Japan and the Korean War: A Cross-Border Perspective

Tessa Morris-Suzuki

The Memory Box of Japan’s Korean War

In 2013, Japan marked the 60th anniversary of the Panmunjom Armistice which ended the immediate violence of the Korean War (without producing a permanent peace settlement). The event was marked by newspaper articles and TV reports, and several public lectures and commemorative events. For most people in Japan, though, the anniversary passed with little fanfare. After all, Japan, as we all know, was not a direct participant in the Korean War, although its economy reaped the benefits of the War boom, and the conflict in Korea also profoundly influenced US policy towards Japan.

As we all know ... but do we? There is, I think, much that we still do not know about the Korean War, and much that has been not so much forgotten as mis-remembered.

In his remarkable book *Remembering Pinochet’s Chile*, Steve Stern likens our memory of historical events to a box in which a family or individual keeps mementos of the past. This big, collectively-built “memory box” is foundational to the community, not marginal; it sits in the living room, not in the attic. It contains several competing scripted albums, each of them works in progress that seek to define and give shape to a crucial point in life, much as the family album may script a wedding or a birth, an illness or a death, a crisis or a success. The box also contains “lore” or loose memories, that is, stray photos and mini-albums that seem important to remember but do not necessarily fit easily in the larger scripts (Stern, 2004: xxviii).

What lies inside the memory box of Japan’s relationship to the Korean War? I imagine the box as containing a large album, representing memories of the war commonly projected by Japanese history textbooks, popular historical writings, movies and TV dramas set in the early 1950s. This album would be filled charts of economic growth—upward-pointing arrows showing the resurgence of Japanese industries in response to the Korean War boom. The charts reflect Chalmers Johnson’s much quoted description of the War as ‘in many ways the equivalent for Japan of the Marshall Plan’ (Johnson, 1973: 23). This family album would also contain pictures of new steelworks and machinery factories, for, as many works on the subject suggest, the Korean War’s ‘impact on Japan during this period was primarily economic’ (Swenson-Wright, 2011: 150). There might be photos of American bases in Japan, and of the western fashions and big band jazz groups that came with them. Somewhere in the album there would probably be a picture of the Police Reserve—the force whose creation during the Korean War marked the start of postwar Japanese rearmament. There would be photos of General MacArthur on the eve of his dismissal, and of conferences leading up to the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty: an acknowledgement that the terms of the Treaty were profoundly influenced by the Korean War.
But in this big album, I do not think that there would be any pictures of Japanese in Korea fighting the war front, or even of dead or wounded people, whether Japanese, Korean or other. For, in the words of one US scholar, while all the other nations involved in the war ‘suffered terribly,’ Japan ‘proved an exception’: ‘for it, the Korean War proved an elixir that revitalized its economy, ended the American occupation, and shaped the peace and security treaties that continued to tether it to a Pacific Alliance with the United States. Japan emerged from the Korean carnage unscathed and, in a sense, re-born’ (Schaller, 2004: 145).

As Elaine Scary reminds us, ‘the main purpose and outcome of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear along many paths.’ The communal album that dominates the memory box of Japan and the Korean War, I would suggest, a collection of images in which violence, death and injuring have indeed been made to ‘disappear along many paths.’ Its images by and large depict Japan, safely protected by its national borders, experiencing only the ripple effects, the distant echoes of war. They amplify Yoshida Shigeru’s memorably insensitive comment that for Japan, the War was ‘a gift from the gods.’

Of course, the memory box of Japan and the Korean War contains many other ‘stray photos and mini-albums’ which convey very different images. A photo album compiled from the perspective of the Korean community in Japan would contain more violent and disturbing images (Nishimura, 2004; Kim, 2007). For port cities like Yokohama, Sasebo and Kokura, too, the photo album of the Korean War looks very different. Kokura, after all, was the place where the remains of tens of thousands of bodies of dead US servicemen were returned to be identified and embalmed by teams that included young Japanese anthropologists (Hanihara, 1965). Studies by some of the academic historians who have looked most closely at the war also present a different set of images. John Bowen, Reinhard Drifte, Roger Dingman, Wada Haruki, Ōnuma Hisao and others emphasize Japan’s direct human and military involvement in the conflict (Bowen, 1984; Drifte, 1989; Dingman, 1993; Wada, 2002; Ōnuma, 2006). Yet their important contributions to historical understanding have yet (I believe) to shift the powerful public perception that Japan’s relationship to war was economic, bloodless, painless, devoid of violence.

