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Kim Yeong Hwan

This is the third article of a three part series introducing historical museums in Japan and their role in public education on issues of war, peace, war crimes and reconciliation. The first article is Takashi Yoshida's "Revising the Past, Complicating the Future: The Yushukan War Museum in Modern Japanese History." The second article is Rumiko Nishino's "The Women's Active Museum on War and Peace."

It is quite unfortunate that even though the war ended more than sixty years ago, the wounds left behind have not yet healed and still cause conflict between East Asian neighbors. Nevertheless, we should not forget that concerned residents across East Asia have cooperated, regardless of nation, in promoting peace and reconciliation in the region at the grassroots level. In order to promote reconciliation and peace in the region, it is essential for people suffering from the trauma of war to regain a sense of honor. For ten years I have been involved in reconciliation projects in South Korea and Japan and have met a number of people who share these concerns and are also examining the underside of the history of East Asia in all of its brutality. In meeting these individuals, I have come to realize that any reconciliation and peace in the region will have to come from such individuals and their determined effort to collaborate across national boundaries.

Collaborative East Asian Workshop: Learning the History of Forced Labor through Remains of the Victims

In the summer of 1997 I arrived in Japan for the first time to participate in a workshop to excavate the remains of the victims who died from forced labor in Shumarinai, Hokkaido while building the Uryu Dam and Shinmei Rail Line. The Collaborative East Asian Workshop was initiated by Tonohira Yoshihiko, a Buddhist priest and a local peace activist, who has worked on various issues regarding involuntary mobilization and labor since 1976.

Tonohira Yoshihiko

This first large-scale international research workshop drew together more than 200 people from Japan and other nations. Many young men of different ethnic origins and backgrounds, including Ainu (a people whose homeland is in Hokkaido, southern Sakhalin, and the Kurile Islands), Koreans living in Japan, South Koreans, and Japanese, joined in excavation of the dam. The workshop was held at a temple called Kokenji near the dam; this was the same temple where Tonohira had discovered a mortuary tablet dedicated to the memory of Korean forced laborers.

Kokenji

This discovery motivated him to study the history of forced labor in Shumarinai. The temple has been converted to a small museum dedicated to the history of Korean forced laborers in the region, and it is managed by the Lectureship of People's History in Sorachi (Sorachi minshushi koza), a non-profit organization represented by Tonohira.

The 1997 workshop called for "etching the past in the mind, feeling the present in the body, and building a future together." I joined in excavating human remains that had been buried for more than fifty years. At night, historians and specialists delivered lectures, which were followed by discussions and other social events that lasted until late at night.

The remains we discovered twenty inches underground had no names or national identity, yet they forced all of us participants to face the brutality of our shared past. For many Japanese young people who had not studied Japan's wartime atrocities, the remains were eye-opening evidence of the ways Japan had victimized people in the past. For many young Korean permanent residents in Japan (*zainichi*), the bones silently told the stories of Korean residents in wartime Japan – stories they had not previously known. For many young South Koreans, the experience inspired greater interest in Japan's colonial history and practices of forced labor; moreover, it led them to recognize the wounds of the Cold War that divided Korean society in Japan into two different camps. To many Koreans, meeting Japanese peace activists at the workshop was a profoundly meaningful experience, since it gave them a far more complex picture of Japanese society.

Workshop in Winter 2007

Workshop in Summer 2006

Beyond the Anger of Victims and the Ignorance of Assailants

Even though we were all working together on the excavations, a sense of unity and friendship did not come easily. Ethnic and national identity, coupled with a sense of victimhood, different understandings of modern Japanese history, and even different lifestyles and customs, led to many problems and frictions. Still, people spoke freely. Throughout the workshop, the participants stayed up late at night talking and expressing their views. For instance, a Japanese college student noted, “The United States dropped the atomic bombs, but few Japanese hate Americans.” He asked, “Why is there anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea?” A zainichi student responded, “Let’s say someone stepped on your toe on a train and hurt it. If the person offered no apology and ignored your pain, how would you feel?”

To give another example, a South Korean graduate student studying in the United States said, “It is important to teach the history of the unfortunate past to the next generation. I have met a number of Japanese young people in South Korea and the United States. I was surprised how ignorant they were of modern Japanese history. If one does not learn from the past, one might make the same mistakes.”

