



We Cannot Allow Governor Nakaima to Falsify the History of the Battle of Okinawa

Medoruma Shun

Translated by Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen

Translators' note:

The following is from novelist and commentator Medoruma Shun's blog, *Uminari no shima kara* ([here](#)) dated March 17, 2012. Medoruma has reported on the ongoing controversy surrounding the placement of a new sign outside the entrance to the site of the 32nd Army HQ Shelter, which is located in Shurijo Castle Park, the pre-eminent symbol of the Ryukyu Kingdom, and Okinawa's leading tourist site. The controversy, which has continued over many years, entered a new stage with the 2012 decision by Governor Nakaima Hirokazu to approve new wording in the sign explaining the events. At stake is the language used to represent key events in which many Okinawan civilians died during the 1945 Battle, and particularly the relationship between Japan's 32nd Army and the Okinawan civilian population. The Battle, took the lives of more than one fourth of Okinawa's civilian population. Phrases such as 'comfort women' and 'massacres of civilians' have been removed from the new signage ordered by Governor Nakaima. The following blog refers to the draft in Japanese of a new explanation panel, which has since been translated into English, Chinese and Korean and now appears on the new sign outside the 32nd Army HQ Shelter site. ~ RS & MA



A controversy has arisen over Okinawa governor Nakaima's deletion of the word "suteishi" (sacrificial stone) from the draft that was prepared for the translation of the description for the explanation panel about the 32nd Army HQ Shelter. Hitherto, the word "suteishi" has been used as a key term that directly captures the essence of the Battle of Okinawa. This word also symbolises "postwar" Japan-Okinawa relations, in which Japan regained its sovereignty with the San Francisco Peace Treaty, while abandoning Okinawa to US military domination, and forcing it to bear the burden of the US bases, even after Japan regained administrative rights over Okinawa. It is the most important word in the explanatory notes on the panel, and Nakaima's decision to delete such an important word reveals his true intent. If we look at other sections that were deleted or rewritten, this point will become even clearer.

Ryukyu Shimpo on 17th March published "sections that have been deleted or changed in the draft translation of the text on the explanation panel about the 32nd Army HQ Shelter." I will quote from it below. Deletions are indicated with [], and changes with [] (→).

[Establishment of the 32nd Army and the construction of HQ Shelter]

In March 1944 [(Showa 19)], the 32nd Army was established to defend the Southwest islands. In December of the same year the construction of the HQ Shelter began and many students [including those from Okinawa Normal School] and local residents were mobilised. In March 1945 [Showa 20], [as the air raids intensified], the 32nd Army moved to the underground shelter and prepared for the battle with the US army.

Five tunnels are linked inside the shelter, but the entrance to the shelter is now

The new explanation panel outside the 32nd Army HQ Shelter in Shurijo Castle Park ([here](#))

closed off, and entry is prohibited.

[Inside the 32nd Army HQ Shelter]

Inside the HQ Shelter were more than 1,000 officers and soldiers [including Lieutenant General Ushijima Mitsuru and Chief of Staff Chō Isamu], civilian army employees from Okinawa prefecture, students [and female civilian army employees]. The shelter was fully equipped with facilities necessary for battle and command, and double- and triple-bunk beds were arranged in rows on either side of the central walkway [Life inside the shelter was also a battle against suffocating heat, moisture and strange smells].

[32nd Army's evacuation from the HQ Shelter to the south]

On 22nd May 1945, Japanese Army HQ decided to withdraw to Mabuni in the south of Okinawa Island in order to fight a protracted war to delay the final battle on the mainland of Japan [with Okinawa as *suteishi*]. In the evening of 27th May, they began a full-scale withdrawal and most of the HQ Shelter was destroyed. During the withdrawal from the HQ, military and civilians fled together but [many officers, soldiers and civilians ended up losing their lives] (→ many precious lives were lost). On 31st May Shuri was occupied by the US Army but during the Battle of Okinawa, many precious cultural treasures that tell the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom [including the main hall of the Shurijo castle] were lost.

The quote ends here. I'll summarise the deletions and changes below.

