

Historiography and Japanese War Nationalism: Testimony in *Sensōron*, *Sensōron* as Testimony 歴史編纂と日本の戦争国家主義—戦争論における証言、証言としての戦争論

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Historiography and Japanese War Nationalism: Testimony in *Sensōron*, *Sensōron* as Testimony

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This essay looks at the use of testimony by manga artist Kobayashi Yoshinori, a prominent neonationalist voice on war issues. It focuses on three themes to assess his 1998 manga Sensōron (On War): Kobayashi's stated position on the validity of testimony as evidence, how testimony is used within Kobayashi's arguments, and the inherently autobiographical nature of Kobayashi's writings. It reveals a key nationalist hypocrisy: while the rejection of personal testimony by victims of Japanese war actions as evidence on historiographical grounds remains central to nationalist denial strategies, testimony is used freely and uncritically to support nationalist agendas.

This essay is part of a three-essay series Testimony and War Memories in Japan. The other essays are ['Introduction'](#) and ['War Responsibility and the Family in Japan: Excerpts from Kurahashi Ayako's My Father's Dying Wish'](#)

Introduction

The bestselling manga *Sensōron* (1998) established Kobayashi Yoshinori as one of the most influential voices within Japan's neonationalist movement of the 1990s and 2000s. *Sensōron* was a collection of Kobayashi's writings on war in his *Shin*

gōmanizumu sengen (New Declaration of Arrogance) column in the magazine *Sapio*.¹ This and Kobayashi's subsequent books have total sales of many millions.² Kobayashi also became a spokesman for the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii rekishi kyōkasho wo tsukurukai, hereafter "Tsukurukai") as it produced its nationalistic junior high school textbook in the late 1990s, although he left Tsukurukai in 2001 following the dismal failure to achieve school adoptions of the book. From 2002 to 2009 he focused his energy on editorship of the magazine *Wascism* (Me-ism), and he continues to write his manga column for *Sapio*. In the twelve years since *Sensōron* was published, Kobayashi has lost none of his ability to stir controversy regarding important issues affecting Japan today and to regularly work his way onto the bestseller shelves in Japanese bookstores.



Figure 1: The front cover and spine of *Sensōron*, published by Gentōsha (1998)

Kobayashi’s manga covers many topics other than war history, but his chauvinistic war nationalism (the defense of Japanese war aims and conduct during World War II, and categorical denial of atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre) combined with his undoubted talent as a manga artist have earned him a large, loyal fan base. He also has numerous domestic and international critics. There is an extensive Japanese literature dedicated to debunking Kobayashi’s arguments in *Sensōron* and elsewhere.³ Whereas these critiques are mainly by progressives aiming to discredit Kobayashi’s evidence and historical narrative, in English his work has been analyzed more for the insights it provides into the state of contemporary war debates and ideological confrontations in Japan over war history. Aaron Gerow, for example, has analyzed *Sensōron* for its slick, new packaging of well-worn nationalist arguments;⁴ Rumi

Sakamoto focuses on what Kobayashi’s eulogies to the kamikaze and exhortations to patriotism mean to Japanese youth in the twenty-first century;⁵ and I have argued that *Sensōron* provides important insights into how family relationships and other personal experiences seemingly unrelated to the war can feed into understandings of war history.⁶

This essay does not focus on Kobayashi’s politics per se, but on historiographical and methodological issues relating to his use of testimony in *Sensōron*. Throughout the manga the stories of numerous individuals are told, including those of Kobayashi himself. Kobayashi acts as his own narrator/central character and one of his trademarks is to appear at the end of a chapter and say “*Gōmanka mashite yoka desu ka*” (“Mind if I sound off a little arrogantly?” in Kyushu dialect – Kobayashi hails from Fukuoka) before making his point for the chapter.⁷ Furthermore, with many episodes recounted from his own family background and childhood, *Sensōron* can be read as an autobiographical account of how and why Kobayashi has come to hold the nationalistic views he does. In this sense, *Sensōron* is testimony: Kobayashi’s testimony.



Figure 2: *Sensōron* as testimony - Kobayashi recalls the fights between his Marxist-influenced father and religious mother during his childhood, page 65.

It is ironic that a prominent nationalist in Japan should have made such an impact with this kind of book given the litany of attacks by neonationalists on the introduction of testimony as historical evidence. Nationalists have typically promoted documentary-based positivist historiography, with a particular focus on official documentation, and made great efforts to invalidate testimony as a reliable historical source, particularly when the testimony is given by someone deemed to have an agenda hostile to Japan (such as former “comfort women” or forced laborers demanding apologies and compensation from the Japanese state). With tens of thousands of witnesses testifying to the atrocities of the Japanese military, it is far easier to make a blanket rebuttal of testimony as evidence than to rebut the evidence within each piece of testimony. There are concerted nationalist attacks on specific pieces of testimony considered especially “dangerous” or “damaging” (the best example, discussed below, being Yoshida Seiji’s

testimony – later withdrawn as a “fabrication” – that as a soldier he abducted women to make them “comfort women”), but the blanket discrediting of testimony is still necessary because not every witness can be discredited individually.

