

A Reflection on Uemura Takashi's Talk at UCLA

Katsuya Hirano

The UCLA event featuring Uemura Takashi was held on May 8th. Over 120 people attended. It was filled with tension, due largely to the fact that Los Angeles has become the primary site for Japanese right-wing activism on the west coast, especially since July 2013, when a memorial to the "Comfort Women" was erected in Glendale Park. Shin-issei (new immigrants arriving from Japan over the past quarter-century) have been organizing meetings and study groups to promote a revisionist history in the greater LA area, and one group, the Global Alliance of Historical Truth (GAHT) (<https://gahtjp.org/>), led by Koichi Mera, filed a lawsuit seeking the removal of the Glendale statue (this lawsuit was dismissed by a U.S. District Court judge in the summer of 2014). As anticipated, nearly two-dozen Japanese (-American) nationalists showed up for the event. Some of them clustered at the center of the lecture hall and caused tension by chattering among themselves during the lecture, abruptly raising their voices during the question-and-answer session, and distributing their pamphlets entitled "Comfort Women Not Sex-Slaves" to the audience.

In planning the event, I agonized over whether we should make it open to the public. I was concerned for the safety of Mr. Uemura, the audience, and the organizing staff. In the end, I decided to follow my judgment that making it public would better serve the event's purpose: first by letting Mr. Uemura and his family's horrible experience of bashing, defamation, and threats be known outside Japan; and second as an opportunity to practice democratic values of open, civil dialogue with all people, including those who hold views that directly oppose ours. I thought that the latter aim in particular

was important, since open dialogue has been rarely respected in the ongoing contention and controversy over the historical memory of the "comfort women."

Despite the tense atmosphere during the event, Mr. Uemura retained his composure, and delivered a disturbing and moving account of his and his family's experiences. He made a very clear case that the nationalists' (major media, journalists, writers, scholars, and anonymous citizens) charge against him as a fabricator was simply untenable. He was also rightly adamant that the nationalists' continuous harassment and defamation of him and his family posed a serious challenge to Japanese democracy and human rights. In his interactions with the audience during the question-and-answer session, Mr. Uemura responded calmly and effectively to a wide range of questions, including whether he received strong support from his fellow journalists, whether he considered the event a political campaign, and even whether he was a spy for China and North Korea. To limit the possibility for volatile outbursts and ensure productive dialogue, we asked the audience to submit questions on cards and did not remove any of these questions. Mr. Uemura actually answered every question that was submitted.



Uemura Takashi speaking at UCLA. Photo by Terasaki Center of Japanese Studies

What was noteworthy about the UCLA event was Ms. Lee Yong-soo's unexpected participation. Ms. Lee, a survivor of the comfort woman system, happened to be in LA for her own lecture to be held in Korea Town. Ms. Phyllis Kim, spokesperson for the Korean American Forum of California and a host of Ms. Lee's event, contacted me to inquire about the possibility of Ms. Lee's attendance at Mr. Uemura's lecture. After discussing it with Mr. Uemura, I invited Ms. Lee to give a brief talk at the event. She delivered an impassioned speech, asking Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and his administration to open their mind to the voices of former comfort women and face the historical truth. She ended by underscoring her resolution not to die until she hears a sincere apology from the Japanese government. She said, "I cannot face my fellow Grandmas when I join them [in heaven] if I have no good news to share."

Although the Japanese rightists sighed loudly and were apparently disturbed when Ms. Lee stood in front of the audience, they remained quiet during her talk. It felt as though the entire lecture hall was overtaken by Ms. Lee's spirited talk and much tension brought about by it. The audience applauded her to show their support for her resolution and courage.



Ms. Lee Yong-soo speaking at UCLA. Photo by Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies

The majority of the audience was very supportive and appreciative of Mr. Uemura. For security reasons, I was originally planning to escort Mr. Uemura out of the room as soon as the event was over. But we were quickly surrounded by people from the audience, and Mr. Uemura wanted to engage with them. Although our interactions were mostly civil, there were a few people who confronted Mr. Uemura by calling him a fabricator and an anti-Japanese element, and who threatened to have me fired from UCLA.

After the event, I received feedback by email from some attendees. They described Mr. Uemura as "courageous," "admirable," and "a true journalist with conscience." They all wished him luck in his libel suit against *Bungei Shunjū* and Professor Nishioka Tsutomu of Tokyo Christian University.¹

The event was a success in that the attendees

including myself learned about Mr. Uemura's extremely difficult situation, and its larger implications for democracy in Japan. But we also learned how to engage openly with those who are antagonistic towards us. It is crucial to embody such engagement when nationalistic emotion and language—mutual distrust and hatred based on racism—are becoming the norm in East Asia.

What Mr. Uemura has been undergoing should not be considered an isolated incident. Rather it is symptomatic of the present reappearance of the ultra-nationalist movement in Japan, which seeks not only to whitewash history but also to exercise an extreme degree of intolerance against anyone whom it considers “dishonoring” or “betraying” the country. Harassment from this movement not only jeopardizes democracy in Japan, but also denies the dignity of those who suffered the insufferable under Japan’s colonial rule and during the war. The nationalists, especially the so-called “internet rightists” who hide behind digital anonymity, continue to direct unabashed verbal assaults against both Mr. Uemura and the victims of the comfort woman system, in an attempt to discredit and silence any voices that call for the Japanese government and citizens to reflect on the unsettled past. This event clearly showed that what we need at this very moment, when mutual accusation is casting a cloud over the East Asian region, is not to commit yet another violation of human dignity but to honor our shared ability to respect and embrace that dignity.

I would like to thank Ted Everhard, who served

as translator for Mr. Uemura at the event, for helpful feedback in writing this essay.

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Notes

¹ See Uemura Takashi, “Journalist Who Broke Comfort Women Story Files 16.5 Million Yen Lawsuit Against Bungei Shunju: Uemura Takashi’s Speech to the Press.” (<http://www.japanfocus.org/events/view/237>)