

# Tomiyama Taeko's Art and Remembrance of the Asia Pacific War

By Laura Hein

As pointed out in the recent issue of *Education About Asia* special section on “the Construction of ‘Memory’ in Asia” (14.1 spring 2009), war memorials in Japan and China present starkly opposing views of World War II. Yet some East Asian individuals have produced far more nuanced and reflective commentaries. One such individual, Tomiyama Taeko, a Japanese visual artist born in 1921, is changing the way the war is remembered in Japan, Asia, and the world. Her art deals with complicated moral and emotional issues that cannot possibly be summed up in simple slogans, making it compelling for more than just its considerable beauty. Tomiyama is passionate about social justice, and her work has long addressed such themes as unfair imprisonment and violence against women, but since the early 1980s, her signature theme has been the responsibility of ordinary Japanese, as well as the wartime government, for causing great harm to both Japanese citizens and other Asians.

Readers can view an interview with Tomiyama in the documentary *Women in Japan: Memories of the Past, Dreams for the Future*, and see some of her artwork, along with some discussion questions, at a permanent Web site hosted at Northwestern University at <http://northwestern.edu/imaginationwithoutborders>.<sup>1</sup> Other information is available in the publications cited at the end of this essay. Discussion of Tomiyama's work would fit well in survey courses in Asian and world history, history of art, anthropology/social studies classes, and courses focusing on gender, Asian religions, and the ways that people come to terms with the experience of war and historical remembrance.

Tomiyama thinks like a poet—layering meaning on top of meaning, almost always finding a way to combine her ideas in “both/and” rather than “either/or” ways. She is creatively ambiguous about many things—origins, identity, knowledge, legitimacy—while crystal-clear about needless suffering, hypocrisy, misuse of power, sorrow, and empathy. Tomiyama is particularly interested in exploring the complex ways that people can simultaneously be victims and perpetrators, sometimes with the same act. She focuses on remembrance not as trauma but as a moral stance of empathy. In other words, rather than primarily trying to remember what was done to her, she wants to remember what she allowed to be done to others in her name but now regrets.

Tomiyama was unable to express this complicated emotion to her own satisfaction until she came up with specific visual images that spoke to both her prewar memories and her postwar sense of outrage. One such image is the fox, the central character in two painting series, *Harbin: Requiem for the 20th Century*, 1995 and *The Fox Story*, 2000. Her foxes are at first glance charming or even cute, such as in one large oil painting of a fox wedding where the foxes are dressed like the Japanese of the early 1940s, including a schoolgirl in the sailor-suit uniform of the day. The background shows a village shrine, while chickens and a dog wander about in the foreground.

Yet first impressions are misleading, and I wonder how many students would immediately recognize the underlying menace. As in Europe, the East Asian fox is a trickster, able to shape-shift and bewitch humans. Tomiyama, of course, is familiar with the many Chinese and Japanese folktales depicting the fox's devious nature. She also borrows from the long irreverent tradition of satirical animal imagery in Japanese art, much of it explicitly celebrating political dissent.<sup>2</sup> She started painting foxes after her friend and artistic collaborator, music composer Takahashi Yūji, penned an opera, *Foxes (Kitsune)*, which, in turn, was



*Sending Off a Soldier.* Image courtesy of Laura Hein.

based upon the research of medievalist Yamamoto Hiroko. According to Tomiyama, Yamamoto “explored the connection between the fox spirit in Shintō and the structure of authority, particularly in relation to the emperor system.”<sup>3</sup> Although at first glance the image looks like something created to delight children, the things that inspired it are very adult: both the creative expression of someone working in a different artistic medium and a scholarly feminist rereading of religious mythology.

