

## Make Your Documentary! A Call To Action

By Jeffrey A. Dym

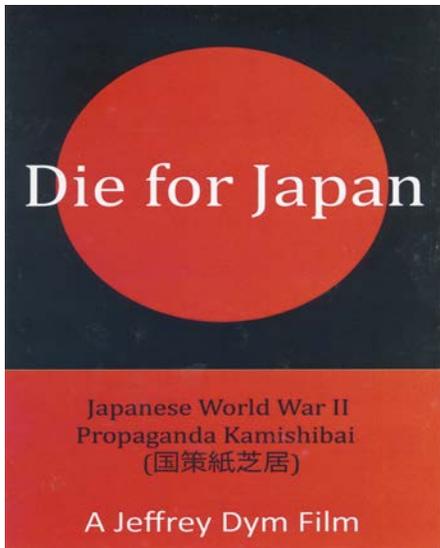
In 2008, I responded to a call in *Education About Asia* for Digital Asia: Documentary Digital Video Workshop, a two-day workshop sponsored by Asia Educational Media Service (AEMS) at the University of Illinois to introduce participants to the various aspects of filmmaking. Being one of roughly twelve participants selected from a pool of about forty applicants, changed the direction of my career.

Prior to the workshop, I had watched hundreds of videos for material to use in my Asian civilizations and Japanese history classes. In 2008, there were some great documentaries, but there were also much too many produced by people who clearly didn't know much about Asia—Chinese images and music in films about Japan, woodblock prints of prostitutes to represent demure, premodern Japanese wives, and all manner of mismatching historical and cultural aspects of Southeast

Asia. Thus, for a very long time, I have felt that academics should be more involved in documentary filmmaking to ensure a more accurate and truthful portrayal of Asia is presented, and not just as talking heads. Providing expert commentary for a documentary is important, but it doesn't always mean that filmmakers will use what one said accurately and correctly. We have all watched documentaries where you know the expert, perhaps even a colleague of yours, is not pleased with how their expertise was misrepresented.

At the time I attended the workshop, I was researching *kamishibai*, Japanese paper plays. Kamishibai were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in 1930s and 1950s Japan. Basically, a kamishibai performer biked around town and animatedly narrated a variety of stories handpainted on cards that he pulled out of a stage, mounted on the back of his bicycle, as the story progressed. In between shows, he would sell sweet and savory treats to the children who had gathered around to hear his tales. Kamishibai is a very visual medium, and I knew that the bulk of any article I would write on kamishibai would be taken up by describing the eight to sixteen images that comprised each story or episode. At the time, YouTube was still in its infancy, but I realized that if I could make a film about kamishibai, I would be able to present more kamishibai than I ever could in a published article and YouTube would provide me with a new and very viable means of distribution.

My first three films are all on kamishibai: *What Is Kamishibai?*, *Kamishibai in the Classroom*, and *Die for Japan*. (They can all be found on my YouTube channel: [DymSensei](#). Or just Google "what is kamishibai"). The three films are admittedly a bit rough, but my aim as an academic filmmaker is to make historically accurate and



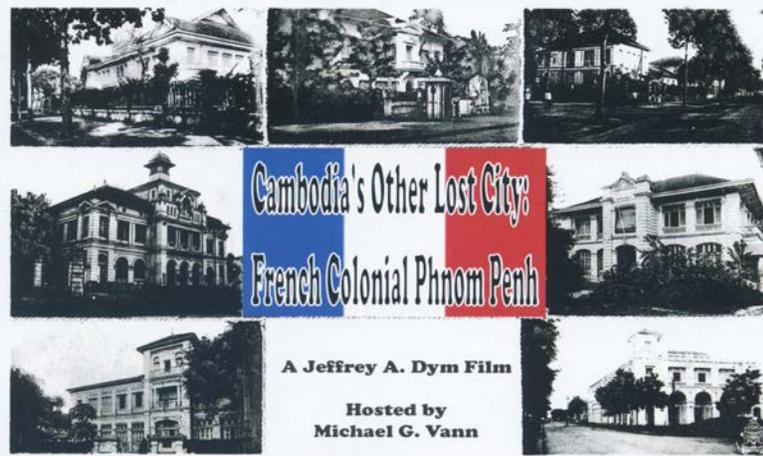
Cover for *Die for Japan* (top) and a sample World War II Japanese kamishibai (bottom). Source: all images in this article are courtesy of the author or screen captures from his documentaries.

truthful films, and to improve with every film that I make. The three films all have very different audiences. *What Is Kamishibai?* is a quick introduction to kamishibai. *Kamishibai in the Classroom* shows how elementary school teachers could use this wonderful art form to promote reading and storytelling in their classroom. *Die for Japan* takes an in-depth look at wartime Japanese propaganda kamishibai, and this film can be and is used in high school and college classroom looking at the Pacific War or propaganda. I'm particularly pleased with this film because of the number and variety of kamishibai I was able to incorporate into it. Documentary production allows one to reproduce far more images than might be feasible in a printed book.

