

# The meaning of life: Regimes of textuality and memory in Japanese personal historiography

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## Abstract

This paper explores cultural logics of memory-making and textuality as manifested through discursive practices in Japanese “personal historiography”. It proposes a sufficient conceptualization of the textuality of reading and writing for sociocultural analysis of memory and history from a pragmatic semiotic perspective. Through close examination of two cases of text-making, I identify writing not just as a tool for decontextualization; rather, or additionally, I demonstrate its functions to destabilize or create contexts, in particular contexts of memory-making. This view of writing allows for a perspective that sees the use and production of personal histories as a proleptic act, the one that foreshadows the ways in which texts written as historical account may be recontextualized in future contexts of reading within imagined and actual trajectories of circulation. The analysis based on this perspective reveals the central assumptions and their ironical workings in the discourse and practice of Japanese personal historiography, regarding a distinct kind of self-fashioning, memory-making, and historical consciousness.

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*Keywords:* Textuality; Semiotics; Materiality; Memory; Japan

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## 1. The flavor of socio-biographical diachrony

Levi-Strauss writes of *churinga*, objects emblematic of “totemic” structure much discussed by Durkheim and others, that they “are the palpable proofs of mythical times, *Alchuringa*, which could still be conceived without them but of which there would no

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longer be any physical evidence.” “Similarly,” he continues, “our past would not disappear if we lost our archives; it would be deprived of what one is inclined to call its diachronic flavor” (1966, p. 242). The analogy continues:

Nothing in our civilization more closely resembles the periodic pilgrimages made by the initiated Australians, escorted by their sages, than our conducted tours to Goethe’s or Victor Hugo’s house, the furniture of which inspires emotions as strong as they are arbitrary. As in the case of the churinga, the main thing is not that the bed is the self-same one on which it is proved Van Gogh slept: all the visitor asks is to be shown it (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 244).

In reality, however, the “showing” of the past requires more than the visitor’s mere desire. For example, modern institutions of the display of cultures and histories, such as museums and libraries, have to make conscious efforts to feign the semblance of that “self-sameness” of the sign vehicle, whether a piece of furniture or paper, so as to render its “diachronic flavor” credible and authoritative – and tasteful – when it is “shown” (cf. Handler and Gable, 1997). What more can we say about this evocative notion of the “diachronic flavor” of the past retained in the sign, for analysis of cultural notions of temporality?

This paper attempts to recover what Levi-Strauss seems to have downplayed, the fact that the semiotic *instruments* by which “the past is shown” both presuppose a certain cultural background and have creative, performative effects on their contextual and cultural surround. I will creatively employ the notion of “flavor” as a synaesthetic trope throughout this paper to explore the materiality of semiotic instruments, the ways in which semiotic media as objects index the cultural category of time and person. I will focus on a specific type of semiotic instrument, graphic artifacts, known in Japan as *jibunshi* or ‘personal history,’ a popular genre of first-person historiography.<sup>1</sup>

Many commentators have pointed to the heightened sense of disbelief and unease that pervaded Japanese public and private life in the 1990s, popularly known as “the lost decade” in the midst of economic recession (Harootunian and Yoda, 2000). A dramatic series of widely publicized national events of commemoration, most notably the death of the emperor Showa in 1989, paved way for a massive outburst of contentious claims about what to make of Japan’s “long post-war” (see Conrad, 2003; Harootunian, 2000). What is commonly observed in this eruption of historical discourse and memory-making is the repeatedly invoked watchword ‘balancing [as in bookkeeping] of history’ (*rekishi no seisan*). The phrase well encapsulates what Gluck aptly called “end-ological” preoccupations, “a seemingly irresistible eschatological surge [...] though without apparent mention of the Second Coming (1997, p. 1). Such a sense of closure presupposes a temporal *terminus ad quem* in the future, a deictic anchoring point from which to recapitulate current

<sup>1</sup> I will follow Hull’s (2003) use of the term “graphic artifacts” interchangeably with “text-artifacts” as discussed in Silverstein and Urban (1996), to refer in general to written textual objects. Silverstein writes, “Text as artifact [...] is only the merest suggestion of denotational text, interactional text, and hence, of course, of discursive interaction. But the *discursive interactional accomplishment of using a text-artifact in some denotational-textual or even interactional textual event(s)* presents, albeit in terms of the problem of ‘reading’ the text (i.e., text-artifact), all of the problems of any discursive interaction, *particularly complex in the way of functional lamination of strata of metapragmatic-pragmatic regimentation*” (1993, p. 38; italics mine). The present paper explores such complexity.

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