



# YELLOW PERIL, ORIENTAL PLAYTHING

*Asian Exclusion and the 1927 U.S.-Japan Doll Exchange*

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**ABSTRACT.** This essay illuminates the role that Asian girlhood has played in the transpacific circulation of racial affects by reexamining the history of the 1927 U.S.-Japan doll exchange from an Asian American feminist perspective. In 1927, just a few years after the 1924 Immigration Act banned Japanese immigration, hundreds of “friendship dolls” traveled across the Pacific Ocean, bearing messages of peace and goodwill. I contend that although the exchange was designed to alleviate racial tensions, the warm welcome that the dolls received was contingent upon Orientalist notions of Asian femininity and the containment of attendant sexual anxieties through an appeal to girlhood innocence. Challenging the black-white binary through which childhood studies often understands race, I show how Asian girlhood calls for a transpacific framework that attends to histories of imperialism, militarism, and commodity capitalism while elucidating the figure of the doll in recent scholarship on Asian femininity and decorative embodiment.

She does not know our language; she is a foreigner;  
So all the other dolls and toys they cannot talk with her.

—“The Japanese Doll,” a poem in the *Youth’s Companion* (1907)<sup>1</sup>

In 1927, just a few years after the 1924 Immigration Act added Japan to the list of Asian nations whose citizens were banned from immigrating to the United States, thousands of “friendship dolls” traveled across the Pacific Ocean, bearing messages of peace and goodwill. Over twelve thousand “blue-eyed dolls” were shipped from the United States to Japan.<sup>2</sup> In return, Japan sent fifty-eight traditional *ichimatsu* dolls to the United States.<sup>3</sup> The

Japanese dolls, with their colorful kimono, tea sets, and other elaborate accessories, were enthusiastically received in ceremonies held across the nation. As fugitive “immigrants” permitted to enter into the United States during a time when Japanese people could not, the dolls carried miniature passports and steamship tickets, trespassing across national borders to be “taken into the hearts of the children of America.”<sup>4</sup> While this transpacific exchange of affection made a deep enough impression in Japan that the government ordered the American dolls to be destroyed during the Pacific War, the exchange quickly faded from America’s collective memory. Today, when the doll exchange is remembered, it tends to register as little more than a curious incident amid the increasingly tense transpacific relations that would culminate violently in the war. Accordingly, the English-language scholarship that presently exists on the topic generally frames the exchange as a tragically optimistic attempt to foster peace by appealing to “the love of little children for one another regardless of race or color.”<sup>5</sup> Helen Kaibara, Terry Kita, and Rui Kohiyama document the doll exchange’s history, but do not examine its significance within the broader context of Asian American racialization.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Kita illustrates the cultural misunderstandings that characterized the exchange, but concludes that “the reasons why people wish to cooperate are not as important as the willingness to do so.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, when the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles held an exhibition titled “Passports to Friendship” in 2002 to celebrate the exchange’s seventy-fifth anniversary, the curators hoped to revive “the original mission to educate children how to respect and value diverse cultures and experiences,” and thus continued the tradition of looking back on the doll exchange with fondness.<sup>8</sup>

Without belittling the dreams of world peace that the friendship dolls still symbolize for individuals on both sides of the Pacific, this essay challenges some of the presumptions that support the idea that the exchange was essentially innocent, particularly given that this moment in history illuminates the sentimental feelings that attach the figure of the Oriental to the childlike and feminine. In a time of intense anti-Japanese feeling, the doll exchange attempted to alleviate racial conflict by displacing emotional labor onto dolls and the young girls called upon to embrace them. Robin Bernstein observes that childhood innocence has “historically mystified racial ideology by hiding it in plain sight” and studies how black dolls scripted violence against black bodies under the protection of childhood’s “holy obliviousness.”<sup>9</sup> However, Bernstein’s work, like most of the scholarship on dolls and race, has assumed a black-white racial paradigm and discrete national focus. This essay demonstrates the need for further Asian American critique in childhood studies by attending to how Japanese

dolls facilitated the transpacific circulation of racial affects. Understanding the racial innocence associated with Asian girls (and with their synthetic doubles in Asian dolls) requires recalibrating Bernstein's concept of "racial innocence" to account for histories of imperialism, militarism, and commodity capitalism—histories that have shaped the distinct racialization of Asian bodies while coinciding with and compounding antiblack racism. As I illustrate, the warm welcome that the Japanese dolls received in the United States cannot be disentangled from Orientalist notions of Eastern childlike femininity. Mari Yoshihara notes that white women in the early twentieth century "'embraced' the East in multiple meanings of the word: they adored it, they eagerly adopted its ways, they believed in it, they brought it close to themselves, and they contained it—in gendered and sexualized ways."<sup>10</sup> This "embrace" of the East extended into the realms of girlhood, where it became literalized and materialized in the embrace of Japanese dolls.

Thus, this essay explores how racial innocence can collude with racial fetishism, disguising Orientalism under the auspices of girlish friendship. The power dynamics between East and West have historically been imagined through sexual metaphor—from the "romance" of the East to its violent culmination in military conquest figured as rape. However, "friendship" with the East has also provided the West with a metaphor for imagining racial and cultural intimacies supposedly uncorrupted by the overtly erotic. Triply subordinated at the intersection of youth, femininity, and the Oriental, the Asian girl elicited the appeal of the feminized exotic while seemingly dispossessing it of its power to retaliate in an uncanny reversal. As Leslie Bow argues, the inclusion of Asian feminine subjects in the U.S. national body has historically been predicated upon compensatory displays of loyalty that assuage anxieties about the perceived susceptibility of Asian women to sexual and political infidelity. Nevertheless, this inclusion is almost always partial: "Sexuality is at once the pathway to inclusion and either a resolution or catalyst to an implied betrayal."<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the image of the young Japanese girl maintained an aura of innocence that depended upon her imagined asexuality. While this imagined asexuality was itself prone to sexualization, it purported to offer the pleasures of the exotic alongside the comforts of nonthreatening difference. In other words, the Asian girl became a figure for imagining racial difference without racial conflict, a "friendly" ethnic other gently enfolding whiteness into dreams of interracial harmony and world peace. Through the doll exchange, both Japan and the United States leaned into these associations to strengthen and expand their imperial power at the expense of Asian girls and women.

In focusing on this discrete example, I do not mean to suggest that turn-of-the-century *Japonisme* explains the representations and experiences of girls of diverse Asian ethnicities, but instead to show how these early fantasies created a *template* for imagining Asian girlhood that has been difficult to entirely discard. Like the “Madame Butterfly” trope to which it is adjacent, the trope of the “mousmé,” or doll-like Japanese girl, has lingered in various guises. “Mousmé” is a French transliteration of *musume*, a Japanese word meaning “daughter” or “girl.” This word was commonly used in both French and English to describe Japanese girls as well as attractive young Japanese women. Likely made popular in the Anglophone world through a translation of Pierre Loti’s French novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), the word suggested an erotic innocence in which infantilization fused with sexualization. Loti writes, “The word *mousmé* means a young girl, or very young woman. It is one of the prettiest words in the Niponese language; it seems almost as if there were a little *moue* [‘pout’ in French] in the very sound, and as if a pretty taking little pout such as they put on, and also a little pert physiognomy were described by it.”<sup>12</sup> Following *Madame Chrysanthème*, Clive Holland’s English-language novel *My Japanese Wife* (1902) features a white male narrator who repeatedly describes his Japanese wife as a “child-woman,” expressing enchantment at her childish ways.<sup>13</sup> He states, “What a child Mousmé is! And yet there is an indefinable charm inseparable from womanhood about her.”<sup>14</sup> The mousmé trope thus enabled innocence to seem erotic and sexualization to seem innocent, disguised as fondness or play. This concept allowed the West to fetishize a sexual object seemingly devoid of her own sexual power.

