

Under the Banyan Tree: Japan's Influence On Contemporary Hawai'i

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My research Project, *Under the Banyan Tree*, looks at Japanese influence in Contemporary Hawai'i, differing from other foreign powers by fostering a unique level of acceptance, particularly in their cultural and political relationships. I have long been interested in the 50th state: from the first generations of Japanese immigrants in 1868 to U.S. colonization in 1893, Japan has been both an early and enduring presence in Hawai'i. Today, this history is visible in cultural institutions, trade ties, and prominent Japanese Americans in local governance.

My research project began with three books: *From a Native Daughter*, a Native Hawaiian critique of colonialism; *Beyond Ethnicity*, investigating race politics in today's Hawai'i; and *The Island Edge of America*, which provides a political history of the islands. Along with my research advisor's reading strategies, these books guided my understanding of Hawai'i's colonial past, race dynamics, and government institutions before I looked into the contemporary role of Japanese influence.

Instead of conducting formal interviews, I reached out directly to Japanese and Hawaiian language immersion schools and cultural organizations through phone calls and informal conversations. This process, described as "bridging" by my advisor, allowed me to find sources and prior studies from Hawaiians, observing the local perspective of contemporary Japanese-Hawaiian relationships. Unanswered calls and emails reminded me that persistence was key in the research process, that sources and analysis were not always readily available, but adapting my methods brought me valuable insights.

I found that Japanese institutions are perceived with a level of trust and integration that foreign actors do not receive. For example, Canadian and U.S. mainland real estate investments were met with backlash for raising cost-of-living prices. At the same time, the Plaza Accord allowed Japan to make lasting investments in Hawai'i's economy, furthering long-term cultural presence and benefiting Hawaiian markets. On the societal and cultural side, language immersion schools and Japanese festivals sustain ties that are not perceived as outside impositions but as a part of Hawai'i's lived identity. Japan has a "unique level of acceptance." Japan's influence in Hawai'i remains a central sculpting element that makes up Hawai'i, shaping the state's policy, identity, and everyday life.

The purpose of my project is to shine light on the reality of Hawai'i, more than a tourist destination or strategic military hub, but a mix of global power and local identity. Over centuries, Japan has etched a model for acceptance in this beautiful place. I plan on furthering my research by going to Hawai'i after my graduation in May of 2026. Acquiring IRB research capabilities and visiting Japanese cultural institutions and businesses in Waikiki will allow me to see firsthand the level of integration I have researched.

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