In my Modern Japanese History class, I always end the segment on World War II with a discussion of wartime propaganda. Prior to making my own documentaries, that meant showing and discussing images from John Dower's *War Without Mercy* (1986) and Richard Minear's *Dr. Seuss Goes to War* (1999). Today, I continue to discuss those works, which mostly focus on American propaganda that dehumanizes and promotes exterminating the enemy, with my film *Die for Japan*, which focuses on Japanese wartime kamishibai where the enemy tends to be absent and the emphasis is on the need for all Japanese to be willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation. The contrast in the content, scope, and purpose of Japanese and American propaganda always leads to a lively discussion. Before I show *Die for Japan*, I show *What Is Kamishibai?*, which in under four

minutes quickly and clearly explains what kamishibai is. Students are always surprised to learn that at one time kamishibai was the most popular entertainment medium in Japan, while at the same time commenting on the connections they see in it to the anime and manga they consume today.

One of the keys to a good documentary is access and knowledge. My colleague Dr. Michael G. Vann is an expert in French colonial architecture in Indochina, and we decided to work together to turn a segment of his research into a documentary. Mike knew about a small grant we could apply for that could take us to Cambodia for three weeks of shooting. We arrived in Cambodia during a heated election and parts of Cambodia literally shut down for days, but over three weeks, we wandered about as “tourists” and filmed Phnom Penh’s remaining French colonial buildings. Our timing for *Cambodia’s Other Lost City: French Colonial Phnom Penh* couldn’t have been better. Since we made the film, Phnom Penh has undergone a tremendous transformation, and many of the buildings we filmed have been torn down. The film not only provides an ideal case study of exploring the urban colonial encounter, but also contributes in a small but meaningful way to historic preservation.



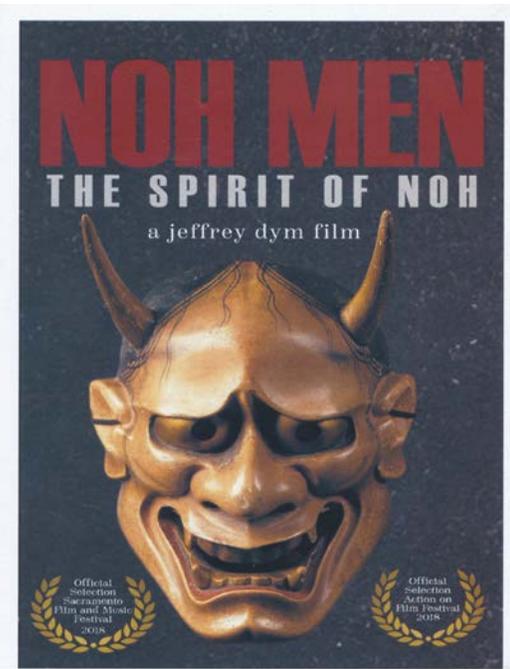
For my next film, I helped a public history graduate student turn his research on *Sacramento’s Japantown into a ten-minute documentary* for a local film festival. Documentaries are a clear form of public history and also a great way to collaborate with your students. In addition, getting accepted into film festivals can be just as difficult, if not even more difficult, as getting one’s article accepted for publication. After the film was screened, the number one comment my student and I received from the festival audience and subsequent viewers was: “I didn’t know Sacramento had a Japantown.” The desire to rid a city of “urban blight” often erases the history and voices of the underrepresented groups who actually built the city. There are many stories all around us that need to be uncovered and told before they are concreted over and forgotten.



Cover for *Cambodia’s Other Lost City: French Colonial Phnom Penh* (top) and a screen capture of Sacramento’s Japantown from 1938 from *A Neighborhood Lost: Sacramento’s Japantown* (bottom).

