

My Graduation Project: the Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum



Author Ayaka Koike

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I am a 22-year-old student who recently graduated from a university in Japan. My school required a final project that summarized our four years of learning. I created the Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum as my project. It is an open knowledge community that explores a multifaceted view of the experience of Japan in World War II, and it started from learning about the Hiyoshi tunnels. So why would a young Japanese person who was born 47 years after the end of the war want to research the Hiyoshi tunnels and World War II? And why create a Virtual Museum? That is the story of this article.

I first learned about the Hiyoshi tunnels in a seminar sometime in January 2014. It is a tunnel complex that was built by the Imperial Japanese Navy as a command center in September 1944. The tunnels still exists at the Hiyoshi campus of the school I study at, but not many people know about them. An article in *The Japan Times* (Nov. 25, 2013) discussed the issues surrounding the tunnels, but “war remnants” and “consensus” — I did not know what these words meant. More than this, I did not know much about World War II. Realizing my lack of knowledge I began reading some history school textbooks and visited the National Museum of Japanese History, Yasukuni Shrine, and the National Showa Memorial Museum. However, even with more knowledge, I still could not connect to the events of World War II.

What Is a War Remnant?

On Aug. 16 and 17, 2014, I attended the 18th Symposium of the National War Remnant Network. I thought if I went there I would

Photo: Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum Project



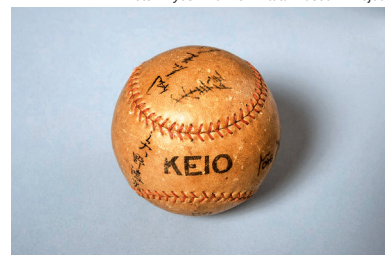
Inside the Hiyoshi tunnels

understand what a war remnant is. I learnt that war remnants are things that are left in Japan from the war. I had only known about the Hiroshima Dome and Yasukuni Shrine as places related to World War II in Japan. But I became aware that there are actually hundreds out there, like the Hiyoshi tunnels, and there is a difficulty in disseminating information, which is why most of them are unknown. The network is persistent on preserving these sites. They say it can tell us more about the war. This made me more curious about the mysterious tunnels in my school.

I began by contacting the Association to Preserve the Hiyoshi Tunnels (APHT) mentioned in *The Japan Times* article. This non-profit organization is located in Yokohama and runs monthly tours. Since the APHT had said the tunnels were important in remembering the experience of the war, I hoped visiting it would stir my imagination and bring to life some scenes from the war, something the textbooks and museums did not do for me. On Aug. 18, 2014, I finally entered the tunnels I had read about. The tunnels were cool, dark and damp. We were equipped with torches, and went among the rooms that we were told were the Japanese navy’s underground headquarters — the telegraph room, ciphering room, war room — and to the doorway to 126 stairs leading to the student dormitory towers used as the aboveground headquarters at the time. Despite what they used to be, the tunnels felt to me like normal tunnels. Afterwards I felt guilty for not feeling enough. The APHT says memories of war are moving from people to things and war remnants are crucial to guide us in future peace-building. After my visit, I was skeptical. Will the tunnels and other war remnants actually help people understand the experience of war?

Back at school, I contacted the Mita Campus to get the contact details of graduates who may still be alive. They put me in touch with the Keio University and War Archive Project group already working on collecting oral histories and student artifacts. On their Facebook archive page was an old baseball with student signatures, and my “Teaching Japan” research lab teacher, Prof. David Freedman, recommended I see the movie *Last Game: Saigo no Soukeisen*. I watched it, and for the first time since starting this project I realized the horror of war and how it altered the lives of students and

Photo: Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum Project



Keio baseball signed by nine students before they were drafted

ordinary people, like myself.

In my study, I also read a web page from the Smithsonian Institution. From here, I learnt more about the idea of artifacts. I learnt that each artifact has diverse meanings for different people past and present, and we must embrace their multiple and conflicting meanings. It made me realize that the importance of the Hiyoshi tunnels is not in looking at empty rooms, but rather in looking at the stories of human experiences.

Memories of Japan & World War II

My research gradually shifted from the Hiyoshi tunnels to memories of Japan in World War II, and I decided I wanted to collect stories. However, it was the summer holiday, and I went back to Singapore where my family still lives. In my day-to-day life I did not think about the three years Japan had occupied Singapore, apart from studying a bit about it at school. This time I intended to look. I first noticed the four-pillar Civilian War Memorial in Singapore's central region. When I was little I had laid flowers there with my family, so I knew it was a memorial of the war. What I had not known is that it also symbolizes the unity of the four main races of Singapore from their shared experience of the war. What's more, I found that Singapore had made World War II sites into popular tourist attractions, and there were many more to see.

