

Article

Keeping the Culture of Death Alive: One Hundred Years of a Japanese American's Family Mortuary

Precious Yamaguchi 

Communication Department, Southern Oregon University, Ashland, OR 97520, USA; yamaguchp@sou.edu;
Tel.: +1-541-552-6241

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Abstract: This article explores a Japanese American family mortuary and its 100 years of service and involvement with the Japanese American community in Los Angeles through five generations of the Fukui family. The Fukui Mortuary is Los Angeles's oldest Japanese American family mortuary and has provided the Japanese American community with services relating to death and bereavement for nearly a century. Through autoethnographic and ethnographic methods, this research examines a site within the Japanese American community after World War II where death, ethnicity, nationality and gender intersect. Studying the cultural and traditional options people have to negotiate, participate and engage in one's cultural practices during a time of death allows us to investigate the structures of power, economics and institutions that are embedded in our histories and societies. Through the mobilization and service of cultural traditions related to death, the Fukui mortuary contributes to the story of Japanese Americans and how ideas of death, religion, gender and ethnicity are situated in community involvement and the genealogy of the Fukui family.

Keywords: Japanese American; hybridity; Asian American; death; bereavement; communication; ethnicity; gender; race; ethnography

1. Introduction

Two years into my Communication doctoral degree, my father passed away unexpectedly just as the fall semester began. My mother, brother, myself, and all of my family were devastated to say the least. Possessing a heritage from a high-context culture (Japanese) and living in a country of a low-context culture (the United States) does not balance itself out into a sort of middle-context culture. In fact, it can become even more confusing. Based upon the writings from [Gudykunst \(2001\)](#), Asians "tend to use high-context messages when they communicate," to maintain "ingroup harmony," as well as use "low-context messages in some relationships (e.g., close friendships)" (p. 35). Transforming one's identity into a hybrid of both cultures creates an ultra-high context culture where the individuals are expected to adhere to the various cultural norms at different times and bounce back and forth between direct and in-direct communication from two very distinctly different cultures. In this case of my father passing away, my mother decided not to have a funeral or memorial service (a surprise to all of our family!), due to some of the high-context cultural expectations of Japanese and Japanese American wives during the time of their husband's death.

"Everyone is sending me *kōden*," she said. "I will not be able to pay back all of this *kōden*."

Kōden is money people give the wife or family of the deceased in order to help pay for the funeral. Japanese culture can be confusing for a fifth-generation Japanese American like myself, a person who has unintentionally become farther removed from Japanese traditions. As my grandmother, Toshi, used to notice, with every generation that is born in the United States, each generation becomes a little less aware of traditional practices. It is moments like these that exhibit the growing distance within the generation gaps between Japanese American families. When I asked my mother, do people

really expect you to pay back the *kōden*, in the exact amount you received, she said, “They don’t expect you to, but they expect you to.” These types of indirect expectations and concepts of holding back display Japanese and Japanese American ways of communicating, exhibiting the values of *enryo* (holding back), *ganbaru* (perseverance), and *gaman* (enduring, tolerance). These three words have no equivalence to words in the English language, and yet, they are so important that my mother, who was grieving, could not even imagine being able to pay back all the large amounts of *kōden* she received.

“When someone gives you *kōden*, you have to return that money back to them, in the form of *kōden* when their family member passes away. I don’t think I’ll be able to do it,” my mother said. My brother, relatives, and myself understood the vast responsibility of organizing a Japanese American funeral and memorial service and also recalled how my father used to express how he never wanted my mother to have to go through the trouble of organizing a big event surrounding his death. We knew the cultural context and responsibility of a wife hosting a funeral and the events that surround it, the economics, and most importantly the sadness of having to see our father pass on was stressful. The Fukui Mortuary helped my mother make the minimal arrangements she wanted: the obituary, the cremation, and basic logistical paperwork needed.

Exploring sites where death and culture intersect well as events that brought Japanese American communities together through their services of mobilizing and embracing cultural traditions related to death contributes to the story of Japanese Americans and how ideas of death, religion and race are negotiated through cultural practices and traditions. The process of researching death and its cultural traditions in the Japanese American community is full of twists and turns as values, traditions and practices weave in and out of Japanese heritage, religion and nationality. Research studies focusing on the diverse perspectives, negotiations and choices Japanese and Japanese American women make in regards to funeral services for their spouses who have passed away display a myriad of choices women make when it comes to memorial services and death. Studies by [Valentine \(2010\)](#) and [Breen \(2004\)](#), show that many Japanese and Japanese American women feel stress due to the numerous responsibilities and obligations my mother felt when my father passed away.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, the majority of mortuaries in the United States did not understand, nor want to accommodate and include Japanese American traditions and practices in their funeral services, especially before, during, and shortly after World War II. In order for Japanese Americans to engage in their cultural customs and beliefs relating to death, a Japanese American family had to create their own mortuary in Los Angeles, California, to serve the needs of their community. This mortuary has been owned throughout several generations of my Japanese American extended family, the Fukui family.