Then there are the stray photos: individual memories of the war, radically diverse, complex, and often impossible to reconcile with the script that has shaped the content of the big album at the centre of the box. And because they cannot be reconciled with that script, I think of them as lying scattered in odd corners of the box, a little crumpled and faded, generally neglected, waiting for someone to pick them up and puzzle over their content.

Here I hope to present you with a few of these of these neglected snapshots: snapshots of Japanese who went to war in Korea, nearly on the South Korean, but occasionally on the North Korean side. Their stories, of course, are exceptional. But they are, I think, more than simply personal stories. They illustrate two much broader points that I should like to make about the nature of the war. In this presentation I should like to suggest that it is time to find a place for these snapshots in our album of images of Japan and the Korean War, because they will help to transform the whole script, the whole way in which we remember this history.

What these snapshots show, I think, is that the violence of the Korean War was fundamentally and inextricably linked to the violence of the Asia-Pacific War. So often, we draw a sharp temporal dividing line between “wartime” and “postwar.” Too often, 15 August 1945 is seen as a universal end-point—the end of the Asia-Pacific War—and 20 June 1950 is depicted as a definitive beginning—the moment when North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea, and the first great “hot war” within the “Cold War” began. But as US historian Bruce Cumings suggests, the origins of the Korean War might be traced back at least to the period from 1931 to 1932, when Japan invaded northeast China and established the client state of Manchukuo (Cumings, 2010: 44). Certainly, for all the individuals whose stories I will tell,
experience of the violence of the Asia-Pacific War flowed almost seamlessly into their experience in the Korean war zone. In this, they were not unique. For hundreds of thousands of Chinese who fought in the war too, combat in Korea was almost an unbroken continuation of their experience of combat in the Asia-Pacific War and Chinese civil war, and for hundreds of thousands of Koreans the violence of the colonial era flowed almost seamlessly into the violence of the Korean War.

Second, the snapshots—the small personal stories—that I shall present here have, I believe, been neglected because many of them do not fit neatly within national borders. They move back and forth across borders, challenging the image that, from the Japanese perspective, the Korean War as a “fire on the other shore”: a military explosion which Japan was observed largely as a bystander.

**Silent Squadron: Ariyama Mikio and the Korean War Minesweepers**

The following passages are extracts of a diary written by a member of a Japanese minesweeper crew engaged in Korean War operations in 1951–1952. The text is brief but evocative, and full of rather nostalgic references back to the colonial era:

18 May 1951, near Busan—The town in the distance seems to be filled with refugees. There are also many shacks built. The mountain on right is Makinoshima where the Japanese navy garrison unit used to be stationed. The mountains have no trees and the scenery is quite different from Japan. It is probably to do with the different climate. The small boats look almost the same as in Japan. People understand Japanese and we do not feel that we are in a foreign country. During the night, the blackout has been enforced strictly ...

6 June 1952, off Incheon—This area is close to Seoul and the front line and we could hear the explosions on the coastline .... The difference in sea tide, we heard, was up to 9 metres and we were really surprised. Mirages could be seen: that was novelty for us. A big island lies in front of us, and numerous UN Force ships can be seen outside the port. Some US hospital ships are carrying troops. During the operation, we went back to Sasebo once for maintenance and leave.

The troubled background to the minesweeping missions described here can be pieced together from the records left by others who took part in them. Ariyama Mikio, for example, grew up in Fukuoka during the years of the Asia-Pacific War, and, on his graduation from Naval College in March 1944, joined the Japanese Imperial Navy. When Japan was defeated he, of course, expected to be demobilized. After all, the Potsdam Declaration, which Japan had just accepted, stated: “The Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives.”

