

JAPANESE AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 20th Century

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Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial 'identity' question, and the schizophrenic identification of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Place of Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Japan

Western autobiography— ranging from the work of Saint Augustine to Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Thoreau, and others— was introduced to Japan late in the Meiji period. These works circulated within the *bundan* literary community, and considerable attention was paid to crafting personal narratives that

expressed one's inner self and the quality of one's social relationships. Yet with few exceptions—the Fukuzawa Yukichi autobiography, most notably—there was little evident interest in the Western genre of comprehensive, exhaustive autobiography. Japanese writers favored shorter, more episodic accounts of one's life and times. Confessional narrative played a key role, largely owing to the Naturalist coterie (1906-10) and its credo of authentic personal expression. This in turn led to the so-called I-novel (*shishōsetsu*) genre, whose claim to pure, unmediated expression free of artifice achieved currency in the Taishō period. The genre, which has generated much debate among literary scholars, remains a hallmark of modern Japanese literature, having essentially displacing 'standard' autobiography.

In short, the most productive vehicles for modern Japanese autobiographical literature have been in the form of episodic reminiscence and autobiographical fiction. The Japanese reader has come to understand that one's most authentic voice is channeled not through an actuarial recounting of the facts and data of one's life, but rather through subjective and suggestive narrative artistry. On the other hand, there has long been a demand for biographical accounts of prominent figures in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. In fact, a number of *bundan* authors who were reluctant to produce their own autobiography took on biographical projects at the behest of major publishing houses.

On the Stages of Twentieth-Century Japanese Autobiography

Pre-war accounts

Late-Meiji and Taishō writers favored accounts of one's childhood and youth, typically expressing nostalgic longing for a world on the cusp of being transformed by urban development, mechanization, and social dislocation. Noteworthy in this regard is Naka Kansuke's *The Silver Spoon* (Gin no saji, 1913). Naka, a protégé of Natsume Sōseki, produced a fascinating record of his upbringing, told in the voice of the experiencing child as opposed to the reminiscing adult. As the narrator relates in his introduction, these memories were triggered by a small silver spoon:

In the drawer of the bookcase in my study, which is full of all sorts of worthless objects, I've kept a tiny box since I was a child. Made of cork wood and adorned with a peony print on each corner, the box may have been an imported snuff box. Although not particularly attractive, the soft, smooth texture of its polished wood has made it one of my prized possessions.

The box is packed full with cowry shells, camellia seeds, and assorted objects that were the playthings of my infancy and childhood. Of these objects, the one most dear to me is a small, oddly-shaped silver spoon. From time to time I'd take the spoon out of the box, carefully wipe away the tarnish, and simply gaze at it, losing all sense of time. . .

Based on *The Silver Spoon*, pp 25-26

As for expansive, Western-style autobiography, it is interesting to note that this literary vehicle appealed to political radicals and leftists. For instance, figures such as Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946) and Ōsugi Sakae (1885-1923) produced major autobiographies that served to promote their political agenda. Ōsugi, incidentally, was influenced by the autobiography of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Of note as well are the autobiographical accounts of radical Japanese women, some of whom were arrested—and executed—by the authorities. Mikiso Hane has compiled a landmark collection of their writings, which challenge the stereotype of compliant Japanese womanhood.

Postwar accounts of the war

The Pacific war, which resulted in the cataclysmic demise of Japan's empire, gave rise to a remarkable production of autobiographical accounts that looked back on one's experiences—both on the front lines and in the homeland—and critiqued the militarism and blind chauvinism that propelled the war effort. Such candor was of course impossible during wartime, on account of the repressive military regime.

Autobiographical accounts of wartime experience were the work of both literary people and 'ordinary' citizens caught up in the conflict in different ways. Among the former, Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) was sent to the Philippines in 1944, where he experienced the disintegration of the Japanese forces in the face of the

American onslaught. Taken captive in January 1945, Ōoka subsequently wrote of his harrowing experiences in a celebrated war memoir. Consider the following episode, which recounts, with a certain philosophical detachment, one's failed suicide attempt in the face of a totally hopeless situation:

I do not intend to belabor the question of why I failed to kill myself. The psychology of a suicide is of minimal interest, and the psychology of the man who fails in his attempt is of less interest still. . . . What actually determines the outcome is in most cases an entirely extraneous, accidental factor. My having survived owes itself to the fact that the hand grenade I carried, which would dispatch me to the hereafter, turned out to be a dud. . . . I had to smile. The irony of fate that refused to grant me a quick and easy death seemed somehow funny to me. (Based on *Taken Captive*, p 26)

A dramatically different perspective is presented by Sakai Saburō, whose autobiography recounts his exploits as Japan's most celebrated pilot and fighter ace— albeit on the losing side.

