

Essential Ingredients of Truth: Japanese Soldiers' Diaries in the Asia Pacific War

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All swindlers on the earth are nothing to the self-swindlers.

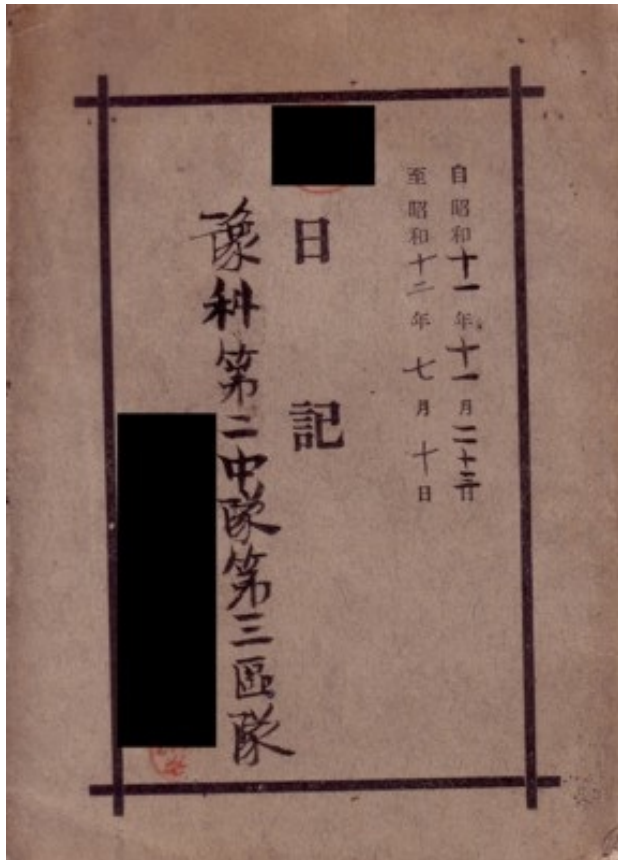
-Charles Dickens

In the last decade, numerous film and print media treatments of the Second World War have focused on the “soldier’s perspective.” Because the wartime generation is now rapidly disappearing, postwar generations have become especially eager to *know* the war. In particular, there is a hunger to learn how it was experienced by ordinary servicemen—a focus popularized most effectively by historian John Keegan (and film directors such as Clint Eastwood, Oliver Stone, and Francis Ford Coppola). Scholars and war history buffs alike seek “reliable” accounts of the war; presumably, the best histories of the war are those that rest on a firm foundation of the most “reliable” sources. Certainly, the larger historical narrative of the war is incomplete without adequate attention to the personal records that servicemen kept at the time, such as diaries and letters. Nevertheless, like any document, it is essential to pay close attention to the assumptions shared by the authors of these documents and their audiences today, especially regarding the “truth” such texts putatively contain. Invariably, issues of self-discipline, including self-censorship, as well as military discipline and direct external

censorship, intrude.

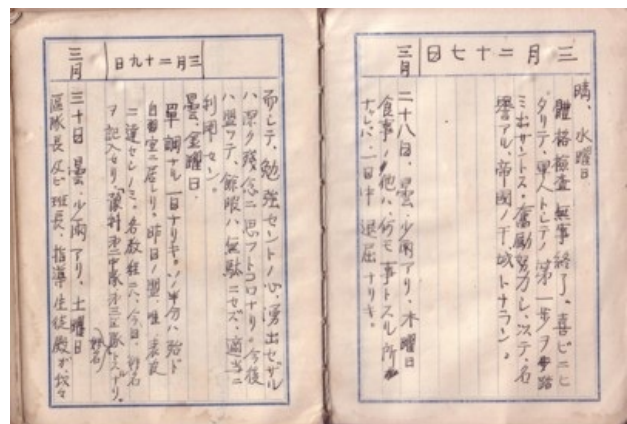
Diary writing in Japan is a practice with a long and formidable history behind it, including notebooks (*tebikae*) composed by the warrior class, bureaucratic diaries (*nisshi*), literary diaries, and travel diaries. In the modern military context, Meiji era war reportage and field diaries (*jinchu nikki / nisshi*) were the most important precedents. Field diaries were potentially subject to peer and superior review, as they were in most, if not all, modern armies, and this practice (beginning in the early Meiji with “work diaries,” or *sagyo nisshi*) eventually gave way to a form of guided diary writing that permeated nearly every wing of the armed forces. This was, in fact, part of an expansion of formalistic diary writing practices in Meiji Japan that even permeated the classroom: schoolchildren were often required to keep diaries subject to teacher and parent review (*nikki kensa*). [1] As mentioned above, diary writing has always been a part of Japanese literary and bureaucratic culture, so one can imagine that when Prussian military advisors (who highly valued field diary writing) suggested such a system to the Japanese, it was immediately embraced. A typical field diary was kept by a combat officer and might include basic information about his unit such as troop position, strength, weather, terrain, movement, and supply and logistics. By the turn of the century, Japanese officers were accustomed to keeping these diaries, and knew that it could be reviewed by their superiors; if so requested, relevant selections from an officer’s diary would be copied by a military clerk and submitted for approval. Since the inception of guided or reviewed diaries in the early Meiji

period, these texts were tightly bound to concepts such as “truth,” “fact,” and self-discipline.



