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Navigating Public History: In Contestation with Japan's Historical Revisionism

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Abstract: In this article, we examine the phenomenon of ‘historical revisionism’ (HR), a movement to construct a ‘bright’ historical narrative of Japan often by denying and minimizing its wrongdoings under Imperial rule, and discuss possible interventions with such narratives through public history. We trace the development of HR, its proponents’ identity as ‘truth-seekers’ and their sentiments, such as victimhood and anti-elitism. We argue that an effective intervention would also require widely building social trust in those professional historians opposing HR by presenting their complex procedure of critical historical research and knowledge so as to ‘immunize’ potential consumers of HR from historical distortions. In times of political contestation over history due to the democratic nature of interpreting history, we suggest shifting away from the common Japanese debate over whether to share academic historians’ ‘authority’ or risk relativism that enables HR, and moving towards a collaborative approach where diverse participants including academic historians share the commitment to interpretive rigor, thereby countering HR.

Keywords: historical revisionism; “comfort women”; Nanjing Massacre; far right; Japan

Conservative approaches to history in Japanese society particularly manifest themselves in forms of “historical revisionism” [*rekishi shuseishugi*, hereafter HR]. According to Sven Saaler, HR can be defined as a:

Highly politicized version of historiography that subordinates scientific method – however defined – to the achievement of political aims. These aims are re-assertion of national identity and the strengthening of citizens’ allegiance to the state, and, as a basis for

these goals, the construction of a ‘bright’ or exculpatory historical narrative of Japan’s recent past.¹

One of the most significant areas of concern in Japan’s HR is the perception of the war that started in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This article focuses on the following issues, keeping in mind both this context and the fact that it is part of a special section devoted to understanding conservative approaches to history in the public sphere: the rise of HR in Japan, its construction and reception, and the anti-elitism and anger with “leftists” that underpins it. Through the lenses of public history – a field of study that is not only concerned with how historians can best convey historical knowledge to the public, but also how, in the first place, history works and how the past is used, utilized, and/or abused in society – this article illustrates the mechanism behind HR’s proliferation in Japan, rather than empirically demonstrating its practitioners’ distortion of historical facts. It also suggests that public historians might intervene by exploring the identities of revisionists, their worldviews, and the patterns of discourse they employ to consolidate these identities.

Given that such discourses stem from revisionists’ self-identify as “fact-seekers” or “truth-seekers” as well as their anti-elite sentiments, we argue that it is necessary to find ways to maintain a rigorously fact-based counter-discourse without appearing authoritarian. This is because simply presenting evidence can be counterproductive; challenging revisionists’ identities on their own terms serves only to provoke defensive reactions and not engagement. We argue that effective intervention by public historians also requires building trust with professional historians opposing HR. One way to do this is to present the complexity and richness of critical historical research methodologies and knowledge mobilization so as to “immunize” potential consumers of HR from the historical distortions offered by the revisionists.² Political contestation over history and the past is enabled by the democratic nature of historical interpretation; a

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1 Sven Saaler. *Politics, Memory and Public Opinion: The History Textbook Controversy and Japanese Society* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2005), 23.

2 Takuya Onodera and Daisuke Tano, *Kensho: Nachisu wa Ii Koto mo Shita no ka* [Analysis: Did the Nazis Also Do “Good Things”?] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2023), 112.

common debate in Japan is over whether academic historians should share their “authority” or risk giving space to histories mobilized and produced by HR. We suggest that, instead, adopting a more collaborative approach where diverse participants (including academic historians) share the commitment to interpretive rigor is the best way for public historians to counter HR.

1 The Rise of Historical Revisionism in Japan

While the Japanese public remains ambivalent about recognizing the invasive nature of the fifteen-year war that began with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931,³ HR gained prominence in the 1990s when Imperial Japan’s exploitation of women – euphemistically called “*ianfu* (comfort women)” – gathered attention and turned out to be a major diplomatic issue, following the testimony of a Korean woman, Kim Hak-sun, who stated that she had been a “comfort woman,” the first testimony made by a former “comfort woman” revealing her name.⁴ This created political and diplomatic tensions between Japan and South Korea regarding the former’s legal responsibility and its obligation to make reparations.

