

'What Could We Do for Peace between Japan and Korea'

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Vanue : Umegaoka Campus, B 302 room

Introduction

There were two incidents that occurred involving Korean antipathy toward the “Yoko Story” (a story entitled “So Far from the Bamboo Grove”) and a memorial monument for a member of a Korean suicide squad. Today I’d like to talk about why these incidents occurred and what can be learned from their background and related problems.

1. Two incidents in Korea

So Far from the Bamboo Grove is an autobiographical story written by a Japanese woman living in the United States. In Korea in January 2007, the book, which was recommended for American school children, sparked a protest that it had distorted historical facts, and various arguments arose, including a call to remove it from the school reading lists. The petition was granted in California in November 2008. The story describes the experiences of a family consisting of a Japanese mother and her two daughters during their flight from North to South Korea at the time of post-war repatriation. One of the incidents they experienced was the rape of a Japanese woman by a Korean man. A Korean girl in America, who claims to be a historical victim, reacted against the story saying that the Japanese woman is described as a victim. The favorable acceptance of the story in Korea suddenly turned into bitter accusations as the girl’s negative reaction became known in that country.

One of the criticisms of the author’s description was the fact that there are no bamboo groves in North Korea, which led to the story being labeled as untrue. This, in turn, raised the suspicion that she might be the daughter of a war criminal. Protests flooded the publishing company, forcing it to cancel the book’s publication.

Another incident occurred as the result of strong opposition to a Japanese actress’s plan to build a memorial for a member of a Korean suicide squad in Korea. A Korean man is said to have appeared in her dream saying “I lost my life in a war long ago, but I have no regret over my death. My only remorse is that I was forced to die under a Japanese name.” The actress located the Korean she dreamed about through extensive investigation and started to communicate with his bereaved family. After many years of preparation it was finally decided that the memorial monument be erected in South Korea in spring this year, but the unveiling of the memorial was cancelled. The opposition movement stated as follows: “A man who remained loyal to the Japanese Emperor is not acceptable in Korea” and “An official apology from the Japanese government should precede the erection of the monument.”

2. The Meanings of the Two Incidents

These incidents allow us to make two observations. Almost all Koreans are conscious of having been the victims of Japan, but here they were confronted with the fact that a Korean man assaulted a Japanese woman. The Korean people reacted against this, saying it would reverse the assailant vs. victim relationship. The basic problem lies in the fact that most Koreans know nothing about the suffering Japanese people experienced at the time of their repatriation. In Korea, little is taught in school about Japan before and after its defeat in the war (or Korean independence), but the events described in the story actually happened. One historical truth that is relatively well known is the harm done by Russian soldiers. The painful repatriation experiences of Japanese women are known from several testimonies. There was a lack of knowledge about such suffering against the background of sharp criticism from Korea. Things might have been slightly different if these hardships had been known.

The Yoko story has its worth as an anti-war account, but it contains insufficient historical background to explain why the victims were there. Of course, this merely shows that there is a limit to any story as a literary work and does not mean, I think, this autobiographical story can be discarded. Korean Americans (unfamiliar with Japanese suffering) became nervous over the acceptance of the story in a country where Japanese and Korean history is not well known. In my view it was a predictable reaction that allowed the Korean minority to survive in America. Normally, a historical story, even if it is a personal account, should have a solid background and context. The story was weak in this respect. For example, if the author as a citizen of a suzerain state had been able to write about her colonial experiences using a multilevel approach, the story would have become more eloquent and misunderstanding should have been avoided.

It may be said that the situation regarding the Yoko story was caused by the different views of history held by the two countries from their respective racial standpoints. Korean people tend to emphasize their own suffering and view it only from their perspective. They should have been educated to know more about the suffering of the offending country. They should also have been sensitive and thoughtful enough to feel sympathy for such hardships. Meanwhile, the author followed the conventional view of the history of post-war Japan, which tends to be remembered in connection with "war." She should have been a little more conscious of the wars engaged in by modern Japan, which were solely waged to win colonies.

Criticisms of the memorial monument originated from Korean people's non-acceptance of those who pledged allegiance to the Japanese Emperor and the lack of an official apology from Japan. The circumstances behind the perception that Japan has not offered an official apology are complicated. It is clear that the apology provided by Japan so far has not been accepted as intended in present day Korea. The logic is that where there is no official apology, there can be no acceptance of a personal apology. Therefore, both Japan and Korea must reconsider their attitudes toward an apology that has not served its purpose.

The negative reaction to the statement "We pledge loyalty to the Emperor" is concerned with the unsolved problem of pro-Japanese people in Korea. Conflicts and antagonism over Japanese-Korean issues are also closely related to the opposing views of political forces in Korea.

3. Multi-layered Structure of Japanese-Korean opposition – Legacies of Colonialism and Cold War

The monument issue seems to be partly attributable to the failure to anticipate such a reaction from Korea. Since the beginning of cultural exchanges between Japan and Korea, mutual understanding has been growing, but a clash such as this is unavoidable without a better understanding of the internal problems of the two countries. Of course, there were some Koreans who adopted a cooperative attitude toward the erection of the monument, and some municipalities that offered assistance with the project. This means that Korea has a better understanding of Japan, but it may be said that this favorable reaction prevented Korea from making a correct judgment. Political opposition between the progressive and conservative parties in Korea sometimes makes Japanese-Korean dialogue difficult, but it does not seem to have attracted much attention. In other words, both the progressive and conservative camps the government and the people, tend to take the same stance against Japan, which is likely to spawn nationalism. Therefore, it is necessary to see who is the first to take the initiative in triggering such a reaction.