Tomiyama spent her junior high and high school years in the Manchurian cities of Dalian and Harbin, and her own memories of youth were crucial wellsprings of creativity. Indeed, Tomiyama’s work is

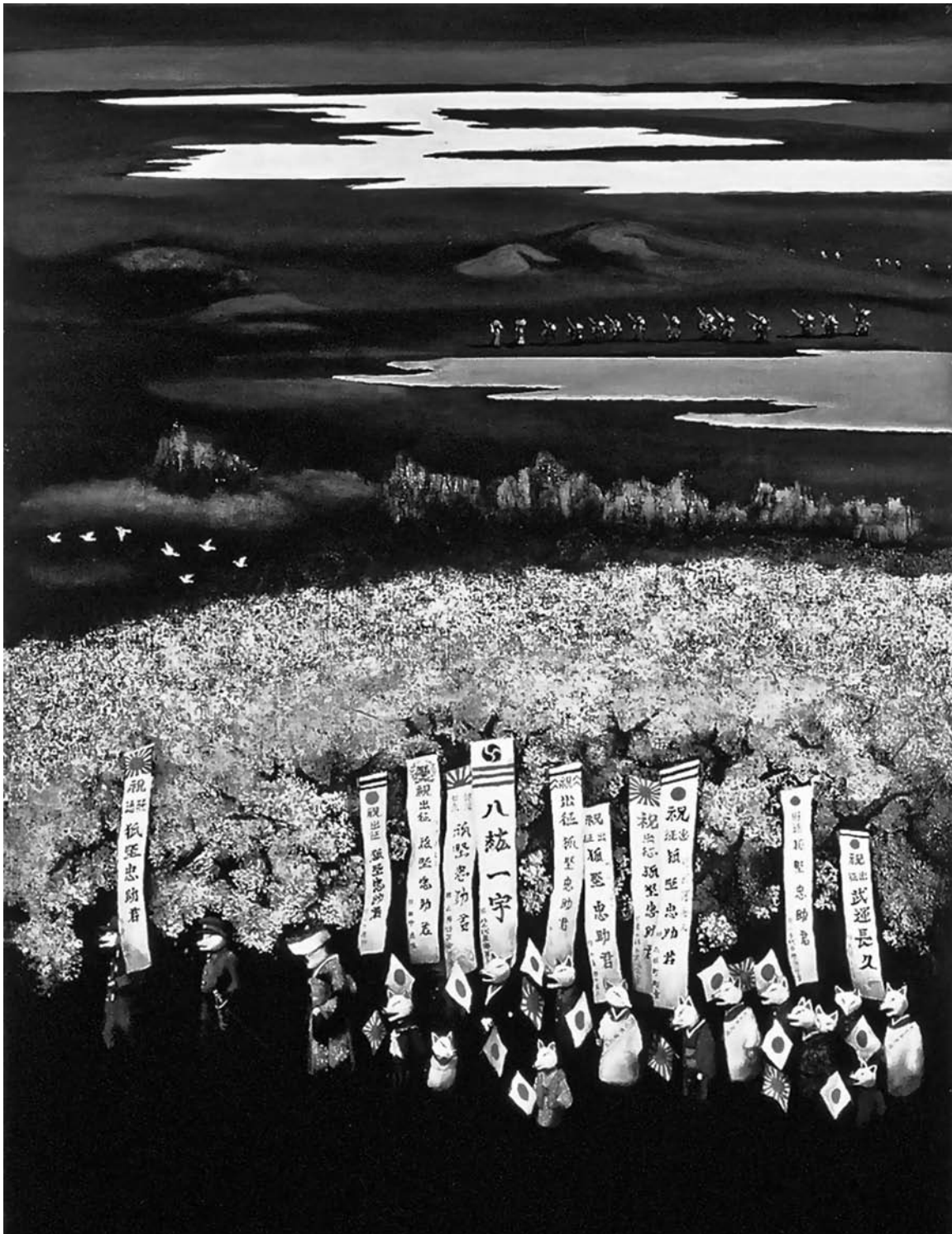
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satisfying, in part, because of the ways that it moves between personal experience and historical issues. Creative work is always autobiographical in some way, but it is more interesting to observers when they can see the ways that the big questions posed by historical events are being addressed in the art. In her seventies, Tomiyama began to think more deeply, not just about growing up in Manchuria, but more specifically about the violence that underpins imperialism. Manchuria in the 1930s was a lively transnational space, which, like other frontier areas, was full of colorful people. The Japanese who lived there were joined by Chinese, Koreans, Russians, and many others, all proposing different visions for Manchuria, ideas that sometimes clashed and sometimes meshed in complex ways.<sup>4</sup> Some people wanted to create planned model cities, others wanted to go back to the land, while others just wanted to make some fast cash. Manchuria attracted very right-wing people who saw Harbin as Japan's beachhead for conquering East Asia, but it was also a refuge for college-educated left-wingers who had lost their jobs in Japan because of their political beliefs but were tolerated in the colonies for their useful skills. As Prasenjit Duara argues, Manchuria effectively reveals the ways that localities simultaneously serve to support and undermine the legitimacy of the state, an insight that Tomiyama expresses in her art.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this complexity that makes it so difficult to move from individual memories to public remembrance, yet close attention to individual places, as well as to individual people, can provide the "hook" that moves specific historical events to the forefront of public consciousness in new ways.

