

This opinion piece by PCI board member, Fumio Matsuo, appeared in the Seien Magazine January 2019 issue.

First, let's begin by making quiet contacts with South Korea --
- while also preparing for negotiations with North Korea
concerning the abduction issue

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By Fumio Matsuo, journalist

In mid-November 2018, I visited Seoul, Korea in search of a way to achieve "reconciliation." The Supreme Court of South Korea had just ordered two Japanese companies to pay restitution to individuals who had performed forced labor in Japan during World War 2, and the Korean government also announced it was issuing guidelines for dissolving the body organized "for reconciliation and psychological healing," based on a 2015 agreement between the two nations' governments, to address another thorny issue. These recent developments spawned new tensions in the relationship between the two countries.

This visit marked my first to Seoul in nearly 20 years, and among the things that most surprised me was not only the large number of skyscrapers that had transformed the city's skyline, but also the almost complete disappearance of Chinese characters in signage and advertising posters, their having been replaced by *hangul*, the Korean native script. On the broad avenue that passes the front of the "Blue House," South Korea's presidential palace, is a massive statue of a seated King Sejong, who is credited with creating the hangul script in the 15th century. The statue, erected 10 years ago, is illuminated at night, evoking what I sensed was a new spirit of Korean nationalism --- an aspect of South Korea that I sense is poorly understood by Japan.

Having flown over from Tokyo wearing only a lightweight coat, I shivered from the cold. With the arrival of winter, in addition to "yellow sand" recently transported by winds from the China mainland, I was also concerned with "fine-particle" airborne dust capable of causing respiratory ailments, and was again reminded

that Korea's location on China's periphery has resulted in not only environmental, but geopolitical difficulties as well.

- Hikari and Nozomi: Names of express trains from the Japan colonial era

Why should I, who do not claim to be an authority on Korean issues, make an effort at this time to achieve reconciliation with South Korea? Seated next to a famous scholar of Korean history while at a dinner engagement that took up the theme of reconciliation, I related to him one of my earliest childhood memories. My father had been posted as an army officer in Shanhaiguan, a famous border town where the Great Wall of China meets the sea, serving as the physical barrier between North China proper and the region formerly known as Manchuria. In 1936 I had returned to Japan with my mother to attend the funeral of my grandfather, traveling by steamship from Tianjin to Shimonoseki.

On our return to China, however, we had to take an express train from the port of Busan to Shanhaiguan via Mukden (present-day Shenyang, Liaoning Province) through the Japan-ruled Korean peninsula and Manchuria. During a portion of that journey we had shared a four-passenger section with two Korean men clad in traditional white garments.

As I related to the scholar about this experience, he promptly replied, "The express trains you rode on the Chosen Tetsudo Railway were named 'Hikari' and 'Nozomi.'" Looking at the reality of how Japan impassively revived these same names and used them for its world-famous Shinkansen, I feel doubts about whether Japan, after the war, engaged in self criticism over its colonization of Korea," he said to me.

The scholar's remarks left me momentarily speechless. Upon investigation, however, I found that what he told me about the names of the express trains was true, as I was to later confirm from a

1940 timetable for the Manchu-Chosen railway.

Looking at imports such as Chinese characters and the cultivation of rice, I realized the further back one goes in history, the more it becomes clear that the two countries' mutual history is inseparable. I was confronted with a sense of how deep the wounds remain from Japan's annexation of its closest neighbor and the forced imposition of the Japanese imperial system on the Korean people.

For the remainder of 2018 following the Winter Olympic Games at Pyeongchang, the South Korean government under President Moon Jae-in had achieved a rapprochement with the North, even to the point that a study had been initiated on restoring railway links between the North and South.

I nevertheless continue to hold my breath in anxiety over how long the "love affair" between President Donald Trump and First Secretary Kim Jong-un will continue. I think that Japan today is called upon to accurately understand the acute position that the Moon government faces.

In 2016, in response to a question from an opposition member on the floor of Japan's Diet, who had asked him, "Do you intend to send to the each of surviving Korean comfort women a letter of apology?", Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had replied, "No, not under any circumstances." While this provoked a strong reaction in South Korea, I am quite certain that Mr. Abe had considered for such an option to exist.

- Making a floral offering to depart from the "unfortunate past"

Winding up my recent Seoul visit, I would like to offer, in no particular order, three proposals for achieving reconciliation.

(1) The joint research conducted by the group of Japanese and Korean historical scholars in 2009, whose Secondary Report was abandoned after submission, should be resumed as soon as possible. A Korean scholar of history directly informed me, "While it might be a pipe dream for Japan and Korea to engage in research for a

common history textbook in a manner similar to that undertaken by France and Germany, it would at least be a start to efforts to relieve the current thorny relationship, even if only slightly." Shouldn't we then at least try it?

(2) Bilateral agreements such as the 1965 pact dealing with Korean claims against Japan, and the accord of 2015, must be maintained. At the same time, however, I believe that differences between the governments of 54 years ago and four years ago, and the current public consensus and feelings among the people of South Korea need to be taken into consideration. In other words, I suppose it means we should avoid such high-handed and dismissive remarks as "In accordance with international law, this is not possible." At the very least, I would propose that various "policy measures" be quietly considered within the scope of dealing with South Korea's government. Considering as how these can be made to connect to the relationships with the United States and North Korea, the importance becomes clear.

Most Japanese today are unaware of the secret pact concluded in 1905 between U.S. President Howard Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Taro Katsura, an old wound in that it represented a "deal" by which, in exchange for the US recognizing Japan's annexation of Korea, Japan agreed to recognize America's authority over the Philippines. If Mr. Trump wishes to succeed in building a new relationship with Kim Jong-un, the U.S. must precede Japan by first addressing this unhealed wound from 114 years ago. Consequently resolving the abduction issue will call for Abe diplomacy to enter into talks with Kim Jong-un, and "to not let matters with South Korea go unresolved" will be a type of overriding necessity. This is because North Korea is certainly closely observing how matters go between Japan and South Korea. The initiation of contacts with Kim Jong-un itself had been realized by Trump's "cooperation" in the Singapore talks.

(3) Across the street from the Japanese embassy in Seoul, which is presently in the process of being rebuilt, I went to see the comfort woman statue. Perhaps because the day I went was not

a Wednesday --- the day when support groups typically assemble there --- not even the slightest air of hostility was in evidence, even among the students in the tent set up beside the statue. Seeing the statue of that young woman as the symbol most evocative of the "unfortunate past" between Korea and Japan, I humbly offered a floral tribute while praying that a resolution will be achieved by members of the next generation. My suggestion would be for Japanese who visit Seoul continue to make floral offerings. What do you, the readers of Seien magazine, think about this? I would welcome your comments.

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