Within the context of war history, therefore, the appeal to nationalists of the methodology of traditional positivist history has far less to do with concerns for historiographical rigor than with legitimizing the obvious bias within Japanese documentary evidence. For example, in the historiography of the era of colonialism and war from 1895-1945, the voices of non-Japanese (or even Japanese) victims do not appear in official wartime documents, specifically in the documents that survived the willful destruction of all incriminating evidence at the end of the war. Rather, it is the authoritative voice of the state that commands the stage. But nationalists face a secondary problem: positivist history as methodology does not specify *whose* documents may or may not be used. The historiography of Japanese nationalistic denial requires another stage: the dismissal of documents in *international* archives as “wartime anti-Japanese propaganda”. This fits into a broader campaign to say that the Japanese public today is easily “brainwashed” by Chinese use of the war as a diplomatic card, or duped by other foreign accusations of Japanese war guilt, such as the postwar War Guilt Information Program run by US Occupation forces.



Figure 3: Brainwashed Japanese and foreign attempts to instill war guilt in Japanese, page 192.

Damning testimony, it goes without saying, is ipso facto unacceptable as evidence within this self-serving nationalist historiography. The inclusion of “favorable” testimony in so many nationalist texts, including *Sensōron*, however, indicates what is really going on: the mantra of positivist history is inconsistently applied and constitutes little more than an attempt to place a scholarly veneer on the real agenda of discrediting any testimonial evidence inconsistent with the line that Japanese war actions were just or noble.

It is within this context that Kobayashi’s work assumes particular significance. This “Bible” of the Japanese rightwing relies heavily on testimony, which has been so frequently attacked by the rightwing. *Sensōron* is replete with named, drawn characters telling their stories, including Kobayashi himself. The depiction and treatment of the testimony varies

markedly from case to case depending on whether the testifier’s views are congruent or not with Kobayashi’s own views. In other words, *Sensōron* epitomizes the inconsistent and self-serving use of testimony and evidence in nationalist texts.

Sensōron on Testimony

Kobayashi’s stated position on testimony, typical of that of many nationalists, is outlined in Chapter 12 of *Sensōron*: “‘*Shōgen’ to iu mono*” (This thing called “testimony”). With no obvious sense of irony, Kobayashi introduces his subject through some testimony by describing one of his personal experiences: a murder plot against him hatched by the Aum Shinrikyō Cult (which perpetrated the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway). Kobayashi had been a strident critic of the cult, a stance that won him many plaudits, even from people who would later revile his stance on nationalism and war. Kobayashi describes how in December 1994 he reported to the police that he was being tailed by members of Aum. In addition, a member of Aum testified in police custody to the murder plot, and another witness positively identified a person acting suspiciously outside Kobayashi’s home. Nevertheless, none of this testimony was sufficient to lay charges of conspiracy to commit murder. “There was no evidence” (*shōko ga nai*), he laments; by implication, testimony is not evidence.⁸

Kobayashi then makes a statement on the trustworthiness of testimony that would be familiar to testimony-based researchers, and would not be particularly disputed by even the most fervent practitioners of life history.



Figure 4: The problems with testimony.

“Testimony” is mingled with various things: preconceptions, mistakes, embellishments, or lies. It changes over time and may be distorted according to the person eliciting the testimony. People may exaggerate, and in repeated tellings of the testimony it becomes a story. Any sensible person in a constitutional state must be aware of this.⁹

The subsequent warnings of the dangers of smooth-talking liars, or the prejudices that encourage people to believe false accusations are also eminently reasonable: he gives the example of a woman “crying rape” against rugby players, and discusses how rugby players in such circumstances face a battle to prove their innocence because people are often quick to assume rugby players would do such things.

So far so good, *or so it seems*. However, part of Kobayashi’s skill in winning over people to his views is the way in which he makes reasonable points and then extends similar arguments to more controversial (and not necessarily comparable) arguments. The controversial arguments, therefore, seem reasonable. For example, shortly after discussing the issue of false accusations against rugby players, Kobayashi slips effortlessly into a seemingly comparable situation: “false accusations” against Japanese soldiers regarding the rape of “comfort women”. According to Kobayashi,

prejudices against Japanese soldiers mean that people all too readily believe the stories of “comfort women”.

The comparison is disingenuous because it makes the point of comparison people’s prejudices (namely the common assumption of guilt based on reputation rather than evidence) rather than the crimes in question (which differ because rugby players do not commit such crimes in designated rugby player brothels set up on the instigation of the rugby authorities). Kobayashi is encouraging his readers to feel that the Japanese soldiers, rather than the “comfort women”, are the victims because they have been unfairly maligned, but he is avoiding the core issue. Given the coercive nature of the “comfort station” system, organized and controlled by the Japanese military, it is reasonable to assume that every time a “comfort woman” was visited by a Japanese soldier it was rape in the absence of proof that the “comfort woman” a) had freely consented to being a “comfort woman”, and b) truly wanted to have sex with Japanese soldiers. By contrast, in the case of rugby players, the absence of a dedicated rugby players’ brothel system set up by the rugby authorities means that the determination of whether a crime has been committed rests solely on the circumstances of the individual case: word of accuser against accused and any other available physical/circumstantial evidence.