But in the final stages of the Asia-Pacific War the United States had attempted to blockade Japan by dropping some 10,000 mines into the seas around the Japanese coast. Massive tasks of minesweeping, and of repatriating Japanese civilians and soldiers from all over East Asia, faced the defeated country, and some members of the former Imperial Navy, including Ariyama, were kept on in service to carry out these tasks under the command of the US occupiers. In May 1948, when the Japanese Maritime Safety Agency was established, minesweeping activities were placed under the control of this agency although, according to Ariyama, effective command was still in US hands. By then, most of the minesweeping work was complete, and Ariyama, who had been a wartime naval officer, was expecting to be purged. But this was not to be.

On 3 October 1950, not long after the outbreak of the Korean War, Ariyama and the ship he
commanded, the MS06, were ordered to go to Shimonoseki. At first, they were told that they were being sent to carry out minesweeping in the Tsushima Straits, to protect Japanese ships carrying troops and supplies to Korea, but it soon became clear that their mission was a very different one. UN forces, which had been driven to the extreme south of the Korean Peninsula, were planning a landing behind North Korean lines, but North Korean forces had created a barrier of underwater mines to protect major ports like Incheon and Wonsan from just such an attack. At this point in the war, the US navy had only ten minesweepers in East Asian waters. So, although Japan had supposedly been fully disarmed, was not a member of the United Nations, and was not supposed to be in any way directly involved in the Korean conflict, the US command (with the agreement of the Yoshida government) took over control of Japanese minesweepers and their crews, and ordered them to the war zone to clear the way for the landings (Buell, 2001: 35).

Taken by surprise, many of the minesweeper crew members adamantly opposed to this redeployment. Ariyama Mikio expressed dismay that Japan risked again being involved in war, and at the dangers to the seamen under his command. He and the crew of his ship disembarked, and threatened to refuse to obey orders, but were eventually and reluctantly persuaded to reboard their minesweeper. They were told that the mission would not only help to save Japan from communism but would also help to restore the pride and reputation of the Japanese Navy, and it was implied that only those who took part in the mission would be given a place in any new postwar Japanese maritime force.

On 7 October, four Japanese minesweepers with escort vessels sailed for Korea under cover of darkness, and rendezvoused with the US fleet near Tsushima. The mission was conducted under a blanket of intense secrecy: so much so that the ships did not even use radio communications, but communicated with one another using flares and semaphore signals. Their minesweeping mission took place off the coast of the North Korean port of Wonsan. On 17 October, Ariyama’s MS06 was working alongside another Japanese vessel, the MS14, when this second ship was suddenly blown apart as it hit a mine, and sank instantly. US vessels dragged the Japanese crew of MS14 from the water, but they failed to find any trace of one crew member, Nakatani Sakatarō. Eighteen of those rescued were injured, two very seriously (Ariyama, 2001).

Vigorous protests again broke out amongst the Japanese crew, some of whom pointed out that they were supposed to be public servants, not members of a military force, and that they had not volunteered for service in Korea. The three Japanese minesweeper captains decided that they were not willing to expose their crews to further risk, and would withdraw from the mission. The standoff between the US forces and Japanese minesweepers came close to exploding point when Rear Admiral Allan E. Smith, commander of the UN Command’s blockading and escort force, was presented with the captains’ decision. He reportedly berated them for being a disgrace to the force, and threatened that, if they did not either return to duty or leave port within the next fifteen minutes, his ships would open fire on the Japanese minesweepers (Ariyama, 2001: 35–37; Suzuki, 2008: 7). In the end, though, the threat was not carried out, and on 20 October the Japanese minesweepers left for home, leaving behind their escort ships, which were later joined by one further minesweeper dispatched from Shimonoseki.

Maritime Safety Agency chief Ōkubo Takeo subsequently apologised to the US military for the behaviour of the Japanese crews, and promised to discipline those responsible, but the US military command apparently softened its stance on punishment when Japan agreed to continue sending minesweeping missions to the war zone. The occupation authorities also responded to the mission by suspending a purge of former Japanese imperial navy officers from public office (Suzuki, 2008: 8). Major Japanese minesweeping operations continued off the ports of Incheon, Gunsan and Chinanpo until the end of the year, and some Japanese minesweepers remained in Korean waters at least until the middle of 1952. Meanwhile, though, Japanese minesweeping operations in other parts of the Korean war zone continued at least into the mid-
dle of 1952. Many of the participants in the mission, almost all of them former members of the Imperial Navy, went on to become the core of Japan’s postwar Maritime Self-Defense Force.

