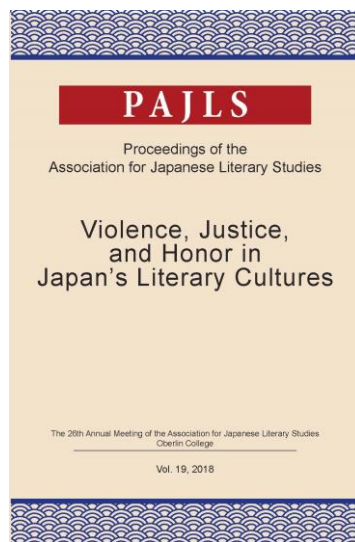


“Destroy the Family, Save the Empire: The Bizarre  
Rhetoric of Mobilization Propaganda, 1937–45”

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**DESTROY THE FAMILY, SAVE THE EMPIRE:  
THE BIZARRE RHETORIC OF MOBILIZATION PROPAGANDA,  
1937–45**

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During Japan's Fifteen Year War (1931–1945), *kamishibai* plays were one of the most widely distributed and frequently accessed media used to transmit propaganda messages to audiences in Japan and its colonies. Originally a street performance/narrative art form for children that celebrated the grotesque, lurid, melodramatic, and uncanny, *kamishibai* was repurposed during the war to address adults as well, and to convey to all its audiences important messages—through illustrations, script, and performance techniques—encouraging them to support the war effort.

Many propaganda *kamishibai* plays were complex fictional narratives featuring appealing and believable characters whose attitudes and actions the audience members were implicitly invited to emulate. But one of the most puzzling aspects of such plays is the frequent depiction of family trauma, presented not as a negative example to be avoided but as a positive tool in support of the empire. In this presentation I will discuss possible reasons why this strange narrative strategy was necessary, and why it may paradoxically have been effective in persuading people to continue their support of the war.

The texts addressed here are special in that they are explicitly meant to be propagandistic. That is, they are meant to persuade the viewers into or out of particular beliefs. Persuasion is a very hot topic at this moment when the United States finds itself to be so politically polarized that intellectuals despair of being able use persuasion to change the firmly held convictions of those people who are being deceived by the current administration. My airplane reading was *Harpers* and *The Atlantic*, both of which had long pieces this month about how difficult it is to change a person's mind about anything through conventional methods such as logical argument, empirical evidence, bribery, or threats. One thing neither piece addresses, however, is the potential power of a narrative—especially an affectively rich fictional narrative—to slip under the guard of people's stubborn convictions and change them emotionally if not intellectually. In other words, I argue that fiction can arouse *feelings* we may not be able to control, and this may be especially true when the narrative in question is

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delivered through script *and* pictures *and* skillful performance, as is the case with *kamishibai*.

The specific context of my materials is mobilization propaganda in a time of war. In *Frames of War* Judith Butler claims that

once we acknowledge that the ‘frames’ through which [the material needs of war] are affirmed or denied make possible the practices of war, we have to conclude that the frames of war are part of what makes the materiality of war [. . .] Just as the ‘matter’ of bodies cannot appear without a shaping and animating form, neither can the ‘matter’ of war appear without a conditioning and facilitating form or frame [. . .] The perceptual realities produced through such frames do not precisely lead to war policy, and neither do such policies unilaterally create frames of perception. Perception and policy are but two modalities of the same process [. . .].<sup>2</sup>

One way of glimpsing the frames that configured Japan’s Fifteen Year War is to look at the narrative products created or sponsored by the government to persuade the people to act against their own self-interest and buy into the imperial and military project, such as wartime *kamishibai*.

Propaganda *kamishibai* literally reached every corner of Japan’s colonies and conquered territories. *Kamishibai* plays were cheap to produce, easy to transport, and could be performed by anyone with a little training. Scripts were prepared in many local dialects of Japanese, as well as in colonial languages, to ensure maximum accessibility. And unlike the prewar version of the medium, these plays were no longer solely for children. At least 70% of wartime *kamishibai* plays were aimed at an adult, or mixed-age audience.<sup>3</sup>

One salient property of propaganda, as opposed to other communicative modes, is its instrumentality: propaganda is trying to encourage or discourage a particular behavior or belief. There were a number of *kamishibai* plays that had the explicit goal of encouraging people to buy war bonds, for example, and others that discouraged people from specific kinds of extravagance. Therefore, another salient aspect of propaganda is that it often attempts to persuade people to pursue a specific

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Kamichi Chizuko, *Kamishibai no rekishi* (The history of *kamishibai*) (Tokyo: Kyūzansha, 1997), 74.

behavior or belief that may be *against their own interests or preferences, or against their better judgment*. I will not go further into the definitions of propaganda here, except to add that it is never ethically neutral. Political philosopher Stanley Cunningham writes, “Because it inverts epistemic values, such as truth and truthfulness, reasoning and knowledge, and because of its wholesale negative impact upon voluntariness and human agency, and because it also exploits and reinforces a society’s moral weaknesses . . . propaganda is an inherently unethical social phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> This is true even when a government is using propaganda to mobilize its own citizens, I would argue.

