

Hidden Legacy: Japanese Traditional Performing Arts in the World War II Internment Camps.

A film by Murasaki Productions, LLC, MPSVD1942, 2014, www.jcalegacy.com. Project funded in part by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant Program.

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Hidden Legacy compellingly narrates the survival and resiliency of Japanese-American performing artists incarcerated in concentration camps¹ located across the central and western states, and the Japanese music, dance, and theater performing arts they brought to life. Such performances helped to dispel the frustration and humiliation felt by many inmates, creating a sense of normalcy needed to endure their hardship, even generating “moments of peace and happiness” in their desolate lives.

For many of us researching and writing about Japanese-American music-making, the film’s interviews with musicians and dancers who taught and performed in the concentration camps are invaluable and add to the growing scholarship of music within such politically charged circumstances. The film’s producer and creative director, Shirley Muramoto Wong, is a *Sansei* (third-generation Japanese-American) *koto* performer and teacher, whose efforts span more than twenty years, culminating in the production of *Hidden Legacy*. For Muramoto Wong, whose mother learned to play *koto* while she was interned at Topaz and Tule Lake camps, this project is a personal journey. With the passing of *Nisei* (second generation), including a number seen in the film, their experiences are indispensable as documentation of a counter-narrative to the wholesale Americanization of incarcerated promoted by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which administered the camps. The treasured photos and actual film footage of Japanese music and dance in the camps imbue the stories being told with the strength and beauty of diasporic traditions transmitted to America by *Issei* (first-generation) immigrants.

In highlighting the Japanese arts performed in the camps, *Hidden Legacy* broadens our knowledge of music-making during the three-year incarceration of Japanese Americans. Minako Waseda’s scholarly article published in 2005² comprehensively describes music in the camps, but seeing and hearing the musicians and dancers give first-hand accounts of their activities illuminates the power and purpose of their art in the camps. Despite the lack of sponsorship by the WRA that Western and American music activities enjoyed, traditional Japanese music thrived. An interview in the film discloses how Japanese music and dance teachers and their students registered together in order to be placed in the same camp. This arrangement established Japanese music-making and dance in some locations. It was dismaying to hear, however, that not all camp administrators allowed the practice of Japanese arts.

Ironically, art overall flourished in the camps, with the Japanese arts blossoming mostly in the hands of *Issei*, who for the first time since coming to the United States had moments of repose from the hardships of daily life. The surge in artistic activity in the camps could be described as “a huge renaissance in art” for Japanese Americans.³ Art-making not only served individual creativity, but it was also a source of dignity, and a chance for detainees to fulfill their aesthetic inclination and

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- 1 There were ten concentration camps situated in Arizona (2), Arkansas (2), California (2), Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming. Separate Department of Justice camps, housing civic and religious leaders in the Japanese community, numbered six main sites in Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota and Texas (2).
 - 2 Minako Waseda, “Extraordinary Circumstances, Exceptional Practices: Music in Japanese American Concentration Camps,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8:2 (June 2005), pp. 171–209.

create beauty in their barren environment. *Hidden Legacy* chronicles how musical activity in the camps for the first time provided opportunities for many inmates to study Japanese music, alongside classical and folk dance. Farming wives were eager to learn what they considered elite arts, elevating their aesthetic selves. Men utilized their imposed leisure to learn *gidayū* or *shigin*, some for the first time.

Muramoto Wong's film contributes significantly to diaspora studies. The viewer is directed toward Japanese diasporic culture and performing arts which provided sustenance to many Issei and Nisei during their unjust imprisonment. More than sixty years have elapsed since this dark chapter in American history; the passage of time has made it easier for survivors to come forward and tell their stories that demonstrate "cultural citizenship – the right to express and maintain the cultural practices of their Japanese heritage"⁴ in response to the repressive conditions of the camps that as a rule discouraged anything Japanese. Sustained practice in the camps kept Japanese music and dance vital, facilitating the resumption of these arts in rebuilt lives and communities after the war, successfully transmitting them to coming generations. The musical arts kabuki, *gidayū*, and *naniwabushi* (popular narrative style of singing) were rejuvenated in the camps, following their decline in pre-war communities in the 1930s due to the popularity of modern Japanese entertainment via radio, recordings, and the cinema.⁵

The film also describes transculturated modifications of Japanese performing arts. Traditionally, music genres in Japan are gender and class specific, although adherence to such tradition is gradually diminishing, resulting in greater social mobility. As the division between classes in the camps became blurred, camp life became more egalitarian. The availability of teachers in the camps spurred opportunities to learn and perform, making it possible for anyone to partake in genres typically reserved for the upper class. Training in kabuki, traditionally performed by men, became accessible to women in the unique setting of the camps. Kabuki productions featured women singing, playing *nagauta shamisen*, and dancing, some specializing in men's roles. Another adaptation by a dance teacher was choreographing dances for *kouta* (short lyrical songs) since they were especially popular with camp audiences. The anomalous circumstances of the camps combined with training Americanized younger generations engendered slight modifications of Japanese performing arts, resulting in Japanese-American nuances of these traditions.