Meanwhile, new technologies of reproduction such as telegraphy, photography, and mimeography and the rise of the mass circulation newspaper and magazine fed growing domestic demand for information about Japan’s modern wars. For example, the *Nisshin senso jikki* (A True Chronicle of the Sino-Japanese War) was published widely after 1895. This periodical included abbreviated or short biographies (*ryaku/shoden*) of famous generals and heroic officers and a diary (*nisshi*, not a personal one) that was dedicated to chronologically delineating the major events of the war. In order for war narratives to be truly compelling, however, authors also had to use a language that could move a broad audience—the hallmark of reportage literature. To this end, “True Chronicle” also included

battlefield poetry and tales of heroism (*bidan*), aiming to satisfy readers ranging from servicemen to amateur military historians and boys with a taste for adventure. Printed on cheap paper, with each issue short and linguistically accessible, “True Chronicle” was easily within the economic and literary reach of middle-class and even many working class Japanese. At the same time, however, military texts such as field diaries were still the basis for this explosion of “fact-writing” about war; representations of the battlefield, such as theater productions, artistic renditions, and news reports, largely relied on official and personal military accounts in order to demonstrate their knowledge of the front line’s “actual conditions” (*jikkyo*). [2]

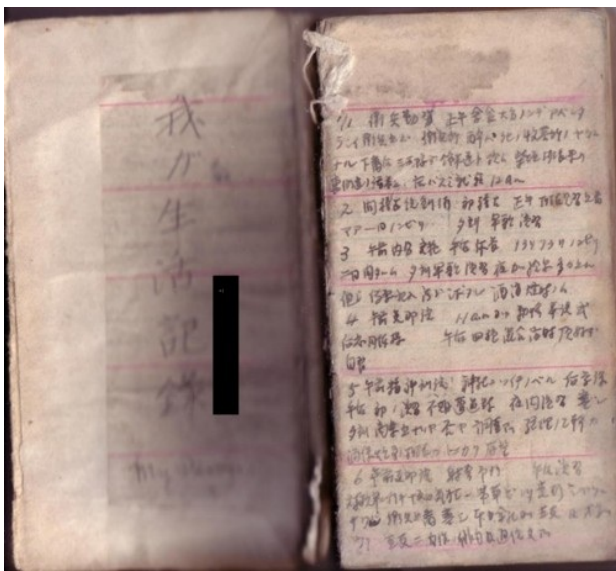


In addition to commanding a knowledge of the “facts” (weather, unit position, terrain, etc.), authenticity was also closely tied to narrating one’s *personal* experience of war. Officers who had served in the Japanese army even printed their diaries, which sold extremely well in the Japanese market, particularly after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. Tamon Jiro’s field diary, published in 1912 as *My Participation in the Russo-Japanese War* (*Yo no sanka shitaru Nichiro sen’eki*), along with Sakurai Tadatoshi’s iconic *Human Bullets* (*Nikudan*), was extremely popular. Tamon claimed that he made the diary public in order to answer frequent questions from inexperienced recruits such as “What happens during war? What

actions do lower echelon officers take during battle? What do you think about (*kannen*) during a battle?” He believed that it would be helpful for “young cadets with no experience of war” and that it would provide material for “readers’ future self-cultivation” (*dokusha shorai shuyo*). [3] Of course, Tamon was aware that his “diary” was to be published, and the possibility of censorship and punishment in Imperial Japan was an ever-present factor when writing a military diary (whether it be subject to review or not). Nevertheless, as will be shown below, the desire to produce a “true” image of oneself was at least as strong, if not stronger, than the often self-contradictory messages sent down by the state, military, and mass media. In fact, merely reproducing acceptable propaganda might make writing a diary unsatisfying. Early on in Japanese modern discourse, the “factual” or “truthful” replication of experience in diary format established the truth value of these texts, as well as tying it to the concept of self-discipline, so spinning any lie authorities might want to hear devalued the diary itself—unless, of course, the author agreed with those views.

International Peace Museum)

