



NHK's Finest Hour: Japan's Official Record of Chinese Forced Labor

William Underwood

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By William Underwood

May 3, 1960:

"We have heard that in March of Showa 21 [1946], the directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA] compiled such an investigative record. However, it was thought that if the documents were used for war crimes prosecutions they would cause trouble to a great many people. Therefore, all of the documents were burned and MOFA does not now possess even a portion of the documents."

--Diet remarks by the chief of MOFA's Asia Bureau during questioning by the Lower House Special Committee on the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. The decision to deceive parliament about records describing Chinese forced labor in Japan had been reached six weeks earlier, on March 17, and the false story would be repeated on multiple occasions. Kishi Nobusuke, prime minister at the time, had served as the wartime czar of forced labor operations and been imprisoned as a Class A war crimes suspect from 1945-48.[1]

May 11, 1993:

"We have been hearing that MOFA compiled an investigative report in March of Showa 21 [1946]. Since that report does not now exist, however, we cannot say anything with certainty. ... Regarding the existence of documents like that, MOFA has employed various means and done all it can. However, we have answered in the Diet in the past that such documents no longer remain, and the present situation has not changed. We are sorry to keep repeating ourselves, but I must state once more that the records are not here."

--Diet remarks by the chief of the regional policy section of MOFA's Asia Bureau, during questioning by the Upper House Welfare Committee.[2]

May 17, 1993:

NHK is Japan's influential public broadcasting network. NHK's nightly TV program, "Close Up Gendai," introduces the Japanese public to the five-volume, 646-page Foreign Ministry Report and related documents about Chinese forced labor (CFL). The records confirm that 38,935 Chinese males between the ages of 11 and 78 were brought to Japan against their will in 1943-45. They performed harsh, unpaid physical labor at 135 mines, docks and construction sites from Kyushu to Hokkaido. The overall fatality rate was 17.5 percent, more than one in six, but at some sites half of all workers perished.

August 14, 1993:

An hour-long NHK Special called "The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report: The Record of Chinese Forced Labor" is broadcast on national television. The network interviewed dozens of people in Japan, China and the United States, while conducting the first research using primary CFL records. These included the Foreign Ministry Report, Site Reports and previously unknown Investigator Reports. NHK Publishing produced a 244-page book with the same title in 1994.[3]

July 18, 2003:

"We knew that these reports were kept in the basement storeroom, but we were not able to confirm that they were the reports submitted by individual companies. We deeply regret not making thorough investigations."

--Public statement by MOFA's China and Mongolia Division, following discovery of more than 100 Site Reports detailing all aspects of Chinese forced labor. The reports were submitted to MOFA in 1946 by the 35 Japanese corporations that used Chinese workers. Two dozen companies remain in business today.[4]

August 26, 2003:

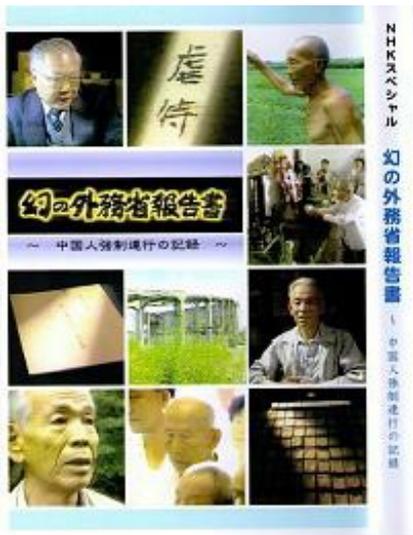
"Regarding the matter of so-called Chinese forced labor, it is extremely regrettable that amid abnormal wartime conditions many Chinese people came to Japan in a half-forcible manner and endured many hardships due to severe work."

--Written statement to the Diet by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro [5]

These days, NHK's programming schedule is long on nature programs and favorable coverage of the imperial family. The problem of Japanese abducted by North Korea also gets plenty of air time, while shows highlighting Japan's atomic victimization have become an August ritual. The reputation of NHK as the media entity least likely to challenge the nation's conservative government was cemented last year, amid revelations that the public broadcaster had bowed to political pressure in sanitizing a 2001 program about military sexual slavery.[6]

The very future of NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai, or the Japan Broadcasting Corp.) has grown unclear. A string of fraud and embezzlement scandals has led 30 percent of households to withhold payment of the mandatory viewer fees that fund the 56-year-old organization. NHK's own reform plans include steep staff cuts, while a government panel has recommended eliminating some of the eight television and radio channels. The network's annual budget requires Diet approval.

NHK and its attitude toward Japanese war responsibility were far different in 1993. During the May 17 broadcast of its “Close Up Gendai” program, NHK exhibited the long-suppressed “Foreign Ministry Report” (FMR) that details the brutal wartime system of Chinese forced labor operated by the state and private companies. Parliament soon took up the matter and Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi expressed his deep regret. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) would compare typesets and analyze writing styles for a year before acknowledging that the FMR in NHK’s possession was the same document it had produced in 1946.



Video cover for August 1993 NHK Special

On August 1, 1993, NHK ran a television documentary about wartime labor conscription involving hundreds of thousands of Koreans, based on name lists made public by the Welfare Ministry. The program was entitled, “Investigative Report: Korean Forced Labor.” Then on August 4, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei admitted for the first time the forcible nature of the so-called “comfort women” system and the Japanese military’s central role in it.

Kono extended the government’s “sincere apologies and remorse to all those, irrespective of place of origin, who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women.” Kono also promised to “face squarely the historical facts as described above instead of evading them.” However, the Japanese government failed to issue a formal apology or to establish a government fund to provide reparations for victims. The Asian Women’s Fund established in 1995 was a private fund that left most victims deeply dissatisfied at the failure of the Japanese government to accept responsibility.[7]

(In an indication of how far Japan has regressed since the mid-1990s regarding responsibility for military sexual slavery, the Daily Yomiuri’s startling editorial on Feb. 6, 2005, was entitled “Asian Women’s Fund Based on Distortions.” The Yomiuri attacked “Kono’s patently false statement” of a decade earlier and blamed it for creating “the mistaken perception both at home and abroad that the women who worked at brothels had been forced to do so by the Imperial Army after being forcibly transported to such facilities for sexual servitude.”)[8]

On August 9, 1993, Hosokawa Morihiro became the first non-LDP prime minister in 38 years and, in his inaugural press conference, stated his belief that Japan had waged “a war of aggression, a war that was wrong.” This rather self-evident observation was unprecedented for a Japanese leader, although during the remainder of his brief tenure Hosokawa would refer more discreetly to a war that had included “aggressive acts.”

(A group of LDP Diet members began meeting a few days later in reaction to Hosokawa’s statement, which helped galvanize the forces of nationalism and historical revisionism that have since become prominent. An account of the period on the Liberal Democratic Party’s website refers to “notable mishaps including Prime Minister Hosokawa’s widely-criticized assertion at a press conference that Japan had acted as an aggressor in the Second World War (Nihon no shinryaku senso).”)[9]

Then on August 14, 1993, capping a self-searching fortnight in terms of accountability for Japan’s war conduct, NHK aired a remarkable hour-long television documentary called “The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report: The Record of Chinese Forced Labor.” The NHK Special was awarded the top prize at the 1993 Asia TV Broadcasting Festival, while a 244-page book of the same title was put out by NHK Publishers in 1994.

Taken together, the documentary and the book likely represent the most aggressive investigation in the network’s history. In a manner scarcely imaginable today, NHK unflinchingly educated the Japanese public about a major, nearly forgotten war crime. In a book subsection called “Ongoing Evasion of Responsibility by the Government and Corporations,” NHK openly called for redress for Chinese victims. A survey of the two dozen Japanese corporations still in business was conducted, asking them if they felt responsible for the deaths at their worksites and if they planned to apologize and pay compensation.