Tomiyama tried to think about some of these issues even as a teenager. When she was sixteen, she read Pearl S. Buck's biography of her mother, published in 1936 and translated into Japanese in 1937. Tomiyama was shocked by Buck's description of her mother's fluent Chinese, her friendly relationships with her servants, and the empathy with which she treated the local people.<sup>6</sup> Buck's mother (who is given a fictional name in the memoir) took this stance to extraordinary lengths. On a sudden impulse, she invited a destitute Chinese woman—a total stranger—to move in with her family, where she lived for decades. Prefiguring a theme that would become central to Tomiyama's work, Buck's mother gave impoverished Chinese women an opportunity to express their sorrows to a sympathetic listener, often for the first time in their lives. When Tomiyama read this book, it focused her attention on the ways that ordinary citizens have the power either to enforce or reject social discrimination. The American missionary's attitude was in sharp contrast to the haughty way that Tomiyama's mother and the other Japanese settlers treated *their* Chinese servants.<sup>7</sup> Yet she did not really know what to do with her own discomfort at the contrast until decades later when she thought of conveying her feelings by invoking the non-human world of powerful spirits.

Returning to these memories in the 1990s, in *Harbin: Requiem for the Twentieth Century* and *The Fox Story*, Tomiyama painted the Japanese of the 1930s and 1940s as bewitched into sending their sons to war for the glory of the Empire and into feeling superior to Chinese. She uses the theme of bewitchment to capture her horror at her own younger complicity in the ways that the war warped everyone's assumptions about life. In the fox wedding ceremony (page 15), the groom is dressed in his army uniform, already prepared to leave for the battlefield, just like many young men in the 1930s and 1940s. Since few soldiers expected to return from the war, many of them married hastily and hoped to sire an heir to carry on the family line before their own lives were cut short. Japanese families and local communities uncomplainingly sent their young men to be killed and their young women to live far from their natal families as impoverished widows with small children. Tomiyama included in this painting several apron-clad lady foxes, whose clothing identifies them as members of the Patriotic Women's Association, emphasizing the large role played by civilians, including women, in enforcing the expectation that young Japanese should hurriedly procreate and die for the nation.

Tomiyama is also deliberately countering the aesthetics of Japanese fascism, particularly the way that the wartime Japanese government used cherry blossoms to celebrate its subjects who died young for the nation. The marriage ceremony continues in *Illusion by Cherry Blossom*, which shows the wedding party under a row of cherry trees in full blossom. The foxes dance and parade under the trees and hide among



*Illusion by Cherry Blossom. Image courtesy of Laura Hein.*

drifting clouds of petals. In Tomiyama's hands, the cherry blossom becomes an emblem of the callousness and deviousness of the Japanese state toward the lives of both its colonial and Japanese victims, reminding us that war, above all, is not pretty. Students can also search for chrysanthemums, the symbol of the Japanese imperial family and therefore of the empire, which function in her work in a similar way.