Complementing the many written accounts of the war is an equally impressive body of oral narratives by a broad spectrum of Japanese. One important sub-category concerns the recollections of those who survived the atomic bombings. A collection of such accounts, compiled by Haruko and Theodore Cook and reminiscent of the celebrated oral histories of Studs Terkel (*The Good War*, for instance), provides what can be considered a composite portrayal of the Japanese wartime experience.

Postwar fictional autobiography

The Occupation period (1945-52) witnessed an outpouring of fictional autobiography that variously recounts, through personal testimony and literary artifice, both the postwar privation and dislocation, and the nation's gradual recovery and regeneration.

Several autobiographical novels by Dazai Osamu (1909-48)— *Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948)— speak to the spiritual vacuum of Japan's postwar circumstance and the loss of the old imperial order and its patriarchal center. Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-2013), for his part, crafted a darkly comic vision of the postwar dystopia through a series of autobiographical tales centering on a pathetically dysfunctional family— in particular, the figure of his hapless, delusional father. A representative account is *A View by the Sea*, which tells of his mother's dying days in a mental institution and his awkward attempts to connect with an inept father.

The career of Mishima Yukio (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated— and enigmatic— literary figures, was launched by an unprecedented autobiographical exposé of the author's sexual awakening. Entitled *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), the novel reveals the protagonist's complex and conflicted interiority through a series of homoerotic encounters recalled with dramatic intensity. What follows is the first of these memories:

My earliest memory— I was around four at the time— has haunted me with a strangely vivid image. . . . It is of a young man who was approaching us, with ruddy cheeks and shining eyes and wearing a dirty roll of cloth around his head as a sweatband. . . . He was a night-soil man, a ladler of excrement, dressed as a common laborer with close-fitting cotton trousers. I found myself choked by desire, thinking that I wanted to *be* him. . . . An inexpressible adoration for those trousers was born in me, for reasons I could not understand. (Based on *Confessions of a Mask*, pp 7-9)

A very different perspective on one's childhood and youth is provided by Kita Morio (1927-2011) in his beautifully evocative autobiographical novel, *Ghosts* (Yūrei, 1954). The son of one of Japan's preëminent modern poets, Saitō Mokichi, Kita captures the exquisite sensitivity of his younger self through his masterful use of lyrical prose. *Ghosts*— an homage to those departed souls whom he recalls— begins with the following reflection upon what makes us human:

Why this desire to relate what we recall of the past? Because, just as any race has its mythology, so an individual bears within him his own private myths— myths that gradually fade, finally

disappearing into the depths of time. And yet things leave their traces, and are a constant preoccupation of the deeper reaches of the mind, lasting until that time when all our actions cease.

And suddenly one day this normally unconscious activity may open up for us and become an awakening of sorts— much like a silkworm, as it slowly consumes a mulberry leaf for no reason it can comprehend, becomes aware of the faint sound of its own mastication. So it raises its head, unsure, fearful almost as it gazes around its small world, experiencing itself as something— whatever that something might be. (Based on *Ghosts*, pp 1-2)

In bears noting that several writers did opt for the more comprehensive, Western-style autobiographic account of their upbringing. Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's *Childhood Years* and Yoshikawa Eiji's *Fragments of a Past* present fascinating and engaging accounts of their respective families and boyhood friends, while serving as valuable documentary sources on life and times in late-Meiji Tokyo and Yokohama.

Family chronicles

An important category of twentieth-century Japanese autobiographical writing is the family chronicle, which broadens the scope beyond the individual subject to encompass one's family and social sphere. Important examples include *Chronicle of My Mother* (1982) by Inoue Yasushi, a renowned author of historical fiction. This deeply moving work recounts his mother's mental decline and eventual death as experienced by her children and grandchildren over a period of ten years. Kita Morio, whose childhood memoir is noted above, published the multi-volume *House of Nire* (1984), which relates the rise and gradual decline of three generations of a family-run psychiatric clinic. Ôe Kenzaburô departs from his elite literary persona in *A Healing Family* (1996), which tells of parental devotion to their brain-damaged son, Hikari, and a father's promotion of Hikari's remarkable career in musical composition. And finally, Inoue Hisashi can be credited with producing a composite family autobiography in the form of numerous personal essays and reminiscences that recount, in a voice at once comical and poignant, the pratfalls and antics of his youth and the challenges of being a father to his three daughters.

