O-sode no furiawase : the touching of sleeves : an original story based on the early life of a Japanese-American dancer for ages nine to eleven

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O-Sode no Furiawase: The Touching of Sleeves
an Original Story Based on the Early Life of a Japanese-American dancer,
for ages nine to eleven

by
Jina M. Accardo

Mentor:
Sal Vascellaro

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
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*O-Sode no Furiawase: The Touching of Sleeves*

an Original Story Based on the Early Life of a Japanese-American dancer,
for ages nine to eleven

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**Abstract**

*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves* is based on a true story; it is the fictionalized memoir of a second-generation Japanese-American girl growing up in a large family in California during the 1930’s and 1940’s. Set against the backdrop of the Depression and the internment of West Coast “persons of Japanese ancestry” during World War II, the story follows the protagonist’s childhood interest in dance as it blossoms into a true calling.

The sections that follow the narrative portion provide its family and historical context, and consider the events of the story in relation to nine- to eleven-year-olds, from a developmental and cultural perspective.
Dedication

To Auntie Michiko, first and foremost, for your mentorship, encouragement, and generosity, for the many hours you spent answering innumerable questions, and for the beautiful pictures to give life to the story

To Jean, constant source of inspiration

To Jeanne, Ken, and Judi, for sharing your treasure trove of memories, photos, and documents.

To Auntie Yo, the extraordinary family historian

To Kathryn, Sachi, and Richard for your wonderful childhood pictures

To Carin, for the amazing letter from Auntie “Toe”

Tayeko Iseri Polk and Charles Sumner Polk, my parents

Adam and Katie, for cheering me on

Michael, for vast amounts of aboveness and beyondness

To Sal, for shepherding me through this with kindness and sage advice

And to all our immigrant ancestors

this is dedicated.
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Introduction
Introduction

Most American citizens can lay claim to having an immigrant in their lives. Maybe it is a parent, or an uncle, a cousin, a spouse, an ancestor, or a friend. Maybe it’s you. If you have a connection to an immigrant, you may be particularly sensitive to the way that population is treated: in the newspapers, the 24-hour news television shows, and on the streets where you live.

To the denizens of the host country, immigrants can seem like a large, amorphous mass of incomprehensible, alien-looking, -sounding, and -acting beings. Certain periods in our country’s history have attracted specific ethnic groups. There have been waves of Irish immigration, of Eastern European, Chinese, Japanese, German, South and Central American. Perhaps the people who come to our shores see all Americans, at first, as being indistinguishable from one another in the same way that perhaps we see them. But to the individual people on both sides of that meeting of cultures, those people’s experiences are as individual as fingerprints. No two experiences are the same.

This is a story of a particular American child: my Auntie Michiko. Her foreign-born parents came to the west coast of the United States from Japan around the turn of the 20th century. Her life path was shaped by her family’s values, their changing fortunes, and their love and support for her. More than that, it was shaped by the level of or lack of acceptance that the prevailing American culture had, for this new generation of citizens and their immigrant parents. And finally, her journey was a product of her own determination, and dedication to an artistic discipline, first from her parents’ homeland,
thence to those of other countries. All these things became part of the adult that she grew up to be. Everything, I believe, touches everything else.

So, this may not resemble other immigrants’ stories. Think of it as one fingerprint among billions. But therein lies, I hope, whatever universality it can claim. It is for all children negotiating their way toward adulthood. For truly, none of us rear our children in the place we recognize from our childhoods, even if we bring them up in the same house in which we ourselves grew up. Anyone who can remember a time before cell phones, cable television, personal computers, female presidential candidates, or marriage equality could tell you that. We all have culture clashes to deal with, and we all have to find a balance between our family’s values and the values we pick up from the world outside our homes. And we are all influenced by the specific time and place in which we grow up.

There once was a child who grew up in America; this is her story.
O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves
O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves

Family, 1931, Los Angeles. From left to right, Yoshiko, Toshiko, Tayeko, Shizu (Mama), Shigeru, Michiko, Saburo (George), Sunao (Harry), Torahei (Papa)

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Foreword
Foreword

There is an old Japanese saying, “O-sode o furiawase mo tasho no en,” that, like many Japanese sayings, is deliberately not spelled out entirely. However, if you look it up online, you may find it translated into English as “Even the touching of sleeves in passing is caused by some affinity operating from former lives.” But in Japanese, the expression is nothing so definite as that.

What it says, and here it is helpful to remember that it was written in the days when a Japanese person always wore a kimono, is this:

Even the chance swinging together of sleeves is some sort of, perhaps large, perhaps small, en.

The word en can be translated as bond, affinity, relation, kinship, connection, and fate. It means all these things at once.

In our family, when asked what it means, we say that a person has touched your life even if you two have only accidentally brushed sleeves in passing.

This story is for those who touch our lives, in large ways and small.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Foreword
Chapter 1

This is the way I remember it.

It is 1930. It is morning in Santa Monica, California. I am seven.

“What are you doing?” I shout over the waves. Papa stands knee deep in the water, scraping something that I can’t see off the pier with his knife.

“Getting bait,” he answers. He wades back to shore, the morning sun lighting him golden from the top down as he emerges. The bucket in his hand streams water from a hole punched in the bottom.

Inside the bucket lies a pile of black, shiny, comma-shaped shells. “What are those?” I ask.

“Muuru-something. Muurugai. In English, ‘mussels,’” he says, struggling with the foreign sound of the letter L. In one swift motion, he runs his blade in the seam of one mussel and opens it with a small cracking sound. Inside, one side of the shell is black-rimmed, chalky white in the middle. In the other side glistens a small, pinkish-tan nugget about the size of Papa’s thumb. He baits his hook.

An hour later, the emptied rice sacks in the back of Papa’s truck are now full of fish. And a bonus – he found an abalone clinging to a rock and pried it off. The outside of the shell looks just like a rock, but the inside is filled with rainbows, and I watch them dance in my cupped hands as we pull away from the pier. Not one of the other fishermen has caught so many fish as Papa.

The sun, now higher in the sky, makes it look like there are disappearing puddles on the road as we drive back to Gardena. We pull up to the alleyway behind our store, where we live. On this stretch of Western Avenue, all the storeowners live in apartments in the back of their stores. Our neighbor who owns the tofu store down the street waves good morning to us.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 1
“We had good fishing this morning, Michiko and I,” says Papa. “Please, won’t you take one?”

Mrs. Nabeshima’s eyes open wide at the sight of our catch. “Maa . . .” she says, which is like saying “Oh, my” in English. She says she will send her son over right away to come get it and bows in thanks. Papa gives away a few more fish to neighbors, then puts the rest in the icebox. I duck inside our apartment, which looks pitch black after being outside in the bright California sun. I hear Mama’s voice from beyond the apartment. She must be in the store.

“Papa? It might be a good idea to wash up before you go to the pier,” I hear her say.

“But we just came from there,” I say as I walk through the doorway that connects the apartment to the back of the store. It’s lighter in here because of the big glass window in front that says “Nippon Shoukai, T. Iseri, owner,” in gold letters. Yoshiko, who’s six years older than me, is writing orders behind the counter. She shoots me a look for contradicting Mama. Which I didn't, exactly.

Mama either doesn’t care or notice, because all she says is “Different pier. Papa has to pick up Cousin Helen at Long Beach.”

“Whose cousin is Helen?” I ask. She can’t be a cousin of ours, I think. She has an American name. None of us do, although I hear some of the big teenage boys call my oldest sister, Toshiko, “Mabel”. But then again, she’s been a little odd lately. She’s starting to curl her hair, and I could have sworn that I saw her wearing lipstick at school the other day.

“Mama’s cousin, from Hawaii. She’s coming by boat, and she’s going to stay with us,” says Yoshiko, not sounding enthusiastic. I’m not sure I’m enthusiastic, either, but maybe Cousin Helen will be interesting if she comes from a little island in the middle of the ocean. Papa showed it to me on a map once and it looked like a sprinkling of dots in a big, blue sea.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 1
“Her older brother Mitsugu is traveling with her to make sure she gets here safely, but he won’t be staying with us. He’ll go to Ojisan’s,” Mama says, referring to our uncle’s house. Ojisan can always use the help. He has a gardening business and it’s very successful; that big movie star William Powell is one of his customers.

“May I take one?” I ask Mama, my hand hovering over the tub that contains the gleaming bottles of Sunrise Soda. She nods, and the glass clinks as I pull one out. The bottle gives a satisfying hiss when I open it.

I love our store. Mama and Papa worked on the California farms for a long time, and so they knew what Japanese farmers’ families wanted for their households. So they saved up their money and started this store, right in the middle of farmland in Gardena. We have soda and American candies, but we have Japanese foods and cooking utensils, teapots, and beautiful chinaware for serving fancy family dinners. There are slippers for the ladies, too, and incense for the little home Buddhist shrines that most people keep.

Yoshiko and I head to the back of the store to the part of the building where we live. There is some leftover okazu, stir-fried vegetables and meat in a pan waiting for us. On the stove is a pot of rice. I scoop rice into bowls for us and get the chopsticks, while Yoshiko scoops okazu onto our little plates. The smell of soy sauce and ginger makes my mouth water.

“What do you think she’s going to be like?” I ask Yoshiko.

“I don’t know. Mama said she’s staying in my room. Gee, I hope she doesn’t snore,” she says.

“Maybe her snores will drown yours out,” I answer.

“I do NOT snore,” she says. “What do you mean by being so disrespectful to your older sister?” She looks at me; I look back. I see her eyes crinkle at the sides. We both laugh.

*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 1*
We are drying the dishes when we hear the faint sound of the screen door being opened. We hear sounds of greeting, women’s voices. Helen must be here. Yoshiko and I dry our hands, look at each other and shrug. We’d better go meet her.

I push aside the noren, the split curtain in the doorway that leads to the store, and there is Mama, talking to a young woman. Or girl. She looks a few years older than Yoshiko, who’s thirteen. She’s wearing a pretty dress, and a cloche hat, and gloves.

“Ah, Helen, here are my two middle girls, Yoshiko and Michiko,” says Mama. We bow to her, and she to us. As I look up and so does she, I see that she is lovely. Delicate features and smooth skin and laughing eyes. She’s seventeen.

Mama is amused at our confusion. “Helen’s mother is much younger than mine,” she explains.

“I am so excited to meet you!” Helen comes over and shakes our hands. “I can’t believe I’m actually here. Do you like to sing and dance, too?”

“Um, I don’t know . . . .” I say.

“Really? Oh, I hear the family is very talented. Your mother plays shamisen and koto and knows all the classical plays. I hear she sings, too,” she offers. Is that my Mama she’s talking about? I try to sneak a glance at Mama without being seen, but she catches me and bursts out laughing. She puts her hand over her mouth to stifle the laugh, and says “Helen’s here to study singing.”

“I am! This is where people come to make it big, and that’s what I want to do!” and with that, Helen drops a perfect wink in my direction. I have never seen anyone do that, where one eye closes and the rest of the face doesn’t move at all. It’s like a doll. And then Papa carries her bag to the back to Yoshiko’s room, and the two girls follow him.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 1
Three weeks later, Helen and Yoshiko are home from school. Yoshiko is helping in the store while Mama feeds Tayeko, the baby of the family. Helen is playing a record on the phonograph, an old Japanese song, and she is dancing to it. The song is a kind of sad story about a samurai who doesn’t have a master, so he wanders around the countryside and thinks about the girl he had to leave behind. I don’t want to interrupt Helen’s rehearsal, so I quietly start trying to move the way she moves. She’s been playing this song a lot, so I know the words now. Without thinking, I start to sing it out loud.

“Well, look at you!” she says, turning around. I’m afraid she’ll be cross, but she smiles and asks me if I want to learn a few steps. I do. She shows me how to step, toe in, always. “I know this looks funny, but don’t forget, if you were dancing this for real, you’d be wearing a kimono, and walking this way keeps the lines of the kimono looking nice,” she says, positioning my hands.

“Now, in this dance, your character is a girl, so your movements have to be small. Keep the fingers of your hand together and the thumb tucked; see? Elbows in. Great! You’re doing very well!”

We dance like that until it’s time to help set the table for dinner.

After that, I watch Helen rehearse often. I learn more of her dances and songs. She teaches me little things. Koshiote, keep your hips low so that your knees are bent. Don’t forget that that kimono line needs to look sweeping and you can’t do that if you’re standing with your knees locked. Hold the fan with a closed hand, always open it holding the hub in your right hand. Every day, she teaches me a new technique. I love the songs and sing them, even when I’m at school. Once, at dismissal, I hear a boy telling his friend that I’m strange. He’s one to talk.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 1
That afternoon, I shield my eyes as I enter the store from the sunlit street. My eyes haven’t adjusted, so I can’t see anything, but I hear voices. I head toward the back. It’s Mama and Helen sitting in the kitchen, having some plum-filled rice balls rolled in sesame seeds. “She’s talented,” Helen says. They don’t see me yet.


