

From a Woman Aggressor. Reflections on Japan and the Asia Pacific War

Greg Vanderbilt, Okabe Itsuko

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Translated and introduced by Greg Vanderbilt

The essayist Okabe Itsuko (1923-2008) readied herself for death throughout her life and, when it came in the early morning hours of April 29, with her died an independent woman's voice of conscience for postwar Japan. The translation which follows is of an address she gave at the annual service in memory of "all the war dead" held by Higashi Honganji temple in Kyoto, shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq five years ago and a year before she announced she was laying down her pen after a half-century career of essay writing and a total of 134 books. The sight of the diminutive and frail 80-year old speaking before the great Kyoto hall of True Pure Land Buddhism, naming herself "a woman aggressor" responsible for the deaths of her loved ones in the war six decades earlier, may have been jarring but her touchstone story of her fiancé Kimura Kunio and her core value of respect for all people, including the weak and marginal, were well-known to a Japanese public longing for a voice grounded in the beauty of daily life and Japanese culture but unyielding in its call for peace and dignity and respect for all men and women.



Okabe Itsuko-san (source: [Asahi Shimbun](#))

In this speech as well she retells her story: of growing up the sickly younger daughter of an Osaka tile wholesaler and a devoted mother; of leaving school due to tuberculosis (incurable in those days); of her engagement to a young officer and his statement to her that "This war is wrong. I do not want to die for His Majesty the Emperor."; of her inability (conditioned by both youth and militarist education) to understand his quiet opposition to the war; of her 1968 visit to Okinawa where he had died in 1945; of her lifelong effort to make public atonement to

him and to show how peace might grow quietly from the dignity of Japanese tradition (which for her, as for many other postwar intellectuals, was seldom if ever connected to the State). Okabe's story anticipated and refutes the Shōwa "greatest generation" story now enshrined in the Shōwa-kan in Tokyo and elsewhere; hers is centered on love – daughterly, sisterly and romantic – for the dead as the source for a conscientious and peaceful future.

Okabe launched her writing career in 1953 after she ended a marriage to a man thirteen years her senior arranged as a way of providing for her parents under hard post-surrender economic conditions. In 1951 she had self-published a collection of her wartime essays but it was a daily radio broadcast starting in 1954 that brought her first readership. Over organ background music she would read an essay written on a single 400-character sheet of manuscript paper; her first piece "Omusubi no Aji" (The Flavor of a Riceball) memorably proclaimed that the deliciousness of a riceball comes from the vitality and love of the human being between whose palms it has been formed. Among the listeners who responded was a girl named Yoshida Mieko, a blind Hansen's disease patient living under forced quarantine at a government leprosarium located on an island off Kagawa prefecture. This encounter led to abiding relationships with many in this then-ignored population there at Ōshima Seishōen, at Airakuen in Okinawa, and at Nagashima Aiseien in Okayama. It was an instinctive solidarity, for Okabe knew sickness and often said she had a history of illness and not one of schooling (a byōreki instead of a gakureki). Self-identification with illness can be a source of strength; the artist Hoshino Tomihiro (who is quadriplegic) provided the cover for a 2001 collection "Because I am weak, I do not break."

Okabe's numerous books of essays – many of them collections of short pieces that appeared originally in art, women's, Buddhist, and left-leaning periodicals and of lectures to teachers and women's groups – all point back to a writer walking, experiencing life, and writing as a largely self-taught and self-consciously postwar Japanese woman. Her seamless synthesis of appreciation of beauty in daily life, of the work of Kyoto craftspeople, of Noh and the classics, and of Buddhism – the flowers of quiet temple gardens and the dignity of ancient and revered images of the Buddha – with the political imperatives she took from Kunio and others she respected, like the socialist Arahata Kanson, points to how to become a complete person. As exemplified here, one case in point was her writings on Korea, ancient Korean culture, and Koreans resident in Japan, where, as in this speech, her emphasis on the dignity of contributions to Japan from the Korean peninsula connected to Japan's wartime malice in Korea and then to the postwar political struggles in which she took a concerned citizen's interest, including the movement for the release of the Suh brothers from decades' long imprisonment in South Korea, and, more recently, friendship with a South Korean academic named [Park Chang-hee](#) who read the 1996 Iwanami edition of her collected works while imprisoned on allegations of espionage in the 1990s and who has opened a community center in her honor near Seoul.