Moreover, Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell emphasize the difference between propaganda and persuasion, and although I will not trace their entire argument here the quick version is that persuasion is interactive, with both parties benefitting and, further, persuasion is based on accurate information. Propaganda in contrast is based on deceit (again even when we are talking about domestic mobilization propaganda, a government deceiving its own people) and benefits one party only.<sup>5</sup> “Deceit” has a somewhat innocuous sound, but Sissela Bok argues that it cannot be taken lightly: violence and deceit “are the two forms of deliberate assault on human beings. Both can coerce people into acting against their will. Most harm that can befall victims though violence can come to them also through deceit. But deceit controls more subtly, for it works on belief as well as action.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, in accordance with the theme of the 2018 AJLS conference, this presentation addresses the violence that deceit can cause and, in accordance with the topic of the panel, it focuses on some of the ways wartime *kamishibai* plays used deceit to encourage Japanese people on the homefront to rip their own families apart in order to support the war effort. But I will end by discussing a play that is not entirely deceitful about the terrible costs of war, and speculate about how it nonetheless may have worked to encourage people to destroy their families to save the empire.

Images of actual physical trauma are not uncommon in propaganda *kamishibai*, but those images invariably depict violence happening to the body of the male Japanese soldier (or munitions factory worker); see Figure 1. In contrast we see virtually no images of violence visited upon

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cunningham, *The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 176.

<sup>5</sup> Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 19.

the bodies of the hated enemy, and no images of violence or even physical trauma involving the bodies of non-combatants—women, children, elders—despite the fact that by the final years of the war such images must have been relatively common in real life.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1 Soldier protagonist is killed in *Nanatsu no ishi* (Seven Stones, produced by the Dainippon Gageki Kabushikigaisha, 1941).

Plays like *Gunshin no haha* (Mother of a War God, 1942) or *Mumei no haha* (The Unsung Mother, 1944), feature the deaths of soldier-sons prominently; see Figure 2. Both plays were aimed at an audience of marginally literate, struggling farmers and in the narrative itself dirt-poor, struggling families are encouraged to give up their talented sons to the war effort. Mothers in particular, like the widowed mother in *Mumei no haha*, are shown as extremely sympathetic characters who bask in the adoration of their sons, while simultaneously supporting the determination of those sons to join the military, regardless of the cost to the family. In the short term, that cost is mostly calculated in terms of temporary loss of labor and intellectual prowess—the ability to read, to do math, to help pull their families out of poverty—but by the end of the plays the cost we see is the

<sup>7</sup> The only exception I have seen is the death of a woman in *Haha wa manzaishi* (My mother was a *manzai* performer), discussed below.

permanent loss of the son's potential contributions to the family because of their deaths. Their mothers, however, may grieve briefly, but they do not repine; nor do they express any regret for their earlier support for the son's military career. There is never a hint that the stalwart characters in these plays feel themselves to have been deceived by the glorious martial rhetoric that enticed their sons to their deaths.



Figure 2 Soldier protagonist dies in *Mumei no haha* (The Unsung Mother, produced by the Tōa Kokusaku Gageki Kabushiki-gaisha, 1944).

As early as 1941 we see plays like this one, *Haha no kao* (Mother's face), which again features a very poor rural widow and her two sons; see Figure 3.<sup>8</sup> After her eldest son goes off to work in a munitions factory, and then dies after falling into machinery, our grieving mother is persuaded to send her second son to the same job. In the middle of the play she had remarked in a letter to the elder son that she and the younger boy are just barely managing to handle the farm work together. So the viewer is left to wonder how on earth she is going to manage now on her own. Not only does she risk losing her only other son to accident or bombing (since munitions factories were prime targets), she also risks her own starvation.

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<sup>8</sup> Original story by Gamō Toshifumi, script by Takeizumi Heisaku, illustrations by Inuma Kiichi, produced by the Dai Nippon Gageki Kabushiki-gaisha, 1941.



Nonetheless, the play ends with her seated before the *butsudan* telling her dead husband how proud she is of her boys' sacrifice.



Figure 3 Cover of *Haha no kao* (Mother's face, produced by the Dainippon Gageki Kabushikigaisha, 1941).