DECADE OF REGRESS

The contemporary reparations movement for Chinese forced labor (CFL), with roots in Japanese society stretching back to the late 1940s, has unfolded fitfully since it reemerged two decades ago. In 1989, survivors of Kajima Corp.’s notorious Hanaoka construction site, where 418 out of 986 workers died and a late-war uprising and massacre took place, demanded a public apology, compensation and establishment of a memorial museum. Kajima did apologize in 1990 but then dug in its corporate heels; the “community relief fund” finally set up in 2000 lacked any admission of wrongdoing. Yet the 14 CFL lawsuits filed nationwide have been notably successful, at least by Japan’s inhospitable judicial standards, with four major victories for plaintiffs so far.

The Tokyo District Court in July 2001 ordered the state to compensate the family of Liu Lianren, who escaped from a Hokkaido mine in 1945 and hid in the mountains until 1958. The Fukuoka District Court ordered Mitsui Corp. to pay compensation in another case in April 2002, while the Hiroshima High Court ordered Nishimatsu Corp. to do likewise in July 2004. Those three cases are now before the Japan Supreme Court. The Niigata District Court found both the state and Rinko Corp. liable for damages in March 2004.

Japanese judges at both the district and appeals court levels, in fact, routinely find that the Japanese government and private companies jointly engaged in illegal conduct by forcibly bringing plaintiffs to Japan and forcing them to work here. This has established a vital historical record, even though most claims are ultimately rejected (as at the Tokyo High Court on June 16) on the grounds of state immunity and a 20-year time limit for filing lawsuits. Judges occasionally (as at the Nagano District Court last March) express their personal desires that victims be redressed through non-judicial means.

But Mitsubishi Materials Corp., successor to the mining arm of the zaibatsu that was Japan's top munitions producer, is currently embarked on a bold defense strategy based on revisionist historical arguments. In a recent lawsuit before the Fukuoka District Court involving a coal mine where one out of every four workers died, Mitsubishi lawyers denied all charges of forced labor, questioned whether Japan ever "invaded" China, and warned that a "mistaken burden of the soul" would result from court findings that forced labor occurred.

Mitsubishi attorneys have told the Miyazaki District Court, in reference to a copper mine where the 31 percent death toll was double the national average, "Conditions at our worksite were in no way any worse than those in China at the time." [10] At the Nagasaki District Court, Mitsubishi has claimed that the operations of the North China Labor Association, the collaborationist Beijing agency that will be discussed below, were not influenced by the Japanese military occupation.

The story behind Mitsubishi's determined campaign of denial regarding Chinese forced labor involves systematic Kyushu-based attempts to whitewash the far larger wartime system of Korean labor conscription by denying that any coercion or violence was involved. "The Truth and Glory of the Coal Mines: The Fabrication of Korean Forced Labor," a 108-page book with tables and photographs written using a middle-school language level, was published in December 2005 by the Chikuhō chapter of the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference). [11]

Nippon Kaigi is a well-funded group of influential Diet members, business leaders, academics and citizens with a strongly nationalistic agenda. The decade-old lobbying organization is said to have 50,000 dues-paying members and millions more supporters who espouse the Shinto religion and other Japanese traditions. [12] Focusing on the rich mining history of the Chikuhō region of Kyushu, once the backbone of Japan's coal industry, the new Nippon Kaigi book is apparently intended as a supplemental teaching resource.

Researchers supporting reparations, meanwhile, have joined what they describe as a pitched battle for control of the historical narrative of mining by both Koreans and Chinese in Chikuhō. Kyushu courtrooms and boards of education have become the intertwined battlegrounds. If the sanitized version of mining history takes root locally, it could spread nationwide and spill over into other industrial sectors that used forced labor extensively. A recent field trip to old mine sites, meant to help counter the revisionist trend, was attended by 30 area residents—and a pair of suspicious strangers possibly connected to the Nippon Kaigi effort.

Reparations backers further claim that attempts to "restore pride" in Chikuhō by eliminating all vestiges of forced labor from the narrative are being spearheaded by former executives of Mitsubishi Materials and Aso Mining Corp., once the family firm of Japan's current foreign minister and prime ministerial candidate, Aso Taro. The frontrunner to become the next prime minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, is the grandson of Kishi Nobusuke, who had served as the bureaucratic overseer of all forced labor programs before heading the cover up of Chinese forced labor as prime minister from 1957-60. Both Aso and Abe maintain close connections to Nippon Kaigi, although since joining the cabinet they are no longer formal members.

Satani Masayuki, author of "The Truth and Glory of the Coal Mines," is a retired front-office employee of Mitsubishi's coal division and a member of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, or Tsukurukai, the national group behind controversial textbooks that downplay and at times deny Japanese war misconduct and atrocities. Satani previously self-published a book called, "Wake Up from the Brainwashing of the Tokyo Trials View of History." The editor of "Truth and Glory" is a former head of the municipal history museum in Iizuka, Chikuhō's main city, and co-author of "The 100-Year History of Aso Mining."



Chinese woman with her father's remains
(NHK Special)

By stark contrast, the German and Austrian governments and companies that used forced labor during the Nazi era, under powerful U.S. pressure, recently completed reparations programs granting formal apologies and monetary payments of more than six billion dollars to nearly two million former workers or family members. Educational programs are a key element of European redress activities and forced labor memorial museums have been built.

Germany agreed in April 2006 to make public up to 50 million documents from Nazi archives regarding the personal fates of 17 million victims of forced labor and the Holocaust. [13] Whereas this major archives release is expected to greatly facilitate understanding of forced labor across Europe, Japan's track record has been to stubbornly suppress virtually all information about forced labor and other war crimes in Asia. To be sure, there are no top-level German government officials with such deep family ties to forced labor and no industry-affiliated groups attempting to minimize or deny the historical reality, making it easier for the German government to comply with demands to open the archives.

In short, current Japanese attitudes toward forced labor reparations are vastly different from might have been expected to result from the 1993 broadcast and 1994 publication of NHK's "The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report." The remainder of this article will consider the compelling record of Chinese forced labor as laid out by NHK, ranging from Interior Ministry directives to harshly mistreat workers to Hokkaido police instructions to falsify death certificates and the postwar government's deliberate deception of the Diet.

The records produced—and then concealed—by the state and industry try to shift blame for the high fatality rates to one another and to the Chinese themselves, while displaying the virulent racism that was intrinsic to the program. While some conscientious Japanese pursued CFL accountability and ensured that records were not lost forever, joint state-corporate moves to evade responsibility predated the “reverse course” phase of the American Occupation that aimed to rehabilitate Japanese industry and political conservatives. From August 1945 down to the present day, NHK showed, the Japanese establishment has been consistently duplicitous in denying and refusing to come to terms with the legacy of Chinese forced labor.

PAPER TRAIL REDISCOVERED

The secret compilation of the massive “Investigative Report on Working Conditions of Chinese Labor,” or Foreign Ministry Report (FMR), amid the domestic chaos of early 1946 was a marvel of organizational efficiency. The process highlighted the strong continuity of Japan’s wartime and immediate postwar institutions of government and economic production, and of the interactions between them. Indeed, it would be difficult to point to any other project of similar scope and sensitivity that was carried out without the knowledge of GHQ during this critical transitional period.

Fearing war crimes prosecutions by the victorious Allied coalition that included the Nationalist Chinese government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) sent a total of 16 investigators to all 135 forced labor worksites beginning in March 1946, while simultaneously instructing the 35 corporations to submit information directly to the ministry. This process resulted in the relatively truthful Investigator Reports as well as the more self-serving Site Reports, with the FMR then being compiled mainly from the Site Reports as a potential tool for state and corporate self-defense. The purpose of the exercise was to portray Chinese forced labor in the best possible light before Occupation authorities could undertake their own investigation. That is apparently why the FMR bears the date of March 1946 despite being completed early that summer.