The historical revisionist movement initially revolved around junior high school history textbooks which discussed the issue of “comfort women.” Individuals such as Professor of Education Fujioka Nobukatsu, conservative critic Nishio Kanji, and cartoonist Kobayashi Yoshinori established the

Association to Publish a New History Textbook [*Atarashi Rekishi Kyokasho o Tsukuru-kai*, hereafter Tsukuru-kai].⁵ Despite Tsukuru-kai’s limited success in textbook adoption, the number of history textbooks for junior high schools referring to “comfort women” decreased, with the issue being entirely absent from those published between 2012 and 2016.⁶ The revisionist discourse subsequently became one of the most important theoretical backbones to far-right movements, notably the ultranationalist Zaitoku-kai, which emerged in the mid-2000s and became notorious for hate speech rallies against Koreans residing in Japan [*Zainichi*].⁷

Revisionist views were not limited to textbooks. Manga and cartoons like Kobayashi Yoshinori’s *Sensoron* [On War] or Yamano Sharin’s *Kenkanryu* [Hat Korean Wave], with the former selling half a million copies while the latter more than one million as a series,⁸ as well as online platforms populated by so-called *neto-uyo* [online right-wingers] already started to emerge in the late 1990s and 2000s.⁹ Channel Sakura shared and consolidated revisionist views, first as a satellite television channel, later as an online content provider.¹⁰ Revisionism was supported by political authorities, notably former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased its strategic communication budget to promote revisionist views, sometimes even requesting modifications to textbooks published in the US.¹¹ Individual Liberal Democratic Party members also

³ Yutaka Yoshida, *Nihonjin no Senso Kan: Sengoshi no naka no Henyo The Japanese View of War: Changes in Postwar History* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005).

⁴ Kan Kimura, *Nikkan Rekishi Ninshiki Mondai to wa Nanika: Rekishi-kyokasho, “Ianfu”, Popyurizumu* [What is the Controversy over the Perception of History between Japan and South Korea? History Textbooks, “Comfort Women,” and Populism] (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2014).

It is noteworthy that, beginning in the 1960s, discourses acknowledging the invasive nature of Japan’s war, the harm inflicted on neighboring Asian countries, and, most importantly, the responsibility of the Japanese public and nation-state (rather than solely the military) gradually gained prominence. Such arguments became more explicit in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the emergence of these narratives did not necessarily stem from an intrinsic sense of remorse; rather, they were strongly shaped by external factors, such as Japan’s growing need to assume a leadership role among Asian countries whose economic importance as potential markets expanded in the post-war era. However, the tension with other Asian countries since the 1990s, with the accusation of wartime atrocities itself, provoked a rapid rise in denialism. See Yoshida, *The Japanese View of War*; Shogo Suzuki, “Japanese Revisionists and the ‘Korea Threat’: Insights from Ontological Security,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 303–21.

⁵ Ibid; Yamaguchi Tomomi, “The ‘History Wars’ and the ‘Comfort Woman’ Issue: Revisionism and the Right-wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S.,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* [Japan Focus 18.6, no. 3 (2020).

⁶ Kohei Kurahashi, “Rekishi wa Dou Nerawareta: Rekishi Shuseishugi no Hirogari o Toraeru [How Has History Been Targeted? Capturing the Proliferation of Historical Revisionism],” in *Kyoyo toshiten Rekishi Mondai* [Learning about the History Issue for Intellectual and Cultural Cultivation], ed. Ichiro Maekawa (Tokyo: Toyokeizai Shinpo Sha, 2020), 23–65.

⁷ Naoto Higuchi, *Nihongata Haigaishugi: Zaitoku-Kai, Gaikokujin Sanseiken, Higashiajia Chiseigaku* [Japanese-Style Xenophobic Exclusionism: Zaitoku-kai, the Right of Foreigners to Vote, and Geo-Politics in East Asia] (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2014).

⁸ Kohei Kurahashi, *Rekishi Shuseishugi to Sabukarucha: 90-nendai Hoshu Gensetsu no Medea Bunka* [Historical Revisionism and Counterculture: The Media Culture of the Conservative Discourses in the 1990s] (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2018).

⁹ Masaaki Ito, *Netto Uha no Rekishishakaigaku: Andaguraundo Heiseishi 1990-2000-nendai* [The Genealogy of Online Rightists: The History of the Counterculture of the Heisei Era in the 1990s and 2000s] (Tokyo: Seikyusha, 2019).