Toward the end of the war we see an increasing number of plays with the same message as *Mother's Face*, only now the children leave at an even younger age. In *Konnichi yori wa* (From Today, 1944), a very young teenager is enticed by a desire to avenge the death of his *senpai* into becoming a *shōnen hikōhei* (youth pilot), and talks his extremely poor farmer parents into allowing it.<sup>9</sup> As he leaves, he exhorts them to send his younger siblings one after another into the service of the state as well, and his parents appear to acquiesce.

These plays are disturbing to read when we know the very low survival rate of the *shōnen hikōhei*, not to mention the fact that a family farm cannot survive without the labor its children provide. Although none of these plays focuses on the dire future of the families like these who *voluntarily* ripped themselves apart for the war effort, viewers of these plays in the 1940s cannot have been unaware of the likely ending to the narrative arc.

Let's look more closely at one final play, *Haha wa manzaishi* (Mother was a manzai performer) which is remarkable in several ways: it features

<sup>9</sup> Script by Yaguchi Eiko, illustrations by Kimata Kiyoshi, and produced by the Dainippon Gageki Kabushikigaisha, 1944.

an extremely charming and likable female protagonist who goes to the battlefield and comes under enemy fire; and the point of view, as we can see from the title, is that of a child vis-a-vis her parent.<sup>10</sup> *Haha wa manzaishi* tells the story of Manzō and Senko, who leave their popular Asakusa *manzai* act to join a group of diverse performers traveling to China to cheer the troops. They leave their 13-year-old daughter Nobuko at home with her grandmother, and as Senko says goodbye to Nobuko and then begins immediately on the train to write her a letter, she is chastised by Manzō, who says that on this trip Senko must think and act like a professional, not like a mother. In fact, because he is the “troupe leader” of their two-person troupe, she must call him “*danchō*” rather than the usual “*anata*.” Senko promises to try.

Once in China they are greeted with glee by the soldiers, who are delighted to see a Japanese woman after so many months abroad, and who thoroughly enjoy the *manzai* act. Senko and Manzō are then asked if they would be willing to venture even further into enemy territory, to entertain a troop pinned down in a dangerous area. They agree, but on the way there a troop pinned down in a dangerous area. They agree, but on the way there the convoy comes under enemy attack. We see the remarkable scene of Senko carrying a wounded soldier on her back to safety; see Figure 4.

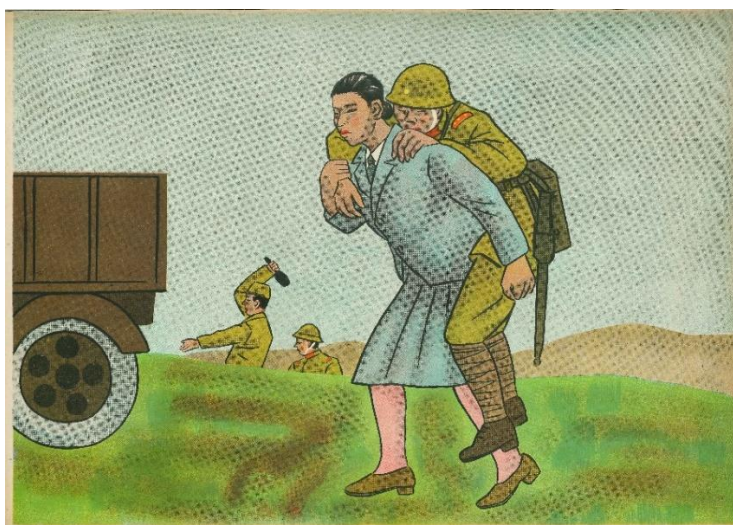


Figure 4 *Haha wa manzaishi* (Mother was a *manzai* Performer):  
Senko carrying wounded soldier.

<sup>10</sup> Script by Yoshida Haru, illustrations by Satō Tairōshi, produced by the Nippon Kyōiku Kamishibai Kyōkai, 1941.



As you might expect, however, Senko herself is shot soon after, and we see her dying in her husband's arms; see Figure 5. As he begs her to *shikkari shiro*, to hang on, she opens her eyes and says faintly "*danchō-san*," and then dies. As Japanese reinforcements arrive, the enemy troops scatter.