In order to promote historical reconciliation among the participants, the first step was to realize how different our historical, social, and educational backgrounds were. Many Koreans and zainichi Koreans felt uneasy about the fact that when Japanese youth think of the war, many first think of the atomic bombings. Koreans and zainichi Koreans found it difficult to understand that many Japanese know nothing about the history of Japan’s aggressive colonialism and war. Many Japanese participants, meeting with Koreans and zainichi residents within Japan who were angry about Japanese colonialism and aggression, were forced to face the facts of modern Japanese history. Through heated discussions, debates, and sometimes quarrels, the participants began to build individual relationships that transcended ethnicity and nationality. The participants started to share a common desire to overcome the past, despite previous ignorance or anger regarding Japan’s wartime aggression.

Since 1997, we have organized biannual workshops in the winter and summer. More than one thousand people have participated in the workshops in both Japan and South Korea. History was the theme of these workshops. In South Korea, we visited the bereaved families of the victims of forced mobilization, interviewed former laborers, and at the “House of Sharing” met with women who had been forced into sexual slavery. We met a bereaved family member who had been waiting for the return of a victim more than sixty years. We heard her pleas for remains from the excavation site, and saw how grateful she was when she learned when exactly the victim died. Before meeting the survivors and bereaved families, some Japanese young people were nervous because they anticipated emotional responses. In fact, the Japanese visitors were always treated as guests and friends, since many of the people they met saw them as a beacon of hope for historical reconciliation in East Asia.

House of Sharing

We also had a workshop in Osaka, Japan. There we visited Korean permanent residents who were affiliated with North Korea. We learned the history of ethnic education in their community and what it meant to live as an ethnic minority in Japan. Our interests are not limited to the past. In order to study contemporary historical issues and how citizens of East Asia can contribute to peace, we have visited American bases in South Korea and the demilitarized zone that divides North and South Korea.

Through ten years of meetings, many participants have built friendships that are immune to the international tensions between South Korea and Japan. Visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese prime ministers and the recent textbook controversy were used by conservatives in both South Korea and Japan to provoke nationalism and conflict that would set back the process of reconciliation and growing friendship between our two nations. But even at the height of these political tensions, the workshops continued to cultivate hope for reconciliation and peace in East Asia.

We have to overcome that form of nationalism that harms international cooperation among different citizens and ethnic groups. Both in the past and in the present, political elites in various regions have manipulated nationalism to achieve their own political goals. Continuous broad alliances among peoples of different nationalities and ethnicities are essential in order to overcome nationalism. Only through striving endlessly for peace will we contribute to reconciliation. No government will be able to disregard our public appeals if they are too numerous to ignore.

Grassroots House Peace Museum

In April 2004, I began to work at the Grassroots House Peace Museum in Kochi, Japan in order to strengthen links among ordinary people in East Asia.

Grassroots House Peace Museum

The peace museum was built in 1989 by the late Nishimori Shigeo and some local supporters. It is a private museum of modest size. The goals of the museum are to teach the importance of peace and to show the cruelties of war. For this purpose, the museum collects artifacts and

loans panels and other teaching aids to the residents of the city of Kochi. As Nishimori believed that nature is the best model of peace, the museum also organizes activities that protect the environment.

Nishimori was a Christian teacher who was involved in the peace movement for many years. In May 1978, he participated in the first special session on disarmament at the United Nations. Peace activism in the United States deeply inspired him. In the following year, he organized a special exhibit on war and peace. After learning that the city was reluctant to include displays of Japan's aggression in the memorial hall dedicated to freedom and the people's rights movement in the late nineteenth century, he decided to build his own museum. He demolished his own house and built an apartment complex in which the first floor houses the museum. He included the Chinese character "Grass" in the name of the museum because in his eyes "ordinary people" are just like grass, but grass can eventually give way to a piece of land becoming a forest. His wish for peace activism was incorporated into the name of the museum.

Nishimori Shigeo

Acknowledging the History of Japan's Victimization

I would like to briefly explain some of the museum's activities. In 1991, the museum organized a trip to China in order to trace the sites of the battlefield where the Kochi 44th Infantry Regiment fought during the war. Ten people participated. They listened to oral testimonies of the survivors of the war. Nishimori later stated that this trip made him realize that Japanese education should detail the devastation that the Japanese military inflicted in China; the trip also reinforced his belief in the importance of examining the war from the viewpoint of the victims. Since then, the museum has initiated trips to China and South Korea almost every year.