¹⁰ Jeffrey, J. Hall, *Japan’s Nationalist Right in the Internet Age: Online Media and Grassroots Conservative Activism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹ Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Ramseyer, the Japanese Right-wing and the ‘History Wars,’” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 24, no. 9 (2022), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss9/4>.

distributed revisionist publications to scholars and foreign correspondents writing about Japan.¹²

Most importantly, elements within academia played a crucial role in promoting the revisionist discourse. Historian Hata Ikuhiko's *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battlefield*,¹³ which denied the forcible conscription of “comfort women” organized by the Japanese military, thereby rejecting the legal responsibility of the Japanese government for compensation, became a key revisionist text. Similarly, Harvard Professor Mark Ramseyer depicted “comfort women” as voluntary prostitutes rather than victims of sexual exploitation. Despite criticism over the selective use of testimonies, the citing of non-existent sources, and ignoring scholarship that contradicted such interpretations,¹⁴ the journal which published Ramseyer's article has resisted calls to retract it (as of November 2025).

2 The Construction and Reception of “Fact-Based” Revisionist Discourses

While some have argued that an age of “post-truth” has arrived, particularly regarding far-right politics,¹⁵ others have argued that the far-right believe they are pursuing the truth in a scientifically rigorous manner, claiming academics' arguments are biased by their ideologies or are simply based on ignorance.¹⁶

Studies have shown that many denialist ideologues, if not all, present their arguments as fact-based and logical.¹⁷

Tsukuru-kai's core members Kobayashi and Fujioka have engaged with the arguments and evidence presented by their opponents.¹⁸ Hyakuta Naoki, author of the bestselling revisionist work *Nihon Kokki* [The National History of Japan], articulates his attitude toward facts stating “I wrote the overview of history [presented in *Nihon Kokki*], based on my interpretation, filling in the gaps of data but also based on facts, as I cannot bend facts.”¹⁹ It is noteworthy, though, that Hyakuta's work was heavily criticized for its numerous distortions of historical facts and he has even admitted that some descriptions were based on Wikipedia,²⁰ suggesting that the level of the rigor of fact-checking might not satisfy academic historians. Still, the act of verification of facts (if insufficient) has allowed him to maintain his self-confidence as a truth-seeker. Furthermore, the construction of perceived truth is strategically achieved through attribution. For example, being able to attribute denialist narratives about “comfort women” to revisionist women establishes an air of credibility.²¹

It may appear rather odd that revisionist discourses in Japan are appealing to some people, despite their tendency to overlook significant historical evidence, which would necessitate a careful examination of the ontological framework and epistemological mechanisms through which individuals adopt an identity as truth-seeker. Revisionists liken the process of confirming truth to competitive debate, as evidenced by the frequent appearance of hypothetical debates between nationalists and what were deemed to be leftists in conservative, right-leaning essays and manga, which serve to stress the purported rationality and logic of HR.²² As Yamazaki Masahiro notes, while historians draw conclusions from facts, revisionists gather evidence to support predetermined conclusions, which makes it challenging to develop a constructive discussion.²³ This way of using facts, which we might call a debate-style, may

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ikuhiko Hata, *Ianfu to Senjo no Sei* [Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1999).

¹⁴ Yamaguchi, “Ramseyer, the Japanese Right-wing and the ‘History Wars.’”

¹⁵ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Tuukka Ylä-Anttila, “Populist knowledge: ‘Post-truth’ repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities,” *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2018): 356–88; Natalie-Anne Hall, *Brexit, Facebook, and Transnational Right-Wing Populism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024).

¹⁷ Kurahashi, *Historical Revisionism and Counterculture*; Dan Öberg and Linus Hagström, “Female Nationalist Activism in Japan: Truth-Telling Through Everyday Micro-Practices,” *Alternatives* 47, no. 4 (2022): 194–208.

¹⁸ Eiji Oguma and Yoko Ueno, *Iyashi no Nashonarizumu: Kusanone Hoshu no Jissho Kenkyu* [Nationalism as Healing: An Empirical Study on Grassroots Conservatives] (Tokyo: Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2003); Kurahashi, *Historical Revisionism and Counterculture*.

¹⁹ Satoru Ishido, *Rupo Hyakuta Naoki Gensho: Aikoku Popyurizumu no Genzaichi* [Reporting on the Hyakuta Naoki Phenomenon: The Current State of Nationalist Populism] (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2020), Kindle edition.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Öberg and Hagström, Female Nationalist Activism; Tomomi Yamaguchi, “Revisionism, Ultrnationalism, Sexism: Relations between the Far Right and the Establishment over the ‘Comfort Women’ Issue,” *Social Science Japan Journal* 21, no. 2 (2018): 193–212.