Such issues clarify why Japanese nationalists are passionately dedicated to refuting the criminality of the “comfort station” system. The alternative is to accept that the state was liable for setting up a rape system, and that every soldier who visited a “comfort station” was by definition a rapist. Such a conclusion would be utterly antithetical to the nationalist claims of a just war, and the purity and nobility of the sacrifice of those Japanese soldiers who fought and died for the cause.

In the attempt to refute the “rape system”

charge, nationalists have focused their energies on denying that there is any evidence (narrowly defined to mean “official Japanese government documents”) of “forced transportation” (*kyōsei renkō*, a euphemism for abduction or enslavement, which is also used in the context of forced labor in factories and mines).¹⁰ If such denials are accepted, responsibility for any sufferings of “comfort women” lies with “comfort station” managers, recruiters and individual clients, not the Japanese military or Japanese state. Japanese soldiers were not rapists by definition, but (to cite an analogy proposed by nationalists that understandably caused a firestorm of indignation) were individuals purchasing a subcontracted service, just like civil servants eating at a canteen in their ministry building that is run by a private catering company.¹¹

In this context, the “involvement” (*kanyō*) in the running of the “comfort station” system by the Japanese military – which was the major claim made by historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki on the front page of the *Asahi* newspaper on 11 January 1992 that forced an apology from Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi a few days later on a visit to South Korea – was a non-issue. Of course there was Japanese military “involvement”, in the same way that a government ministry is “involved” in a canteen within its building. So what? For Kobayashi:

“There were no women abducted (*kyōsei renkō*) by the Japanese military or turned into sexual slaves. There were women who sold their services to Japanese soldiers of their own volition (*jihatsutekina shōfu*) or because of unavoidable circumstances (*yamunaki shōfu*), and that’s all there is to it.”¹²

The implication within Kobayashi’s reasoning is that any “comfort women’s” sufferings were

brought upon themselves.

But, unwittingly, Kobayashi’s comparison with rugby players illustrates precisely why “involvement” is the issue, and not simply “forced transportation”/abduction. The comparison clarifies why the “comfort women” issue is a collective/state responsibility issue by introducing a supposedly “comparable” situation which is clearly only an individual responsibility issue.

Nevertheless, for nationalists the lack of documentary proof of “forced transportation” is the key. Kobayashi states that former Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Ishihara Nobuo and even Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei (who delivered the [Japanese government’s official apology to the “comfort women” on 4 August 1993](#)) have admitted that there was no “evidence” (meaning “something other than testimony”) for “forced transportation” provided for the 1993 report. Admission of “forced transportation” had been made to appease political pressure from South Korea, Kobayashi claims.¹³

Kobayashi continues by trumpeting the recantation of the testimony of Yoshida Seiji, a soldier who said he abducted women to work as “comfort women” in a book titled *Watashi no Sensō Hanzai* (My War Crimes, published by Sanichi Shobō in 1983). Yoshida’s testimony, in Kobayashi’s view, is a classic example of “testimony” as “fiction”.¹⁴ Kobayashi completes his dismissal of the “comfort women” as a war responsibility issue by portraying the testimony of “comfort women” as a product of contemporary political expediency. The “comfort women” were not testifying immediately after their wartime experience, but decades later on the incitement of leftist activists. Indeed, the first significant testimony by former “comfort women” only took place more than forty years after the end of the war. As Kobayashi put it:

There was no testimony then, but there is now. People are wrapped up by testimony tainted with today's values of human rights, feminism and anti-war principles, *Gōmanka mashite yoka desu ka?* People who want to be good people don't have the guts to distance themselves from testimony.¹⁵

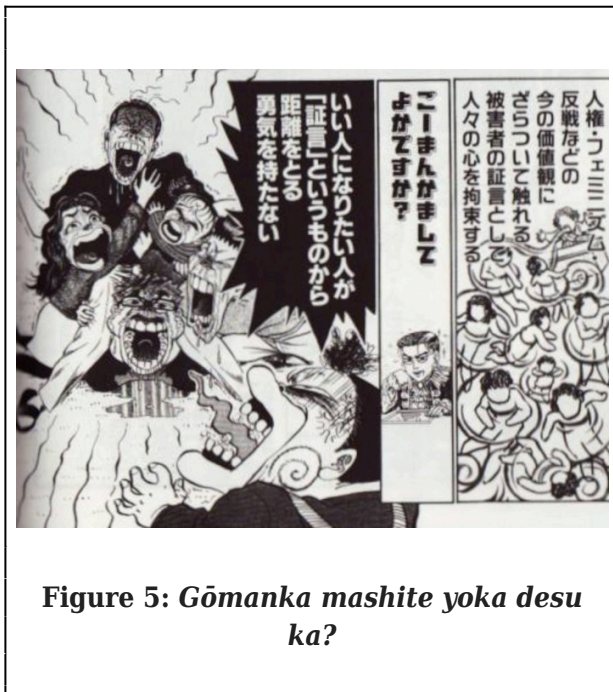


Figure 5: *Gōmanka mashite yoka desu ka?*

These arguments reveal the three key mechanisms of nationalistic denial with regard to the treatment of testimony.