This research engages in autoethnographic and ethnographic methods and interviews with people who are involved in the oldest Japanese American mortuary on the West Coast to tell the story of how they mobilized to keep their cultural customs alive through providing traditional services relating to death. [Foucault \(1980\)](#) believed death, just as life, was generated through forces of power, history and institutionalization that sustained a way of life through the maintenance of enforcing certain structures of society and culture. Even during the time of death, Japanese Americans struggled against being regarded as docile bodies, unable to express and practice their cultural beliefs and identities. For Japanese Americans, death does not mean the end of one’s life; passing away is part of passing *on* towards ancestorhood.

1.1. Funeral Rites, Traditions and Cultural Transformations in Japanese American Communities

During a time of death and bereavement, an individual’s culture can play a significant role in the events related to the passing of a loved one. This article emphasizes the role the Fukui Mortuary has had on the Japanese American community in Los Angeles. Though the main focus of the article is how the Fukui Mortuary provided cultural services to their community, it is also necessary to give some background on the cultural traditions, perspectives and values of death for some Japanese and Japanese American people. Like most cultures in the United States, the Japanese American population

consists of a variety of generations and identities. Some Japanese Americans have recently moved to the U.S. from Japan, while others like myself are of the fifth-generation and their families have had a long history in the U.S. The diversity amongst Japanese Americans is immense due to the differences in regional, religious, socio-economic, generational identities, and more.

The rites of passage, age and death have been a part of Japanese culture for hundreds of years. Much of the Japanese culture that influences customs relating to death come from Shinto beliefs and Buddhism. Japanese religious funeral services tend to focus on strengthening the “unity and bonds among family members who share the same ancestors,” (Tagaya et al. 2000, p. 136). Not all Japanese people share the same belief system and practices, and their cultural practices are not always consistent with a singular religion. Sagara-Rosemeyer and Davies (2007) describe this “multi-layered belief system” using the example of how “most Japanese celebrate the birth of children at a Shinto shrine, have wedding ceremonies at a Christian church, and bury the dead at a Buddhist temple, without experiencing any religious dissonance” (p. 225).

Many of the traditions, values and beliefs emphasize family, ancestors and umarekawari (reincarnation). Sagara-Rosemeyer and Davies’s (2007, p. 234) research explains how one Japanese child stated, when a person dies they go to anoyo (the Buddhist afterlife) but when asked to describe anoyo, he said, “heaven where God lived”. Another child from the same research study (Sagara-Rosemeyer and Davies 2007, p. 237) learned about “Christian beliefs outside the family,” as well as “learned Buddhist traditions through familial religious practices”.

Throughout Japan’s history there have been hundreds of different memorial, burial, cremation, religious and bereavement traditions. Some of the customs, practices and beliefs are common amongst Japanese people, and some traditions are very specific to certain regions, time periods or families. Shinya (2004) explains how Japanese funeral rites throughout history usually have included both a funeral ritual at the home of the person who passed away and a funeral at a temple or cemetery. Before the 1920s, it was common for funeral processions to take place. The funeral procession would act as the “bridging” between “the deceased’s home and the ritual at the family temple where a cremation or burial [is] carried out” (Shinya 2004, p. 29). The memorial and funeral practices in Japanese traditions often focused on the family helping their loved one towards a peaceful journey into “rebirth in the next world” (Shinya 2004, p. 28).

Japanese traditions relating to death, rebirth and veneration are very symbolic and the communication between the living and the dead are often displayed through symbolic rituals and customs. *Sosen suhai*, a tradition of ancestor veneration, helps to preserve the “sacred nature of family ties beyond the grave,” and helps to keep a continuity between the living and dead family members (Valentine 2009, p. 35). Having reminders of loved ones who have passed away in one’s home is not unusual on a daily basis, or especially during *obon*, an annual event where Japanese and Japanese Americans honor the spirits of their loved ones who have passed away and even hope to have these spirits visit them in their homes.

The use of a *butsudan*, a domestic Buddha altar in a family’s home, or *saidan*, a funeral altar, along with funeral services and grave visits contribute to the domestic rites of the family and connect them to their loved ones who have passed away (Valentine 2009). The placement of symbolic items is very important in the rituals of a Japanese funeral. Shinya (2004) wrote how in Western funerals the “coffin typically dominates” the centrality of the funeral. In Japanese culture, the altar and its tiers are often more important than the coffin. “Funeral directors typically advise families to spend less money on the coffin and more on the altar (Shinya 2004, p. 28).

1.2. The Passing of Time and Milestones in Japanese Culture

The passing of time is marked by various milestones in Japanese and Japanese Americans’ lives including special birthdays starting with the *kanreki*, the sixtieth birthday celebration. Numerous special birthdays after a person’s *kanreki* are also identified as milestone events such as a person’s *sotsuju* (ninetieth birthday) and a *koju* (one-hundred-eleventh birthday) (Tsuji 2011). Death is often

combined with symbolic rituals in Japanese culture; traditions such as the pillow sutra “performed at the bedside at the time of death,” cremation, and multiple memorial services held every seven days for seven weeks as well as a memorial service “after 100 days, one year, three years, seven years, and so forth” (Braun and Nichols 1997, p. 332). The rituals that correlate with specific days after an individual has passed away, are “rites of passage to ancestorhood,” and are important for the “deceased in their journey through the different post-mortem stages” (Tsuji 2011, p. 30).

Japanese funeral rituals have changed throughout time, especially with the “emphasis from veneration to memorialization” (Valentine 2010, p. 276). Previous research has found generational differences in Japanese American customs when it comes to death. World War II and the Japanese American internment camp experiences had an effect on Japanese Americans’ participation in Buddhist religious practices (Braun and Nichols 1997). The *kazokuso*, a family funeral, has become more common. Families arrange ceremonies that incorporate the rituals they want as well as have more affordable options to commemorate their loved ones. The rituals, customs and traditions of Japanese and Japanese American funerals and memorial services are assumed as a heavy responsibility on family members as many of these rituals are very detailed and have deep histories rooted in Buddhism and Japanese culture.

1.3. *The Importance of Community after the World War II Internment Camps*

Japanese Americans have faced many challenges when it comes to preserving their culture, traditions and practices in the United States. After World War II, Japanese Americans were struggling to find work and places to live after they left the internment camps. Fifth-generation Japanese Americans, like my brother and I, never faced the discrimination and racism all four of our grandparents have after they left the internment camps. It was shocking to us to find out from our grandparents and previous scholarly literature, the hatred that existed towards Japanese Americans.

There have been racist misconceptions of Japanese American people being viewed as a sick race (Kitano and Kitano 1970) and as “aliens” in their own country (Bishop 2000, p. 71). This article seeks to describe Japanese Americans beyond their victimhood and towards the awareness of their labor, participation and strengths of building, rebuilding and providing for their community and preserving their cultural traditions in relation to death, bereavement and mourning.

Japanese immigrants were the second group of Asians to come to the United States in the 1850s after the Chinese (Lee 1999). Most of them relocated from Japan to Hawaii and then from Hawaii to the mainland of the U.S. They arrived in large numbers and the majority of them worked as laborers in plantation, industrial and agricultural jobs in Hawaii and on the west coast of the U.S. It was not until the early 1900s that anti-Japanese American sentiments began to take place. In 1908, an agreement between Japan and the United States took place that restricted Japanese men to immigrate into the country but accepted women into the U.S. (Lee 1999). In 1909, all Japanese Americans were required to join the Japan Association of America formed by the Japanese Counselor General in San Francisco, California (Gudykunst 2001). This association controlled all the immigration and traveling documents from Japan to the United States. By the 1940s, there were about 125,000 Japanese Americans in the U.S. and 80,000 of them had been born in the U.S. When World War II began, immigration from Japan to the United States was not permitted until the McCarren-Walter Immigration Act in 1952. Due to the previous laws forbidding Japanese men to immigrate to the U.S. in the 1950s, 86% of the Japanese American population consisted of women. By 1980, there were approximately 700,970 Japanese Americans in the United States. Only a small minority of 43,250 Japanese people were recent immigrants to the U.S. (Gudykunst 2001).

On 7 December 1941, the Japanese military attacked Pearl Harbor. Two months after the attack on 19 February 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 that gave the United States Army permission to exile 120,000 Japanese Americans from the west coast and relocate them into what President Roosevelt himself called “concentration camps” (Daniels 2002). Any Japanese American who possessed one-eighth blood of Japanese ancestry was removed from their homes and put into

internment camps in remote areas of the U.S. away from the Pacific coast. Japanese Americans left their properties, homes, businesses, were forced to abandon their pets, and fit as much of their belongings as they could into one suitcase each. They were persuaded to pack clothing for all types of weather, medications, and personal bathroom essentials all into one suitcase. Numerous family relics and valuable objects were abandoned. On 21 June 1943, in *Korematsu v. the United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the internment camps as constitutional, due to it being a necessary action in the time of war. Though Japanese Americans in the Midwest and East Coast were not forced to leave their homes and belongings, many faced brutal discrimination and suspicion as anti-Japanese American sentiments took place all across the U.S.

