

New Agenda for Peace Research in the Asia-Pacific --- APPRA Conference 2011

SUMMARY

A Dialogue between Museum Displays: Korea & Japan, Korea & the USA

Peace and history museums create displays offering a coherent narrative of events. Perspectives vary among museums. The Kyoto Museum for World Peace describes Korea differently from the Yushukan in Tokyo. Visitors to any single museum have little access to other perspectives on the narrative provided. This paper compares the contents of several museums that address the last 100 years of Korean international relations, and describes a possible process for enabling museum visitors to learn about alternative approaches to similar materials. Korea is the pivotal nation in this presentation because, though the difference between Japanese and Korea perspectives is widely noticed, there are powerful differences too between US and Korean perspectives on World War II and on the Korean War. The presentation will examine museum displays covering two topics (1) Japanese colonization in Korea and (2) the Korean War. Each of these has continuing powerful echos in Korean life to this day, the first in the dispute over islands and the second in the US military presence in Korea. The presentation will center on guide books and images, from the actual museum displays.

The Colonization period as described in Korean and Japanese museums, juxtaposes Seodaemun Prison History Hall, and Cheonan Independence Hall with the Yushukan and the Kyoto Museum for World Peace, each of them a museums with a strong, distinct point of view. Seodaemun Prison was built in the early days of Japanese governmental power in Korea and in the 1990s it became a memorial for Korean "martyrs", the resistance fighters who challenged Japanese authority under colonization. The Cheonan Independence Hall was originally planned over 50 years ago. It was one of the first history museums completed in Korea and it addresses Korea's ancient history briefly before describing the economics, politics and penal systems imposed under colonization. The Yushukan has long been a focus of international commentary, since it is associated with the controversial shrine which memorializes all military personnel who died for the Emperor since the mid nineteenth century. It covers all Japanese military activities and the history of the shrine since the Meiji Emperor's accession. The Kyoto Museum for World Peace has taken a wide ranging view of the history of the last 60 years, refusing to justify and support the resort to violence by any nation including Japan, while remaining compassionate about the suffering on all sides.

All four museums are highly critical of and focus considerable attention on nineteenth century patterns of colonization: from the Japanese perspective, the threat comes entirely from Western nations. From the Korean perspective, the threat and burden emanated from Japan. Interestingly, none of these four

museums give serious consideration to the role of China in nineteenth century international relations, although the perspectives in both Japan and Korea are entirely compatible with the Chinese vision. This is interesting since neither Japan nor Korea would naturally accede to each other's view of the events. The role of civilians in the conflicts is covered in markedly different ways in the four, as is the willingness to use graphic and intense displays of physical cruelty. The presentation will also address whether and how the Koreans contributed to Japanese war efforts, whether the contribution is mentioned and whether it is described as voluntary or involuntary

Displays about the Korean War will compare two national/official institutions: the Smithsonian Museum of American History and the Seoul War Memorial and Museum. The Smithsonian is part of a national series of museums founded more than a 100 years ago, all located at the heart of the National Capital. The Seoul Museum was built adjacent to the headquarters of US Forces in the Yongsan area of Seoul. For many US veterans of the war in Korea, it seems legitimate to describe that war a "forgotten." There are memorials in most US State Capital cities now, and there is a large memorial on the National Mall in Washington DC. But the history is barely mentioned in US general conversation, and the display in the Museum of American history is very small. This of course is in marked contrast to the detailed display in Seoul, however the two displays echo accurately the place of each country in the other's eyes. The US is huge in Korea. Korea in the US is huge as an electronics supplier, but the official role the USA still plays in Korean military affairs is almost invisible.

This discussion of the museums was motivated originally by becoming aware of the strength and energy both the history of Japanese colonization and the history of the US role in Korean politics carry in Korean affairs to this day. These museums, with the exception of the Yushukan, all play a part in school education in the three countries. Group tours visit all of them regularly. In Seodaemun, for example, 6000 students a day see the displays during the 4-5 months of school tour season. The Smithsonian Museum is packed with schools and families all the time. My prior research indicates that these school visits play a significant role in increasing the sense of national pride carried by many students. And yet there is no way for a student in Japan to see the Korean displays, nor for an American student to see the Japanese displays, without an enormous financial cost.

The presentation will end with a description of aspirations for a computer application to be made available freely on the web and on mobile devices such as I-pads and "smart phones." Such an app would enable users to see multiple stories from museums at the same time. Developing the application is fairly simple technically. Obtaining permissions to copy displays from the museums would entail complex negotiations. Many museums already have mobile and web-based versions of their displays. The challenge would be to arrange for many of them to appear in the same piece of software.