**Japan’s Floating War**

Sannomiya Kazumi still recalls the horrors of the scene on Wolmido, the island just off the port of Incheon, where the US-led Incheon landing of September 1950 began. Sannomiya was not involved in minesweeping, but was a crew member on one of the thirty-seven Japanese-crewed landing vessels which put US and South Korean forces ashore in this decisive battle of the war. Near the place where they came ashore stood an abandoned bunker, still containing the blackened body of the North Korean soldier, burnt beyond recognition by a flame thrower (Kabasawa, 2007c: 86).

Having survived the Asia-Pacific War as a sailor, Sannomiya had embraced Japan’s peace constitution, and believed that he would never have to go to war again. He found work as a sailor on one of the huge landing vessels operated by the Civilian Merchant Marine Committee [商船管理委員会] to carry Japanese repatriated returning to Japan from the lost empire, as well as Koreans being repatriated from Japan to Korea. But after the outbreak of the Korean War, US forces discovered that they were desperately short, not only of minesweeping vessels but also of landing craft, so thirty-nine landing ships, including the ship on which Sannomiya worked, were placed under US control for use in the war zone. Japanese sailors are estimated to have constituted one-third of all the crews on landing vessels at the Incheon Landing. Many, including Sannomiya, went on to take part in the Wonsan Landing and in the evacuation of US and Korean troops from Heungnam in December 1951.

After the end of the Korean War Sannomiya was to become an energetic peace campaigner and later a member of Fuchū City Council, and in 2003 he sought unsuccessfully to sue the Japanese government on the grounds that, although a civilian in a country that had renounced war, he had been ordered into a combat zone, where he and his fellow sailors had been exposed to danger and war trauma. The risks had been multiple. As Sannomiya stated in his testimony, “in the confined space of the ships, tuberculosis spread from one vessel to the next, and many of my comrades, aged 23 or 24, died or had their health permanently damaged as a result” (Tokyo District Court, 2003). In all, about 2,000 Japanese sailors employed by the Civilian Merchant Marine Committee were sent to the war zone under US command in landing ships or transport vessels.

Large numbers of privately-owned merchant vessels were also temporarily requisitioned by US forces. On 26 September 1950, a flotilla of 200 small motorized sailing vessels, acquired mostly via the private firm Tōzai Kisen and carrying around 1,300 crew members, set sail from Japan for the port of Busan, where they were to be used as lighters, carrying troops, explosives, ammunition and other cargo between larger vessels and the shore. Immediately after the Incheon Landing, these ships were ordered to go to Incheon to help unload supplies at the newly-captured port. This again provoked resistance amongst some of the crew. Kitamura Masanori, a sailor on one of these ships, recalls that there was a heated all-night debate, in which senior officers sought to persuade reluctant crew members to accept their deployment to Incheon, where fighting was still raging. In the end 190 ships sailed for Incheon, but some sailors refused to take part in the mission and returned to Japan. Among them were the captain and engineer of the Dai-37 Gokokumaru, who demanded a transfer to another ship on the grounds that the mission they had been ordered to perform violated the Japanese constitution (Kabasawa, 2007b: 46).

Many of the Japanese seamen sent to the war zone were experienced sailors, often former members of the Japanese navy, but as Akeboshi Mutsurō, who worked on Korean War landing
vessels, recalled, ‘a mass of LR seamen who were almost completely inexperienced were also recruited. It seems there were quite a few cases where drifters who gathered in Yokohama (for at that time there were many unemployed people, known as ‘Futarō’) were semi-forcibly brought on board. In some cases, these people joined the crew only to disappear later’ (Akeboshi, 2005: 49). In hard economic times, the pay (which included a substantial element of ‘danger money’) was attractive. Ordinary seamen serving on the landing ships could earn about four times the average monthly wage, and there were also other, less official opportunities for money-making: US naval vessels were officially alcohol-free, so Japanese sailors could buy cheap bottles of Torys whiskey in Japan 90 yen and sell them for the equivalent of 500–700 yen to American sailors in Incheon (Akeboshi, 2005: 48).