Even when Japanese Americans were released from the internment camps, they continued to feel a great need to prove their loyalty as Americans (Luther 2003). In 1943, President Roosevelt recruited Japanese Americans into a U.S. military combat team, which contributed to the U.S. Army's 442nd regiment and the 100th battalion, where Japanese Americans fought for the U.S. American side in World War II. Many Japanese Americans volunteered to join the U.S. Army to show their dedication to their American country (Luther 2003).

On 17 December 1944, the U.S. War Department revoked the internment camps but the interned Japanese Americans had to demonstrate their loyalty by signing affirmatively on a loyalty oath questionnaire before they were released (Luther 2003). Many Japanese Americans were eager to leave the internment camps but it was a stressful and frightening time for both young and old Japanese Americans since many of them did not have any homes or jobs to return to. Great challenges awaited them since most of them lost their homes, jobs and belongings, and the political climate of the country and its people still had negative feelings towards Japanese Americans. Many of the older senior citizens and adults who had children and grandchildren had a hard time leaving the camps because they had anxieties imagining how they would start their lives over again (Luther 2003).

After World War II, Japanese Americans created communities in Los Angeles neighborhoods and its surrounding areas. The Fukui Mortuary is located in Boyle Heights. This neighborhood in Los Angeles is where communication, culture and race intersect. Kurashige (2010, p. 23) writes about the ethnic relationships in neighborhoods where Japanese Americans lived after World War II. He states that Japanese Americans living in Southern California, "were welcome in Southern California so long as they confined themselves to the proper social and geographical place defined by whites". Previous research on identities and urban social spaces in Los Angeles are "dynamic fields of social capital and creative spaces for the trans-generational persistence" of Japanese American identities (Smith 2008, p. 407). This article seeks to discuss the complexity of Japanese Americans' community engagement in Los Angeles through Japanese cultural practices and customs relating to death provided by the Fukui Mortuary.

1.4. Situating Ethnic Identity, Gender, Generation and Death in Asian American and Communication Studies

Generation, gender, sexuality and identity are some of the topics of Asian American studies and communication research. Fifth-generation Asian Americans, like myself, are experiencing new perspectives of identity, looking forward to our future generations, and looking back at our ancestors and their experiences in the United States. Exploring the Fukui Mortuary, as a site where negotiations of culture, family, generations, gender and community take place, contributes to the field of Asian American, communication and genealogical studies through the narratives, memories and community engagement of the Fukui family.

The field of Asian American studies is categorized into different waves (Ono 2005). The First Wave of Asian American and communication research was directed towards studies on national identity and Asian American issues of political, cultural and intellectual communities. The Second Wave of Asian American Studies has defined itself as a period of questioning and challenging the first phase, as well as seeking lines of power beyond the discourse of victimhood and examining identity through historical, social and organizational frameworks. Critical ways of rethinking the parameters of Asian American

studies is the ultimate focus in [Ono's \(2005\)](#) writing towards drawing attention to the development of the second phase. The emergence of Japanese American stories in the context of business ownership, community involvement, and generational research strives to go beyond the focus of victimhood and instead reclaim their progress and transference of culture to their future generations.

The history of the Fukui Mortuary fits well into this second wave of Asian American studies in communication, of identifying their progress and the building and re-building of their business and lives after World War II. The focus of transferring family history, cultural knowledge, and service to their community emphasizes the role of cultural communication in a genealogical setting of the Fukui Mortuary business. The Fukui family found ways to support the Japanese American community through the cultural services, customs and traditions they could provide families during a time of death and bereavement, which are ways of contributing to the support and visibility of Japanese Americans in Los Angeles.

Analyzing how Japanese Americans have changed their victimization into strength, empowerment, and new opportunities also describes the complexity displayed in our identities. Feelings of “shame, frustration, and bitterness,” of their civil rights were enforced due to the imprisonment of the internment camps, and the loss of many Japanese Americans’ belongings, businesses, and homes was devastating ([Matsumoto 2000](#), p. 485). The attempt to relocate Japanese American people, by displacing them in internment camps hundreds of miles from their homes, affected them negatively even after they were released from the barbed-wire fences. Their identities were changed after they were imprisoned; shamed and segregated from society. The moment when Japanese Americans were released from the internment camps should not be recognized as the moment when the struggles of Japanese Americans came to an end, because they continued to struggle against much of the American population who still viewed them as enemies. For Japanese Americans who were in the World War II internment camps, many of them were challenged with issues of racism in their everyday lives and worked hard to persevere through difficult times to establish opportunities for their future generations ([Yamaguchi 2014](#)). The determination of the Fukui Mortuary is a small part of the Japanese American history and the story of how families and communities rebuilt their lives.

