102 | book review

airborne dreams: 'Nisei' stewardesses and Pan American World Airways

Christine R. Yano, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, USA, 2011, 248pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-4850-4 (Pbk), \$22.95

'Airborne Dreams' draws on a miscellaneous picture of the interplay of the Jet Age, post-war American–Japanese relations, the commodification of science and technology, the 'Nisei' programme of Pan Am and the micro aspects of the 'Nisei' stewardesses' lives. This book combines archival research, participant observation of Pan Am celebration parties, as well as interviews with 34 former Pan Am stewardesses. According to Yano, 'Nisei' not only refers to second-generation Japanese Americans, but also to third-generation Japanese Americans, Japanese nationals and people with other Asian ancestry. Here, the term 'Nisei' is used as 'a convenient label rather than a sociological fact' (Yano, 2011: 16).

The 'Nisei' project was launched in 1955 and the Cold War served as political motivation for the appearance of the Asian face in America, as the US turned to Asia and maintained military bases in Japan. Yano stresses that 'Nisei' had a 'symbolic significance' in that 'they could be displayed as a triumph of assimilation and mastery of the world' (p. 19). As the leading airline in the US, Pan Am was the first company to incorporate the 'Nisei' project, as part of US national aspirations for hegemony. However, at that time the US still followed a racialised policy when dealing with Japanese-Americans. A 'Nisei' stewardess had to deal with gender and race-related negotiations between herself, her family, colleagues and the company. Professor Yano explains how these stewardesses were 'racialized, gendered, and commodified' through industry practices (p 18). She contextualises issues of race, gender and class in the post-war era, especially from 1955 to 1972, which coincides with the pinnacle of the Jet Age and the golden age of Pan Am.

This book has six chapters. The first two delineate a broad picture of the social-political change of the specific era and the racialised strategy of Pan Am's 'Nisei' Program. Chapter Three juxtaposes the personal experiences of 'Nisei' stewardesses with the company's strategy and addresses the recruitment process in which racial issues were embedded. For example, the company emphasised more the stewardesses' exotic Asian appearance rather than their Japanese language proficiency. Chapter Four depicts 'Nisei's' segregated life experiences before becoming Pan Am stewardesses, due to their Japanese family background. Moreover, Yano demonstrates the racialised social networks between 'Nisei' and other colleagues that became obvious during work and leisure time. She claims that

'they noted social snubs based in race, but they found their own activities and made their own friends' (p. 152).

Chapter Four and Chapter Five address the upward mobility in the 'Nisei's' lives with respect to career and marriage. Through flying with Pan Am, they got to know a prestigious upper-class lifestyle and acquired a sense of worldliness, although somewhat equivalent to a white, Euro-American way in terms of food (wine, caviar and French cuisine) and culture (opera, films and classical music). Their life course changed because of Pan Am, as some got married at a late age and some remained single. The author suggests that 'Nisei' stewardesses had more opportunities to marry up, as seen in her example of a 'Nisei' stewardess marrying a white movie star. However, she does not elaborate how the Pan Am experience has influenced the 'Nisei's' marriage pattern and partner-choosing.

Some interesting themes emerge in Chapter Five. For example, when discussing resistance and agency, Yano gives an example of a 'Nisei' stewardess trying on a customer's luxurious ermine coat (p. 151). The author considers this act a means of transgression displaying the class gulf between the airline customers and these stewardesses. However, was this behaviour unique among the 'Nisei' stewardesses or prevailing among the stewardesses as a whole? It could be more clearly addressed.

I am concerned with two general issues. The first regards the heterogeneity of the 'Nisei' group. How many of Yano's informants were born in Japan? How many were second-generation or third-generation Japanese Americans? How many were of other Asian ancestry but also considered 'Nisei' by Pan Am? Based on this book, the 'Nisei' was not a homogeneous group, but then what are the similarities and differences within this group? It would be helpful to know these in order for readers to better understand their lives.

The other issue concerns the celebratory tone of the book. Yano indicates that 'the ones who spoke with me tended to be among those most strongly devoted to the airline and their Pan Am selves' (p. 169). Through interviews, they recollected a great airline that compared to none in civil aviation history, creating a nostalgic, proud and celebratory tone of a disappeared golden age, and of the airline that they devoted a significant part of their lives to. These informants' celebratory tone may dilute potential critical remarks in terms of gender and race inequality.

A.R. Hochschild's 'The Managed Heart' addresses stewardesses and emotion management and focuses on the characteristics of stewardesses as commercialised emotional labour, stressing the relationship between emotions, gender and class in a social-psychological way. By contrast, 'Airborne Dreams' concentrates on social history and the intersections of race, gender and class in relation to 'Nisei' stewardesses.

Above all, 'Airborne Dreams' advances our understanding of the history of civil aviation, of Pan Am and of the 'Nisei' stewardesses. The style is clear and smooth without abstruse theories. It should draw the attention not only of academia but of a general readership as well.

Yang Shen
LSE, University of London

reference

Hochschild, A.R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

doi:10.1057/fr.2012.18