I come back from washing my hands, and my skin prickles as Mama turns to me. I feel as though I’m about to be in trouble, but Mama says “Helen thinks you have some talent and that you should study classical Japanese dance.” My eyes twinkle. “Well, well, it looks like you are interested, aren’t you?” she says. Helen smiles encouragingly.
Chapter 2

Gardena, California

Two years later, it is 1932, and I am nine. Helen is back in Hawaii, performing as a singer. I have been dancing for two years, and my sensei has been letting me teach the younger children. Because I am now teaching, I go to the studio three times a week. I never seem to tire of it. One afternoon, after dance class, I go home and walk into the store. Yoshiko is scooping miso, the fermented bean paste, out of the taru, the wooden barrel that it came in, into Mason jars so we can sell it. “Gee, my wrist hurts,” she says, rubbing it. “You’re lucky you get out of chores around here.” “Yoshiko,” Mama says in a voice that has a warning in it, “Michiko is too little to do what you do. Besides, right now, she has her own after-school job. It’s dance. We are Americans, but Japanese culture is important, too.” Papa and Mama are very strict about education and culture. We all go to the Japanese language school in Compton, because Papa declared it was “The best!” He even bows to books before he reads them. And oh, boy, don’t let him catch you putting a book on a chair or the floor! That would be unacceptable, to show such disrespect to education.

One day, a man comes to the store, buys a brass-colored teapot, some miso, a rice paddle, and he offers Mama several boxes of strawberries in payment. After some quiet talk between them, in which I see the man looking sheepish, he leaves. “It’s hard for people right now,” says Mama. “They can’t pay for things they need, and they can’t get work.” Ah. So, the man hadn’t any money, which is why he brought strawberries from his farm to pay with, I think. Little do I know that this man’s troubles are a sign of the Great Depression.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 2
Photo above: Toshiko, left, and Yoshiko, right, with neighbors in front of the store. Below, Michiko in costume.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 2
Chapter 3

"Depression" was the name they gave that time, the ten or so years after 1929. We were just kids and didn't understand it all, but we saw how people lost their jobs and couldn't find another. By 1933, about a quarter of the country was out of work, and those who did have jobs had to take less pay. At first, maybe your family would cut back on the little extras. You would try to mend worn clothing rather than buy new. If you were clever with the needle, maybe the patches in your dresses wouldn't show, at first. But the patches would get bigger, and still there wasn't enough money. So you'd cut back on food, first the luxury items, like sweets. Slowly, though, you would need to cut back further. Maybe the only meat you could afford was one chicken for your whole family, for the week. You'd make a stew or a big pot of soup to make it last longer. And still that was not enough, so eventually your weekly soup would have no meat at all, just beans and a few vegetables.

At the beginning of the Depression, we could see our customers’ suffering, and so Papa let them pay what they could, when they could. Maybe he thought that everyone's trouble would end soon, and then they would pay us what they owed. Only that didn't happen. Our money started to run out, and with it, our options.

In the icebox is a bowl with two boiled eggs inside. I take one out. Crack it on the counter and turn, crack and turn, crack and turn, then I start to peel it. Mama’s voice behind me tells me that it’s for my brother Saburo. He needs it more, Mama says, because he's working in Ojisan’s gardening business. He is silent, but when he looks at me, his eyes say, “I win.” I clench my fists under the table to prevent angry tears from starting.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 3
As bad as the food shortages were, they were not the only problem brought on by years of widespread unemployment. Millions of people became homeless during that time. Those who had relatives willing to house them were lucky. But there were many who had to take shelter where they could find it. Some found abandoned buildings with no running water or heat. Others built makeshift shelters with what they could find. Soon there were clusters of such dwellings all over the country. They were called shantytowns.

By 1936, our customers’ increasing inability to pay us made it impossible for us to pay our own bills. Papa had to close the business; that’s when I learned what “bankrupt” meant. Losing the store was bad enough, but we lived in the apartment behind it. The day that the sheriff padlocked the store, we also lost our home.
Left, Toshiko in front of the store on Western Avenue. Right, Saburo’s high school graduation portrait, 1938.
Chapter 4

Now it’s late 1936 and I am thirteen. I am performing with my dance teacher’s group, and we travel. Not far, mostly around southern California. Mama sews costumes and wigs for us; I sometimes wonder if there is anything that she cannot do. Our store is gone, closed a few months ago. Now we live in a little house that Ojisan rents for us.

“Why does Papa have to be so mean? I hate him,” my little sister Tayeko says to me one day. She’s nine.

“You mustn’t say such things. You’ll understand more when you’re older,” I say to her, which would almost be funny if it weren’t so sad. This is almost word-for-word the conversation I had had the previous week with our eldest sister Toshiko. At the time, Papa had, in one of his nearly constant bad moods, said something unkind to Mama, which I won’t repeat. And I told Toshiko I hated him.

“Papa,” said Toshiko at the time, “has lost his faith in people. And he has lost face.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “And what right does that give him to be awful to everyone?”

“Michiko, there is a lot you don’t know. Papa shouldn’t have let the okyakusama – his customers – go without paying for so long, but he took pity on them. And some tried to pay even when they didn’t have money. You remember that big stack of hay bales out in back of the store, right before we closed?”

“Sure, I did. It was almost up to the second floor window . . . .”

“Well, that’s how one of the farmers paid us. One man even tried to give Papa his horse. But you see, there were some who told Papa they couldn’t pay, and then he’d see them in town with a new car, or the wife had a new fur coat.”

_O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 4_
Who would do such a dishonorable, disgraceful thing, I wondered. Toshiko wouldn’t tell me; we knew everyone in town. She didn’t want me to think any less of people, and she wouldn’t spread gossip.

“But what do you mean, ‘He lost face’?”

“Face: it means your honor and good name. Your face is what you show to the world, and when people think of you, that’s what they picture. For so long, Papa’s face meant hard work, and honesty, family, and respect for life and education; and now, at least to him, it means humiliation and defeat.”

“Why? Is it because he blames himself for losing the store?” I asked.

“I think that’s a big part of it, but I am sure that having Ojisan rescue the whole family and give us a home was very hard on Papa’s pride.”

My mind keeps going back to the day the sheriff padlocked the store; you could see how sorry he was to do it. Papa handed in the store’s keys, but under his arm, he kept the blotter from his old desk. Sometimes, when he doesn’t think anyone is looking, he touches it.

So now, each of us has had to find work. Yoshiko and Toshiko are working in some rich people’s houses. It’s pretty common for schoolgirls to work as nannies and caregivers to the wealthy around the Hollywood area. The lady who Yoshiko works for is an invalid. That means she’s sick and she can’t get up and around to do things. The boys are working for Ojisan, our uncle, whose gardening business is still thriving, thanks to movie stars. Papa is learning a type of therapeutic massage called shiatsu. I had offered to quit dancing, but Mama wouldn’t hear of it.

“No, you keep doing what you’re doing. This will be something that you can do as an adult, so it’s important. Besides, you’re getting paid now.” This is true. I am getting paid for teaching. It isn’t a lot, but right now, nobody turns down any kind of work, even

*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 4*
thirteen-year-olds. Really, though, I already feel as if dancing is my job – not the kind of job that makes you tired or unhappy, but the kind of job that always makes you think and wonder and want to understand and do better. I can’t imagine ever not wanting to do this.

Michiko

Michiko

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 4
Chapter 5

Late 1940, Little Tokyo, Los Angeles

Stuck, stuck, stuck, I am just stuck, I think to myself. With the dime that my older brother “Bu” (that’s what I called Saburo) had given me, I had treated myself to a bowl of noodles in Little Tokyo after dance class, and am now heading over to the photography shop to wait for a ride home. Toyo Miyatake is an important photographer in the Japanese-American community, but his shop is also a good place to talk to people. Artists, musicians, reporters for the Japanese-American newspaper, the Rafu Shimpo, stop by to catch up with each other, so you can always find out what’s going on there. A reporter who I’ve seen before holds the door open for me. I am thinking that he’s kind of handsome when my thoughts are interrupted.

“Mich-chan! How you doing; everybody well?” says Uncle Michio as I walk in. He’s not my uncle, but he’s been a friend of the family long enough to be called one.

“Fine, thank you, and yourself?” I respond.

“A polite but unenthusiastic answer! Doshitano? What’s wrong?” he smiles.

“No, I’m fine, thank you; everybody at home is also fine. I just came from odori class.”

“I can see that, Little One, as you are carrying your dance bag. But I am not seeing the usual light in your eyes. True?”

He’s right. There was a time when I had so much to learn, and every day was a new discovery. A new technique, a new song, a different role, and teaching is always interesting, because it always changes. But now, the challenges are smaller and fewer, and my future is... what, exactly? What are my options, I wonder. We can’t afford for me to go to Japan to get certified with a name so that I could start my own school. I’m not that interested in all-girls’ Kabuki – I am very interested in the classical theater, but I
don’t know how many opportunities we would get to perform in the United States. I sigh. I really want to dance more than act, but – and I don’t know how much more my sensei can teach me. I’m seventeen years old, I’m going to be graduating from high school soon.

“I guess I’m restless. I want to be learning more, somehow.”

“Interesting. So, classical Japanese dance, after all these years, is starting to fence you in? How lucky! I have an idea for you.”

“You do?”

“My sister-in-law is looking for people. Why don’t you talk to her?”

I’d heard of Teiko Ito, who danced professionally under the name Teiko Ono. She was a dancer and had a troupe. But wasn’t she one of those modern dancers, like Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham, with their odd, sweeping movements and exaggerated facial expressions? I didn’t know if I could do that, and wasn’t sure I was interested.

Uncle Michio laughed at my concerns; he was a modern dancer and choreographer himself.

“No, no, that’s not all she does. She’s interested in all sorts of ethnic dancing. She’s actually recently back from traveling around southeast Asia, learning I don’t know, Balinese, Javanese, bunch of different dance styles. You could ask her, go see. If you don’t like it, then,” he clapped his hands twice, “you know, that’s it. But it might be worth a look. I think maybe that you are a seeker, like me. When I left Japan, I was going to be a singer, if you can believe it, and look at me now. It doesn’t pay to be timid.”

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 5
Michiko, about 1940

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 5
And that’s how I met Teiko. I danced with her troupe for a little over a year, learning all sorts of Asian dances. Had it not been for the war, I think I might have done that for years. But there was so much going on in the world that we barely understood.

In late 1939, war broke out in Europe when Germany invaded Poland, and then France, and England. The United States wasn’t involved, although many people said we should be. On the other side of the world, Japan was at war with China. Eventually, these two wars would bleed into each other, as countries started to pick their allies. Japan and Germany joined with Italy to form the Axis alliance, and to fight much of the rest of Europe – and Russia, as well.

But the United States was an ocean away from these conflicts on either side, or so we teenagers thought. Would these countries fix their own problems without us having to get involved? On December 7, 1941, we got our terrifying answer. Japanese planes attacked our naval base in Hawaii, at Pearl Harbor, destroying our planes and warships, and killing thousands of people. Now we were at war, with the Japanese because of the direct attack on our soil, but also with the other countries of the Axis alliance.

At the time, nearly all of the Americans of Japanese ancestry, along with their immigrant parents, lived on the west coast of the United States. Many were in Hawaii, but the bulk of us were on the mainland. Our government, for reasons that I will never fully understand, decided that we needed to be moved away from the coast. Not one Japanese-American was ever found to be disloyal to the United States, but from the moment that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, we were seen as a potential threat. Two months after the attack, in February of 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, declaring that all persons of Japanese ancestry were to be evacuated from the coast and moved inland. We had no idea where we might end up.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 5
Chapter 6

Late January, 1942

It’s been nearly two months since Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. As an American, I am furious at Japan, and I am also frightened for all of us Japanese-Americans, particularly our elders. The newspapers talk about us as though we were the enemy just because our faces look like theirs. What will become of my parents and all of their generation of Japanese-Americans who were never allowed to become citizens, even though they have now been living here longer than they did in Japan?

I have been dancing with Teiko Ito’s group for the better part of a year now. We have a repertoire of Asian dances, which we have just taken on a tour of the west coast. Now, we are scheduled to do a tour of South America. We have our vaccinations and I need to get a passport and a visa.

Yoshiko is at the house with her two children when I get home from rehearsal. She’s holding the baby, Ken, while Jeanne draws with colored pencils on the floor. She looks up as I come in.

“Obasan!” says Jeanne in her piping two-year-old voice. It means “aunt,” but to me, that word is inextricably linked with my own Obasan, my mother’s sister. I see her in my mind’s eye, as though in a silent movie, a tiny woman with salt-and-pepper hair tied in a bun at the back of her head. She’s reading a Japanese women’s magazine and clipping articles. No, no, I am not ready to be an Obasan.

“Say ‘Auntie Michiko’,” I enunciate.

“Anti Miko?” she says.

“Yes, just so,” I say. “What are you drawing?”
She looks up at me, her eyes nearly covered by a curtain of black bangs, and says nothing. I look back at my sister.

“Nani! Haven’t you taught her any English at all?” I ask.

“I guess not . . . .”


“Well! You know he doesn't understand English, and I don’t want to exclude him. That would be . . . rude.”