1.5. Methods

Financial and economic responsibilities are often expected of the deceased person’s family, as well as the obligation of traditional cultural practices. Some of these traditions are heavily symbolic of the deceased person’s well-being and ability to experience a peaceful journey into the next world ([Valentine 2010](#)). For Japanese and Japanese Americans, death is not a taboo topic of discussion. As [Braun and Nichols \(1997, p. 333\)](#) wrote, “In Buddhism, people are encouraged to talk about and plan for death. Many temple members have living wills”. As [Tsuji \(2011\)](#) observed, the topics of death are integrated into Japanese people’s experience and throughout an individual’s life.

The Fukui Mortuary has been passed down through five generations of my mother’s side of the family, specifically through the male ownership of generations of sons. Gender responsibilities and obligations to the Fukui family have played a significant role in the leadership of the mortuary; the way property and ownership of the Fukui Mortuary can be traced to an even deeper tradition than just my family’s business. [Tsuji \(2011, p. 30\)](#) explains how the Meiji era of 1867–1912, around the time the Fukui side of my family emigrated from Japan to the U.S., influenced the Meiji Civil Code where “the rule of male primogeniture, or succession by the eldest son,” legitimized the responsibilities of granting the eldest male the responsibilities of the household.

Though the Fukui Mortuary has been passed down through the male family members of the Fukui family, the Fukui women have played meaningful roles in the leadership of the mortuary. It is through the narratives of my great-grandmother, grandmother and mother that I learned about the mortuary growing up, as well as my relative, Catherine Tanaka, who is the head Funeral Director and Secretary/Treasurer of Fukui Mortuary. Husbands, wives, sisters and brothers have also worked

side-by-side at the Fukui Mortuary. Collectively, the mortuary is a family business serving the Japanese American community.

The relationship between Japanese practices and death has been previously explored through ethnographic methods. Boret (2014) investigated the *satoyama*, the ecological landscapes of Japan that are tied with the tree burial rituals and Tsuji's (2011) article on the rites of passage to death and the afterlife incorporate ethnographic methods as ways to inquire about the meanings, rituals, beliefs and changes of death and Japanese culture. This autoethnography—and ethnography—consists of interviews I had with my grandmother, Toshi Tabata, before she passed away; my mother, Patricia Yamaguchi; the President of the Fukui Mortuary, Gerald Fukui; the Secretary/Treasurer and Funeral Director of Fukui Mortuary, Catherine Tanaka; and notes and observations from my own experiences of having visited the Fukui Mortuary throughout my life. Two interviews with the President of Fukui Mortuary, Gerald Fukui, took place at the mortuary and were digitally recorded. This study is not only about my family and the mortuary; this ethnography and its narratives contribute to knowledge about the Japanese American community in Los Angeles and Asian American history.

2. Fukui Mortuary and My Family

The story of my family and Fukui Mortuary goes beyond the lineage of my own family; Fukui Mortuary is part of Japanese American history and one of the many stories contributing towards the history of Asian American communities in Los Angeles. My great-grandmother, Tomi Hara, from my mother's side of my family was the daughter of Soji Fukui, the founder of Fukui Mortuary in 1918. Like many Japanese Americans, Soji immigrated from Japan to Kona, Hawaii, over 100 years ago. He was the *issei*, the first generation, from my family to emigrate from Japan and establish his family in the U.S. My family started with Soji Fukui and now has made it through to the sixth-generation of Japanese Americans with my newborn son.

The mortuary was already well-established by the time my grandmother Toshi was born in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. The memories my grandmother Toshi had of Fukui Mortuary were based upon her childhood experiences of spending summers wandering around the mortuary. She would recall nights where she would stay with her grandparents at the mortuary while her mother and father worked and she would wander the halls of the mortuary, frightened, knowing it was a place where dead bodies were brought in and out of before their funeral services or cremation. Growing up in Boyle Heights where the mortuary is located, Fukui Mortuary is a place where my grandmother Toshi learned about her culture through the lens and traditions of death, even though some of the memories for her were scary.

The Fukui Mortuary has always seemed to exist strongly throughout the generations of my family and beyond into the Japanese American community. Almost every single Japanese American funeral I have ever attended, not only the funerals and memorial services of family members but of other Japanese American friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, has been facilitated through this mortuary. Some of these memorial services were Buddhist, held in a temple in Downtown Los Angeles, filled with incense, and others were non-religious and held at the Fukui Mortuary Chapel.

My mother, who is the granddaughter of Tomi Hara (my grandmother, Toshi's mother), did not spend much time at the mortuary growing up. She had spent most of her youth in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles, a multicultural neighborhood of mostly Black and Japanese Americans, and stepped away from less conservative ways of life as she and my father embraced the hippie culture throughout the 1960s and 1970s. My mother's memories of the mortuary are mostly from my great-grandmother and grandmother's stories. She recalls how her grandmother would describe the life of a family who ran a mortuary as difficult. My great-grandmother would tell my mother, sometimes people in the community saw their family as "vultures," present and waiting to attend to people when someone had passed away. I was very surprised to hear this because I had always felt that the mortuary was a place of comfort and relief for families when someone has passed away, that they were there to attend to the needs of the family, help with accommodations, and facilitate a variety of ceremonies.

