

The Reality of War

By Naofumi KANEKO

The year 2010 marks the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II. I have to wonder, however, if we are properly looking at the present in the perspective of history. We once directed our spears on Asia under the banner of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere,” thereby opening a war with the United States and its allies. Once defeated in the war, however, we just turned to the United States, setting out to build a prosperous country while looking askance at other Asian countries left smoldering in the ruins of war. In his book “*Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II*,” American historian John Dower described how Japan embraced its defeat after the end of the war. But wasn’t it rather a process in which we chose not to be conscious of defeat in war and get away with it? What in the world have we avoided seeing for ourselves?

The other day, photographer Toyomitsu Higa, who is an Okinawan friend of mine, visited me, carrying with him a thick file of pictures. He has been working on a personal project of having the survivors of the Battle of Okinawa tell their wartime experiences and recording them in pictures. He showed pictures of the skeletal remains of war dead recently unearthed from a construction site in Naha City, the capital of Okinawa Prefecture. In the Battle of Okinawa, later called the “Typhoon of Steel” in reference to the ferocity of US gunfire, over 200,000 people, including civilians, died. Many bones of the dead are said to be still lying, unnoticed, beneath the bloody battlefields of Okinawa’s main island. A small portion of them was brought out in bright sunshine 65 years after the war. “The bones seemed to be glad,” Higa told me. He then stared at me with intensity and added, “Many bones are still sleeping in Okinawa, left untouched. What do you people living in mainland Japan think about that?”

In Okinawa, the scars of war are still very much real, unfolded before people’s eyes. It is not just about the bones of the deceased. The fact that 75% of US military facilities in Japan are crammed into Okinawa is the result of the islands being cut off from Japan at the end of the war and since controlled by the US military. As Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, US bases remained untouched. People say the peace and prosperity of mainland Japan have been brought about at the sacrifice of Okinawa. However, it is not so frequent for mainland people to have an opportunity to ponder about it. For them, the war is a thing of the distant past rarely crossing their minds. Or, the war, portrayed as a romanticized account of the “martyrdom” of those who died for the country, conjures up a sense of self-respect among lonely youths having lost track of history, aban-

Photo: Wakamatsu Production



A scene from Japanese movie “Caterpillar”

done by the increasingly stratified society, and having lost touch with people. Some call them right-wing fanatics on the Internet. However, efforts to recall the concealed memory of war are not entirely nonexistent.

The Japanese movie “*Caterpillar*” was shown at the Berlin International Film Festival last February, and its leading actress, Shinobu Terashima, won the best actress prize. The film is about a soldier who returns home with all four limbs lost in the Sino-Japanese War in which he served on active duty. Appalled at the sight of him, his wife was speechless. But the village community decides to treat him as a “war god,” collectively demanding that she serve him as a “virtuous” wife appropriate for a war hero for the sake of the country. But the ex-soldier cannot utter a word and spends day in and day out asking for nothing but food and sex. The wife murmurs “eat and sleep...eat and sleep” at the sight of her husband. What is crossing the husband’s mind, time and again, is the image of a woman he raped in a Chinese village. Many Japanese viewers were apparently shocked by the rape scene, which they felt was depicted in a far too graphic manner. In my view, however, the Japanese audience, detached from the reality of war, could have been taken back by the hidden reality of war suddenly exposed before their eyes.

In Berlin, the movie was reportedly received with applause. The difference in viewer reactions between the West and Japan probably stems from the difference in the reality of war between them. In the West, which has experienced the Kosovo conflict and the war in Iraq, the presence of war wounded is a real issue. Back in Japan, the only place where the reality of war exists, in an uneven way of location, could be Okinawa gasping under the heavy burden of US bases that is too disproportionate compared with the rest of Japan.

Isn’t it possible that Japan is thoroughly cut off from the memory of war so much that it has difficulties in understanding why and where it came from to reach where it is? Let us see the present reality afresh from the perspective of history. It is an essential thing for us to do in order to shed light on ourselves as we stand now. **JS**

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