The Legend of Okei:

How a Young, Faceless Nursemaid became the Face of the Japanese American Population of California

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On a small hill located just outside Placerville, California stands a marble headstone that reads “In Memory of Okei Died 1871, Aged 19 Years. (A Japanese Girl),” with a Japanese translation on the back side. On Mount Seaburi in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan, there is an exact replica of this headstone. These matching tombstones represent an important point of connection between Japan and the United States. In the year 1869, a young girl named Okei traveled from the province of Aizu-Wakamatsu in the northern mountains of Japan’s biggest island, Honshu, to the recently established gold mining town of Placerville, California in a desperate attempt to start a new life with a small number of other Japanese people. In 1871, two short years later, Okei died and was buried atop a hill, where she was rumored to take evening walks while singing songs from her

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1 The headstone in California is not the original headstone, but an exact replica of the original, which had cracked about a decade ago. The original headstone could be taken out and flipped around so the Japanese side could face out when appropriate (for visits from Buddhist and Shinto priests or other similar events). The gravesite in Japan has the Japanese side facing out, and the English translation on the back side.
2 Photo taken by Christina Sumprer on June 13, 2017 in Placerville, California.
4 Herb Tanimoto, Interview by Christina Sumprer, June 15, 2017. Although her gravestone reads “Okei,” and oral history refers to her as “Okei,” there has been discussion about whether or not this was her true name or not. Her name could have been “Keiko,” which “Okei” would have been a respectful nickname for. Putting the character “お” (pronounced “o”) before something is a sign of honor and respect in the Japanese language.

When Okei and her fellow colonists were jolted from their peaceful lives by the Boshin War, they were lead across the Pacific Ocean to California by a Prussian man named John Henry Schnell. The aim of Schnell and the colonists was to establish a farm where they would produce tea and silk by growing tea and mulberry plants, raising silk worms, and manufacturing the final products themselves. However, despite the colony’s original success, it failed within two years of its establishment. Schnell and his family left, claiming they were going to aquire more financial support to keep the colony up and running, but failed to return. Colonists slowly started to disappear until only two were left at the colony. Sakurai Matsunosuke and Okei stayed at the colony and eventually moved in with and worked for the owners of the neighboring ranch, the Veerkamps. Matsunosuke worked under the employment of the Veerkamps until his death in 1901, establishing himself as a hard worker and well-respected and treasured member of the Veerkamp family. Okei was also well-liked by the Veerkamps, but her death unfortunately came much sooner. She was buried at the peak of her favorite hill, and her grave has been cared for by the Veerkamp family for the past 140 years, until the land was purchased by the American River Conservancy in 2010.\footnote{Ibid, 1-2. All the information in this paragraph comes from this source, which is the official history of the Wakamatsu colony and is posted on their official website. This history was written by the Executive Director of the American River Conservancy.}

During the second half of the twentieth century, interest in the Wakamatsu colony began to rise.\footnote{According to a comment on an online newspaper article, Okei’s grave was “rediscovered” by a Japanese Immigrant woman named Kiyoko Fukumoto Hainsworth in the seventies. Hainsworth continued to do some research on Okei and brought her story to light which helped the story of Wakamatsu become popular in the} Americans of Japanese descent began to take interest in the history of the first Japanese
immigrants coming to the United States, as well as the Wakamatsu Colony’s role in the beginning of permanent Japanese migration to the United States, and to California in particular.\(^8\)

It has been recognized by both the state of California and the Japanese American Citizens League as the first Japanese settlement in the United States.\(^9\) Japanese Americans and “tourists from Japan…. Visit the Wakamatsu monument and Okei’s grave at Gold Hill” in an effort to discover the very beginning of their ties to California and to honor the dedicated young girl who helped to begin it all, but was unable to live her life to the fullest and see the results of her hard work.\(^10\)

Despite the Wakamatsu Colony’s importance in the history of permanent Japanese immigration to the United States and its significance in the lives of Japanese Americans, historians have all too often glossed over the colony’s existence. Much of the scholarly work on Japanese immigration begins its timeline in the 1880s, completely ignoring the Wakamatsu Colony and its contribution to immigration, probably because of its small size and lack of success. There has been very little scholarly work on the colony itself; the body of works is limited to some short histories and unpublished work done by the docents at the Wakamatsu Colony.\(^11\) This lack in scholarly secondary sources, along with many of the available sources

\(^{8}\) Ibid, 2.
\(^{9}\) “Boxer Introduces Bill to Preserve 1st Japanese Settlement,” Mountain Democrat (Placerville, CA), August 12, 2009.
\(^{10}\) Bill Dillinger, “The Legend of Okei,” in Sierra Heritage.

\(^{11}\) The onsite historians at the Wakamatsu Colony’s location in Placerville are Herb Tanimoto and Wendy Guglieri. Herb travels to the Bancroft Library at University of California Berkeley to research the history of the colony whenever he can. He and Wendy have put together a comprehensive collection of photos, documents, and maps in attempts to piece together the unknown history of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony. However, most of their published work is in the form of articles for the American River Conservancy newsletter and informational pamphlets. Herb also recently published a historical fiction novel about Okei-san and the Wakamatsu Colony, titled Keiko’s Kimono, in 2016.
being riddled with inconsistencies and conflicts, has made the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony a very elusive topic for research.