My mother explained how the Fukui Mortuary was a family business, so everywhere the Fukui family went, they were known for their family business of attending to the dead. However, even though some people may have seen the family as “vultures,” as my great-grandmother described, when it came to loved ones passing away, the majority of individuals in the Japanese American community usually used the services of Fukui Mortuary based upon the mortuary’s sensitivity and expertise to hosting a nuance of Japanese cultural and traditional practices for people’s funeral services. As the President of Fukui Mortuary Gerald T. Fukui confirmed, the mortuary was originally called the Japanese Undertaking Company (shown in Figure 1) and was later changed to Fukui Mortuary in order to adopt a less morbid title and replace it with one that represented the professional institution of the Fukui family.

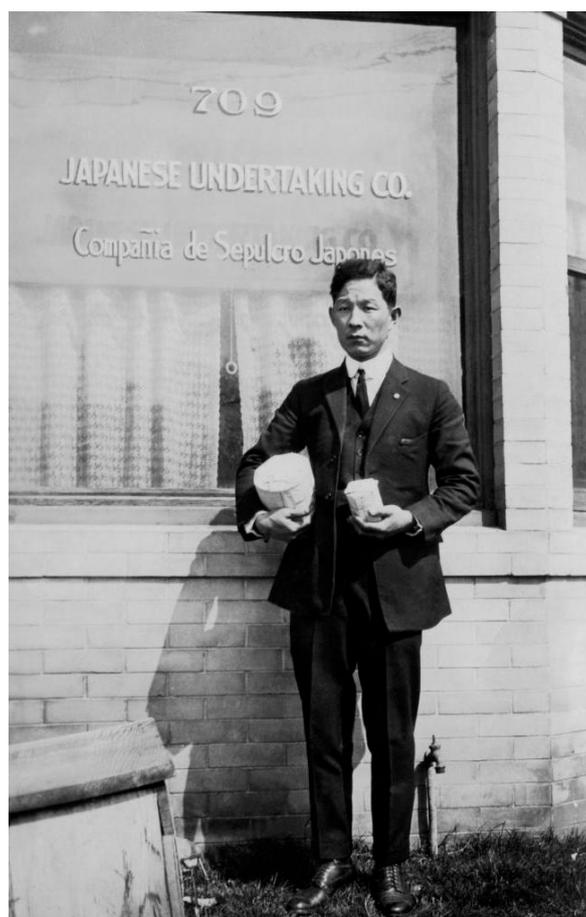


Figure 1. The picture of Hitoshi Fukui, circa 1925.

One of the most important narratives of this project comes from Gerald T. Fukui, the great grandson of Soji Fukui, the founder of the mortuary. Gerry, as we call him in our family, is the President of Fukui Mortuary, and his nephew, Eric Tanaka, also works at the mortuary. They represent the fourth- and fifth-generations of Fukui Mortuary. The story of Gerry’s family tells an in-depth narrative of Fukui Mortuary in its relationship with the Japanese American community and Japanese American history.

2.1. Gerald T. Fukui and the Fukui Mortuary

Within the past year, I met with Gerry twice to listen to his perspectives and narrative of our family’s history and mortuary. He is a fourth-generation Japanese American as well as the fourth-generation within the Fukui family to take over the mortuary. For Gerry, the Fukui Mortuary

is about the Japanese American community, history, culture, and providing services to people when their loved ones have passed away. When he speaks about the history of the mortuary, it is very important for him to add the details of his family history into the story to create a context of how the mortuary started.

Gerry's great grandparents, Soji and Tama Fukui, immigrated from Hiroshima, Japan, to Kona, Hawaii, during the late 1880s. Soji Fukui, was born on 2 December 1868. He and his wife bore five children after they immigrated from Japan; one of those children was my great grandmother Tomi Hara. After Soji worked in the sugarcane fields of Hawaii, he realized this was not the life he wanted, and moved from Hawaii to Seattle, Washington. Throughout the Fukui family's time in Washington, one of their sons, Hitoshi Fukui, was inducted into the U.S. Army and fought in World War I. Hitoshi was in the 364th Battalion and was a runner in Belgium and France, where he would deliver messages between the trenches during the war.