Women writers and their autobiographical collages

A number of women writers turned to personal narratives centering on family, acquaintances, and career. For some, the accumulated volume of such narratives amounts to a sequential, composite autobiography. For example, Kôda Aya (1906-90) embarked on her distinguished literary career on the strength of a series of remembrances of her father, the celebrated author Kôda Rohan (1867-1947). Aya's personal writings offer a trenchant and sensitive account of a father-daughter relationship that witnessed the vicissitudes of Japan's imperial and wartime history.

For her part, Uno Chiyo (1897-1996) wrote widely of herself as a liberated modern woman— a so-called *moga*— and of her many romantic encounters and escapades. Mukôda Kuniko (1929-81), representing the next generation of Japanese women, wrote numerous personal accounts of herself as a daughter, professional writer, and keen observer of the social scene. The penchant for publishing collections of literary personalia marks as well the work of Mure Yôko (1954-), representing the next generation of Japanese women writers. Mure's savvy, occasionally sassy narrator delights in her pithy, stylish observations and personal revelations.

A recent autobiography entitled *Will Not Forget Both Laughter and Tears* (2013) is the work of Mitani Tomoko (1945-), an 'ordinary housewife' who took it upon herself to write about her world in appealingly down-to-earth language.

Other voices

An important category of autobiographical literature is the recent work of expatriate Japanese who reflect on their bifurcated identity in Japanese and/ or their adopted language. For instance, Kyoko Mori (1957-) has written numerous works of autobiographical fiction in English— most notably, *Polite Lies: On Being*

a *Woman Caught Between Cultures* (1997)— that recount her dual heritage and the circumstances of her rejection of her Japanese 'self' in favor of the freedom she gained in the American Midwest.

A far larger category— two complementary categories, actually— consists, on one hand, of the personal writings by foreigners— *gaijin*— reflecting on their experiences living and travelling in Japan. On the other hand, there are numerous accounts by Japanese reflecting on their 'expat' experience, be it in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, China, or elsewhere. Such writing can be traced back to the late Tokugawa era, when foreigners were allowed into the country, and when Japanese were once again able to leave their homeland and experience the larger world. Of particular interest is a fascinating anthology, edited by George and Carlson, of expat reminiscence by a range of Western writers.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Japanese autobiography offers a kaleidoscope of forms and voices, ranging from the 'standard' comprehensive account of one's life to the assorted personal episodes and reflections that collectively yield a composite profile. The proportion of 'standard' autobiography appears to have increased since the postwar era, but the predilection for the personal essay and for autobiographical fiction remains strong. The border separating the 'genuine' and 'factual' from the fictive and fanciful remains obscure at best.

Autobiographical expression in the age of electronic and social media— in Japan and elsewhere— has been radically transformed, and narrative itself has given way to (or been augmented by) images and graphic display. One can imagine autobiography presented as a pastiche of tweets and blog postings, a graphic narrative mixing image and text, or simply a sequence of images and graphic display. The possibilities are limitless, and the status of exclusively literary self-representation is anything but clear.

Sources

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Questions and Issues

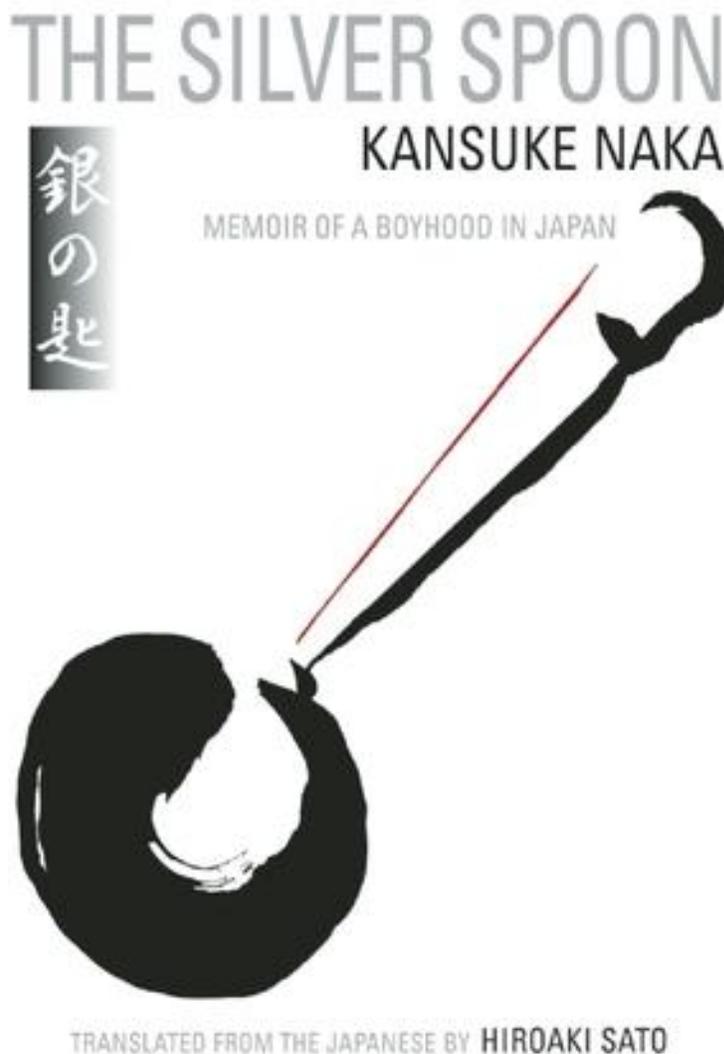
How would you explain the difference between biography and autobiography? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each? Do these genres appeal to you equally?

