Japan in Perspective: Visual Narratives of Difference in Japanese History

Jinhee Lee
Eastern Illinois University

One of the gloomiest things that I have read in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* many years ago was the report that identified the top reason for professors to leave for another job as the *people* they work with. The flip side of the same coin is, then, they stay where they are because of the people. That was certainly the case for me: one of the many reasons why I chose to stay in the Midwest region was indeed the people (perhaps because we have nothing else). In particular, ever since I was introduced to it as a first year graduate student sometime during the last century, Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs (MCAA) has been such a nurturing, collegial, and intellectually stimulating community of scholars from ambitious undergraduate students to retired professors. It is truly my privilege to introduce the following articles in *Studies on Asia,* the journal of MCAA.

The authors of these four articles have presented their works originally in a panel that was organized for MCAA in September 2012 in honor of Professor Ronald P. Toby on the occasion of his retirement. It was to celebrate his lifetime scholarly accomplishment in both sides of the Pacific and the intellectual impact that he has made on his former students who are now doing research, teaching, and serving in the field of Japanese history in several continents. Since the time of the Conference, Professors Barske and Park have significantly expanded their original papers, and Toyosawa and Lee developed new pieces along the line of the theme that the panel shared: visual representation and narratives of difference in Japanese history.

The theme of the panel was selected among the topics and approaches that the authors had grappled with in the process of their intellectual training under Ron's guidance at one point or another. As the panel discussant Professor E. Taylor Atkins had pointed out, the

points of convergence and resonance between these papers reflect Ron's intellectual influence: his thematic concerns with articulations of difference and his methodological interest in visual artifacts as sources of historical analysis.

In her analysis of *Nihon fūkeiron* (1894), an instant bestseller of Shiga Shigetaka (1863-1927), Nobuko Toyosawa interrogates the author, content, as well as the context of production, reception, and re-production of this influential text. Through empirical and semiotic reading of Shiga's maps, illustrations, and prose, Toyosawa presents the ways in which he visualized Japan's *kokusui* (national essence) in its distinctive physical and geographical landscape, thus spreading his version of "aesthetic nationalism" in the context of Japan during the first Sino-Japanese War.

Valerie Barske, on the other hand, introduces the intricate relationship between visualizing Japan and visualizing Okinawa, the ambiguous Japan's "self" and "other" at once as it became a prefecture-colony of Meiji Japan. Under the influence of what Barske calls "nestled colonialism," Ifa Fuyū, the "Father of Okinawan Studies," depicted Okinawan women as bearers of the culture of "Southern Islanders," including their religious rituals and traditional bodily practices such as tattooing. In Ifa's visual illustrations, Okinawan women appear different from and yet prototypical of "Japanese" culture and nation, thus becoming the fore-sisters of true "Japaneseness."

Japan's narrative of self was influenced not only by its "internal" colonized Okinawanas but Koreans as well. As Ron's scholarship over the years has shown, the twelve official visits of the Korean embassy to Tokugawa Japan left not only fascinating visual records but also long lasting political and cultural legacies in both countries. According to Doyoung Park, it was not only the state but

also intellectuals who found the visit of Korean embassy useful for their own purpose in the context of Tokugawa Japan. While the shogunate government sought to use the foreign embassy's visits to Edo for its domestic political self-legitimization, various intellectuals of Japan utilized their association with the Korean Neo-Confucian scholars for their own purpose; Meeting with the Korean scholars—who considered their meeting with Japanese elites more or less their "tutoring" session for the inferior scholars—was a pragmatic opportunity for the Japanese intellectuals' self-promotion since it could raise the market value of their scholarship. In fact, not only the endorsement of their neighboring country's scholars but also the differences that they found in themselves from the Korean scholars' approach to Confucian and Neo-Confucian texts were advertised to publicize the superiority of their own scholarship.

Finally, Jinhee Lee's article deals with Japanese effort to differentiate Koreans from Japanese physically as well as culturally in the context of Japanese colonial expansion into the Asian mainland. By the early 1920s, a particular image and "knowledge" about the colonized Koreans in the name of *futei senjin* ("malcontent Koreans") became ubiquitous in the Japanese metropole, especially as the subjugated deemed increasingly rebellious and threatening to the order of the Japanese empire. Such colonial knowledge production and representation of Koreans were intrinsically intertwined with Japan's self-interest to identify and distinguish the Korean "enemies within" in their midst. The colonial representation, however, had a violent consequence beyond control when the great earthquake of 1923 triggered the rise of rumors about impending Korean riots against Japanese and an extreme form of "self-defense" measures took place in the form of a preemptive massacre of over six thousand Koreans in the Japanese metropole. The belated efforts by the

authorities to stop the rumors and cover up the mayhem resulted in the obfuscation of the historical evidence and the twist of the responsibility for the massacre. Nevertheless, several key records of the pogrom, such as children's drawings and writings as well as several artists' paintings preserved the vivid record of the fear of the colonized and reveal what is missing in the colonial archives both in the metropole and the colony.

While each of these pieces offers its unique contribution to the ways in which we think about Japan and its narratives of the self and others in a particular historical context, all of them bear the clear mark of Ron's intellectual influence in paying close attention to the intersection of visual representation and history as they interrogate Japan's narratives of difference. However, as Atkins put it, there was nothing oppressive about this influence:

> After I'd graduated and become a professor myself, Ron shared philosophy of mentoring future scholars with me, which I paraphrase as: "Bring in smart students whom I can not only teach, but from whom *I can learn*, and then *get out of their way*." I reflected back on my graduate training and realized that he did precisely that….It says something about his character, but also about the capaciousness of his intellect and imagination, that all these folks here bear his imprint yet none of them bear the scars of a forcible self-replication or cloning process. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say how much I appreciate his efforts to both guide and get out of the way.

Accordingly, the pieces that follow are by no means representative of all of Ron's immensely productive mentoring or scholarly contribution, but only a glimpse of it.

Ron will see that, as the meaning of a work always goes beyond the intent of the artist, each of his former students' works will take its own life and generate different meanings than what he might have envisioned in them initially. Likewise, now I invite you to discover the multiple meanings and the new findings in the works that are included here.

In such a spirit of collective meaning-making, I thank, once again, each of the panelists, including the four authors, discussant Professor E. Taylor Atkins, panel chair and the Executive Secretary of MCAA Professor Greg Guelcher, and the audience who demonstrated the productivity of multigenerational scholarly discussion as well as their admiration of Ron's continuing scholarly impact in the field. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Ali Riaz, the editor of *Studies on Asia* and Editorial Assistant Ashley Toenjes for making it possible to continue our dialogue and reach the audience beyond the constraint of the time and space at the original conference. I applaud for the meaningful work that they are doing through *Studies on Asia* and MCAA in our midst.