Tomiyama has created other artworks that focus directly on the pain that wartime Japanese caused other Asians. For this purpose, another image from Asian folklore, the shaman, was particularly useful. This often-female figure commands powers that are neither entirely good nor evil. Japanese mythology and the earliest histories of Japan suggest that such female shamans played an important role in ancient Japan, as they did in much of northern Asia. Tomiyama imagined these shamans traveling from Siberia across the steppes of Asia and then continuing by sea farther south, connecting the region through reli-



*Sending Off the Spirits of the Dead.* Image courtesy of Laura Hein.

gious ritual and stories of the gods rather than through military domination. The shaman, in her hands, represents an ancient political and religious past that challenges the importance of patriarchy, Shintō, and the Japanese imperial family, and therefore the antiquity of the Japanese state, by suggesting an alternative pan-Asian history that might have been.<sup>8</sup>

The above image shows the shaman (foreground) together with newly made Korean widows after their men were sent as slave laborers to Japan's wartime mines. In a series created in 1984, Tomiyama combined her longstanding concern for working conditions in the mines with recognition that, as bad as life was for Japanese miners, they had not come to the aid of the Koreans, whose experience had been far worse.<sup>9</sup>

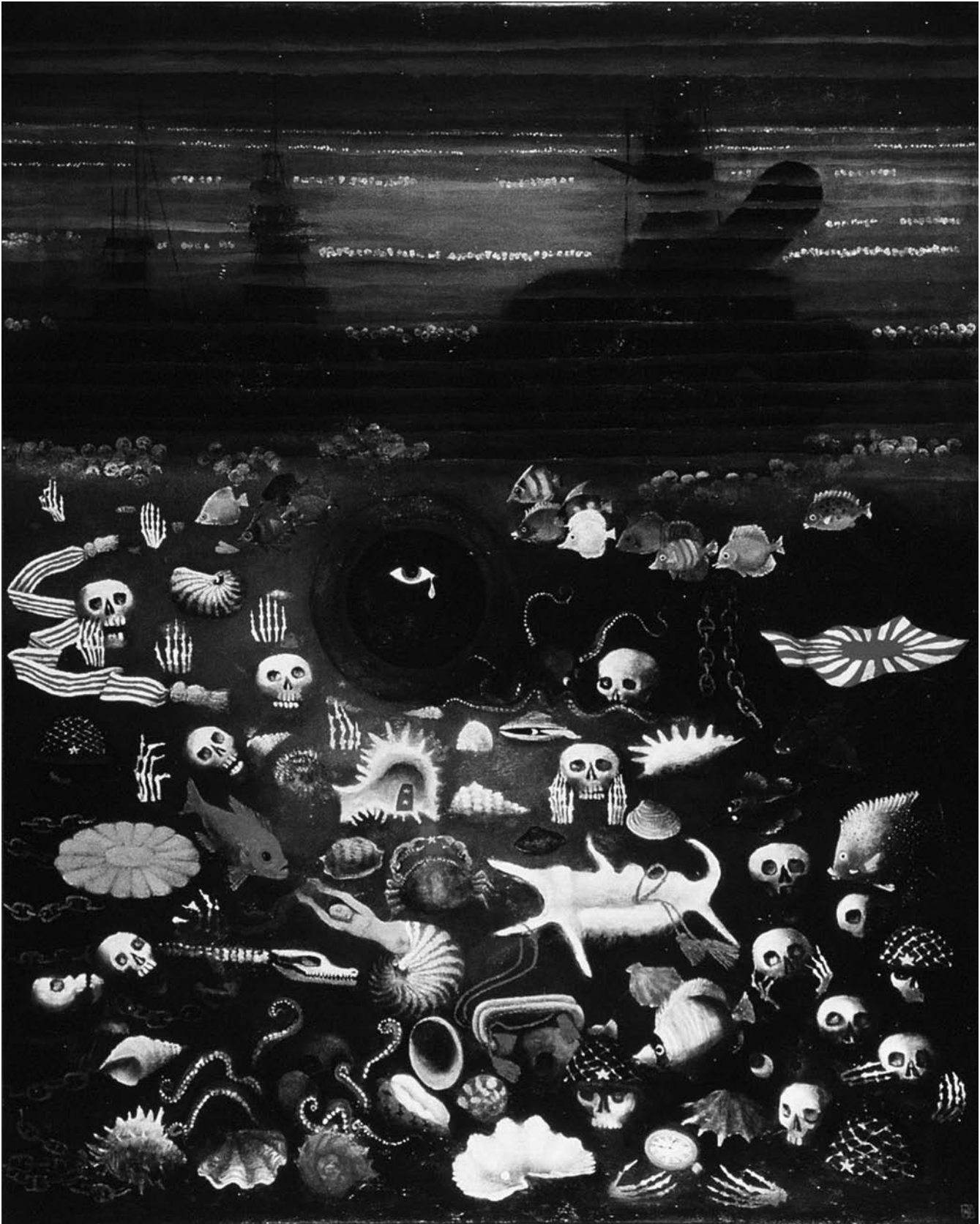
Tomiyama depicted the shaman in her narrative series from 1988, *Memories of the Sea (Umi no kioku)*, which focused on Korean girls and young women who had been conscripted to provide sex to Japanese soldiers during World War II. Borrowing from the tradition of medieval Japanese picture scrolls, she linked this series of large oil paintings and collages into a narrative, in which a young girl asks the shaman's help in finding her lost sister, whose bones lie at the bottom of the sea. The jewel-colored paintings depict war's debris—broken bodies, cast-off weapons, rusty chains, and the hulls of sunken ships.