Accordingly, this essay reveals how closely Japanese girlhood has been tethered to doll-hood itself. In so doing, it contributes to recent scholarship that explores the particular forms, textures, and psychic structures attached to racialized and gendered embodiment and inscription. As Anne Anlin Cheng and others have shown, Asian women have often been associated with the decorative and synthetic and therefore represent critical figures in the boundary crisis between persons and things. Cheng writes that the “vast and tenacious history of Oriental female objectification is refracted through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism.”<sup>15</sup> However, the fetishization of Asian “dolls” has found purchase not only in adult romance but also in children’s culture. The playful, and at times seemingly frivolous, confluence of Asian girls and Asian dolls is therefore important to understanding how violence masks as innocence on both the personal and political scales. The doll exchange demonstrates how feminized Asian commodities have long been central to projects grounded in patriarchal nationalism and imperialism, dating back even decades prior to Japan de-

clarifying Hello Kitty an official ambassador and symbol of global friendship.<sup>16</sup> The Asian girl's position at the intersection of numerous aestheticized and sentimentalized identities—the child, the feminine, and the Oriental—illuminates the stakes of equating people with aesthetic objects in ongoing histories of exclusion from immigration and citizenship.

### Cute, but Yellow

When the doll exchange took place in the late 1920s, it joined an already well-established American tradition of associating Asian cultures and peoples with children's toys. Specifically, Japanese dolls became popular items found on many American children's toy shelves beginning in the late nineteenth century. Their ubiquity responded in part to the Orientalist notion that Japan represented a "paradise for children," as an American missionary named Margaret Tate Kinnear Ballagh declared in 1862.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in *Madame Chrysanthème*, the white male narrator repeatedly calls Chrysanthème "my doll" and even asks, "Is it [Chrysanthème] a woman or a doll? Well, time will show."<sup>18</sup> In John Luther Long's short story "Madame Butterfly" (1898), the geisha Cho-Cho-San likewise despairs at being equated to a "plaything" in the minds of Western people.<sup>19</sup> Building upon *Madame Chrysanthème* and other popular Orientalist fantasies, an 1893 article in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* titled "Mme. Chrysantheme at Home" claims that "the most one can say of a Japanese beauty is: 'How pretty she is!' or, 'How cute!' . . . And yet the Japanese girl charms everyone. . . . [She is] so dainty and so sweet that you cannot help liking her."<sup>20</sup> In each of these cases, the "charms" of Japanese girls and women—"charms" being small, fetishized objects—make them "merely the toys of men."<sup>21</sup> These imaginative associations were not confined to fantasy, but had significant repercussions for Asian American girls and women. Kathleen Tamagawa, a half-Japanese writer born in the United States in 1893, recalls of her girlhood, "I felt myself to be a comicality, a toy. I was often spoken of as a 'Japanese doll,' or worse still as the 'cute' little Japanese."<sup>22</sup>

As Tamagawa's testimony suggests, the Japanese girl/doll was thought to represent the epitome of "cuteness," embodying the diminutive qualities that Americans found so alluring in their fantasies of Japan. Lori Merish argues that the cute aesthetic developed in the United States in the late nineteenth century, staging "the assimilation of the Other ('uncivilized' child and/or 'freak') into middle-class familial and emotional structures."<sup>23</sup> Drawing from Merish, Sianne Ngai argues that cuteness is a "commodity aesthetic" that involves "not just an aestheticization but an eroticization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for 'small things' but also, sometimes,

a desire to belittle or diminish them further.”<sup>24</sup> However, Merish and Ngai do not examine how the emergence of the cute aesthetic coincided with the period’s widespread fetishization of Oriental commodities. Bow and Christine Yano each situate cuteness in longer histories of Asian racialization, but focus primarily on the globalization of Japanese *kawaii* (“cute”) culture beginning in the late twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The cute aesthetic’s relationship to Japan and Japanese commodities dates back to at least the early twentieth century, when it arose together with commodity Orientalism and the globalization of children’s culture. During this time, Japanese dolls performed the “assimilation” of the Oriental other, while simultaneously helping to rationalize the exclusion of Asian immigrants who inevitably exceeded their desired functions as “cute” objects.

When anti-Japanese feeling became especially virulent in the early twentieth century, fetishistic ideas about Japanese cuteness therefore collided with yellow peril rhetoric directed at the growing population of Japanese American women and children and the threat they represented to white supremacy. The development of family life in what had previously been a predominantly male and adult population of itinerant laborers raised anxieties that a race of “unassimilated” Asian immigrants were flooding the United States. In California, where anti-Japanese sentiment was particularly high, the press warned that the United States would soon be overwhelmed by a “swarm of native-born children of Japanese parentage.”<sup>26</sup> Newspapers decried the number of Japanese American children in public schools as well as the number of extracurricular schools teaching Japanese language and culture, known as “Buddhist schools” or “Jap schools,” that supposedly indoctrinated the “Mikado’s own” with Japanese dogma, thereby preventing the successful assimilation of Japanese children into mainstream American culture.<sup>27</sup> The increasing population of Japanese women further stoked these fears. As potential mothers of native-born Japanese children, Japanese women were accused of “breeding little Japs and upsetting the purpose of the immigration exclusion laws.”<sup>28</sup> In line with these views, a 1920 article in the *San Francisco Examiner* titled “How the Jap ‘Picture Brides’ Are Japanizing California” juxtaposes a photograph of “two cute picture brides . . . in Japan” with “how the pretty Jap picture bride looks after she begins to work as a field laborer” (see Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> In placing the “cute” young picture brides alongside an older Japanese woman who wears a large hat, apron, and heavy gloves to work in the fields, the article purports to reveal the hidden ugliness concealed within the mousmé trope for sensational effect. In a February 1921 issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine, Vice President Calvin Coolidge gave authority to these anxieties, asserting that “the unassimilated alien child menaces our children.”<sup>30</sup>



Figure 1. "How the Jap 'Picture Brides' Are Japanizing California," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 11, 1920.

Consequently, the cuteness ascribed to Japanese women and children existed in a fraught relationship with the notion that they presented sexual and political threats to the racial purity of the nation. As Ngai observes, the cute object is intimately associated with “the infantile, the feminine, and the nonthreatening” and makes a soft appeal to tender emotions often associated with vulnerable populations.<sup>31</sup> Yet the pleasure people take in cute objects cannot be separated from the power people wield over them and associated fantasies of manipulating, possessing, and containing them. The cute object itself also maintains a sinister power; its ability to incite our aggression points to the disquieting hold it maintains over our emotions. The *San Francisco Examiner's* sensationalistic warning that “two cute picture brides” might conceal an “uncanny fertility” exploits this slippage. In other words, it asserts that the “cute” and the “ugly” do not simply represent two opposing faces of Japanese femininity, but that it is the very deceptiveness of Japanese women’s cuteness that renders them “the greatest enemy of race suicide in the world.”<sup>32</sup> These uncanny reversals—Oriental plaything, yellow peril—were exploited again in the *San Francisco Examiner* with a photograph depicting a young Japanese American child being examined by two congressmen under the headline “Cute, but Yellow” (see Figure 2). The caption elaborates, “Here’s one of the chief causes for California’s fear of the Oriental flood.”<sup>33</sup>



Figure 2. "Cute, but Yellow," *San Francisco Examiner*, July 16, 1920.

As "foreigners-within," Asian Americans have long maintained an uncanny presence in the national psyche.<sup>34</sup> In his foundational essay on this concept, Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as that which is both of the home and not of the home, as the surfacing of unconscious matter.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that the "inscrutable" Asian whose presence has been repressed from most narratives of American national identity—whose acknowledgment would destabilize the black-white paradigm that props up American racism, and therefore America itself—is continually toggling between cute and uncanny cultural representations. The evocation of cuteness in the hysterical and hateful anti-Japanese discourses that erupted in the early twentieth century reflects the emotional confusion of a white supremacist society struggling with its uncanny closeness to the Oriental other, an intimacy it at once desired, feared, and disavowed. A 1911 poem in *Life*, titled "That Japanese Craze," captures the transference of these ambivalent emotions onto Japanese dolls:

There's Japanese paper on the walls,  
 And Japanese storks in all the halls,  
 A Japanese gong to dinner calls  
 In a tone that's weird and wheezy;  
 Japanese gods along the stair,  
 And bamboo what-nots everywhere,  
 And Japanese dolls with funny hair—  
 It makes one Jap-uneasy!<sup>36</sup>

The Japanese doll therefore became an object onto which many white Americans deflected their “uneasy” feelings about Japanese immigration. By assimilating Japanese dolls into the domestic space of the home, they sought to bring the Oriental other into the domestic space of the nation strictly on their own terms.