The conscience of these writings is encapsulated in a poem she often shared, written out in Osaka dialect: Uttara akan. It's wrong to sell out. Don't betray. Tomodachi o uttara akan, it begins. Don't sell out your friends. It then lists other unbetrayables – the children, your true heart and mind, affection, faith, education, scholarship, secrets, the will, nature, life – before repeating Jibun o

uttara akan. Jibun o uttara akan. *Don't betray yourself. Don't betray yourself.*

Following the death of her mother in 1959 and the 1963 publication of the book she mentions in the speech Alone in the Old Capital, Okabe relocated from Kobe to Kyoto. After several years, she purchased a house along the Kamo River with tatami rooms cooled by river breezes and a Taishō-era Western-style annex. She lived there by herself from 1975 until downsizing to an apartment three years ago. Her sentiments for its well-loved furnishings shared with readers, the house provided a stage for her deep appreciation of each component of daily life. Any meal there included a toast (always with Kirin beer) and a taste of Okinawa's pink and pungent tofu known as tofuyo, a reminder of her love for the place Kunio died. Her kimonos, once a trademark even when she traveled alone in Europe in the late 1960s, were transformed by a long ago student – she briefly taught flower arranging as a substitute for an English course banned in wartime – and lifelong friend named Yamashita Machiko into smart pant and tied-jacket outfits.

室生寺・五重塔の前で（一九六二年頃）



**At Murōji Temple, ca. 1962 frontispiece to
Alone in the Old Capital**

The following is a translation of Okabe's April 2, 2003, memorial address as it was printed with her revisions as a pamphlet by Higashi Honganji: Kagai no Onna kara (Kyoto: Shinshō « Ōtaniha Shō « musho Shuppanbu, 2004). A complete list of her books can be found in the last, a collection of aphorisms entitled Living in Purity: Itsuko's Words (Chura ni Ikiru: Itsuko no Kotoba) (Fujiwara Shoten, 2007) and a detailed chronology of her life (including byōreki) in her autobiography Last Words (Yuigon no Tsumori de) (Fujiwara Shoten, 2006). Her children's book Shiro the Deer (Shika no Shiro-chan) which tells of an ugly-duckling deer in Nara has recently been translated into Korean and Chinese but there are as yet no other English translations.

Education for Death and not for Life

I am grateful to be invited to join this Memorial Service for All Those Fallen in War (*Zen Senbotsusha Tsuichō Hōei*) and that a person such as me could be asked to say what I think, even if what I have to say may be embarrassing.

As we said together in the time of confession a few minutes ago, war is the terrifying business of killing, but the era into which I was born was the war. What passed for education from primary school through girls' high school was militarist education, education which taught my generation to "die gladly for His Majesty the Emperor." No one said "Live!"

The whole religious world followed this policy. It dispatched chaplains and it took no part in the struggle to stop the killing. It was a time when everyone, myself included, expected to die. It was acceptable just to die, but the young men who were being sent off to other lands went to kill as many people of those countries as possible and then be killed themselves. That's how it was.

The other day when I read in the newspaper about the Otani protest against possible war in Iraq, now when such appeals are needed from all religious groups, now when all religious groups are needed in the struggle against war, I was moved and overjoyed by the Otani denomination's appeal and so I come to the service today boldly and with a full heart. [1]

I don't know if it will make sense to you, but the education received by boys and girls of my generation taught us that "it is better to die than to live." Without complaint, boys of my generation were conscripted and sent to the fields of death. There they killed and they themselves died and a great many were injured. How terrible it must have been for their families.

My brother, who was four years older than I, was sent to do aerial reconnaissance over Singapore. His plane was the only one sent and

I imagine they were prepared for anything. It was a superior aircraft called a *Shinshitei* and was quite fast. When the British combat planes came after them, they were able to escape and come home. With the information they gathered, his command devised strategy for the invasion of Singapore. Even so, my brother fell there in 1942.

At the time, I was made to think my brother's death was a glorious death in battle. Mother was a *gunkoku no haha* (a mother of the military nation) and I was a *gunkoku* maiden. No other way of life was possible. We couldn't even imagine another way of life. As one who grew up in those times, when the invasion of Iraq erupted the other day, I could hear the explosions in my head – the sounds of the bombs falling and of the antiaircraft fire. I was watching it on television but I felt as if I were there.

War is absolutely wrong. Killing is wrong. And yet I received a tearful letter from a Christian wondering why, in America with all its Christians, do American Christians not stand at the very forefront of opposition to war.

