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The Straits of Dead Souls: One Man’s Investigation into the Disappearance of Mitsubishi Hiroshima’s Korean Forced Labourers

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In the early 1970s, Fukagawa Munetoshi began to investigate the disappearance, a month after the end of World War II, of a group of Korean forced labourers who had worked at Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima Shipyard. His account presents a complex picture of the working class in Japan during wartime and the immediate postwar period, as well as the Japanese colonial system for obtaining forced labour in Korea. It also raises serious questions about the responsibilities, past and present, of Japanese authorities in government and big business toward wartime Korean forced labourers. Fukagawa’s story draws on his experience as a former Mitsubishi employee and atomic bomb survivor, and also his cultural awareness and criticism of Japanese chauvinism. His account provides an alternative view of the Hiroshima atomic bombing from the perspective of a group of Korean hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors) who did not see themselves at that time as ‘victims’ of American military might, but instead of Japanese military conquest and occupation, even though the subsequent destructive health effects of radiation sickness changed their view in later decades.

In the early 1970s, peace activist and tanka poet Fukagawa Munetoshi began to investigate the disappearance of 246 Koreans who tried to return to their homeland from Japan after World War II.1 Of this group, 240 had worked as forced labour at the Mitsubishi Hiroshima Shipyard during the last years of the war. The remaining six were family members, only one of whom had a connection with the shipyard. Fukagawa published his account in 1974 as Umi ni keta ni hibaku Chōsenjin chōyōkō—Chinkon no kaikyō (Straits of Dead Souls—The Korean Forced Labourers, Survivors of the Atomic Bomb, Who Vanished into the Sea). Fukagawa’s narrative is that of an atomic bomb survivor who was Japanese, a hibakusha, but someone who also was a Japanese supervisor of these Koreans, and thus indirectly part of the apparatus of control over forced labourers. The tension created by these contradictory roles runs through his entire account. Although it is only one man’s investigation, it is a firsthand account of a microcosm of the working class world of Koreans and Japanese inside the Mitsubishi Shipyard complex in Hiroshima; the situation of Korean families living under Japanese military rule in Korea and Japan; and zaibatsu—government collusion to maintain control over a militarized society at war, followed by corporate—government collusion to resist full

1 Fukagawa worked at Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima Shipyard from July 1945 to 1949. From the early 1950s he ran a small printing shop that produced name cards. Starting in 1974 he worked at Kyoritsu Hospital until retiring. In these decades he devoted much of his time to writing poetry and assisting the anti-nuclear weapons movement with its strong popular base in Hiroshima (anonymous Hiroshima peace activist email, 17 May 2006).
revelation of this sordid history. His story is an investigation not only of events from the 1940s, but also the subsequent cover-up and the responses to the cover-up through legal action and social movement mobilization that sought justice and compensation for these forced labourers.

The issue of compensation for wartime forced labour—including foreign forced workers from Poland and Russia—has been researched for decades among historians of the Third Reich. In contrast to their Korean counterparts, foreign forced labourers who worked in Nazi Germany have had some success in their pursuit of wage compensation from German companies. According to William Underwood, the ‘Remembrance, Responsibility and the Future’ Foundation, established in 2000, made it possible to direct some $6 billion to these former workers, with funds provided by the German federal government and more than 6,500 industrial enterprises. As these ‘payments drew to a close in late 2005, about 1.6 million forced labour victims and their heirs had received individual apologies and symbolic compensation of up to $10,000’.2 Scholars of German history tend to be equally divided on the ‘forced labour as slavery’ debate, while scholars of Japanese history almost universally reject the ‘slavery’ analysis, even though policies toward and conditions of foreign forced labourers in Japan and Germany were virtually identical.3 There still is a certain reluctance on the part of some Japanese historians to compare the German and Japanese wartime experiences of forced labour and the broader implications for identifying the character of the Japanese system of political economy as fascist or not.