Nishimori's philosophy is visible in the exhibits. In the 732 sq. ft. hall, "one-thousand stitch" belts, steel helmets, blood-stained uniforms, magazines, firebombing shells, and many other items are displayed. Visitors can touch the items. They are exhibited not to provoke sentimental yearning for the past, but to remind visitors of Japan's responsibility for the war. In the eyes of Nishimori, Japan's invasion of Asia began in 1894 and coincided with Japan's modernization. The displays include photographs of Japanese atrocities in China, Korean and Chinese forced laborers, and women coerced into sexual slavery.

Inside Grassroots House Museum

Exhibited Wartime World Map

The majority of peace museums in Japan stress the effects of firebombing and the atomic bombs, but the Grassroots House Peace Museum focuses not just on the devastation in Japan, but also highlights Imperial Japan's victimization of Asian peoples. In my view, Japanese peace education has emphasized Japan's victimhood, especially as symbolized by Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although Japanese education has, since the 1980s, started to include discussions of Japanese aggression and colonial activities, it seems that education has not inculcated in Japanese students a meaningful understanding of Japan's wartime atrocities. I believe that one of the factors that causes friction in historical reconciliation between Japan and its neighbors is its obsession with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In order to promote reconciliation in East Asia, it is essential to exhibit displays that reveal the devastation and destruction that Japan inflicted upon its neighbors.

History of Resistance: Establishing the Alliance Among Peoples in East Asia

The Grassroots House Peace Museum also contains displays dedicated to people in Japan who fought against militarism during the war. For example, the poet Makimura Ko (1912-38) wrote "A Poem for Guerrillas in Guangdong, China" (Kanto paruchizan no uta), which condemned Japanese imperialism and aggression. Moreover, Makimura engaged in anti-war activities, such as distributing anti-war leaflets. He was arrested, found guilty of violating the Peace Preservation Law, and was tortured. He died at age twenty-six as a result of the torture.

Many visitors from South Korea have been surprised to know that there were Japanese people like Makimura. On August 15, 2004, a documentary on Makimura was broadcast in South Korea to celebrate the day of liberation. It was unprecedented for the South Korean media to honor the life of a Japanese on the day that South Korea regained its independence from the Japanese Empire. Moreover, the program was received favorably.

In my view, examining the stories of Japanese who fought against Japanese aggression will help promote the spirit of these people and will contribute to an alliance among the peoples in East Asia. Many South Koreans simply regard Japanese society as a monolith, treating the whole nation as a collective of aggressors. Stressing the history of Japanese such as Makimura can significantly alter the image of Japanese in South Korea.

Peace Museum: Center of Local Peace Movement

The Grassroots House Peace Museum not only displays artifacts relating to war and peace, it also functions as a communal space that helps to enlighten people about the meaning of war and peace. For this reason, the museum is deeply concerned with current issues. Since the beginning of the Iraq War in March 2003, the museum has organized anti-war protests and peace concerts almost every week. Every year we plan numerous special exhibits, public forums, film screenings, and workshops in order to cultivate a passion for peace among ordinary people.

Anti-Iraq War Rally

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the role of peace museums in promoting reconciliation. Peace Museums in every nation must be immune from nationalism and must be willing to examine atrocities committed by "our" nation. Citizens in every nation should honor anti-war sentiment in their own nation and strive to uncover the hidden histories of anti-war activists. Finally, peace museums should be centers of peace activism that educate the public not only about past wars, but also about the many on-going wars in our world today.

For other articles on Japanese and East Asian museums and history education illuminating issues of war, peace and war atrocities, see:

Kirk A. Denton, Heroic Resistance and Victims of Atrocity: Negotiating the Memory of Japanese Imperialism in Chinese Museums

Frederick R. Dickinson, Biohazard: Unit 731 in Postwar Japanese Politics of National "Forgetfulness"

Laura Hein and Akiko Takenaka, Exhibiting World War II in Japan and the United States

Philip Seaton, Family, Friends and Furusato: "Home" in the Formation of Japanese War Memories

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