and American government’s role in the West.


3. The overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1893 and the subsequent annexation in 1898 violated treaties between the United States and the Hawaiian Kingdom and therefore violated international law on treaties and the U.S. Constitution, which states in Article VI that all treaties are the “Supreme Law of the Land.” In 1993 Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed PL 103-150, which admitted that the U.S. government had illegally invaded and occupied the Kingdom of Hawaii. See Francis A. Boyle, “Restoration of the Independent Nation State of Hawaii under International Law,” St. Thomas Law Review 7 (1994–95): 727–38.

4. The Reciprocity Treaty was renewed in 1887, with the added provision that the Hawaiian Kingdom would permit the United States to use Pearl Harbor as a naval base.
King Kalākaua was forced to sign the treaty, having lost most of his power as a result of what is called the Bayonet Constitution.


7. For graphs showing proportional representation of Japanese and other ethnic groups in various professional occupations, see Tamura, Americanization, 211–34.


10. The exception is Jon Davidann’s essay, “Colossal Illusions,” which was published previously in Journal of World History. It is included because of its relevance to the theme of this volume.