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First Symposium Discussion

Compiled by Carrie Cheng and Eri Nakamura, Chair of the First Symposium

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There was considerable interest among the symposium participants in Higashino-san's presentation regarding the documentaries on World War II and its impact on Japan.

Participant A*: To Higashino-san, the issue of succession (passing on knowledge/information) is a very important one to raise. I was also very impressed by the Western system of distributing TV documentaries to universities. On top of that, I have been thinking and researching about why such violence and its deep memories are not talked about, and if there is a system of suppression in society as a whole. In this respect, I thought that thinking about the war from the perspective of popular culture, which young people today are familiar with, could be an opportunity to pass on memories to the next generation.

Makoto Higashino: There appears to be general agreement that the documentaries are an important record of history and will be very useful for educating people today and generations to come. The universities, educational institutions, and research institutions in America and Europe have an arrangement contract for distribution of documentaries made by broadcasting stations. I wonder if this can also be done in Japan.

I hope that the documentaries can be used more and more. If I can make a personal comment, of all the documentaries I've made, the story of the man who discovered the journal of his father's experience in Manchuria affected me most, particularly the vivid description of atrocities that happened.

Regarding questions about the accuracy presented in documentaries: I think it is very important to be as accurate as possible to record what happened in history; but also to consider in what context and from what perspective the facts are positioned.

There are many responses to videos. When I made the documentary from which the video clip was shown, I struggled with questions of 'how do I prevent the father (soldier) in the documentary from being misunderstood' and 'how do I explain the context.' If careful attention is not taken, it can be very dangerous.

Higashino-san concluded his discussion: Although I don't know what's going to happen in the world, I think that going back and forth between what happened in the past and what's happening in the present will probably help revitalize the facts of the past in the present day.

* Participants have been de-identified because consent to publish their identity was not sought.

Higashino-san's comments reflected the underlying theme of this series of symposiums: that the long-term effects of the war continue in the present. The present can be made sense of in light of the past war. There is a hope that a deeper understanding of the past will provide more meaning in our lives.

Iko-san responded to the discussant's comment about the resistance to the war and the atrocities that were committed and why we know very little about it. He highlighted the complex matter of Japan's attitude during the war. The combination of the attitude of ethnic superiority, obeying without question, and the prejudice and dehumanization of others has led to atrocious war crimes in World War II.

Toshiya Iko: In massacres the biggest aspect is the presence of ethnic superiority. By holding the idea of being superior, it is difficult from a behavioral perspective to stop the massacres.

Another contributing aspect is the army's constant emphasis on absolute obedience. It is extremely difficult to take the high road position that a command is a crime. The military is this type of organization.

Although not limited to Japan, when it comes to massacres, the dehumanization of others is seen. Derogatory names are used for the enemies, like Jap, Yankee, Gook, cockroach, snake. Referring to the enemies as these names leads to the attitude that because they are not human, it doesn't matter if they are killed.

To stop these atrocities from repeating, the only way is education.

He referred to the international laws and humanitarian standards of war.

Japan was not sufficiently educated about the international laws, not just within the military but to all of Japan.

Japan was indoctrinated with military thinking of obedience and did not question what was happening. They disregarded the international standards of what is acceptable behavior in the war, rather than being educated by these international standards.

Eugen Koh: As an outsider, it is very difficult to hear the war crimes that were permitted during the war; for me, as a Chinese person, it is especially difficult to hear about those that were committed in China. But, I think, it is also very difficult for my Japanese colleagues to hear all this. It takes courage to listen and to learn from the past. It takes a lot of courage for Iko-san and others to talk about this painful history with such honesty. I hope for the rest of the series of symposiums, we can all do that with courage.

Dr. Koh also acknowledged the difficult emotions that were stirred up during the symposium.

Tadashi Takeshima: I would like to ask Sasaki-san a question. Is the mobilization from Taiwan included in the labor force mobilization? At that time, was the mobilization of people from Taiwan considered natural because they were "Japanese citizens"? Please tell us the definition of "labor mobilization" and your perception of it at the time.

Kei Sasaki: The definition of 'labor mobilization' was slightly narrow in this presentation. It is possible to consider labor mobilization as the activities apart from combat. However, a more

narrow definition of the people mobilized in the war/munitions industry and the construction industry can be considered.

Taiwanese were considered as a subject of the Japanese Empire, so they must take part in the war mobilization activities.

I would like to respond to the discussant's question about the opposition to the labor mobilization. Among the countries that were invaded by Japan, there were differences in the opposition to labor mobilization. In countries that were attacked, like China, there was stronger opposition to labor mobilization, and this was met with stronger violent suppression, while in those countries that were already colonized and considered as part of the Japanese Empire (such as Korea and Taiwan) the opposition was limited; there was some security in their social status as a Japanese person. Some cooperated with Japan to gain a more favorable position. For the Japanese people, their motivation was their pride and loyalty to the emperor. The ideology and grandiose ideas of the war initially drove the labor mobilization of the Japanese. However, in the later part of the war, their reality and experience of starvation, loss, and defeat led to a collapse of this ideology.

There were a few questions about the care of orphans, and in many instances, the lack of care, after the war. Dr. Koh asked Honjo-san if he could clarify what he meant by 'war orphan.'

Yutaka Honjo: The term 'war orphan' generally refers to all the children whose parents have died during the war; both in the countries invaded by Japan as well as those in the country. Usually, the discussion on war orphans is about the thousands that were left without parents or family in Japan and they would live on the streets, homeless.

Shigeyuki Mori: The number of orphanages increased during the postwar period to raise war orphans. I would like to know if you know anything about how this affected the overall structure of orphanages and their policies for raising children.

Honjo-san: While recently orphanages are being referred to in research journals, there is very little on the individual histories and personal accounts. We do not know much about this. There are questions asked about why orphanages were built, what was their purpose. The issue of orphans was an extremely huge problem after the war.

Honjo-san said he agreed with all the presenters' comments about the importance of knowledge and education, expressing how "important it is for this information to be written in historical textbooks."

There was also a brief discussion about the issues of domestic violence and sexual violence toward women and its relation to the war and the so-called 'comfort women.' A participant commented that it appears the Japanese attitude toward women contributed to the sexual violence during the war. Another participant added that this continues to be an issue in present day Japan.

Kai Ogimoto: In terms of the long-term effects of World War II, is it possible to think how the structure of imperial Japan, before and after World War II, as you mentioned today, is related to the social problems of today's Japan? For example, is it possible to discuss the similarities and differences in the Japanese government's response to the new coronavirus and the movements surrounding the hosting of the Tokyo Olympics? I would like to think about how we can analyze the past and present and how we can connect them to a persuasive discussion.

Eri Nakamura: It is unfortunate that we have run out of time to discuss Ogimoto-san's observation. There is a need for the Japanese society to come together as it has happened here today, in this first of the five symposiums on Japan's World War II trauma. Historians and people supporting this work have shared information on the actual history from research. It has been a very important opportunity for all of us to discuss these historical facts from a multi-disciplinary perspective. In all, it has been a successful sharing together of some very difficult and uncomfortable discussions. While the first symposium has come to an end, I hope we can continue such important discussions over the next four symposiums.