²² Kurahashi, *Historical Revisionism and Counterculture*.

²³ Masahiro Yamazaki, *Rekishisen to Shiso Sen: Rekishi Mondai no Yomitoki Kata* [History War and Thought War: How to Interpret the History Issue] (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2019).

partly stem from the peculiar nature of HR in Japan, namely its link to the diplomatic controversy between Japan and neighboring countries over the former's legal obligations towards victims of Imperial Japan's invasion and occupation.²⁴ Consequently, regarding the issue of "comfort women," discussions tend to focus on the binary question of whether the Imperial military was directly involved or not rather than understanding the complex circumstances of exploitation.

What has potentially rendered this perception of a confrontational debate even more convincing is the *rekishisen(so)* [history war] narrative, where evidence-gathering practices driven by predetermined objectives are particularly evident. The concept of the history war began to be used within the revisionist circle in 2013, following what was dubbed the *jouhousen* [information war] narrative of the late 2000s.²⁵ This related to the exposure of Imperial Japan's wartime atrocities, a process that revisionists dismissed as Chinese and South Korean propaganda allegedly aimed at discrediting Japan internationally, particularly in the US. Revisionists contend that failing to counter this 'false' historical narrative could weaken Japan's position in national security matters, including territorial disputes with these nations.²⁶ While revisionists have attempted counter-propaganda efforts abroad, these often inadvertently increased awareness of the atrocities.²⁷ The linkage between the issue of HR and international politics might even have resulted in the compromise of the revisionists' claims to identity as fact-based truth-tellers. As International Politics professor Sase Masanori has noted, "In the game of politics [...] it is effective to recite one's theory enthusiastically, loudly and confidently, *even if it lacks evidence*."²⁸ This suggests that acknowledging the differences in the purpose of analyzing and presenting the facts is integral in countering revisionist discourses.

This history war discourse exacerbates the victimhood mentality common among the Japanese far right,²⁹ which further justifies the prioritization of winning debates. The rise of issues concerning the recognition of and compensation for wartime atrocities, which makes Japan lose a core feature of its post-war identity as a pacifist country, coupled with the exposure of the failure to properly face their shameful past (especially in stark contrast with Germany), which damages its reputation in international society, has created ontological insecurity.³⁰ This alleged victimhood status of Japan is embodied by, for instance, children of Japanese origin who are imagined by revisionists to be bullied in the US (though without substantiated evidence) because of widespread 'misinformation' about Japanese wartime atrocities that followed the installation of "comfort women" statues.³¹

To understand how the audience of revisionist discourses acquires a truth-seeker identity, it is also necessary to acknowledge the adeptness of revisionist discourse in presenting a factual gloss to their work which adds to the cognitive cost of recognizing falsehoods. Below we offer some examples of the techniques used to deny the exploitation of "comfort women."

Firstly, revisionists use poor and unreliable sources, which nonetheless seem to yield authority. Ramseyer for example, cited the testimonies of Mun Ok-ju, a former Korean "comfort woman," from a source provided by something called the Korean Institute of History.³² Although this appeared to be credible, in fact the source is a blog, whose creator is not identified, which cherry-picked parts of Mun's memoir.³³

Secondly, revisionists identify a 'root' cause of the proliferation of 'fabricated' claims about Japanese military atrocities, and attempt to discredit such claims by exposing the cause. Revisionists commonly exaggerate the impact of the fact that former Japanese soldier Yoshida Seiji's

24 Kimura, *Nikkan Rekishi Ninshiki Mondai to wa*.

25 Motokazu Nogawa, "Rekishisen' no Tanjo to Tenkai" [The Birth and Development of the "History War"], in *Umi o Wataru "Ianfu" Mondai: Uha no "Rekishisen" o Tou* ["Comfort Woman" Issue Goes Overseas: Questioning the Right-wing "History Wars."] eds. Tomomi Yamaguchi et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2016), 12–40.

26 Ibid.

27 Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue"; Sachiyo Tsukamoto. "The counter-boomerang effect of transnational revisionist activism on the memory of 'comfort women,'" *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1,346–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221134907>.