### **A Charm Offensive**

When Reverend Sidney Gulick conceived of the doll exchange in 1926, he hoped to recalibrate America's feelings about Japanese people away from the uncanny other and toward the cute toy. A former missionary in Japan, Gulick had become a prominent advocate for better understanding between Japan and the United States and between Japanese Americans and white Americans. As executive secretary of the Commission on Relations with Japan of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, he led one of the foremost American organizations working to promote peace with Japan in the interwar period.<sup>37</sup> Notably, in *The American Japanese Problem*, published in 1914, Gulick affirmed his faith in the importance of affect to ending anti-Japanese racism, expressing the belief that racial discrimination arises from feelings deep in the psyche: “Race feeling is one of those emotions of which the possessor is almost inevitably unconscious.” Thus, amid mounting hostilities toward Japan, he hoped to counter the feeling that Japanese people were “intrinsicly unpleasant, untrustworthy, unacceptable.”<sup>38</sup> Following the implementation of the 1924 Immigrant Act, he campaigned for the adoption of a quota system rather than an outright ban.<sup>39</sup> However, when he realized that his efforts were merely inciting backlash, he quickly switched tactics to a “charm offensive” under the belief that “we who desire peace must write it in the hearts of children.”<sup>40</sup> These tactics would not only tap into positive feelings attached to childhood nostalgia but also respond to the ambivalent role that Japanese American women and children played in anti-Japanese discourses. As Gulick himself notes in his reflections on the 1920 “Hearing Before the Committee on Im-

migration and Naturalization," one of the two primary concerns discussed before Congress was "the question as to the character of American born children of Japanese parentage and as to their capacity for becoming Americanized."<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the soft power of a "children's diplomacy" became his recourse; he hoped to foster "good feeling between the two countries" after his attempts at direct political action proved unsuccessful.<sup>42</sup> In 1926, Gulick formed the Committee on World Friendship Among Children (CWFC), with the "Doll Messengers of Friendship" as one of its first major projects.<sup>43</sup> If living Japanese women and children embodied an imagined threat, Japanese "playthings" might offer a solution.

Often nicknamed the "doll diplomats" or "doll ambassadors," the friendship dolls represented a grassroots effort that supposedly reflected the dreams of the "common people" for a world of racial tolerance and international peace.<sup>44</sup> By engaging everyday Americans and by tapping into the romance of Japan's perceived childishness, the friendship dolls aimed to produce "a great fund of good feeling" toward Japan. Specifically, the exchange labored to locate these good feelings "in the minds and hearts of the children and young people."<sup>45</sup> In July 1926, as the exchange got under way, Dr. Frank Crane, a Presbyterian minister and columnist, explains the logic behind the exchange in one of his popular "Four Minutes Essays":

When so much is being done to arouse suspicion and distrust toward Japan among Americans it is refreshing to see this gesture of good will and kindness on the part of the children. In spite of the efforts of politicians and others, it is the feelings of the common people that has its way at last. We cannot begin too early to instill good will, friendship and understanding among the children of the various races. The Japanese children should be the friends and not the enemies of the American children.<sup>46</sup>

Reverend E. C. Fry further captures the optimism driving the project in a column for the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*: "Many hearts in both countries are hoping that this new form of dealing with international relations—the children's diplomacy—will become a great help toward establishing and maintaining thoroughly friendly relations between the two nations."<sup>47</sup> Thus, not only did Christian leaders initiate and facilitate the exchange, but Christian missionary values of international "good will" provided its ideological foundations.

Namely, white Christian women played an important administrative and affective role in orchestrating the project. Charged with tending to the emotional development of children, women constituted the affective center of an effort that aimed to elide the masculinist spheres of militarism

and governmentality. Rui Kohiyama writes, “Even leaving out the doll, a feminine plaything, the concept of ‘world friendship among children’ was intrinsically feminine in the U.S. . . . The American tradition sanctioned two approaches to . . . international relations. One was hard and masculine, and the other was soft and feminine with religious tones.”<sup>48</sup> Lucy W. Peabody, a leader in the women’s missionary movement and an editor of the Christian children’s periodical *Everyland, a Magazine of World Friendship for Girls and Boys*, occupied a particularly prominent position in these efforts as a chair of the CWFC. Her work at *Everyland* is revealing, demonstrating the narrative fantasies that underwrote the exchange. In a story Peabody personally authored for the periodical in 1911, Santa Claus travels to Japan to “bring Christmas” to Japanese children. In this whimsical take on missionary work, Santa dresses in a kimono and rides a rickshaw, carrying along presents for “little brown children” with “so many foolish toys” but “no Christmas.”<sup>49</sup> After proselytizing to the Japanese children, he pulls “thirty of the prettiest little dolls, dressed like Americans” out of his kimono sleeves in a dramatic gesture.<sup>50</sup> Fifteen years later, Peabody mobilized networks of Christian women to realize this fantasy of benevolent influence. Women, who accounted for over 90 percent of the CWFC’s membership, worked to purchase and prepare not thirty but more than twelve thousand American dolls for the children of Japan.<sup>51</sup>

According to the doll exchange’s design, both national and local organizations serving youth—including schools, Sunday schools, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, and Girl Reserves—could purchase and outfit a doll as a gift for Japanese children. This doll would then be sent with a personalized letter to the “Doll Travel Bureau” in New York City.<sup>52</sup> A leaflet distributed to potential participants detailed the proper procedures (see Figure 3). As Gulick wrote in his correspondence to Viscount Ei’ichi Shibusawa, known as “the grandfather of Japanese capitalism” and an instrumental figure in orchestrating the Japanese side of the exchange, “it would be better to make no reference to the Immigration Law whatever” in the leaflet and instead that “it would be wiser to confine the educational material entirely to the good qualities of the Japanese.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the leaflet simply stated that the dolls would help children “learn something of Japan’s love for children and home, and begin to know Japan as she really is.” To underscore the urgency of their mission, it would, however, vaguely add, “The task is stupendous. The time is short. The effort should be nation-wide to be effective.”<sup>54</sup> In addition, the leaflet specified the kinds of dolls that should be sent: dolls that were “new, properly dressed and suitable in every way to go to Japan as a Messenger of Friendship and Goodwill.” Most of them would be mass-produced composition dolls, with heads made of sawdust and glue. The

leaflet specified that they should cost between \$2.50 and \$4.00, approximately \$100 to \$160 in today's prices.<sup>55</sup> The CWFC also deemed it important that the dolls be as uniform as possible and possess "face, arms, and legs of unbreakable material; joints and wigs hand sewn; eyes that opened and closed; and a voice that should say unmistakably 'Mama.'"<sup>56</sup> In short, the dolls were to exhibit some of the most modern technical advancements in the mass production of American dolls, showcasing innovations such as indestructibility, mobility, and speech inspired by modern fantasies of animation through technological innovation.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 3. A photograph that appeared on the leaflet's cover (Sidney L. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 1929).

Despite the desire for uniformity, the girls who participated in the exchange were able to customize the dolls to some degree by selecting them, naming them, designing and sewing their clothes, and preparing letters to accompany them.<sup>58</sup> Once at the Doll Travel Bureau, the dolls would receive the necessary documentation to make the journey to Japan: a ticket for ninety-nine cents and a passport for one penny.<sup>59</sup> While this was ostensibly a pure and whimsical display of childhood friendliness, the instructions inside the leaflet painstakingly detail bureaucratic particulars:

All travelers to foreign lands must have proper tickets. . . . In addition to the ticket, each doll should have a passport. This, the children can

be told, is a letter of introduction from the government of the United States to that of Japan, giving assurances that the traveler is a well-behaved citizen of the United States and will observe with care the laws of Japan during the proposed visit. . . . This passport, properly viséd [inspected], should be secured from the Doll Travel Bureau.<sup>60</sup>

The instructions continue at length, emphasizing that the friendship dolls exemplify “well-behaved citizens” and stressing the importance of teaching good citizenship to the exchange’s child participants. The passports themselves similarly take care to document that each doll represents “a loyal and law-abiding citizen of the U.S.A.” who promises to “obey all the laws and customs of your country.” In contrast, when Japan sent dolls to the United States in return, their passports avoided legal rhetoric and instead requested that American children “kindly . . . accept” the dolls as gifts conveying “sentiment[s] of warm regard and friendship.”<sup>61</sup> In this way, the American-initiated side of the exchange strenuously reinforced loyalty and lawfulness, both concerns embedded in the anti-Asian legislation of the turn of the century. For instance, passports figured prominently in the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907–8, in which Japan agreed to cease issuing passports to Japanese citizens desiring to work in the continental United States except in instances of family reunification.<sup>62</sup> While seemingly playful, the doll exchange thereby labored to promote trust in just governance and to assert the need for immigrants to adhere faithfully to “proper” legal procedures. Miniaturization, a quality of childhood play, became transmuted into the minute particulars of a “cute” bureaucracy.