The Foreign Ministry Report lists the names of all 38,935 Chinese males, aged 11-78, who were brought to Japan between 1943 and 1945, as well as causes of death for the 6,830 men (17.5 percent) who perished in the course of performing harsh labor at mines, docks and construction sites. Details include hometowns, occupations, next of kin, methods of procurement, location and duration of detention in North China, ports of departure from China and arrival in Japan, and names of ships. Circumstances of food, clothing, housing, work and supervision at company sites are described, along with accounts of disturbances and postwar repatriation to China. Amid the tables and statistics is MOFA’s conclusion that the program was a huge financial burden on corporations and failed to alleviate Japan’s manpower crisis as intended. [14]

An NHK producer was discreetly informed about the voluminous record of Chinese forced labor in early 1993. The Foreign Ministry Report, Site Reports and Investigator Reports that the network revealed to the nation during the May 17 news show and the August 14 documentary were obtained from two major sources: Chen Kunwang of the Tokyo branch of the Overseas Chinese Association (OCA) and Otomo Fukuo, one of the 16 MOFA investigators dispatched to worksites.

The Taiwan-born Chen had come to Japan in 1941 to study law at Chuo University, becoming vice-president of the Tokyo OCA in 1950. Chen told NHK that someone connected to MOFA (presumably Otomo) secretly gave him the FMR and most of the Site Reports via a middleman in the early 1950s, after disobeying orders to destroy the records in order to preserve the truth about CFL. The bulky reports were handed over in installments using rucksacks, during rendezvous in coffee shops. The OCA’s Ginza office was deemed an unsafe storage place for top-secret government documents, especially since the group was considered an informal representative of Beijing during much of the Cold War. So key sections of the reports were microfilmed and everything was stored off-site in cardboard apple boxes. Chen delivered the yellowed 47-year-old materials to NHK’s Shibuya office using a station wagon.



Chen Kunwang with records he hid for decades (NHK Special)

In 1955, in fact, Chen had publicly stated that the Overseas Chinese Association possessed the records, during an earlier phase of the CFL reparations movement when the main goals were to erect memorials and hold commemorations, while excavating remains of victims and returning them to China. Chen told NHK he even allowed the Japanese Red Cross Society to make a copy of the FMR, in an unsuccessful attempt to enlist the group’s help in pursuing state responsibility for CFL as a crime under international law. The Japan Red Cross eventually provided limited cooperation in repatriating Chinese bones.

Individual Site Reports, containing sensitive information such as the names of Japanese staff who supervised forced labor, were sometimes wielded by the OCA to browbeat recalcitrant companies into handing over remains. Chen recounted how one corporation denied that remains in its possession were of Chinese origin at all—until he dropped a Site Report, complete with the personal seals of senior management, on the office table. The company later reportedly complained to MOFA that information it had been promised would remain confidential was in the hands of reparations activists. Even during the decades when their existence was officially denied, the reports played an instrumental role in the pursuit of accountability for Chinese forced labor.

NHK learned about Otomo Fukuo through internal MOFA documents discovered by Japanese redress activists at the U.S. National Archives, referring to the ministry’s early 1946 appointment of CFL site inspectors and funding of the investigation. Otomo was 79 years old when NHK tracked him down and received a second FMR and a large cache of unusually reliable Investigator Reports, a class of records that not even the OCA had realized existed. Starting mostly with surnames only, NHK managed to identify the 16 investigators half a century later and interviewed several of them.

Not regular ministry employees, the investigators contracted for the FMR job had worked in wartime China as analysts for agencies like the government's East Asia Research Institute and some went on to postwar careers in academia, in Otomo's case as a Senshu University economics professor specializing in labor issues. Several of those who fanned out to worksites were apparently progressives, evidenced by the fact that the Investigator Reports establish patterns of cruelty and mistreatment omitted by the company-produced Site Reports and the final FMR. Otomo visited seven sites, observing conditions that differed greatly from company descriptions and interviewing locals who told him that the miserable living standards were good enough for Chinese.

The inspector sent to Mitsui Corp.'s Miike coal mine recalled for NHK that his red-carpet treatment included being plied with alcohol during the afternoon, adding that he believed Mitsui officials were deceiving him to hide their war crimes. After a month of inspections in the hinterlands the investigators returned to Tokyo and began compiling their more objective reports, even as trusted MOFA officials were independently writing up the FMR based on company Site Reports and the extensive CFL records the state already had. The dispatch of the contract investigators may have been a diversionary tactic intended to placate GHQ and the Chinese government in the event of war crimes prosecutions.

As Otomo explained, "The Foreign Ministry Report was meant to be given to foreigners like the Chinese if questions arose, so the purpose was to show that there was no extreme cruelty at all. Severe cases of abuse were depicted as contrary to government policy and the result of misguided personal actions by worksite staff. Basically, it was a self-defense document. Nevertheless, the report contains factual information about the forced labor system and how it was carried out. It accurately tells what kind of Chinese were brought to Japan, as well as where and how they died. So despite its limitations, the report is certainly an extremely valuable document." [15]

NHK's production team went far beyond passive reliance on the FMR in rushing to complete the documentary by August 1993. Crews filmed interviews in Japan, China and the United States, while staff researchers pored over the three types of reports looking for discrepancies. Meetings with local museums, corporate historians and labor union archivists helped narrow the focus to three worksites: two Hokkaido coal mines and Furukawa Mining Corp.'s Ashio copper mine in Tochigi Prefecture. NHK was undeterred by initial refusals to cooperate with the project and determined to avoid fuzzy euphemisms in telling viewers about the historical reality.

"We decided at the beginning that we would absolutely avoid concealing the identities of interviewees," the NHK book related. "Still an unresolved issue after half a century, Chinese forced labor was a serious and sensitive problem for Sino-Japanese relations. That was precisely why we did not want to use ambiguous descriptions. We sincerely explained to the people involved that we wanted to accurately convey the facts and continued persuading them to cooperate." [16]

NORTH CHINA CONTEXT

Construction and mining industry organizations approached the government regarding the "internal importation" (naichi inyu) of Chinese workers beginning in 1939, refining the concept in an August 1941 position paper. With domestic heavy labor shortages becoming evermore critical, the state turned this corporate vision into administrative reality in two steps: the November 1942 "cabinet resolution" that led to the trial introduction of 1,411 laborers beginning in April 1943; and the February 1944 "vice-ministers' resolution" that led to the full importation phase beginning in March 1944. (Kishi Nobusuke authorized both measures, first as Minister of Commerce and Industry and later as Vice-Minister of Munitions; both portfolios included extensive oversight of forced labor.)

Companies submitted their numerical requests for Chinese manpower to the Welfare Ministry, which in turn consulted with the Munitions Ministry and Transportation Ministry to determine allotments. Then the Beijing-based North China Labor Association (NCLA), staffed mostly with Chinese after having been set up by the Japanese Embassy and Imperial Army, oversaw the procurement, detention and shipment of workers to Japan. The forcible deportations were carried out over a 25-month period ending in May 1945. Some 90 percent of workers were obtained via the NCLA, according to the FMR, mostly through the vaguely defined method of "administrative provision" that grew increasingly violent over time and is discussed below.



Region of North China where forced laborers were obtained: Hebei, Shanxi, Shandong, Shaanxi, Henan provinces (NHK Special)

Nearly all laborers came from three provinces of North China around Beijing and half came from Hebei Province alone. Sixty percent of workers left wives and children behind in China and were presumably their families' main breadwinners, a statistic that strongly suggests the involuntarily nature of the program. It is also necessary to understand the ruthlessness of Japan's military occupation of North China, which in some respects resembled later American warfare in Vietnam. (American military planners reportedly studied Japanese counterinsurgency tactics, the results in Vietnam being similarly unsuccessful.)

Inose Kenzo, 71, interviewed on camera by NHK, was a soldier in late 1943 in a North China combat zone contested by Japanese, Communist Chinese and Nationalist Chinese armies. Despite having seized coastal cities with relative ease years earlier, Inose explained that Japan was unable to hold the villages of the North China plain after dark and faced continued guerrilla resistance from forces associated with the Communist Eighth Route Army. During "subjugation operations" (tobatsu sakusen) lasting three or four weeks, Inose's unit roamed around the periphery of Japanese-held territory until their food or ammunition ran out, pillaging food through "local requisition".