With the rise of mass politics in Japan in the early twentieth century a subtle transformation occurred in war reporting and literature about war. Previously, such texts focused on the exploits of the officer class. Press reports on the “people” (however construed) were heavily influenced by leftist reportage and socialist realist fiction, but this was also a sign of the broadening of the literary market. Not coincidentally, the Japanese military, with the rise in diary writing among its (increasingly literate) enlisted men, began to extend its disciplinary gaze down into lower and lower ranks. Texts with titles such as “Record of Self-Reflection” (*hanseiroku*), “Record of Self-Cultivation” (*shuyoroku*), “Training Diary” (*kunren nikki*) began to proliferate in the 1930s; education officers (*naimuhan kyokan*) typically wrote comments in these diaries in red ink or pencil and fixed their personal seal inside. The military high command viewed the act of recording one’s life as a serious reflection of personal growth and self-discipline. Thus, in 1936, one sergeant wrote in a new recruit’s diary that, “No matter how difficult it may seem, you must take your diary (*hanseiroku*) seriously! It is your ‘mirror of truth’ (*makoto no kagami*). It will be your last will and testament (*igonsho*)!” [4] By the 1930s, mass production of blank diaries and writing utensils (such as cartridge-fed fountain pens) made these instruments of self-discipline accessible to the “common man.” During Japan’s period of “total war” against Chinese, Russian, and, finally, Western armies (as well as its flirtation with fascist models of socio-economic management), the military, private companies, and state encouraged and sought to control diary writing: blank diaries complete with military ballads (*gunka*), patriotic poems, and nationalistic rhetoric in the margins were produced bearing titles such as “Diary of the Holy War” (*seisen nikki*) and were distributed widely to troops.



Diary, “A Record of My Life” (Kyoto: Ritsumeikan



Inside cover of a war diary mass produced for servicemen during the 1940

What constitutes “truth,” however, has always been difficult for servicemen in wartime, and it was no less so for some veterans in the postwar era. Japanese captives of the Chinese Nationalists were enrolled in reeducation programs, particularly in “Peace Village”—a holding facility near Chongqing, Sichuan Province—and guided diary writing was part of their daily life there. Later, Japanese servicemen who were forced to “reflect on” and confess their crimes by the Chinese Communists faced what their guards (and instructors) referred to as a “True Acknowledgment of Crimes” (Jp. *makoto no ninzai*, Ch. *zhen de renzui*). For many, it was a cathartic moment of self-transformation—much like the one that occurred when they began their “mirrors of truth.” [5] When Japanese veterans returned home, sometimes speaking out against the atrocities committed by the Imperial Army, they were ostracized by a community that remembered the war from a very different point of experience (firebombing, evacuations, and losing male family members, just to name a few). Rumors circulated that “Returnees” had been “brainwashed” (*senno / xinao*, a postwar neologism) by the Chinese Communist Party. After “returnee” Suzuki

Yoshimasa was given a chilly reception by his neighbors, he reflected,

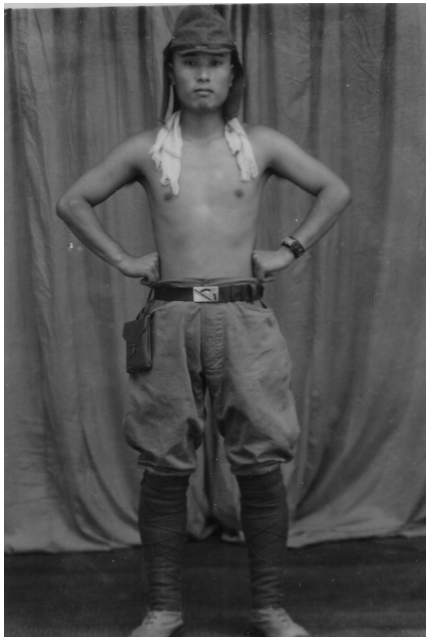
For the first time, I thought about this term “brainwashing.” Then, I realized afterwards that I had been “brainwashed” from childhood by Japanese militarism, and, because of that, I had committed atrocities. For me, my studies, self-criticisms, and acknowledgment of crimes [in China] only opened the door to my *True Acknowledgment of Crimes*. [6]

However eloquent these “returnees” might have been, postwar Japanese society was, for the most part, unwilling to listen; an early attempt to record the “confessions” of these veterans, run through as they were with the language of the Chinese Communists, was largely dismissed by the Japanese media as a fraud. [7] Despite intense social pressure, these “returnee” veterans refused to abandon what they believed to be the “truth”—just as veterans with more positive views of the war did, as well. [8] Even if one were to accept the argument that *postwar* accounts might lack the essential reliability to be used as historical sources, can one really accept that some deeper “truth” would be revealed in the *wartime* documents? When reading wartime and postwar documents, opposing, contradictory, and highly individualized views of “the truth” inevitably emerge.

In looking at personal diaries from the Second World War (1937-1945), one of the most important facts to be confronted is the widespread support for the war effort. At the same time, Japanese wartime diaries convey a strong sense that, for many servicemen, discovering truth, writing truth, and even “embodying truth” was a major preoccupation.

Particularly on the home front, these two goals were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In 1937, a few days after receiving his notice to serve, Kimura Genzaemon, a schoolteacher from Akita Prefecture, wrote the following entry in anticipation of his departure from Hirosaki:

6am lecture from the squad commander. Dreams of the battlefield and running about the barracks. Every night my dreams are not about my home, not about my wife and children, but actually an image of myself on the battlefield. The most beautiful thing in the world is “truth,” an “image of one who seeks truth,” a “process toward truth.” If there is anything beautiful about war, it is that “truth” that only war can possess.