The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony has managed to captivate audiences across continents, and yet lacks a strong presence in the scholarly realm. The purpose of this paper is to find the reason why the Wakamatsu colony has been so important to the Japanese American population in California, in the broader United States, and in Japan, and to interrogate why Okei, a seemingly unimportant colonist, became the spiritual figurehead through which the story of the colony is told. The Wakamatsu colony has provided a point in history for the people of Japanese descent in the United States to claim as their own in a country where they feel they are outsiders, despite their status as American-born citizens. Okei has become the face of the colony because her identity as a colonist, while she is known by name, is just vague enough for anyone to be able to identify with her.

Before diving into the rich history and culture surrounding the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony, it is important to understand the cultural context behind the colony and situate its existence within Japan’s history. Japan had kept itself successfully isolated from most of the rest of the world (except for some trade with other East Asian countries, and very limited interactions with the Dutch) for two and a half centuries during the Tokugawa reign. However, in July of 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Japan with his powerful black ships in tow, and offered Japan an extremely unbalanced trade agreement. Japan did not have the military power to effectively resist Western countries, who had modern technology and weaponry on their side, and were forced to accept the uneven trade deal. Japan was in turmoil over how to deal with this new encroachment of Western forces that could not be stopped. Disagreement over how to
handle the situation led to internal political unrest, and opened the door for a revolution to happen.12

In 1868, the Meiji Restoration took place. There was much upheaval about modernization in Japan after the West’s forced entry, and the Meiji Restoration was partially a response to this “expansion of the West [into] Asia.”13 Many of Japan’s citizens had realized they were far behind Western countries in regards to modern advancements in military, government, and society; these same citizens did not believe the Shogun was handling the situation well, or that the Shogunate was an effective form of government in the modern era Japan had been forced to enter. There were four domains, Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen, that “actively challenged Tokugawa rule,” while most of the other domains “waited on the sidelines” to see who would come out on top in this power struggle.14 Only a few remaining domains, including Aizu, continued actively supporting the Tokugawa Shogunate.15 The battle between the supporters of the Meiji and supporters of the Tokugawa would be referred to as the Japanese Civil war, or the Boshin War.16

The ruling daimyo of Aizu, Matsudaira Katamori, had close family relations with the Tokugawa family which had been present for many years, and Lord Matsudaira felt an obligation to remain loyal to his family.17 Lord Matsudaira did not believe the Meiji Restoration would succeed, but he was proved wrong by a devastating defeat.18 The city of Aizu was destroyed and

13 Ibid, 405.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 4.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
many of its people killed. Large numbers of those who were not killed fled into the mountains or to other cities in attempts to escape with their lives. A small group of survivors, however, were led across the Pacific Ocean to the United States by a Prussian man named John Henry Schnell in hopes of starting a new life by establishing a farming colony.\textsuperscript{19}

John Henry Schnell and his brother Edward Schnell were foreigners who had come from Prussia to Japan as businessmen. John Henry Schnell worked for the German Legation and sold Western firearms and technology to daimyo while Edward Schnell worked for the Dutch Legation\textsuperscript{20} and as a cartographer.\textsuperscript{21} John Henry Schnell sold weaponry to Lord Matsudaira, for use against the Meiji leaders, and trained his samurai on the usage of Western firearms.\textsuperscript{22}

Because of the enormous support John Henry Schnell provided for Lord Matsudaira and his domain, Schnell was granted an honorary Japanese name (Hiramatsu Buhai\textsuperscript{23}, which used the same Kanji as Matsudaira’s name), samurai status and swords, a house in Aizu-Wakamatsu, and was allowed to marry a Japanese woman of the samurai rank.\textsuperscript{24}

However, once Aizu-Wakamatsu lost the Boshin War, Schnell no longer had any sort of protection from the Meiji leaders, who knew exactly how he had been supporting their main opposing force, and knew he had to flee Japan if he wished to keep his life.\textsuperscript{25} He and Lord

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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 123.
\textsuperscript{21} Herb Tanimoto, Interview by Christina Sumprer, June 15, 2017. Edward Schnell made a map of the world while working as a cartographer. University of California Berkeley’s Bancroft Library has a print of it.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Matsudaira worked together to plan out and establish the colony, with Matsudaira providing the financial support needed to fund the initial launch of the colony as well as maintenance of the settlement.26 Matsudaira and Schnell chose Northern California to be the location of their future colony, thinking that the climate would be similar to that of Northern Japan, since they were on the same degree of latitude, and would thus be easy for the crops to adapt to.27 It was also likely that Schnell and Matsudaira had seen what little Japanese literature there was on the United States; this literature described California as a land of opportunity and as a place with fertile soil and a mild climate perfect for growing crops.28 With such a glowing recommendation from dependable Japanese sources, California must have seemed like the ideal place to begin an agricultural life anew.