But the dangers were real. Towards the end of November 1950, for example, three families in Yokohama received the news that all families had dreaded during the Asia-Pacific War, but that most had ceased to fear since Japan’s surrender: their sons had been killed in the war zone. Seventeen other families all over Japan were receiving the same news at the same time. In all, twenty-two Japanese sailors had been killed when their vessel the LT636, transporting supplies to the front line, hit a mine off Wonsan, but the family of one of the sailors could not be located, and so were presumably not informed. Since the sailors were officially ‘civilian labourers’ working for the occupation forces, and their direct involvement in the conflict was a potential source of deep embarrassment to the US military authorities and to the Japanese government, their deaths were not made public. The written notifications sent to their families listed the sailors as ‘missing,’ and the only commemoration of their deaths was a secret ceremony attended by a small group of officials at a temple in Kanagawa. The families were not invited to the ceremony, but instead received a photograph of the event and a ‘casket’ supposedly containing the ashes of their loved ones, but in fact empty, because the bodies had never been recovered. At the same time, they were given a compensation payment and strict orders never to reveal the story of the sailors’ deaths (Yokohama Shi, 1977: 60–61). In the midst of the Allied occupation, these orders were taken seriously. The brother of Nakatani Sakatarō, the 21-year-old sailor killed when the minesweeper MS14 was sunk on Wonsan, would later recall that he and his family really feared drastic punishment from the Occupation authorities if they revealed the true circumstances of Nakatani’s death (MBC, 2001).

The total number of Japanese killed or wounded in the Korean War is unknown, although one official report records 47 deaths by seamen and others engaged in war tasks in the first six months of the war alone (Ishimaru, 2008: 35). Some were also injured by ‘friendly fire’: in July 1950, for example, a young Japanese seaman named Yasuda Yōhei was shot in the leg, and another Japanese crew member was slightly injured, when a US soldier on their ship fired his gun at Yasuda after finding him smoking a cigarette in defiance of the rules (All Japan Seaman’s Union, 1950). The number sent to the Korean war zone, including the crews of minesweepers, motorized sailing ships, landing and transport vessels, as well as dock workers and repair workers, is estimated to have totalled about 8,000 (Ishimaru, 2008: 35).

To place this figure in perspective, we might recall that, of the sixteen countries that participated in the war under the United Nations command, only five (the US, UK, Australia, Canada and Turkey) sent as many as 8,000 troops to the Korean War zone. New Zealand sent 4,500; France 4,000; South Africa 811; Luxembourg 89 (Korean War Educator). Of course, Japan’s participation was not, in any official sense of the word, military; but it was substantial, physical, and very much connected to the violence of war. Japan, it should be added, was not the only country whose nationals took part in the war in an unofficial and now largely forgotten capacity. Kawamura Kiichirō, who served on a US military transport vessel carrying explosives and other cargo from Japan to Korea during the war, recalls his amazement at the multinational crew who served on his ship: including Latin Americans, Filipinos, Indonesians, Samoans and a Norwegian (Kawamura, 2007: 22).
But the recruitment of Japanese for military activities in the Korean War zone was a potentially explosive topic. Most Koreans, needless to say, had no desire to see a return to their soil of Japanese in military roles. By late 1950, the Soviet Union was energetically raising claims in international forums that the US was ‘grossly violating the terms of the Potsdam Agreement’ by using Japanese recruits in the war (Australian Embassy, Moscow, 1950). Many of the countries fighting with the US, and under US command, were also deeply concerned about the issue. A Japanese presence in the war zone could be seen as a breach not only of the Potsdam Declaration but also of the newly introduced Japanese constitution, and some US allies even feared that it could risk provoking full-scale Soviet and Japan involvement in the war. In early July 1950, for example, the Australian government, which had just received information about a Japanese presence in the war zone, sent a secret telegram to its diplomatic mission in Tokyo:

This is the first we have heard of any Japanese workmen being employed by the allied forces. Please advise urgently, after informal soundings, where such workmen are being employed at present and where it may be proposed to employ them in future. In particular, we should like to know whether the American forces are being accompanied by any Japanese workmen to Korea itself .... As it is common allied policy to try to localize the Korean conflict, it seems to us that great caution is necessary in accepting any form of Japanese assistance in Korea itself (Department of External Affairs, Australia, 1950a).