I think but do not say that, in three more years, Jeanne is going to be in a Los Angeles school with English-speaking kids. What happens if she doesn’t know any English by then? And yet, I say to myself, I am so glad that Papa sent us all to Japanese language school when we were kids. A lot of our friends don’t speak or read Japanese at all. They don’t know the stories, historical plays, the songs, legends . . . .

“Okay,” I say, and sit on the floor next to Jeanne. “Kore wa nan desu ka? (What is this?)” I say to her, making sure that I speak standard, school-taught Japanese, not the slangy home-style talk we grew up with. I point to the drawing.


“Maa, kirei desu ne!” My, how pretty!

“Can you take the baby while I start dinner?” says Yoshiko. I pick Ken up. “Also, Teiko called. You can call her back any time, she said.” I hoist Ken on my hip, pick up the phone and ask the operator to connect me with the Itos’ line.

“Aah! Mich-chan, bad news. Our tour got cancelled. It’s the war,” says Teiko. Of course. Since war had been declared, we all knew there was a risk of this happening. With all the uncertainty in the world, it has been hard to predict anything. Maybe it’s for

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 6
the best. How awful might it have been if something had happened stateside while we were away? What if we couldn’t get back home? I shudder as I think this.

I hang up. Although I don’t know it, in two weeks we will be told that “all persons of Japanese ancestry” on the west coast, whether citizens or not, need to pack up what we can, because we will be moved.

We had to pack up our houses and sell our business and whatever we could, or ask our neighbors to look after our homes. Then we were to report, with the two suitcases we were permitted to bring, to the Santa Anita racetrack to learn our eventual destinations. For months, while these relocation camps were being built, we were confined there. Finally, in August, half of our family was sent to a “relocation camp” in Wyoming. They had to wait to move my older sister Toshiko, because she had given birth to her second child at the racetrack. In October, her family joined my brothers Saburo and Harry at a camp in Rohwer, Arkansas.
Chapter 7

August 1942, somewhere in Wyoming

“Tayeko, stay close.” That’s Mama, talking over her shoulder to my kid sister, who is trying to maneuver herself and a suitcase between the seats of the train. We’re getting off. Stiff, cramped, and badly in need of a good washing, we step out into the sun. We shade our eyes and squint. The soldiers had pulled all the shades down in the train so that we couldn’t see where we were going. We know we’re in Wyoming, which I’ve seen on maps in every classroom I have ever been in, but exactly where is anyone’s guess.

Down the length of the train, families are stepping out onto the gravelly ground. We all have tags with assigned numbers fastened with string to our belongings and our jackets. When the wind blows, they dance. Some of the smaller children laugh at this, and their amusement reminds us to try to pretend we are not afraid.

The wind is constant, and smells like nothing. Not ocean, not plant life, nothing. Over its bluster, I hear my brother Shig’s voice. He arrived before us and has come to the train to help us with our things.

“Mama! Hey, Michiko, Taiko-Bom-Bom!” we hear. Normally, Tayeko hates it when he deliberately pronounces her name so that it means “drum,” but today, she runs to him. “Niisan!” she cries; big brother. We are so relieved to see a familiar face.

“I thought I’d never be able to find you in this crowd,” he grins as he carries our suitcases in his strong arms. “You sure are a sight for sore eyes. Let’s get you settled in before the dust storm starts.”

“Is it dangerous?” asks Tayeko.

“Naw, Bom-Bom, it isn’t like the Wizard of Oz or anything. You don’t see buildings flying, but you want to be inside ‘cause the grit and dust will get in your eyes. And it comes through the cracks of all the barracks.”

*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 7*
Tayeko pretends to be miffed. “You may call me Tai.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says, winking.

“Why are the walls cracked?” I asked.

Shig has always been handy; there isn’t anything he can’t build. He shakes his head in the direction of the barracks. I suspect that he doesn’t approve of the workmanship.

“They smacked this place together in such a hurry, all the lumber was green. So, as it dried, it warped and air comes through the gaps. Try to find a straight wall or floor in this place. Ain’t easy.

“Here’s a funny story for you, I guess. When we first got here, they hadn’t even put the fence up around this place. And here we were in the middle of nowhere. We didn’t see anyone around, but of course, we didn’t know how the local folk felt about us. You better believe we were plenty nervous. So what do you think we did? Built the darn fence ourselves. Can you beat that? We finished our own prison. You never saw a fence go up so fast.”

He laughs and shakes his head, but then his easy grin fades. I look at him as he squints into the distance. That mountain, he says, the one that looks like a script “r”, is Heart Mountain. His outward calm is comforting, but I wonder what is going through his mind. After having had to quit college when Papa’s store went bankrupt, he had settled into a good job in Ojisan’s gardening business in L.A.. And he had just gotten married when the order to evacuate came out. So now he and his bride have to spend their honeymoon in the same barrack as the whole family. How long can they keep us here? What happens when we get out?

“Where’s Papa?” it occurs to me to ask.

“He’s been assigned to a barrack with my father-in-law.” He thinks for a second, then laughs. “Two of the hardest heads in Wyoming, under the same roof. They’re

_O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 7_
probably drawing lines on the floor to divide up their territories. And do NOT translate that for Mama, or I’ll tell her you have a boyfriend.”

I smile at his teasing but also because, unbeknownst to him, I do have a boyfriend: that handsome reporter I had met at Toyo-san’s photography shop in L.A. Besides, Mama knows about him. When I’ll see him next, though, is anyone’s guess. Last I heard, he was headed to a camp in Colorado. As that thought passes through my mind, a dry, gritty gust of wind reminds us that a dust storm is approaching. We pull our collars up around our necks, pick up our suitcases, and go down the rows of barracks until we find our new living quarters.

March 1943, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Wyoming

“Midori-chan, koshiote, lower your hips and bend your knees. Don’t forget, we want to see beautiful flowing kimono lines as you dance, yes?” The sound of my voice echoes in the big multipurpose room I am standing in with my students. Midori is maybe seven or eight years old, one of the more attentive and naturally graceful students in my class. As we step in time to the music together, she looks like my little shadow.

They are letting me teach a class in camp; in fact, I was asked to. They encouraged those of us who have some training to lead activities: dance, art, sewing classes, for example. I heard one of the elders saying that there are about 10,000 Japanese-Americans in this camp, so I guess they don’t want us idle. There’s a school, there are sports, the adults have jobs, and a sort of governing organization. They even started a newspaper last fall, The Heart Mountain Sentinel. It’s not bilingual the way our old Rafu Shimpo was back home in California, which is too bad, because a lot of our parents can’t read English too well, maybe at all.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 7
“Is class over?” My little sister Tai comes into the room, bundled in a coat, her head nearly covered in a long scarf wound around her. She’s actually not so little any more, I think. She’s in high school now.

“Just finished. I was going to pick up Mama and wash up at the dreaded latrine before dinner.” The latrine is a building that is a big public bathroom. Not like in a nice department store, though. This one has no doors or curtains anywhere. You have to bring a friend to hold up a towel or a sheet if you want any privacy.

“I hope Mama eats something tonight,” says Tai. We have been worried about her. She has always eaten fresh fruits, vegetables, tofu, and rice. Like many of the internees, she is a Buddhist and a vegetarian. But in this place, they serve a lot of horse meat, beef, and mutton. And the vegetables are gray and taste like metal. I heard someone say that they only had fifty-four cents a day to spend on each one of us. She doesn’t complain, but I can see that her cheeks are hollow, and her clothes hang on her tiny frame.

“Mama is strong, don’t you worry. She won’t let this defeat her, and she won’t starve. Also, she told me she sent away for some seeds, and she’s going to plant vegetables around our barrack for the spring.” If anyone can grow food in this crumbly dirt, she can.
Below, Yoshiko with Ken and Jeanne, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Wyoming, winter 1942-1943
Shig and his bride Sumi in front of barrack, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, 1942 or 1943.

Heart Mountain Relocation Center, 1942-1945 (exact date unknown). From family collection. Photographer unknown.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 7
Chapter 8

Mama knew I had a boyfriend but she didn’t know that he had started to talk seriously about marriage. Not that she would have disapproved. She had met him and liked him. And after all, she had been married at nineteen, only a year older than I was now. Not only that, but she had married a man she had never set eyes on, through a marriage that had been arranged overseas. I had the advantage of getting to know the man I was going to marry, didn’t I?

I remember his eyes, warm and kind. He was maybe ten years older than me, but he never treated me like a kid. He was considerate and respectful, and I thought that this could be the man I would be willing to take the biggest chance of my life with. When we parted to go to our assigned camps, we promised to write letters. That was our only way of communicating; telephone calls weren’t allowed.

Each letter I got was like a gift, telling news, giving me a chance to imagine what he was going through, and hinting at future plans. I think we both did our best to make the letters chatty and light, although we ached to see one another and had no idea when that would be.

One day, a nice, fat letter came from him. It started by making jokes about the terrible food and telling me about all the colorful characters that he ran into at his camp job, which naturally, because he’d been a newspaperman, was at the camp’s newspaper. And then he wrote about his dreams for what would happen after we’d get released. We’d be married back in Los Angeles, he said, and have a house, and of course I would have quit dancing by then . . . .

I stopped at that line. I must have misunderstood. Was he saying that, if I married him, he would expect me to abandon dance? I looked again. Maybe it was just one possibility out of many that he was writing about. Maybe I shouldn’t worry.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 8
Except that it continued to bother me. So I thought carefully about the letter I wrote back to him. Like him, I started my letter with something light, not too personal. I wrote a description of a crazy snowstorm we’d had that turned a large, shallow depression between barracks into an instant skating rink. I told him about the coats that Mama had made us out of the Army-issued blankets we’d gotten. I gave him some updates on people we both knew, and then finally asked the question point-blank. Did he think that a woman should always give up a career if she married? As I sealed the envelope, I thought, could he really expect me to quit dancing?

Michiko and Tai in front of barrack, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Wyoming, 1944

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 8
Chapter 9

October 1943, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Wyoming

“Doctor, can you help?” I hear the strain in the man’s voice before I see him come in through the door. He is carrying a small boy into the camp hospital. I am on duty as a dispatcher; it’s my new part-time job. I look at the boy. He doesn’t seem to be conscious.

“What happened?” asks the doctor on duty.

“My son’s been sick for a few days. We didn’t think it was serious, but now, he’s passed out.” The woman standing silently next to the man is holding her coat together with one hand. Her knuckles are white and she is biting her lip.

The doctor motions for the man to set the boy down on the table. He gently lifts one lid of the boy’s eyes and passes a light in front of his face. He peers into the boy’s ear. He warms his stethoscope with his hands before placing it on the boy’s chest. He listens, then examines the boy’s hands. “Hmm,” he says.

The boy’s father, who has been patient up until now, starts to speak. But the doctor pulls out a comb and asks the father to hold the boy’s head steady. Methodically, the doctor parts the boy’s hair, from one side of his head to the other. Finally he stops, and looks up at the parents. “What you’ve got there is a tick. We’re just going to remove it, and I suspect that your boy will be back playing baseball in no time.” I see the parents let out their breath simultaneously, and I realize that, like them, I have been holding my breath, too. The boy groans - how wonderful! He will recover. I think that, if I weren’t a dancer, I would like to be a doctor and help people get well like that.

I still have the image of the parents’ relieved faces as I walk back to our barrack. It looks less barren now that Mama planted flowers and vegetables outside, but the end of the growing season has come, and our little crop is almost gone. Although it’s almost
impossible to keep our barrack floor free of the dust that blows everywhere, I take my shoes off at the door and switch to slippers. On the bureau that my brother Shig made out of scrap wood, I see two letters addressed to me. One is from Teiko Ito, with whom I was dancing before the war. The other is from my fiancé. I am impatient to read his letter, but wait until nighttime when I can get some privacy.

Late that night, by the light of a flashlight, I open the letter and start to read, but I’m not really reading. I’m just looking for the answer to my question. And there it is, on the last page, he says that he would surely expect a wife of his to “choose a career or love.”

So, he’s saying that it’s either dance or him, period.

The tears start in my eyes. I think my heart is breaking. Then, slowly, I realize that what I am, actually, is angry. What sort of man would ask me to do this, to give up something I have worked so hard and so long to perfect? As soon as I think that, a voice in my head says “Probably most of them; that’s what men expect these days.” Yes, but he is not most men! I thought he was better than the rest – or at least, I thought my happiness mattered more to him. And with that thought, my heart breaks again. I cannot bring myself to marry him.

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*O-Sode no Furiaiwase: the Touching of Sleeves*, Chapter 10
Chapter 10

October 1944, Heart Mountain, Wyoming

A year has passed since I broke up with my fiancé. I continued to work in the camp hospital, teach dance, and perform in our camp. I was even able to take some students and travel to the other camps to perform for them. But now, I am leaving camp for good. I am allowed to because Teiko Ito, who is now in New York, has written a letter offering me a job and a place to stay.

“Why can’t I come with you?” says my little sister Tai. She is sitting on the bed while I pack my suitcase.

“Because you don’t graduate from high school until June. We have talked about this, many times,” I say.

“But can I come when I graduate?” she asks.

“If we can find you a job,” I say. My sister is a talented artist, but I don’t know anyone at all in New York aside from Teiko and her husband, “Uncle” Yuji. But they seem to know everyone, so it’s possible. “I think so, but I don’t want to make a promise unless I can keep it. Right?”

