



Japanese Neo-Nationalism and the Idea of East Asian Community

by Richard Gunde

Sung Suh (Ritsumeikan University, Japan) explores a dream of a Northeast Asian community of peace & prosperity

Professor Sung Suh, one of Asia's foremost campaigners for peace and justice, presented a talk on June 18, sponsored the UCLA Center for Korean Studies, that was simultaneously depressing and uplifting, pessimistic and encouraging.

On the one hand, Professor Suh dissected and analyzed the rise of Japanese neo-nationalism, a force that "confronts reconciliation and cooperation in East Asia and threatens the peace and stability of East Asia." On the other, he offered an idea of a future East Asian (or, more specifically, Northeast Asian) community -- a community built on prosperity that will link China, Japan, and Korea.

Neo-Nationalism and the Crisis of Japanese Identity

"Japan," Professor Suh declared, "is really an abnormal country." It has, he argued, refused to apologize for the crimes its government and military committed in the Pacific War and it has refused to pay compensation to its victims.

Indeed, the trend in politics in Japan is, in this respect, not promising.

"Since the end of the Cold War," Professor Suh observed, "Japanese politics has been swinging to the right and militarizing. . . . Now the Liberal Democratic Party plans to amend the Peace Constitution. The revised constitution will encompass the emperor as not the symbol of the state, but the chief of state; abolishment of Article 9 [which renounced the right to wage war]; homage to the hinomaru [the Japanese flag] and Kimigayo [the Japanese national anthem]. Also, the tide of grassroots rightism or neo-nationalism is rising, especially using the excuse of North Korea."

The admission of Kim Jung-il, the leader of North Korea, that Japanese citizens had been abducted from Japan by North Korean agents, "caused the Japanese media to stir up a mass hysteria. This has created what might be called a state of speech fascism and elevated anti-North Korean xenophobic militancy to

unprecedented heights." This has resulted in an increasing number of anti-Korean incidents in Japan, "especially against female students of Korean ethnic schools."

Japanese neo-nationalism, Suh explained, is a complex phenomenon. Unlike the traditional rightists and ultranationalists of Japan, neo-nationalists tend to be young people who are disconnected from communities (companies, labor unions, and the like). They feel a sense of isolation and hopelessness.

Against this background, how is it that Professor Suh is able to foresee what he termed "the dawn of a new age in Northeast Asia," an age not merely of multilateral cooperation but of regional integration?

From Confrontation to Reconciliation

Sung Suh contended that as part of the "globalized movement toward reconciliation" we can imagine a future "community of prosperity" in Northeast Asia that will begin to emerge from mutual economic prosperity, and will evolve into a "community of peace."

Sung went on to declare that "for a long time I have dreamed of a regional community of co-prosperity in Northeast Asia like the EU. The age of Northeast Asia will finally come to full fruition. I pledge to devote my whole heart and effort to bring about that day at the earliest possible time."

Moreover, this community, one can imagine, will have a united Korea -- the country "at the heart of Northeast Asia" -- as its core and as its vanguard.

As remote as such a community may seem, it is not, Sung believes, beyond our imagination. He offered two metaphors, so to speak, to illustrate how bitter enmity can be transformed into amity. First, in the DMZ (demilitarized zone) between North and South Korea, the enormous underground tunnels, supposedly built by North Korea as a possible avenue of invasion of the South, are being turned into an integral part of a "security tourism package." Extended two kilometers on either side of the North-South border, "the DMZ is a treasure-trove of nature. It has become a paradise of animals and plants, something we can be proud of before the world." Both North and South Korea have applied to the UN to have the DMZ recognized as a world heritage site: "a platform from which to send out to the world messages for peace and the protection of the environment. . . . One can see how quickly history is changing in Korea."

Second, Sung mentioned the island of Qinmen (Kinmen), controlled by the government of Taiwan, but which lies just ten kilometers from the shore of the city of Xiamen (Amoy), China. Qinmen and a few other islands "were once a symbol of Taiwan's conflict with China, for they once served as a foothold for Chiang Kai-shek's rollback policy of retaking the mainland." Qinmen is riddled with tunnels and caverns carved out of the rock, housing such facilities as a military hospital, a naval base, and so on. "Military structures that were once built at enormous cost are now used as tourist facilities."

At the same time, democracy has come to South Korea and Taiwan, countries that not many years ago violently opposed their people and perpetrated crimes on a massive scale in the name of fighting communism. Moreover, "in East Asia democratization has led to the settlement of historical wounds within nations."

Thus, "the age of division and confrontation in East Asia is passing."

To achieve a Northeast Asian community, Sung argued, will necessitate two fundamental steps. The first, and perhaps the easiest, will be to reestablish an international balance of power, "to check U.S. unilateralism. . . . To recover the world balance of power which was damaged by the U.S.A., it is useful to set up a new 'three-kingdom age': that is, an era characterized by a balance among the "kingdoms" of the United States, the European Union, and a Northeast Asian community.

The second, and perhaps more difficult, is find a way to get from where we are today -- facing the

growing strength of Japanese neo-nationalism -- to where Professor Sung believes we will be in the future -- a Northeast Asian community of peace. The fundamental problem, Sung stated, is Japan. "Will Japan be able to turn to Northeast Asian community"? What concrete steps must be taken to move from the present to the future? What concrete steps are possible today? These are questions Sung Suh posed, and left his listeners to ponder.

* * *

Sung Suh is the author of *Unbroken Spirits: Nineteen Years in South Korea's Gulag* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), a memoir of his 19 years as a political prisoner in South Korea. Born in Japan to Korean parents, and a graduate of Tokyo University of Education, he was arrested in April 1971 on charges of spying for North Korea while he was a student at Seoul National University. His arrest, and later that of his brother, were among the first of numerous arrests of resident Koreans from Japan who came to what they saw as their homeland in order to study. These arrests were part of the anti-communist policies of the Park Chung Hee dictatorship and the tightening of Park's control over South Korea that ended with his assassination in 1979. Suh's case became a cause celebre in Japan and around the world. In 1973, Amnesty International designated Suh a prisoner of conscience. He himself became both an expert on and a symbol of human rights. Suh was finally released in 1990, without ever having recanted. He is now a professor of international relations and human rights at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, and the co-convenor of the International Symposium on Human Rights and Peace in East Asia.

Suh Sung is also the author of a new book, *Proposal for the Age of Northeast Asia: From the Crisis of War to the Peace Building* (Tokyo: Heibonsha Publisher Inc., 2003, in Japanese) on the politics of East Asia that calls for reconciliation and the development of a Northeast Asian community. He has also authored numerous books on international relations, peace studies, and human rights, and has co-edited several anthologies.

6/25/2004

© 1997-2002 UCLA Asia Institute. All rights reserved.

To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser.