

## Creative Oblivion: Is a “Memory of Our Past” Really Important?

SUGITA Yoneyuki

OSAKA UNIVERSITY

In view of this year’s grand theme, “Toward a Common Memory of Our Past,” Professor WAKABAYASHI Chiyo gives a most appropriate presentation. Professor WAKABAYASHI emphasizes the importance of learning history and of remembering war. In this way we can both cultivate our awareness of the past and foster our common memory of the past.

Focusing on two groups, *Gamafuyah* and *Han-no-Hi no Kai*, both organized in the 2000s, Professor WAKABAYASHI analyzes the significance of cultivating war memories of Okinawa. *Gamafuyah* is a volunteer group that digs in caves to collect bones of the unknown victims of the Battle of Okinawa. This activity is considered to be peace education for citizens: They cultivate memory of the war by digging in the caves, finding and touching the bones, and consoling the souls of the dead.

*Han-no-Hi Kai* is also a people’s group aiming to study the history of the drafted Koreans killed in the Battle of Okinawa. It is estimated that between 8,000 and 20,000 Koreans were killed in the Battle, but an official high school history textbook makes little mention of the Korean casualties. *Han-no-Hi Kai* connects Okinawa with Korea, recreating Asia as an entity in which we may have solidarity for peace.

Professor WAKABAYASHI’s stimulating presentation inspires heated discussion at the session on war memory in Okinawa. First, we often use the term “postwar,” but we should stop and think about the connotations of this word. “Postwar” is a vague term in Japan, but it suggests that the war was over and that Japan has been transformed into a peace-loving democracy. This idea does not reflect the turbulent “postwar” development in Okinawa. In addition, in order to establish a common future, we need a common past. However, whose past is “our” past? Some people went through the past and enjoy peace in the “postwar” era, but others do not. This session prompts us to ponder what the terms “postwar” and “our” past really mean.

Second, Professor WAKABAYASHI repeatedly mentions the need for “learning” history. Besides actually collecting and touching the bones, are there other ways to learn history and cultivate memories? One suggestion made in the session was to introduce a gender perspective. This was because women sexually assaulted by U.S. soldiers in Okinawa may share similar feelings with those

unidentified civilians killed in the Battle of Okinawa.

Third, the discussion in this session touched upon cultural issues in Japan and Korea. Why is it important to find and collect the bones and to make efforts to identify those bones? A cultural perspective may be necessary to answer properly this question. The Japanese and Koreans attach religious and cultural significance to collecting bones, identifying them, and returning them home.

The presentation and discussion afterwards were lively and intellectually stimulating. However, what is truly important for me is a topic that was never questioned or discussed at all at this session: Is a “memory of our past” really important and necessary for human beings to lead fruitful lives? “Memory of our past” largely implies selecting, remembering, and keeping backward-looking aspects of our past. Human beings tend to be obsessed with the hideous past and are rather slow to forget about it and move forward. Rather than keeping gloomy memories of our past, I propose sending our past into “creative oblivion.” “Creative” because we should selectively turn troublesome aspects of our past into oblivion, but we should maintain promising and constructive memories of our past, something that becomes a solid base for us to move forward. What we need today is a usable past or a usable memory to enrich our present condition and to step forward to build a productive future. Rather than becoming sentimental, we should be more practical and realistic about our past.

Is it worth digging in the caves, collecting bones, and, if successfully identifying them, returning them home? Is it worth spending time, money, and other precious resources on these activities? Do we really console the souls of the dead by doing so? I really do not think so. This mortal world is for the living. The fact that we are making every effort to lead creative lives for a better future may be a most effective way to console the souls of the dead. Human history is mostly a history of wars, atrocities, bloody battles, and enmity. If we try to have a common memory of our past, it is inevitable that we retain negative and painful aspects of our past. This is a vicious circle. In order to avoid this vicious circle, “creative oblivion” is crucial for human beings to envision a better future.