"Even in the cases of children and young women, we never knew who might have a weapon," Inose said of the search-and-destroy missions. "So whoever ran away from us was considered an enemy combatant. We took everybody we arrested to our garrison and confined them to an army facility as prisoners of war. In other words, they were war booty. We fought and won the prize; we considered those people to be wares we had acquired. At first we took ammunition, small arms, food and money as our war booty, but eventually people became booty too. That's how any Chinese who looked as if he could work came to be treated as a possession that could supply labor power." [17]

NHK also referred to "laborer hunting" (roko gari) in disputed areas of North China, a practice that predated the deportation of workers to Japan. Earlier, those captured supplied forced labor to war industries in Manchuria and parts of North China. Inose recounted how his army unit, sometimes with the help of collaborationist Chinese soldiers, surrounded entire farming hamlets and captured all mature males. However, Japan never accorded Asians official POW status. Interrogation by torture invariably followed, with a large percentage of men then entering the forced labor feeder system. The practice served the dual purpose of cleansing rural villages of actual or potential adversaries and providing desperately needed workers, thereby inadvertently fueling a nationalist response.

FORCIBLE RECRUITMENT

The activities of the North China Labor Association must be viewed within this context of state-sanctioned Japanese terror and the extreme dehumanization of Chinese people it entailed. With Japanese leaders in place at the top rungs, the NCLA was a full-service agency for labor procurement, transportation, security and disbursement of wages. The association also maintained housing and training facilities and provided sanitation for them. But the reality of the NCLA's work, and especially the predominant practice of administrative provision, was very different from innocuous-sounding official descriptions. [18]

After receiving approval from Tokyo for their labor requests, Japanese companies dispatched representatives to Beijing for direct negotiations with the NCLA, in the hope of obtaining desirable workers quickly. Corporations in several Site Reports, along with the government in the Foreign Ministry Report, severely criticized the NCLA and sought to shift blame for Chinese forced labor onto the association itself.

Administrative provision "was concerned only with raw numbers and there were many problems with laborers' physical fitness and willingness for work," according to the FMR. "The reality at the time was that the main targets for introduction [of labor to Japan] were former prisoners of war, reeducated soldiers and convicted criminals. But the numbers of such workers was smaller than expected.... Compounding the difficulty of meeting labor needs even for North China itself, the region's good harvests, high commodity prices and deteriorating law and order exacerbated procurement problems. Vendors advanced into North China with impetuous plans for obtaining the required numbers of workers. As a result of these incomplete provision networks, Chinese workers of inferior quality were procured using half-forcible means." [19]

Labor supply and demand realities, along with a deteriorating security environment, created a late-war seller's market for labor contracts in North China, making it unlikely that Chinese would willingly migrate to the land of their unwelcome occupiers. Furukawa Mining's report for its Ashio worksite shows that the company requested 300 workers from the NCLA but received only 257. The Ashio Site Report states that an NCLA branch office sent Chinese and Japanese staff to villages around Shijiazhuang and "gathered by hunting," with abductions of local residents and prisoners being carried out in the presence of Furukawa employees. NCLA personnel were recorded as saying to one another, "We will be hated by average Chinese because the recruitment is being done half-forcibly. It is dangerous and we might be killed." [20]

A Mitsui Site Report explained under the heading of "recruitment methods" how 600 workers were obtained in two batches of 300. The first batch resulted partly from "wholesale abductions by Chinese police" of laborers from busy streets, and the rounding up of thieves and traffic violators who were then turned over to the NCLA's subcontracting agencies. The second batch involved sending prisoners of war, local robbers and spies to a labor training center for a period of time and then furnishing them to agencies. Significantly, the Mitsui report confirms that the NCLA transported workers only after requesting and receiving permission from the Japanese Embassy and Army. Mitsui added, "Workers obtained through administrative provision had been gathered by force, so these men often tried to run away and escape to their hometowns." [21]

A Site Report produced by Kumatani Corp. offered the following blunt conclusion for the CFL scheme's general lack of success: "Labor salaries had been exhausted by that time in North China. The Chinese people's anti-Japanese sentiment and uncooperative attitude made the situation very difficult, which is why the industrial labor association had to rely on administrative provision. The result was that all of the workers introduced to our company were convicts who had little experience in manual labor. That was the number one cause of the program's failure." [22]

NHK GOES TO CHINA

The Chinese government did not make NHK's task of filming in China easy during the summer of 1993. It took the network four months to get permission to visit China on a one-week visa, and a pair of government minders constantly accompanied the NHK personnel, who had to receive time-consuming authorization each time they entered a new county. A Japanese photographer would experience similar red tape when he traveled around rural North China to produce a 2003 book documenting the current living conditions of forced labor survivors. [23] This reality underscores Beijing's lukewarm past support for CFL reparations, and makes clear the unfairness of Japanese court rulings that reject compensation by saying victims should have filed their lawsuits years earlier.

NHK was greatly assisted by Liu Baochen, a professor at Hebei University who with the help of students began locating former workers and recording their oral histories in the late 1980s. "I started this research to fill in the blank spaces of China's modern history," Liu reported. "Until now in China, there have no books or materials of any sort to elucidate the actual conditions of forced labor. It has been buried in the darkness of history. That's why I want to make the facts clear, starting with the testimony of the people who were taken to Japan." [24]

Remarkably for the time, Liu distinguished between the right of individual Chinese citizens to claim compensation from Japanese corporations and the right of the Chinese state to claim compensation from the Japanese state, adding that Beijing and Tokyo agree that the latter right was terminated by the 1972 Joint Declaration. The Chinese government would not make the same distinction until 1995, when it finally gave victims the green light to file lawsuits in Japanese courts.

Liu Zhongtang, still a Shijiazhuang-area farmer like most of those who were taken to Ashio, supplied for the camera a first-person perspective on his "recruitment" via administrative provision on June 10, 1944. NHK inquired whether he had gone to Japan voluntarily, prompting Liu's animated response: "Don't be ridiculous! There's no way that could have been termed recruitment. Nobody wanted to go to Japan no matter what wages they might have received. That's because there was no guarantee of ever returning to China alive. They bound us and forced us to go! How can you call that recruitment?" [25]



Liu reenacts his 1944 abduction (NHK Special)

The 28-year-old Liu was snatched from his farm near the war's shifting front lines by Japanese and Chinese puppet soldiers. During interrogation he was nearly suffocated by having a wet towel placed over his mouth, and told that "if you are not an Eighth Route Army member, then you will tell us the names of villagers who are!"[26] Liu's wife and father learned that he had been abducted and taken to Japan only when he returned home in January 1946; his mother died in his absence.

Thousands of Japan-bound Chinese passed through Shijiazhuang's ghastly Sekimon Labor Training Center, a Japanese-run prison until the name was changed in 1943 and still a prison in reality after that. Liu Zhongtang, though, was taken by Japanese Army truck to a smaller detention facility and then by train to the Tanggu concentration camp near the port city of Tianjin, which he called the most hellish leg of his 18-month nightmare. He spent about 50 days in the dirty and overcrowded Tanggu camp, which was patrolled by Chinese guards but had Japanese soldiers manning the gates and watch towers with machine guns. An admixture of farmers, penal convicts, demobilized soldiers, and Communist and Nationalist captured troops, the inmates were confined to their beds for 18 hours a day and beaten if they opened their eyes.

Food, sanitation and medical care were so abysmal at the Tanggu facility and other ports of departure that, according to the Foreign Ministry Report, 812 men died in transit between China and their intended worksites in Japan (564 of them at sea and 248 in Japan).[27] However, the overall CFL fatality figure of 6,830 excludes the thousands of men who likely died in detention or were killed while trying to escape prior to reaching the Chinese coast. The FRM blamed the Chinese side for abuses at Tanggu and aboard the overloaded cargo ships in which workers were forced to sit directly atop loads of coal. These conditions undoubtedly contributed to deaths in Japan, but the Tokyo government was ultimately responsible for events in occupied North China.