28 This quote by Masanori Sase (1994) can be found in Nogawa, "The Birth and Development of the 'History War'."

29 Kenichiro Ito, "Anti-Korean Sentiment and Hate Speech in the Current Japan: A Report from the Street," *Procedia Environmental Sciences* 20 (2014): 434–43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proenv.2014.03.055>.

30 Suzuki, "Japanese Revisionists and the 'Korea Threat.'"

31 Emi Koyama, "Amerika 'Ianfu' Hi Secchi e no Kougeki" [Attacks on the Establishment of 'Comfort Women' Statues in America], in *Umi o Wataru "ianfu" mondai*, eds. Tomomi Yamaguchi et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2016), 52–79.

32 Ramseyer, "Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War."

33 Pyong Gap Min, "My Response to Ramseyer's Effort to Deny the History of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 24, no. 9 (2022), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss9/2>; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "The 'Comfort Women' Issue, Freedom of Speech, and Academic Integrity: A Study Aid," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 19.5, no. 12 (2021): 1–11.

testimony that Korean women were forced to become sexual slaves was later found to be untrue. In fact, although Yoshida made many media appearances, particularly in the early 1990s,³⁴ the “forced mobilization” discourse had already circulated before his testimony received such attention.³⁵

Thirdly, revisionists, such as Kobayashi, often point to the inconsistencies in survivors’ testimonies as evidence of their unreliability. This contrasts with the majority of historians who value oral histories as a means of understanding the lives of ordinary people which were not recorded in public documents.³⁶ Rather than discarding them, these testimonies should be considered in conjunction with other pieces of evidence.³⁷

Lastly, revisionists deliberately make selective use of, or even distort, evidence to suit their purposes. An example of the former is when Ramseyer refers to a woman called Osaki in Yamazaki Tomoko’s book *Sandakan Hachibanshokan* [Sandakan Brothel No. 8], which according to Ramseyer showed that women were capable of agreeing to a contract to be a prostitute even at the age of 10.³⁸ Aside from Ramseyer’s problematic assumption about the discernment capacity of a young person, according to Yamazaki’s book, Osaki did not know what it meant to be a prostitute and was horrified when she had to do so, details which Ramseyer chose not to mention.³⁹ By way of distorting evidence, Ramseyer emphasizes the Japanese government’s strict stance against the forcible recruitment of women who had not previously worked as prostitutes to serve as “comfort women,” citing a directive issued by the Director of the Home Ministry’s Police Affairs Bureau on February 23, 1938. This directive, which has often been used by revisionists as evidence that “comfort women” were prostitutes, included provisions highlighted by Ramseyer. These provisions included that women were permitted to travel for the purpose of prostitution only if they were licensed prostitutes aged 21 or older, if they returned home once their contract expired, and if they secured travel identification documents

in person from the police office.⁴⁰ This line of argument, as Yoshimi Yoshiaki has pointed out, overlooks critical flaws in this directive (such as its enabling of human trafficking) and more tellingly ignores the fact that these conditions did not apply to women from Korea or Taiwan.⁴¹

Similar tactics can be found in other revisionist discourses, such as the denial of the Nanjing Massacre.⁴² Rather than merely glorifying Imperial Japan, revisionist discourses maintain a facade of scientific inquiry, basing claims on seemingly sound logic and evidence, thereby increasing the cognitive cost of falsification. The consumers of revisionist discourses may identify themselves as truth-seekers because of their genuine conviction that they are offering flawless arguments, resisting false narratives.

Critically assessing revisionist arguments requires considerable knowledge of available data, discourse genealogy, and historiographical methods. Such assessment necessitates credible literature, expert knowledge, and, as Tsujita Masanori argues, time to compare different historical narratives, which are not easily accessible.⁴³ While the importance of countering revisionist discourses with fact-based arguments will not wane, it would also be worthwhile to consider boosting the general level of trust in professional historians (even though some of them are in symbiosis with revisionists), so that individuals can base their judgement on professional historians’ narratives of modern history even when their resources are limited.

3 Anti-Elitism and Anger with “Leftists”

Similar to the far right in other contexts,⁴⁴ Japanese revisionists present themselves as critical thinkers while describing their opponents – whom they see as leftist academics and elites – as “illogical,” “emotionally driven,” “lacking agency,” “[their belief has become] religious,” and

34 Hata, *Ianfu to Senjo no Sei*.

35 Sung Hyun Kang, “Ramseyer’s History Denialism and the Efforts to ‘Save Ramseyer’: Focusing on Critique of ‘A Response to My Critics,’” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 24, no. 9 (2022), <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss9/3>.