It is a noble thing to believe, but one need not go to war in the name of God or kill in God's name. And yet, in Japan, His Majesty the Emperor was a god. There was no way to go against the Emperor system. "Die happily" we were told. That's how it was.

My breast literally aches when I hear the words "all of the war dead" as those memorialized in this service. During the last war, so many B-29s flew over our heads, dropping shimmering fire bombs as the brilliant red flames rose up. How many people were there below? How many lost their homes?

At that time both Mother and I were coughing up blood and so, without any idea that Osaka would be bombed, we had rented a small house near the sea at Izumikita and gone there to recuperate. Then the air raid warnings came

and the skies over Osaka turned crimson.

The house where I was born and raised was in Osaka. My father and my eldest brother's wife and child were there. We were worried. My room in that house was on the third floor. When I opened the east-facing window, I could see the roof of the Minami MidÅ. Minami MidÅ belongs to the Otani denomination and the Kita MidÅ belongs to Honganji. I grew up seeing the roofs of these two great temple halls.

The Body Turns to White Ashes

Mother believed in Shinran ShÅnin with all her heart. Morning and evening she would chant the sutra. Though he was married to Mother, Father had fallen for another woman and he was never at home except for meals. He was at the other woman's house. Because of her, I have four younger half-siblings.

Sometimes Mother wept as she chanted the sutra. What was she thinking as she cried? With all her heart she wanted Buddha to hear her. When she cried, there was nothing I could do except to curl up beside her and share my warmth so she could feel "there are children here too." Then, comforted, she would start again to lift up her voice in the sutra.

Then she would always chant Rennyo ShÅnin's "Letter on White Ashes." [2]

"We who are robust and hearty in the morning may be white ashes by evening."

I grew up hearing this. When I was small, my body was weak and relatives and neighbors all said that "it won't be long until this child dies," but, look, I've lived this long!

But I have never thought that way. I am one who is aware that I will die. Even now I am deeply grateful to my mother. Morning and evening, she chanted that "Letter on White Ashes" that tells us to be prepared for our deaths, as if to warn the child who snuggled

against her wondering if she too was soon to die to "be aware of yourself."

Thank you, Mother. *O-Kaa-chan, ooki ni.*

Today, as I come before the image of the Buddha in whom my mother believed with all her heart and mind, I feel as if I am coming to greet her. Though this year marks the forty-fourth anniversary of her passing, she lives on in my heart. My brother who died in the war, my fiancé, the neighbor boy who taught me so much, and so many others live on there.

Not Killing, but Bringing to Life

All those who fell in the war have much to teach those of us who are here now about living. With pain and grief, with all our hearts, we pray for them.

I don't know why I didn't die then. I don't know why I was born, into this world in this age, as a Japanese girl.

None of us come into being out of our own desire but since we do exist, we must treasure Life. But look at Iraq these days. How hard it is to survive each day in Iraq. Innocent people are being killed by bombs dropped heedlessly from the sky. I tremble when I think of their plight.

More than ten million people worldwide have demonstrated against the Iraq war. Even in America, there was a demonstration in Washington with half a million people. Despite these people saying it is wrong, the killing goes on. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt bring forth life. Thou shalt show the way to the Pure Land. But this is not what is done. Hence the realities of our world. The unfortunate realities.

In these times, I feel like all of Japan of today is gathered in its former self. Japan is about to join the Iraq War on the side of America. The Prime Minister has made this decision without one word of consultation with the people. This is unforgivable.

I can say “Unforgivable. Unforgivable,” but I am in no shape to participate in protests. I can only lie quietly in bed but my heart is angry. I must say that what is despicable is despicable. I am livid. Under these conditions the world is destroying itself.

As the appeal declared, if war breaks out again, war and terrorism will recur in retaliation. Together with anti-war prayers for the value of life, the appeal strongly cries out to international society to not engage in military action. With all my heart I join in the Otani protest.

What I have wanted to say, what I have thought, what I have written has not amounted to that. No one listens. One by one, we must come into consciousness. One by one, we each must speak responsibly. Yes, what is wrong is wrong.

During that war, Mother chanted the sutras and yearned and hoped with all she had, but my brother died in the war, my fiancé died in the war, and my sister’s husband died in the war. Thinking of dying in war as expected and as glorious was the tragedy of that time, the tragedy of the Japanese people. We must not allow it to be repeated. This is the meaning of my title today: “From a Woman Aggressor”.