Claimed the Ashio Site Report, with its vested interest in soft-pedaling a 42 percent death rate: "Concerning the treatment of Chinese laborers, facilities established by Chinese authorities were extremely inadequate. There were many points such as the provision of food that we truly regretted. A major problem was that there was not a single doctor for a place accommodating more than 2,000 people. The staple food of mantou [Chinese buns] was half-cooked and there was no water system, forcing people to drink muddy water from the Shirakawa River. Chinese laborers who were already malnourished had to stay for long periods in Japan and many of them continued to suffer from diarrhea. ... Japanese companies urged local agencies of the North China Labor Association to seriously reflect on this."[28]

CONDITIONS IN JAPAN

The primary cause of the program's high death toll was that conditions in Japan were wretched and workers were treated harshly. The goal was to maximize industrial production, and to minimize the security risks of bringing young, male enemy nationals to the home islands, by crushing their will to resist. Official state and corporate policies called for extreme camp security, inferior clothing, overcrowded sleeping quarters, primitive sanitation with no bathing facilities, limited medical care, and minimal amounts of the poorest quality food—which was to be withheld as necessary to ensure discipline.

Conditions were closely monitored through a system of camp inspections and company reporting that involved the Interior Ministry, Welfare Ministry, Munitions Ministry and Greater East Asia Ministry. Yet the 1946 records include more attempts by the government and companies to evade accountability by blaming each other and, again, the Chinese themselves. NHK made effective use of frank Investigator Reports and previously unknown "smoking gun" documents, leaving zero doubt about who was really at fault.

"Measures for Controlling Imported Chinese Workers," general directives issued by the Interior Ministry in April 1944, show that police were acutely worried about escapes and organized rebellions. The Chinese were to be quarantined and separated at all times from the Korean conscripts and Allied POWs who frequently performed forced labor at the same industrial sites, as well as from local Japanese. In June 1944, based on the so-called "Honma recommendations," the Interior Ministry issued more draconian guidelines called "Reference Documents for Use of Chinese Workers."



GHQ photo of liberated Chinese at Hanaoka (NHK Special)

Honma Fusakichi, NHK recounted, had gone to China as a teenager out of a sense of adventure and stayed for 20 years. After first working as a "coolie," he became involved in transportation ventures using Chinese laborers and later ran Chinese soldiers in gathering intelligence for the Imperial Navy. While contracted to the Interior Ministry in March and April of 1944, Honma accompanied ministry officials on 20 high-level visits to CFL worksites, concluding that conditions were far too soft. (Okazaki Eijo, who was in charge of the ministry's camp inspections and also headed the Special Higher Police, had tapped Honma for the job. Postwar lustration would keep Okazaki out of public office until 1952, but he was elected to the Diet on the maiden LDP ticket in 1955 and later served as Kishi's deputy cabinet secretary.)

"Reference Documents for Use of Chinese Workers," the startling product of Honma's advice, cover all aspects of camp life and are quoted at length:

"Regarding living quarters, the ceiling should not be more than [ten centimeters] higher than workers' heads when they are seated. Then we could more than double the number of workers presently in camps. Bathing facilities are especially excessive and are not necessary for Chinese workers. How many of them have ever experienced taking a Japanese bath? According to Chinese customs ... if you take someone into your home and invite them to bathe, it means they can sleep with your wife or daughter. It is the attitude that the conquered show to conquerors. Baths will spoil them and make them work less hard. Some hot or cold water in a basin is sufficient. ...

"If you give them only a little food, they will be tense and their work productivity will improve. If you give them more food, their tension will decrease and more people will become sick, lowering productivity. ... It may be difficult to reduce food rations right away, so you can start with the sick and workers who have been resting. Or, it should be possible to reduce food rations by a small amount every day. ... The labor power of Chinese workers is said to be the best in the world. If you use Chinese properly, they will work several times harder than Japanese. ... At present the Chinese [in Japan] come in third; with Japanese first and Koreans second. It is said the Chinese are spoiled. If you allot them twice as much work as Japanese or Koreans, it will be more effective. ...

"The more affection you show to Chinese, the more spoiled they become. And when they become spoiled, they return kindness with ingratitude. The Chinese are a race unaffected by feelings. ... In China runaways are beheaded or shot. If we do not punish runaways in a similarly severe manner here in Japan, we fear it will become more and more difficult to control them. ... It is true that the Chinese have loving feelings for their homeland and the graves of their ancestors. But they never shed real tears. Tears for people like them are skillful acting." [29]

NHK then introduced Site Reports that either paraphrased or quoted directly from the Honma recommendations, indicating that they became nationwide standards after filtering through prefectural police channels. Nittetsu Mining Corp.'s report for its Kamaishi site, citing Iwate police instructions, referred to the 10 centimeters of head space and said baths are appropriate only for conquerors. It mentioned other security instructions including barbed-wire fencing more than two meters high around sleeping quarters with locked doors, as well as a camp self-government system that rewarded cooperative Chinese and led to violence among workers. Nittetsu, needing to finesse the fact that 41 percent of Kamaishi workers died, contended that the state's excessive top-down control had the effect of lowering industrial output.

The Investigator Report for Ashio included the following numbered directives from Tochigi police: "2) Be overpowering as method of control. ... 3) When you capture runaways, do not let them return to their camp and work again. (If they are allowed to return, other workers will be relieved to see that runaways are not killed, causing others to flee.) ... 5) Make the living quarters as shabby as possible. ... 6) Make the food as poor as possible and consider it to be fodder. They should be given mostly bran, corn or leeks—not rice or wheat. Feed them according to the diligence of their work." [30] As with the Honma guidelines, the overall image suggested is that of a kennel for livestock rather than a work camp for voluntary contract laborers.

While company-produced reports predictably omit mention of cruelty or torture, NHK presented the Investigator Report for Mitsui Mining Corp.'s Sunagawa worksite in Hokkaido, detailing specific deaths from "illegal conduct." In one case, a recaptured escapee was hung from the ceiling, beaten and then suffocated by having cloth stuffed in his mouth. NHK located one of the deceased man's former barracks mates in China. He recalled on camera a virtually identical account of the incident.

COVERING TRACKS, BLAMING VICTIMS

Chinese forced labor deaths became a major concern only after Japan's military defeat, prompting the state and industry to jointly conceal the truth. In an "Important Notice for Preparing Name Rosters" discovered within an Investigator Report, Hokkaido prefectural police directed, "Causes of death such as malnutrition, starvation, suicide and death by occupational injury should be rewritten so as not to stimulate other parties. The rewriting of death certificates should be coordinated with doctors and local public officials." [31]

Otomo Fukuo told NHK about one railroad worksite in Hokkaido where 26 out of 90 death certificates had been rewritten and falsified on police orders. On the night that Otomo finished his inspection of the site, a local doctor discreetly confessed that police had told him "not to write anything on death certificates that could cause trouble later." [32] The result was that innocuous-sounding fatalities due to colitis and gastrointestinal inflammation came to predominate. But Otomo found that real causes of death were sheer lack of caloric intake, lack of medical care, cruelty and exploitation.

The inhumane treatment resulted in widespread health problems. The Foreign Ministry Report notes that more than 20,000 men, over half the total, contracted skin diseases (an unsurprising result of working in mines and never bathing) and these led to numerous deaths. Loss of eyesight due to vitamin deficiency and poor sanitation was also very common.