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Tomiyama wanted to redress the wrong done to these women and to the families who mourned them by bringing their story into public remembrance. While many Japanese (including virtually all soldiers) had known about this practice during the war, they had thought of the women as doing an unpleasant duty, similar to the men drafted into the Army. Typically, they felt pity for them without questioning the policies that had led to their enslavement. Similarly, the few women who survived the war were dishonored, not only in Japan, but also in their own societies. They had not yet reframed their personal memories of sex slavery as a great social injustice. The first such individual to speak publicly about her own experiences, Kim Hak-son, did not do so until 1991, four years after Tomiyama painted this series.<sup>10</sup> One reason the Japanese paid attention to Kim was that Tomiyama and a few others had already demanded that they focus on this issue. Tomiyama had deliberately set out "to speak for those whose experience had been silenced by modern history," finding a surer voice for herself in the process.<sup>11</sup>

Tomiyama also began making slideshows of her work in the 1970s, beginning with a series of lithographs of political prisoners being held in South Korea. She contributed to a global effort coordinated by Amnesty International to protest the incarceration and brutal treatment of Korean prisoners, including the famous poet Kim Ji-ha. Tomiyama thought Japan should share blame for the cruelty of the Korean regime, because in the 1970s it was still filled with men who had collaborated with the Japanese imperialist government

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On the South Pacific Ocean Floor. Image courtesy of Laura Hein.



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before 1945. After the war these men had maintained power only through the military support of the United States, which saw the Republic of Korea, along with Japan, as a pillar of anti-Communism in East Asia.

After a planned documentary on this subject featuring her work was abruptly cancelled (probably because of behind-the-scenes political pressure from the Japanese government), Tomiyama explored the slideshow as a method of getting her message out in a more accessible manner. Now she makes DVDs instead. Tomiyama's practices of reproduction and mixed-media dialogue connect to her non-traditional work relationship with other creative artists, particularly composer Takahashi Yūji. The two artists have collaborated since 1975 to produce traveling art shows that combine aural and visual elements. Takahashi composes music on computers, as well as traditional instruments, to harmonize with photographs of Tomiyama's fragmented paintings and collages. Tomiyama sees their collaborative work as built on the practice of medieval monks who used music and the picture scrolls mentioned earlier to spread their doctrine of faith in the Buddha. At the same time, both artists are exploring very contemporary media idioms. As in all other aspects of her work, Tomiyama and Takahashi Yūji's connection to each other is not only artistic and political, but also transnational in scope. They have recently finished their fifth major project together.