Eventually, Soji and his family decided to come down to Los Angeles and settled in Boyle Heights. Gerry recalls:

Because of the way racism was back then, the tensions and everything that was occurring, the majority of Japanese Americans had only one place they could settle which was Boyle Heights. There were quite a few Japanese that lived out there, not many of them had yet settled out in the South Bay or the valley . . . the majority of them settled here in Boyle Heights and of course when someone passed away they had to use a mortuary so this is the original mortuary.

The mortuary building has been maintained and small parts of its façade have been remodeled throughout time. Gerry believes the building was created before the 1900s and the owner played a significant role in the history of the Fukui family's mortuary:

Because the owner was Caucasian (shown in Figure 2), he could not deal with the Japanese language, he could not deal with the customs, and so he hired my great-grandfather to help, and I understand there were two others, and so they helped out. Somewhere down the line, the original owner, this hakujin man [white man] passed away or sold it to the three of them and it became the Japanese Undertaking Company. Now who the two other men are, we're not sure. Somewhere there after, the other two dropped out and my great-grandfather took it over and it became Fukui Mortuary. The earliest record we have on date is 1918, that tells me World War I ended in 1917, so before 1918 he must have come down here (to Los Angeles).

Gerry expressed of how the white man who owned the mortuary did not know Japanese customs and hired Soji to help connect with the Japanese American community because Soji knew the Japanese customs, traditions and language. My grandmother used to tell my mother and me a slightly different version of why the mortuary existed. She used to tell us:

White people did not want to deal with Japanese bodies. During that time, people were racist and they did not want to handle Japanese bodies or were not willing to incorporate Japanese traditions so we had to create our own mortuary.

It was not the intention of Soji Fukui—the founder of Fukui Mortuary—to become a mortuary director when he immigrated to the U.S. Before getting into the mortuary business, he engaged in different industries such as hat making, a restaurant business, and for a while he worked with other Japanese Americans as a chick-sexer. Eventually, he found his niche in the mortuary business where he was able to help other Japanese Americans since he knew the Japanese language, customs, and he has passed his knowledge of the mortuary business down to five generations of his family.

When Gerry discusses the family history of the mortuary, incorporating Japanese American history is inevitably intertwined with the story of the mortuary. He mentions how mortuaries in the

U.S. in the early and mid-1900s had no idea about Buddhist funeral ceremonies, Japanese traditions, and practices. The Japanese American World War II internment camps also played a role in the history of Fukui Mortuary. Like many Japanese Americans who were living in the Los Angeles area after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Fukui family was imprisoned at the Santa Anita assembly relocation camp and were transferred to the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, internment camp. For most all Japanese Americans who were living on the West Coast during World War II, the Japanese American internment camps were a devastating experience for most individuals and families.



Figure 2. The photo of an unknown Caucasian man with the Fukui children at the Fukui Mortuary.

2.2. *The Japanese American Community and Fukui Mortuary*

The Fukui Mortuary was one of the very few Japanese American businesses that was able to withstand the loss of businesses Japanese Americans experienced during World War II. The majority of Japanese American people lost their homes, vehicles, businesses, pets, and the majority of their belongings; the Fukui family and their mortuary was the rare exception. The mortuary was not in business and serving the public when the Fukui family was imprisoned in the World War II internment camps. Unlike other Japanese American business owners, they had a Jewish family who looked after the building. Gerry states:

You know, a lot of people lost their property or had to sell their property (during World War II). We think there was someone who knew my great-grandfather really well, who said, "We'll watch the building." From what we understand, it was a Jewish family. Now, was it the original owner? I don't know, but they must have watched the mortuary, the property, to some degree they watched it. They must've paid for the property tax, I would imagine. Some how the property tax was paid for otherwise they would have lost it. After the war when they came back, there were some homeless people living here so they had to kick them out. They were very fortunate. They were one of the very few who were able to maintain their business.

Gerry gave me a digital copy of a fascinating photo from the Fukui archives that shows a white man, perhaps the former owner of the mortuary, with two of the Fukui children (shown in Figure 2). This man is thought to be the individual who helped the Fukui preserve their ownership of the Fukui Mortuary building while their family was in the internment camps. Due to this rare instance of a non-Japanese American individual taking care of the property taxes and ownership of the Fukui Mortuary, it is the oldest Japanese American mortuary in Los Angeles and one of the oldest Japanese American businesses on the West Coast. Gerry states:

We've been around since 1918, at least that's the earliest record I could find. The only time the mortuary was not in existence was when they [the Fukui family] was in camp, but when they were in camp, he helped.

There is another one (mortuary), the Kubota Nikkei one but they started in the 1950s.

By 2018, the Fukui Mortuary will be 100 years old. It is uncommon for any small business, especially a Japanese American business to have survived that long and to be passed down through five generations of one family. Gerry recalls how his father never pressured him to work at the mortuary, he recalls:

My father said, do whatever you want. If you don't want to work at the mortuary then that's fine. Then I asked him, "What would you do with it then?" He said, "I'll just sell it." So he didn't push me, and even when I was working here when he was still living, he didn't push me . . . A few years right before he passed away, I started to really get involved in the community, and I'm involved more in the community than I am in the mortuary business.