She is trying hard not to sulk, which alternately makes me want to cry and laugh. She’s seventeen and has crushes on all the movie stars and that skinny singer Frank Sinatra, but right now, she looks about five years old. She’s serious about New York, though. She started keeping a scrap book when we first arrived at camp. She’d had one when she was younger, back home, that was full of Hollywood stars’ photos. But this new one has pictures of the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Broadway, and Sardi’s.

Later that evening, I have dinner with the family in the mess hall for the last time. Yoshiko comes in with her two children. Jeanne is nearly five now, and she helps her

*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves*, Chapter 10
little brother sit on the bench as though she were a miniature mother, murmuring encouragement as he climbs up. Papa and Mama sit across from me. Tai helps Shig and his wife with their two tiny children, both of whom were born in camp. “I guess we’ll have to toast you with coffee, Mich-chan,” says Shig, and we hold our mugs up. “Congratulations on being the first to leave!”

“You won’t be here much longer, I’m sure,” I say, and I hope that I am right. But they’re all going back to California. When will I see them again?

As we walk back to our barrack after dinner, Tai says to me, “Do you remember when we were in Gardena, we’d go out at night behind the store and Mama would tell us stories?”

“Ooh, the ghost stories! We’d be too scared to sleep!” Mama was a gifted storyteller. She would speak in a very old-fashioned way, and she’d change her voice for every character. Her ghost stories were terrifying. Afterwards, Tai and I would sit fearfully, back to back, until we couldn’t keep our eyelids open any more.

“Mama?” says Tai. “Could you tell us a story tonight?”

“What? Do you want me to get no sleep at all on my last night here?” I ask.

“No, Mama, tell one of the star stories,” says Tai. “It’s a clear night tonight. Do the Tanabata one, please?”

It was one of my favorites. There are two stars, Altair and Vega, that meet in the sky once a year, in the summer. In Japan, the stars are called the Herd Boy and the Weaving Princess, and their meeting is celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month, and is called Tanabata.

It’s starting to get chilly, but we bring some chairs out of the barrack so that we can sit outside. Shig gets an extra shawl to wrap around Mama’s shoulders. She looks

_O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 10_
around at us and then she starts with the words that begin Japanese tales:  *Mukashi mukashi* – long, long ago. And this is how she tells the story:

> Long, long ago, when all was young and the heavens were still being built, the King of the Heavens worked all day placing stars in the night sky. His own daughter was a beautiful star, and they called her Weaving Princess. Her job was to weave the cloth of the heavens, a fine, silky cloth of clouds and mists.

> One day, the King became concerned that his daughter was working too hard. “Daughter,” said he, “Why don’t you put down your shuttle for today and play by the waters of the Milky Way?” “Why, thank you, Father,” she said, and made her way down to the stream.

> As chance would have it, another star, a boy who was herding his cows, brought them to the other side of the stream at just the moment when the princess arrived. She found him to be a charming companion, and they spent the day together. And the day after that, and the day after that; and days upon days came and went. Soon, Weaving Princess and Herd Boy were deeply in love.

> But the two were so wrapped up in each other that they did not notice that the princess was no longer weaving her cloth of mists and clouds. The earth below was parched and cracked. The herd boy’s cows were wandering lost throughout the heavens. They may not have noticed, but the King of the Heavens did. He was most displeased. He flew down to the Milky Way where he confronted the two errant lovers.

> “How dare you neglect your sacred duties?” he thundered, and his eyes flashed lightning. “I forbid you to see each other!” And with that, he churned the Milky Way into a wide, raging river with rolling waves, separating the Princess from the Herd Boy.

> Weaving Princess could not be consoled. She would not stop weeping, and she would not weave. At first, the King her father was determined not to give in
to her. But her misery was so apparent and so relentless that at last, he gave them permission to see each other once a year.

The Princess and the Herd Boy were consoled. They dutifully went back to their work, and looked forward to the time each year that they could spend the whole day together. And so, from that day until this, on the seventh day of the seventh month, the birds use their bodies and their wings to form a bridge across the Milky Way so that the two lovers can meet.

And with that, Mama’s story has ended. It’s October, long past Tanabata, but the night is clear enough to see the stars and the Milky Way. After tomorrow, when I’m in New York, if I can look up at night and see these stars, and know that my family can see them, too, then I won’t feel so far away from them.

In the dark, I think I can hear Tai sniffling a little. Then I hear Shig’s voice, near her, saying low, “All these years, I never realized – that’s the worst romantic story I’ve ever heard.” Tai giggles in spite of herself and then I hear a thwack as she punches his shoulder. “I mean, one day a YEAR?” We all burst out laughing, then pick up the chairs and go inside.

The next day, I leave Wyoming.
Chapter 11

I have brought something to read for the train ride, but I can’t stop looking out the window at the passing land, the hills, the houses, the cars, and the sky. For the past two years, I’ve had the same view of Heart Mountain, and little else except barracks, so everything I see feels fresh and new. Unlike that grim train ride that brought us to camp, today we are not required to have the blinds pulled shut. I drink in the colors and shapes of the landscape as it flies by.

I switch trains at Colorado. As I am settling my purse and my coat next to me on the seat, a voice asks if a seat across from me is taken.

I look up. The owner of the voice, I see, is a young man in an army uniform, with brown hair and green eyes. No, I say, go ahead.

He starts to talk, says something about his home. He’s going home on leave. Sure missed his mom’s cooking. Looking forward to seeing friends. He’s a hakujin, a Caucasian man, just talking to me, like you’d talk to a regular person. He doesn’t think of me as the enemy. Wasn’t that why they put us, what was it, 110,000 or 120,000 “persons of Japanese ancestry,” in camps? Didn’t they say that everyone hated and feared us? If he weren’t sitting across from me right now, I would be shaking my head in wonder at this whole scene.

A couple of hours later, when he gets off the train, he smiles, touches his hat, and wishes me a good journey. I smile back and wish him the same.
Chapter 12

Late Fall 1950, Manhattan

It’s early evening. I am walking briskly from the bus stop to the apartment in Greenwich Village that my sister Tai and I share. Half of the day I’d been in rehearsal for an ethnic dance program at the Museum of Natural History, and then I had two students to teach late in the afternoon. I just want to get home, start preparing dinner, and take a nice, hot shower.

Those two students I had this afternoon are the latest dancers this week who have asked me to help them prepare a routine for their auditions. The word is that Rodgers and Hammerstein, two of the biggest names in musical theater, are writing a musical show based on a Welsh woman’s memoir about teaching the royal children of the King of Siam.

I stop at the little Italian deli downstairs from the apartment, pick up some groceries and climb up the stairs. Uncle Yuji and Teiko got us the place and live in the same building, which makes it seem more homelike. And Josie, who owns the Italian deli lives there, too. So it’s almost as if we have a whole neighborhood at 216 Thompson Street.

Back in junior high school in Gardena, they taught us how to make tamale pie. It is still one of my favorite recipes, especially on a chilly day like today. I brown the meat in skillet, put in the tomatoes and fragrant spices. While that simmers, I make the cornmeal topping. I scoop the meat mixture in a baking dish, pour the cornmeal batter on top. I put the full baking dish in the hot oven and set a timer. I have just enough time to take a shower before Tai gets home from her job at a costume design house.

By the time I have dried off and wrapped my hair in a towel, the smell of the tamale pie is floating through the apartment. Tai is home and chopping sweet onion and avocado for a salad.
“Say,” she says, “you had a call when you were in the shower. It was Marion.” Marion is a dancer friend of ours who is also my student.

“Really? I just worked with her yesterday on her audition piece. Maybe she got the part? I’d better call her right away.”

Marion picks up on the second ring. By the time she answers, I’ve decided that I probably shouldn’t ask her anything, just in case she didn’t get the part. I’ll just say hi and see what she says.

“It’s not definite, but I did get a call-back for the second round of auditions,” she says.

“That’s great news! Do you need a different routine for that one? A longer piece, something a little more intricate?”

“Oh, yes! Certainly . . . but actually, there’s something else. You know Jerome Robbins is the choreographer for the show, right?”

“Yes, sure I know! They have big names working on this show. If you get this one, you’ll probably have good steady work in a really top-notch production,” I say.

“Well, Mr. Robbins asked me who I studied with. And he’s asked a few other dancers who have gotten their routines from you. So now he wants to talk to you.”

And so, for the next three years, I will dance on Broadway in “The King and I,” and be the show’s consultant on “Oriental Dance.”

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O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 12
O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 12
Chapter 13

July 1954, Los Angeles

After three years in New York, “The King and I” became the first Broadway musical to take the whole cast around the country. It was a big cast, and a lot of them were children, so it felt like we were moving a small town every time we changed locations. You don’t realize how different one theater is from another until you have to perform in a new one every few weeks. It was often exhausting, but the challenges kept us thinking about our performances in new ways all the time. And the children were so good and so much fun, even the tiny ones.

I happened to be in Los Angeles rehearsing when Mama called to say that Papa had collapsed nearby in Gardena. I asked her to have an ambulance take him to the hospital, and I’d meet her there. I grabbed every bit of cash I had and threw it in my purse. One of the kids in the show had a car, and we jumped into it and sped to the hospital.

Mama meets me at the emergency room door, and grabs my two hands. “I’m sorry to pull you away from your work. But you speak better English, and - ”

“No, Mama, please, it’s fine; don’t worry. How is he?”

“He can’t move, and it’s hard for him to speak,” she says as we walk through the corridor to his room. I notice how gray Mama’s hair has gone, but her steps are still brisk. A Caucasian man in a white coat comes out through the door.

“I’m Michiko Iseri. Is my father – how is my father?” I ask him. He may be relieved that I speak Californian-accented English, but if so, he gives no sign. “Miss

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 13
Iseri, my name is Dr. Carmichael. Your father has had a stroke. I’m afraid that we may not know for the next day or so what the outcome will be.”

I had no idea it might be this serious. He’s always been so strong; I sometimes forget that he is twelve years older than Mama. I am having trouble focusing on the doctor and his words, but I need to pay attention so that I can translate for Mama. I think he said that, if Papa’s brain swells too much from the injury that the stroke had caused, that it will make him stop breathing. If that happens, it will be over for him. But it is possible that the swelling will go down, and maybe Papa will survive. Not as he had before, perhaps, but at least he’ll be alive.

My sisters and brothers come in to see him over the course of the day. Papa isn’t conscious, so we whisper in his room as though he were asleep. After everyone else leaves, Mama and I sit with Papa through the night. Even though our family is Buddhist, I pray then, to what or whom I will never know. I say, Please, let Papa wake up.

O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves, Chapter 13
I must have dozed, but when I open my eyes, the early morning light comes through the hospital room’s blinds in bright, horizontal bars. Sometime during the night, a huge flower arrangement from the cast of the show had been delivered, and it sits like a rainbow-colored firework on the table next to him. As I get up to lower the blinds a bit, I hear a groan. I go to Papa’s bed and squeeze his hand.

“Papa, Michiko here. It’s Michiko,” I say gently. I don’t want to startle him.

He can only open one eye. The other one doesn’t budge. He moved his lips with effort. “Michiko,” he whispers, finally.

“Papa, don’t tire yourself. Please. Just rest,” I say, holding his hand. But he has something he wants to say.

“I took money out of your bank account when you were little,” he manages.

“I know; don’t worry about it.”

“You knew?”

I did know, and had for a long time. I was making money teaching classical Japanese dance, and it was a large enough amount that Papa had to open an account for me. But I was too young to have a bank account without an adult, so Papa’s name was on it, too. Mama told me that, shortly before our store went bankrupt, Papa made one desperate move to keep it open by emptying that account to pay some bills. He had always been ashamed of using his daughter’s money to pay his debts. It had been the last straw for a man who had lost face in the eyes of his family, his community, and himself.

Papa tries to turn his head away from me, but he can’t. He closes his eyes.
“Papa, you always tried to do the best for us. I understand. Really. Thank you; when I think what you and Mama . . . .”

He turns back to me. He sighs and pats my hand. “Michiko, you were always strong.” I think he is trying to smile. Then he closes his eyes.

Papa doesn’t make it through the next night. It’s two weeks after his 80th birthday.

Three nights after his funeral, I am in the wings of the stage. I have felt numb for the past week, after all the family, the friends, hugs, flowers, and cards. It has seemed as though it had happened to someone else. But now I need to get back to work.

I am the soloist in the opening number, and the overture is about to start. As I pick up the sash of my Siamese costume with my fingertips, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I thank Helen, then Mama, and finally, Papa, for the wisdom they had shared and the sacrifices they had made for all of us kids, and especially me. And with that, I square my shoulders, raise my bare foot and step out into the light, onto the stage.

The End
End Notes

Much of this story is true. It centers on my aunt Michiko (Iseri) Terajima, who, along with six other siblings (including my mother, the baby) was born in the United States, of Japanese immigrant parents. My grandparents learned farming in California and Arizona, and saved up enough money to buy a general store that once stood at 15413 Western Avenue in Gardena, CA. Cousin Helen came to stay early in 1930, and she encouraged my grandmother to get Japanese dance lessons for Michiko. And my grandfather died of a stroke when Michiko was touring with the Broadway cast of “The King and I.” She paid for the ambulance and got to talk to him before he died. I don’t know what was said, but she knew that he was proud of her. And yes, he had taken her earnings when times were desperate.

