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Reconciliation without Reparations? Chinese Forced Labor in Japan and the Prospects for Redress

Summary:

Nobody disputes that 38,935 Chinese men, aged 11-78, were brought to Japan to perform heavy labor between 1943 and 1945—and that 6,830 of them (17.5 percent) died. The question is: What should be done about it now?

Fearing war crimes prosecutions, the Japanese government and 35 corporations documented the entire Chinese forced labor program in 1946. The government then hid the five-volume “Foreign Ministry Report” and misled the Diet for half a century, shifting only in recent years to the official position that the program was “half forced.”

Fourteen compensation lawsuits filed by Chinese victims remain pending in Japanese courts. Judges typically accept plaintiffs’ versions of historical events, but reject the claims because the statute of limitations has expired. Last year, lawyers for major Japanese companies began denying that forced labor ever occurred. The Chinese government says it will soon permit victims to file class-action lawsuits in Chinese courts, putting Japanese industry on a collision course with Beijing.

This presentation will describe the record of Chinese forced labor in Japan and the postwar cover up. It will also consider the redress movement’s current status and future prospects. The impact of historical revisionism in Japan and strained Sino-Japanese relations will be discussed.

About the presenter:

Assistant professor at Kurume Kogyo University and Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University since 1997. Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at Kyushu University; degree expected in March 2007. Dissertation title: “The Reparations Movement for Chinese Forced Labor in Wartime Japan within the Global Trend toward Repairing Historical Injustices.” BA in Government-Journalism and MA in Government from California State University, Sacramento. Freelance writer and former newspaper reporter.

Outline:

1. Historical overview

- a) Basic summary
- b) Forcible deportations from China
- c) Forced labor in Japan

2. Postwar cover ups and pioneering redress activities

- a) Foreign Ministry Report and early evasion of accountability (from NHK)
- b) Truth-telling efforts and grassroots reparations work during the 1950s
- c) Liu Lian Ren, PM Kishi and the multi-agency conspiracy (MOFA archives)

3. Contemporary reparations movement

- a) In Japan and China since the late 1980s
- b) Mitsubishi and corporate revisionism today
- c) Chinese courts as the final frontier

4. Chinese forced labor in photos

- a) 1993 NHK Special: “The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report”
- b) Faces of reparations in the twenty-first century

5. Possible futures for Chinese forced labor redress

- a) Context 1: global reparations movement
- b) Context 2: Japanese historical revisionism
- c) Context 3: Sino-Japanese relations

A RECENT ARTICLES:

1) *“NHK’s Finest Hour: Japan’s Official Record of Chinese Forced Labor”*

Historical account based on 1946 records produced—and then concealed—by state and industry, as presented in NHK’s 1993 TV special and 1994 book, “The Phantom Foreign Ministry Report: Record of Chinese Forced Labor” (in Japanese). Posted June 20, 2006, at ZNet:

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=17&ItemID=10454>

<http://hnn.us/articles/27053.html>

<http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/2187>

2) ***“Chinese Forced-Labor Victims Press Japan to Embrace Emerging International Standards of Accountability”***

Highlights mismatch between Japan’s approach to its forced labor past and aspirations for global leadership. Suggests factors like economics, security and international reputation could lead Japan to move beyond narrow legalism. Posted May 2, 2006, at YaleGlobal Online:

<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=7338>

3) ***“The Japanese Court, Mitsubishi and Corporate Resistance to Chinese Forced Labor Redress”***

Examines hardening corporate attitudes as seen in Mitsubishi’s brazen and historically counter-factual legal defense strategy. Suggests Japanese companies are on a collision course with China. Posted March 29, 2006, with Japanese translation at Japan Focus:

<http://www.japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=560>

4) ***“Chinese Forced Labor, the Japanese Government and the Prospects for Redress”***

Describes declassified “smoking gun” records from 1952-72, released from MOFA archives in November 2002. Details the Kishi-era cover up that subverted citizens’ efforts to compile name rosters and repatriate remains. Posted July 8, 2005, at Japan Focus:

<http://www.japanfocus.org/article.asp?id=326>

B From ARTICLE 1 above:

* "Reference Documents for Use of Chinese Workers," issued by Interior Ministry, June 1944:

"Regarding living quarters, the ceiling should not be more than [ten centimeters] higher than workers' heads when they are seated. Then we could more than double the number of workers presently in camps. Bathing facilities are especially excessive and are not necessary for Chinese workers. ... Baths will spoil them and make them work less hard. ... If you give them only a little food, they will be tense and their work productivity will improve. If you give them more food, their tension will decrease and more people will become sick, lowering productivity. ... It may be difficult to reduce food rations right away, so you can start with the sick and workers who have been resting. Or, it should be possible to reduce food rations by a small amount every day. ... The more affection you show to Chinese, the more spoiled they become. And when they become spoiled, they return kindness with ingratitude. The Chinese are a race unaffected by feelings. ... In China runaways must be beheaded or shot. If we do not punish runaways in a similarly severe manner here in Japan, we fear it will become more and more difficult to control them. ... It is true that the Chinese have loving feelings for their homeland and the graves of their ancestors. But they never shed real tears. Tears for people like them are skillful acting." (NHK Publishing, 1994; 162-63)

* Security directives to companies from Tochigi Prefectural Police:

"2) Be overpowering as method of control. ... 3) When you capture runaways, do not let them return to their camp and work again. (If they are allowed to return, other workers will be relieved to see that runaways are not killed, causing others to flee.) ... 5) Make the living quarters as shabby as possible. ... 6) Make the food as poor as possible and consider it to be fodder." (NHK Publishing, 1994; 155-56)

* "Important Notice for Preparing Name Rosters," issued by Hokkaido Prefectural Police:

"Causes of death such as malnutrition, starvation, suicide and death by occupational injury should be rewritten so as not to stimulate other parties. The rewriting of death certificates should be coordinated with doctors and local public officials." (NHK Publishing, 1994; 43)

* May 3, 1960 ... MOFA's premeditated deception during Diet questioning:

"We have heard that in March of Showa 21 [1946], the directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA] compiled such an investigative record. However, it was thought that if the documents were used for war crimes prosecutions they would cause trouble to a great many people. Therefore, all of the documents were burned and MOFA does not now possess even a portion of the documents."

* July 18, 2003 ... MOFA public statement:

"We knew that these reports were kept in the basement storeroom, but we were not able to confirm that they were the reports [about Chinese forced labor] submitted by individual companies. We deeply regret not making thorough investigations."

* August 26, 2003 ... Written statement to Diet by Prime Minister Koizumi:

*"Regarding the matter of so-called Chinese forced labor, it is extremely regrettable that amid abnormal wartime conditions many Chinese people came to Japan in a **half-forcible** manner and endured many hardships due to severe work."*