“This war is wrong.”

Some here may know him. Mr. Takahashi Kazumi (1931-1971) was a novelist who died young. When he was an assistant professor at Kyoto University, he started an association called the “Dialogue Society.” Participants, including some who are still living like Komatsu Sakyō and Murai Hideo, read and commented on my book *Alone in the Old Capital*.^[3] He invited me to come and speak to them and he even came to my house to get me.

Here is what I said to Mr. Takahashi Kazumi then, in May 1968. I had long considered women to be the victims of war. Their beloved

husbands, their children, their brothers and sisters were killed in war and they were left to preserve their homes and families on their own. Then they faced the air raids before their very eyes. I saw them as victims.

In April 1968, a month before I met Mr. Takahashi Kazumi, I went to Okinawa for the first time. My fiancé died there in the war. I gathered up my courage and was taken there for my first visit.

When my fiancé whom I so respected was twenty-two, I was almost twenty. In those days, young men and young women did not go out together like they can today. It wasn’t possible to have serious conversations either. When my brother died in the war, his classmates from primary school came to pay their respects. One of them was named Kimura Kunio. He was in officer training. All I could do was put out tea and a sweet and bow politely, but I watched from behind a paper screen.

His mother was such a kind woman. Later, she spoke to my mother. “They seem to like each other. Shall we arrange their marriage?”

His mother came to visit, carrying with her only a white fan, and he became my fiancé. Now that we were engaged, he could enter my room with its view of the rooftop of the O-MidÅ. It was the first time for us to speak alone. We had only a brief time together.

Kunio straightened his uniform and spoke clearly. “I think this war is wrong. I do not want to die in such a war. I do not want to die for His Majesty the Emperor.”

Then in a quiet voice, he said, “But I’d gladly die for you or for the country.”

I was shocked. From the time I was born until that very moment, I had never heard such words. “This war is wrong. I do not want to die for His Majesty the Emperor.”

Saying something like this, if caught, meant court martial and prison. I was startled and I answered, "If it were me, I'd die happily." Kunio never mentioned the war again. That was the last time. It was the last time we met.

He said he would like to come again but that time and place never came. I had no idea what any of what he said meant. How pathetic and miserable it all was. When I think of it now how sorry I feel.

Without any further opportunity for us to talk, Kunio left by night train from Osaka Station. Osaka Station in those days was pretty run-down and that night it was mostly officers-in-training boarding trains. I don't know where they were headed that night but Kunio was smiling broadly as the tears ran down his face.

Kunio was against the war. It was right in the middle of the war when he said to me, "This war is wrong." My brother had died in 1942 so this was in 1943, just when Japan was losing at Guadalcanal.

The train that was arriving on the opposite platform that night we saw him off carried nothing but the remains of soldiers. Rows and rows of white urns were being unloaded that night. It did not even occur to me that this must not be allowed to happen.



思慕の人・木村邦夫氏と婚約（1943年、20歳）

**Engagement photo with Kimura Kunio, 1943
(reprinted in *Yuigon no Tsumori de*)**

Okinawa, the Trail of Bones

Kunio ended up in northern China, in what was called "Hokushi" in those days. The Japanese military was occupying China and he was forced to participate in the invasion of another country.

When the platoon Kunio commanded was on patrol, it had a run-in with a local unit of Chinese resistance forces and he reportedly killed the other commander. Was that worthy of a medal in those days? When the letter telling me of this arrived along with his fountain pen, I really did not know what to say.

I had waved my flag as I sent Kunio - Kunio who had so clearly expressed his true feelings

that “this war is wrong” – off to the war. It was thus I who had caused him to kill on the battlefield.

This was how I changed my mind and this is why I had to go to Okinawa.

As you may know, in that terrible Battle of Okinawa, Japanese forces came out from the trenches around the headquarters at Shuri Castle to fight the Americans as they came ashore. So many battleships came from the south and surrounded the island. Their guns were so huge and the island so small and they kept striking and striking it.

Kunio met the attack and fought back and both of his legs were blown off. Then, I’m told, he took his pistol and ended his own life, there at a place called Mt. Tsuka in Shimajiri County. A Lieutenant Masuda, who was with the neighboring platoon, was with him at the end.

After that, the residents of Okinawa and soldiers, all headed south. The American military surrounded them and pushed them south as well. Each volley from American artillery blew away twenty, thirty people. The leaves of nearby trees were splattered with human flesh.