Once the planning was complete in 1869, Schnell, his wife, and infant daughter arrived in Yokohama with a small group of colonists to board the steamship China, which would carry them and their “thousands of tea plants, mulberry trees, silk worms, and other traditional crops” to San Francisco, California.29 From San Francisco, they traveled to Sacramento, and then on to Placerville, where the 160 acres of land30 they had purchased from Charles Graner awaited them

26 Ibid.
30 The number of acres that were purchased from the Graner family by John Henry Schnell has appeared as many different numbers from several different reputable sources; the number generally ranges from 150-200 acres, so the actual amount of land purchased was probably in between these amounts. Included on the purchased land was a house and several other buildings for farming purposes. The original Graner House still stands and is currently being renovated and furnished with period furniture and appliances. There is a barn/slaughterhouse that, according to Veerkamp oral tradition, is located in its original location where it was during the Wakamatsu Colony’s existence. The building, however, is not original, as the original structure was destroyed by a cyclone in 1897. It was rebuilt using wood from the original structure.
just outside the town. Two more small groups of colonists from Japan would follow this same route in the coming months to join Schnell at the farm in Gold Hill.  

The colony’s main products were to be tea and silk, as those were Japan’s main exports and Schnell thought it would be very profitable to produce them outside of Japan and within the United States. Many of the colonists had been farmers occupationally in Japan, and had the skills to plant and take care of the mulberry trees, tea plants, and assorted other crops. With the expert knowledge and dedicated hard work of the colonists, the Wakamatsu colony at first thrived. The colony successfully and proudly displayed their crops and silk at the “1869 California State Agricultural Fair in Sacramento [and] the 1870 Horticultural Fair in San Francisco,” and won much admiration from the Northern Californian population. The Wakamatsu colony was well on its way to achieving its dream.

However, the brilliant success of the colony did not last for long. California’s climate was not as similar to Japan’s as Schnell had originally hoped; it was hot and dry in comparison to Japan’s extremely humid climate. Soon after their arrival, a devastating drought hit Northern California, further escalating the issue of keeping the crops sufficiently watered. Additionally, the colony may have had conflicts with miners in the area, who siphoned off their water supply.

32 “The Japanese Settlement: Schnell’s Japanese – Town of Wakamatz – Their Industry – Pisciculture – Wax Tree – Rice, Bamboo, Tea, Etc.,” Daily Alta California (San Francisco, CA), June 16, 1869. California newspapers published very positive reports on the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony because of their intentions to produce tea and silk. California was very eager to be able to support itself and be independent from other states, and the Japanese colony added a new crop that would be able to support them in this quest. Additionally, newspapers reported that these Japanese colonists did not interfere with any existing occupations, and were therefore not a threat to the European Americans who had already settled in California.
further intensifying their need for water.\textsuperscript{35} Placerville, formerly known as “Hangtown” due to its seemingly lawless population and consistent hangings of outlaws, had numerous problems with miners causing trouble for local farmers and other business owners. Although Schnell worked hard to keep their lack of success hidden from the surrounding population, the colony could not save their crops from the hostile environment and drought, and had no products to show for all their hard work, eventually revealing the failure of the colony.

The other major problem the colony experienced was a lack of funding. Because the colony was unable to produce any crops or silk, they had nothing to sell in order to make money to buy more supplies. At the same time, their biggest financial supporter Lord Matsudaira, had given up his title and wealth to the Meiji state in exchange for his life and could no longer fund the colony and its endeavors.\textsuperscript{36} Schnell then gathered up his family and claimed that he was returning to Japan in an attempt to find more funding to continue the colony. However, he was never to be heard from again.\textsuperscript{37} It is likely that Schnell, with his past of lying to newspapers about the success of the colony, never planned on returning to the Wakamatsu colony, but had intended to flee from it and start another business venture elsewhere.


\textsuperscript{36} The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony farm, America’s First Issei: the Original Japanese Settlers,” (Informational Pamphlet, American River Conservancy, 2016), 8. Matsudaira Katamori became a Buddhist monk after giving up his title and wealth, and lived out the rest of his days in a temple.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. It is still unknown where he went when he left the colony. There are hypotheses that he went back to Japan and was killed for his support of the Tokugawa Shogunate, he returned to Japan and lived the rest of his life in anonymity, he moved to somewhere else in the United States, or he returned to his homeland in Europe. There was a claimed sighting of Schnell in Switzerland, but it has never been proven.
When the colony began failing, the Wakamatsu settlers began to leave and attempted to find jobs elsewhere. After Schnell left, all but two of the remaining colonists left the farm in hopes of finding better prospects outside the colony. The fate of every colonist is not known, but it is believed that some of them returned to Japan, missing their families and homeland, while others searched for a place in the United States to continue their lives. One colonist, Kuninosuke Masumizu, married a woman of African and Blackfoot Native American descent named Carrie Wilson. Kuninosuke moved to Sacramento with his wife, where he became a farmer and fisherman, and opened up his own fish shop. Because of his ability to speak Japanese, Spanish, and English, he was hired as a part-time interpreter in state capitol’s courts. He continued to live in the area until his death in 1915, and his descendants still live in the greater Sacramento area.