Thus, the conflation of persons and things that the doll exchange instantiated transformed the same bureaucratic mechanisms that excluded Asian Americans from full personhood into “cute” accessories. As Roland Barthes muses in *Mythologies*, toys often “reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness.”<sup>63</sup> Yet as much as toys induct children into the mundane and often violent structures of adult life, they also soften these structures, imbuing them with positive feelings. Ian Hacking describes bureaucracy as a way of “making up people”; that is, bureaucracy not only categorizes people, but comes to inform how we imagine ourselves and others.<sup>64</sup> In their work on racial formation, Michael Omi and Howard Winant repeatedly borrow Hacking’s language to insist on this point: “Race is a way of ‘making up people’” by attributing “social and symbolic meaning to perceived phenotypical differences.”<sup>65</sup> By miniaturizing paperwork, the doll exchange attempted to attach girly feelings to bureaucratic management, rendering “making up people” whimsical and fun. This aestheticization of bureaucracy is further highlighted by Gulick’s

choice to name the CWFC's headquarters the "Doll Exchange *Bureau*." At this central location, the dolls would be systematically counted and tabulated such that Gulick was able to not only provide the exact number of dolls sent to Japan (12,739) but also chart the numbers sent from each state, proudly declaring that the "banner state" of Ohio sent 2,283 dolls and that Pennsylvania, the runner up, sent 1,935.<sup>66</sup> Further, the doll exchange invited children to participate in this game, suggesting that boys act as business and ticket agents and that girls select the dolls and sew their clothing.<sup>67</sup> While these designations assigned boys and girls to "separate spheres," they also asserted that masculinized control and feminized care could play together. Side by side, boys and girls facilitated the aestheticization of procedures that managed national belonging.

Bureaucracy controls the terms upon which we become visible before the state. For Asian women, this visibility has historically intersected with the visibility of the aestheticized body. Lisa Lowe underscores this point: "The administration of citizenship was simultaneously a 'technology' of racialization and gendering."<sup>68</sup> In *The American Japanese Problem*, Gulick quotes the anti-Japanese agitator and attorney general Ulysses S. Webb, a man instrumental to the implementation of the California Alien Land Law of 1913: "The fundamental basis of all legislation upon this subject [of the Alien Land Law], State and Federal, has been, and is, race undesirability. . . . The simple and single question is, is the race desirable."<sup>69</sup> For Asian women, this question—"is the race desirable?"—has been linked to sexual desire. Moreover, it has been managed through not only the bureaucratic administration of "life" or the organic body, but also ornamentation and the Asian woman's synthetic embodiment. Cheng argues that the legal definition of personhood in the United States has itself been adjudicated through Asian femininity, with the question of what constitutes a "person" always bound up in questions of Oriental ornamentation. Cheng illustrates this point by examining the 1875 "Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women," officially known as *Chy Lung v. Freeman*. In litigation that reached the U.S. Supreme Court, judges deliberated over whether twenty-two Chinese women attempting to enter the United States were sex workers, and consequently whether they could be permitted to immigrate.<sup>70</sup> As Cheng shows, the trial paid undue attention to "the question of decoration: detailed discussions about forms of costume; the colors, patterns, and feel of fabrics; the cuts of sleeves; and even hairstyles."<sup>71</sup> Cheng argues that this fixation on the surface elucidates "the ornamental function of the sartorial in order to consider the act of 'dressing' or 'putting something on' as a dynamic and judicial process."<sup>72</sup> Additionally, we might note how this case conflated ornamental and bureaucratic detailing through the fetishiza-

tion of a segmented, synthetic body. In the doll exchange, the Japanese dolls—whose legal status as “ambassadors,” “immigrants,” and/or “citizens” was never quite clear—were therefore able to slide almost effortlessly into categories of personhood that were always already ornamental. By making bureaucratic processes playful, the doll exchange provided the pleasures of the exquisite and embroidered Orient alongside fantasies of innocence, making a game of bureaucracy’s confluence of boredom and violence.

The friendship dolls further supported existing structures of racialization by strictly delimiting who could be chosen to represent a “well-behaved citizen” of the United States. Gulick’s committee recommended that the dolls should “look like attractive American . . . girls” and should “be carefully dressed in every detail since they will serve as models in a country where habits and customs are undergoing rapid changes.”<sup>73</sup> This rhetoric contained deliberately coded language to ensure that the dolls would be white. The minutes of a meeting of the CWFC record the following: “Discussion about how to avoid the sending of colored dolls followed. Decided that the literature should indirectly suggest that the dolls should be white, using the expression ‘look like attractive and typical American girls.’”<sup>74</sup> These measures allegedly were undertaken to avoid offending Japan by ensuring that participating organizations would not send black dolls. In addition to the racism underwriting the 1924 Immigration Act, the United States had blocked Japan’s attempts in 1919 to include a racial equality clause in the Treaty of Versailles, thus exacerbating the nation’s insecurities regarding its place in a Western racial hierarchy.<sup>75</sup> Because race was therefore a sensitive topic in U.S.-Japan relations, the CWFC perhaps wisely avoided sending black dolls to avoid touching upon Japan’s bruised sense of racial superiority over other non-Western nations. Still, the whiteness of the American dolls came to the forefront in other ways as well, belying the notion that this decision merely functioned to appease Japan’s own racial prejudices. The passports underscored the whiteness of the American dolls by listing not only hair color and eye color but the shape of the nose and mouth, thereby tethering racialized notions of beauty to the image of the “attractive and typical” American citizen.

Further, the statement that the dolls should “serve as models” illustrates how Gulick never abandoned his missionary impetus or his Orientalist views of Japan. In his writing on the friendship dolls, Gulick maintains an Orientalist’s faith in the notion that Japanese people harbor childlike and animistic views of the world. Consequently, he asserts that dolls in particular should appeal to “the psychology of the Japanese people.”<sup>76</sup> According to Gulick, the Japanese Hinamatsuri, or “Doll Festival,” preserves “the old romance of the land,” displaying “that element of pageantry, the effect

almost of being a scene on a stage, to which a child's imagination makes instant response."<sup>77</sup> That is, Gulick reasoned that Japanese animist beliefs would allow the dolls to be received as if they were living girls. However, because placing too much emphasis on Japan's fetishization of dolls would likely have troubled the doll exchange's many Christian supporters with suggestions of paganism, Gulick also stressed the utility of dolls in teaching Japanese girls to become "the ideal of Japanese womanhood—to be a good and true wife, a wise and loving mother."<sup>78</sup> The guidelines state that the dolls sent to Japan should therefore be "carefully dressed in every detail" to allow them to "serve as models" to a nation that many Americans still regarded as half-suspended in an ancient past.<sup>79</sup> Gulick asserts, "The Japanese . . . are peculiarly susceptible to the influences of personal goodwill and kindness; that is, they are peculiarly assimilable under right and wholesome moral influences."<sup>80</sup> Thus, while Gulick may have assumed a more open-minded attitude toward Japan and its diasporas than many other Americans of his time, his advocacy efforts were always contingent upon his confidence that Japanese people were "peculiarly assimilable" through appeals to childhood whimsy.