In response, the Australians were reassured that ‘Japanese were not being rearmed and that none would be taking part in the fighting in Korea. The only Japanese used would be workmen employed by Allied forces and ships’ crews carrying freight to Fusan [Busan] .... General MacArthur’s Chief of Staff Almond issued strict orders that no Japanese were to be employed with the army in Korea as plenty of Korean labour was available’ (Department of External Affairs, Australia, 1950b). But the realities, as we have seen, were different. The solution that the US forces had contrived was to use the sea as a zone of invisibility, in which the Japanese presence could be used with safety. As long as the Japanese sailors and other military support involved in the war were at sea and not on Korean soil, the US could claim—with just a little stretching of the truth—that Japanese were not being ‘sent to Korea.’ So even workers engaged in land-based tasks like dock labour and repair of military vehicles were generally kept semi-confined in converted cargo vessels moored off the shore of Korean ports like Incheon and Busan. As an urgent US military request for freighters pointed out, these were needed because ‘existing policy does not allow the Japanese to go ashore on Korea, therefore, it is necessary to provide floating housing to accommodate these personnel’ (Miles, 1950).

This floating world of the Japan’s Korean War presence has interesting historical implications. Suspended in the seas between Japan and Korea, and strictly instructed never to speak of their experiences, the Japanese directly involved in the Korean War became invisible, not only to their contemporaries, but also to later generations. In a world where territorial boundaries limit our historical horizons, the presence of the Japanese participants in the war all too readily vanishes into the space between national histories.

Bases and Boy Soldiers

While thousands of Japanese participants in the war were floating back and forth across the maritime border zone between Japan and Korea, a similar number of young Koreans were making journeys across the border in the opposite direction. In July 1950, the US military established the KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to the United States Army) scheme, allowing them to recruit Koreans directly into their own ranks. In August, the Japanese transport vessel
Shinanomaru carried the first batch of 2,300 Korean recruits from Busan to Yokohama, where they marched in columns down the gangplanks and past the red-brick warehouses on the Yokohama waterfront, and boarded trains that would take them to the US 7th Infantry Division’s base at Camp Fuji, near Gotemba for training (Kabasawa, 2007b: 47). Many of these were young men had been rounded up more or less at random from the streets of Busan: “in the contingents shipped to Japan, schoolboys still had their schoolbooks; one recruit who had left home to obtain medicine for his sick wife still had the medicine with him” (Appleman, 1987: 386). In all, over 8,600 KATUSA recruits would be brought to Japan for a rather cursory period of training before being sent into the maelstrom of the Incheon Landing in September.

Other US bases, at Asaka in Saitama Prefecture and Beppu in Ōita Prefecture, were being used to train the Zainichi Koreans who had volunteered to fight on the South Korean side in the war. When the Korean Resident’s League [Mindan] issued a call for volunteers to the Korean community in Japan, despite widespread opposition to the war and considerable support for the Northern side amongst Koreans in Japan, they anticipated recruiting tens of thousands of soldiers. But the US military were wary of the whole process, in part at least because they feared it would encourage supporters of North Korea to start a rival movement to recruit volunteers for the North. In the end just 642 Zainichi Korean recruits were sent to the front, where they participated in some of the fiercest conflicts of the war. 135 were killed or went missing in action. By the time the war had ended, the occupation of Japan had come to an end too. Japan, having regained its sovereignty, had unilaterally rescinded the Japanese nationality of colonial era migrants to Japan, and about half of the surviving Zainichi Korean recruits found themselves debarred from returning to the country where they had been grown up and recruited for service (Kim, 2007).