Another of the keys to a good documentary is access to the subject. I would love to make a documentary on the history of manga, but I doubt I could be granted access to the top Japanese publishers that would be needed for such a project. Being a professor from a state teaching university doesn’t carry the same weight as having the institutional backing of the BBC or NHK or The Discovery Channel or Harvard. Be that as it may, two of the things many of us have gained in years of research and working in the field are connections and access. Make use of those connections! In 2016, Sacramento State welcomed the exhibit *Traditions Transfigured: The Noh Masks of Bidou Yamaguchi*. As part of the exhibit, the noh mask maker Bidou Yamaguchi came to our campus and gave a demonstration of his mask making. Prior to Bidou coming to campus, I had been working with Matthew Dubroff, a graduate school friend who researches and performs noh, to create a film on this genre of classical visual arts. We had written a script exploring all aspects of noh and applied for grants to fund an elaborate production. When Bidou came to campus, thinking I could maybe use the footage in the noh project I was working on, I asked if I could film him. He graciously said yes. When funding for the larger project on noh fell through, I decided to make an in-depth film on just one aspect of noh: noh masks. In researching noh masks, I discovered the encyclopedic work on the topic by Stephen Marvin. When I emailed Marvin to ask if I could use images of his masks in my film, he graciously said yes, inviting me to visit Hawai’i to see his masks in person and to interview him. In short, I turned some research, connections, and a little bit of serendipity into my next film, *Noh Men: The Spirit of Noh*. With the connections in noh that I made with this film, I began working on my subsequent film, my first feature-length documentary on noh costumes: *Flowers on the Stage: Noh Costumes*. With this film, to show the scholarship that went into making it, I included a bibliography in the credits for those who want to learn more about the topic. Currently, I am working on several other films on different aspects of noh.

If I were a professional documentarian trying to earn a living through my filmmaking, I would make only one film covering all aspects of noh and hope that I could somehow earn an income from production grants and selling it. As an academic who makes documentary films, I don't need a huge audience for my films. (Don't get me wrong, I would love a huge audience for my documentaries, but I'm also a realist who recognizes that there just aren't that many people in the world interested in noh as a cute cat or baby or someone unboxing a package or eating.) Nevertheless, I can make films that focus on particular aspects and features of noh and that delve into and explore a topic in a scholarly fashion. These are films that students of noh, theatre generally, or medieval Japan would be interested in. The films are filling a pedagogical lacuna that your research could fill, too.



Cover for *Noh Men: The Spirit of Noh*

While I do not show both of my noh films in their entirety in my Cultural History of Japan to 1800 class because of time constraints, I do show pieces of them when I lecture on noh theatre. Recognizing that I have some “behind-the-scenes knowledge” of noh usually elicits some good questions about noh from the students. I also tell them where they can watch the films in their entirety, and based on discussions after class and during office hours, it is clear that students do watch the films on their own. (I'm not sure how many of them read our articles and books on their own.) There is a learning curve to making documentaries, and most filmmaking requires an army of people. However, that should not be an impediment to turning your research into a documentary. I bought books, took a couple of classes at a community college, and found some online tutorials to teach me how to edit. I also used some savings to buy a good camera and, even more importantly, very good microphones. Over the last decade, the price of film equipment has become incredibly affordable. You can even make a film using a smartphone. (While smartphones can take good images, the audio quality isn't always so great.) Powerful editing software is also inexpensive. In short, now is a great time to become a filmmaker. Today, for a few thousand dollars, you can buy very high-quality film gear, the equivalent of which would have cost tens of thousands of dollars fifteen years ago. Moreover, the resources to teach yourself the various aspects of filmmaking are plentiful.

Many readers were probably already using videos in their classes, but with the pandemic and the move to online teaching, I imagine you are incorporating even more films and video clips than before. I also would bet that many *EAA* readers rely on as many or more video clips in their teaching as they do academic articles. Yet traditional disciplinary conventions in academia only value publications, not documentaries. While *EAA* does discuss documentaries in its pages, it is something of an exception for academic publications. Many major academic journals devote over half their pages to book reviews and zero pages to documentary reviews. On the rare occasions when a major documentary film on a historical topic comes out, like Ken Burns's *The Vietnam War*, many academics are quick to criticize it (while simultaneously planning to use clips of it). Moreover, much of the harsh criticism will run along these lines: had the content of the documentary been published into a monograph, it probably would not have received any awards. I think it is time that academic documentaries received the same attention from publications and the academy itself that articles and monographs do.