Even though the political philosopher Maruyama Masao decisively stated in the late 1940s and 1950s that Japan was indeed fascist, it is only recently that a minority of scholars who focus on Japan have returned to this conclusion. Andrew Gordon comments that ‘few Western scholars of Japan use the term fascism to describe wartime Japan’, but he adds that ‘I have spoken of fascism in these last chapters in hopes of reopening the issue of its conceptual relevance to Japan’.4 More recently, a number of scholars in Japan, the United States, and Germany have explored the connections among Germany, Japan, and Italy, focusing on specific features of Japanese fascism involving ideology, political systems, and nativist religion.5

Fukagawa’s published investigation adds to the extensive literature in Japanese relating the personal experiences of hibakusha, the people who lived through the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some of the most significant hibakusha accounts and evidence have been translated into English.6 His publication also broadens our understanding of Hiroshima’s—and Japan’s—wartime and immediate postwar social and labour history, especially the experiences of Korean forced

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2 Underwood, ‘Mitsubishi’; Marek, ‘Final Compensation’.
3 For the German scholarly literature and debate, see Herbert, Hitler’s Foreign Workers; and Roth, ‘Unfree Labour’.
4 Maruyama, ‘Fascism—Some Problems’; Gordon, Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan, 33, 302–342. For arguments rejecting wartime Japan as fascist, see, for example, Duus and Okimoto, ‘Fascism and the History of Prewar Japan’.
5 Reynolds, Japan in the Fascist Era.
6 See, for example, Nagai, The Bells of Nagasaki; Ibuse, Black Rain; and Committee for the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A full discussion of the massive number of historical, political, social, and cultural publications related to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is beyond the scope of this article. For some sense of the complexity of this subject, see Hogan, Hiroshima in History and Memory.
labourers. The challenge is to expand this historical scholarship to include more of the
information compiled by Japanese community-based investigators and writers such as
Fukagawa.

The Mitsubishi Hiroshima Shipyard during Wartime
and Hiroshima’s Koreans

Mitsubishi was the most important zaibatsu involved in wartime production in Japan. As
a private company, it was contracted by the Japanese government to build one of the
country’s most important warplanes, the Zero, and it had major manufacturing plants
that produced munitions and military vehicles. Mitsubishi’s huge construction shipyards
in Nagasaki, Kobe, Yokohama, and Shimonoseki, which built 22% of all Japanese naval
tonnage from 1941 to 1945, constituted a core part of the company’s industrial empire.8
World War II’s largest battleships, the sister ships Musashi and Yamato, were built sepa-
rately at the Mitsubishi Nagasaki Shipyard and at the government-owned Kure Naval
Shipyard. Mitsubishi also had many far smaller construction and repair yards, which
included its Hiroshima Shipyard.

Although Hiroshima had become the centre for the Japanese Imperial Army head-
quarters in Southern Honshu during the Meiji Era, the city did not have the level of
military and naval production that characterized many other Japanese ports, such as
Yokosuka; Tokyo and other cities in Kantō; those in the Osaka/Kobe region; Nagasaki
and Sasebo in Kyushu. Hiroshima prefecture, however, included the Kure Naval Base
and its massive government shipyard that was the largest in wartime East Asia and
employed 29,000 by 1944.9 Many infrastructure projects in Hiroshima prefecture and
its Inland Sea islands just off the coast also required large numbers of workers.

The demand for labour in Japan during the 1930s, when the country was moving to
full scale war with China, could not be met solely by native-born Japanese. Koreans
became the main immigrant group to fill this vacuum. Their migration commenced
decades earlier when Korea became annexed and occupied by Japan, which disrupted
and impoverished Korean agricultural villages while also creating opportunities abroad
in the heartland of the empire. Initially, Korean labourers came as free migrants, but
later many became victims of deceptive recruiters and captive worksites that were little
more than modified slave labour camps. Some Koreans travelled to Japan to study in
high schools and universities, while others migrated voluntarily as families to avoid con-
scription. In 1920, Hiroshima prefecture had only 1,173 Koreans; by 1930 their
numbers had reached 11,136, and by 1935, 17,000.10

