



# Life encapsulated: Addressivity in Japanese life writing



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the 'graphic artifacts' (Hull, 2012) of *jibunshi* ('personal history'), Japanese life writing, as semiotic time capsuling. By semiotic time capsuling, I mean a material process of effacement and resurfacing that mediates 'non-adjacent timescales' (Lemke, 2000). I focus on one grassroots literacy movement (original formulator of the genre name, *jibunshi*) and its ideology of addressivity, a fantasy of tele-communication that conjures up other times, other lives, and other values. The movement's practical philosophy of the life-historical 'record' as a time capsule-like sign addressed to distanced addressees offers its participants an unlikely tool for politicizing everyday life against hegemonic nationalist nostalgia.

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## 1. The everyday remains

The record makes one happening, one event, eternal.  
The record makes marginal events of the world total.  
The record connects actions of the no-name to humanity.  
Only the record gives eternal life to the disappearing.  
Recording, one does not remain silent; so one need not remain anguished.  
Recording, one will not be forgotten; so one need not repeat the same story of glory.

Hashimoto Yoshio, 'The Record'<sup>1</sup>

Or you open it up and see nothing there: the life that you thought would be attached to these scribbles has evaporated, the wine has gone stale. Either that or it has become a sauce so thick that it's disheartening: you don't have the time: you close the book, saying 'later, I'll look at it later.' You die without rereading it.  
But sometimes a dialogue begins.

Philippe Lejeune, 'Rereading Your Diary'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Hashimoto, 1974, p. 1. All translations from Japanese sources in this paper are mine, unless otherwise noted. Japanese personal names appearing in Japanese-language sources are rendered in the original order, viz., Last name, First name.

<sup>2</sup> Lejeune, 2009, p. 325.

Hashimoto Yoshio had a rubber stamp. It simply says, 'Preserve' (*hazon*). Nothing special: simple, unadorned, probably mass-produced. He may have had many. But for him, it represented a tremendous power. Throughout his life he had developed a habit of marking his personal belongings with this inscription, especially various kinds of documents. Hashimoto (1902–1985) was a poet, activist and philosopher from Hachioji, a suburban city in west Tokyo. His name is virtually unknown in the Japanese national public sphere: by his own admission, he was a 'no-name,' a nobody, that is, an ordinary man, while he also considered himself an 'eccentric' (Hashimoto, 1996, p. 165; Arashi no Naka de no Shuppan o Iwau Kai, 1997, p. 108) When he does get talked about today, it is almost exclusively in the context of a social movement he started in the 1960s, called Fudangi, 'Recording the Everyday.' A grassroots literacy project, Fudangi aimed to mobilize 'ordinary people' to write and self-publish their own 'personal histories' (or *jibunshi*), and to document the changing landscape of Japanese postwar social life in order to leave posterity traces of the everyday. The movement is still ongoing, even 30 years after the founder's death. The story of this movement and the life historical genre of *jibunshi* are the central ingredient in this paper, but for now, let me dwell a little bit longer on Hashimoto's stamp and his habit of 'preserving' texts.<sup>3</sup>

When he died in 1985 Hashimoto left a massive amount of documents, largely unorganized, including those related to Fudangi's 'everyday life documentation' project. Soon after his death his Fudangi followers created an archival depository for these texts, a rather bland, unadorned prefab facility, which eventually came under the private care of Hashimoto's son at the son and his wife's residence in south Hachioji. In 2003 I visited the couple to learn about their father and his movement, was given access to the library, which the couple simply referred to as *shoko*, 'book stacks,' and over the years I gradually became part of their project of reorganizing the everyday remains of their father.

The *shoko* has come to serve as a placeholder for those objects inscribed with Hashimoto's sign, 'Preserve.' But there appears to be no particular principle according to which he decided to use this sign. While it is found on usual suspects, like his book collection, his published and unpublished works, and journals and life histories produced by his Fudangi followers, the sign also transpires on what largely seem to me to be random scribblings he had made on the back of supermarket ads and junk mail, as well as other ephemera like business cards, posters, tourist brochures and event flyers. It is not (simply) that he saw something important in these objects. The sign does not carve out categories of the addressee to be recruited in any interesting way. Rather, it orders a potential peruser to pay attention to the text without specifying anything about the nature of perusal. Scholars and local historians, as well as Fudangi followers, have made visits to this *shoko*, and like these previous visitors, every time I confront the Preserve sign I feel uncertain as to what, concretely, to do with these texts thus designated for preservation, except, perhaps, for urging myself to pay extra attention to them. The way the sign draws attention while leaving the condition of attending unspecified recalls the kind of 'indexical' sign that C. S. Peirce called 'degenerate [by one degree], a sign that 'represents a single object because it is factually connected with it, but which conveys no information whatever' (Peirce, 1992, p. 172).

'Preserve' announces an end of entextualization, sealing the text as a finalized object. The *shoko*, then, is itself a space of 'Preserve,' an index that draws attention to all kinds of 'finished' texts for later use without specifying conditions of such use. As suggested in Hashimoto's poem 'The Record,' cited above, he gestures to a fantasy of finalization that seeks to arrest the everyday remains of his life, a 'record of the no-name,' *in potentia*, placing them under the potential care of a peruser, *any one* among 'humanity,' 'eternally,' so that the record-maker can, in his own time, continue to live, and die, 'without anguish.' For Hashimoto the record is no mere representation of the past; it is an art of finalizing a life. But by precisely the same token, the record also opens up a new life of its own, outliving the record-maker. There is a gap between the record of a life and the life of a record.

In this paper I explore this compound aspect of finalization and potentiality as a way to rethink 'addressivity.' Bakhtin (1986, p. 95) defines addressivity as 'an essential marker' of sign-in-event, its 'quality of being directed to someone.' 'The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 99). My central ethnographic focus is on Fudangi, a project of grassroots literacy led by Hashimoto that mobilizes *jibunshi*, 'personal history,' as a key method of preserving the elusive reality of postwar Japanese everyday life. To borrow from Goffman, Fudangi seeks to capture that temporality of 'the everyday life of an average person ... [where] events involving him will be memorable to no one' (1963, p. 69), and do so not by making such persons more 'memorable' (by elevating them above 'average') but in such a way as to preserve that very condition of relative non-memorableness, the 'residue' of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991), as an authentic sign of 'ordinary people,' the modern no-name. How do Fudangi participants construct their own fantasy of addressivity to animate their everyday history project? How does *jibunshi*, as a genre, organize 'concepts of the addressee' as Fudangi practitioners attempt to preserve a time that may turn out to be 'memorable to nobody'?

In attending to these questions I find useful Hull's formulation of 'graphic artifacts' (2012). The emphasis he places in his analysis on the agency of documents and the sense of uncertainty helps clarify my argument. 'The perdurance of [graphic artifacts] beyond the circumstances of their creation situates them within a horizon of uncertainty' (Hull 2012: 129), and their material circulation breathes new life into them in processes of 'decontextualization' and 'recontextualization' (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). As Blommaert also suggests, 'writing is productive: it offers a rich indexical terrain for others to judge' (2008, p. 189). While Hull follows Bakhtin, as I do (Nozawa, 2007, p. 156), to emphasize the impossibility of 'finalization' in these

<sup>3</sup> Citizen-initiated grassroots literacy movements like Fudangi are often grouped under the rubric of *seikatsu kiroku undō* ('life document movement') in the chronicle of Japanese social movements; see Amano, 2005; Gayle, 2005; Sand, 2007; Sasaki-Uemura, 2001, Tsurumi, 1997.

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