First, a distinction is made between “testimony” and “evidence”. Actually, testimony *is* a form of evidence, which, like any other piece of evidence, needs to be corroborated. It may not be “physical evidence”, but it is evidence nonetheless.¹⁶

Second, Kobayashi insists upon criminal court standards of “innocent until proven guilty” and “beyond all reasonable doubt” regarding the “charges” brought against Japan relating to the “comfort women”. In other words, as long as

the testimony of witnesses may be disregarded and there is a lack of official documentary evidence, Japan remains “not guilty”. This helps explain the nationalist obsession with disputing individual pieces of evidence of Japanese war crimes, such as some gruesome photographs, allegedly of atrocities in China, dismissed by Kobayashi as fakes (Chapter 11, see below Figure 11). Kobayashi and other nationalists have had some success in exposing doctored or fake photographs, and this contribution to historiography must be recognized. But a photograph proven to be a fake is not evidence for the lack of Japanese atrocities. It is merely a statement about that individual photograph. The disingenuous feature of such nationalist tactics is creating the impression that each piece of evidence declared “unreliable” constitutes a step toward the “innocent” verdict for Japan that must follow if guilt cannot be conclusively proven.

But historians cannot operate in terms of simple black and white, or “innocent” and “guilty”. Historical evidence is often contradictory and incomplete, and defies a definitive reconstruction of the past. Yet this does not mean that historians are unable to reach a conclusion “beyond all reasonable doubt”. Nobody denies that the “comfort stations” existed, and the compelling evidence of what went on inside them (extensive harrowing testimony from both “comfort women” and Japanese soldiers) is that the “comfort station” system subjected thousands of women to appalling and sustained sexual violence. Even so, we do not yet have a definitive history of the “comfort women” as there are many issues which remain to be uncovered – such as the extremely sensitive issue of how local recruiters, and not only the Japanese military, were complicit in the enslavement of, and abuses suffered by, “comfort women”. So, whether documents exist to “prove” the existence of “forced transportation” or the exact circumstances in a specific case is hardly the point, unless one is

trying to “prove” the exact details of a specific individual’s case in a court of law.

Third, and most significantly, Kobayashi’s chapter on testimony reveals the nationalist double standard that exists throughout *Sensōron*: testimony supporting his historical views is acceptable, while all other testimony is ipso facto “unreliable”. Kobayashi started his chapter on testimony with the story of Aum’s plot to kill him. Using his standards of “evidence”, we should actually disregard this anecdote as “unreliable” because it is based on only three pieces of testimony (a far smaller body of evidence than exists concerning the brutalities committed in “comfort stations”). Using testimony, specifically his own uncorroborated testimony, to make the argument for why testimony is “unreliable” is ironic. ... or perhaps extraordinary hubris.

Kobayashi has been extraordinarily successful, however, in blinding many readers to such analytical inconsistencies. It is vital to recognize that nationalists like Kobayashi are not simply “extremists”. Kobayashi and others with similar views are dedicated to defending national honor and promoting their idealized view of Japan. Often these goals can be achieved using eminently “reasonable” or “moderate” arguments that resonate strongly in the mainstream of Japanese public opinion. For example, when going on the offensive about the war records of other nations, Kobayashi is hardly extremist in attacking the inhumanity of atomic and firebombing of civilian targets toward the end of the war, or the multiple atrocities committed by the Chinese state throughout the twentieth century. The problem lies in the failure to apply equivalent moral standards to Japanese actions.

Likewise, Kobayashi makes many sensible points about testimony. Spotting when the argument tips over from “reasonable” to “self-serving and inconsistent” is the key to assessing his work. Kobayashi as both

polemicist and manga artist is highly skilled, however, in obscuring that tipping point.

Testimony in *Sensōron*

Having established Kobayashi’s double standard in the use of testimony, instances of the double standard in practice become glaringly obvious as one reads the rest of *Sensōron*. Despite debunking testimony in Chapter 12, in Chapter 15, “*Tsūkaina sensō taiken*” (Thrilling War Experiences) Kobayashi spends 64 pages (pp. 209-272, just under one sixth of the 381-page book) recounting the “war experiences” of one individual: Takamura Takehito.



Figure 6: Artillery man Takamura Takehito, page 210.

Before turning to Takamura’s story, however, the chapter title “Thrilling War Experiences”

deserves discussion. Kobayashi judiciously avoids the word *shōgen*, “testimony”, although the chapter clearly is testimony - in other words, a personal narrative account of experiences, whether written or oral. Instead, he used the word *taiken*, “experiences”, which somehow makes it sound as if the narrative has been substantiated and can thereby join the canon of “historical fact”.