It was terrible. They were headed for the southern tip of Okinawa – Mabuni Hill – where, it is said, they lowered their heads and died. The living came to take the possessions of the dead. Japanese soldiers also took from the dead. Really, they did. They drank from the canteens of the dead. They stripped the corpses and replaced their own worn-out uniforms. They took shoes and whatever else they could.

And then, they headed further south, to the cliffs, to where there was no place to run. Okinawan people had escaped there too, and because Japanese troops were there as well, the Americans fired and fired.

There were caves called *gama* and they went

inside. Someone who was there told me how they sucked on what little water dripped down the cave walls. There was nothing to eat and so, after the sun had gone down and they thought the Americans might be gone, they’d creep out of the cave, but they’d be swept up by the searchlights and killed. Anyone who passed out would end up an American prisoner.

Then there are the bones of those who died in the Battle of Okinawa. So many bones. They died en masse. Later there would be three hundred thousand at Hiroshima and 230,000 or 240,000 at Nagasaki. No one knows the truth. No one knows the real numbers. Such things cannot be known.

Among them was the man who saw Kunio die. Lieutenant Masuda’s entire platoon was killed in the final attack. Then there were the so-called youth labor corps, boys who were swept up into the war along with girls made to serve as nurses. How my heart aches when I think of how they suffered.

Here’s what one of the people who told me what happened in Okinawa said. The Americans did not bother to gather up the remains of the dead Japanese. They buried the bodies of each and every dead American soldier and erected a cross over each grave, but they used bulldozers to push the remains of the Japanese soldiers and the people – along with destroyed weaponry and whatever else – into craters left by the bombing and buried them there. Then they paved and made concrete roads over the top. When I go to Okinawa, I say to myself, “I’m walking on their bones.”

Because I heard the “Letter on White Ashes” when I was small, I’ve always thought of myself as “a child of the white bones,” of my whole being as nothing but ashes. But it was other people – local residents, the people of Okinawa, and Japanese soldiers – for whom it did not seem to matter whether they were killed. So many died. So many were killed. It was Japan’s way not to care about life.

Hearing the Woeful Cries

At that time, a vast underground complex called the Matsushiro Imperial Headquarters was being built at Matsushiro in ShinshÅ« should Tokyo and the Imperial Palace be bombed. I went to see it and it is magnificent. And yet what I cannot comprehend is that it was workers forcibly brought over from Korea who built it. Seven thousand of them, it is said. They were so maltreated, they were starving and weak and yet worked until they were on the verge of collapse. Then they were thrown away. Women were brought over to be sex slaves.

Today I visited the exhibition “Korean Grandmothers’ Pictures” in the temple visitor center gallery and saw the wonderful pictures by Kim Sundok and others from Korea. To stand before their artwork and see that they are the same age as I, brought over at fourteen, brought over at seventeen. There are works on display by a number of women who were brought over on ships that flew the Japanese military’s Rising Sun Flag.

I say “brought over” but they had no choice. I can hear the woeful cries of those girls. Then there is a painting where a cherry tree has turned into a Japanese soldier and under it lies a naked girl. Around the base of the tree are skulls, skulls, skulls. I want each and every Japanese person to understand the feelings of the Korean woman who felt compelled to make this picture.



Kang Duk-Kyoung “Deprived Purity”
source: <http://www.nanum.org/eng/>

These women are the same age as I am and yet I was attending girls’ higher school, singing Buddhist hymns at morning service. It was when I was about to enter the second year at that school that I contracted tuberculosis and had to leave school and stay in bed. In those days there was no medicine to treat tuberculosis. There was nothing to do but stay home in bed so that no one else would catch it. There wasn’t much to eat either.

I am Awakened as an Aggressor

I was able to call myself “a woman aggressor” to Takahashi Kazumi because I had been to Okinawa a month before we met, to the place where my fiancé died in the war.

Kunio had said “this war is wrong,” but, waving my flag, I sent him off to it. Waving my flag and doing nothing to oppose the war, I sent them

all: my brother, my brother-in-law, the young men of the neighborhood, my family's employees, the neighbor boy I respected so, all of them. I killed them. When I first set foot on Okinawan soil, I saw that women are the victims of war but that I was an aggressor. I felt the sharp pains of the victimizer who kills those she loves by not standing against war.

