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Testimony and War Memories in Japan: Introduction

Philip Seaton

"Testimony and War Memories in Japan", comprising two essays and an introduction, brings together a most unlikely pair of Japanese authors: Kurahashi Ayako and Kobayashi Yoshinori. The first essay, "War and Responsibility in a Japanese Family", is a selection of extracts from Kurahashi Ayako's autobiographical book *My Father's Dying Wish* (Paulownia Press, 2009). It describes the effects on her and her family of her father's deathbed request: for an apology to be placed on his gravestone for his actions as a military policeman (*kempei*) in China during World War II. The second essay, "Historiography and War Nationalism in Japan", is a study of the uses of testimony within Kobayashi Yoshinori's bestselling manga *Sensōron*, On War (Gentōsha, 1998).

In terms of their positions on war history and Japan's war responsibility stemming from its actions during World War II, Kurahashi and Kobayashi could hardly be further apart. Kurahashi is a retired schoolteacher and progressive activist with interests in Japan's China War and the "comfort women" issue. A staunch critic of the Japanese government's responses to war responsibility issues, Kurahashi calls for sincere official apologies and payment of compensation to victims of Japanese aggression.

Philip Seaton and Kurahashi Ayako

By contrast, Kobayashi is a neonationalist manga artist. He was at the forefront of campaigns by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho wo Tsukurukai) to promote more patriotic history in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He denies Japanese atrocities, such as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, and lauds the spirit and sacrifice of the war generation, particularly kamikaze pilots. Kobayashi considers apologies and compensation for Japanese war actions anathema. He calls for Japanese people to shake off their 'masochistic' historical views and revere the war generation.

Kobayashi Yoshinori

Their public profiles are very different, too. Kurahashi enjoys modest success as an author. She has a number of novels to her credit, as well as the autobiographical book *My Father's Dying Wish* and some non-fiction articles, including in the magazine *Sekai* (World). Almost all her writings address war responsibility issues. However, she is largely unknown outside progressive activist circles. The Japanese original of *My Father's Dying Wish* (*Kempei datta chichi no nokoshita mono*, Kōbunken, 2002) had a modest readership, having sold around 4,000 copies by 2009.

By contrast, Kobayashi is prolific and famous. His book *Sensōron* and other writings have sold many millions of copies. His manga series, *Shin Gōmanizumu Sengen* (A New Declaration of Arrogance), has been featured in the weekly magazine *Sapio* since 1995 (and in *SPA!* 1991-5). While focusing heavily on the Asia-Pacific War, he has campaigned on a wide range of other issues, too, from HIV-tainted blood products in the 1990s to the so-called "war on terror" in the 2000s. Kobayashi's sharp humor, his vivid, at times memorable works as a manga artist, and a brash style have appealed to many, particularly to Japanese youth. He is arguably the most influential rightwing protagonist in the war history debates of the past decade.

However, Kurahashi and Kobayashi also have surprising amounts in common. Both are from the immediate postwar generation: Kurahashi was born in 1947 and Kobayashi in 1953. Neither has to deal with issues of personal responsibility or the traumas of personal war experiences, yet both grew up in the decades immediately following the war. Both were heavily influenced by their relationships with a particularly loved relative who served as a soldier during the war: Kurahashi's father was a military policeman in Manchuria and China, while Kobayashi's grandfather was a soldier in New Guinea. As the two essays reveal, these family backgrounds are central to their motivations to address war issues.

Another commonality is the theme of individual responsibility, which is central to both authors' work as they consider their relatives'

wartime actions and more generally those of Japanese soldiers. Mainstream war discourse in Japan has generally attributed responsibility to "the military" and wartime leaders (particularly those convicted as Class A War Criminals such as General Tōjō Hideki . . . but not the emperor). Ordinary soldiers, by contrast, are often portrayed as victims of a brutal military system or as individuals caught up in tragic events beyond their control. Kurahashi, however, ultimately concludes that her father bears individual responsibility for his war actions. After much soul-searching she is unable to escape the painful conclusion that her father did "many inexcusable things" to the Chinese people. By contrast, Kobayashi cannot conceive of his grandfather as bearing responsibility for any crime; rather, he casts him in a heroic light for the very fact of having served his nation. Kobayashi's focus on the individual relates to what he considers to be the selfish nature of contemporary Japanese society in comparison to the self-sacrifice of the war generation. He is particularly keen to ask whether members of today's younger generation are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the greater good of the nation, as the kamikaze did during the war.