She was touring with Teiko Ito’s dance group, which was about to go to South America, when she returned home, from which point she and her family were detained at relocation camps, half at Heart Mountain in Wyoming, and half at Rohwer, Arkansas. She continued to teach children at Heart Mountain, and at some point before her release, went on a tour of the other camps to perform.

She danced in “The King and I” and got credit as “consultant on Oriental dance. She was in the original Broadway cast, two revivals, and as has been mentioned in the story, she and the Broadway cast took the whole show on the road, performing all over the country. (In the movie, she is the dancer in the “Getting to Know You” number, and the angel and Lover George in the “Small House of Uncle Thomas” one.) With the money

_O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves_, End Notes
she made from the movie, she took herself around the world, and was a houseguest in the royal palace of the then-prince of Thailand (Siam).

She has met and befriended many people, famous and not. She lived in Japan while she was married to a Japanese Kabuki actor, and now she lives and works in New York City.

February 20, 2014
For Further Reading

For those who are interested in the early history of Japanese-Americans, there are no
doubt many options that were not available when the following book originally came out
in 1969, but I would still like to recommend it for its thoroughness and historical
perspective:

Hosokawa, B. (1969, 2002). *Nisei: the quiet Americans (revised edition)*. University of
Colorado Press.

For the Tanabata story, I used two sources:

Mifflin.


According to Mr. Hearn, it is a tale with ancient origins in China, and there are many
versions. In some, the Princess and Herd Boy are young playmates. In others, they are
married. Sometimes, the Princess is weaving beautiful cloth, but it has nothing to do with
clouds. Sometimes the Herd Boy is first seen washing an ox in the waters of the Milky
Way. I think that this gives us latitude to tell it our own way, don’t you?

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*O-Sode no Furiawase: the Touching of Sleeves*, Further Reading
Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase

What follows is the first attempt to write a children’s story based on my mother’s family story. The more complex it got, the less appropriate it was for children. But it is the actual background story for what became O-Sode no Furiawase. It starts with my grandparents immigration to the United States from Japan, and how we came to learn it.

Who were these guys? We couldn’t read the back. (Turned out the guy standing was our grandmother’s brother.)

Introduction

It was the second time in that phone conversation that she said “So, I have all these photos . . .” that I realized that my cousin Jean had a larger point to make. Jean’s the daughter of the eldest sister of the Iseri clan, and I’m the daughter of the youngest. There are two in between, but I’ll get to that later.
The story with the photos was that they had ended up with her when her mom, who had been the family matriarch, died two years before. And we’re talking four generations’ worth of photos, not necessarily in order, nor in photo albums, not to mention labeled - or if labeled, not necessarily in English. And neither of us reads Japanese characters.

So, she continued, could she interest me in helping her figure out who the people were, where the pictures were taken, and when? Sort of build a family history, like an annotated picture book? Maybe in electronic form?

At which point I started to panic. How could I say no? I probably couldn’t. As big as our family is, of that whole bunch, only Jean and I had the combination of time and technological know-how. Besides, no one else in the family was as curious about the family history as we were. But what if I couldn’t hold up my end? She would be a) left holding the bag, and b) disappointed in me, which I would richly deserve.

Let’s see. Both of our moms were gone, and so were our three uncles. There were only two people left in the family who might be able to help us with the family history, Auntie Yoshiko in California and Auntie Michiko, near me in New York. Jean and the photos were in North Carolina. My head was starting to hurt.

“Have you tried talking to either of the aunties?” I asked. In my experience, I couldn’t get a linear story out of either one of them. And not because they were in their late 80’s to early 90’s, either. They were just conversational wanderers and always had been.

Not really, Jean said. She’d more or less thought I’d have a better idea how to do that. (Oh, really!? the voice in my head screeched.) But she had chosen me for the very reason that I was the right person to work with her. We had similar ways of thinking, and we
were probably the only ones in the family who could work with all the software and hardware we might need to do this.

If I said no, Jean would try to do it herself, which was a burden no one should be made to bear alone. And selfishly, it was a chance for me to talk to a cousin I had always liked but not known too well. And maybe we’d learn some family history.

“Okay, I’m in.”
Chapter 1: Ganbatte – verb. It means “Do your best!” but also has a lot of “Best of luck!” thrown in.

So, this was the plan. Jean had all the photos, so she’d work on that piece, scanning them and putting them on some online service. We’d deal with the problem of getting either of the aunties somewhere near a computer to view the photos some time later. Me, in the meantime, my job was to start talking to them.

As bad a typist as I am, I type faster than I write, so I dragged a laptop to the phone and dialed Auntie Yo. She sounded a bit froggy.

“I have a cold,” she said. I suggested that maybe I should call back when she got better, but I told her that I was calling because I was interested in the family history. We made a little chitchat about kids, grandkids, and I was ready to hang up, but she seemed to want to talk, so I stayed on the line.

Four hours later, we hung up. She sure can talk. Which was great, but when I looked at what I’d typed, it was a mess. There was a lot of information in it but it went back and forth in time and was in bits and pieces. I saved it, made a copy, which I cut and pasted into a table in roughly chronological order.

And that became the routine: drag laptop to the phone, call, ask questions and type. Try to figure out where everything went after the phone call. It wasn’t like the stories she was telling me weren’t rich. They were, but they were jumbled up,

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
as though someone had handed me a bag filled with some pieces of a very large
jigsaw puzzle, and I had to try to figure out where they belonged.

This is what happened when I asked Auntie Yoshiko what she remembered
about learning English.

“I don’t remember,” she said. I was silent but if I’d had a thought bubble over
my head, it would have said “Oy.” I knew that she’d been born in Arizona. But
her parents were immigrants from Japan. They spoke nothing but Japanese at the
time, so I figured she might have learned English as an older child. I heard her
voice through the receiver again.

“I kept asking my mother, ‘Did I speak English all the time?’ and she said of
course I didn’t speak English. My mother had to speak Mexican, Spanish.”

I never knew that. Yes, my grandparents (Shizu was my grandmother and
Torahii was my grandfather) had come to the U.S. as day laborers, fruit pickers,
in California. They had saved up money to lease a farm of their own, but Japanese
weren’t allowed to lease farms in California. Torahii heard that Arizona was
looking for farmers, so they moved to Phoenix and leased one there. Although
some of their coworkers were Japanese, many more were Mexican. My
grandparents’ second language hadn’t been English. It had been Spanish.
Sure, she said. Maybe us kids spoke some Spanish, too. Most other Japanese-American kids called their parents Mother and Father in Japanese, but “we always called them Mama and Papa, no okaasan and otousan.”

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
Kids like her, who were too small to go to school, had to go out in the field with the parents. That, she remembered. They would play near their parents, and when they got old enough, they would help plant or pick the vegetables and fruits. They had to wear hats to protect them from the brutal Arizona sun. She’d been born on the farm – “Yes, on the farm! Mama didn’t go to hospital; there were always medical people who came from Japan who took care of people, samba-san, midwives.” But she couldn’t recall speaking Japanese or any other language before the age of six. Besides, she said, “I went to grammar school for two, three months before we went to Japan.” The family had gone to Japan for a year, and very nearly didn’t come back.

They had to give up the farm in Phoenix in late 1924 to go to Japan. I already knew the date from an ancestry website that I’d joined. “We were there, my

Suizenji Park, Kumamoto-ken, Japan, ca. 1900.

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
mother’s mother was ill and that was why we went.” They received a letter from Japan telling them to come quickly, because Mitsu, Yoshiko’s grandmother, was dying. Since they didn’t know how long they would have to stay in Japan, they had to give up the lease on the farm. Their friends threw them a goodbye party, and they left by boat for Japan. (Travel by airplane wasn’t done by average people in those days.) Yoshiko had just turned seven. When they arrived in Kumamoto, Japan, she and her older siblings had to start school there.

Class in Kumamoto, Japan, 1925. Auntie Yo is in the top row, 4th from left. Uncle Harry is 6th from left. Close-up below.
“We had fun! They [the kids] called us Amerika-san,” she laughed. “The teacher was very nice, he taught us the Japanese alphabet.”

That summer, Yoshiko’s grandmother Mitsu died. Although this was, of course, sad for the grownups, the younger children had little idea of what was going on. The children were intrigued by the elaborate funeral, which ended with a ceremony where the body was ceremonially burnt in a large fire.

“We even followed the undertaker[s]. They came in those pretty Buddhist fancy palanquins. Looks like a temple. *Mikoshi*, they call them. Men carry [them] on their shoulder.
“They dressed her after she died, then sat her up and put her in the palanquin, then burned her right there at the otera.\(^1\) We watched while they put the whole thing in the pyre. A couple of us, my sister and brother and I, we ran after them.”

By the time Mitsu died, Yoshiko and her parents, three brothers, and two sisters had been in Japan for nearly a year. Her parents started to argue about what to do next. While her father wanted to stay in Japan with the money they had made on that farm in Phoenix, her mother wanted to come back to America.\(^2\)

\(^1\) The term "oteras" refers to the traditional Japanese funerary shrines.

\(^2\) Auntie Yoshiko was unable to provide any more details about that argument, but Auntie Michiko said, “Oh, Mama put her foot down! She said ‘I want my children to grow up in America!’”

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Kids on the deck of the ship Shinyo Maru on the way to the U.S. from Japan, 1925. Yoshiko on right.

The family was back in California by Christmas 1925. They’d been in Japan just about a year.

“So I guess I must have learned English when we started school back here. I would have been about eight, huh?” Auntie Yoshiko sounded surprised. So, that’s the story we got just by asking her about learning English.

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Chapter 2: *Shikata ga nai.* There is nothing to be done. (This is used when circumstances are bad and beyond your control. It means that you must bear this as best you can right now.)

“Papa never told Mama he was in trouble, but Mama knew.” - Michiko

Months had passed since that first conversation with Auntie Yoshiko. In the meantime, Jean and Auntie Michiko and I had traveled to California to get all of us in the same room with the photographs that Jean had scanned. The aunties oohed, aahed, muttered, conferred and argued over them. Oh, remember him? Wasn’t that so-and-so’s uncle? No, no, you’re thinking of our neighbor somebody-or-other. No, that can’t be, because . . . .

Between the meals, the sightseeing, and visits with other family members, we were making progress. The aunties knew a lot. In fact, too much to absorb in the short time we were there. But the original plan, to write a piece on each of the siblings, was going down in flames. We could have written an encyclopedia on a couple of them, but had very little on some others. And little hope of mending that imbalance. We returned to our respective homes without a game plan, for the first time in months.

One piece of the family history had been, not exactly a taboo subject, but you just knew you weren’t getting the whole story. And the way you knew was this routine, that I remember my mother using: you would ask a question, and she would answer in almost identical language every time she answered. Maybe, if

*Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase*
you were curious, you could get away with one more question, but at some point, if she’d had enough, there would be this pause. Then she would look into the distance and change the subject. I know this is a family “thing” because I have seen others do it. It is a signal that you are not invited to ask any more about it, but they don’t want to have a confrontation with you. So your best bet is to drop it.

So that was what would happen, when I was growing up, if you asked too much about “the store.” We knew that our grandparents had owned a store in Gardena, way back when Gardena was all farmland. The store had groceries, kitchen, and household goods for the local Japanese farmers; and we heard that it was hugely successful, except that it went bankrupt nine years after they opened it.

I was so well-trained not to ask about the store that I almost didn’t ask this time. But it seemed silly to not mention it at all, so I went to Auntie Michiko. She had been four when it opened and only thirteen when the sheriff came to padlock the store. What might she tell me?

Although Auntie Michiko spent much of her non-school hours taking Japanese dance lessons, teaching younger kids, and performing, she spent a lot of time in the store and remembered it well. She said that shopkeepers on that block lived in the back of their stores, which was why my mother was born there, in the back of the store, soon after they opened, in February, 1927.

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
The only known picture showing the front of our grandparents’ store at 15413 Western Avenue, Gardena, California. Auntie Toshiko is on the left, Auntie Yo is on the right, and visitors are in between them.

All the stores along that block of Western Avenue had been built so that the owners could live with their families in the back. Auntie Michiko had been sleeping in the bedroom, and heard it when the midwife gave the newborn baby a slap to make sure it started breathing correctly.

“When [Tayeko] was born, that’s when I woke up. I heard crack-crack.” – Michiko

So the story was this: after my grandfather lost the argument to stay in Japan, the family got on a ship bound for the United States, and settled in California. Torahei (that was my grandfather’s name) had done some research, and he chose Gardena, because it was near a very good Japanese language school in Compton. Torahei had given in to Shizu (my grandmother) and come back to America, but

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
he was determined that his children were going to be educated in Japanese as well as English. “Papa had a lot of respect for education. Are you kidding? Before he read a book, he’d bow to it,” said Auntie Michiko.

