

Koreans and Japanese: Honoring Colonial Lives



Byung-ho Chung (left) and Tonohira Yoshihiko (right). Source: All photos used in this upper section are screen captures from the film *So Long Asleep, Waking the Ghosts of a War*.



Map of the volunteers' route by bus and ferry from Asajino, Hokkaido, Japan, to their final destination in Seoul, South Korea.

Out of a War's Ashes

By Byung-ho Chung

A chance encounter drew me into the work of repatriating the remains of Korean men who died doing forced labor in Hokkaido during the Asia-Pacific War. In 1989, I was engaged in field research for a doctoral dissertation on Japanese day care centers. People suggested that I visit the center directed by Tonohira Yoshihiko, chief priest of a rural Buddhist temple. There, I learned that Reverend Tonohira was also leading local volunteers excavating the remains of victims from wartime construction projects—men whose bodies had been dumped into unmarked pits seven decades ago.

Many bodies were those of young Korean men, conscripted at a time when Korea was a colony controlled by the Japanese Empire. More than a million men were taken from Korea to labor at sites across the empire; over 200,000 of them were sent to Hokkaido.¹ There, Tonohira and his Japanese volunteers were showing Buddhist compassion for lost souls—those who die away from home—by cremating their remains and preserving the ashes in local temples.

Unfortunately, they were not using standard archaeological procedures; before cremating skeletons, they did not measure and record them for evidence of causes of death or take DNA samples to help identify individuals. So I said to Reverend Tonohira (we became good friends), “I need to return to Korea and become a professor of anthropology; then I’ll bring back a team of archaeologists and students to work with you.”

That took another eight years. But over the summers since 1997, more than 1,500 volunteers have come to Hokkaido to do the heavy labor of excavating at remote sites. Many burials are in abandoned graveyards, locations covered with new forest growth, the ground often matted with thick tangles of bamboo grass.

Preserved sets of remains began to accumulate, and we decided to repatriate 115 of them to South Korea in September 2015, timed to the seventieth anniversary of the war’s end. The film *So Long Asleep, Waking the Ghosts of a War* follows our pilgrimage across the Japanese islands as we carried those remains for proper reburial in the municipal cemetery in Seoul City.

Tonohira and I wanted the excavation and repatriation projects to be as much or more about the future as the past. Postwar government policy in Japan has often denied that the men were forced to labor, and South Korea tends to treat the issue with polite neglect. We have made a point

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A Steppingstone for Peace on a street in Seoul, near a home of the repatriated victim. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

of recruiting international teams of student volunteers, with each team including members from Japan, South Korea, and *zainichi* (the population of Koreans living in Japan).

During daytime, the students do painstaking work as excavators and recorders. In the evenings, they play, eat, and drink together, and turn to the verbal labor of building friendships without borders in an East Asia where at least some people long to be freed from nationalist rancor. The workshops have taken on a life of their own, with meetings not always connected to excavation sessions. Members have learned each other’s languages, and some have even married and their children in turn have joined the workshops.

Japanese and Korean governments alike tend to deny responsibility for the men’s remains. “That war is ancient history; governmental reparations were paid decades ago; forget it and move on” is their attitude. Far from hoping for help from them, we worried that they might block our repatriation pilgrimage.

The large Japanese corporations that operated the Hokkaido coal mines and wartime construction ventures also deny responsibility for the men. They put the blame instead on subcontractors and labor bosses who directed daily operations decades ago, small companies that have long been defunct.

So we chose instead to activate the power of cultural values and general human norms of decency, and repatriate the remains regardless of official policies. What we found—is it any surprise?—when we took the precaution of informing government agents in advance were words to the effect of “We approve of what you’re doing; just don’t ask us to put it in writing officially.”

So Long Asleep ends with a public funeral ceremony in Seoul City Plaza and reinterment in a new memorial site in Seoul Municipal Cemetery.



Archive photo of conscript laborers working on the Uryu Dam in the 1940s.



Volunteers working on an excavation near Shumarinai, Hokkaido, in 1997.

But the project continues. Reverend Tonohira continues to appeal to Japanese citizens to take up the task of repatriating more of the 10,000 Korean laborers' souls yet buried in Japanese soil.

The student workshops continue to serve as a venue where Japanese, Koreans, and *zainichi* can speak openly about issues of prejudice and how to create human harmony across East Asian national borders.

Now, the project has a new initiative we call Steppingstones for Peace. For each victim of forced labor in Hokkaido, we are creating a small bronze tablet inscribed with his name and life details. We are placing these near each man's old home in Korea. Near each labor site in Hokkaido, we are placing a tablet that lists the names of the men who were sacrificed. The idea comes from a project in Germany named the *Stolperstein* that has placed over 60,000 such monuments near the homes of victims of the Holocaust throughout Europe.

The men deserve to be remembered not as abstract numbers but as individuals who experienced unique lives. We must admit the truth of the past that governments would rather deny—admit it not to dwell on it, but to use it as a launchpad for a more humane collective journey. ■

SUGGESTED READINGS

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NOTES

1. The editors wish to thank William Underwood for his help in confirming this statistic.

BYUNG-HO CHUNG is Professor and Chair of the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Hanyang University, and President of the Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology, South Korea. For almost two decades, he has planned and practiced the excavations and repatriations of the remains of Korean forced labor victims in Hokkaido, Japan. He has also founded Steppingstones for Peace, a Korean NGO, which organizes the commemorative activities for national reconciliation and peace. His books and articles include *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (with Heonik Kwon, 2012) and "North Korean Refugees as Penetrant Transnational Migrants" (*Urban Anthropology*, 2014).

So Long Asleep Waking the Ghosts of a War

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY DAVID PLATH

DVD, 60 MINUTES, COLOR

AN MPG PRODUCTION, 2016

Documentary available through Documentary Educational Resources beginning July 2017. Visit www.der.org to order a copy and for more information on the documentary.

Reviewed by Franklin Rausch

So Long Asleep: *Waking the Ghosts of a War* is a well-produced documentary that traces the finding, excavation, and repatriation in 2015 of the remains of 115 Korean conscript laborers whom the Japanese forced to work in Hokkaido, Japan, and who died during World War II (referred to as the Asia-Pacific War in the documentary). The documentary focuses mostly on interviews with the volunteers who traveled to Hokkaido to exhume the remains of the laborers, footage of the work itself, and sites of commemoration for the deceased. As such, it touches upon a multitude of subjects, including colonial history, peace and reconciliation, memories of the war and how they influence contemporary politics in Japan and Korea, and how the living relate to the dead, particularly in religious terms.

So Long Asleep begins with a quote from Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Vintage Books, 2015): "For if the living let go of the dead, their own life ceases to matter," establishing one of the central themes for this documentary: the importance of remembrance. Subtitles then explain that young Korean men were taken as conscript laborers to Japan during the Asia-Pacific War, that some died there and were buried in shallow graves, and that seventy years following the end of the war, they were being taken home by volunteers. It is later noted that state-to-state talks to repatriate remains had failed to make progress. As this is explained, a procession of white-gloved Koreans and Japanese carry white cloth-wrapped boxes behind a man bearing a memorial stone, as a Japanese-accented man's voice reads the Korean names of the deceased. Then, Tonohira Yoshihiko, a Japanese Buddhist priest, is interviewed (we only hear his answers, not the questions), and he describes how when visiting a dam with some friends, he met with an elderly woman who informed him that she helped take care of a Buddhist temple that no longer had a resident priest