A Kajima Corp. Site Report, unrelated to the Hanaoka construction site, shamelessly pinned blame for rampant illness and disease on workers themselves. "Chinese workers lack any concept of sanitation and wash their faces using the same water and basin that other Chinese with virulent eye diseases use. An unexpectedly large number lost their eyesight as a result. ... Regarding the cause of diseases, most skin disorders were brought with them from China, including stubborn eczema which is difficult to treat and leads to suppuration. The cause of gastroenteritis is traceable to living environments in China. In addition to having weak bodies and weak resistance, they lack a personal sense of hygiene and neglect their health. For example, they stealthily pick up and eat rotten leftover food that has been thrown away, resulting in colon bacillus and making activity difficult." [33]

A company with a great number of abuses to account for, Kajima made an in-company transfer of 280 laborers from an Iwate mine to an Ibaraki mine in April 1945. Fully half of these men died in Japan, with the Ibaraki worksite's report observing that none of them could get off the train unassisted and 70 percent of them could not walk at all due to eye, lung and intestines illnesses. Kajima's Hanaoka Site Report attributes most deaths to skin diseases and diarrhea, making the June 1945 worker uprising and retaliatory massacre of Chinese sound like isolated incidents that could not have been avoided. The FMR says the Hanaoka Incident resulted from fear and resentment toward supervisors, worsening food conditions, additional work hours and general dissatisfaction. No Investigator Report for Hanaoka has ever been found.

NHK interviews of retired company staff and people living around former worksites shed light on the cruelty of Chinese forced labor. “These were people we were at war with in those days,” a former mine employee said. “We’d have killed each other if we had met on the battlefield. The Chinese were our enemies.” Several Japanese offered similar explanations, reasoning that the CFL workers “were enemies originally, so there was no choice but to treat them rough.”[34]

POSTWAR PRIORITIES

Representing all major companies in the sector, the Construction Control Association moved quickly after the nation’s August 15 defeat to set up the Chinese and Korean Labor Response Committee. NHK referred to a committee report that described the industry’s goals in the immediate postwar period as follows: 1) destroying documents; 2) implementing a defense strategy for preventing war crimes investigations from spreading beyond Hanaoka; and 3) obtaining monetary compensation from the government for costs associated with both forced labor programs. The committee report mentions three days of document-burning that commenced on August 16 at the direction of the Munitions Ministry.[35]

American soldiers stumbled upon dead and dying Chinese at Hanaoka in October 1945 while liberating Allied POW camps in the Akita area, bringing Chinese forced labor to GHQ’s attention and sparking a war crimes probe. By the following month the construction industry had a plan to protect Kajima, always a highly influential company and an early promoter of the CFL concept, by conducting its own survey of labor by Koreans and Chinese. Meanwhile, a top MOFA priority throughout the fall of 1945 was beseeching GHQ for help in maintaining work camp security and quickly repatriating foreign laborers, who were causing disruptions and demanding wages across the country.

The construction group continued its adversarial stance toward forced labor inquiries by retaining a Kobe lawyer for damage control in the eventful spring of 1946. The lawyer in turn hired Hirai Shoichi, a central figure in the ongoing compilation of the Foreign Ministry Report who retired from the ministry’s directorate in May 1946 to more directly assist corporate Japan in the evasion of war crimes prosecutions. Besides being an early postwar case of amakudari, Hirai’s work on Hanaoka’s behalf underscores the self-exculpatory nature of the entire FMR process.



Hirai Shoichi examines report he compiled in 1946 (NHK Special)

“To put it bluntly, the goal was to hide the trouble at Hanaoka from GHQ,” the 87-year-old Hirai told NHK. “I was working to compile the FMR so they thought I would be useful. I tried to prevent the trouble from spreading to the company itself. In the end, the GHQ investigation ended without going that far and Kajima was saved. That’s why Kajima has continued without any problems until today.”[36] Hanaoka-related convictions at the Class B/C war crimes trials in Yokohama were limited to six local police and low-level camp staffers; light prison sentences on reduced charges were meted out and early releases were granted soon after the Occupation ended.

Hirai was the chief investigator on the FMR project, having managed coal-related labor needs in China as a researcher with the Greater East Asia Ministry before it was absorbed by MOFA at war’s end. Hirai functioned as the middleman between MOFA’s top brass and the 16 investigators, dispensing in new bank notes the money needed to fund the study but not visiting any worksites himself. Instead, he stayed in Tokyo and worked on the section of the FMR dealing with the cabinet resolutions that authorized the program.

“Chinese workers whose country won the war had been forcibly brought here, so it was a very bad situation for Japan. That’s because it was forced labor,” Hirai frankly recalled of the period so critical to the formation of postwar attitudes about war responsibility. “GHQ was just beginning to comb through Japan’s war conduct in detail. There was a danger that this type of problem would be treated as a war crime. That was our number one fear at the time. To stave off war crimes prosecutions, we had to prepare something in advance, before GHQ could investigate. That’s why we carried out our investigation.”[37]

GHQ AND CFL

Even though serious crimes had been systematically committed at all 135 Chinese forced labor sites, GHQ brought war crimes charges against only two, reflecting a racial double standard that devalued the suffering of Japan’s Asian victims in contrast with European and American POWs. The Occupation’s “reverse course,” the shift from purging wartime figures from public life and dismantling zaibatsu conglomerates to policies that emphasized political stability and economic recovery, also played a major role.

NHK went to Los Angeles and interviewed William Simpson, the former CFL investigator who had led the Hanaoka inquiry until being sent back to the U.S. in April 1946. He gave the film crew a previously unknown 30-page report about Hanaoka atrocities he had written in 1945. In Simpson’s informed opinion, American authorities lost interest in prosecuting forced labor because “there was a civil war in China and there was not much to be gained by the investment of effort by the United States. A judgment was made not to emphasize the shortcomings of Japanese corporate personnel at higher levels because these were people we wanted to work with in the Cold War as allies.”[38]

Insight into early 1946 interactions between GHQ and corporate Japan is found in “Unjust Enrichment: How Japan’s Companies Built Postwar Fortunes Using American POWs.” The book’s author, Linda Goetz Holmes, reprints a confidential Feb. 12 report by William Sebald, political advisor to General MacArthur, and a confidential Feb. 15 memorandum to the secretary of state. Both records describe meetings with top executives of the leading Mitsui zaibatsu, who express their deep concern about looming war reparations payments and warn of social dislocations that economics reforms could produce.

"As Japanese companies, under the lash of the military, it is hardly reasonable to expect the large Japanese combines to [have done] otherwise than carry out the instructions of the Government during the war," Sebald wrote on Feb. 12, summarizing Mitsui's position with apparent approval. "Too rapid a disintegration of the large combines can only result in economic chaos in Japan. Once such chaos does result, Japan will be ripe for Communism, already growing as a result of the clever infiltration of Communists among the workers in all branches of industry. Is it believed that a Communistic Japan is in the best interests of the United States?"[39]

Very early on, GHQ appears sympathetic to Mitsui's portrayal of itself as a victim of militarism in need of lenient postwar treatment, something the San Francisco Peace Treaty would formalize in 1951 by waiving, at American insistence, reparations claims against Japan by Allied nations. Within days of the Mitsui-GHQ meetings, moreover, companies began submitting their Site Reports to the Japanese government for inclusion in the Foreign Ministry Report.

The spring of 1946 also saw indemnification payments totaling 56,725,474 yen from the Japanese state to all 35 corporations that used Chinese forced labor, a practice GHQ was aware of and eventually put a stop to. The FMR describes the compensation following a cost-benefit analysis of the supposedly unprofitable CFL program, but payouts were directly proportional to numbers of Chinese workers obtained. Mitsui's 5,696 workers were the most that any company received, representing nearly 15 percent of the total. Mitsui received about 14 percent of the state compensation, also the highest figure.

Chinese and Allied POWs in virtually all cases, by contrast, were never compensated for their forced labor either by the Japanese state or their employers. Most Korean labor conscripts never received the wages they earned, despite their status as imperial subjects. Even today, the Japanese government continues to hold unpaid wages and related deposits for Chinese, POW and Korean forced labor. Beyond the monetary aspects, a basic aim of the postwar evasion of accountability for forced labor has been the perpetuation of key features of the wartime political and economic order. This continuity, in turn, greatly hampers redress efforts.