Although their reception cannot be thought to justify Gulick's Orientalist logics, the American dolls did receive a warm welcome when they arrived in Japan in March 1927 to coincide with the Hinamatsuri. There, they would be met by important government officials, the royal family, and other prominent people as well as by girls who were specially chosen as representatives.<sup>81</sup> One of the CWFC's correspondents describes this reception as "a beautiful sight" with "the little girls all . . . dressed in their very best Japanese costumes" walking down the gangplank of the ship from America, each girl holding a doll in her arms.<sup>82</sup> The welcome ceremonies that followed included speeches, songs, and formal greetings from both American and Japanese children.<sup>83</sup> Subsequently, the dolls were exhibited at major Tokyo department stores, indicating the extent to which they signaled the expansion of Japan's Western-style capitalist economy. They were then distributed to kindergartens and primary schools throughout the nation.<sup>84</sup> A select number of the dolls, including a special doll christened "Miss America," also had the honor of appearing on display at the Tokyo Educational Museum in an elaborate, two-story dollhouse, a gift from the empress herself. One American correspondent, "Mrs. Bowles," describes the display as follows:

It is a perfect Japanese house, surrounded with an exquisite Japanese garden, the whole enclosed in a huge glass case. Miss America is, of course, sitting in the place of honor; on either side, as guests, are a

number of American dolls, together with a few Japanese dolls who act as hostesses. All over the garden are articles used for kindergarten games. Some dolls are sliding down the slide; others are on the see-saw; some are picking flowers. There are just enough Japanese dolls to act as caretakers and hostesses.<sup>85</sup>

The pleasure that Mrs. Bowles takes in this scene is the pleasure of containment. Not only has the “perfect Japanese house” been reduced to the diminutive scale of a toy, but “Miss America” finds herself in “the place of honor,” surrounded by Japanese dolls who serve as her “caretakers and hostesses.” Significantly, the author notes that there are “just enough” Japanese dolls for the purpose of providing hospitality—in welcome contrast to the images of invading hordes of surplus Japanese workers disseminated by the American media. Further, the idea of enclosing Japan in “a huge glass case” recalls a popular passage written by Rudyard Kipling in 1889. In one of his Japanese travel letters, Kipling quotes a fellow traveler: “It would pay us to establish an international suzerainty over Japan; to take away any fear of invasion or annexation, and pay the country as much as ever it chose, on condition that it simply sat still and went on making beautiful things while our men learned. It would pay us to put the whole Empire in a glass case and mark it, ‘*Hors Concours*,’ Exhibit A.”<sup>86</sup> The doll exchange authorized this type of containment, enabling Americans to experience Japan as merely a diorama of “beautiful things” that “sit still”—that is, of dolls. Per Kipling, this dollhouse would appear *hors concours*, or “not for competition,” its hazards safely behind glass.

In this way, the doll exchange posited the Japanese girl/doll as an ideal embodiment of Japanese femininity and “friendship” as the ideal relationship between nations. By doing so, it worked to contain the putative sexual threat embodied by Asian femininity. Through friendship, the two nations could supposedly maintain an affective relationship devoid of romance and kinship. Friendship is typically thought to be a voluntary relationship based on personal compatibilities: similarity, proximity, reciprocity, attraction, equality. A relationship without formal obligations, friendship extends affection outward beyond the domestic space while rarely disrupting the integrity of “home.” It is an intimacy that preserves familial difference. By evoking friendship, the doll exchange therefore purported to offer the positive feelings attached to the East without the threat of betrayal. Simultaneously, it afforded the illusion that this “exchange” was a relationship between equals, occluding the power imbalances on which it rested. In a time in which miscegenation raised intense anxieties about racial purity, friendship also suggested that there would be no “mixing” of races. In *The*

*American Japanese Problem*, Gulick mimics this line of thinking: “Intermarriage between Japanese and whites is particularly obnoxious. How can oil and water mix?—or brown and white? The offspring is ‘neither Japanese nor American’; what is it but a fearsome monstrosity?”<sup>87</sup> While Gulick did not himself subscribe to these views, he believed that friendship and mutual understanding needed to precede interracial romance.<sup>88</sup> Scaling “friendship” up to the level of the nation, he writes, “For sixty years the treaties between Japan and the United States have emphasized the friendship of the two peoples.”<sup>89</sup> In accordance with this thinking, the doll exchange performed the containment of Asian hyperfemininity to suggest that the fetishistic allure of Japan could nevertheless be preserved—or even augmented—through the imagined innocence of girlhood friendships.

### **Mute Ambassadors**

While Gulick maintained that there was no need for Japan to send dolls in return, Japanese leaders moved rapidly to reciprocate. However, in contrast to the over twelve thousand commercial dolls sent to Japan by the “common people” of the United States, the Japanese government commissioned some of the nation’s best artisanal doll makers to create fifty-eight large, expensive, and exquisitely crafted ichimatsu dolls in an attempt to showcase Japan’s artistic ingenuity.<sup>90</sup> In part, this was an attempt to reassert Japan’s status as a “civilized” nation after the series of perceived insults that had culminated in the 1924 Immigration Act. Accordingly, the Japanese dolls were designed to appeal to the West’s admiration of Japan’s “beautiful things” while extinguishing any existing associations between Japan and the production of cheap toys and trinkets. By the 1920s, Japan had developed a reputation for producing inexpensive, flimsy, and ersatz toys that were thought to be merely imitations of their Western counterparts. When Germany, once the world leader in toy manufacture, ceased exporting toys to the United States during World War I, Japan attempted to fill the gap, much to the dismay of many American toy manufacturers. As a 1915 article titled “Invasion of the United States” alleges, “The ‘Made in Germany’ sign that used to adorn our Christmas toys has been changed to ‘Made in Japan.’” Drawing parallels between the yellow peril and an “invasion” of Japanese toys, the article then warns, “The Japanese have been clever enough to eliminate everything ‘Japanesey’ from the toys. The dolls are dressed in American cut clothing, and the soldier in facsimile of the American or English uniforms. . . . Well, we should worry.”<sup>91</sup> A 1916 article, “The War’s Influence in Toyland,” echoes these sentiments, warning of what it sees as the Japanese toy industry’s two great advantages: low-cost labor

and a talent for being a “cheap imitator” of Western innovations.<sup>92</sup> It alleges, “In the land of the Mikado they are now turning out figures of old Santa Claus himself for America’s next Christmas. Santa Claus not with slant eyes and Oriental features, but with the same old German cast of countenance that children here know so well. The Japanese are wonderful imitators.”<sup>93</sup> Under Peabody’s leadership, a 1919 issue of *Everyland* would translate these anxieties for child readers:

Any nation as full of children as Japan is naturally brimful of toys. . . . In fact there are so many toys that they “run over” into America. In spite of the long ocean trip and the “duty,” or money which each toy dog or cat has to pay to get into this country, they are cheaper than American toys. This is because Japanese toy-makers are quite pleased if they earn twenty cents a day, while few Americans get less than two dollars, or ten times as much.<sup>94</sup>

As this passage’s rhetorical maneuvers indicate, the Japanese toys “running over” into the United States became proxies for Japanese immigrants, with both toys and persons thought to devalue the imagined integrity of American labor.

Sending fewer dolls of higher quality was therefore almost certainly a strategic maneuver on the part of Shibusawa and his Japanese collaborators. The exquisitely crafted dolls that they produced would travel to the United States as elite ambassadors rather than as lower-class laborers. Shibusawa explains his thinking: “The initial question is what kind of and how many dolls to send. First of all, the dolls cannot be easily broken, disposable products. They must be tough enough to fulfill their mission, traveling safely across long distances and over seas and mountains. Moreover, they must be artistic. Our country Japan has achieved international renown as, above all, a nation of fine art.”<sup>95</sup> Shibusawa’s emphasis on aesthetics indicates that Japan’s chief objective was not to combat racial prejudices against ordinary Japanese citizens, but to defend the reputation of the empire, even if that meant placating Orientalist desires.