What are the pros and cons of the 'standard,' full-length autobiography versus the episodic, 'fragmentary' approach to personal narrative favored by many Japanese writers?

Childhood and youth reminiscence is a hallmark of Japanese autobiography— and arguably of autobiographical writing more generally. What do you find moving about such reminiscence? How would you approach writing an account of your own upbringing?

What 'life lessons' can you glean from the autobiographical passages presented above? Is there anything distinctively Japanese about the quality of self-reflection expressed here, or does it reflect universal concerns and understandings?

Images



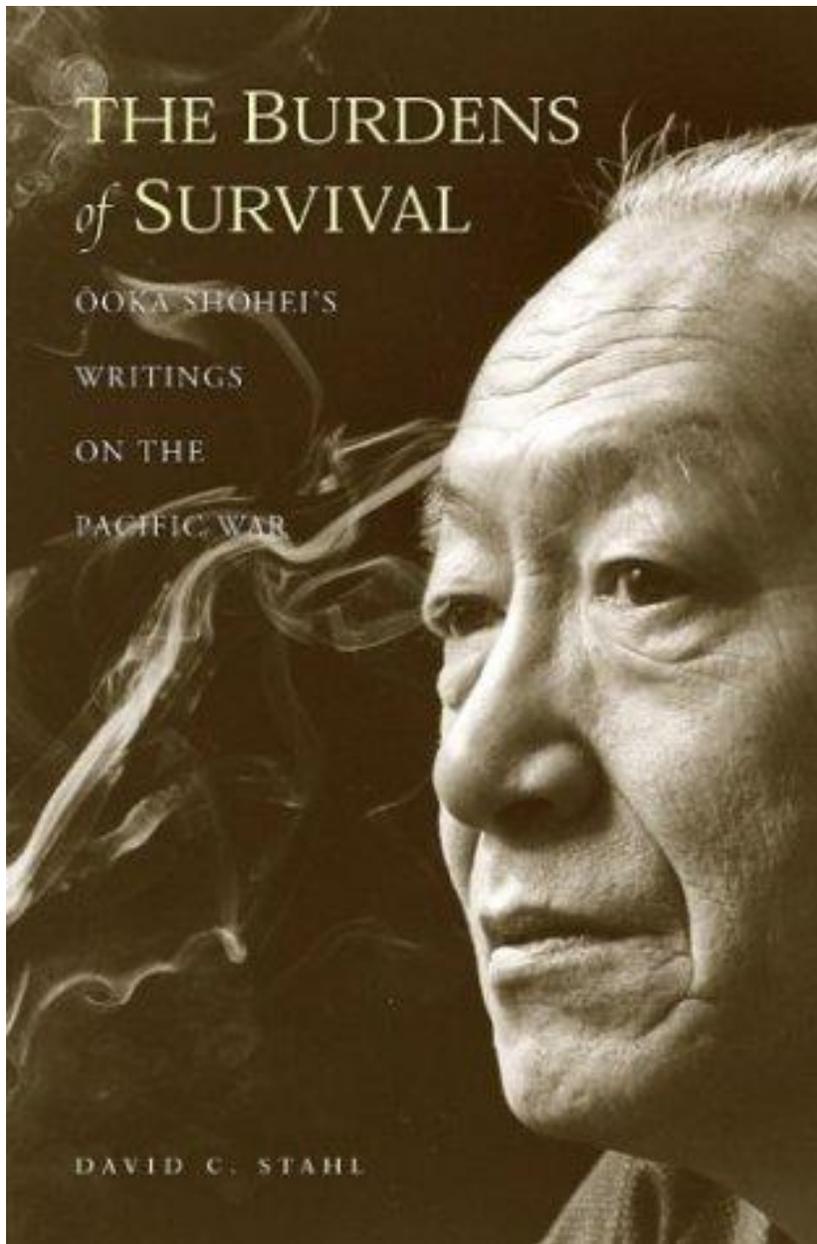
(Source: Goodreads)