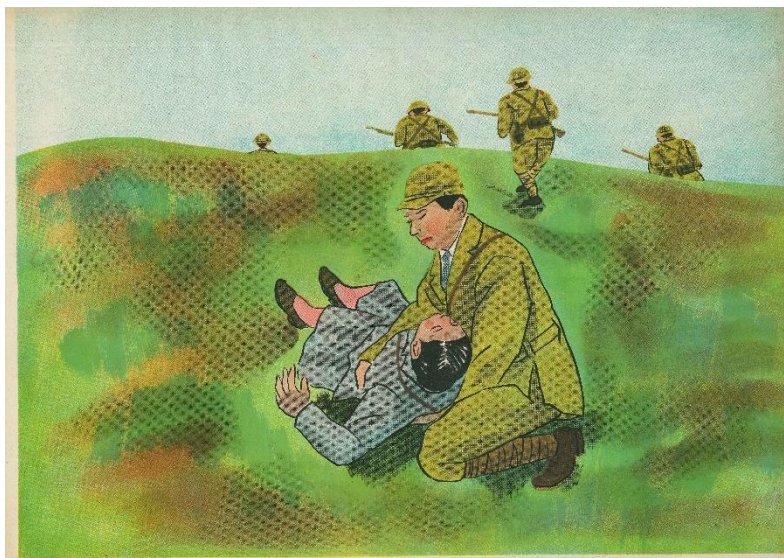


Figure 5 *Haha wa manzaishi*: Senko dying in Manzō's arms.

The next thing we see is an ominous image of Nobuko coming home from school to find strange boots in the *genkan*. She manages to hold herself together (while her grandmother is prostrate with grief) while a military officer tells her of her mother's brave death, just as brave and noble as that of a soldier, but then she runs outside and the script tells us that Nobuko presses her face against the fence. She tries not to cry, but finally calls out "Okaa-chan!" as tears pour down her cheeks.

Yoshida Haru's depiction of the wife in this play is very appealing (although Satō's illustrations seem to me somewhat less so): Senko is witty, strong-minded, loving, brave even under fire, and thoroughly professional. The message to women viewers seems to be that if they can subdue sentimentality and serve the nation professionally and bravely, then even if they don't die from a bullet the way Senko did, their contributions to the war effort can be considered as important as those of the soldiers.

But this message is undercut by the fact that the point of view of the play is that of Nobuko, and we end with her heart-rending grief—it is very hard to see any positive result for her in this narrative. In other words, there is remarkably little deception here: children in Japan were losing their parents, fathers and mothers, to the war, and the result was devastating, as this play makes clear. So how on earth could it have passed the censors as constituting proper propaganda?

The short answer is: I do not really know and we cannot know. But in fact the play makes use of a number of visual and narrative tropes that are common in other plays that are deceptive in a much more straightforward way about the emotional costs of family trauma, downplaying the terrible grief and material damage, so in that sense it may have seemed to the censors to be pushing the same emotional buttons.

For example, the scene where Manzō holds the dying Senko in his arms is a visual and narrative set piece, as we see in these various examples; see Figures 6 and 7. It is noteworthy that in every other case it is a soldier being cradled by another soldier. Disturbing and sorrowful as these images are, in propaganda *kamishibai* the death of the soldier is taken as a given, at least potentially, and with enough repetition the viewer becomes at least somewhat inured to it. But to see this tweaked so that it is not a male body in uniform but a female body in civilian clothing dying on the battlefield is a powerful repurposing of this familiar trope.



Figure 6 Dying soldier in *Mumei no haha*.

Moreover, in the case of the soldiers, we rarely have any last words; or when we do, as in *Mumei no haha*, where the dying man invokes his mother, those words are broken and pitiful. Senko's last word, however, "*danchō-san*," shows both presence of mind and wit, affectionately teasing her husband as she dies in his arms. The power of such an appealing portrayal of female strength may have struck the censors, and—for all I know to the contrary—the viewing audience, as a powerful inducement to women to emulate Senko's devotion to the cause.



Figure 7 Dying soldier in *Nanatsu no ishi*

In conclusion, I have written elsewhere about some of the ways that these plays may have functioned effectively as pro-war propaganda, despite their very dark themes of death and loss.<sup>11</sup> For today let me just summarize my speculative conclusions:

- plays about poor rural families may well have been meant to inspire better-off, less rural families, encouraging viewers to think, “If they are sacrificing their sons despite what that will cost them, it would be *mōshiwakenai* for me to do less.”

<sup>11</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, *Propaganda Performed: Kamishibai in Japan's Fifteen-Year War* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

- the *shōnen hikōhei* were volunteers, but universal conscription—for both military and factory work—meant that for many families these plays simply represented the unavoidable realities they were struggling with, but presented those struggles in the form of brave, likable icons on which to model one’s own behavior and through which to see one’s own trauma mythologized.
- *kamishibai* plays were among the only forms of “entertainment” in the final years of the war, and made use of multiple sensory paths to pull viewers into the emotional gestalt of the story: the script, which ranged from authentic-sounding dialog in local dialects to high-flown patriotic rhetoric; the pictures, which, while deliberately somewhat primitivist, were often beautiful and evocative; and the performance, which might include heartbreaking songs at the most emotionally charged moments of the play, ensuring that the entire audience, whatever their private views of the war may have been, sobbed together as one. The resulting sense that the entire imperium was working and, more importantly, *feeling* together in unison, was a key goal of propaganda *kamishibai*.