Deleted passages:

- [Establishment of the 32nd Army and the construction of Headquarter Shelter]• [(Showa 19)]• [including those from Okinawa Normal School]
- [Showa 20]
- [as the air raids intensified]
- [Inside the 32nd Army Headquarter Shelter]
- [including Lieutenant General Ushijima Mitsuru and Chief of Staff Chō Isamu]
- [female civilian army employees]
- [The life inside the shelter was also a battle against enveloping heat, moisture and strange smells]

- [32nd Army's evacuation from the Headquarter Shelter to the South]
- [with Okinawa as *suteishi*]
- [including the main hall of the Shurijo castle]

Changed section:

- [many officers, soldiers and civilians ended up losing their lives] (→ many precious lives were lost)

The main deletions are subheadings, the names of Japanese eras, proper nouns and concrete descriptions. The names of Japanese eras may not be necessary for non-Japanese to understand the explanation panels, so some deletions like this are perhaps appropriate for a "summary." On the other hand, there are many deletions that seem to be politically motivated.

First is the deletion of the expression "*suteishi*," which is at the centre of the controversy. This is a word that captures the essence of the Battle of Okinawa, and has been a keyword in the discussion of the Battle. The deletion of subheadings or concrete descriptions can be explained as being a "summary", but to delete this important, though short, keyword, seems to suggest a political will to use "summary" as an excuse for concealing and falsifying the essence of the Battle of Okinawa. On 17th March *Ryukyu Shimpō's* editorial carried the following critique:

In January 1945, Imperial General HQ announced the Imperial Operational Plan. With regard to the Battle of Okinawa, this public document became a quasi law. This document characterised Okinawa as the "leading edge in conducting an elastic defence strategy," and stated that at the "leading edge," "effort will be made to damage and exhaust the enemy as much as possible." The aim was to earn time ("make an effort to damage and exhaust the enemy as much as possible") in order to prepare for the decisive battle on the mainland ("elastic defence"). "*Suteishi*" is the word that summarises this. This policy is the fundamental reason for the tragedy of the Battle of Okinawa, where the military, which was supposed to protect the locals, dragged them into the battle and even chased them out of their shelters. This is why "*suteishi*" is the core, the symbol, of the Battle of Okinawa. Deleting this word would conceal its essence.

The battle of Okinawa, for the Japanese military, was a battle that inevitably led to *gyokusai* ['to die heroically like a shattering jewel' – a euphemism for compulsory mass suicide in the Okinawan context]. The combined Japanese naval fleet had already been practically destroyed, air defense strategy had no choice other than to rely on kamikaze attacks, and the supply lines of weapons, ammunition and other goods had been cut. In addition, the 9th division had been withdrawn. Facing the overwhelming domination by the US military, in a situation where no one believed they could win, they chose to prolong the war in order to gain time to prepare for the final battle on the mainland, knowing that such a strategy would increase the victimisation of the local residents. Okinawa was certainly made into a *suteishi*. We should never allow Governor Nakaima and the prefectural government to conceal this fact and distort history.

The second reason for my feeling about political motivations of the prefectural government is that two individual names (Lieutenant General Ushijima Mitsuru and Chief of Staff Chō Isamu) have been deleted. It is extremely unnatural to delete names of the generals from an explanation of the Army HQ Shelter. The explanation panel will contain, in addition to Japanese, translations into English, Korean and Chinese. Okinawa prefecture is actively trying to attract Chinese tourists; but some of the Chinese tourists, if they see names of Ushijima Mitsuru and Chō Isamu, would be reminded of the Nanjing Massacre.² One becomes rather suspicious that the prefecture may have deleted these names for this reason.



Thirdly, while in the past the deletion of the reference to the 'military comfort women' has been an issue, in this draft for translation, 'female civilian employees' – let alone 'comfort women' – have been deleted, to create the impression that there were no women in the HQ Shelter.

Previously this blog has introduced some literature and newspaper articles to help us think about the 'comfort women' and 'massacre of residents' in the 32nd HQ Shelter in Shuri. As these documents clearly show, in addition to the female civilian employees, who did clerical jobs and looked after the officers, inside the HQ Shelter were also those who were forced to become 'comfort women', as well as women from pleasure quarters such as Wakadōrō in Tsuji and Kaikōsha.

If we kept the reference to 'female civilian employees,' some foreign tourists may wonder what those women were doing in the HQ Shelter. Perhaps some of them would seek an answer. Governor Nakaima and the prefectural office, by concealing the fact that there were some women in the HQ Shelter, are trying to prevent the possibility that such a question might be asked. Deletion of the 'comfort women' is bad enough, but this distortion of history by deleting the figure of women from the explanation of the HQ Shelter is even more sinister.