Japanese soldier in Burma

Kimura reflected on what the war meant to

him, and why he was participating in it as a soldier. Then, Kimura’s diary transformed briefly into an extended farewell letter to his wife and children—whom he had to leave behind. If he could only embody a life of “truth,” he wrote, even if he was “covered in blood and tortured by all the pains of this earth,” he could face his children after the war. [9] After enduring the brutal privations of the war in Northern China, however, what began as an intellectual concept became more tightly tied to physical self-discipline. In the bombed-out city of Zhengding (in Hebei province), Kimura revisited his concern for “truth,” but was concerned with “bodily health”—that which springs naturally from a cool, clear spirit, the abnegation of indulgences, vegetarianism, and “self-caution” (Jp. *jikai*, Ch. *zìjìe*, watching one’s own behavior and correcting faults). Kimura’s complex (and often idiosyncratic) views on truth were tied to his belief in self-discipline, which places his text not only within the conventional view of the war, but also within the discourse on self-discipline in modern Japan altogether.

Because one’s version of the truth could be highly individualized, however, servicemen often came to radically different conclusions about war and self in their diaries. The emergence of the Special Attack Forces (*tokkotai*, popularly known as “kamikaze”), for example, could be very divisive. A Japanese officer in the Philippines, Obara Fukuzo, hearing of a sixteen year old pilot, wrote “In the sixteenth year of life to have attained such self-control, such enlightenment, is surely to have reached the sublime heights of the gods. This is Japan! This is Japan!” [10] Nevertheless, sixteen year old flight recruit Nishimoto Masaharu, who toasted Special Attack pilots before their departure, knew better after over two years in flight school (*yokaren*) than to slavishly idealize the young men as heroes: “I wonder if the Special Attack pilots from last night made it safely to their target ships ... No way (*masaka*).” [11] Nishimoto, like many

pilots, hinted at the fact that the Special Attack program was wasteful and ineffectual, while Obara, viewing the phenomenon as an Army officer in the Philippines, experienced it as inspirational heroism. How can we reconcile these two views of the same phenomenon? At first glance, it seems that only individual “truths” are reliable in diaries.

Unfortunately, what some diarists might consider “truth” in many ways appear to outside readers as narcissism and self-delusion. When Japanese servicemen encountered inhabitants of their expanding empire in the Pacific, they were often struck by how compliant these subjects seemed to be, and how lavishly white colonizers had been able to live. Thus, in places like occupied Dutch Indonesia, servicemen found government propaganda to be a compelling vision of their new role as liberators of Asian people in the Pacific. “Hara Kinoshige,” an elite pilot who had participated in the bombing of Pearl Harbor, seemed delighted at how quickly colonial peoples had learned to interact with occupying forces, and quickly adopted the patronizing tone of a benevolent overlord. After landing at his new airbase in Kendari (on the Indonesian island Sulawesi), Hara wrote:

We visited the homes of the local civilians (ryomin) and were treated to coffee. They have some trust in us. They are proud to receive us graciously (taigu suru), and we also find them very cute (kawaigatte iru). Teaching them Japanese is a struggle, but they are very serious, so they pick it up quickly [...] The islanders are all filled with new hope, and can be seen everywhere working their hearts out. People are really simple and pure (jun). They do have that

trait, unique to the people of the South Seas, to mill about and do nothing, but the natives (dojin) here are better than those up until now. [12]

Undoubtedly, this was a refreshing change from dealing with the resistance in central China, but men like Hara were unable to understand the limited options available to colonized populations, and mistook necessity for sincerity. Part of the 1942 Buitenzorg (Bogor, near Jakarta) invasion force, a Lieutenant Watanabe (only his family name was recorded) saw his role as a heroic destroyer of white oppression in Asia. Like many of his comrades, he was amazed, and perhaps repulsed, by the splendor of the houses of “white people” in Indonesia, where “the homes without personal cars are few indeed.” He snarled, “It is a situation where extravagance has no limit, and it has been squeezed from the blood of the natives (dojin no chi wo shibori aru jyokyo).” Even in China, where the Japanese met their fiercest resistance, diarists could find evidence of their “holy mission” in momentary acceptance to Japanese rule. Private “Kurozu Tadanobu” composed such a comforting vision in his diary:

The houses of the Chinese are flying our Imperial flag with signs that say “Welcome Japan!” The refugees from Zhenjiang [in Jiangsu] have more or less returned [...] We spent the night here. So far, Zhenjiang has been the most culturally sophisticated town in China, with tall buildings and electricity. It is fabulous. [...] There was a Chinese man who had lived in Japan for a while; he spoke Japanese, made us tea, and welcomed us here. [13]

Throughout the Pacific, confidence in Japanese military prowess ran high in the early months of 1942 as the British, Dutch, French, and Americans collapsed or were routed and Asian populations were “liberated.”