He decided that the Japanese language school in Compton was the best. So they moved nearby in Gardena, and that’s where the store was, at 15413 Western Avenue.

“The store, Nippon Shoukai, grocery store. We lived there, too, in the back. So, the half of the building as you go in, on the left, you had candy,

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furia was e
American and Japanese (Mary Janes, marshmallows) and soda, and an
icebox. Every day the man would bring the ice. Then we had . . . it
looked like a picnic table, and that’s where they displayed the Japanese
dishes . . . we had . . . Chinese slippers . . . a lot of them were velvet. Like
a ballet slipper with the strap across .” - Michiko

It was a general store for Japanese farmers, so it had the kinds of foods, dishes,
and household things that they would want. On the counter were Chinese herbs,
medicines, and some American candies. Imported lacquer ware and ceramic
dishes for fancy occasions were displayed on a long table. There were kettles and
teapots. Pickles, rice wine (sake) and fermented soybean paste (miso) came in
large wooden barrels called taru; one of the children’s chores was to scoop
whatever came in the large barrels into glass mason jars to sell to the customers.
When the taru were empty, Shizu would plant flowers in them.

Yoshiko and her older sister Toshiko would walk home from school and work in the
store, taking customers’ orders. They had to be able to understand and write in Japanese,
because most of the farmers didn’t speak English. Shig, the eldest brother, was muscular
and carried huge sacks of rice from the store to the truck. Since he was old enough to
drive, he made deliveries, with younger brother Harry riding shotgun.

That whole block was filled with stores and restaurants. Across the street was
a Japanese theater, the Yamatoza, where you could see plays and movies. An
adjacent lot was used for parking, and for neighborhood baseball games.

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
“I used to skate to school, on Western Avenue. We all used to walk to school. Later, [George] got a bicycle and I used to ride on the top.” - Michiko

Business was good. The children got to take dance lessons, and *shamisen*\(^3\) and *koto* lessons. Auntie Michiko was so devoted to her dance lessons that soon she was assisting and teaching smaller children. Shig became the first in the family to graduate from high school, and started junior college. Torahei bought a big car that had cut glass vases in between the windows.

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\(^3\) *Shamisen* and *koto* are both Japanese stringed instruments

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Michiko, about 1932.

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
Auntie Toshiko and Auntie Michiko, late 1930’s

But a terrible crisis came that left few families untouched; it became known as the Depression. Businesses failed and people lost their jobs. Daily news reports were dire; still, in spite of it all, it seemed possible that the family store might survive this Depression, or so their thinking went. Their customers were farmers. Everyone needed food, so the farmers would still be in business, wouldn’t they?

But then, one the customers confessed that he couldn’t pay his bill. Torahei told him that was okay, he could pay when he had the money. Then it happened again, another customer. Soon, it was happening more often. Some farmers would pay in fruits and vegetables, but Torahei couldn’t sell them fast enough. Shizu would take the baby, Tayeko, and try to sell strawberries on street corners. But much of the food rotted and had to be thrown away.

“One guy couldn’t pay Papa, tried to pay with a horse. Said he didn’t have any money, not too many vegetables, ‘but you can have my horse.’ Can you imagine?” - Michiko

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
Finally, the farmers were too embarrassed by their inability to pay to even show up at the store. Torahei started to make trips out to the farms, trying to collect payment. But a typical visit to a farm would be like this: he would greet the farmer, carefully avoiding any mention of money owed, because it was critically important to never make the other person “lose face.” The farmer, not having the money, but not wanting to appear to be inhospitable, would invite Torahei in for a drink. The two men would chat and drink, and after a while, Torahei would leave, usually without having been paid.

If a man spends an afternoon driving to see people who owe him money and all they give him is a drink, he will be no richer, but he will get intoxicated.

“. . . we were coming home . . . the policeman pulled us over because Papa was weaving. He was drinking o-sake. And the policeman gave us a warning.” - Michiko

He started getting drunk oftener. There were arguments at home. Lessons stopped, except for Michiko’s dance lessons, because she was now good enough to start earning some money by teaching younger students.

Sometimes, Torahei would spot one of his customers with some new, showy purchase. One man drove by in a shiny car; another man’s wife was seen wearing a fur coat. This would alternately sadden and enrage him, but by this time, the business was beyond the help of those one or two customers. There is a family photograph of Yoshiko, smiling, posing in a lovely dress for her high school

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
graduation. What the photo does not show is that the dress was her older sister’s.

That dress had been bought for Toshiko two years earlier when the family had money, but now there was none. Yoshiko, always handy with needle and thread, had altered the dress to make it look different from when her sister had worn it.

Soon the sheriff would come and padlock the store. “He was sorry to do it. You could tell. But he had to.” - Michiko

Auntie Yo in reconstructed graduation dress, 1936.
Chapter 3, Nana korobi, ya oki (fall down seven times, rise up eight)

Part I

Now that we had broken some of the ice about the store closing, it was easier to ask what happened immediately afterwards. For the first time, they talked about the jobs they took in order to make money after the store was shut down.

Mama worked a lot, at a nursery, across the street, when we were living on Madison Avenue, she worked there. You know in the tray they would plant little buds? What do you call it. Seedlings? And all the ladies would bring things home from, I guess it was the forewoman. It was sewing, you know, gloves and things. I used to pile it up for Mama, the pieces of the gloves. Piecework. All the ladies would bring those things home and somebody would come pick them up. - Michiko

Fast forward to 1941. Five years had passed since the store had closed. Toraei was now sixty-seven, and Shizu was fifty-five. To Toraei’s burning and everlasting shame, Shizu’s sister Taka and brother-in-law Ben had taken them in when they had to leave the store, back in 1936. Now, they were once again independent, and living not too far from Hollywood. He had learned shiatsu, Japanese pressure massage. Shizu worked at a nursery and did something called piecework, which meant that someone would deliver pieces of items that needed to be sewn together, like gloves, and her job was to assemble them. Their sons

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
were all working: Shig and George worked with their uncle Ben as gardeners, and Harry was a truck driver.

Left, wedding picture of Auntie Toshiko and Uncle Dick, 1940. Above, Uncle George with his uncle Ben, a.k.a. Ojisan.

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
The oldest sister, Toshiko, was married and had a baby boy, Richard. Michiko, now a young woman, was doing both classical Japanese and other Asian dancing, teaching, and traveling. Tayeko, the baby, was now a teenager, completely star-struck. She would carry an autograph book wherever she went, because movie stars were plentiful near Hollywood. And Yoshiko had just moved back in, after suffering the loss of her first child.

By early 1941, Yoshiko had married, had two children, and was expecting her third, when she noticed a large, dark blue lump on her eldest daughter Emiko’s face. At first the doctor didn’t know what it was, but after he removed it, he took Yoshiko aside and told her to take Emiko home and give her lots of love and make her comfortable, because that was all that could be done for her.
Emiko died in June. There was a quiet service at the Buddhist temple in Japantown, Los Angeles. And Yoshiko took baby Jeanne with her and moved back with her parents.

It was a time for much-needed healing for the family, but what they didn’t know was that Japan was about to attack the United States by bombing Pearl Harbor. That act of war from overseas hurled the lives Japanese-Americans on the west coast of the United States in an unanticipated direction.

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Part II, World War II

By this time, Jean and I were talking to each other on the phone pretty regularly. One day, it occurred to me to ask her how old she was when she found out that the camps that our mothers had once been in were not supposed to be fun.

“Oh, I don’t know. Old? Teens?”

Same here, I said. I thought they were some weird parent-child sleep-away, because they never told us about the barbed wire and the armed guards. They only told us about the ice skating in winter, and the ghost stories and dust storms in the summer. They didn’t tell us that they had been forced to leave their homes and live under armed guard for three years, and that the only reason for this was that they were Japanese Americans. And for some reason, I don’t think I knew that, while most of the girls in the family were sent to Heart Mountain in Wyoming, Auntie Toshiko, Jean’s mom, had been sent with her husband and babies to Rohwer, in Arkansas.

 Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
Above, Auntie Yo with Jeanne and Ken, Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Cody, Wyoming. 1943. Below, Ken at Heart Mountain, 1944

Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
After Pearl Harbor, Japanese residents, who had been forbidden American citizenship, had to register as aliens, be photographed and fingerprinted. My grandmother’s alien registration form.

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Jean and I, by the time we had this conversation, had been working on this family history for over a year. Stories and pictures were multiplying like rabbits. But we could only talk to our two aunties. All the uncles were gone. Her mother, probably the gentlest of the sisters, had recently passed on and mine had been dead for decades. I told Jean that I wished that we could talk to her mom, a.k.a., Auntie Toshiko.

“You know, my niece Carin once did a project about the Japanese-American internment camps, and she interviewed my mom. She must have a transcript of it,” Jean said.

As it turned out, the interview had been done by mail, so what I got was a copy of the letter that Auntie Toshiko had written to her, in her beautiful California public school handwriting. I was surprised at how candidly, not to mention how richly she wrote about a topic that had once been so quietly but effectively suppressed in our family.
On the first page, she wrote “Dear Carin, I tried my best to put some information re-1942 evacuation of all Japanese immigrants and their American born children from their homes and incarcerating them in internment camps in writing.

“These pages were written as best I can recall the events of the World War II that affected our lives. I had no time to edit so excuse the rambling ons – the sentence structure – etc.

“Grandma”

She started with what happened after the Japanese attack. “Immediately after ‘Pearl Harbor,’ all Japanese families were ordered to stay within a five mile area and under time curfew. At night we were not allowed to leave our houses after
eight PM. Also had to keep our shades drawn in the rooms so the light wouldn’t show through the windows.”

Two months later, in February, the U.S. government declared that they could designate any land area a “military zone,” and ban any persons of “enemy ancestry” from there. Japanese and Japanese-Americans had to move away from the west coast or be removed. Toshiko and her family tried to move some miles inland, but then all of California was declared to be off-limits, so they gave up.

When the internees arrived at the camps, they were still being built. Piles of lumber were stacked by the barracks, and some of the wood was still green, so it warped.

“Persons of Japanese ancestry” were given two months to report to temporary assembly centers to await transportation to relocation camps. While they were not told how long they would have to stay in these camps, they were told that they

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were allowed to bring no more than two suitcases per person. Toshiko and her husband owned a business, a crate and box company. What were they going to do with all their belongings and the business?

“It was difficult because the public was aware of our situation so we had strangers coming to offer us nickel and dimes for our basinets and other belongings – such as $75 for a twelve room apartment furnished - $100 for the car – couple hundred for the crate and box company. This situation was prevalent in all the families. We were so humiliated and angry towards people in general that we decided to give the apartment to one of our tenants, left the car with the men next door, and I think the box company was left with one of our Caucasian

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partners. I felt good about all this because we didn’t have to deal with those unscrupulous gougers. (I got pretty nasty there, didn’t I?)” she wrote.

A kindly neighbor lent them a car to get them to their designated assembly center, the Santa Anita racetrack. Because they had a car, they were able to bring one of baby Richard’s toys, a little red wagon. I read on.

“We were escorted to our new dwelling. It was a small horse barn. It was dark inside with couple sets of army bunk beds stacked by the side walls. There was a small space at the end to put our belongings. The floor was soft asphalt – the walls were covered with something like a canvas or a sack material. I sat on the lower bed to rest after the long ride and felt the ground sinking. It wasn’t the ground – the metal bed poles were sinking into the soft black asphalt floor.

“All of a sudden, I felt like crying. I was too tired to think. It was dark and smelly there. Remnants of hay (horse feed) was sticking out of the walls. Well,

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maybe . . . this was better than what was waiting for us ahead. At least, as I looked out, I could see the blue skies of southern California.”

They reported to the mess hall. Unfamiliar foods were slopped onto trays. Showers and toilets were in the latrine, but there were no doors or curtains. There was no privacy, so the women internees donated old sheets to hang in shower stalls and around the toilets.

I remembered that my cousin Kathryn had been born at the assembly center at the racetrack, so at this point, Auntie Toshiko would have been seven months pregnant. “The laundry area was about a short block away. Several troughs were provided for us. It was fortunate for me to have brought the little red wagon with me. I loaded it with the clothes in the bucket, a washboard and soap and pulled it across the lot to do my wash. Can you visualize a pregnant woman pulling a wagon full of laundry and slowly trotting across a lot to do her wash? Like the covered wagon days? We can do it if it was the only way. The return trip to the barrack was more difficult as the clothes were wet and heavy. There were some clotheslines in the back where we hung them.”

The army didn’t move the evacuees from the racetrack for a few months. Auntie Toshiko wrote that she was sent to their new “home” some time in September. Richard was nearly two and Kathryn was three months old.

The camp that they were sent to was the farthest away from the west coast, in Rohwer Arkansas. The train ride took several days. “The army put us on some

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old train and we were finally off on a long journey to a place called McGehee, Arkansas – a small train depot. During the cross country trip the shades were drawn and we were not allowed to look out the windows. I think we crossed over part of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, . . . Louisiana, and into Arkansas. From McGehee, we were transferred to a truck and taken to our new camp of Rohwer.

“We rode from the station on dirt roads across some cotton fields that were already harvested and saw some cotton still left on the branches.

