Praise and Prejudice: American Attitudes Toward Japan in Uncle Ben

Anna Nielsen
anna.nielsen15@gmail.com
Rachel Baron
Emily Orton

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/fhssconference_studentpub

Part of the Asian History Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Nielsen, Anna; Baron, Rachel; and Orton, Emily, 'Praise and Prejudice: American Attitudes Toward Japan in Uncle Ben' (2018). FHSS Mentored Research Conference. 341.
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/fhssconference_studentpub/341

This Poster is brought to you for free and open access by the Family, Home, and Social Sciences at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in FHSS Mentored Research Conference by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Praise and Prejudice: American Attitudes Toward Japan in *Uncle Ben*

Rachel Baron, Anna Nielsen, Emily Orton

Mentor: Dr. Aaron Skabelund | Department of History

**Introduction and Hypothesis**

*Uncle Ben in Japan* is a 1933 geographical workbook intended to teach American schoolchildren about Japan. It is an issue of the Weekly Reader series *The Uncle Ben Books*, later acquired by Scholastic, that introduces the fictional international travel account of “Uncle Ben” as told through “letters home.” This text highlights both positive and negative American attitudes towards Japan in the 1930s. Although this work expresses certain views progressive for its time, it also contains evident assumptions of American national superiority.

**Historical Context**

The attitudes seen in *Uncle Ben* were influenced by earlier Western views of Japan and Asia in general. In the 1870s, the craze of Japonisme expressed the ideals of a safely distant, aestheticized female “Orient” of kimono and fans. Later discrimination, conceptualized in the racial epithet “Yellow Peril,” depicted faceless, numberless hordes in Asia poised to take over the world. These positive and negative views both exoticized Asians as “the Other.”

**Praise of Japan in *Uncle Ben***

Uncle Ben’s “letters” emphasize positive views of Japan in their adoption of Western customs and their native traditions of piety and respect.

- “Within the last few years, the Japanese have learned to eat more bread” (25).
- “[Schoolchildren] sit up at desks like American children and allow their legs and backs to grow straight” (33).
- “[Japanese children] did not say, ‘Oh please let us stay up a little longer!’ as I have heard American children say. The children of Japan obey their parents the minute they speak” (27).
- “Girls in Japan begin when they are very young to obey the ‘men folks.’ Girls generally ‘give in’ to the boys in Japan!” (27).

**Prejudice Against Japan**

Despite the favorable opinions above, Uncle Ben also expresses critiques of Japanese customs and physical appearance which reveal American beliefs of superiority.

- “There was so much to see [on the train to Tokyo] that I felt as if I were at a circus” (4).
- “Japanese children always smile… their little narrow eyes twinkle” (33).
- “Everyone sits on the floor here… It is hard for me to get used to this custom. My long legs ache after sitting on the floor!” (42).
- “[A Japanese home] is like a large toy house. I keep thinking that it is not real” (20).

**Conclusions**

The view of Japan presented in *Uncle Ben in Japan* is quite progressive for its era. Nevertheless, its tone is often overly adulatory and even infantilizing, showing that the United States saw itself as a paternal Westernizing teacher to Japan. Although native Japanese traditions are portrayed as exotic and inferior, the author highlights certain qualities such as filial piety as admirable and worthy of imitation. Overall, the book’s goal is to instill a sense of “American-ness” in young readers by emphasizing the mystic “otherness” of Japanese culture.

**Selected References**