36 Naoko Kumagai, *Ianfu Mondai* [The Comfort Women Issue] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2016).

37 Kang, “Ramseyer’s History Denialism and the Efforts to ‘Save Ramseyer.’”

38 J. Mark Ramseyer, “Contracting for sex in the Pacific War,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 65, no. 105971 (2021): 1–8.

39 Amy Stanley et al., “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War”: The Case for Retraction on Grounds of Academic Misconduct,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal | Japan Focus* 19.5, no. 13 (2021): 1–28.

40 Ramseyer, “Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War.”

41 Yoshiaki Yoshimi, “Response to ‘Contracting for Sex in the Pacific War’ by J. Mark Ramseyer,” *International Review of Law and Economics* 76, no. 106158 (2023): 1–8.

42 Tokushi Kasahara, Zouho Nankin Jiken Ronso Shi: Nihonjin wa Shijitsu o Dou Ninshiki Shitekitaka [Expanded Edition the History of the Controversy over the Nanjing Incident: How the Japanese Have Recognized Historical Facts] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2018).

43 Masanori Tsujita, “Rekishi ni ‘Monogatari’ wa Naze Hitsuyoku ka: Akademizumu to Janarizumu no Kyodo o Kangaeru” [Why Does History Need a ‘Story’? Contemplating Cooperation Between Academia and Journalism], in *Kyoyo toshiten no Rekishi Mondai* [Discussing the History Issue for Cultural Literacy], ed. Ichiro Maekawa (Tokyo: Toyokeizai Shiposha, 2020), 183–213.

44 Ylä-Anttila, “Populist knowledge.”

“lacking principle,”⁴⁵ suggesting that revisionists view their opponents as dogmatic rather than scientific. To counter their position and challenge these stereotypes of irrational “leftists,” factual refutation is essential. However, it is worth noting that such factual rebuttals should still entail an attitude of respect that would signal the acknowledgement of revisionists’ independent judgement capacity, rather than treating them as unenlightened. Studies of far-right discourses have elucidated how messages not only convey information but also incite emotional reactions in the audience.⁴⁶ When engaging with revisionists, this insight proves valuable: rather than merely presenting correct counterarguments, those who engage with them, particularly academic historians, should avoid appearing as condescending elites who might provoke antipathy.

Anti-elite sentiment has characterized revisionist movements since the 1990s.⁴⁷ The newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* has been particularly targeted as a perceived epicenter of leftist discourse, as evidenced by Hyakuta’s statement: “I am anti-authoritarianist. The strongest authority? That is *Asahi Shimbun* [...] [T]he biggest authority is Asahi-esque entities, which include those affiliated critics.”⁴⁸ Similarly, the circulation of the influential right-wing magazine *WILL* rose markedly with its fourth volume entitled *Asahi Shimbun o Sabaku!* [Condemning Asahi!], after which it consistently criticized *Asahi* owing to its position as an establishment voice supported by elite readers and contributors.⁴⁹ The othering of elites and mainstream media is rooted partly in the historical development of revisionist discourse: right-wing/conservative publications, such as *Seiron* magazine and Kobayashi’s manga, have created spaces for consumers of rightist ideology to offer their voices since the early 1990s, thus functioning as an apparently democratic public forum.⁵⁰ With the widespread adoption of computers and the internet in the 1990s, the antipathy against the mainstream media harbored by the users of the influential online bulletin board *2-channeru* [2-

channel] grew to be succeeded by part of rightist internet users.⁵¹ Their self-image as taboo-breaking rebels appeals to the sympathizers of the far-right ideology in Japan.⁵²

The distinction between “us” and “them” (non-elites versus elites) becomes especially significant when the ‘other’ is closely associated with fear.⁵³ The discourse of history wars accelerates this othering by contextualizing their existence within international politics and national security concerns. Elites are consequently labelled as *han-nichi* [anti-Japanese] entities.⁵⁴ The perceived risk posed by the leftists results in a sense of disgust.⁵⁵

