

ESSAYS

A Review of **STARFESTIVAL** Exploring Cultural Heritage

By Gary Mukai

Prior to joining Stanford University in 1988, I was an elementary school teacher. My last teaching assignment was in the first grade, which I taught for six years. When I heard that Boston Public Schools (BPS) had recently adopted *StarFestival* for all of its 210 first grade classrooms in order to encourage cross-cultural learning programs about Japan, I was impressed and moved for a number of reasons.

For one, the adoption is a strong indicator of BPS's commitment to international and cross-cultural education. I had the honor of meeting Dr. Shigeru Miyagawa, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who created *StarFestival* as a multimedia curriculum for students at the K–12 levels to learn about modern Japan and its cultural and historical underpinnings. I learned that Miyagawa had grown up in a small town, Hiratsuka, in Japan and at the age of ten in 1962, moved to Durham, North Carolina. His family was the only Japanese family in town. He spent very impressionable years in Durham and later in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; his struggles with his identity as a Japanese immigrant in the United States were his inspiration to develop *StarFestival*. During our conversation, I was very impressed with Miyagawa's sincere concern for K–12 education and the need to reach students when critical attitudes are developing—attitudes that are key to their identity formation. I'm sure that Miyagawa is a mentor for many of his undergraduate and graduate students at MIT; through *StarFestival*, in many ways, he also will serve as a mentor to many K–12 students. It is noteworthy that Miyagawa began his teaching career as a K–6 teacher.



Second, *StarFestival* is a wonderfully comprehensive curriculum package—it includes a CD-ROM (called *StarFestival: A Return to Japan*), which is the heart of the package, as well as a teacher's guide, field and search notes, student workbooks, and a big book called *When I Was a Boy*. The CD-ROM examines

Japan and issues of cultural identity as its main character, "The Professor," visits twenty sites from his childhood, conducts interviews, and shares his past. My favorite site was number 17, "High School." During my exploration of this site, I learned about the experiences of Miyagawa's mother during World War II. During a B-29 bombing raid on her town, she grabbed a pair of scissors and ran off to a forest by a beach. She later wished that she had taken something more valuable.

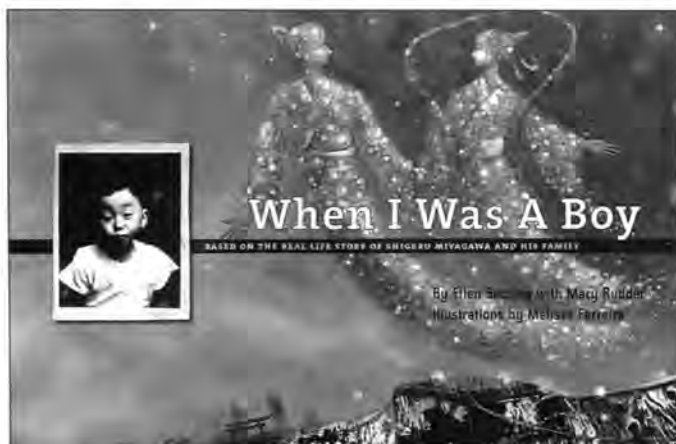
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Throughout *StarFestival*, students are encouraged to reflect upon their own identities. I was struck by the scissors with which she ran off, and thought about my own family's life in California shortly after the U.S. entry into World War II. Prior to the internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast, most Japanese Americans were given very short notice to pack up only belongings they could carry to camp. Many later had regrets not only about what they had left behind or sold for bargain prices but also about what they had taken. My grandfather, for example, took a coconut painted with a scene from Hawaii. He had immigrated first to Hawaii in the early twentieth century and had purchased this coconut. I sometimes wonder why he would have taken such a bulky and seemingly useless item—especially when space inside one's suitcase was so valuable. As it turns out, I still have that coconut in my office, and I thought about it while exploring the experiences of Miyagawa's mother during World War II. In many ways, the scissors and coconut have become artifacts that are symbolic of a particularly difficult time period, i.e., World War II, for Miyagawa's family and for mine. Though neither Miyagawa nor I were alive during World War II, nonetheless our families' experiences during the war helped to shape both of our identities as Japanese Americans.

Third, I wish that I could have studied from *StarFestival* as a first-grader myself. As a third-generation Japanese American, I, too, struggled with my identity as a young boy growing up in rural California. American students of Japanese descent will probably make immediate emotional connections to Miyagawa's experiences with identity—as I did while exploring the twenty sites on the CD-ROM. The focus on the theme of "identity" in a U.S. context and Miyagawa's personal touches throughout *StarFestival* should provide inspirational linkages for all American students (and teachers).



The task of making a CD-ROM meaningful to a K–12 audience is certainly a daunting one. Willamarie Moore of the Boston Children's Museum, has carefully and successfully integrated content from *StarFestival* into activities and lessons that are very accessible to a young audience. The activities she has developed focus on the themes of Food & Clothing, Home & Hobbies, the Tanabata Festival, Work: Fishing Industry, and World War II. These activities are available in a



K–12 teacher's guide and workbooks for grade levels 3–6 and 7–9. Moore's collaborative work with teachers and understanding of effective pedagogy certainly come through in her work.

During its development, the curriculum was successfully piloted at all K–12 levels. If I were still teaching, I would use this curriculum package without hesitation. The big book, *When I Was a Boy*, coauthored by Ellen Sebring and Mary Rudder with illustrations by Melissa Ferreira, is one of my favorite parts of the *StarFestival* package. This book tells the story of "The Professor" in *StarFestival* from the time he was born and lived in Japan until at age ten he left for the United States with his family. It is very richly illustrated with accompanying photographs. If I were teaching at the high school level, I would take advantage of *StarFestival Field Notes*, which provide cultural and historical notes about information in the CD-ROM, to help me prepare more advanced activities as well as to assist with the debriefing of topics such as food, gift giving, education, business, generational differences, and World War II.

Along with its Japan content, *StarFestival* fulfills general and immediate educational needs—teaching to the standards, exploring cultural identity, and integrating computer skills. This is why BPS was able to adopt it system-wide as part of its core curriculum. Teachers will be pleased to know that Michael Hartoonian (Professor at the University of Minnesota, former President of the National Council for the Social Studies, and coauthor of the National Social Studies Standards) has noted "The *StarFestival* CD-ROM and Curriculum make a dynamic connection between the complexities of content, as envisioned by the national standards, and students' engagements with meaningful and authentic narratives and intellectual mysteries." Other endorsements, awards received, and ordering information can be found on *StarFestival's* Web site, www.starfestival.com. I'm sure that your exploration will be as rewarding as mine. ■

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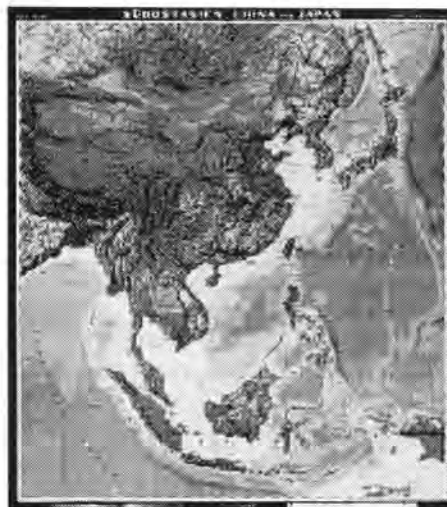
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