Testimony

This series looks particularly at another important theme running through both writers' work: testimony. Both Kurahashi and Kobayashi blend historical investigation and autobiography in their writings. In their historical investigations, the voices of individual soldiers, "comfort women" and others who experienced the war are introduced at length. At the same time, both works are autobiographical. Kurahashi and Kobayashi feature prominently as actors in their own writing. This provides fascinating insights into the dynamics of representation and grassroots activism on the war issue in Japan. Neither Kurahashi nor Kobayashi are academic writers and they speak from the heart. Both are utterly dedicated to their respective causes.

The essay "Historiography and War Nationalism in Japan" discusses at length Kobayashi's use of testimony. It finds his usage inconsistent and distorting. Kobayashi criticizes the use of testimony by other writers critical of Japan's war atrocities, yet he relies heavily on testimony. Testimony supporting his nationalist agenda is deemed reliable while that opposing his nationalist agenda is dismissed as unreliable. For Kurahashi, the reliability of testimony is of great concern, too, although she dedicates very little space in her book to the methodological problems of using testimony that Kobayashi raises. When confronted by women telling the most shocking stories of sexual violence committed by Japanese soldiers – and even more poignantly, the decades of extreme physical and emotional suffering that it caused – Kurahashi's instinct is not to doubt or question, but to reach out, hold the woman's hand and offer what encouragement she can. If some mistakes of detail exist within the woman's testimony it is to be expected in recounting traumatic events that occurred many decades ago. What is most important is to acknowledge the woman's pain, and to recognize the responsibility of the Japanese military for ruining her and countless other people's lives.

When testimony presents a direct challenge to her progressive views, such as when an old soldier reminisces and justifies his war actions, Kurahashi's instinct is to challenge the way in which people see their own position within war history, rather than to challenge memories of the experiences themselves. This is demonstrated by an episode in *My Father's Dying Wish*, which is the only time Kobayashi Yoshinori's name appears in her book. An old soldier, Mr. A, and six other rightwing colleagues decide to attend a talk about the Nanjing Massacre given by a grassroots activist group Kurahashi is involved in. The men are let in on condition that they do not interrupt the presentation by Ono Kenji (whose important work documenting the executions of surrendered Chinese soldiers in Nanjing appears in Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi's *The Nanjing Atrocity, 1937-38: Complicating the Picture*, Chapter 4). Kurahashi writes:

> Ono calmly gave his presentation and introduced diaries and photographs using overhead slides. At the end of the talk there was question time and the group of men all thrust up their hands and said '*hai*' (yes, me) as if they were children at school. 'The photos of the Nanjing massacre are all fake', said one middle-aged man, while another said, 'The atmosphere at this meeting is completely different from the atmosphere at ours.' What he was really saying is that their meetings were upbeat while ours were morose. Ultimately they said nothing about Ono's presentation. At the end the old man Mr. A said, 'I fought in the war. What do people who've never been to war understand? I know because I was there.'
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> *Mr. A may have experienced the war but his arguments relied too heavily on that experience, which surely counted for little if he had not grasped the nature of the whole war* [Italics added]. It was so crude and shallow. I just thought, 'is this the level of the liberalist view of history?' I was angry and disappointed. But, after the meeting had ended a middle-aged man came up to me and said, 'Let's have a public debate. We have Kobayashi Yoshinori's book on our side. War is not for wimps, because it's war y'know.' I declined their offer saying that our viewpoints were different. I had no sense that we could ever see eye to eye.
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> Kurahashi Ayako – *My Father's Dying Wish*, p. 62.

Indeed, Kurahashi and Kobayashi will never see eye to eye. But placing their writings side by side here reveals much about the contested nature of Japanese war discourses and the role of testimony within those discourses. Perhaps better than any opinion poll data or academic monograph can do, these two contrasting autobiographical voices bring into focus the formidable hurdle that Japan faces in generating even a modicum of national consensus about its war history. Yet failure to do so cannot but leave clouded Japan's relations with her most important neighbors, China and the two Koreas, as well as the Philippines, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations. As such these two essays are not simply about the opinions and activism of Kurahashi Ayako and Kobayashi Yoshinori, but reveal the most fundamental aspects of the "history issue" in Asia.

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