Japanese serviceman poses for a victory photograph in Burma (Personal Collection)

Watanabe boasted that they captured so many weapons, automobiles, and ammunition from the Dutch that they “are concerned with what to do with it all.” In Bandung, he continued thus:

Since we launched our surprise landing against the Dutch, we’ve crossed 100 ri in 13 days. A truly rapid advance, our entry into the final target of Bandung was tremendously impressive, and the majesty of our unbeatable Aoba Division was true to its appearance. The cooperative efforts of our units’ action, especially the air forces, are worthy of praise. [...] The enemy knew that they

should not resist us, and quickly announced their surrender. [14]

Even the dire news of a surprise American attack at Guadalcanal did not shake Watanabe’s faith in the Japanese armed forces. It quickly becomes clear from these diaries that such illusions were not merely the result of crafty indoctrination, but sprung from the fantasies and desires of the diarists. After all, no one required Watanabe or Hara to keep these diaries, and they were not subject to review. What functions might these self-delusions serve?

Japanese servicemen frequently used their diaries as a space for “self-mobilization:” encouraging themselves to be brave, castigating their lack of initiative, or even demanding that they prepare to make the “ultimate sacrifice.” Obara Fukuzo mobilized himself right up to the end, even re-writing his entire diary in the middle of the thick jungles of Luzon. While cut off from Japanese media and his commanding officers, he struggled to maintain a vision of himself as a hero. As he and his men faced hunger and disease, “falling into a strange kind of confusion,” Obara’s diary demonstrated the increasing tension between “resolution” (kakugo) and daily hardship:

Now we must live the lessons (senkun) of ‘Saipan’ and ‘Guadalcanal’. We must take those bastards (yatsura) and kill them, grinding them the pieces. Every grain of rice is for this purpose—a grain that is part of the Divine Will (shin’i). Yet, when I think about the physical strength and tribulations of the soldiers sweating and hauling over many dozens of ri in mountains every day ... And what of the women and children at home

with empty stomachs? I want that, even for one day, they might once be able to eat their fill. But, this, this is for victory!

While rewriting this diary, however, he still could not completely obfuscate the instability of his personal narrative. Previously pliant colonial subjects began to drag their feet. “Filipino bastards,” Obara cursed, “Forgetting all gratitude (shigi) for the gift of independence, they yearn only for the soft pleasures of American-style hedonism!” His increasingly strident tone—anger at the unwilling colonial subjects, suffering over the loss of his comrades, pain from severe athlete’s foot, hunger and constant strafing by US Grumman fighters—only made the power he exercised over these experiences through narrative seem more brittle. Was Obara’s increasingly inflexible tone overcompensation for his fear, anger and anxiety? Why else would he feel so compelled to rewrite his entire wartime experience in such a patriotic idiom? [15] In an environment where death was nearly assured, censorship was not Obara’s concern, and yet he embraced patriotic discourse for his self-narrative—evidently by choice. No one required Obara to keep this record.

The diary served as a “factual record” for servicemen that many referred to later; they re-read their personal records in order to draw conclusions about themselves, the enemy, and their worldview in general. One striking similarity between diarists from all nations is the authors’ desire to chronicle even the most horrifying scenes and then meditate on their meaning. Even Kimura, who was an otherwise cool and level-headed diarist, could not bear the sight of the carnage in war-torn China:

We pull out to the edge of the city gates and spend the evening there. Chinese dead are piled up on the city walls—I cover my eyes. The

city is full of corpses, and I am overwhelmed by its ghastliness (sakimi ni semaru). [...] They say Shijiazhuang [in Hebei] will fall. How far are we trying to go? We can’t find the unit; we don’t know where we’ll sleep. The waning moon is alone over the city of Zhengding, brilliant. [...] Even when I gaze at the Chinese dead—forcing myself to look at them until I feel I can no longer stand it—no “awakening” (satori) comes of it. I still cannot untangle the problem of where in one’s heart practical bravery comes from. [16]

In the face of such a mind-numbing sight, Kimura still struggled to find truth—his lack of “awakening” while meditating on this terrifying vision profoundly disturbed him. Many Japanese who survived the first landings at Shanghai in August and September, 1937, tried to capture on paper the horrible onslaught. Squad Commander “Nagatani Masao” described the surreal devastation that characterized war-torn Wusong:

I feel like I’m still on the boat—rocking and swaying. Everywhere you look, the place is brutally torn apart from air raids. I’m finally able to truly understand the worth (kachi) of war. This is how you know how horrible, how savage a thing it is (makurumono). Right where we were resting, under the shade of a tree, were soldiers who had just come back from an intense battle; I was filled with a sense of fortune and gratitude for

having landed safely on this land, taken by the blood and tears of the marines and forward land units. I offered a small prayer to the spirits of the war dead and, facing towards the Emperor in the far, far East, while feeling how grateful I am for my country Japan, I was able to sense how horrible (zankoku) this thing called war really is. [17]

Personal failure was another subject of deep reflection. Corporal Hamazaki Tomizo lost his sword right before the attack on Nanjing in December, 1937, reprimanding himself in this emotionally charged entry:

I have no face to show my superiors or the men; there's no excuse for losing a weapon necessary for battle, and nothing can be done about it, but seppuku is even more unfilial (fuchu) at this time. How can I fight without a weapon? After losing my sword, I should die on the frontline. No matter what method you use, a fatal wound cannot be cleansed [...]