“I noticed only a few old shacks along the way where some residents lived. There were tubs and household and farm implements hanging on the outside walls of these houses. The homes seemed to have dirt floors as we passed by them. Remember, this was way back in 1942 . . . .

“We finally reached our camp and was taken to our new home. It was an end unit of a barrack, still unfinished. Lumber and other building materials were strewn around the yard. This condition existed all around us to house around 10,000 people.

“Since this was to be our permanent residence for the next unknown period, we did our best to plug up the holes and slits on our walls – made curtains for the window out of dish towels or old sheets – and oh – we had at the end of our unit a heavy cast iron coal or wood burning stove to keep us warm for the winter.

“Our camp was divided into blocks – probably 200 people in each block. Ours was #27A. Our facilities were larger than Santa Anita but it was up to the

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residents to do whatever they could to make the place more attractive and livable. We needed curtains in the bathrooms, dress up the dining room (mess hall) and grow some greens around the barracks.

“There was not a single tree or bushes growing in the camp. Just hundreds of barracks enclosed by a barbed wire fence and an army guard posted on a high tower watching over us. After we got settled, we were allowed to use mail order catalogues to order some things we needed. The women ordered clothes and some materials to decorate their rooms. Others ordered yarn to knit sox and sweaters, etc. The men bought seeds – to grow flowers and vegetables. We finally had a pretty nice environment soon. We had schools for the children – elementary to high schools. Most of the teachers came from our own camp. Life was different.

“In a small community of single ethnic group and various intellectual and family backgrounds, it wasn’t the easiest place to live. But in spite of occasional disputes, one or two riots, we got along pretty well. There were occasional deaths – boys inducted into the army.”

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I knew she meant the Japanese-American young men, first banned from enlisting in the United States armed forces, and then finally permitted to, although most of them were restricted to serving in European combat zones.
Finally, three years, one more baby later (Sachi, a girl), and the war now over, Toshiko and her family were permitted to leave the camp.

“We were happy but where would we go? Most internees had very little money and no home or job. The government was going to pay us $50 a person and transportation to our new destination. What a dilemma!

“It was a very confusing moment!

“At that time all the anger, confusion, and fear of just hanging in the air was felt in most of us. But we had to go on – and we packed and got out of the barbed wire fence enclosure with a new hope.”

And with that, Auntie Toshiko’s narrative ended. She closed with this thought:

“After that experience – I pray that we can all live in peace together . . . .”

Me, too, Auntie. Thank you for this, and thank you, Jean and Carin, for bringing her voice into this family story.

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When I was a kid, Auntie Michiko used to say stuff like “Fall down seven times, rise up eight,” and it used to drive me crazy. That doesn’t even make any sense, I’d say. She would say that that’s how resilient you need to be, ready to get up eight times even if you’ve only fallen down seven. It’s a Buddhist saying, and if you go into a Japanese store, you might see a red, pear-shaped *papier-mâché* figure. It represents a fifth century Buddhist monk from India, called Bodhidharma, or Daruma in Japanese, and this figure is weighted on the bottom. No matter how many times you try to tip him over, he will always pop back up.

The story that the aunties told cousin Jean and me was of a family that got knocked down repeatedly, and refused to stay down. Repeatedly.

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Origins of the Story *O-Sode no Furiawase*
Auntie Toshiko with children, from left to right, Richard, Sachi, Jean, and Kathryn, 1946.

After being released from camp, Auntie Toshiko moved to Minneapolis and then back to Los Angeles. She had a total of five children (Jean being the next to

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last), and worked as a bookkeeper for a produce company until her retirement.

She was a wonderful cook, a cheerful warrior, and lived to be 93, passing away in 2008. We miss her immensely.

Auntie Yoshiko, 1990’s.

Auntie Yoshiko, mother of cousins Jeanne and Ken, owned a dry cleaning and clothing repair shop. In her spare time, she made chigiri-e, a Japanese art form similar to collage, where pictures are constructed from torn bits of paper. As I was editing this, she passed away in Los Angeles in her 95th year. This project

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would not have been possible without her invaluable and generous help, and it would have been much less fun without her singular sense of humor and dry wit.

Auntie Yo at Nisei Week in Los Angeles, 1990’s.

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Auntie Michiko moved to New York, joined a dance troupe there, then joined the original Broadway cast of the musical “The King and I.” She was also in the revival and in the movie, and has traveled the world. She still works and lives in Manhattan, and gives me much-needed advice on everything from home remedies to Buddhist koans.

Auntie Michiko, in costume for opening number of stage production of King and I, 1951(?).
My mother, Tayeko, followed Michiko to New York. She worked for costume designers making headpieces before becoming an independent artist. She passed away at the age of forty-three. I miss her every day.
The uncles all married, had children, and kept in touch just enough so that someone along the Auntie Grapevine always knew they how they were doing.

Our grandparents, Torahei and Shizu, moved back to California, although not together. They stayed on friendly terms. He practiced shiatsu, and she, when she wasn’t making sweaters, beading necklaces, making Japanese wigs or sewing costumes for plays, travelled to visit her growing broods of grandchildren, in California, Minnesota, and New York.

My grandmother, Mom, and me, near Staten Island Ferry, about 1960.

And those heaps of pictures, the ones Jean had? She organized them all. With the aunties’ and our other cousin Jeanne’s help, we have identified nearly all of them, and we know approximately when and where they were taken. And where

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they fit in the big family story, not to mention American - and Japanese - history, too.

From left to right, Yoshiko, Toshiko, and Michiko. Irvine, CA, 1974.

The more I learned, the more amazed I was at how resilient our grandparents and parents were. They faced hardships I have never known, certainly, but they kept bouncing back - with humor, courage, and a surprising lack of anger and bitterness. It’s no wonder they said “fall down seven times, rise up eight.” It wasn’t just a saying for them. They lived it.

Origins of the Story O-Sode no Furiawase
My grandmother Shizu (whom we called Obaachan), on her 88th birthday, 1974.

Thank you, Auntie Yo, Auntie Michiko, and Auntie Toshiko, for your stories, your candor, and your courage. Thank you, Jean, for inspiration and your Herculean labors. Jeanne, thanks to you for making the treasure trove of documents available.

To our children: may you add your uniquely wonderful stories to the family history, and pass them to your own children. Enjoy the journey, and ganbatte!

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Some mysteries may not be meant to be solved. This is one of our ancestors on a farm somewhere, but we don’t know where. Hawaiian cousins? Arizona? California? What do you think?
Developmental Considerations for the Target Audience

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Developmental Considerations for the Target Audience

I see the target audience for my story, *O-sode no Furiawase*, as being generally in 4th or 5th grade, a developmental stage that Erik Erikson (1963) called the 4th Age of Man, “Industry vs. Inferiority.” It is the age at which play begins to be replaced by “the pleasure of work completion by steady attention and persevering diligence” (Erikson, 1963). This is considered to be a sensitive stage; this is to say that, if the child is discouraged by failure at this point, he may withdraw from the activity that had had the potential to enhance and solidify his sense of identity.

Children in this bracket are, when compared to older and younger children, better able to learn skill mastery on their own. While able and willing to experiment, they are now more aware of and concerned about the quality of what they produce. They are developing a more acute sense of big issues of fairness, justice, of the world around them, and a budding awareness of their potential place in it (Wood, 2007).

The opening of *O-sode* catches the child at the beginning of that stage, at a point where she is still mostly following her parents around and asking the million questions that children do. But then, a glamorous teenage cousin comes to visit. Through this cousin, my protagonist, Michiko, develops an interest in dance. She receives encouragement, mostly tacit, by her family, but their bankruptcy and forcible displacement from her home threaten her career.

While the internment of West Coast Japanese-Americans during World War II is a complex topic whose depth may not be fully comprehensible to a fourth- or fifth-
grader, this can be useful as a way of introducing the subject in the more relatable
format of a personal narrative.

Although the outcome for Michiko is by no means assured at the beginning of
the story, she evolves from a child who takes dancing lessons into a dancer. I would
hope that my story’s reader would recognize in Michiko a child who discovers a
calling, and through that, her own particular path to adulthood, and to her place in the
world.
Cultural Considerations
Cultural Considerations

The more I have studied at Bank Street, the more important and more complex I find culture and cultural interaction to be. What determines how one immigrant group will succeed or fail in an adopted country is how the host country’s denizens perceive and accept the newcomers’ differences. If the native people value and respect their immigrants, then that population can thrive. If not, then clashes can ensue, and the results can be dire.

I hoped to address a theme that some potential readers, regardless of ethnicity or national origin, might identify with: that is, some sense of cultural otherness, of belonging to a group that is not the dominant one. Cultural interaction, by necessity, raises questions about what truth is, what and who shall be valued, and who gets to make those determinations. In other words, cultural interaction is, by its nature, political, and goes to the heart of how we live. So, while not every potential reader is going to know much, or perhaps anything, about Japanese or Japanese-Americans, he might identify with some sense of not being part of the dominant group in some way.

In this story, there is a large and obvious consequence to being part of the non-dominant culture, in that the Japanese-Americans get incarcerated without due process or any of the protections that we might expect our laws to afford our citizens. Having said that, it was not my intention to make this event a focal point, or to discuss blame. In this story, the internment was one of several potential stumbling blocks for the protagonist.
I remember that, in the first Bank Street class I took, there was a reading about child development that juxtaposed American upper- and lower-socioeconomic status (SES) families in this way: in higher SES families, there was a strong tendency for parents to ask their young children instructional questions. In contrast, lower-income parents were more likely to confine their questions to children to the type for which they actually wanted the answers (Berk & Windsor, 1995). This struck me as a significant difference in parenting practice, with the potential to affect how readily a child adjusts to classroom life and the sorts of questioning conventions that teachers use. So, here was an example of one parental practice that I thought might impact children educationally, and it did not appear to, at least necessarily, hinge on race or national origin. So how might Asian/Asian-American parents’ culture set them and their children apart from Western parents and children?

My Initial Perception of Key American vs. Japanese-American Cultural Differences at the Outset of this Project

The cultural underpinning of this story may not strike all readers as being strongly or obviously Japanese-American, but to me, it very much is, in at least two key respects:

Expectations of children and parental praise.

In this story, the reader will not see the parent lavishing praise on the child, nor does the child expect or seek it. This is not atypical of Japanese and Japanese-American families. A child is expected to give his best effort, but it is understood that he is
doing this for his own betterment and honor, and, to some extent, for the honor of the family. Praise and bribes are not typically used by Japanese parents to get their children to excel academically (Schneider, Hieshima, & Plank, 1994).

**Family members’ roles.**

The Japanese family structure (*ie*), one that differs from what we call “nuclear family” in that it is more multigenerational, is hierarchical, and each member, age permitting, has a role (Lebra, 1984) that serves the unit. Older children have responsibility for and jurisdiction over younger siblings, and chores are assigned to older children as their capability permits. In my story, and indeed, in my aunt’s childhood home, the older sisters took orders and stocked the shelves in my grandparents’ store; the brothers performed the strenuous labor and/or drove the truck to the customers’ farms. The younger children were relatively free to play as they wished, but as Michiko got older, her dancing began to be perceived, by her family and by her, as something that, to a certain extent, defined her. Dance, in her life, had the gravity of a role or job, even when she was rather young, and before she was making money in its practice.

Although I initially had a sense that Japanese and American cultures informed the story, I thought that it was important to have a deeper understanding of the two. Although I found some studies that look at differences in the ways that far Eastern and Western people think and behave, the Eastern component was not always limited to Japanese or Japanese-Americans. Still, a picture has emerged that leads me to believe that the differences are considerably more profound than I’d supposed, and less prone

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to being eradicated through assimilation, even after two or three generations in a
different country.

Results of Research on Asian vs. Western views on Family, Children, and
Education

**On the question of how much difference culture can make.**

. . . remember the central revelation of anthropology: the idea that the social world in which we live does not exist in some absolute sense, but rather is simply one model of reality, the consequence of one set of intellectual and spiritual choices that our particular cultural lineage made, however successfully, many generations ago.

- Wade Davis, anthropologist and ethnobotanist (2009)

We always supposed, really, something would give us a definition of who we really were, our class position or our national position, or our geographic origins or where our grandparents came from. And I don't think any one thing any longer will tell us who we are.

- Stuart Hall, British sociologist and cultural theorist (in Martin & Neal, 2014)

**American and Japanese theories about infants and small children.**

The way that mothers perceive and evaluate their infants’ behavior is largely framed by their cultures, according to a 1996 study (Shwalb, Shwalb, & Shoji, 1996). The researchers sought to examine Japanese mothers’ ideas about infants in a way that did not superimpose other cultures’ values. They therefore asked the mothers to list what they considered to be measurable attributes of infants. They prefaced the description of the actual study by observing that they had concluded, based on their readings, that
Japanese beliefs about children showed a great deal of consistency, not only geographically, but over the course of Japan’s recorded history as well.