Therefore, unlike the grassroots efforts launched in the United States, Japanese officials selected and clothed the dolls, naming them after each of the forty-seven prefectures, the six major cities, and the four colonies. In addition, “Miss Dai Nippon,” or “Miss Great Japan,” held special status as the most elaborate of the dolls and a gift from Princess Teru, daughter of the emperor and empress.<sup>96</sup> Each doll was to be larger than thirty inches tall, have mobile arms and legs, be dressed in a formal kimono with real underwear and *tabi* socks, and come with an array of accessories, often including tea sets and parasols, at a total cost of 350 yen, or the equivalent

of approximately \$7,000 today.<sup>97</sup> Children were enlisted to each contribute one *sen*, or about half a cent, to go toward the purchase of the doll that represented their local area. However, while children were able to write letters and purchase local goods that could be included among the dolls' accessories, they had little say on matters of design and dress.<sup>98</sup> Instead, a competition was held among the top doll makers in Tokyo. The dolls selected in this competition would be the largest ichimatsu dolls of their time, and each would possess a unique and almost hyper-realistic appearance. This realism resulted from their prosthetic glass eyes and carefully molded and painted faces, designed to emphasize each doll's unique individuality.<sup>99</sup> Dressed in fancy kimono instead of everyday clothing, and blurring the boundaries between persons and things, the dolls would satisfy the pleasures that many Americans took in displays of Oriental splendor.

Unsurprisingly then, when the dolls arrived in the United States in time for the 1927 Christmas season, the welcome ceremonies held for them not only celebrated their exotic appeal but also continued to reinforce the idea that only a white doll or a white child could represent an American citizen. The guidelines for a "typical program" provided by the CWFC suggest that the American flag should be presented by a "Boy Scout," followed by the Japanese flag, which should be presented "if possible by a Japanese boy." An "American girl" should then receive a Japanese doll from a "Japanese girl if possible."<sup>100</sup> While the guidelines indicate some skepticism about the "possibility" of finding children of Japanese descent to participate, photographs taken at the ceremonies do seem to depict white and Asian girls standing side by side, often accompanied by Japanese dolls that appear almost as big as the girls themselves. In so doing, the lifelike, life-sized dolls evoked a sense of the uncanny, blurring the boundaries between human children and aesthetic objects, while maintaining this uncanniness safely within the realm of a cute make-believe game. Gulick recalls, "The symbolic ambassadors gave an amazing impression of being persons rather than dolls. Upon their delicately beautiful faces was written the gentle reserve of the Orient, but with it was a whimsical and wistful expression that made a subtle emotional appeal."<sup>101</sup> Cheng writes that Asiatic femininity irradiates the modern "fantasy of turning things into persons," and the pageantry of the welcome ceremonies enacted this fantasy by confusing the distinctions between the hyper-realistic Japanese dolls and the young Japanese girls assigned to present them.<sup>102</sup> A photograph in the *Oakland Tribune*, announcing the arrival of the friendship dolls, demonstrates this elision: Miss Dai Nippon stands positioned between two girls, each of them holding one of her hands (see Figure 4). The older girl, named Helen Adele Landenberger, wears a white dress with a large hair bow and knee socks. The younger girl, named Tai Ebina, appears to be the same size as the doll

itself and is similarly dressed in a kimono and *geta* shoes.<sup>103</sup> By placing these three figures in a row, the photograph provokes questions of sameness and difference, offering up multiple permutations of affinity: white/Asian, girl/doll. However, given the ways in which the girls are clothed and presented, the photograph ultimately dissolves the distinctions between the Japanese girl and the Japanese doll, while leaving the subjecthood of the white American girl intact.



Figure 4. "Oakland Children Greet Japanese Friendship Dolls," *Oakland Tribune*, November 28, 1927.

In the United States, the "gentle reserve" of the Japanese dolls was further accentuated in numerous statements supporting the notion that beautiful, speechless dolls were the ideal ambassadors to make a "subtle emotional appeal" to the American public. At their reception in Washington, D.C., speeches drew direct connections between the silence of the dolls and their affective power (see Figure 5).<sup>104</sup> While playful, these statements are nevertheless revealing, particularly because they were quoted repeatedly in press coverage and therefore resonated with popular feeling.

Tsuneo Matsudaira, the Japanese ambassador to the United States, jokes that he feels excited to have “no less than fifty-eight fellow ambassadors to assist [him],” and then elaborates, “They will have an unrestricted entrée to the beautiful world of innocent happiness . . . the world of childhood, the doors of which are but slightly open for diplomatic officials. . . . These dolls are silent, they do not talk, but sometimes silence is more eloquent than speech.”<sup>105</sup> Likewise, James J. Davis, secretary of labor and a noted white nationalist who nevertheless participated in the ceremonies, asserts, “Statesmen might well pattern after the object lesson these mute ambassadors are giving and devise ways and means of reaching ‘the hearts and souls of peoples.’”<sup>106</sup> Together, Matsudaira and Davis’s statements disclose a conflation of Asiatic silence with affective power. The ability of the dolls to evoke “friendly feeling” and touch “the hearts and souls” of American people becomes a product of their speechlessness and emotional reticence, their perceived ability to passively absorb any thoughts or feelings projected onto their blank faces. To put it another way, the particular “object lesson” that the Japanese dolls offered might be thought to concern objectification itself. The perfect Japanese ambassador became a “mute” aesthetic object whose presence confirmed positive feelings already attached to docile Asian bodies.



Figure 5. The official welcome in Washington, D.C. (Sidney L. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 1929).

Therefore, while the doll exchange may have endeavored to build peace by appealing to childhood innocence, a more cynical perspective might question how it promoted feelings that linked Japan and its diasporas to the infantile and the feminine to assuage anxieties regarding an imagined threat of Asian takeover. Of note, the exchange also enabled each nation to prop up its empire, even while purporting to foster international friendship. The CWFC, emboldened by the enthusiasm that the doll exchange had garnered, continued to send gifts to children overseas over the next few years, including thirty thousand school bags to Mexico and twenty-eight thousand treasure chests containing “good books” to the Philippines, then an American colony.<sup>107</sup> These gestures allowed the United States to uphold its self-image as a peacemaker and international benefactor while disavowing its military and colonial involvements. Similarly, in Korea, Japanese officials ordered Korean children to welcome the American dolls by singing the Japanese national anthem alongside both Japanese and American flags.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, Davis’s participation should serve as some indication that the doll exchange failed to challenge the foundations of imperialism and white nationalism. A eugenicist who believed in selective immigration, Davis had written only a few years earlier in his 1922 biography *The Iron Puddler* that white Americans would need to “teach our young to love the soil” or otherwise risk a future in which “an alien race will take away their heritage.”<sup>109</sup> As secretary of labor, his presence necessarily evoked conflicts that pitted working-class white Americans against the Japanese immigrants thought to be flooding the job market with cheap labor. Thus, at its worst, the doll exchange did more than just fail to secure peace between two warring empires; it became complicit in state violence, deflecting responsibility by replacing labor with play and living Japanese immigrants with “cute” Japanese dolls.

### **Cold Comforts**

Although the doll exchange has, for the most part, become a blip in U.S. history over the past ninety years, the friendship dolls remain minor emblems of the extinguished hope that the exchange once promised. In Japan, when the Pacific War broke out, many of the friendship dolls bore the weight of intense hostilities, a testament to the affective power they once held. Under government orders, the following radio announcement was transmitted across Japan: “The numerous American dolls sent to Japan several years ago are cheap ones whose purpose was to deceive Japanese children. Schools that still have the dolls should destroy or burn

them immediately.”<sup>110</sup> Consequently, most of the blue-eyed dolls were demolished, except for a few that sympathetic individuals rescued and placed into hiding. Accordingly, for some Japanese people, the doll exchange has taken on an amplified affective significance in the aftermath of the war, coming to symbolize the dizzying feelings attached to the volatility of U.S.-Japan relations. If the *kawaii* aesthetic developed as a response to postwar Japan’s infantilized position in relation to the United States,<sup>111</sup> the dolls embodied this *kawaii* quality perfectly while pointedly underscoring its historical origins. Today, the dolls are still commemorated in schools, museums, and popular media, such as Eiko Takeda’s children’s book *The Mysterious American Doll*, published in 1981, which features a *kawaii* blonde-haired doll with big, teary blue eyes on its cover.<sup>112</sup> In the United States, where the friendship dolls never quite achieved the same level of affective significance, many still on exhibit when the war broke out nevertheless found themselves quietly stowed away in backrooms or basements. Only in Raleigh, North Carolina, would one of the dolls, Miss Kanagawa, remain on display. However, a new placard placed next to her would read, “With a grim determination we now are committed to stop for all time Japanese aggression. This has no bloodthirsty implications to destroy peoples as such. We still believe in peace and good-will, to live and let live. Men, women, and children of Japan have this good-will but they have now been dominated by ruthless leaders. Proof of such latent good-will are the Friendship Doll Exhibits.”<sup>113</sup> This placard shows how the friendship dolls continued to hold the promise of “good-will” housed in the hearts of ordinary people, even as they affirmed the will to stop Japanese aggression, ominously, “for all time.”