Figure 3
Kuninosuke Masumizu.
Photograph provided by the American River Conservancy.

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38 In 2014, a Japanese schoolgirl, Naori Shiraishi, discovered that one of her ancestors had been a Wakamatsu colonist while doing an ancestry research project for school. The colonist was named Ofuji Matsugoro and he returned to Japan where he continued his life and his family still lives. This is the first evidence found that proves that some colonists had returned to Japan after the failure of the colony.

39 Carrie Wilson was said to be over six feet tall and towered over her husband, who was over a head shorter than her. Their descendants still live in the Sacramento area.


41 Ibid.
The other two colonists whose fates are known were Sakurai Matsunosuke\textsuperscript{42} and Okei. They both stayed with a neighboring family, the Veerkamps, serving as a farmhand and a nursemaid respectively. Matsunosuke, known affectionately by the Veerkamp family as “Matsu,”\textsuperscript{43} worked for the Veerkamps until his death in 1901.\textsuperscript{44} He became a well-loved and respected member of the Veerkamp family, and was entrusted with many important tasks during his employment. Okei, who came over to the United States as a nanny for Schnell’s young daughters, worked as a nursemaid for the Veerkamps. She was “bright, and… learnt needlework and cooking from [Louisa Veerkamp], who was very fond of her,” and was described by Henry Veerkamp as “a nice girl, and when she wore Japanese kimono she was really beautiful.”\textsuperscript{45} Unfortunately, Okei died soon after the failure of the colony. In 1871, she fell ill

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{MatsunosukeSakurai.jpg}
\caption{“Matsunosuke Sakurai (pictured here in his work clothes).”}
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\textit{Bill Dillinger, “The Legend of Okei,” in Sierra Heritage, 35.}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item It is believed that Sakurai Matsunosuke was a former samurai. It is unknown if this was actually true, but it has been passed down orally by the Veerkamp family.
\item Unpublished work, no author or title. This source is what looks like a page from a book in the process of being edited. It includes an interview with Inez Veerkamp, whose father knew Matsunosuke well. She also reported that her father often talked about the wonderful garden that Matsunosuke grew, and how wonderful a gardener he was.
\item Henry Veerkamp, quoted in John Van Sant, “The Wakamatsu Colony: From Aizu to Gold Hill,” (doctorate paper, University of Oregon, 1992), 12. It has been hypothesized that Louisa Veerkamp may have been grooming Okei to become a wife to one of her sons, probably Henry since he was the closest in age to her. This may be where some of the (possibly) imagined romance between Henry Veerkamp and Okei comes from.
\end{enumerate}
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(possibly with malaria)\textsuperscript{46} and died at age 19. She was buried on the site of the Wakamatsu colony, on what was known to be her favorite hill, and was given a wooden grave marker. However, after fifteen years of saving and borrowing from friends, Matsunosuke bought a proper headstone for Okei, which lasted almost a century but had to be replaced when it cracked in the twentieth century. Okei was the first Japanese woman to die and be buried on United States soil.

The Veerkamp family purchased the land the Wakamatsu colony had occupied and incorporated it into their own ranch. They continued to live on and maintain the property, farming some of the same crops (those that had succeeded), that the colonists had originally planted and tended. The Graner house that had been the headquarters for the Wakamatsu colony served as a house to different branches of the Veerkamp family for several generations.\textsuperscript{47} The Veerkamp family maintained Okei’s gravesite, keeping it clean and trimming the plants around it back, so the headstone would remain visible. Once the Veerkamps began to keep cattle that were free to roam around the property, they put up railing around the gravesite so cows wouldn’t use the headstone to scratch themselves and destroy it in the process.\textsuperscript{48} The Veerkamp family continued maintenance of the Wakamatsu colony until the American River Conservancy

\textsuperscript{46}Wendy Guglieri, Interview by Christina Sumprer, June 15, 2017. It is hypothesized that the Schnells did not take Okei with them because she was already ill when they left. Thus, because malaria is known to come back in several bouts, it is thought that Okei may have had malaria.

\textsuperscript{47}“The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony farm, America’s First Issei: the Original Japanese Settlers,” (Informational Pamphlet, American River Conservancy, 2016), 10.

\textsuperscript{48}Herb Tanimoto, Interview by Christina Sumprer, June 15, 2017. Stories of Wakamatsu were passed down orally through the Veerkamp family. Okei was often described as a “Japanese princess,” and was heavily romanticized in the stories told through the generations. The generations of Veerkamps may have felt a special connection the Okei and the Wakamatsu colony, and felt obligated to maintain her gravesite.
purchased\textsuperscript{49} the land in hopes of helping to preserve and refurbish it for future generations to visit.\textsuperscript{50}

On December 16, 1966, the Division of Beaches and Parks of California’s Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee “recognized the ‘Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony’ as an episode of historical significance.”\textsuperscript{51}

A monument and plaque were placed and dedicated in the centennial year of 1969 by California Governor Ronald Reagan.\textsuperscript{52}

Governor Reagan gave a speech at the dedication ceremony, acknowledging the “contributions of the Japanese to [the] California way of life” and declaring 1969 to be the official centennial of Japanese immigration to the United States.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{49} “Conservancy Acquires first Japanese Colony Site,” \textit{Mountain Democrat} (Placerville, CA), November 12, 2010. The purchase of this land in an attempt to preserve the colony site was supported by many organizations, inside and outside the United States, including but not limited to: the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan; the Japanese American Citizens League; the Japanese American Historical Society; the California Rice Commission; the Placer Land Trust; the Consul General of Japan; the Sierra Nevada Conservancy; People to People International; the California Cultural and Historical Endowment; and the California Office of Historic Preservation.