Hamazaki did “cleanse” himself of the wound of humiliation, however, by using his diary as a space for self-mobilization: “I won't be taken by this [mistake] and let it darken my heart; I'll use my error as a basis for preparing for the next battle.” As the battle to surround Nanjing intensified, however, he felt more and more pressure building on him as a commanding officer who is responsible for the lives of his men. He tried to console himself with the bitter reality of the battlefield, writing, “Today for the first time I lost two men under my command. Whether by luck, fate or my bad leadership, we

neither tended to them nor looked back, just advanced; this is the true face of war. If you rest for one second and reflect, you're emotionally overwhelmed” (kanshin muryo). [18]



The highly individuated nature of “truth” could also manifest itself when diarists attempted to explain their actions and those of others. Months of bitter Chinese resistance following the Japanese landing at Shanghai generated great anger among the servicemen who entered Nanjing in December, 1937: “Ouchi Toshimichi” listened to horror stories of the battlefield and reflected, “The Chinese army has become really despicable (nikurashiku) to me; I want us to wipe them out (senmetsu) as quickly as possible.” [19] Others became disgusted by war and even their own “comrades.” After the initial fighting, some Chinese Nationalist forces withdrew without collecting their wounded and dead. The Chinese dead lay scattered amidst Japanese casualties in trenches and in the fields. As the Japanese advanced, Umeda described the scene:

While looking for other Japanese in the trenches, I came across wounded Chinese soldiers (fusho shita teki-san). Shocked, I led them to the unit commander. It was pitiable to see them undergo various inquisitions (torishirabe). So this is war, I thought, but an hour later they finished the investigation and were led to the rear by Lieutenant Yamane. They were probably killed. Even though they're our enemies, they're human beings with a soul like all other living things in this world. To use them as helpless tests for one's sword is truly cruel. There's no place as cruel and unjust as the battlefield. [20]

Most Japanese servicemen, however, found some space for themselves between being the willing perpetrators of war atrocities and those who learned to despise all war. Medical Officer "Taniguchi Kazuo," who initially strongly justified Japan's invasion of China, expressed remorse for some of his own actions as a representative of the Imperial army. When Chinese residents attempted to return to their home in Yuci, Shanxi Province, Taniguchi curtly rebuffed them. Reflecting on this, Taniguchi later wrote, "It is actually their home, but here I am acting as if I am the owner. It is really too bad." He had not transformed into a stridently anti-war advocate for Chinese liberation, however. He began to compose an article, almost certainly based on his diary record, about the heroic and narrow escape from certain death he had experienced on the battlefield in November, 1937: "Maybe when it is finished," he wrote, "I might be so bold as to submit it to the Empress." [21] Taniguchi never strayed far from his role as an extension of empire. Even after everything he had seen and

done, he was able to re-attach himself to the sources of that authority.

Just in case one might think that these texts reveal some inherently "Japanese" preoccupation with truth and personal record keeping, I should note that similar trends can be found in the wartime diaries and letters of Chinese, American, and Soviet servicemen as well. Many American servicemen, for example, had little love for the army or their commanding officers. Staff Sergeant Bernard Hopkins raged at the citations given to ignorant officers while the heroism of noncommissioned officers was ignored. He wrote, "I think my blood will boil when I hear of Generals and Colonels being cited." During the Japanese invasion, the complacency and impotence of US commanding officers on the Philippines infuriated him. He unleashed his anger in his diary:

The war plans called for this area to be held—but the local big-wigs—plenty of them asleep on the matter and few of them knowing anything of the area. I've been there—felt that it would take the Jap 6 months to get in there. Well, the Japs got into the area in less than a month. These same big-wigs didn't know there was a sugar cane railroad up into the area. [...] [The map] has been on file here (in HD Hq) for over two years now. I certainly hope someone gets wise soon, before the Japs start pelting us with 8" guns from over here ... [22]

Many Chinese Nationalist officers recognized their faults and struggled to correct them; they used their diaries as a space to complain, worry, and propose solutions to problems whose consequence could include death.

Division Commander Liu Jiaqi took self-discipline very seriously, and railed against those who did not meet his standards:

The officers and men in this division are not making any effort in building our outer defenses, and more than a few cannot follow the regulations. I am deeply concerned about this. I'm good at cultivating a spirit of meticulousness during a period of peace, but once we get our orders, it is not such an easy thing to do. From here on out, regarding our fighting spirit, if we are not resolved to die in battle, it is going to be extremely difficult to achieve victory. The officers and men in the division are spineless (*weimi jingshen*), our system of punishment and reward is unclear, so I'm truly concerned about our battle against the Japanese. [23]