The first time I met Takahashi Kazumi was the first time I said that "I consider women to be victims of war, but I was an aggressor." He understood. "This is important," he said. "Write about women's war experience, about how women wage war." He was soon to get sick and die but I thought of myself thereafter as one who killed a lot of people.

Everywhere the Japanese and their military went throughout the world they killed the people of that place with their *Hi no Maru* flag and *Kimi ga Yo* anthem. They bowed before the flag and went off to kill. They sang *Kimi ga Yo* and they committed murder. Large Rising Sun flags flew from the rooftops above the rooms where they brought their sex slaves. The Japanese military did such things.

Many times I contemplated suicide since there was no excuse for lying sick in bed, doing nothing. Mother understood I was ready to die and she held my hand and wept. "You've got to live while your mother is still alive. There can't be any dying first."

"I thought if I were to die, Father would take care of you, but that's wrong, isn't it?"

Mother cried when I said that. I set death aside and sought a long life.

Kunio left more words in a message he wrote as his and his classmates' graduation. "Victory too is tragic," he wrote. It is a sad thing to win. In other words, war is wrong. It is wrong to kill and it is wrong to kill oneself. It is not a matter of winning or losing. War is absolutely wrong. Waving my flag, I sent a man who firmly held

his own tenets of belief off to the war. I killed him. There were no men like him in Osaka, men who could declare so clearly their opposition to war. I did not understand. I have no excuse. I did nothing to give comfort to Kunio.

After I went to the place in Okinawa where Kunio died, a man who was in officer training with him visited my home in Kyoto. He came to tell me about Kunio. He told me that Kunio absolutely refused to go to the comfort station where the so-called "military comfort women" were. Others would go whether they approved or not, but he would not go. Once they dragged him and he stayed awake the whole night. Kunio and the woman he was given for the evening gathered the girls who were free and they talked the night away. This is what this man came to tell me.

There is no forgiving how so many people were killed everywhere the Japanese went and how they themselves were killed and how so many others lost their homes and were separated from their families or even killed and were killed as the Americans bombed places all over Japan.

When I went to look for my father after the firebombing of Osaka, I saw the charred plain the city had become, burnt as far as I could see. I walked the streets, carrying the brocade bag Mother had packed with riceballs for me to eat. Corpses were piled along the roadside. Some were lying on mats but they all were dead, in just the positions in which they had breathed their last. As I walked on, I came across a storehouse that had survived the fire but it was still burning. Suddenly, it burst into flame.

When I reached our house, there was, of course, nothing left. When I saw only the burned ground where our house had been, I prepared myself but then I thought that Father might still be alive. It turned out that during the bombing, he took bedding down by the Yokobori River and got it wet. Then he covered himself with it and was protected from the

sparks and falling embers. I asked around and finally I found him. How relieved we were. Together we went home to where Mother was.

The Wrongs Done to the People of the Korean Peninsula

I don't know who can be counted among the war dead. Life is *fushigi*. It is a mystery for us all. No one knows who will die first. That is why I believe that every living person must protect and treasure the entire human family, not just their circle of friends, but all circles of friends throughout the world.

The names of everyone who died in Okinawa – truly “all the war dead” – are carved onto the Cornerstone of Peace that has been built on Mabuni Hill. Yet what makes my heart ache is how few Korean names there are. There are so few names of the Koreans who were forced without their consent by the power of the Japanese military to come to Okinawa and to fight the war and who then were killed.



木村邦夫と刻銘された「平和の礎」の前で
(1999年6月20日、76歳)

Locating Kunio's name (fourth under Osaka prefecture at right) on the Cornerstone of Peace, Okinawa, 1999 (from *Yuigon no Tsumori de*)

Some families declined to have their loved ones' names added to the monument. They are justified, considering what Japan did to Korea. How ashamed and miserable I feel when I think of the colonial era when Japan menaced Korea with its military power and forced it to submit to Japanese rule. Thinking of the Korean women's pictures, I say, as a Japanese, "*Gomen nasai*." Please forgive us. I long for us to live together and to move forward together.

Despite these clearly stated facts, there has been no clear apology to the people of the Korean peninsula. Then, when I think of all the resident Koreans who live here in Japan and have suffered so many humiliations and have so much to say, so much that we Japanese must hear but have yet to, I wonder about those of us

who try to do the right thing. I understand how from before this Japanese archipelago became the country of Japan, it was shaped by the rich civilization of the Korean peninsula and the Korean people, their culture, thought, religion, technology, literature and so on which brought over by Korean experts. The extent to which our ancestors received the influence of the culture and civilization of places from throughout China and South and East Asia – Buddhism is one example – and expanded it in Japan over the generations is beyond our imaginations.

