

Akihiro Yamaguchi

## The Importance of Mutual Understanding

One day in February 2003, I followed my parents and entered a large concrete building. As I walked around the bare building, I suddenly came upon terrible scenes. Melting skin, maggot-infested corpses and devastated land appeared. Everything seemed dark, the black and red of fire and blood. Oh my god, I thought. I have come to hell. I was so scared, and I could not stop myself from leaving the exhibition hall. I was in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

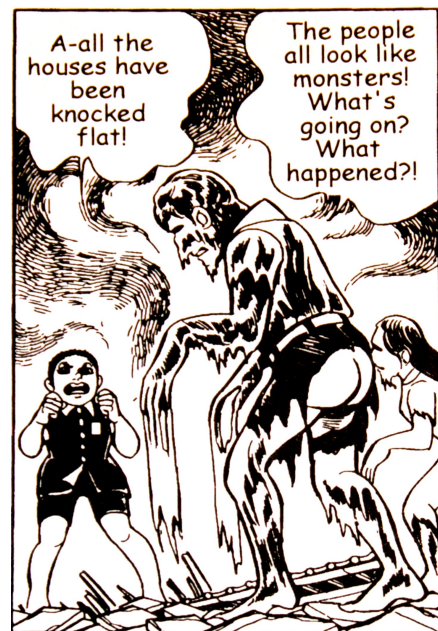


Fig.1 This “Barefoot Gen” comic frame represents the tragedy of the atomic bomb. (Nakazawa p254)

The exhibits emphasized the tragedy of the bombing, hoping for world peace, and they said that we must not repeat the same mistake anymore. Additionally, the bombing seemed depicted as an unprecedented act of terrorism against civilians shown from

the perspective of a victim.

Interestingly, history is one of the most invisible indications of culture, and it is strongly bonded to our patriotism, or the identity of citizens. Usually, most people are educated about their history, which was created by their ancestors and themselves, along with their culture. But we may not realize the difference in perspectives between our history and that of others. Sometimes, this unrecognized difference creates serious conflicts. Through my experiences in Japan and the U.S., I have noticed different perspectives about the atomic bomb and have realized the importance of understanding diverse viewpoints, in order to realize one's own potential cultural prejudice.

After I came to the United States in July 2010, I realized that the atomic bombing was widely justified in this country. The perspective on the atomic bombings which I learned in Japan is very different from that of this country. In 2009, lots of media in Japan emphasized President Obama's speech in Prague before the

summit of the U.S. and the European Union as a “change,” or the reflection of a change of American perspectives. He said, “As a nuclear power – as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon – the United States has a moral responsibility to act” (“Remarks of President Barack Obama”). Looking at media responses to the speech, many people in Japan could considered it a reflection of the United States’ repentance of past events. However, I realized this may not be true when I heard the objections to his speech in the U.S.

To learn about American perspectives about the bombing, we can read some high school textbooks used in the U.S. As we can see from one of them, *The American Promise*, the bombing seems to be depicted as the right decision, and this perspective has become commonly accepted by many American people. The book describes the atomic bombing as follows:

Truman made the decision to drop it on Japan to end the war quickly and to prevent an invasion of the home islands, which would have cost millions of lives. The war ended

quickly thereafter, with lives saved on both sides of the battlefield. After the explosion of the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese emperor asked that his people end their fight. World War II thus came to an end. (“Atomic Warfare”)

From the textbook or the representations of Hiroshima like in Fig.1, it seems possible to simply justify or condemn the bombing. However, we should not do so easily based only on a single perspective. The problem is not just about the bombings. Even now, I have a lot of things to learn, and I cannot justify anything. The more I learn about it, the more complex it seems. Because of the complexity and the ambiguity of the atomic bomb’s meanings related to different nationalisms, it is very hard to see the facts, the real purpose and background of it.

To this day, many people in the two nations often discuss the justice or injustice based on their experiences, but they cannot reach a settlement. Even today, if someone tries to justify or condemn the historical events in terms of only their national perspective, it inevitably will create antagonism.

We need to think about the purposes of how history is depicted, and realize the way nationalism is created based on historical representations. We need to think about the purposes, the reasons why some histories try to justify national actions. This may be a good way to know about the invisible nationalism within our histories. If possible, we should go to historical sites and learn different perspectives to understand how others look at the same events. This is one of the best ways to reduce conflicts and increase mutual understanding.

Back in the museum, I left the fearsome exhibits, and waited until my parents came out. We left the museum. I felt a cool breeze, and walked through the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. It took a while to be free from the fear and get to sleep that day. Looking at the ceiling in bed, I started thinking. Why was the depiction of the exhibit so graphic and scary? And still, I am thinking.

## Works Cited

- “Atomic Warfare.” *The American Promise: A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES*. James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, Susan M. Hartmann, eds. Bedford/St. Martin’s. Web. 21 Oct. 2010. <[http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/history/cap/con\\_index.htm?25](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/history/cap/con_index.htm?25)>
- Buruma, Ian. *The Wages Of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*. New York: HarperCollinsCanadaLtd, 1994. Print.
- Fujiwara, Kiichi. “Sensou wo kiokusuru” 戦争を記憶する. Tokyo: Koudansya Gendai Shinsyo 講談社現代新書, 2001. Print.
- Nakazawa, Keiji. *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima volume 1*. San Francisco: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 2004. Print.
- “Remarks of President Barack Obama” Embassy of the United States. The United States of America. 5 April. 2009. Web. 21

Oct. 2010 <<http://prague.usembassy.gov/obama.html>>

[Undergraduate Diversity Conference Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)