Servicemen around the world recorded not only “facts” about the war or the army, but also about themselves. In the Red Army, where the gaze of the commissar was supposed eradicate all privacy, Soviet servicemen too used their diaries as a place to gripe, record the “true war,” and ponder revelations about themselves. Red Army translator Vladimir Stezhenskii, for example, frequently complained about being drafted into the army and pined for his girlfriend, Nina. He further worried desperately about his close friends being sent to fight the Germans in the bloody battles of late 1941 and early 1942:

I thought a lot about Arthur. For a long time now I have not believed that he was “evacuated” to the Bashkir

farms (*sovkoz*), and, lo and behold, Ninka has written me that he went into a combat battalion. [...] In the first month of the war—when the first sound one heard after the night passed was a bomb exploding—Arthur said, “You alive, old man?” “Yeah, I’m alive.” Yeah, that’s what we said. My whole life, all of my happiness, sorrow, and misfortune, my friends were with me; at all times, during difficult moments, I had friendly support and essential, intelligent counsel. [24]

The dedication to keeping an accurate account of thoughts, conditions, events, and revelations when facing death was something servicemen around the world would have recognized. One should not presume, of course, that these diaries contain the “whole truth” regarding the events they describe, but what text could possibly do this?

Indeed, like Stezhenskii, many Japanese diarists saw articulations of the self to be one of the most valuable forms of “truth.” Servicemen juxtaposed or embedded these “reflections” within the delineation of battlefield experience, where they derived their authenticity as warriors. “Yamamoto Kenji,” a private who fought in Shanghai in 1937, copied a letter he considered unlikely to be passed by the censors into his diary before sending it to schoolchildren in his home prefecture (Kochi):

I’ve leapt into canal beds, into the enemy camp, and stabbed Chinese soldiers to death. I’ve shot Chinese soldiers when they came to attack us at night, too. Also, while thirstily drinking soup made from

chestnut husks, hungrily chewing raw garlic and daikon, I shot the Chinese at close range as they fled. If I went on about the fighting and such, well, there's a lot of interesting stuff (omoshiroi koto) to tell, but, in order to maintain military discipline (gunki no hochi), they won't let me write about it. [25]

"Sakaguchi Jiro," a veteran soldier from both the Manchurian Incident and the battles of Northern China in 1937, reflected in his diary on how the war had changed him.

I want to stop living in holes in the ground and go home [even if] temporarily. Another victorious spring here at the Holy War, and, looking back, I think our work is pretty impressive. This just confirms the fact that our task is to carry out punitive expeditions and work hard to build northern China, striving even harder than before. [...] Considering the fact that I've overcome all of these hardships, a man's body, although it has a limit, really goes quite far. Even when it is your [own body], you can't but be surprised. [26]

The diary, then, became a space where record of fact and record of self became bound up in the same discourse; the concomitant assumptions, including the idea that a diary can somehow capture "truth," created a possibility (for better or for worse) for servicemen to speak authoritatively about who they "really" were. When Kimura nonchalantly mused on the nature of war, self, and gambling, he perhaps

unwittingly revealed the man that he created through his war diary:

In all competition (shobugoto), in order to feel a fleeting sense of superiority when victorious, one must gamble against the danger that, when defeated, one feels remorse and regret, as if one is doomed—and that is what war is like. [...] Therefore, only those who stink of vulgarity will engage in competition. In other words, competition is something only mankind does, as a game. [...] If this is some bellicose nature (sotosei) inherited from our primitive past (yasei jidai), then no one is quite as primitive as he who is obsessed with competition. But, within this competition, there is an opportunity one should take to perfect oneself (mizukara wo migaku beki kien).

Even when he grew frustrated with his prolonged stay in China, he still wrote with the same dry and cynical tone: "after one and a half years of working as a human target, all burning emotions have dissipated." Near the end of 1938, he further reflected, "If a man can discard those paltry emotions, everything in this world is, really, quite clear, I think." When he finally made it home in November 1939, Kimura wrote that he felt moved for the first time in over two years. [27]



River crossing in Burma

A diary contains whatever “truth” its author believes to be relevant to the story he is telling about himself. Sometimes, the story is heroic, but other times it is gruesome and even incomprehensible. More often than not, the voice one discovers in a wartime diary changes dramatically from one page to the next. Rather than viewing a diary as a window to truth (indeed, as servicemen themselves arguably saw it), scholars should consider the ways in which diarists used the text as a tool for defining who they were, regardless of whether the story they told about themselves was “true” or not. Like psychoanalysis, perhaps, the truth value of the tale is less important than its ability to impress consistency across the chaos that otherwise characterizes the daily experience of identity. Any other less organized self-narrative might be taken as a form of madness.

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Notes:

Names that I have introduced in quotes are pseudonyms. I have been asked to use them in order to protect the privacy of the diarists and their families. I have used black bars wherever images reveal personal names or other private information.

In order to gain access to the roughly two hundred wartime diaries written by Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and American servicemen, I have relied heavily on the kindness of archivists, activists, and scholars around the world. One of the most underused resources for Japanese wartime materials are the many “Peace Museums” there. The documents are generally open to qualified researchers and the staff are always quite helpful. Although there is no comprehensive guide to these archives, many can be found through the Heiwa hakubutsukan / senso shiryokan gaido bukku (Aoki shoten, 2000), edited by the Rekishi kyoikusha kyogikai. Also, interested researchers should be all means make use of the “[Peace Network](#)” hosted by Ritsumeikan’s Kyoto Museum for World Peace.