Many of Tomiyama's paintings, prints, and collages since *Memories of the Sea* represent an attempt to imagine a more equal and respectful relationship between Japanese and other Asians. Both a set of prints from the 1970s and a series of large oil paintings she began in 2009 (at age eighty-eight) depict the ways that Asians and Japanese live under the same sky. Her most recently completed series, *Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers*, 2009, re-imagines Asia as a series of roads across land and water for magical puppets to travel, picking up and combining cultures along the way. Viewers familiar with Asian theater traditions will recognize Wayang shadow puppets from Indonesia, painted figures from Papua New Guinea, Chinese masks and dolls, Burmese marionettes, Taiwanese wooden puppets, and Japanese Bunraku figures. Significantly, the puppets avoid centers of political power, such as Tokyo and Beijing, and instead wander the backwaters of the Amur and Sepik rivers, past Awaji Island and the coastal waters of Southern China. Japan is neither the origin nor the culmination of the journey, merely one stop along the way. Together with Buddhist and folkloric deities, elegant dolls in Manchurian headdresses, and various not-quite-human creatures, the puppets wander across Asia, searching for a place where their gifts are valued but only finding a home at the bottom of the sea.<sup>12</sup>

Tomiyama's paintings and prints provide an alternate way of framing the wartime experience, presenting a sharply self-critical, but also ethically engaged way to connect personal experiences to public remembrance. It acknowledges Japanese suffering but insists that Japanese recognize the pain they inflicted on others too. Her long-term effort to express her own memories publicly helps to explain why the responsibility for war and empire moved to the forefront of debate in Japan in the early 1990s and has not disappeared. Tomiyama's exploration of such difficult issues also provides a model for the rest of us to think about our places within our own societies, how we choose to remember our individual and collective pasts, and the always complicated ways in which they intersect.

#### Possible Discussion Questions

1. Why did Tomiyama find the thought liberating that Western artists had robbed non-Western artists of their subjectivity and appropriated their artwork? Is her stance any different? In today's world, when images proliferate, and are "sampled" and "quoted" in all kinds of ways, does this issue matter any more?
2. Tomiyama has acknowledged the influence of German artist Käthe Kollwitz but has also said that she worried about being labeled "the Japanese Kollwitz." Eleanor Rubin, an American artist whose work is also featured on the Web site and in the book, never worried about being pigeonholed as "the American Kollwitz," nor does borrowing ideas from Japanese artistic traditions cause her anxiety. Why this difference? Similarly, why do we often hear Japanese artists described as the equivalent of Western artists but rarely the other way around? For example, Chikamatsu Monzaemon, a famous playwright, is frequently referred to as Japan's Shakespeare and Miyazaki Hayao, director of *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, is similarly identified as Japan's Walt Disney.

3. Is Japan worse at acknowledging discriminatory attitudes and cruel policies than other combatants in World War II? How do we know? What about the combatants in other twentieth-century wars such as the Việt Nam or Korean wars? How should we think about controversies over the past when the wronged party is using its legitimate grievance about the past to gain some unrelated advantage in the present?
4. During the war, the Japanese people accepted the idea that they should make sacrifices that later seemed misguided or even crazy to many of them, including to Tomiyama. What do you think would matter to you the most after an experience like that?
5. What responsibility do people born after 1945 have for World War II-era actions committed in the nation's name by their government and society?
6. Tomiyama's art deals with both remembrance of the war and of colonialism. In one case, she comments on Japanese actions directed against foes and in the other against colonial subjects. Does this distinction matter and, if so, in what ways? ■