The disorienting journey of the young Korean KATUSA recruits was mirrored by the experience of a number of young Japanese who found themselves unexpectedly transported from US bases in Japan to the Korean battlefront. Not long after the end of the allied occupation of Japan in 1952, the Asahi newspaper published an article about a 29-year-old Tokyo man named Hiratsuka Shigeharu, who had died fighting with US forces in the Korean War in September 1950. Hiratsuka, a painter employed at a US military base in Japan, had gone to Korea with US troops from his base following the outbreak of the war on 25 June 1950, and was believed to have been killed in action not far from Seoul. Hiratsuka’s father sought an explanation and compensation from the US occupation forces, but was told that his son had traveled to Korea illegally and without authorization, and had never been an official member of the UN/US forces in Korea. His family was therefore not entitled to any military benefits. A follow up article published in the Asahi the next day reported that Yoshiwara Minefumi and two other young men from Oita Prefecture had also disappeared after going to Korea with the American Forces.

The occupation authorities (Supreme Command Allied Powers, SCAP) were very well aware of the story of Hiratsuka. Since US strategy had determined that Japanese in the Korean War zone were, as far as possible, to be kept at sea, reports that Japanese were in fact accompanying US military units onto Korea soil, and that some might have died in land battles on the Korean Peninsula, risked (as one army memo put it) causing ‘serious international complications,’ and around the end of 1950, a top secret US military investigation was launched to examine the matter.

The inquiry confirmed the death of Hiratsuka, but was unable to determine the fate of Yoshiwara, who had apparently been killed, wounded or captured near Daejeon on 20 July while working for the US 24th Infantry Division. All US divisions in Korea were then ordered to find out whether they had any Japanese nationals in their ranks, and if so to place them in ‘protective custody’ and repatriate them to Japan. On their return, the repatriated Japanese were questioned, fingerprinted, offered jobs with the occupation forces on Japanese soil, and firmly instructed never to tell anyone about their experiences in Korea. Declassified US records show
that by the middle of 1952, 118 Japanese serving with US units in Korea had been repatriated.

Most of these Japanese base workers had been ‘houseboys’ (a term then widely applied to adult male servants), cooks, drivers, repair workers or (in a few cases) interpreters in Japan. But when they got to Korea, a number of them found themselves carrying weapons and engaging in combat. One man, for example, was taken along by his company because they thought he might be able to help them as an interpreter. After landing in Busan, he traveled with the American troops from to Daejeon, where ‘the unit was hit by the enemy and about half were killed or wounded .... At eight o’clock at night I lay down in a rice paddy because of the enemy all around .... I stayed in the rice paddy all night.’ He then walked for ‘three or four days,’ by which time he had lost contact with his unit, with whom he was only reunited several days later. At some point in his journey he was ‘grazed across the face by two burp gun bullets’ and treated on the spot. He told his interviewers that he had been issued with a carbine, and ‘I used it all the time. I don’t know how many North Koreans I killed.’

To me the most disconcerting stories, though, were those of five children, most of them war orphans, who had been “adopted” by US military units in Japan as “mascots,” and then taken to the Korean battlefront when the unit was deployed to war. One of them was a child known to the Americans as “Jimmy,” whose parents had been killed in the bombing of Tokyo, and who had been taken to Korea at the age of ten by an American soldier whose name he did not know. After about one month he was abandoned by the soldier who had brought him there, and went to work as a houseboy for an officer in the 23rd Infantry. He moved repeatedly from one unit to another, and was at some point supplied with a gun with which he claimed to have shot and killed ‘three of four Chinese.’ He also said that he had been slightly wounded in one of the encounters. On his return to Japan, he was given $104 and (like all the others) an order never to speak about his experiences. He had no known family in Japan, and it is unclear what happened to him afterwards (Record of interview of Y.S., 1951).

