

A Foot soldier in the War Against Forgetting Japanese Wartime Atrocities

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By David McNeill

The Chukiren Peace Memorial Museum nestles among swathes of identikit houses in a suburb of Saitama Prefecture, watched over by a pensioner -- a foot soldier in what Milan Kundera called the struggle of memory against forgetting. Voluntarily funded and still smelling of new paint, the museum is a work in progress; an antidote, hopes Curator Niki Fumiko, to the narcissistic chauvinism of the Abe administration, which she and her supporters believe is poisoning the bloodstream of Japanese politics.

“We are in a very dangerous period,” says the 80-year-old former teacher, who once led the women’s section of the Japan Teacher’s Union. “Awareness of Japan’s role in wartime is fading, but also awareness of the war itself. We all have to do what we can.” The resource center is a first step, to be followed by the opening of a children’s library this spring. “To make people understand their common humanity we have to start teaching history to kids from picture books. Leaving it until adulthood is too late.”



Niki Fumiko at the Memorial Museum

The core of the museum’s collection, housed in a 180-sq meter warehouse in Kawagoe, is the testimony of 300 Japanese veterans who confessed while in custody in China to committing atrocities there, including rape, torture and infanticide. Graphic video and photographic evidence showing some of the most brutal crimes of the Imperial Japanese Army is held in the archives as a resource for scholars.

“You won’t find these things in school textbooks,” says veteran Ebato Tsuyoshi, who calls his time in captivity in China ‘a miracle.’ The testimonies include an account of a sergeant-major who raped and killed a Chinese woman, then cannibalized her with his unit. Ebato says he himself trained recruits to use captured Chinese for bayonet practice. “Terrible things like this happened all the time,” he says. “But now people are saying that they never happened. Japan is trying to keep a lid on a stinking pot.”

Kubota Hisao, 86, the first born of ten children from a farming family in Kanagawa prefecture, joined the war in China in 1942. He told Kyodo News that he is still haunted by the memory of shooting a boy of 14 or 15 who was hiding in a hollow, at the order of his squad leader. “I pulled the trigger immediately, like a machine...We were taught that the superior’s order was the same as the emperor’s. I didn’t even hesitate,” he said. “But I felt as if I was killing my little brother.” “All people who went to the war took part, directly or indirectly, in a massacre,” he added. “Japanese people talk about the sufferings of atomic bomb attacks and air raids, but we need to understand them in the context of Japan’s war of aggression.”

The testimony and over 20,000 books were donated by Chukiren, an association of returned war veterans founded in 1957 and dissolved by its aging members in 2002. Many of the 1,100 veterans who formed Chukiren believed they would be executed for their crimes. But only 45 were indicted in 1956 war crimes trials, and all were freed from Chinese jails and repatriated by 1964. Some spent the rest of their lives writing and speaking about what they did, fueled by a mixture of atonement, compassion and the need to fight what they saw as Japan’s historical amnesia. When they weren’t being ignored, they were the object of scorn, vitriol and mistrust. Many said they had been brainwashed by Chinese communist propaganda.



Chukiren members celebrate their 50th anniversary in December 2000

The opening of the resource center has been covered by Kyodo, a tiny article in the Asahi newspaper and some local publications, but otherwise ignored by the Japanese media. “We expect nothing less from the mainstream press,” says Niki. While not happy with the media blackout, she says it does bring one advantage: the museum’s collection of mainly hardcopy files is less of a target for an ultra-right firebomb. “It’s a real possibility,” she admits, hinting that the uyoku have already paid a visit. “We have to be vigilant.”



Takahashi Tetsuro, 85, introduces the Memorial Museum to Chinese Embassy staff from Tokyo (Kyodo News photo)

The following interview took place at the Museum in December 2006

Question: The museum is quite remote. Are you confident that it is accessible to ordinary people?

Niki: It is remote but its main purpose is to provide facts and evidence first to history scholars. This is not an attraction for everyone. We prioritize researchers. What is unique is the huge volume of data collected from more than a thousand returnees from Fushun (in Liaoning,

then in Manchuria, about 30 miles from Shenyang) and Taiyuan (capital of Shanxi Province) this cannot be found in any other museum. This is a place for researchers, scholars and people who want to read the collections.

We're especially proud to have most of the writings of the late Dr. Masami Yamazumi, (a former president of Tokyo Metropolitan University and well-known critic of conservative Japan).

War changes human beings into animals and gives us license to kill other people. In the detention centers in China, the captured Japanese searched their hearts for what they had really done during the war as they prepared for punishment, sometimes execution. They confessed, made testimonies, pleaded guilty and then were finally forgiven by the Chinese people. The returnees were eternally grateful for the generosity and mercy of the Chinese and their treatment in China.

The term *ningen kakumei*, or personal revolution, is widely used by the repatriated Japanese. Since many Japanese associate the term with the communist revolution (specifically, the Great Cultural Revolution), conservatives have criticized the repatriated, calling them brainwashed or "converted." Dr. Yuasa Ken (part of a Japanese unit close to Unit 731 in Harbin, wartime Manchuria) who witnessed executions and vivisections on humans in China, is one of many repatriates who speaks of his gratitude toward the Chinese and how he and his colleagues were labeled "communist enemies" after coming back to Japan.

We are not a highly visible group and don't have any intention of making the museum stand out. However, there are some middle-aged people and older who are interested in running the museum. The retired generation handles clerical matters, and younger people

participate in rallies and demonstrations against the revision of the Constitution and the Educational Fundamental Law. Also, we support lawsuits filed by Chinese people; for instance those kidnapped by the Imperial Army.

We plan to start a library for local children this spring. To make people understand their common humanity we have to start teaching history to kids from picture books. If they learn about these things during childhood, they can study more deeply after they become high-school students; leaving it until adulthood is too late. A group of local volunteer mothers is working on this project. We don't intend to expand this library beyond being a local one, but would like to spread the idea for this project, perhaps inspiring others to start similar things in other towns.

Q: What is the single most important piece of evidence, photograph or revelation in the collection?

It is difficult to pick one, but many photographs provide compelling evidence of what was done there in the war. And of course the testimonies are very valuable. The repatriated survivors used to be rank-and-file soldiers which means they were in the frontline of the most murderous activities. It is very difficult for these people to talk about the experience of killing children or making people the targets of bayonet practice, and so on.

Q: The fact that much of this testimony comes via the Chinese Embassy will of course persuade critics that China is simply trying to generate more anti-Japanese feeling. What's your view?

We don't care what these people say. The returnees have written documents here, risking their lives. We don't need to promote or show this museum to those who cast slanders and slurs on what we do. Regardless of what they say, most people cannot help but realize the



facts once you actually visit the places where these crimes took place. There is no way the locals in China can ignore what happened to their own villages. If Japan tries to ignore this or the feelings of these people, it will show that it is worthless as a nation. We believe what we should do is collect and preserve this evidence, and trust scholars on how to use them.

The Chukiren museum accepts donations:

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Saitama ken, Japan)

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David McNeill writes about Japan for the London Independent and other publications. He is a Japan Focus coordinator. Posted at Japan Focus on January 26, 2007.

See Linda Hoaglund, [Stubborn Legacies of War: Japanese Devils in Sarajevo](#) for a film about Japanese wartime atrocities and the activities of Chukiren.