\textsuperscript{50} “The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony farm, America’s First Issei: the Original Japanese Settlers,” (Informational Pamphlet, American River Conservancy, 2016), 10. The ARC hopes to renovate the old barn to create an event space open to the public to rent, as well as renovate and refurbish the Graner house with period furniture to create a more exciting attraction for tourists and a more useful tool for teaching and learning about Wakamatsu.

\textsuperscript{51} “Wakamatsu Colony Centennial: 100 Years of Japanese in America,” (Informational Booklet for the Centennial celebration of the Wakamatsu colony, 1969).

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. The monument consisted of one large boulder, with the dedication plaque on it, and three smaller boulders, which represented the four main islands of Japan. The large boulder represented the largest island, Honshu, whereas the three smaller boulders represented the three smaller islands: Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
to enhance the preservation of the colony were brought to the National level, and the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as well as the California Register of Historical Resources.\(^{54}\) By granting this title to the Wakamatsu colony, the United States national government acknowledged its cultural importance and the need to preserve it for future generations. In early 2010, California Senator Barbara Boxer introduced the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act in an attempt to further recognize and preserve the colony’s history. Unfortunately, despite being introduced twice, the bill was never passed.\(^{55}\) However, its recognition by a state senator has brought its historical significance to the Japanese American community to light and has provided more opportunities to preserve the colony’s history.

Thanks to the Veerkamp family’s careful maintenance of Okei’s gravesite and the Graner house, as well as the government’s preservation attempts, these historical landmarks are available for the public to visit. Many of the people who come to visit Okei and the Wakamatsu colony are of Japanese descent, either Japanese Americans or tourists from Japan\(^{56}\) itself.\(^{57}\) Okei’s gravesite has often been the site of religious ceremonies, conducted by Buddhist priests from all over the United States and Japan, which are performed in order to honor Okei.\(^{58}\) Some of the Japanese American visitors from the Northern California area (as well as the rest of the


\(^{55}\) “Boxer Introduces Bill to Protect Wakamatsu Settlement in Gold Hill,” *Mountain Democrat* (Placerville, CA).

\(^{56}\) Kiyoko Fukumoto-Hainsworth, *Kiyoko: Memoirs of Sajima’s Daughter*, (Hapa Studios, 2016), 151-152. The NHK Broadcast (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, or Japanese Broadcast Corporation) made a documentary about Okei and the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony to be broadcast in Japan. They contacted local Japanese immigrant, Kiyoko Fukumoto-Hainsworth, and interviewed her about Okei’s life and her own. This documentary was broadcast for the NHK’s 50\(^{\text{th}}\) anniversary.


\(^{58}\) Ibid.
United States) use the Wakamatsu colony to figure out exactly where they belong in a society that sees them as foreigners in the country where they were born. Citizens of Japan frequently visit Okei’s gravesite as well; they often represent tourists from her home province of Aizu-Wakamatsu, where she is more well-known than elsewhere in Japan.59

Before beginning an analysis of how the Wakamatsu Colony has affected the lives of Japanese Americans, it is necessary to contextualize the Japanese American experience within the rich history Japanese Americans have in the United States, as immigrants, Nisei, sansei, and so on. In the current political environment of the United States, Japanese Americans are sometimes made to feel foreign and alienated in their birth country, and thus that they do not belong in the United States.60 The Wakamatsu colony, the site of the very first Japanese settlement in the United States, provides a sense of belonging to Americans of Japanese descent. That sense of belonging comes from having a shared history; Japanese have been settled in the United States for over a century, and thus, when Japanese Americans are told to “go back to their country” by hateful and racist Americans, they have a sense of history that provides evidence that this is their country. There is a community of Japanese Americans in Northern California and beyond, searching for a sense of belonging and a place that makes them feel at home, that has gathered around the Wakamatsu colony as their anchor to the United States.

59 The motives of Japanese citizens for visitation of Okei’s gravesite probably stem from a desire to learn about Japan’s history and how it came to interact with other countries after so many years of isolation and what the results and repercussions of those interactions were.

60 It is important to acknowledge that I am a white scholar who is attempting to navigate research about Japanese Americans. As a white person, I cannot truly understand how Japanese Americans feel in our society. However, I have done my best to get my information about how Japanese Americans feel from academic articles written by Japanese (and sometimes authors of other Asian descent, when applicable) to keep my perspective as up-to-date as possible as well as my claims as true as possible. However, some of my sources do come from a white perspective. I attempt to take this into account in my analysis.
While the Wakamatsu colony was one of the very first organized groups of Japanese settlers to come to the United States, significant migration from Japan to the United States did not begin until about a decade after the colony had failed. Before 1885, it was illegal for Japanese citizens to emigrate from Japan (which, of course, means that it was illegal when the Wakamatsu colonists immigrated to the United States), and thus not many Japanese had come to the United States before this. Many of the Japanese who came over were agricultural laborers, and stayed in this field, spreading across California and becoming a very large and important source of its agricultural labor for many decades.