## NOTES

1. Joanne Hershfield and Jan Bardsley, *Women in Japan: Memories of the Past, Dreams for the Future* (Online, 2002). Please see Jan Bardsley's Web site at <http://www.unc.edu/~bardsley/womeninjapan/> (accessed July 11, 2009) for lesson plans associated with the film and purchasing information. The Northwestern Web site will be integrated with Laura Hein and Rebecca Jennison, eds., *Imagination without Borders: Feminist Artist Tomiyama Taeko and Social Responsibility* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, forthcoming 2010). Tomiyama Taeko and Takahashi Yūji, bilingual book and DVD, *Hiruko and the Puppeteers: A Tale of Sea Wanderers* (Tokyo: Gendaikikakushitsu, 2009), ISBN 978-4773809084.
2. Peter Duus, "Presidential Address: Weapons of the Weak, Weapons of the Strong—The Development of the Japanese Political Cartoon," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 60.4 (November 2001): 965–998.
3. Rebecca Jennison, "Tomiyama Taeko: An Artist's Life and Work" *Critical Asian Studies*, 33:1 (2001), 108. See also Yuki Miyamoto, "Fire and Femininity: Fox Imagery and the Ethical Imagination," in Laura Hein and Rebecca Jennison, eds., *Imagination Without Borders*.
4. Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).
5. Duara embeds this point in a larger argument, that "national incorporation of the local is . . . (only) one factor or phase in a wider process of the formation of the local." He also identifies the power of the local as its ability to provide relief from alienation by "imagining a community of common purpose as well as sentiment." For Tomiyama, the specific locality of Harbin clearly serves this function in an anti-nationalistic manner. Prasenjit Duara, "Local Worlds: The Poetics and Politics of the Native Place in Modern China," Thomas Lahusen, ed., "Harbin and Manchuria: Place, Space, and Identity," a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99.1 (Winter 2000): 13–45. Quotes are from pages fourteen and twenty-six. See also Joshua A. Fogel and Yamamuro Shin'ichi, "Chimera: A Portrait of Manzhouguo: Harmony and Conflict," at *Japan Focus* at <http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/2384>, posted on March 16, 2007, accessed on January 13, 2008. Professor Yamamuro's argument, published in Japanese in 1993, is much like Tomiyama's—that Manchukuo functioned as a myth that blinded Japanese to the effects of their actions.
6. Pearl S. Buck, *The Exile* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1936). This was translated as *Haha no Shōzō (Portrait of My Mother)* by Fukazawa Shōzō and published by Daiichi Shobō in 1938.
7. Professor Len Swidler and Tomiyama Taeko, "History, Memory and the Art of Dialogue," Unpublished interview recorded July 10, 2005, in Tokyo, 4, translated and edited by Rebecca Jennison. Also see "Asia eno Shiza to Hyogen" Organizing Committee, *Silenced by History: Tomiyama Taeko's Work* (Tokyo: Gendai Kikakushitsu, 1995).
8. The silent spirit No-Face in Miyazaki Hayao's 2001 film, Dir. Hayao Miyazaki, *Spirited Away* (Walt Disney Video) (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) which won an Oscar, can be seen as another version of the shaman.
9. The 1984 series was called *Pop Out, Balsam Seeds! (Hajike hosenka)* and focused on the grief felt by both Korean forced laborers and the wives and mothers they had unwillingly left behind. These coerced workers were sent to mines, shipyards, construction sites, or were put to work building bomb shelters. Tomiyama reworked the same image, adding in the shaman figure in a 2000 show, *The Fox and Coal Mines*, that was specifically about the Koreans who were sent to the mines.
10. Korean feminist activists in Korea had already begun to highlight this issue, and Tomiyama was aware of their efforts very early because of her ongoing work with the Korean democracy movement, but it was not yet a feature of Japanese public discussion. See Ueno Chizuko, *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2004) including "Translator's Introduction" by Beverley Yamamoto.
11. Quote is from a wall text in the 2006 exhibition, *Remembrance and Reconciliation* at Northwestern University January–February 2006. More information is available in Tomiyama's Japanese-language autobiography *Ajia o Daku: Gaka Jinsei Kioku to Yume (Embracing Asia: Memories and Dreams of an Artist)* (Tokyo: Iwanami: 2009).
12. Also see Tomiyama and Takahashi, *Hiruko and the Puppeteers*.

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