Site commemorating the ritual suicide of Generals Ushijima Mitsuru and Chō Isamu

Fourthly, by rewriting "many officers, soldiers and civilians ended up losing their lives" as "many precious lives were lost," this draft conceals the large-scale victimisation of the residents, which characterises the Battle of Okinawa. Through generalisation, abstraction and aestheticisation, the phrase 'many precious lives' cunningly erases the figures of the residents who were killed as the island was

turned into a battlefield. This is linked with the deletion of the word *suteishi*, and evinces the attempt of the prefectural government to conceal the truth about the suffering of Okinawans.

Another related issue, which is my fifth point, is that in the draft for translation, the fact that a resident was slaughtered is concealed from the beginning. The documents this blog has examined so far have made it clear that a woman was slaughtered in the Normal School's practice paddy field near the 5th and 6th tunnel on the south side of Shuri Castle.

There are testimonies of three former Normal School students who directly witnessed the incident. Moreover a senior staff officer, Yahara Hiromichi, and an officer of the guard, Hamakawa Masaya, have also mentioned this incident. Although there are discrepancies in the details, there is no doubt that a woman suspected of espionage was stabbed with knives by other women in the Shelter, and was finally beheaded by a Japanese soldier. Despite the evidence, Governor Nakaima is trying to erase this from history.

Sixth, by deleting concrete descriptions, the reality of the conditions inside the Shelter and the battlefield are erased, which makes it harder to feel what it was like. This is also related to the previous five points, but the Okinawa Prefectural Government is using the fact that this is a "summary" as an excuse for removing concrete and realistic descriptions. Overseas tourists would naturally need more detailed explanation, but they end up with insufficient materials.

The above six points indicate the political intention of Governor Nakaima and the prefectural government to alter the accounts of the Battle of Okinawa. Using the right-wing protest that started with an appeal from *Channeru Sakura* (Cherry Channel) as an excuse, or in fact, as an opportunity, Governor Nakaima is actively trying to falsify accounts of the Battle of Okinawa.

For Governor Nakaima and the prefectural government, Shuri Castle is a place for communicating the glorious history of the Ryūkyū Kingdom; it is not a place



for communicating the tragic history of the Battle of Okinawa. On the contrary, they are trying to remove and conceal the tragedy, and by burying the HQ Shelter, attempting to erase the abhorrent memory of the Battle of Okinawa as soon as possible.

Politically motivated selection of the directors of prefectural museums and art galleries, the view that culture is nothing but entertainment for tourists, and the falsification of the history of the Battle of Okinawa that is inconvenient for the State all attest to the poor calibre of Nakaima, a former MITI bureaucrat.

Medoruma Shun is a novelist and critic of Japanese neo-nationalism, local pork-barrel politics, and the US military presence in Okinawa, particularly the plan to build a new marine airbase off the coast of Henoko in Nago City, where he resides. He is widely regarded as Okinawa's pre-eminent writer. Born in Okinawa, he graduated from the University of the Ryukyus. His story "[Droplets](#)" (Suiteki), for which he received Japan's Akutagawa Prize, is available in Michael Molasky's translation in Michael Molasky and Steve Rabson, eds., [Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature From Okinawa](#).

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Notes:

1 Suteishi refers to a stone in the game of go which is sacrificed in order to gain further strategic advantage, much in the way that a pawn can be sacrificed in a chess game to gain significant advantage.

2 Col. Chō Isamu was in Nanjing in December 1937 as aide de camp to Prince Asaka. He is frequently cited as having ordered the massacre of Chinese prisoners (see, for example, Honda Katsuichi, *The Nanjing Massacre*

(Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 169.) Da-qing Yang notes that while Chō is believed by some to have issued the order to kill all Chinese prisoners in the name of General Iwane Matsui, he left no paper trail. "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre," in Joshua Fogel, ed., *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, [here](#) (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000), p. 141. For earlier discussion of controversies over representation of the battle in monuments, memorials and exhibits, see Gerald Figal, "Waging Peace on Okinawa" in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., [Islands of Discontent: Okinawan Responses to Japanese and American Power](#), (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 65-98, especially pp. 91-94, and Figal's [book](#) *Beachheads: War, Peace and Tourism in Postwar Okinawa* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

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