When Japanese immigrants began to come to the United States in large numbers, most of them were young, male laborers, with only a few families with women and children. This, along with inherited “anti-Chinese discrimination,” led to a distaste for and a distrust of Japanese immigrants by European Americans. Public outcry against Japanese immigrants “invading” schools (an extremely exaggerated statement) led the United States government to pass laws limiting Japanese immigration, which neither “[ended] immigration or [checked] the West

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64 Ibid. Earlier in the nineteenth century, massive amounts of Chinese immigrants had come to the United States, especially California. The European Americans, who had also just migrated to the West Coast, were very displeased with the Chinese immigrants, believing that they were stealing jobs and money from the white people and then going back to China with it, rather than staying in the United States and helping to build the economy there. Additionally, most of the Chinese immigrants were young, male laborers, and were often perceived as very rowdy, unpleasant, and a danger to white women. Many of the Chinese women that came to the United States were prostitutes and this was not received favorably by European Americans either. This resulted in a series of laws banning Chinese immigration. The Japanese immigrants that came later inherited this negative sentiment.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid. The United States wanted to maintain friendly relations with Japan and did not want to harm their relationship by banning Japanese Immigration. Thus, the United States proposed the Gentlemen’s Agreement, where the United States declared they would not formally ban Japanese Immigration, a long as Japan only granted
Coast agitation against the Japanese.”\textsuperscript{67} Japanese and European American became even worse during World War II, when a national distrust of anyone of Japanese heritage developed, due to their role with the Axis powers.

While attitudes towards Japanese Americans became less blatantly racist by the end of the twentieth century, they have not become completely positive. Japanese Americans, along with other light-skinned, East Asian Americans, are often perceived as a “model minority” and receive many microaggressive, racist comments based upon the stereotypes of this status. This means that Japanese Americans are believed to have made “rapid achievements educationally and occupationally,” and become very successful despite their minority status.\textsuperscript{68} Their “model minority” status has also perpetuated the stereotype that they are “passive, industrious, respectful, patient, [and] intelligent,” no matter how they are treated.\textsuperscript{69} The perpetuation of these stereotypes by the model minority myth is dangerous because it influences non-Asians to expect Asian Americans to follow the stereotype and pressures Asian Americans to “act in accordance with the stereotype.”\textsuperscript{70} This, along with fetishization of Japanese women and Japan as a whole, has done much damage to the Japanese American population. They are made to feel as constant foreigners and are often ignored in political and social movements because of their “model minority” status.\textsuperscript{71} These constant social pressures make Japanese Americans feel isolated and foreign in their own country of origin. They do not have many places or events that make them passports to immigrants the United States would want (women, children, skilled laborers, and others who seemed likely to stay in the United States permanently) in an attempt to avoid the situation that had developed with Chinese immigrants.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 48.
feel as though they belong here in this country, and the Wakamatsu colony provides a point central to the Japanese American population and its development in the United States, where they can create a sense of common history among themselves.

With the discrimination Japanese Americans, as well as other minority groups in the United States, face on an everyday basis, it can leave them feeling as though their identity prevents them from belonging anywhere. As a person of Japanese descent, they can be made to feel like foreigners in the United States because of how they look and the customs they may have carried over from their Japanese heritage. On the other hand, they may not feel as though they are truly Japanese, because they grew up in the United States with Western influence and customs. Thus, a common feeling is that they are stuck in a liminal space between the two sides of their identity, never truly belonging anywhere with nowhere to comfortably call “home.” Therefore, the only place many Japanese Americans can find solace is in the company of others who are in the same situation of being in a liminal identity space. They develop a group identity and band together to create a community of their own, where they can feel like they belong.

This “notion of a group identity” that is developed by a group of people who share some common feature then leads to collective memory among the members of that group. Thus, a group will identify “narratives of past experience” that connect them together “within which they [will] find meaningful forms of identification that may empower” them. These collective memories of a past narrative bond the community together and “give them a sense of history,

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place, and belonging” that they may not have had before. The groups who share collective memories and create narratives to form communities can “vary radically in size and complexity,” and can be formed by common identity traits, such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, as well as many other facets of the identity; these groups can be made up of large or small communities. By forming these communities through collective memory of either a real or imaginary historical narrative, people of minoritized identities are able to carve out a safe place that feels like home in a larger community that constantly rejects and foreignizes them. Collective memory also provides these groups with agency, gained from “a sense of individual and shared identity and belonging,” that they would not have without a developed community. With this agency, these groups can push back against the mold, so often held up through stereotypes and societal expectations, that is placed on them by society, and can develop an identity for themselves. This identity that is developed within and by the community for itself is immensely less harmful that the identity stamped on them by society, and greatly increases the quality of life for its members.