4 Beyond ‘Authority’: Collaborative Resistance to Revisionism

Given that revisionists self-identify as truth-seekers, counterarguments to HR need to remain rigorously fact-based. Instead of aiming to establish forums with right-wing advocates, which runs the risk of creating an illusion of equivalency in discourse and validating their self-perception as critical thinkers when there really is little likelihood of constructive argument,⁵⁶ we suggest that scholars opposing HR should actively participate in creating easily accessible and understandable resources for the public, the potential consumers of HR. Rather than relying solely on what are often perceived as elitist academic publications, academic historians should collaborate with content creators and practitioners to develop sources and tools through contemporary media, such as manga or podcasts, that enrich understandings of complexities in historical facts and source criticism. Adopting what John Tosh terms “critical public history” would empower people to question and refute revisionist discourses in which the methodologies of public history can play an important role.⁵⁷

Furthermore, the analysis above indicates that it is essential that academics and public historians wishing to oppose HR need to be highly mindful of revisionists’

45 Oguma and Ueno, *Nationalism as Healing*.

46 Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2021).

47 Oguma and Ueno, *Nationalism as Healing*.

48 Ishido, Reporting on the Hyakuta Naoki Phenomenon.

49 Maiko Kajiura, *‘Uyoku Zasshi’ no Butaiura* [The Backstage of a “Right-Wing” Magazine] (Tokyo: Seikaisha, 2024).

50 Kurahashi, *Historical Revisionism and Counterculture*.

51 Ito, *Netto Uha no Rekishishakaigaku*.

52 Yutaka Yoshida and Yoko Demelius, “Seduction of Far-Right Actions: A Pathway to an Authentic Self?,” *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 21, no. 2 (2024): 187–210, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590241245380>.

53 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion. Second Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

54 Hall, *Japan’s Nationalist Right in the Internet Age*.

55 Oguma and Ueno, *Nationalism as Healing*.

56 Tsujita, *Why Does History Need a “Story”?*

57 John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

sentiments and sensitivity to what they see as the authoritarian and elitist attitudes of scholars. This would go some way to undermine revisionist claims to be truth-seekers, and not allow them to easily dismiss counterarguments as elitists. Wider discussion and explanation of the complex procedures of rigorous historical research would also encourage public trust in scholarship, while recognizing that potential consumers of HR lack the time and resources to conduct extensive historical research themselves. Making the products of such research more accessible, offering sources of information that are demonstrably more reliable than those used by revisionists, would neutralize revisionist discourse and its truth-seeking claims.

The landscape of historical discourse has transformed in recent decades, with digital technologies enabling unprecedented public participation in historical debates. As Jerome de Groot has argued, there has been “an enfranchisement of the individual into history”⁵⁸ which means historical interpretation has now become even more democratic, and public discourses on history are inevitably and increasingly political and contested. The presumption that academic historians inherently possess unquestioned authority is increasingly outdated. Academic historians need to intervene in public spaces when confronting HR, however, this intervention should not depend on ghostly notions of unquestionable authority but rather on methodological competencies based on their continued reflection of their epistemology. Distinguishing credible from non-credible producers of historical knowledge thus becomes less important than demonstrating a commitment to interpretive rigor and that the products of such histories should be held to this

standard. Ultimately, if this practice were to be shared among producers of history, opposing historical distortion would be a collaborative project that crosses conventional boundaries, and pools a diverse range of skill sets towards achieving common goals. This is, after all, a practice that has already been established in the many contexts of global public history.

Discussions of public history in Japan, public history being a concept imported and developed through academia in the past decade, tends to remain anchored in the question of whether or not to abandon the authority of academic historians – the binary of ‘letting go’ versus ‘holding on’ that has been challenged by Michael Frisch’s notion of shared authority.⁵⁹ Our examination suggests, however, that in confronting HR this may prove to be more of an obstacle than a help in developing constructive discussion. This is because claiming authority, which underpins the notion of sharing it, plays into accusations of elitism wielded by revisionists, encouraging only defensive reactions and hindering cooperation with those who work outside of academia. Academic historians’ credibility rests on their interpretive rigor, not on claims to spectral authority. We should aim to normalize academic historians’ collaboration with wider actors whom they share aims with, working together in the political arena of historical debate. Ultimately, departing from notions of authority may counterintuitively strengthen resistance to HR by facilitating broader coalitions and more effective cooperative action based on shared commitments to methodological rigor rather than institutional position and privilege.

⁵⁸ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016), 67.

⁵⁹ Michael Frisch, “From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back. In *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*,” eds. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 126–37, 136.