Long Journey Home: A Moment of Japan-Korea Remembrance and Reconciliation

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On 11 September 2015, a remarkable journey will begin from a little temple in the tiny northern Hokkaido town of Tadoshi. Over the following ten days, a group of Japanese, Koreans and others will wind their way through several Hokkaido towns, to Tokyo and Kyoto, Hiroshima and the port of Shimonoseki, and then across the straits to Busan in Korea, and finally to Seoul, where they will participate in a public memorial ceremony in the square in front of the city hall.

The most important participants in this journey are not the living, but the dead: the bones of 115 Koreans brought to Japan as labourers during the Asia-Pacific War will be carried along the route, with ceremonies of remembrance along the way, to their final resting place in Korea. The itinerary they will trace in September follows, in reverse, the route they travelled in trucks and boats and trains when they were taken to remote mines and construction sites in wartime Japan, unaware that they would never see their homes or families again. More than seventy years on, they are at last going home.

It has been a long journey in every sense of the word. Some of the remains of the dead labourers have been kept since the war in Buddhist temples attached to the Jōdō Shinshū [True Pure Land] school, Japan’s largest
Buddhist grouping. These include the remains of fourteen Korean workers killed in a wartime gas explosion in a coal mine in the Hokkaido town of Bibai, where almost 5000 Korean workers had been brought as mine labourers. In colonial times, Jōdō Shinshū collaborated actively in the colonisation of Korea and in efforts to “reform” Korean Buddhism along Japanese lines. As part of their reflection on their own organisation’s historical responsibility, members of Jōdō Shinshū’s Nishi Honganji branch have been caring for remains of forced labourers held in their temples, performing ceremonies for the repose of their souls and, where possible, making contact with their families to ensure the return of the remains.

Excavations at the Asajino Airfield site.

Other bones were unearthed during decades of research and excavation carried out by Hokkaido citizens’ groups on sites where large numbers of forced labourers had been put to work. One of these sites was the Uryū Dam in Shumarinai, northwestern Hokkaido: a vast hydroelectricity project constructed between 1937 and 1943, which created what was then the largest artificial lake in Northeast Asia. A second was a military airfield built during the war at Asajino Airfield, on the northern coast of Hokkaido. Over four hundred Korean labourers were brought to labour on the construction of this airfield, and the remains of 34 who died on that site will be among those returned to Korea on this journey.

The harsh experiences of these workers formed part of a long history of forced labour in Hokkaido. In the Meiji Era, convict labourers from other parts of Japan were brought to the island and put to work in chain gangs building roads and railways. By the start of the twentieth century, convict labour had ceased to be used for these projects, but had been replaced by so-called “takobeya” (octopus pot) labour, where workers were kept confined in cramped barracks, subject to drastic punishments if they attempted escape. These practices were continued into wartime, when in all some 145,000 Korean and 16,000 Chinese were brought to Hokkaido as mine and construction labourers. The memories of this forced labour continue to cast a deep shadow over Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbours (see Underwood 2006 and 2010; Seaton 2015).
Memorial statue, Shumarinai.
Preparations for an Ainu ceremony for the dead, Shumarinai.

Core organisers of the homecoming journey are members of the East Asia Collaborative Workshop for Peace [Higashi Ajia no Heiwa no tame no Kyōdō Wākushoppu], a group formed in 1997 by Tadoshi-based Buddhist priest Tonohita Yoshihiko, Korean anthropologist Chung Byung-ho and others, and the associated East Asia Citizens’ Network, created by the same group as a non-profit organisation earlier this year. For the past eighteen years, the Workshop has been bringing young people from Japan, Korea and elsewhere together for regular gatherings, during which they have excavated the Shumarinai and Asajino sites. To date, more than one thousand people have participated in the group’s workshops, which also provide an opportunity for young Japanese, Koreans and others to share ideas and learn about the past together (Tonohira 2013; Morris-Suzuki 2013).
The skeletons of labourers, buried where they fell or in nearby mass graveyards, can sometimes be identified because in some cases they were buried with personal items. A painstaking and emotionally harrowing process of seeking out surviving relatives and arranging the return of remains has been continuing for years. Other bones remain anonymous – as are the lives that ended on these remote corners of Japan.

September's event, which will be the largest such return of remains by grassroots citizens groups, is testimony to the longing of many Japanese people to right the wrongs of wartime and seek reconciliation with neighbouring countries. This longing survives despite the rising tides of nationalism in East Asia, and despite recent failures of the Japanese government to address the troubled legacies of war with sincerity and good faith.

The scars left by past injustices are not easily healed. September's journey of homecoming is not the end of the story, just one significant step on the way. But it is testimony to the power of ordinary people to create dialogue across borders and to address deep-seated problems of remembrance and reconciliation.

The organisers of the homecoming welcome international support. You can learn more about their journey at http://2015houkan.jimdo.com/ (in Japanese).

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REFERENCES