Some members of the Japanese American community have formed a collective memory around the historical narrative of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk colony. They have romantically embellished the bare bones of its history with legends and stories that may or may not necessarily be true, which has helped to flesh out their history in the United States. There have been historical fiction novels, poems, plays, and songs written about the Wakamatsu colony and its members. These works tell the story of individual colonists, as well as the story of the colony as a whole, and build upon the existing story. Whenever a new piece of information about the

74 Ibid.
75 Ibid, 144.
76 Ibid, 146.
colony is discovered it adds to the story and will sometimes even have its own story made up and
told. Each of these works, written by both Japanese American and Japanese authors, contributes
to the collective memory of the Japanese population surrounding the Wakamatsu colony.
Festivals and ceremonies are held at the colony’s location in an attempt to celebrate and offer an
opportunity to learn about Japanese American culture in addition to the colonists’ story.77

The Wakamatsu colony has become a center of collective memory for the Japanese
American population within California not only because it was the first step towards permanent
immigration to the United States for the Japanese, but also because it serves as a point in
Japanese American history where they were accepted and treated well by the local European
American populations. The Veerkamp family was very fond of their new neighbors, and gave
them “a hearty welcome” and continued to aid them throughout the colony’s short lifespan.78
The European American population in California was very excited to receive the Wakamatsu
colonists, because they brought with them new crops that would further diversify California’s
agriculture79 and an attitude of acceptance of Western culture.80 European Americans preferred
the Japanese to other Asian immigrants because the Japanese readily adopted Western clothing
and culture and came with their families as permanent settlers who would contribute their hard
work and money to the United States, rather than going back to Japan and investing it there.81
Japanese immigrants seemed more willing to shed their former identity and adopt Western
standards for themselves, which appealed to European Americans. Many newspaper articles

77 “Boxer Introduces Bill to Preserve 1st Japanese Settlement,” Mountain Democrat (Placerville, CA),
August 12, 2009.
Wax Tree – Rice, Bamboo, Tea, Etc.,” Daily Alta California (San Francisco, CA), June 16, 1869.
81 Ibid.
reported that the Japanese were “in no way...[inferior]” to Europeans and European Americans because they were clean, educated, and refined. At this point in time, the Japanese were considered to be superior to other East Asian populations, and were welcomed as helpful additions to the newly settled (by Europeans) West coast.

Sources about how the Wakamatsu colonists were treated are from mostly, if not all, Western authors. Thus, the colonists’ perspective is not given, and what the white authors have to say must be taken with a grain of salt. The Japanese colonists may have felt they were being treated as “noble savages,” racially inferior to their European American counterparts but still considered above Chinese, black, and Native Americans by the aforementioned European Americans, due to their education and cleanliness (some of which transfers into their status as a “model minority” today). Therefore, when reading about Matsu and Okei and their affectionate relationship to the Veerkamps, it must be remembered that only the Veerkamps’ perspective has been recorded. Matsu and Okei may have felt the relationship to be demeaning but necessary because they were in a foreign land where their relationship with the Veerkamp family was their only asset.

Later, when European Americans began to feel harsher and less welcoming to the increasing number of Japanese immigrants, the original feelings towards the Wakamatsu colony stayed the same. The colonists had still been appreciated and well-liked, no matter how their successors faired. Thus, as tensions between European Americans and Japanese Americans fluctuated for the next century and a half, the feelings towards the Wakamatsu colonists never changed. This provides a beacon of hope for the Japanese American populations; they were once

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
welcomed and appreciated as hard-working equals, rather than just a hard-working “model minority,” which meant it was possible and could happen again. It also provided a kind of defense against aggressions towards Japanese Americans by European Americans, who might claim that the Japanese didn’t belong in the United States. Japanese Americans could fight back against these attacks and claim that they did in fact belong in the United States, and had even been welcomed warmly by the citizens and government of the United States. The Wakamatsu colony serves as an anchor for the Japanese American population.

Much of Japanese American history is violent and cruel, mostly remembered as the “yellow peril” and internment. With this violence surrounding their history, the Wakamatsu colony provides a memory of a time of peace and hope which can be recalled in an attempt to pacify their violent past. Japanese Americans can reflect back on the colony’s history and use it as a tool to change the memory surrounding their history to a more peaceful and content history. It is a piece of history that has been, and still is, viewed in a positive light since its existence and secures their position as Americans in the United States.

The young Japanese woman who is buried on the Wakamatsu property, often called a princess when stories about her were passed down orally, Okei,\(^4\) has become the spiritual figurehead through which the story of the Wakamatsu colony is told. Okei was a young nursemaid, whose family name is not even known, so how did she become such an important figure to so many people? Why was it not the beloved Matsu, who lived for so much longer on the property who became the figurehead of Wakamatsu? I believe it was because of how little is known about her. Okei’s story is well known with few concrete details and can be easily

\(^4\) Okei is often affectionately referred to as “Okei-san” in stories and has sometimes been referred to as “Okei Ito” although her true family name is not known.
romanticized, which leads to easy captivation of listeners eager for a tragic story; her identity is just well known enough to catch the attention of an audience while being just vague enough to be able to represent a wide variety of people.