MOFA ARCHIVES

None of the three types of CFL reports were presented at the Yokohama war crimes trials, but until recently it had remained unclear whether GHQ ever knew of their existence. Chen of the Overseas Chinese Association told NHK that MOFA actually gave the Americans an English version of the FMR. Hirai, however, doubted that GHQ was aware of the document because he was not asked about it on the single occasion he was summoned for questioning.

"You are the only people to ever ask me about the report in any detail," Hirai told NHK with a chuckle.[40] Hirai said he assumed the 30 FMRs produced and then distributed to top MOFA officials had been destroyed or would remain concealed forever, and appeared shocked to see the Investigator Reports again.

The GHQ mystery may have been solved in December 2003 with the release of declassified records from the MOFA archives. The records show that the Japanese government stubbornly resisted American requests for CFL records in 1947 and never handed over the FMR. Instead, the state once again solicited information from companies, which expressed their displeasure at the renewed request and submitted only minimal material. In November 1948, the same month the Japanese war crimes tribunal ended, the government finally sent a "jeep-ful" of statistical data to GHQ, which returned the documents the following February. [41]

"GHQ had many things to deal with, so they did not bother with such minute matters," concluded Hirai about the early postwar pursuit—and avoidance—of the truth about Chinese forced labor. "Well, that definitely put us at ease. There are divided opinions: some people say war crimes should have been made completely clear, while others say hiding as much as possible was better. I think it was basically Japanese-like to leave things ambiguous, without making them into war crimes. Japan has become so prosperous during these forty-odd years thanks to this approach."[42]

A far more weighty release of MOFA records took place in November 2002, and was described at length by the author in a July 2005 article (<http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/1693>) for Japan Focus. Lawyers for Chinese plaintiffs in a Fukuoka lawsuit were the first to introduce as courtroom evidence some 2,000 pages of these declassified documents about Chinese forced labor, many of them formerly top secret, from the years 1952-72. The records included reports by MOFA and other government agencies, minutes of meetings between bureaucrats and lawmakers, and summaries of heated confrontations with citizen groups.[43]

The MOFA archives confirm that throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, progressive Japanese citizens excavated the remains of deceased Chinese victims and pushed the government to repatriate them to China, while erecting memorials and holding commemorations. The Japanese government is shown to have gone to great lengths to evade responsibility for Chinese forced labor by suppressing evidence, formulating a cover-up strategy, and repeatedly lying to the Diet and citizen groups.

The state campaign of deception peaked during the late-1950s when Kishi was prime minister. His administration made a concerted effort to block the CFL issue from being raised in the Diet because of its potentially explosive impact on the controversial revision of the U.S.-Japan security treaty in 1960, and to avoid reparations demands from the Chinese government. Kishi's personal responsibility for forced labor was also surely a major factor, as was the collective desire of Japanese industry to hide the truth.

Despite the official denials presented at the beginning of this article, the MOFA records made public in 2002 show that the Foreign Ministry, Welfare Ministry, National Police Agency and secretariats of multiple cabinets possessed substantial records about Chinese forced labor deep into the postwar period. Reparations activists charge that the Japanese government and private companies may still be hiding CFL records today. If not, they say, this would confirm that the records were secretly destroyed.

The NHK of 1993 undoubtedly would have highlighted the long-running cover up if the MOFA records had been available a decade earlier. The conspiracy revealed by the documents was a far graver matter, involved far more actors and extended over a far longer time frame than the Watergate scandal that brought down an American president three decades earlier. In the event, the incriminating MOFA archives were not reported by the NHK of 2002 or other Japanese media in any serious or sustained manner. Few Japanese, as a result, are fully aware of their government's dishonest track record.

NHK AS REDRESS ADVOCATE

I recently received an emotional email from an ethnic Chinese man who read my article about Chinese forced labor in the Singapore Straits Times. [44] He related the hardships his family experienced in Singapore under Japanese occupation, accused the Japanese media of an information

blackout concerning the facts about World War II, and predicted another war between China and Japan. Certainly the Japanese media have done a poor job of describing World War II atrocities, but the Singaporean's caricature was overblown.

He would have been especially amazed that Japan's public broadcaster aired an exposé like "The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report." The project coincided with the high-water mark of Japan's collective awareness of its war responsibility and could not be replicated today. Indeed, CFL activists say they have asked NHK to rebroadcast the documentary, but have been told that the current domestic political climate makes that impossible. The program continues to be shown in CFL courtrooms, typically after corporate objections have been overruled.

Following up on the 1993 broadcast, NHK sent a questionnaire to 24 of the 35 corporations then in business. Nineteen companies responded, with nearly all saying they had no plans to reinvestigate the issue or compensate victims. Regarding CFL deaths, one respondent said corporations bear some responsibility; 13 respondents said "no comment" because we "cannot confirm facts today" or we "can't judge matters at this stage"; three said the problem was the government's exclusive responsibility. Eleven corporations said they would consider apologies and compensation if asked; three corporations (including Kajima) said they would consider apologies but not compensation; only two said they would consider neither.



Map of all 135 Chinese forced labor sites, prepared by plaintiffs' lawyers

NHK's survey was conducted before the Chinese government gave the go-ahead in 1995 for its citizens to sue in Japan, and well before the main wave of CFL lawsuits appeared after 2000. The survey results suggested grounds for cautious optimism, but courtroom outcomes and the recent hardening of corporate attitudes have dashed expectations.

Half a dozen years before Germany set up its forced labor redress fund, NHK pointed out that Mercedes Benz had voluntarily researched the company's wartime role and compensated forced workers. "Should not Japanese companies also have the self-awareness to at least properly research their own histories?" NHK asked. "Can these corporations move into China and develop their businesses while leaving their past unexamined?"[45]

In the book more than in the TV documentary, NHK's advocacy of the nascent CFL cause came close to violating the political neutrality mandated by its charter—ironically, something it is accused of today due to general support of government positions. "It has become impossible to evade the issue through makeshift excuses like, 'We do not know the details about so-called Chinese forced labor because there are no public documents.' The natural thing to do is learn the historical facts and gain a correct understanding. This has become possible at last," NHK wrote in 1994.[46]

"Especially now, at a time when appeals from people who were victimized by Japan during the war are coming from Asian countries one after another, and in order for Japan to be accepted as a member of the Asian community, it is necessary for Japan to clarify the wartime facts as soon as possible," the book continued. "A half century after the end of World War II, the state, industry and each individual Japanese are now faced with the serious task of coming to terms with the past."[47]

That task remains unfulfilled today, as Japanese society has, for the most part, declined to act on NHK's advice. And with self-assertive nationalism steadily displacing historical self-examination, the country has moved further away from acceptance in Northeast Asia.

CONSCIENTIOUS JAPANESE

The Japanese state and industry have actively opposed CFL reparation efforts for six decades, while most Japanese individuals are apathetic and ignorant of the historical reality—due in no small part to the silence of thousands who were personally involved with the labor program in China or Japan. Yet vital exceptions exist. These include Otomo Fukuo's apparent leak of the MOFA records to the Overseas Chinese Association around 1950; the vital reparations work accomplished throughout that decade by the Memorial Committee; and the ongoing dedication of lawyers, researchers and citizens in courtrooms and citizen actions across the nation.

NHK devoted a subchapter, called "Voice from the Valley: Atonement of a Former Soldier," to the activities of Inose Kenzo. Introduced above, Inose helped forcibly deport Chinese and later became an amateur historian of forced labor at the Ashio copper mine, writing a book called "Mountain Stream of Deep Regret." In the early 1950s he joined local efforts on behalf of war-displaced Japanese still in China and helped form the Tochigi chapter of the Japan-China Friendship Association, a group that has been promoting CFL reparations for half a century.