The tremendous irony is that Kobayashi actually depicts himself doing what any conscientious life-history researcher would do when confronted with testimonial evidence: cross-referencing the testimony to other forms of evidence to verify the testimony’s utility as evidence, and following up inquiries with the witness.



Figure 7: Researching Takamura’s story

“I [Kobayashi] am not a military history buff and am lacking in knowledge, but I tried to write this section making the best use of the available materials (*shiryō*). [His assistant adds] I was touched by how Takamura-san gave frank answers to our ignorant questions.”¹⁷

On the surface, Kobayashi’s rendition of

Takamura’s war service appears to constitute a model example of how to use testimony and demonstrates that Kobayashi is perfectly aware of what is required to satisfy professional codes of life-history research. He has chosen as his witness an upstanding, “reliable” member of postwar society in Japan (Takamura had a distinguished career in business after the war). The story that Kobayashi recounts is of one man’s service as an artilleryman in the Philippines, Burma and towards the end of the war back in Japan as a training officer. As a member of a named unit, the Sakaguchi Unit, Takamura’s testimony (presented in extensive diaries kept at the time) could certainly be cross-checked against the documentary record in the form of the unit history and contemporary newspaper reports. Kobayashi indicates he has done this.¹⁸ The witness was questioned for clarification on certain issues and Kobayashi says there has been a rigorous process of checking the story. This is all one can ask the researcher using testimonial evidence to do.

However, there must be three notes of caution, despite the appearance of rigor in the historiography.

First, Takamura’s testimony is obviously used precisely because it supports Kobayashi’s broader political aims: to present “thrilling war experiences” as a counterargument to Japan’s many peace groups with their mantra of “war is bad”. Kobayashi is heavily critical of progressives for the way, he believes, that they actively seek out testimony compatible with their political agendas to press Japan into apologizing more. Such accusations merely sound like hypocrisy, however, when one sees Kobayashi’s own selective use of testimony in action, and, in particular, his overwhelming reliance on a single witness.

Second, some have questioned the story itself. In a discussion on the anonymous internet chat room 2 Channel during 2009 there was an

ongoing debate about the reliability of Takamura's story (running to over 150 postings) under the title "Takamura Takehito-tte" (About that Takamura Takehito). One person noted that Takamura's diaries and other materials that could have been used to verify his story do not appear in Kobayashi's bibliography. Indeed, they do not. An innocent oversight on Kobayashi's part perhaps, but it constitutes a serious omission given Kobayashi's attempts to portray himself as a rigorous researcher. Consequently, Takamura's story in *Sensōron* is effectively an unsourced story. Kobayashi nowhere indicates precisely what materials were used. Other netizens question why a person whose war experiences have achieved such prominence seems to exist only in Kobayashi's book. My own net searches have drawn a blank regarding alternative presentations of Takamura's story - either in print or online form. Takamura undoubtedly existed: he fought (and lost) an election in 1976 in his native Yamaguchi (running against Kishi Nobusuke of all people!). But it seems Kobayashi has a complete monopoly on his story. If a "comfort woman" had her story told in such an opaque fashion, Kobayashi would surely have been the first to decry it as "unreliable".

Third, the chapter is an exciting adventure story cum morality tale in which Takamura is the heroic central character. The chapter has almost a cinematic feel, helped in no small part by the visual format of manga. This significantly increases the danger of the semi-fictionalization of Takamura's experiences for the purposes of both providing an exhilarating read and conveying the intended message. As Rumi Sakamoto argues (about the whole book, although it is particularly applicable here), "Using manga as a mixed media of visual and written texts, Kobayashi effectively blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and ideology, past and present."¹⁹ One may only speculate at what "inconvenient" aspects of Takamura's story were altered or omitted

(either by Takamura or Kobayashi).

Most important, however, is the fact that Kobayashi's treatment of this veteran's story is in stark contrast to the treatment of the testimony of soldiers confessing to atrocities. This is clearest in Chapter 13, where Kobayashi ridicules the testimony and confessions of members of the Chinese Returnees Association, Chūkiren. This group of around 1,000 soldiers was interned at the Fushun War Criminals Detention Centre after the war, where they reflected on and came to acknowledge their crimes. The soldiers returned to Japan in 1956. In the half-century thereafter, they continued to speak out about their personal crimes and those of their units in an effort to prevent such crimes occurring again. Kobayashi portrays them as sniveling wrecks brainwashed by their Chinese gaolers, rather than ordinary men whose treatment at the hands of their erstwhile enemies placed their own wartime brutality in stark and painful perspective.



Figure 8: A Japanese soldier confessing to war crimes, page 187.

