

**Promoting Peace and Reconciliation as a Citizen of East Asia:
The Role of the Collaborative East Asian Workshop
and the Grassroots House Peace Museum**
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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 together, regardless of nation, and have contributed to 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 the same concerns and who 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 would have to come from such individuals and their determined effort to collaborate across national boundaries.

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

In summer 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 Uryū Dam and Shinmei Rail Line. This workshop, named the Collaborative East Asian Workshop, was initiated by Yoshihiko Tonohira, a Buddhist priest and a local peace activist, who has worked on various issues regarding involuntary mobilization and labor since 1976. It was the first large-scale international research workshop to draw 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 the excavation. The workshop was held at a temple called Kōkenji near the dam; this was the same temple where Tonohira had discovered a mortuary tablet dedicated to the memory of Korean forced laborers. 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 minshūshi kōza), a non-profit organization represented by Tonohira.

The slogan of the 1997 workshop was "etching the past in the mind, feeling the present in the body, and building a future together." With my fellows, I excavated 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 (*zai-nichi*), the bones silently told the stories of Korean residents in wartime Japan – stories that 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 than they had previously imagined.

Beyond the Anger of the Victims and Ignorance of the Victimizers

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 a great deal of friction. 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 an anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea?" A zainichi student responded, "Let's say someone stepped on someone else's toe on a train and hurt them. Asking the person why they were hurt would ignore the feelings of the person whose toe was stepped upon."

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 that when Japanese youth think of the war, they first think of the atomic bombings, but zainichi Koreans tended not to understand why many Japanese do not know the history of Japan's aggressive colonialism. For many Japanese participants, meeting with Koreans from the mainland and Korean residents within Japan who were angry about Japanese colonialism and aggression forced them to face the facts of modern Japanese history. Through heated discussions, debates, and sometimes even quarrels, the participants began to build individual relationships that transcend ethnicity and nationality. The participants started to share the same desire to overcome the past, despite their previous ignorance or anger regarding the aggression in Japan's wartime past.

Since 1997, we have organized biannual workshops in winter and summer, and more than one thousand people have participated in the workshops held in both Japan and South Korea. History was always 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 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, yet the Japanese visitors were always treated as guests and friends, since many of the people whom they met saw them as a beacon of hope for historical reconciliation in East Asia.

We also had a workshop in Osaka, Japan. There we visited Koreans who were permanent residents in Japan with North Korean passports. 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 various meetings, many participants have built friendships that are immune from 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 during the height of these political tensions, the workshops continued to cultivate hope among participants 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 and wide-scale 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 Kôchi, Japan in order to strengthen the alliance among ordinary peoples in East Asia. The peace museum was built in 1989 by the late Shigeo Nishimori and some local supporters. It is a private museum, modest in 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 Kôchi. As Nishimori believed that nature is the best model of peace, the museum also organizes activities to support environmental protection.

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 is used as an exhibition hall for the museum. He included the Chinese character "Grass" in the name of his 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 indeed incorporated into the name of the museum.

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 Kôchi 44th Infantry Regiment fought during the war. Ten people participated in the tour, and 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 devastations 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, uniforms with blood stains, 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 the visitors of Japan's responsibility in 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 slave laborers, and women coerced into sexual slavery.

In general, peace museums in Japan tend to 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 the victimization that imperial Japan caused. 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 established among 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. Therefore, in order to promote reconciliation in East Asia, it is essential to exhibit displays that show 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 Kô Makimura (1912-38) wrote "A Poem for Guerrillas in Kantô, China" (Kantô paruchizan no uta), a poem which condemned Japan's imperialism and aggression. Moreover, he 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 he had undergone in prison.

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 the liberation. It was unprecedented that the South Korean media detailed a 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 single monolith, treating the whole nation as a collective of aggressors. Stressing the history of Japanese such as Makimura will 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, but it also functions as a communal space that helps to enlighten people about what war and peace really mean. 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 the passion for peace among ordinary people.

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 each 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.