Notably, in the 1980s and 1990s, the doll exchange was resurrected in response to reemerging transpacific conflicts and Japan’s rising status as an economic power. For instance, in 1994, a few predominantly black schools in the Pittsburgh area launched a project to resume sending dolls to Japan. While the reasons for this timing are not explicitly invoked, this project was almost surely a response to the reemergence of racism as a contentious issue in U.S.-Japan relations. John Russell explains how, during this time, the United States and Japan both “employed racism to construct each other as inveterately racist ‘Others,’” hostilities that placed African Americans and Asian Americans in the crossfire.<sup>114</sup> Blackface *kawaii* commodities, including Sambo dolls manufactured by Sanrio, the Japanese company best known for creating Hello Kitty, became linchpins in these discourses.<sup>115</sup> Hence, the Pittsburgh-area schools specifically chose to send a Native American doll (of unspecified tribal identification), two African American dolls, and other dolls “of various Eastern European heritage” in

an effort to showcase America's racial diversity. Robin Hurt, assistant to the mayor of Wilkinsburg, a predominantly black city with a participating school, stated that this project would allow "[Wilkinsburg] kids . . . [to] speak on their African-American heritage" while offering Japanese children "a better understanding that all the kids who go to school aren't the same." Hurt adds, "It's a way for the kids here, in inner-city schools, to learn they can be proud of their heritage. . . . They can break down these barriers and stereotypes adults have that have made African-American kids look so bad."<sup>116</sup> In this way, African American leaders worked to repair the original exchange's discrimination against "colored dolls" and its ongoing influence on transpacific racisms. Nevertheless, this new iteration of the exchange maintained the aim of mending political relations through appeals to the imagined innocence of girlhood friendships.

Another highly revealing sequel to the exchange occurred in the corporate sector. In 1992, Miss Toyama, a friendship doll in Kentucky, was pulled out of storage, repaired by Yoshitoku Dolls, and exhibited across the state for the strategic purposes of having her "resume her role as an ambassador of . . . global friendship." These efforts were championed by the company Universal Fastners, Inc., a subsidiary of the Japanese corporation YYK, which operated a factory in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. A YYK spokesperson states, "There's a lot of goodwill here. She's still continuing her mission."<sup>117</sup> However, as a *Wall Street Journal* article titled "Single, 69, and a Real Doll" reports, YYK and the other sponsors of the doll's statewide tour may have been "interested more in Miss Toyama's economic impact than in the folds of her obi." The hope was that Miss Toyama might encourage Japanese investment and trade. As evidence, the article observes that her "itinerary follows a path blazed by yen-dollars," making stops either at Kentucky cities that maintained Japanese factories and businesses—Hitachi in Harrodsburg and Toyota in Georgetown—or at cities that were hoping to attract them. Global capitalism thus found an opportunity to profit from the doll exchange's memory. However, in the tone of the *Wall Street Journal* article, we can also see how Japan's reemergence as a global power revitalized familiar yellow peril discourses, once again projected onto sexual anxieties about Asian femininity. With the title "Single, 69, and a Real Doll," the article insinuates that Miss Toyama is no longer a girl but a single, older woman. Listing her relationship status, age, and description, she places an ad in the *Wall Street Journal* as if seeking a sexual partner. Enacting a similar uncanny reversal from "two cute picture brides" to "field laborer," the article frames her economic seduction as a sexual seduction. After listing her itinerary, the article pauses to further underscore this point, stating, "Miss Toyama is, in short, a used woman."

The legacy of the doll exchange moreover continues to unfold in contemporary kawaii culture. By the late twentieth century, Japanese kawaii icons started to fill in the gap left by the friendship dolls, assuming their role as signifiers of global friendship. For example, Hello Kitty and Pikachu achieved official status as diplomatic ambassadors of Osaka in 2017 to support the city's bid to host the 2025 World Expo.<sup>118</sup> In this way, much like the friendship dolls, Hello Kitty, Pikachu, and other kawaii characters serve as agents of "soft power," playing upon their associations with the childlike and feminine to equip Japan with cultural capital in the aftermath of its forced disarmament. Here, Hello Kitty's often-noted lack of a mouth reprises the "silence" of the Japanese dolls, suggesting feminine docility while inviting emotional projection.<sup>119</sup> As Yano and Bow demonstrate, the seemingly innocent appeal of these kawaii commodities cannot be disentangled from the flows of racial capitalism nor from questions of Asian American racialization. The prehistory of kawaii's globalization in the doll exchange exposes the extent to which this has long been the case. To shift the focus from military power to "soft power" requires not only acknowledging girlhood's significance to international politics, but turning from more overt iterations of physical discipline and force to the violences that accompany playfulness and comfort. Thus, although girls and their dolls are often viewed as of trivial importance to the mature, masculinist political sphere, they become crucial to understanding the ways in which capitalism and colonialism converge in the exercise of soft power. The 1927 doll exchange therefore highlights the promise of further transpacific critique of children's culture, particularly given the processes of racialization that have aligned Asian girls with highly affectively charged "playthings," figures whose depoliticization preserves racial power differentials while soothing racial stress.

Today, the logics that the doll exchange fostered are also being reprised in ongoing efforts by the United States and other Western powers to sentimentalize children of color in moments when empathy is otherwise wanting. Although these uses of childhood innocence vary widely in form and affect, Save the Children, UNICEF, and other organizations continue to leverage children to generate sympathy. The Refugee Doll Project launched in Virginia provides lesson plans and other resources along with instructions for refurbishing standard commercial dolls into "educational tools to be used in schools, libraries, and multicultural events to foster awareness of and appreciation for refugees."<sup>120</sup> Comparably, the American photographer Brian McCarty's War-Toys project invites children traumatized by war "to become art directors for Brian's photographs of locally found toys, recreating their experiences through a deconstructive and disarming filter of

play.” These educational and therapeutic uses of dolls perform important work. Nevertheless, there continues to exist the belief that childhood innocence might save us, that play and war are incongruous, and thus that the insertion of soft toys into adult-initiated conflicts will prove “disarming.”<sup>121</sup> However, as the doll exchange shows, childhood innocence is a slippery concept prone to creating misunderstandings. The use of dolls and toys as proxies for intimacy may hold the promise of healing, but it also risks the exclusion of persons, allowing people to believe they “embrace” the other without the messiness of an actual encounter. In contrast, a politics of friendship can lead to genuine solidarity only when it stops seeing young children as our sole repositories of gentleness and embraces truer forms of vulnerability.

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### Notes

1. Laura Spencer Portor, “The Japanese Doll,” *Youth’s Companion*, March 14, 1907, 129.
2. Not all of the friendship dolls sent from the United States had blue eyes, although all (or most) of them were white. Nevertheless, the common Japanese name for the dolls is 青い目の人形 (*aoi-me-no-ningyō*), meaning “blue-eyed dolls,” likely due to the popularity of a Japanese song by the same name, written by Ujo Noguchi in 1921. See Sidney L. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship: The Story of a Goodwill Project between the Children of America and Japan* (New York: Friendship Press, 1929), 115.
3. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
4. *Ibid.*, 97.
5. Athella M. Howsare, “Messengers of Friendship to Japan,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, October 14, 1926, 982.
6. See Helen Kaibara, “Far from Child’s Play: Doll Diplomacy Following the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924,” *Rikkyo American Studies* 38 (2016): 179–205; Terry Kita, “Unintentional Cooperation: The Friendship Doll Mission and the Inescapable American Image of the Kimono-Clad Little Japanese Girl,” *Journal of Japonisme* 3 (2018): 129–86; and Rui Kohiyama, “To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean: The 1927 Japan-U.S. Doll Exchange,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 16 (2005): 55–80.
7. Kita, “Unintentional Cooperation,” 182.