**Prisoner no. 600,001**

At least two Japanese base workers taken to Korea with the US forces were taken prisoner and held in China or North Korea until the signing of the armistice in 1953. But it is the story of another Japanese prisoner-of-war that, I think, most vividly illustrates the complex continuities that linked Asia-Pacific War to Korean War. Matsushita Kazutoshi, a fisherman’s son from Kyushu, was fighting with the Chinese People’s Volunteers on the North Korean side in the war when he was captured by United Nations forces and incarcerated in Busan POW camp, where he remained until June 1953 (For further discussion see Morris-Suzuki, 2015). We do not know exactly how many Japanese fought on the North Korean side in the war—estimates range from a few dozen to around three hundred. Others—including doctors and nurses—served behind the lines in Northeastern China. All of them were Japanese soldiers or civilians left behind in China after the end of the Asia-Pacific War.

Matsushita had been recruited into Japan’s Kwantung Army in 1944, and had deserted while fighting with Japanese forces in China. He spent months hiding from both Chinese and Japanese forces in an abandoned village before being captured by the nationalist Chinese army soon after Japan’s surrender, and was then enrolled by them into the ranks of the Chinese Nationalist 74th Division, and given a Chinese name—Han Yisheng. Matsushita fought with the Chinese Nationalists in the civil war for three years before being in turn captured by Chinese communist forces at the major civil war battle of Menglianggu and enrolled into the ranks of the Chinese People’s Army. Initially he was well treated, and given the task of growing vegetables for his fellow soldiers, but after the outbreak of the Korean War he was incorporated into the Chinese People’s Volunteers, and, with other members of the Chinese Third
Army’s 20th Division’s 20th Army Corps, was sent across the Yalu River into battle on 10 December 1950.

Later, he would describe how the Chinese People’s Volunteers received extensive ideological education but were poorly equipped, often with old Japanese rifles, and had little training in military skills. As his Chinese division approached Wonsan, Matsushita again deserted, and somehow managed to walk almost all the way from Wonsan to Seoul before, in a state of collapse, surrendering to the United Nations Command on 24 May 1951. He was incarcerated in Busan prisoner of war camp, becoming the only Japanese POW to be held by the Southern side in the Korean War.

Despite appeals from his family, who believed that he had been killed in China until they were contacted by the Red Cross in 1952, and efforts at mediation by Japanese parliamentarian Nakayama Masa, Matsushita seems in effect to have been abandoned to his fate by the Japanese government. The United Nations Command also appears not to have known what to do with him. Matsushita thus became embroiled in the complex negotiations over the fate of prisoners of war—an issue that seriously delayed the signing of the Panmunjom Armistice. Eventually, before dawn on 18 June 1953, South Korean President Yi Seungman, who opposed the signing of the armistice, ordered South Korean guards at several POW camps to open the gates and allow a mass escape of almost 27,000 prisoners of war considered to be sympathetic to the South. One of them was Matsushita Kazutoshi, who walked out of Busan POW camp and straight into the arms of the South Korean military, who proceeded to enroll him into their ranks. They appear to have used him primarily for propaganda purposes, finally allowing his repatriation to Japan at the end of July 1954, a year after the end of the Korean War.

After his long war, Matsushita Kazutoshi lived for decades in his Kyushu birthplace, where he found work as a plumber. He married and had two sons, but barely spoke about his wartime experiences. The fisherman’s son from Miyazaki Prefecture had passed through the hands of all the major military forces in Northeast Asia, but, beyond a brief interview with the local newspaper in 1954, his own feelings towards them are shrouded in silence. When he died, his story, long forgotten by all except those who knew him personally, disappeared with him. In this respect too, Matsushita is perhaps symbolic. His journey strikes a discordant note, which cannot be harmonized with the dominant narrative of the war. It spreads untidily over the national and temporal borderlines with which we tame and constrain history. And for these reasons, it readily slips through the cracks of national memories of war.

In remembering the life of Matsushita Kazutoshi, and of the other border-crossers discussed in this paper we can, I think, find new ways to remember the Korean War. These memories remind us of the depth of Japan’s involvement in that war, and make us see the war as a truly regional event whose impact crossed boundaries of territory and time. For this very reason, the ongoing legacies of the unfinished Korean War also have implications that cross boundaries. Like my home country Australia, which was also a key combatant in the war, Japan—having been so deeply engaged in the conflict—shares with other combatant nations a responsibility to contribute to the quest for a long-delayed peace on the still divided Korean Peninsula.

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Australian National University