Okei’s unfortunate and untimely death did not allow for her identity to leave a lasting mark on history. Her short life became a metaphor for the short life of the colony that was her home, both ending tragically young and to be remembered over a century later. Because of this connection with the lifespan of the colony, it is easy to weave the two together, implementing her short life as a story-telling method. Okei’s story added a bit of personal drama and flair, making it more accessible and relatable for the Japanese American population who use her to connect them to the United States. Japanese Americans and immigrants are able to relate to the young girl who came to a country she didn’t know, whose language and culture she didn’t understand, but still worked hard and made an impact on history. Perhaps, even though Okei was unable to thrive due to her illness and sudden death, the young Japanese Americans who connect with her will be able to succeed where she could not. They see her as a brave, determined young woman and will carry her determination and legacy with them as they fight to belong in a country that refuses to accept them.

Kiyoko Fukumoto-Hainsworth, a woman who moved from Japan to California in her youth after World War II, discovered the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony after having lived in Placerville for many years. Once she discovered the colony and Okei’s gravesite, she visited often and wondered about the young girl and how she ended up in California. As Kiyoko stood at Okei’s grave, she “could feel the girl’s longing for Japan,” because she “too was isolated from
other Japanese people, living [there] in the mountains” so far from her homeland. She was interviewed for a Japanese-produced documentary about the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony; when she was finally able to listen to the documentary, she found that “they had intertwined [her] life with Okei’s,” as had the local newspaper several months earlier. Kiyoko, as well as others, compared herself with and related to Okei, finding solace in the life of the young girl who came to the same town of Placerville so many years earlier. Kiyoko’s story is just one of many Japanese Americans who have found solace with Okei.

In addition to being able to relate to her, it is much easier to create stories about Okei when so little is known about her. A very common embellishment in her story is to create a romantic relationship between Okei and Henry Veerkamp, her neighbors’ son who was about the same age as her. Many of the novels written about Okei have given her a romantic subplot with a tragic ending, her untimely death. Embellishments like these help to form a more concrete and relatable image of this young woman, as well as flesh out the body of work that surrounds her and the colony.

Due to her short lifespan and historically devalued role as a nursemaid, not much is known about Okei and who she was as a person. Her lack of specific identity has helped her become the figurehead of the Wakamatsu colony; because people only know about her brave move across the Pacific Ocean and tragically short life, her vague identity can be used to represent anyone. Okei can easily tell the story of Wakamatsu because she can represent any of the brave colonists, who have an even more ambiguous sense of identity than she does.

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85 Kiyoko Fukumoto-Hainsworth, Kiyoko: Memoirs of Sajima’s Daughter, (Hapa Studios, 2016), 150.
86 Ibid, 152.
Having a physical location with which Okei is associated helped strengthen her ties to the collective memory surrounding the Wakamatsu colony. Her gravesite serves as a place for visiting pilgrims to go to, pray at, and connect with each other at. It serves as a point of connection between Japan and the United States for the Japanese American population, where they can feel connected to their roots without leaving their home.\textsuperscript{87} This provides a space that recognizes both sides of their identity as Japanese and American, a space that is not often found in the United States or anywhere else in the world, and offers a sense of belonging. By being able to connect with the very first Japanese Americans, the current Japanese American population is able to carve out a space for themselves.

Okei and the Wakamatsu colony, despite their tragically short lives, have held a lasting influence on the Japanese American population. Although the colony was a phenomenal failure, it has served as an anchor which Japanese Americans use to keep themselves established in the United States. Japanese Americans, because of their Japanese heritage, have often been socially pushed out of the United States by European Americans, constantly fighting to feel safe and comfortable in their own country. The colony acts as a standard that Japanese Americans and immigrants can compare their treatment to, and use to fight against intolerance and oppression. It represents a peaceful beginning to a violent and tragic history.

The Wakamatsu colony has helped to provide a safe space where their identity as Japanese and American is respected, honored, and even celebrated, instead of acting as an isolating force. Unique to the Wakamatsu colony is the celebration of the Japanese American identity; many spaces that are structured to be a safe place for Japanese Americans specifically

celebrate their Japanese heritage and lack a celebration of the unique Japanese American identity. Because of this, it is important that the Wakamatsu colony continue to be well taken care of and preserved, so that it may remain a safe and connecting force for the Japanese American community in California.

Okei’s original gravesite in Placerville continues to serve as a point of connection between the two cultural facets of identity for Japanese Americans. It continues to collect small offerings of food and tokens of affection from interested locals, admirers, and those seeking a place of belonging. The headstone itself, with its English and Japanese translations of its transcriptions, are symbolic of the two identities many Japanese Americans have, like two sides of a coin. Americans of Japanese descent are sometimes forced to display one side or the other, depending on the population surrounding them, just as the headstone does. Though she is no longer alive, people of conflicting identities can relate to Okei and her headstone. She teaches them that a person does not have to be one distinct identity or the other, but can be somewhere in-between the two. The headstone may have either the Japanese or the English side on the front display, but it always has both present.
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