8. Japanese American National Museum, "Passports to Friendship: Celebrating 75 Years of U.S.-Japan Friendship Doll Exchange," [www.janm.org/exhibits/passports/](http://www.janm.org/exhibits/passports/).
9. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 18, 8.
10. Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.
11. Leslie Bow, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43.
12. Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, trans. Laura Ensor (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1897), 88.
13. Clive Holland, *My Japanese Wife: A Japanese Idyl* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1902), 3.
14. *Ibid.*, 143.
15. Anne Anlin Cheng, "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (2018): 419.
16. Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 85.
17. Margaret Tate Kinneer Ballagh, *Glimpses of Old Japan, 1861–1866* (Tokyo: Methodist Publishing House, 1908), 69.
18. Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, 64.
19. John Luther Long, "Madame Butterfly," in *Madame Butterfly and a Japanese Nightengale: Two Orientalist Texts*, ed. Maureen Honey and Jean Lee Cole (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 75.
20. A. B. de Guerville, "Mme. Chrysantheme at Home," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* (1893), 27.
21. *Ibid.*, 30.
22. Kathleen Tamagawa, *Holy Prayers in a Horse's Ear: A Japanese American Memoir*, ed. Greg Robinson and Elena Tajima Creef (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 19.
23. Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 189.
24. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 59, 3.
25. See Yano, *Pink Globalization*; and Leslie Bow, "Racist Cute: Caricature, Kawaii-Style, and the Asian Thing," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 29–58.
26. "How the Jap 'Picture Brides' Are Japanizing California," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 11, 1920, 66.
27. In one issue of the *San Francisco Examiner*, the headline "Yes, This Is in California" appears alongside a photograph of Japanese children at a

Buddhist school. In another issue, the headline “Not in Japan, But Right Here in California” appears alongside a photograph in which white and Japanese American children at a Central Valley school stand segregated, with the Japanese American children outnumbering the white. See William H. Jordan, “Yes, This Is in California,” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 22, 1921, and “Not in Japan, But Right Here in California,” *San Francisco Examiner*, July 15, 1920.

28. In California, American-born Japanese children were thought to represent a particular threat, because their rights to American citizenship threatened to undermine the efforts of the 1913 Alien Land Law. This legislation had been designed to disenfranchise the state’s growing Asian American population by prohibiting “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning land.
29. “How the Jap ‘Picture Brides’ Are Japanizing California,” 66.
30. Calvin Coolidge, “Whose Country Is This?,” *Good Housekeeping*, February 1921, 109.
31. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 59.
32. “How the Jap ‘Picture Brides’ Are Japanizing California,” 66.
33. “Cute, but Yellow,” *San Francisco Examiner*, July 16, 1920.
34. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.
35. In his essay “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud unpacks the origins of *Unheimlich*, the German term for “uncanny.” He points out that *Unheimlich* is the inverse of *Heimlich*, or “belonging to the house.” He writes, “Starting from the homely and domestic, there is a further development towards the notion of something removed from the eyes of strangers, hidden, secret.” See Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 126, 133.
36. Irving Dillon, “That Japanese Craze,” *Life*, July 6, 1911, 16.
37. Sandra C. Taylor, *Advocate of Understanding: Sidney Gulick and the Search for Peace with Japan* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1984), xii.
38. Sidney L. Gulick, *The American Japanese Problem: A Study of the Racial Relations of the East and the West* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1914), 172.
39. Taylor, *Advocate of Understanding*, 165.
40. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, xiii.
41. Sidney L. Gulick, *Should Congress Enact Special Laws Affecting Japanese?* (New York: National Committee on American Japanese Relations, 1922), 7.
42. “The Doll Diplomats,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, April 14, 1927, 340.
43. Taylor, *Advocate of Understanding*, 179–80.
44. Dr. Frank Crane, “Dolls for Japan,” *Modesto News-Herald*, July 25, 1926, 12.
45. *Shibusawa Ei’ichi Denki Shiryō* 渋沢栄一伝記資料, vol. 38, 32.
46. Crane, “Dolls for Japan,” 12.
47. Rev. E. C. Fry, “Doll Diplomats,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, December 15, 1927, 1170.

48. Kohiyama, "To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean," 59.
49. Lucy W. Peabody, "With Santa Claus in Japan," *Everyland, a Magazine of World Friendship for Girls and Boys* (1911), 5.
50. *Ibid.*, 9.
51. Kohiyama, "To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean," 60.
52. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 8–9.
53. *Shibusawa Ei'ichi Denki Shiryō*, 8.
54. *Ibid.*, 15.
55. *Ibid.*, 16.
56. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 8.
57. Miriam Formanek-Brunell explores how male inventors entered into the previously feminized space of the doll industry at the turn of the century to produce "allegedly 'indestructible' dolls based on the machines they admired." See Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 37.
58. *Shibusawa Ei'ichi Denki Shiryō*, 16.
59. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 10.
60. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
61. Bill Gordon's expansive website on the doll exchange collects information about friendship dolls that have been recovered in addition to images of their passports, tickets, and other accessories. He also provides a wealth of popular articles and other resources. See [www.bill-gordon.net/dolls/index.htm](http://www.bill-gordon.net/dolls/index.htm).
62. Gulick, *Should Congress Enact Special Laws Affecting Japanese?*, 7.
63. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 53.
64. Hacking uses the phrase "making up people" to capture how "people spontaneously come to fit their categories" through a process of what he calls "dynamic nominalism," in which bureaucratic categorizations inform performances of selfhood and vice versa. See Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36.
65. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 109, 111.
66. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 115.
67. *Shibusawa Ei'ichi Denki Shiryō*, 16.
68. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 11.
69. Gulick, *American Japanese Problem*, 189.
70. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 27.
71. *Ibid.*, 32.
72. *Ibid.*, 38.

73. Howsare, "Messengers of Friendship to Japan," 982.
74. Kohiyama, "To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean," 75.
75. Yuko Kawai, "Deracialised Race, Obscured Racism: Japaneseness, Western and Japanese Concepts of Race, and Modalities of Racism," *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015): 31.
76. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, xv.
77. *Ibid.*, 4, xv–xvi.
78. *Ibid.*, 4. This is almost certainly a translation of the popular four-character phrase *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母), an expression that also appeared in Chinese and Korean and captured patriotic ideals of femininity for East Asian women at the turn of the century.
79. *Shibusawa Ei'ichi Denki Shiryō*, 16.
80. Gulick, *American Japanese Problem*, 174.
81. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 38.
82. *Ibid.*, 33.
83. *Ibid.*, 39.
84. *Ibid.*, 45.
85. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
86. Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea: Letters of Travel* (New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1899), 311–12.
87. Gulick, *American Japanese Problem*, 18.
88. *Ibid.*, 177.
89. *Ibid.*, 185.
90. Kita, "Unintentional Cooperation," 139.
91. "Invasion of the United States," *Furniture Manufacturer and Artisan* 71, no. 6 (1915): 279.
92. "The War's Influence in Toyland," *Crockery & Glass Journal* 25 (1916): 41.
93. *Ibid.*, 25.
94. "She Wants to See Who Makes Her Toys," *Everyland, a Magazine of World Friendship for Girls and Boys* (1919), 84.
95. *Shibusawa Ei'ichi Denki Shiryō*, 90–91, translation mine.
96. Kita, "Unintentional Cooperation," 139.
97. *Ibid.*, 140.
98. *Ibid.*, 141.
99. *Ibid.*, 143.
100. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 105.
101. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
102. Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 435.
103. "Oakland Children Greet Japanese Friendship Dolls," *Oakland Tribune*, November 28, 1927.
104. Kohiyama, "To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean," 70.
105. Gulick, *Dolls of Friendship*, 96.
106. Frederic William Wile, "Washington Observations," *Evening Star*, December 28, 1927, 8.

107. Kohiyama, "To Clear Up a Cloud Hanging on the Pacific Ocean," 70, 71.
108. *Ibid.*, 66.
109. James J. Davis, *The Iron Puddler: My Life in the Rolling Mills and What Came of It* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1922), 258.
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