Inose recalled his shock in 1958 at Liu Lianren's emergence from hiding in Hokkaido; Liu had been abducted from a region of Shandong Province not far from Inose's base camp. After learning (apparently through 1946 records activists possessed) that two Ashio Chinese were unaccounted for, Inose became obsessed with the possibility they could still be hiding in the rugged mountains around the recently closed mine. He began canvassing the area three or four times a week, searching for bone fragments around the camp crematorium and questioning local villagers. When it was determined that the missing Chinese had been sent to Hokkaido for plotting an escape, Inose traveled to Hokkaido on his quest for truth-telling and personal healing. Inose's actions during this period were precisely the type of grassroots redress work that the state and companies

have systematically sought to subvert.



Inose Kenzo at the Ashio memorial (NHK Special)

The idea of a memorial at Ashio arose around 1970, as part of a citizens' movement to restore Japan-China diplomatic ties and support China's bid for United Nations membership. The impressive "Chinese Martyred Heroes Memorial" was erected in 1973, after 20 million yen in contributions were raised within the prefecture. Local residents carried by hand the 109 football-sized stones that form the base of the 10-meter-tall memorial and list the names of the 109 dead Chinese—again, presumably obtained from either the nominally non-existent FMR or the Ashio Site Report. Chinese remains were taken from a local temple and placed inside the memorial. Someone secretly trims the grass around the monument and leaves flowers; Inose told NHK it could be a fellow China-front soldier seeking to expiate war guilt.[48]

Such reparations and reconciliation activities remain little known within Japan, and virtually unknown outside the county. Yet committed Japanese continue to quietly carry out similar projects in several locations, often in conjunction with CFL litigation efforts. The problem is the wide and growing disconnect between their work and actions of the Japanese state and industry.

DIVISIVE ROAD AHEAD

Chinese forced labor victims and Japanese companies led by Mitsubishi Materials are now entering a decisive phase of the reparations process with diametrically opposed truth claims. Certainly the major 1993-94 investigation by NHK, the respected equivalent of the BBC in the United Kingdom and a far more influential and ambitious organization than PBS in the United States, excludes Mitsubishi's interpretation that only voluntary contract labor was involved.

Accountability has remained elusive in Japanese courts, where the government and companies still seek to shift responsibility onto each other. A legislative proposal for a CFL compensation fund, stressing the injustice of the present situation and the importance of moving toward reconciliation, has languished in the Diet for several years. As the "zenmen kaiketsu" (comprehensive solution) proposal succinctly summarizes: the Foreign Ministry Report identifies the 38,935 Chinese who were brought to Japan; the state continues to hold large deposits that were never paid out to these workers; and corporations that used Chinese forced labor received substantial state compensation.

The redress movement's center of gravity is steadily shifting to China. Beijing has indicated that former workers will be permitted to file class-action lawsuits against Japanese corporations in Chinese courts, marking the first litigation in China stemming from Japan's war conduct. Chinese individuals and companies are contributing hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of China-side legal efforts. Petitions demanding apologies and compensation are being presented to the Chinese offices of Japanese conglomerates amid heavy media coverage. The oral histories of 600 workers were published in a five-volume collection last year, as younger family members of CFL victims fast passing from the scene pick up the reparations torch.

Because Japan's current approach to wartime forced labor and other unresolved historical injustices represents a path that cannot lead to reconciliation, the CFL issue is certain to become more prominent within Sino-Japanese relations in coming years.

The closing scene of "The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report" shows Inose Kenzo standing alone in front of the Chinese forced labor memorial, with the din of Ashio's summer cicadas dominating the soundtrack.

"My atonement for the war is not over yet," Inose says with a pained expression. "I must continue atoning. One hundred nine people died at Ashio. If there are still people living in China who have not forgotten their resentment, I truly want to meet them and apologize. This memorial alone does not settle the past." [49]

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Diet remarks are quoted in NHK Publishing, *The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report: The Record of Chinese Forced Labor (Maboroshi no Gaimusho Hokokusho: Chugokujin Kyosei Renko Kyosei Rodo no Kiroku)*. Tokyo: 1994; 9-10. The Kishi-era cover up is documented in William Underwood, "Chinese forced labor, the Japanese government and the prospects for redress." [Posted](#) at Japan Focus on 8 July 2005.

[2] NHK Publishing, 10.

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- [5] Japan House of Representatives website. Written statement to Diet by Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, 26 August 2003. [Available](#)
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- [12] See Linda Sieg, "Japan lobby group backs patriotism." Reuters story [posted](#) at www.swissinfo.org on 15 June 2006.
- [13] Charles Hawley, "Germany agrees to open Holocaust archives." Spiegel Online, 19 April 2006. [Available](#)
- [14] For the FMR in its entirety, see Tanaka Hiroshi and Matsuzawa Tessei, eds., Chinese Forced Labor Documents: "The Foreign Ministry Report", All Five Volumes (Chugokujin Kyosei Renko Shiryo: "Gaimusho Hokokusho" Zen Gobunsatsu Hoka). Tokyo: Gendai Shokan, 1995. In addition, a total of 111 Site Reports were analyzed in Nishinarita Yutaka, Chinese Forced Labor (Chugokujin Kyosei Renko). Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 2002. Nishinarita suspects that a full 135 reports may never have been produced, as some sites received workers via intra-company transfers.
- [15] NHK Publishing, 44.
- [16] Ibid., 85.
- [17] Ibid., 197.
- [18] For details about the NCLA's organization and operations, see Tanaka Hiroshi, "The state, corporations and Chinese forced labor: the mechanism of 'administrative provision' of labor power" (Chugokujin no kyosei renko to kuni to kigyo: rodoryoku "gyosei kyoshutsu" no mekanizumu), in Kosho Tadashi, Tanaka Hiroshi and Sato Takeo, eds., Nihon Kigyo no Senso Hanzai: Kyosei Renko no Kigyo Sekinin. Tokyo: Soshisha, 2000; 126-153.
- [19] NHK Publishing, 73.
- [20] Ibid., 146.
- [21] Ibid., 149-150.
- [22] Ibid., 150.
- [23] See Suzuki Kenji, Living Witnesses of Chinese Forced Labor (Chugokujin Kyosei Renko no Iki Shonintachi). Tokyo: Kobunken, 2003.
- [24] NHK Publishing, 118-119.
- [25] Ibid., 129.
- [26] Ibid., 128.
- [27] Ibid., 152.
- [28] Ibid., 148.
- [29] Ibid., 161-162.
- [30] Ibid., 155-156.
- [31] Ibid., 43.
- [32] Ibid., 43.
- [33] Ibid., 167-168.
- [34] Ibid., 172.
- [35] Ibid., 210-213.
- [36] Ibid., 61.
- [37] Ibid., 58-59.

[38] Ibid., 191.

[39] Linda Goetz Holmes, *Unjust Enrichment: How Japan's Companies Built Postwar Fortunes using American POWs*. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2001; 177-79.

[40] NHK Publishing, 62.

[41] "GHQ ni hokokusho dasazu," *Nishinippon Shimbun*, 24 Dec. 2003; "Foreign Ministry dragged feet with GHQ," *Asahi Shimbun* online, 25 Dec. 2003.

[42] NHK Publishing, 62-63.

[43] See "Gaimusho 'gokuhi' bunsho ga kataru Chugokujin kyosei renko kyosei rodo jiken no sengoshi: kokusai hanzai inmetsu kosaku no kazukazu to heiwa yuko wo negau naigai seron." Fukuoka: Liigaru Bukkusu, 2003. The 32-page booklet excerpts MOFA archival documents submitted to the Fukuoka High Court by plaintiffs' lawyers. See Footnote 1 for the author's original article.

[44] See William Underwood, "East Asia's Troubled Waters – Part III: Chinese forced-labor victims press Japan to embrace emerging international standards of accountability." Posted at *YaleGlobal Online* on 2 May 2006. [Available](#).

[45] NHK Publishing, 222.

[46] Ibid., 223.

[47] Ibid., 223.

[48] Ibid., 194-209.

[49] Ibid., 209.