

Can “Shikata Ga Nai” be used as familial glue?

An exegesis interpreting the family ties in Japanese American culture,
and studying the collapse of Jeanne Wakatsuki’s family as a
result of internment at Manzanar

Have you ever been riding a bike and the chain slips off of the gear shaft? What happens? The chain breaks or gets caught up in the gear cluster; the gears jam up and stop spinning; the wheels stop moving because your peddling doesn't direct any energy to the tires, and lastly, you can fly off of the bike and scrape up your knees and elbows. Just as the bicycle requires all parts in tact in order to function, the family unit requires a vast amount of systematic integrity to survive. In Japanese American culture, the family provides the infrastructure—supporting all the members of the family. When that system is broken down, the family cannot survive, nor provide that needed support. Though a crisis has the potential to unite a family and bring them closer together, it can also be too much weight for the family to bear and, thus, break it apart. Such is the case in Jeanne Wakatsuki's family, which through internment at Manzanar, the removal of a father-figure, and the complete neglect of all Japanese traditions, collapses.

Those three injustices—internment at Manzanar, loss of Ko as a father-figure, and removal of Japanese traditions—all act as stones being thrown at a window. Though each one individually would cause chips and cracks in the window, it takes all three stones to shatter the familial glass.

Firstly, the internment at Manzanar started with the removal of the Japanese Americans from their homes on the west coast. Jeanne and her entire family were forced out of their houses and transported to a camp in the middle of the desert. Being completely uprooted and required to live in isolation from the rest of the population can only end in negativity and destructiveness. Being removed from society and placed far from the rest of civilization even though much of Jeanne's family were United States citizens served not only as one of the most overshadowing injustices committed on American soil, but also contributed to the collapse of the Wakatsuki family.

Secondly, in Japanese American culture, the father is revered as the head of the household, whose orders and will are to be upheld with paramount respect. Losing this figurehead of the family during the aforementioned injustice of Japanese internment would be similar to the

death of a fearless national leader during wartime—it would nearly ensure the demise of the entire nation, or in this case, the destruction of the family. Though Ko was cocky, arrogant, and somewhat irrational, he served as the main pillar of strength in the Wakatsuki family. If that main support beam is removed, the entire house crumbles. Not only was he taken away from his family, sent to a different interment camp, and physically abused, he was placed back with his family in a terribly weakened and condemned state. The beatings and mental trauma that he underwent at his camp changed who he was as a person. Though he was arrogant before his interment, he never lost control or did anything to hurt his family. After his extended interrogation, he resorted to drinking to ease his pain, and lashing out against his loved ones to make himself feel better. Therefore, his return proved to be *worse* for revival of family bonds than when he wasn't around at all.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the neglect of and total disregard for Japanese tradition and cultural normality served as the stone that would fracture the familial glass, allowing the poisonous air of indifference and assimilation to pour into the Wakatsuki home. At Manzanar, basic Japanese norms such as privacy, and family integration were completely destroyed. For example, the latrines were erected in such a way that privacy was nullified. One person would be sitting back to back with another while trying to use the bathroom. The modesty of Japanese upbringing (especially for the women) was disregarded, and efficiency took its place. For Jeanne and others of her generation, this lack of privacy was uncomfortable, but bearable. For the older generations—Jeanne's mother and grandmother—this was entirely unacceptable and embarrassing. Having grown up in Japan, they couldn't bring themselves to expose their bodies to complete strangers; that type of bodily exposure and lack of privacy was reserved for acts of intimacy between spouses. Not only individual privacy, but family privacy was also neglected. In the barracks, the only thing separating one family from another was a poorly constructed wall made

of sheets, and blankets. Families weren't even allowed to eat with one another in the same fashion that they had in their own homes. They were forced to eat in a "mess hall" with many other Japanese American families. Mealtime played a large social role in Japanese culture, and to have that social construct removed from every day life shocked and tore apart many families at Manzanar, including the Wakatsukis.

The phrase "Shikata Ga Nai," which means "it has to be done" or "there is no other way" was repeated several times throughout *Farewell to Manzanar* and was illustrative of the silent resistance of the Japanese Americans against internment. Though that type of thinking and methodology helped many of the Japanese deal with the injustices that were placed on them against their citizenship, it didn't help maintain family structure. In fact, it actually damaged familial bonds because it maintained a passive pacifistic approach to encroachment. While it helped ease the pain of internment, it destroyed self-esteem and made the Japanese Americans seem helpless and subservient. The damage had been done; no matter the sociological philosophy, family bonds had been broken and didn't fair good chances of being mended—the Wakatsukis would never again experience the Japanese sense of family that they once had, which was the most devastating injustice of the United States against them.