I was born in 1923. On September 1 that year, the Great Kantō Earthquake hit. Men and women who had been forcibly brought to Japan by the military to work on public construction were detained and murdered by the police and military as the result of rumors spread deliberately by the Japanese government. As the prejudice of the Japanese citizenry deepened, they killed whomever they thought was “Chōsenjin.” This all happened the year I was born. Just to think of the conditions in those days is miserable. I reflect sadly on the cruelty of Japanese society.

I was at home in Kyoto before dawn on January 17, 1995, when the Hanshin Earthquake hit. I remember how I could not take my eyes off my television as I braced for aftershocks. Kobe was where I had lived for a decade, where my nieces and nephews and many of my friends and acquaintances still lived. Imagining the flames, there was nothing I could do except telephone them one-by-one to check. There were many houses where I could not get through. I was at my wit’s end.

Exhausted by the quake, my niece’s family came and lived upstairs in my house. “Somehow we found each other,” we said to each other with gratitude. I had no strength whatsoever to go to the affected areas and do something for those who had died and those who were suffering.

When I heard that some resident Korean women living in Kobe worked hard to prepare food for the victims of the earthquake and fire, I was struck by the goodness of the Koreans in comparison to the cruelty with which they were treated by Japanese citizens after the Great Kantō Earthquake.

My niece and family who were staying on the second floor of my house could not be still. Though they enjoyed using my bath, they said that “when we think of everyone in our neighborhood who survived the earthquake and has no place to bathe, we do not feel we can go on living here” and they went back to their friends and neighbors. Helping each other, they started again.

Suh Kyung-sik

On May 31, 2003, Asō Tarō, the chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party Policy Research Council, made a terrible misstatement. In a lecture in Tokyo, he declared that the policy of forcing Koreans to adopt Japanese-sounding names (known as *shi kaimei*) “began from the desire of the Koreans in those days for Japanese names.” He apologized after his statement was reported in the newspapers, but I doubt Asō himself learned anything. I’ve had it with this Chairman of the Policy Research Council.

I know that for every Korean having one’s own name is a point of pride and dignity and a connection to one’s ancestral lineage. At the time when Japan invaded Korea with military force and subjected the peninsula to colonial rule, this policy forced onto the people was one part of Japan’s offensive “policies for creating Imperial subjects” which set out to destroy tradition and individual dignity.

I respect Suh Kyung-sik. He has published a number of fine books based on his excellent sensitivity, intellect, scholarship, and ideas. In his personal history of reading called *A Child’s Tears*, he tells how he hoped the world of ideas

would be “a bridge I could make my own.” He then writes about the inequality he experienced as a Korean in Japan, inequality inconceivable to Japanese people.

I could not imagine the same life course as the Japanese around me. At that time, it was not possible for a resident Korean to become a public servant or a professor at a national university. It was impossible to become an attorney and the barriers to employment in large corporations were nearly impassable. What meaning would there be to work in such a place my whole life? I could not even plan my life expecting to always live in Japan. I could have only a temporary life, always preparing for and expecting the time to come when Japan would no longer allow me to stay. That’s what I thought.[4]

I cannot say how much I have learned from his understanding of humanity.

Please forgive me for speaking at length despite the limited time allotted me.

Humankind, humanity is necessarily headed for death. It is for this reason that I ask us all to

respect each other, to treasure each other, to protect each other’s freedom and each other’s life as it is. This is not only for those like us; it is for everyone. My hope is that we can make a society where everyone can find happiness, where everyone can rejoice together, and where everyone respects each other.

Thank you.

[1] [A Protest over the Possible Military Operations against Iraq](#) was issued on February 28, 2003.

[2] [Hakkotsu no Ofumi](#) is a letter from the fifteenth-century True Pure Land abbot Rennyō often read at funerals.

[3] *Koto Hitori* (Shinchōsha, 1963; reissued Fujiwara Shoten, 2005). Originally serialized in *Geijutsu Shinchō* with Okabe’s own photographs.

[4] So Kyon-shiku, *Kodomo no Namida* (Shōgakukan Bunko, 1998), p. 175. This passage appears in his chapter on reading Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.

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He wrote this article for Japan Focus. Posted May 10, 2008.