The contrast between the treatment of Takamura with his “thrilling” war experiences and this “sniveling” soldier confessing to war crimes is also noteworthy because it illustrates the power of manga as a visual format to influence readers’ views by means other than the use of “evidence”. Through the way people are drawn within the manga, the perceived reliability of witnesses can be portrayed in far more underhanded ways than explicit statements about them. Compare for example Kobayashi’s then colleague in the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), Nishio Kanji, describing the barbarity of an American soldier in sending a Japanese soldier’s skull to his fiancé as a souvenir (a story made famous by being featured on the cover of *Life Magazine* in May 1944),²⁰ with arch-opponent historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki (the man whose scoop in the Asahi newspaper on 11 January 1992 ignited the “comfort women” debate in Japan and whose subsequent book became a classic study of the “comfort women”) having to back pedal on the issue of the “forced transportation” of “comfort women” following the 1996 confession of Yoshida Seiji that his testimony of rounding up women was “fiction” (Kobayashi’s term).²¹



Figure 9: An austere, authoritative Nishio Kanji, page 140.



Figure 10: A laughable Yoshimi Yoshiaki, page 180.

The use of testimony in *Sensōron*, therefore, is revealing not only for the clear imbalance between the treatment of testimony supporting and opposing a nationalist agenda, but also in the way that the visual format of the manga is utilized to sway the reader’s opinion about the reliability of both the testimony of historical actors and the views of scholar-activists participating in war debates in Japan.

Sensōron as Testimony

Sensōron was published in 1998 and a lot has happened in Japanese war discourse since then. Nevertheless, *Sensōron* remains relevant to our understanding of Japanese war nationalism twelve years after its publication because it remains an influential text and because it frankly reveals why its author, Kobayashi Yoshinori, came to hold nationalistic views.

Sensōron can be read as testimony. Kobayashi himself appears frequently throughout the manga, either as narrator or as central character in the story. He often recounts

stories from his own life (the Aum death plot incident described above, or his parents' fights, see Figure 2), he depicts himself in the process of researching his topic (see Figure 7), and he often faces his readers and tells them his views.



Figure 11: These photos allegedly of the Nanjing Massacre are fakes, Kobayashi tells his readers.

The autobiographical episodes provide great insight into why Kobayashi has come to hold the views he does. Two particularly important themes emerge: first, his playground scraps with other boys; and second, his reverence for his grandfather in contrast to some thinly veiled disdain for his parents.

First, in Chapter 6 (“The Sprouting of a Moral Individual”, *Rinri aru ko no Mebae*), Kobayashi describes being an avid reader of military adventure manga as a boy. The heroic stories of wartime kamikaze pilots were an inspiration during playground fights at school, where he often suffered a beating at the hands of bigger boys.



Figure 12: “I am a kamikaze”, explains Kobayashi as a boy. “Let’s go and lose.” (page 73). For Kobayashi it was more important to defend his honor than to avoid a beating.

As an adult, Kobayashi’s reverence for the self-sacrifice of kamikaze is transformed but undiminished. “The Kamikaze Spirit” (*Tokkō Seishin*, the title of Chapter 7) is juxtaposed with the selfish individualism and consumerism of modern Japanese society (detailed in Chapter 1, where he concludes by saying, “Japanese individuals are just consumers”).²² The individual (*ko*) and public (*ōyake*) are two key themes for Kobayashi. He finishes Chapter 7 with his trademark *Gōmanka mashite yoka desu ka?* “The kamikaze did not lose their individuality. They discarded it for the sake of the public. They died for the future of the nation, in other words, they died for us.”²³

The second autobiographical theme concerns his grandfather. Kobayashi paints a very unflattering portrait of his parents, particularly his father. There are scenes of Kobayashi as a young boy being hit mercilessly and being held head down by his ankles over a waterfall. This is in marked contrast to the depiction of his grandfather, who was a soldier and member of Katō Daisuke's theater troupe in New Guinea that has been the subject of the book (and later two films) *Minami no shima ni yuki ga furu* (Snow Falling in a Southern Island).²⁴ Kobayashi has great respect for his grandfather and depicts himself listening intently to the stories of his grandfather as a little boy.²⁵ At his grandfather's funeral, Kobayashi mourns the passing of a man first "abandoned by the military leadership in New Guinea" and then "abandoned by a masochistic nation of peace activists". But for Kobayashi he was the kind grandfather who tried to stop a little boy from being dangled over the waterfall by his feet.²⁶ For Kobayashi the thought of his grandfather and other former soldiers being demonized is too much: "Even if they are called evil, I want to defend our grandfathers."²⁷

These episodes provide insight into the roots of Kobayashi's nationalism. Both are perennial themes within studies of war memories: the uses to which war history can be put in contemporary circumstances (inspiration in playground fights) and importance of the war narratives of those with whom there are strong ties of blood or identification (his grandfather, and also the kamikaze). Once the strong moral and emotional agenda is defined, treatment of other issues follow suit. If his grandfather was fighting and the kamikaze were dying for Japan, then that Japan must be a nation that was worthy of sacrifice. It cannot be a rapist state complicit in the forced transportation of thousands of "comfort women", nor can it be the perpetrator of a heinous massacre in Nanjing or other war crimes. Japan's honor must be defended at all costs.