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
**ŌSUGI
SAKAE**



TRANSLATED WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY
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Source: Goodreads)



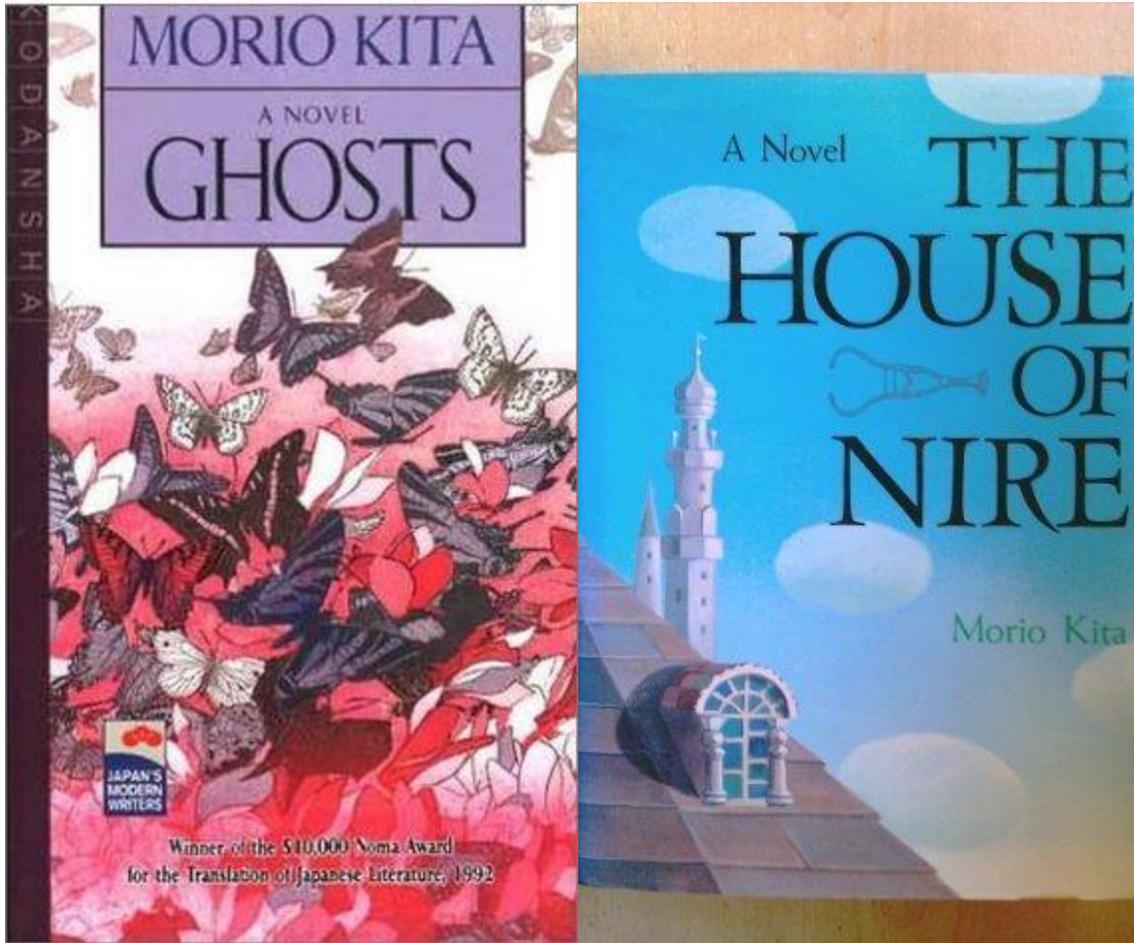
Scholarly study of Ôoka Shōhei's writings on the Pacific War (Source: Abe Books)