Hidden Legacy is a tribute to the performers and teachers whose remembrances and stories amplify our understanding of how music and dance enlivened their proscribed lives. While for Nisei and Sansei viewers the flow and length of the film may not be an issue, for other audiences the film could have been more tightly organized along themes that better unify the interviews. Perhaps *Hidden Legacy* could have benefitted from the discreet use of a lead narrator to frame the rich tapestry of peoples' stories to insure a more compact presentation and coherent viewing experience. Indeed, such a device is used at the end, successfully bringing the film to a close.

A classroom showing of *Hidden Legacy* puts a human face on current issues such as immigration, civil rights, national identity, and exclusion. The oral histories of these artists convey the power of artistic expression, and the possibilities for people to transcend oppression and extreme circumstances through the practice of music and dance. The film is also a story of an important, albeit uncomfortable chapter in American history that is often downplayed in school curricula.

3 Andy Noguchi, "Camp Art: Strength, Dignity and Culture in the Concentration Camps," *East Wind: Culture and Politics of Asians in the U.S.* 2:2 (1983), p. 54.

4 Shirley Muramoto Wong, *Hidden Legacy: Tribute to Teachers of Japanese Traditional Arts in the War Relocation Authority Camps*, Concert Program, Koyasan Buddhist Temple, Los Angeles, California, 2010, p. 3.

5 Waseda, "Extraordinary Circumstances, Exceptional Practices," p. 176.

The extra video footage included on the DVD is valuable for teaching in the classroom and exposing audiences to hearing and viewing the music, dance, and instruments discussed in the film. Rarely heard sung epics accompanied by Chikuzen *biwa* performed by Kokuto Molly Kimura expose listeners to a medieval genre that encompasses a unique aesthetic of Japanese traditional music. Rare footage of *shimai* – *nō* drama dance – accompanied by singing is another performing tradition dating back to medieval times (1185–1573). Viewers have the pleasure of hearing Shirley Muramoto Wong perform “Haru no umi” [‘Spring Sea’] a twentieth-century *koto* and *shakuhachi* duet written by the well-known blind *koto*-performer-composer Miyagi Michio. Dramatic *shigin* deftly sung by master Kokko Ohigashi highlights a traditional song genre that enjoyed renewed popularity in certain camps. Visually entertaining is the *buyō* (classical dance) performance by interviewee Bando Misayasu, with Japanese popular song as musical accompaniment.

Overall, the film is a gem, a wealth of personal recollections, conveying not only the pain of those years, but the positive attitude and experience of opportunities to engage in the performing arts of the Japanese homeland. Lastly, the soundtrack – a wonderful array of Japanese traditional, contemporary, and fusion music – merits attention. Musical pieces that coalesce the Japanese *koto*’s idiomatic playing style with a jazz-based modern sound are the creation of Muramoto Wong and her band, Murasaki Ensemble, one of a number of groups whose continuous use and innovation of the *koto* has helped to sustain this instrument in the twenty-first century.

Transforming Nikkeijin Identity and Citizenship: Untold Life Histories of Japanese Migrants and Their Descendants in the Philippines, 1903–2013.

By Shun Ohno. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015. Pp. 284.

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The aims of this carefully crafted book are clear-cut: to add to the growing global literature on Nikkeijin, individuals of Japanese descent who are predominantly overseas and do not have Japanese citizenship. It seeks to shed light on lesser known populations outside of Brazil and the United States, focusing on the history and experiences of Nikkeijin from the Philippines. Ohno does this by bringing a complex narrative to a period surpassing a century and spanning two World Wars through meticulous historical research and oral history paradigms commonly found in social anthropology, investigative journalism, and human rights law. The work is also informed by the larger philosophical premise of the intrinsic value of a “history from below.”

Countries in the Asia-Pacific war theatres, the author argues, are distinct from Brazil and the United States, because in this region Japan directly engaged in sustained military operations. The smaller numbers of Nikkeijin in the Asia Pacific when compared to the Americas result from postwar outcomes often characterized by the death or removal of militarized and auxiliary civilian populations to Japan. The Philippine segments of this global story are both typical and unique. Japanese descendants of mixed (*mestizo*) Filipino heritage did not all repatriate to their father’s country for fear of their mothers or themselves being unwelcome; years of Japanese schooling for some, however, inculcated a race ideology where the Emperor’s subjects were deemed superior to Filipinos. The question of their citizenship and identity laid bare larger structural forces that exceeded their experiences. Here was a trifecta: a modern twentieth-century colonialism (in this case, by the US) and imperialist/ethnic-nationalist expansionism (in this case, by Japan) converging on an incipient state (in this case, the Philippines) which was occupied, in turn, by both powers.