I decided to join the award-winning Journeys Private Limited tour to learn more. At the meeting point, the tour guide approached me hesitantly; she told me it was rare for a Japanese to join. I was surprised by two things: first, that many people outside of Japan, mainly from Australia and United Kingdom, who like myself did not live during war, are flying all the way to Singapore to learn what their living relatives or ancestors experienced; and second, that the tour guide felt concerned that I might feel uncomfortable during the tour. It was nice of her to care, but I did not take part in the war, so why should I feel uncomfortable?

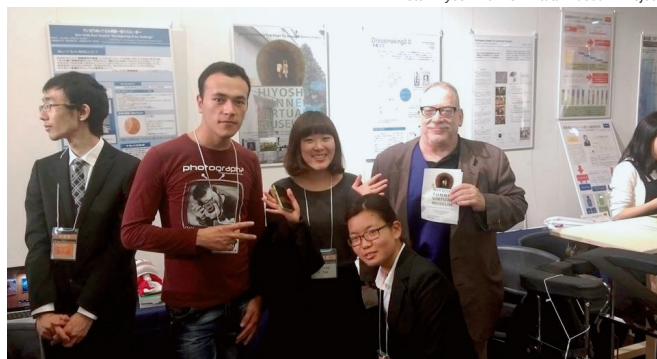
During the tour, the guide narrated many stories, especially about prisoners of war — of the pain they endured, their acts of bravery and loyalty, and the thoughts they had of their loved ones. These brought tears to their eyes, and also mine. The tour made me think of a magazine I had read, the September issue of *JPlus*, that contained a feature about a Japanese lady, Yuko Gan, who married a Singaporean in 1967 and became a tour guide on Japanese history in Singapore. She said there is a huge gap in the understanding of history between the nations that invaded and those that were invaded, and I felt this is true.

Recently, I also became more attentive to the news. I became aware there is tension building between Japan and the international community over territorial disputes, Yasukuni Shrine visits, the “comfort women” issue, and most recently the proposed revision of Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. People tell the Japanese, “It's your fault, it's your fault.” But most of us did not live during the war, not to mention make the decision to go to war. So why are we having problems with diplomacy, and how can we reduce the gaps and make our feelings connect?

Consensus on History

In my experience in Japan and Singapore, I have come to realize that there is a lack of open information and discussion about the experience of World War II in Japan. I found there is not enough provided in

Photo: Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum Project



Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum Project at Open Research Forum

textbooks, at national museums or on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website for people to really understand the horrors of war. In the *Japan Times* article, the government says it needs a national consensus to determine whether or not the tunnels are significant for our modern history. However, “consensus” is a political notion and from my experience I have found there is no agreement. Based on my thoughts, rather than saying what is right and wrong, the way to remember the experience of war is to share our knowledge of experiences and feelings, and educate ourselves and each other so that we can all come to terms with the past, and move forward together.

The Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum

The Hiyoshi tunnels essentially led me to the idea of a Virtual Museum, a platform for sharing knowledge. The museum achieves five main things I found are problems surrounding the issue of preserving the tunnels: 1) we can share information without a consensus, 2) it can be operated and maintained at low cost, 3) it enables easy access to a large audience, 4) it will be interactive and collaborative, and 5) we can innovate for sustainable development.

Ultimately, I created a site with a collection of people's war experiences, an interactive map that locates museums and resource centers across Japan, a page with links to other digital archives with oral history, and also a survey to incorporate people's ideas into the project. As the project developed, my teacher encouraged me to take it to the Open Research Forum — an annual Shonan Fujisawa Campus event held in Tokyo's Roppongi district — to share it with the public and find partners. After the summer holiday, I had less than two months to prepare. I worked with students to create a logo, and make a poster and pamphlets. It was a rush to get things done but many people came to the booth and I felt proud. On top of this, I found a student, Hiroshi Sasaki, who will continue the project once I graduate.

Will people around the world contribute to the Hiyoshi Tunnel Virtual Museum, and can we create a community of knowledge to explore experiences of war that people can share?

I hope so.

<http://yaksyakster.wix.com/hiyoshitunnel>

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Ayaka Koike was born in Singapore and studied at the United World College of South East Asia from Grade 1 to 12 (August 1998–May 2010). She recently finished studying in Japan at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus in the Faculty of Environment and Information Studies, and began working at Nidek Co., Ltd. in April.