When they compared the attributes that the Japanese mothers had listed to a Western-based questionnaire (The Revised Infant Temperament Questionnaire), they observed that two attributes were absent from the Japanese list: persistence and distractibility. Of the traits that overlapped between the Japanese questionnaire and the Western, a few stood out as having different connotations for Japanese. “Sociability” in the Japanese results was often attached to bathing, since co-bathing is practiced in Japanese families. “Dependence” was considered to be a positive trait, since Japanese believe that an infant’s emotional security hinges on a close bond with the mother. As another researcher has observed, one of the differences between Western and Japanese culture is that, in Japan, the primary dyad is mother and child, whereas in Western culture, it is the sexual dyad (Lebra, 1994).

Japanese mothers, says Lebra, have close physical bonds with their babies, and consider babies to be less distinctly separate entities than do American mothers. Japanese mothers carry their infants more than Americans do; but the Japanese mothers directly engage their infants less. As a result, Japanese babies vocalize less frequently than American babies, and when they do, they are more likely to make sounds of distress.

To Western eyes, small Japanese can appear to lack discipline, and their mothers can appear to lack, or fail to exercise parental authority. However, Japanese mothers in cultural considerations
Lebra’s study overwhelmingly expressed a desire to instill a sort of empathy known as *omoiyari* in their children. Lebra described *omoiyari* as being “on top of the moral-value hierarchy in Japanese culture, judging from the frequency of its appearance in people’s self-reflective talks, media, and various campaign slogans” (Lebra, 1994).

The mothers strive to develop *omoiyari* between their children and themselves, and use that as a way of teaching their children a deep awareness of and empathy for others. This will help them navigate, first, the hierarchical world of the Japanese family unit (*ie*), which is often multigenerational and has prescribed roles for its members, and secondly, the world beyond (Lebra, 1984).

So close is the bond between the Japanese mother and child that a great deal of incidental, or “osmosis” learning occurs, often without the mother’s awareness. Whereas American mothers describe specific lessons that they give their children, like teaching them the alphabet or reading, Japanese mothers say that they do not teach their children. The evidence shows that Japanese mothers not only teach their children constantly, but they continue to do so throughout their children’s schooling. In contrast, American mothers tend to stop teaching once their child enters school. For Japanese mothers, so interwoven is teaching into the fabric of everyday life, that it is often invisible to the mothers. It is common for Japanese mothers to believe that their children have learned to read spontaneously, *shizen ni*, by nature (Azuma, 1994). I was rather taken aback when I first read this, because I had been quite certain, for years, that both my children had learned to read spontaneously. As a child of second-generation Japanese-American mother and a European-American father, and

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particularly because my mother passed away early in my life, I had long thought myself to have been completely assimilated into American culture. But my parenting style, in this and other ways, appears to have contradicted that assumption.

**Language and learning.**

A recent Stanford University study by Anne Fernald, Virginia A. Marchman, and Adriana Weisleder, (2013) demonstrated a substantial linguistic gap between very young children from high- and low- socioeconomic status (SES) families.\(^4\) The researchers presented this as a matter of particular concern because, they state, language growth is an established predictor of academic success, and the rate of language growth, once established, tends to be persistent.

The idea of language growth being a key predictor of academic success is interesting in light of the information that Japanese mothers talk to their young children less than do Western mothers. But there is evidence that linguistic differences between Western and some Far East Asian cultures have a lasting impact on cognition.

In 2002, Heejung S. Kim, a Korean-American researcher at Stanford University, wanted to discover how differently Asian-Americans and European-Americans perceived the role of language in cognition. He had read in a San Jose newspaper

\(^4\) The study was conducted on families whose first language was English. The racial breakdown was: non-Hispanic White (66%), Asian (13%), Alaskan Native/American Indian (10%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (6%), or African American (4%).

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article that colleges with high Asian populations were concerned that their students spoke so little. He cited studies that showed that Japanese and Chinese mothers speak to their young children less than do American mothers.

Kim’s (2002) theory was that Western and Far Eastern cultures differ in the degree to which they correlate thought with speech: it is generally accepted in Western tradition, going back to the ancient Greeks, that talking and thinking are linked and mutually beneficial. However, Asian cultures, being steeped in Taoist and Buddhist thinking, do not have a tradition of associating speech with thought. In fact, they have an ancient tradition of associating silence, visualizing, and silent meditation with intelligence and wisdom. He conducted a series of studies with Asian-American and European-American participants, all of whose native and dominant language was English. The results supported several of Kim’s theories: first, that European-Americans overwhelmingly equate speech with good thinking, whereas Asian-Americans do not. Secondly, thinking aloud while working does not affect the performance of European-Americans, but it negatively impacts the performance of Asian-Americans. Importantly, it is not the mere act of speaking that affected these groups. In the third study, Kim required all of the test subjects to speak while performing their tasks, but half were thinking aloud about the task while the other half, selected at random, were required to repeatedly recite the alphabet. Reciting the alphabet did not negatively impact the Asian-Americans’ performance in this study, but it did for the European-Americans. This supports the theory that “European-Americans tend to process cognitive information more verbally than East Asian
Differences of perceiving: analytic vs. holistic thought.

In *The Geography of Thought*, author Richard E. Nisbett (2003) posits that Western thought, which has its roots in ancient Greek and Rome, views proper study methods to consist of minute examination of objects in a largely decontextualized way. In contrast, he says, in Asian cultures, informed by centuries of Confucian, Buddhist, and, in Japan, Shinto thought, stress is laid on the interconnectedness of all things. He calls these two viewpoints analytic and holistic. In a short anecdote, he cites a study where Japanese and Americans were shown a pyramid-shaped object, made of cork. Respondents were then shown two new objects, one that was made of the same material, and one that was the same shape. When asked to identify which object matched the cork pyramid, Americans tended to choose the same-shaped object, while the Japanese picked the object made out of the same substance (Nisbett, 2003).

In a perhaps more dramatic example, in 2001, Nisbett and fellow researcher Takahiko Masuda had constructed an experiment to study the differences in Japanese and American observation of scenes. The researchers anticipated that the Japanese
respondents would be more aware of “field information” in a scene, be more aware of the relationship between objects, and be more context-dependent in recalling the scene.

To this end, they showed Japanese and American respondents an animated film clip of a fish tank. The fish tank showed several major fish, some smaller fish, bubbles, other small creatures, and inert objects like rocks, snails, and shells. They then showed the test subjects a second scene, in which several elements might have been changed: moving or inert objects may have been introduced, the background might have changed, or it might have been removed. They were asked, in each case, to describe what they had seen.

As anticipated, the Japanese recalled more about environments, inert objects, and the smaller fish than the Americans did. Americans started their descriptions with the larger, more prominent, “salient” objects first, whereas the Japanese started by describing the environments. Japanese made more comments about behaviors or relationship between objects. The Japanese respondents were much more likely to mention the feelings of the fish tank inhabitants. And, as had been anticipated, the accuracy of the Japanese respondents’ answers was adversely affected by showing them previously seen objects against a different background. The American respondents were unaffected by the change in backdrop (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001).

How the interconnectedness of things impacts a sense of self.

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A person whose approach to observation is holistic is likelier than an analytic thinker to see himself in the context of a greater whole, and Professor Qi Wang of Cornell University has conducted studies comparing Chinese and European-American children that demonstrate that this is the case. She posits that, in European-American culture, “[i]ndividuals are encouraged to seek and maintain their independence from others by attending to the self and by discovering and expressing their unique inner attributes.”

Chinese culture emphasizes interdependence, particularly within families. In two studies, American and Chinese or Taiwanese children were asked to recount stories about themselves. The Americans recalled many more details, particularly about the way they thought and felt, whereas the Chinese children were more likely to talk about the circumstances, the environments, and the roles of other people (Wang, 2004, 2006). Interestingly, in a separate study, bilingual children from Hong Kong showed more interdependent values when interviewed in Chinese than when interviewed in English (Wang, Shao, & Li, 2010). This suggests that culture and language are intertwined enough that linguistic code-switching accompanies a cultural code-switching.

Asian cultures, it should be said, are not the only ones to show more holistic thought than American culture; it just so happens that I was looking for research that juxtaposed the two. Researchers Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama, and Nisbett (2010) cite several; Croatian, Russian, and Orthodox Jewish cultures, they attest, tend to put less emphasis on individuality and more on interdependence than average Americans do. The same researchers also state that a higher emphasis and regard for
interdependence tends to accompany less mobile communities (such as farming or fishing), and lower SES communities.

**Differences in expectations of female children.**

My aunt was born in the United States (Phoenix, AZ, to be precise) in the early 1920’s. While women did work in family enterprises like farms, it was a time when it would have been unusual for a female child, American, Japanese, or Japanese American, to be expected to embark on a solo career. However, in Japanese households, certain circumstances may change this. While Japanese women were and are generally expected to marry and to prioritize their roles as wives and mothers, an exception may be made if the woman’s father perceives her to be his successor. She need not be his successor in his own profession, but if she is the child most likely to duplicate or exceed the career achievements of her father, then she may be encouraged to pursue that goal (Lebra, 1984). This is not uncommon in cases where a girl is an only child. In my aunt’s household, she was one of seven siblings, but she was, from an early age, the most specifically goal-oriented of them.

During the time of my aunt’s childhood, classical Japanese dance, which was what she studied, was a realistic and respected career path for a girl, if she was dedicated and talented enough. The goal of students of classical Japanese dance was to be certified to open a dance school of their own. In order to do so, they had to be sent to a dance academy in Japan. If they studied not only dance, but also classical drama and music,
and were deemed worthy, they would be given a unique professional name, which would confer upon them the right to lead a dance academy of their own under that name. Ultimately, my aunt did not follow that path; as told in the story, she found the world of Japanese dance to be limiting, and branched out into other ethnic dances. But her parents had every reason to believe that dance would provide her with a lasting career. Their support for her efforts never, as far as she knows, wavered.
Conclusion
Conclusion

In trying to grasp the breadth of cultural differences between Japanese and Americans, I have presented a few studies here. I went in search of research that compared Japanese and Americans in order to better understand the story I was writing, but there was another motivation. I did not entirely agree with the Western child development theory I was reading. I did not believe, for example, that learning was as socially dependent or as language-based as Vygotsky believed (in Berk & Winsler, 1995). And I did not always agree with Erikson (1963). For example, in the following quote, he characterizes his Third Stage of Man as being one in which “[i]nfant sexuality and incest taboo, castration complex and superego all unite here to bring about that specifically human crisis during which the child must turn from an exclusive, pregenital attachment to his parents to the slow process of becoming a parent” (Erikson, 1963). I do not find it credible that small children are sexual beings in the way he is describing. Whose cultural bias should one believe?

What the research I found did demonstrate to me was that there is a depth of credible evidence showing profound differences between Eastern and Western cultures. In particular, two experiments, the one with the simulated fish tank and the one where test subjects either did or did not talk while performing tasks, indicated striking differences in cognition.

As progressive educators, in our efforts to make sure that our students are always in that dynamic space that we call the zone of proximal development, we take great pains
to understand both our students and ourselves. This would be a challenging enough
task in a culturally and racially homogeneous society, but the United States is not that
place. Teachers and students approach intellectual and social challenges from
perspectives that have been informed, at a very deep level, by their cultural
backgrounds. It is incumbent upon us to remember that we may not know how
different our truths are from our students’. What I have tried to present in my
children’s book, O-sode no Furiawase, is a portrait of a child who has two cultures
and two very different languages\(^5\) (actually, three, including her parents’ regional
dialect\(^6\)), who is growing up at a time when there are unprecedented opportunities for
her, but also sources of strife, injustice, and grief. She starts out as an observer of her
elders, but quickly discovers a passion that evolves and sustains her throughout her
life.

The type of child I had in mind as my story’s reader is one who is starting to define
him or herself. With this self-knowledge comes a greater awareness of others, first
one’s family members, then increasingly, the world at large. I hope that any potential
reader will find Michiko’s path to adulthood and her career interesting, but will also be

\(^{5}\) The Japanese language does not have definite or indefinite articles or plurals. Sentences often lack subjects if
the subjects have already been established. Verbs, along with their tenses, are at the ends of sentences. In a
Japanese sentence, the listener might not find out if it is interrogative until the end. Finally, much of Japanese
written language is pictorial, and depending on how the characters are combined, can be pronounced completely
differently. For example, if one combines the characters for “now” (ima) and “day” (hi), the word
“today” (kyou) is yielded.

\(^{6}\) Michiko’s parents came from Kyushu and spoke a regional dialect, Kumamoto-ben, which is unintelligible to
speakers of standard Japanese. Children here are taught standard Japanese in gakuen, Japanese language
schools.
spurred to think about what makes people identify with one group or another, and what the potential consequences of that identification are.

The Western conception of person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.

- Clifford Geertz (in Nager and Shapiro, 1979)
References
References


Appendix
Appendix

Permissions

To protect the privacy of contributors of photographs, letters, documents, and interviews, the original permission letters are being held by the author. A blank sample of the letter follows in this Appendix.
Date: ________________________________

Bank Street College of Education  
610 West 112th Street  
New York, NY  
10025

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter will serve to inform you that I have given permission to Jina Accardo to use (check all that apply):

☐ my real name  
☐ photographs of me  
☐ transcripts of our interviews  
☐ family documents and/or letters that I have provided her for use in her master’s thesis.

Sincerely,

______________________________

Signature