Kobayashi's views may have been taken to an extreme in the length to which he goes to deny Japanese war crimes, but he is utterly "normal" in one important way: his views of history are inextricably linked to personal circumstances. In this sense, Kobayashi's book has much in common with that of Kurahashi Ayako (see 'War Responsibility and the Family in Japan'), although Kobayashi's and Kurahashi's positions on war history and responsibility could not be further apart. Both books interweave autobiography with historical investigation and clarify how the priorities of the latter are so often driven by the personal/family experiences cataloged in the former. As Japanese people look back on war history, there are few lenses that refract their views of the past more strongly than love and respect for relatives from the war generation.

Positivism as the Default Historiography of Japanese Nationalism

This paper has looked at Kobayashi Yoshinori's arguments in *Sensōron* from the perspective of testimony: his stated position on testimony, his use of testimony, and possible readings of *Sensōron* as testimony. One must conclude that there is precious little consistency in Kobayashi's treatment of testimony: the flaws of testimony as "evidence" are explicitly stated in a book whose emotional power rests on the author's personal testimony; the testimony of those with "friendly" views is treated utterly differently from the testimony of those with "hostile" views; and by becoming his own narrator/central character, Kobayashi blurs the boundaries between personal statement and historical research.

Such inconsistencies place into sharp relief what is really happening in nationalist historiography. Historical positivism has almost become the default methodology for nationalists in Japan, in theory at least (on the evidence of *Sensōron*, as we have seen, the practice may be very different). If one is to

continue denying Japanese aggression and atrocities during World War II, one must work to exclude or invalidate the voluminous evidence to the contrary. An important component of this agenda is to insist on Japanese official (government and military) documentary evidence, which to this day remains the basic position of the political right in Japan on war issues. In the October 2009 edition of *Seiron* (the rightwing monthly opinion magazine), for example, Abiru Rui repeated the old mantra that there was no documentary evidence to demonstrate that “comfort women” were forced into military prostitution.²⁸ Abiru’s arguments were explicitly stated in the context of the Democratic Party of Japan’s election victory, explaining that Prime Minister Hatoyama had to be prevented from going any further than previous governments in repeating the [Murayama communiqué of 1995](#) (the apology repeated by all subsequent Japanese governments as the standard wording of Japan’s official apology). The flaws of such positivist approaches and nationalist historiography have been exposed at length by many researchers,²⁹ but as long as these disingenuous historiographical practices persist, it is necessary to draw attention to them.

With the installation of the Democratic Party of Japan government in September 2009, the war issue has disappeared somewhat from the international political agenda in East Asia (or perhaps it has just been drowned out by the controversy over the Futenma base relocation issue on the Japanese public agenda). But this does not mean that the historical consciousness debate has been resolved. Japan’s political rightwing may be in the temporary wilderness of opposition, but rightwing voices remain influential and maintain the ability to stir controversy. Kobayashi Yoshinori remains an active publisher, and former Air Self Defense Forces Chief of Staff Tamogami Toshio (who was forced to resign after winning a prize for

an explicitly nationalistic and militaristic essay denying Japanese war guilt) has become the new darling of the rightwing and recreated himself as a prominent pundit following his dismissal from the ASDF in 2008.³⁰ One can be sure that such people will not lie down and accept a Japanese government taking an apologetic stance, particularly on the “comfort women” issue, based on what they consider to be the “flimsy” evidence of testimony by victims. Consequently, however calm the diplomatic waters seem to be given the more conciliatory stance of the Democratic Party of Japan government toward China and South Korea, Japan’s war memories will remain heavily contested, and the use of testimony will remain an issue of historiographical contestation at the heart of Japan’s unresolved national debate over colonialism and war.

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Notes

¹ The ‘Shin-Gomanizumu Sengen’ column started in *SPA!* in 1991 and moved to *Sapio* in 1995. See Frederik L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley: 1996); pp. 224-8.

² Kobayashi’s other books include: *Taiwanron*

(On Taiwan, 2000), *Sensōron 2* (On War 2, 2001), *Sensōron 3* (On War 3, 2003), *Okinawaron* (On Okinawa, 2005), *Yasukuniron* (On Yasukuni, 2005), *Iwayuru A-kyu senpan* (The So-Called Class A War Criminals, 2006), *Heisei Jōiron* (Expelling the Barbarians in the Heisei Period, 2007), *Tennōron* (On the Emperor, 2009).

³ For example, Uesugi Satoshi, *Datsu Gōmanizumu Sengen, Kobayashi Yoshinori no “ianfu” mondai* (Breaking Away from the New Declaration of Arrogance, The “Comfort Women” Issue According to Kobayashi Yoshinori) (Tōhō Shuppan, Osaka: 1997); Obinata Sumio et al, *Kimitachi wa Sensō de Shineru ka, Kobayashi Yoshinori “Sensōron” Hihan* (Can you die for your country in war? A criticism of *Sensōron*) (Otsuki Shoten, Tokyo 1999); Uesugi Satoshi, *Datsu Sensōron, Kobayashi Yoshinori to no Saiban wo Hete* (Breaking Away from *Sensōron*: The Kobayashi Yoshinori Lawsuits) (Tōhō Shuppan, Osaka 2000).