Yasuoka Shôtârô (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Mishima Yukio: the photo and the aphorism (Source: AZ Quotes)

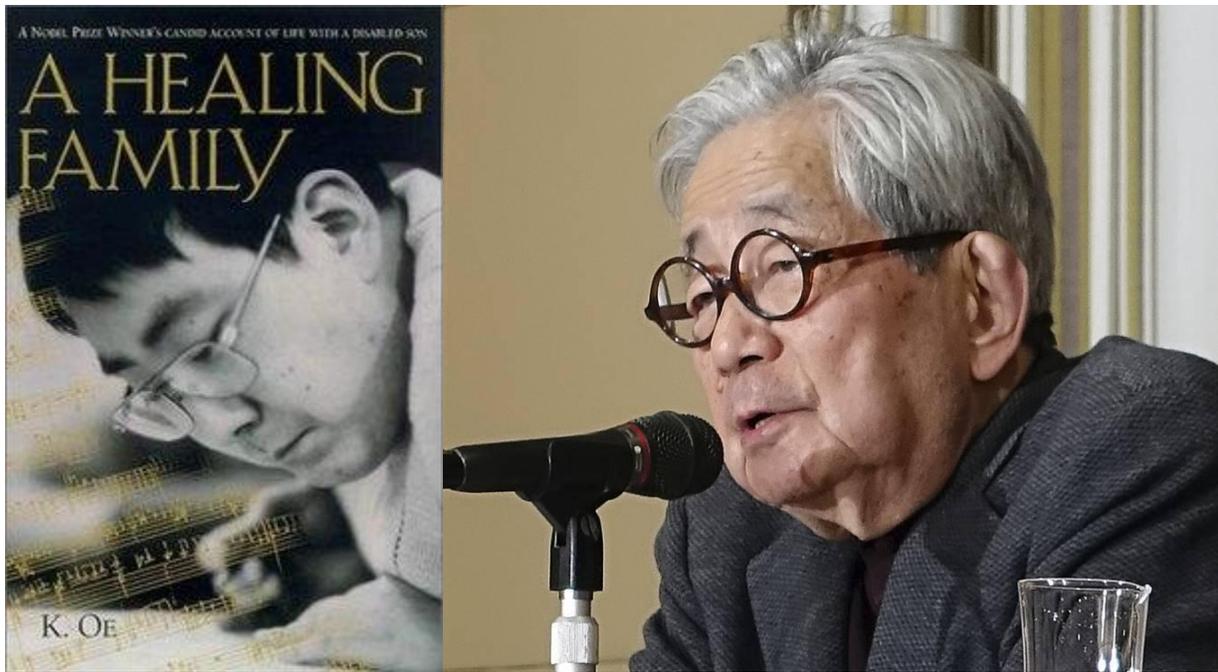


Kita Morio, *Ghosts*(Goodreads)

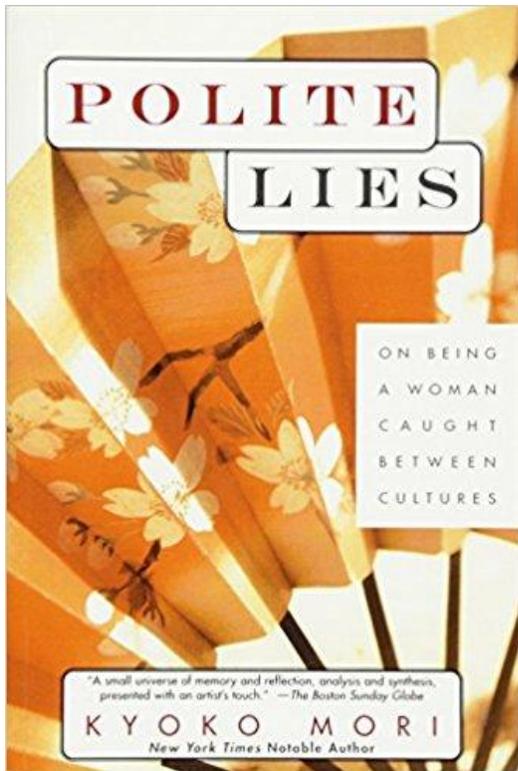
Kita Morio, *The House of Nire*(Abe Books)



Inoue Yasushi (Source: nowheretostay.blogspot)



Ôe Hikari (Wikipedia) Ôe Kenzaburô, author of *A Healing Family* (Japan Times)



Kyoko Mori's memoir (Amazon)

Kyoko Mori's photograph (Harvard Review)