The willingness of Gerry and his ancestors to continue to serve the Japanese American community during their times of death and bereavement have provided Japanese American families comfort throughout some of the most racist decades before and after World War II. My mother always told me that without the Fukui Mortuary, Japanese Americans in the Los Angeles area struggled to find mortuaries and businesses that would attend to Japanese American bodies, funerals, and traditions during their time of death and bereavement. My grandmother would agree and said, "Without the Fukui Mortuary, Japanese Americans would have to use other businesses and mortuaries who would not understand our traditions."

Though many Japanese Americans in Los Angeles no longer practice all of the rituals from Japan, Gerry emphasizes that there are some Japanese Americans who strongly wish to have certain customs included in their funeral, and they are there for them:

Giving kōden. Wearing the black armbands. Going through service of all the Buddhist funeral rites: the pillow service, the funeral service, the burial service, the 49-days service, etcetera. Some of them still practice that and the giving back after the funeral.

From my own personal experiences of attending several Japanese American funerals and memorial services, there were usually a few traces of rites and rituals from Japanese culture such as the presence of incense, an altar, the giving of kōden in a *bukuro* (a special envelope), and bowing to the family of a deceased loved one. Gerry explained how kōden is one of the most common Japanese practices in Japanese American services:

In the old tradition of Japan, this dates before he [the founder] came here. When people would die, people would come from long distances and in fact, back when they would walk, they would give the family (of the deceased) kōden, which literally translates into "money to buy incense." The family of the deceased was supposed to take part of the money of the kōden and give something back to that person for coming the long distance. Either feeding them or putting them up for the night or something like that, so these traditions are still carried on, giving back.

The Fukui Mortuary helps families with all the arrangements they may need including organizing the *kōden*. As I listened to Gerry talk about Japanese rituals, I began to remember attending funerals and the smell of incense along with passages from the bible, and going to a restaurant to eat lunch afterwards with the family and friends of the deceased. It did not feel extraordinary or strange for the funeral to be held in a Buddhist temple in Downtown Los Angeles and have a Christian passage read at the memorial service. The diversity and variety of service arrangements at Japanese American funerals were accurate examples of our culture's perspectives of spirituality, religion and death deriving from both Japanese and American cultures.

3. Bridging the Rituals and of Death through the Generations

This autoethnographic article focuses on the Fukui Mortuary and their 100 years of leadership and community involvement as the oldest Los Angeles-based Japanese American mortuary. Through exploring the communication and culture of this mortuary and its connections of ethnicity, gender and generation, as well as the Japanese American community after World War II through autoethnographic and ethnographic methods, this article examines how Los Angeles's oldest Japanese American mortuary has provided the Japanese American community with services of death, bereavement and traditions. The Fukui Mortuary is part of my extended families' business and significant to our familial identity. Both the women and men in our family have contributed to the mortuary, some of their duties and perceptions have been different, but both genders' obligations intertwine into a historical family business serving the Japanese American community.

The ability to have a mortuary that was willing to facilitate such multicultural arrangements implementing Christian and Buddhist practices, as well as non-religious ceremonies, has been important for Japanese Americans. The accessibility of the Fukui Mortuary has provided Japanese American people for 100 years with the options to implement singular, dual or multiple religions into a single memorial service or even provide a family with funeral arrangements that are not religious at all. The ability for Japanese Americans to practice their own traditions, cultural practices, and beliefs during the time of death outside of the social hierarchies and institutions that excluded Japanese funeral and memorial service practices has helped preserve cultural traditions and build community among Japanese Americans. Japanese American mortuaries gave them the possibility of managing their cultural values while living in the U.S. and, even more importantly, a way for their loved ones to receive the dignity, support, and respect they deserved as families helped the deceased pass on to ancestorhood.

4. Conclusions

To own a business for Japanese Americans such as the Fukui Mortuary was both disruptive and supportive to society. The complexity of identity of being American and of Japanese heritage are thoroughly expressed during a time of death, when Japanese Americans' loved ones passed away in a country they call home but through the rites of their distant homeland of Japan. The Fukui Mortuary has been a site where culture and the negotiation of many people's identities have taken place including my own. In the daylight and professional spaces, I see my habits and norms as very American, and in the quiet and almost invisible spaces of mourning and bereavement I, perhaps along with other Japanese Americans, have been comforted by rituals and customs that have crossed the bridge over generations, time and seas to assist our loved ones who have passed on in their journey to what may be rebirth, heaven, or just a type of peace that is not defined by a single religion or nation.

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