⁴ Aaron Gerow, “Consuming Asia, Consuming Japan: the neonationalist revisionism in Japan” in Laura E. Hein and Mark Selden (eds) *Censoring History: citizenship and memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (M. E. Sharpe, New York: 2000).

⁵ Rumi Sakamoto, “Will you go to war? Or will you stop being Japanese? Nationalism and History in Kobayashi Yoshinori’s *Sensōron*”, [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), 2008.

⁶ Philip A. Seaton, *Japan’s Contested War Memories: the “memory rifts” in historical consciousness of World War II* (Routledge, London: 2007), pp. 199-200.

⁷ Schodt, *Dreamland Japan*, pp. 225-6.

⁸ Kobayashi Yoshinori, *Sensōron*, Tokyo: Gentōsha; pp. 176-7.

⁹ *Sensōron*, p. 177.

¹⁰ A further argument is that the high wages “comfort women” could receive in comparison to the soldiers they “comforted” explains why women might want to work as “comfort women”. However, refuting abduction (“forced transportation”) is the primary goal for nationalists.

¹¹ There are various renditions, but one prominent proponent of this analogy was Fujioka Nobukatsu. See Fujioka, Nobukatsu, *“Jigyakushikan” no byōri* (An Analysis of Masochistic Historical Views in Japan (Bunshun Bunko: Tokyo 2000), p. 126.

¹² *Sensōron*, p. 180.

¹³ *Sensōron*, p. 179. Following the publication of the Japanese government’s initial investigative report into the “comfort women” on 6 July 1992, the Korean government complained that it was based solely on documentary evidence and ignored “comfort women’s” testimony. The second report, issued on 4 August 1993, which precipitated Kōno’s apology, did include testimony. The testimony was central to the report’s conclusions that there had been the “forced transportation” of women. This is Kobayashi’s primary objection to the second report and Kōno statement. For details see Philip Seaton, “Reporting the ‘comfort women’ issue, 1991-1992: Japan’s contested war memories in the national press,” *Japanese Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, May 2006, pp. 99-112.

¹⁴ The leading figure in the campaign to expose Yoshida as a liar was historian and Tsukurukai member Hata Ikuhiko, who visited the areas where Yoshida said he had served and abducted women to become “comfort women”. Hata’s conclusion that Yoshida was lying was published in the nationalistic magazine *Seiron* in the June 1992 edition: “Shōwa shi no nazo wo u – Jūgun ianfutachi no shunjū” (In Pursuit of the Mysteries of Showa History – the age of the “comfort women”). Yoshida was forced to

admit he had fabricated parts of his story.

¹⁵ *Sensōron*, p. 182.

¹⁶ Kobayashi suggests through his introductory anecdote (the murder plot against him) that testimony on its own is insufficient to bring criminal charges, but this is somewhat misleading. Groping on trains (*chikan*) is a crime for which there is typically little or no physical evidence, and court proceedings rest solely on the word of accuser, accused and witnesses. Such cases are notoriously difficult to prove (leaving thousands of molested women with little recourse to justice) but have also led to some well-publicized miscarriages of justice. Nevertheless, the existence of such trials (and the admission of testimony in all other trials) clearly indicates that testimony is an important form of evidence that will stand up in court.

¹⁷ *Sensōron*, p. 271.

¹⁸ *Sensōron*, p. 248.

¹⁹ Sakamoto, “Will you go to war?”.

²⁰ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon Books, New York: 1986), p. 65.

²¹ *Sensōron*, p. 180. See also Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military in World War II*, (Columbia University Press, NY: 2000).

²² *Sensōron*, p. 18. It is highly ironic that such a critique of consumerist Japanese society exists in a text that has become so representative of

“consumerist nationalism” on the war issue (see Gerow, “Consuming Asia, Consuming Japan”). Not only Kobayashi but also other nationalist writers put out dozens of mass-market books regurgitating the familiar nationalist arguments of “Japan did no wrong” or “Japan has been tricked into accepting war guilt”. A consumerist public that feeds on nationalism and the sensational controversy it creates is what enables Kobayashi to become extremely influential (and wealthy!) as an individual.

²³ *Sensōron*, p. 96.

²⁴ *Sensōron*, pp. 57-64.

²⁵ *Sensōron*, p. 59.

²⁶ *Sensōron*, p. 208.

²⁷ *Sensōron*, p. 64.

²⁸ Abiru Rui, “Dai-ni Murayama danwa wo soshi seyo” (Let’s prevent a second Murayama communiqué), *Seiron* September 2009, pp. 92-3.

²⁹ For a good recent example see Yonson Ahn, “Japan’s “comfort women” and Historical Memory: The Neo-nationalist Counter-attack,” in Sven Saaler and Wolfgang Schwentker (eds) *The Power of Memory in Modern Japan* (Global Oriental, Folkestone: 2008), pp. 32-53.

³⁰ Herbert Bix, “Tamogami's World: Japan's Top Soldier Reignites Conflict Over the Past”, [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#), 2008.



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