Why did Korean young people join suicide squads? It was not because the Japanese war was justifiable as some Japanese say. In those days, there were many people in Korea who went to war as volunteers. The fighting was initially considered a “Japanese War” and irrelevant to Koreans, but the various conciliatory words spoken by the Korean Government-General Office and Japanese opinion leaders prompted the Korean people to volunteer for the war. Specifically, it was stated that the war was in the cause of justice and it was an honor for men to become soldiers. It was thought that the Japanese invasion was due to the weak Korean military officers under the civilian leadership in the age of Chosen (the Japanese name for Korea) and therefore Korea should restore its military strength. Becoming a soldier was also considered a way of regaining manliness. For those who came from families too poor to provide their children with an education, entering military service was one way to win state recognition or rise in the world. They also told themselves that they were joining the war not for Japan but for Chosen. Some thought of the choice as a step toward preparing for their independence through experience. Others expected the Chosen’s position to improve once victory was secured if they played a role during the war. I am critical of all of these views, but I would like to emphasize that all these reasons were based on the fact that Koreans had a strong desire to be treated like Japanese. Such a desire had its roots in persistent discrimination despite the slogan for “Korean-Japanese unification.” In fact, the colonialism that sought to rule others created such a social structure.

The Korean reaction against Japan is concerned with the issue of pro-Japanese Koreans. This shows that the present conflict is a legacy of colonialism. The opposition exhibited by the left and right wings over pre-war colonialism continued as an attitude toward Japan. This also indicates that the current Japanese-Korean confrontation is related to the cold war structure. The “Yoko Story” and the memorial monument offered the possibility of helping Koreans to understand Japan despite the problems involved. But the confrontational structure contributed to preventing their understanding. Who were the real victims in history? Some Koreans were

victims and others perpetrators. The same applies to the Japanese. The same person can be a victim or a perpetrator. Koreans do not appear to be ready to fully open their hearts to others' suffering because of their lack of such a perception. Some of the victims and perpetrators stubbornly refuse to listen to others because of their insufficient knowledge or possibly their own self-interest. Who refuses in what context? An opportunity to start a new dialogue can be found by looking at such a case of rejection and the context, and not by criticizing the reaction of the other country as nationalism.

4. What is Needed Now?

Although blatant colonialism and the cold war are assumed to have tentatively ended, the political structure they created remains. When considering Japanese-Korean issues, we should keep in mind that the current conflict between the two countries is partly ascribable to colonialism and the cold war. It is not solely the result of nationalism. In that sense, we especially need a strong will to dismantle the structures of the cold war and colonialism. Simply blaming everything on nationalism will make it all the more difficult to solve the Japanese-Korean issues.

Two years from now will be the 65th anniversary of the end of colonial rule and the 45th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Japan and Korea. In the 20 years that have passed since 1990, many people have been trying to reflect on the past, while seriously arguing about historical problems such as comfort women. During this period, there has been a lot of trial and error in our relationships along with some progress as regards our mutual understanding and dialogue. The Japanese-Korean issues have not been solved because there has been no foundation for real dialogue between the two countries. For reconciliation between the two nations, we need to develop a way of thinking that is acceptable to many Japanese and Korean people. Since the complex structure of the respective hardships has not been apparent, we have been prone to think of our own race or the other race only, resulting in one party suffering suppression. If we go beyond the confines of race and think as citizens, both Japan and Korea should be able to better understand each other. However, the prevailing opinion among those who know each other well is that there will be no immediate solution to the Japanese-Korean problems, and so they should be put on the back burner or passed on to the next generation. These words seem to have originated in resignation and lack of belief. I believe such attitudes reflect defeatism and a safety-first principle that gives precedence to political life and safety. We must have a sense of responsibility for the past two decades during which we were not successful in solving the problems. Moreover, we must become aware of our duties not to leave old conflicts unsolved for the next generation and to make up for what we have done. It seems that the time has come for those concerned to rethink their attitudes, and this should include self-examination.

The real faces of ordinary Japanese have become visible to Korean people since Japanese culture started finding its way into Korea. Regretfully, however, favorable attitudes toward the culture are discussed within contexts unrelated to politics and history. Culture and history are

connected and we cannot talk about them separately. In fact it is essential to see how closely they are related.

Right or wrong, Japan and Korea have the same social system, so both have the potential to create a desirable relationship with a little more effort. If this were achieved, a reconciliation between Japan and Korea – former colonial and suzerain states in Asia – would make it possible to resolve the past difficulties in a way different from that followed by European countries.

The 21st century could mark a really new beginning characterized by freedom from the colonialism that suppressed people in the 20th century, nationalism and the cold war. Therefore, I think Japan and Korea should not give up their efforts at reconciliation and instead continue working toward the goal by overcoming the many remaining misunderstandings and conflicts.

Thank you very much.