Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

AAVEd
Asian American Voices for Education

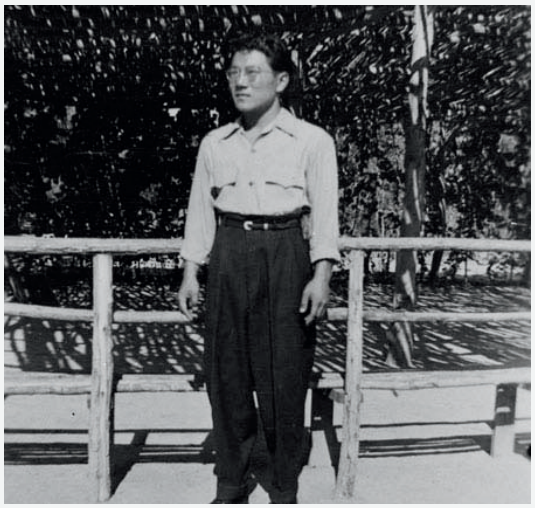
High School Lesson Plan on
Zoot Suiters Behind Barbed Wire: Civil Liberties, Identity, and Incarceration in WWII

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSSUSH19: Examine the origins, major developments, and the domestic impact of World War II, including the growth of the federal government.

SSCG7: Demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights.

SSCG16: Analyze the difference between involuntary and voluntary participation in civic life.



Japanese American Zoot Suit Culture During WWII

Standard lessons on Japanese Americans during World War II often present two simplified narratives: Japanese Americans as passive victims of incarceration or as patriotic soldiers, especially members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, who proved their loyalty through military service. This lesson challenges that binary by exploring young Japanese Americans who used fashion, slang, and counterculture to navigate the trauma of losing their civil liberties.

What Was Zoot Suit Culture?

The zoot suit was a youth subculture that grew during World War II among working-class Black, Chicano, and Filipino youth in cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. The style featured oversized jackets with padded shoulders, high-waisted ballooned pants tapered at the ankles, wide-brimmed hats, and long watch chains.

More than clothing, zoot suit culture represented confidence, rebellion, and independence. Zoot suiters listened to jazz, danced the jitterbug and lindy hop, gathered in social spaces, and rejected expectations of conformity. During the war, fabric restrictions led critics to label zoot suits as wasteful and unpatriotic. Tensions erupted during the 1943 Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots, when white servicemen attacked youth of color wearing the suits.





Japanese American Zoot Suiters

Japanese American youth, particularly in Los Angeles, were influenced by this culture. When Executive Order 9066 forced approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans into incarceration camps, some Nisei (second-generation Japanese Americans) brought their urban styles and identities with them.

The camps brought together Japanese Americans from different regions and backgrounds. Many noticed differences between the "LA kids" and others, with some parents viewing Los Angeles youth as rebellious or negative influences. Terms such as **yogore** ("dirty") and **pachuke** (from the Mexican American term pachuco) were used to describe youth associated with delinquency, reflecting broader racial stereotypes surrounding zoot suiters.

For many young people, however, the zoot suit was not a symbol of criminality. The dramatic clothing represented confidence, fashion, and a sense of freedom at a time when their government had taken away their rights.

Rebellion, Assimilation, and Memory

Incarceration created anger, frustration, and a loss of faith in American democracy. Some youth responded by rejecting expectations of obedience. Groups such as the Esquires at Rohwer camp in Arkansas challenged authority through fighting, gambling, and other acts of rebellion — behaviors that reflected the psychological impact of imprisonment.



The War Relocation Authority (WRA) encouraged Japanese Americans to assimilate into white middle-class society. Pachuke youth challenged this goal by embracing bold clothing, slang, and connections with other communities of color.

After the war, Japanese American leaders, including the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), emphasized stories of loyalty and military heroism, especially the achievements of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. While this helped fight discrimination, it also overshadowed stories of resistance like the zoot suiters, rebels, and draft resisters.

Their experiences reveal a more complex history of Japanese American responses to injustice - one that includes creativity, identity, and survival.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo Credit:
(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

1. Junichi "Frisco" Yamasaki—posing in drapes, Poston, Arizona, concentration camp, 1942. Gift of Frisco Yamasaki, Japanese American National Museum [2000.415.1]
2. Frank Tellez, full-length portrait, standing, facing right, wearing hat and zoot suit. Associated Press. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons
3. "Young Japanese Hold Dance," Tule Lake War Relocation Center. University of Southern California, Regional History Collection

Contact us at info@aaved.org

History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



AAVEd

Asian American Voices for Education

aaved.org AAVEd.org @aaved_org