While working closely with them, I found that archivists and curators there and at “Peace Osaka” keep the most comprehensive lists and up-to-date information on Japan’s many “Peace” and “War” Museums.

- [1] See especially the discussion in Samuel Hideo Yamashita, *Leaves from an Autumn of Emergencies: Selections from the Diaries of Ordinary Japanese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 9-10
- [2] Ohama Tetsuya, *Shomin no mita Nisshin / Nichiro senso: Teikoku he no ayumi* (Tosui shobo, 2003), p. 50
- [3] Tamon Jiro, *Nichiro senso nikki* (Tokyo: Saiho shobo, 1980, orig. 1912), introduction (original)
- [4] Sendai: Sendai minzoku rekishi shiryokan: "Morita Tatsuo," "Hanseiroku," 1936.3.17-18, 25. Marking a self-account or diary with red ink or pencil is a practice that was likely connected to that of Confucian scholars who corrected students' writings.
- [5] See Linda Hoaglund, "[Stubborn Legacies of War: Japanese Devils in Sarajevo.](#)"
- [6] Hoshi Toru, *Watashitachi ga Chugoku de shita koto: Chugoku kikosha renkakukai no hitobito* (Tokyo: Rokufu shuppan, 2002), p. 28.
- [7] In spite of vigorous opposition, Kanki Haruo was the first to successfully publish these accounts in the post-occupation era. Kanki Haruo, *Sanko: Nihonjin no Chugoku ni okeru senso hanzai no kokuhaku* (Kobunsha kappa, 1957).
- [8] See Cook and Cook's interview of Tanida Isamu in *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1985), p. 29, where he denied the severity of the Nanjing Massacre.
- [9] Kimura Genzaemon, *Nicchu senso shussei nikki* (Akita: Mumeisha shuppan, 1982), p. 16-17
- [10] Carlisle, PA: United States Military History Institute: Obara Fukuzo, "Gekisen," with 1976 translation by Edward J. Rasmussen, 1944.10.30. I have made some changes to Rasmussen's fine translation according to my own interpretation of the Japanese text.
- [11] Nishimura Masaharu, *Yokaren nikki* (Kumamoto: Kumamoto Nichinichi Shinbun joho senta, 2003), p. 245 [1945.7.22]
- [12] Kanoya: Kanoya koku kaijo jieeitai shiryokan: "Hara Kinosuke," "Toyo nikki," 1942.3.6-7
- [13] "Kurozu Tadanobu," "Jinchu nikki," in Ono Kenji et alia, *Nankin daigyakusatsu wo kiroku shita kogun heishitachi* (Tokyo: Otsuki shoten, 1996), 1937.12.10. The pseudonym is Ono's.
- [14] Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Archives: Lieutenant Watanabe, [no title; personal diary notebook], 1942.3.3, 17
- [15] Obara, *op. cit.*, 1944.12.26, 1945.1.27, 2.13
- [16] Kimura, *op. cit.*, 1937.10.11
- [17] Takamatsu: Takamatsu-shi heiwa shiryoshitsu: "Nagatani Masao," "Techo," 1937.9.4

- [18] Tokyo: Boeicho boei kenkyujo: Hamazaki Tomizo, "Nisshi," 1937.12.2, 11
- [19] "Ouchi Toshimichi," "Jinchu nikki," in Ono Kenji et alia, ed., 1937.12.7. The pseudonym is Ono's.
- [20] Umeda Fusao, Hokushi ten senki: Umeda Fusao jugun nikki, ed. Umeda Toshio (self-published, 1970), 1937.8.26; many thanks to Yoshimi Yoshiaki for pointing this text out to me.
- [21] Osaka kokusai heiwa shiryokan: "Taniguchi Kazuo," "Yasen byoin nikki," 1937.12.13
- [22] Carlisle: USMHI: S/Sgt Hopkins, Bernard O, "Diary," 60th Coast Artillery, 1942.2.2, 3.11
- [23] Liu Jiaqi, Zhenzhong riji (Wuhan: Zhanshi chubanshe, 1938.1), 1937.10.6
- [24] Stezhenskii, Soldatskii dnevnik: voennye stranitsy (Moscow: Argaph, 2005), p. 32-33. At that time, the Soviet Army was almost entirely eliminated by invading German forces, so Stezhenskii was considering the very real possibility that his friends, particularly Arthur, were already dead when he wrote the passage on February 2, 1942.
- [25] Kochi: "Kusa no Ie" heiwa shiryokan: "Yamamoto Kenji," "Jinchu nisshi," 1937.12.17
- [26] Personal Collection: "Sakaguchi Jiro," "Jinchu nikki," 1939.1.4
- [27] Kimura, 1938.12.1, 12.14