We are the experts in our field. Why do we let filmmakers tell our stories? Yes, if you are a top scholar in a field with expertise in a subject with broad interest you can sometimes get professionals to turn your work into a documentary. But for most of us, that isn't really an option. I am proud of the films I have made, but I will never be as good a filmmaker as someone who has studied and makes films for a living, just as a filmmaker will never know as much about Japan as I do after thirty-five years of study. One advantage I, and many of you, have over a documentary filmmaker is that we don't need to earn a living from selling our films. I earn a living as a professor of history. Part of my job is research, and luckily, I am at an institution that allows me to make films that count as scholarship at my university. My travels to Japan and other parts of Asia are part of my research agenda. Instead of submitting papers for publication, I submit my films to film festivals. To its great credit, the Association of Asian Studies has been ahead of the curve in incorporating a film expo into its annual conference. (The film expo grew out of AEMS, which ran the workshop I mentioned earlier.) I haven't presented a paper at the AAS annual conference for several years, but I have shown two films at the AAS film expo. When Bidou Yamaguchi had an exhibit of his masks at the Indianapolis Museum of Art Galleries in 2018, he asked me to edit a short video from the footage I had of him that would run on a loop as part of the exhibit, so I made *Carving a Noh Mask with Bidou Yamaguchi* (2018). Since then, several other museums and filmmakers producing educational videos for nonprofit companies have



Screen captures from *Flowers on the Stage: Noh Costumes* (left) and *Carving a Noh Mask with Bidou Yamaguchi* (right). Bidou Yamaguchi is pictured on the right.

asked if they can use clips and/or my entire films in their works or as part of their exhibits. Is this not similar to other scholars quoting your work? When I entered academia, I never imagined that my research would be exhibited in museums around the world.

Perhaps Sacramento State is unusual in allowing me to pursue documentary filmmaking as part of my research agenda. Or, perhaps, many *EAA* readers interested in pedagogy and making their research more widely available through nontraditional means are also at institutions where they can make films. If I did research for a book or article, I would have expenses very similar to those incurred in making documentaries. If I were to publish an article, I would not earn income from it. Thus, I post my films for anyone in the world to see on YouTube. Documentary filmmakers generally can't do this. One reason so many documentaries, especially those on narrowly appealing topics, are so expensive is because the filmmaker needs to earn money for the expenses incurred making the film, and, more importantly, to make a living.

The public isn't clamoring to know more about kamishibai or noh theatre, but there are plenty of educators who are and who can incorporate videos on kamishibai and noh into their courses. For many readers, there probably isn't vast public demand to watch a documentary on what you are researching, but there most certainly are other teachers and academics who would be interested in using all or part of a video in their classes. There are plenty of great films and documentaries about Asia out there, as attested to by the other articles in this issue. Still, there are hundreds of important and educational stories that educators are searching the internet for right now to use in their courses that need to be told, but never will be told unless YOU pick up a camera and make them!

## GETTING STARTED

In 2018, I walked the eighty-eight temple Ohenro pilgrimage around Shikoku. I carried a rather large, first-generation DJI portable camera and an iPhone for filming, and an iPad for editing and posting videos daily. Anyone can make videos with the most basic of equipment, but I offer the following general equipment guidelines when beginning this craft. Buy what you can afford and are confident in using. I personally like the all-in-one video camera, used generally by run-and-gun documentarians. They are rather simple: point and shoot. Many people like a DSLR or a mirrorless camera because they allow you to change lenses and control the shot. But remember, go with the kind of camera that you feel comfortable with and, most importantly, a camera that does not intimidate you. HD is all you need to get started. A 4K camera will give you a lot more options when you get to editing; however, 4K files are huge and require large external drives and a fairly powerful computer for editing. Invest in a good tripod and always use a tripod when you can. Also, invest in a good microphone from the start. A good external microphone is always better than the built-in microphone of the camera. Most viewers are willing to deal with poor-quality video more than they are poor-quality audio. If you plan to do interviews, invest in lavalier microphones. As mentioned, you can edit on an iPad, and they are becoming more powerful all the time. However, a powerful laptop or desktop computer with plenty of RAM and a good graphics card will make editing, particularly rendering, go faster and more smoothly. In terms of editing, you can always start with something simple like iMovie, but I would highly recommend taking the time to learn how to use one of the high-end editing programs like FinalCut Pro or Adobe Premiere Pro. They can be a bit intimidating, but are worth the effort. Learning professional editing tools can transform a project.

In terms of learning any aspect of filmmaking, I would recommend sitting in on a class at your institution if you can or taking a course at a community college. There are also many videos online and online courses, such as [IzzyVideo.com](http://IzzyVideo.com),



The author edits a documentary on his computer video editing setup.

[LarryJordan.com](http://LarryJordan.com), and [Lynda.com](http://Lynda.com), that can guide you through whatever aspect of filmmaking you want to focus upon and learn. I recommend a general overview course to provide grounding in how to use the camera and editing software that you select and then to watch more focused topic videos as you try to figure out something you are working on or run into difficulty learning.

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