7 For Korean forced labourers in Japan, see, for example, the Investigation Team on the Truth about
Forced Korean Labourers in Japan published by Kashishobō (Tokyo). The series includes volumes on
Shikoku (1992), Osaka (1993), Chūgoku, including Hiroshima prefecture (2001), and Kantō (2002),
as well as ones on Hyōgo and Chūbu. Other publications not in this series include Jōdo, Chōsenjin no
kyōsei renkō to chōyō; and Kantō, Chūgokujin kyōsei renkō. The best English language legal history of the
Japanese system of forced labour is Schmidt, ‘Japan’s Wartime Compensation’. For works specifically
on Koreans in Hiroshima in wartime, see, for example, Suzuki, Kankoku no Hiroshima; Pak, Chōsen
Hiroshima han-Nihonjin; and Hiroshima no Kyōsei Renkō o Chōsasuru Kai (ed.), Chikagō ni uzumoreta.
For Japanese labour history in English, see, for example, Garon, The State and Labor in Modern Japan; and
Moore, Japanese Workers and the Struggle for Power. For social history of Koreans in Japan, see Weiner,
Race and Migration in Imperial Japan; and Smith, ‘Ethnicity, Class and Gender in the Mines’.
8 The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Japanese Naval Shipbuilding, 7.
9 Ibid.
10 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 109. Fukagawa quotes a Zainichi Korean source for these figures.
In *Chinkon no kaikyō*, Fukagawa provides a brief history, with some statistical details, of the violent occupation of Korea by the Japanese military and the upheaval resulting from changes in village agriculture and land ownership. Hundreds of thousands of Koreans left their villages for the cities, but also migrated to Japan to escape hunger and to seek employment. Korean workers who faced bad working conditions in Japanese mines, construction sites, and industry organized labour resistance, but the Japanese authorities in Korea and in Japan sought to control them through pro-imperial organizations under the rubric *Kyo¯wa Kai* (*cooperation associations*). Police kept a close eye on these organizations based in the Korean population, particularly in Japan. Korean leaders of *Kyo¯wa Kai* assisted Japanese authorities in maintaining order and control over Korean workers below them. Fukagawa relates that the Hiroshima *Kyo¯wa Kai* remained in existence throughout the war, but was generally recognized as a police-enforced surveillance organization.

By the early 1940s, deception in recruiting turned toward overt coercion, with the introduction of full scale forced labour roundups, euphemistically labelled conscription, which replaced voluntary migration for the most part. This labour policy was considered kidnapping by most Koreans who were not collaborators with Japanese authorities. By 1944, Hiroshima prefecture had 81,863 resident Koreans. This number declined to 60,000 by 1945 as many Koreans found their way back to their homeland as a result of the devastation of Hiroshima prefecture’s regional cities like Kure and Fukuyama from American incendiary bombing, and finally the atomic bombing of Hiroshima city, where roughly half to two thirds of the prefecture’s Koreans may have lived.

Not all Koreans in Hiroshima at the end of the war were forced labourers. Some early migrants became well established, such as the older brother of Choi Il-Chul, who excelled as a well-paid engineer in a local military factory. Among Koreans, the top of the hierarchy included those not even in the working class or middle class. Hiroshima was the adopted home of Prince Eun Yi, who belonged to the royal Korean House of Yia and who married into the Japanese Imperial family after Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910.

The forced labour campaigns began around 1939 and contributed to the doubling of Hiroshima prefecture’s Korean population within four years. Throughout Japan by 1944 there were 286,472 Korean forced labourers. This was the largest number for any single year. Of these, the greatest number—157,795—were employed in factory and non-mining, non-construction jobs. By early 1945, Mitsubishi Hiroshima employed 2,600 Korean forced labourers. This was about half of the company’s total workers at that location.

Korean forced labourers who came to Mitsubishi against their will were told by Japanese authorities in Korea that they would receive pay for their work, with half being paid to them in Japan and the remaining half sent to their families in Korea. Koreans in Mitsubishi Hiroshima never saw the full ‘half’ payment meant to go to them directly, while their families received little or nothing of the other half. Tracking...
where this money actually went was the subject of a major 1993 NHK television
documentary, which found that the funds appear to have been diverted through Japanese
government agencies into secret bank accounts. Legal efforts to recover lost wage pay-
ments have been unsuccessful in Japan, although a South Korean government-sponsored
investigative team began their own inquiry independently in 2005.

Although Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima operation was small compared to its other shipyards,
Koreans at Hiroshima, in contrast to Mitsubishi’s Nagasaki yard and the government-
owned Kure Naval yard, performed many types of work from labourer to skilled
positions. In Nagasaki Koreans were confined solely to labourer jobs; Koreans at Kure
were excluded entirely from the construction yard and confined to digging air raid
trenches and tunnels in the surrounding hills and harbour islands. The Nagasaki and
Kure yards had extremely high security, with special fences and screens that hid views
of construction of the battleships Musashi and Yamato even from local Japanese residents.
At Mitsubishi Hiroshima, however, Koreans and Japanese worked almost as equals in the
workplace despite their difference in working status (‘free’ and ‘unfree’) and ethnic
ranking (‘superior’ and ‘inferior’).

During the height of the Pacific War (1941 to 1945), there were no independent
unions at the Mitsubishi Hiroshima Shipyard because all worker organizations through-
out Japan became subsumed under the government-run Industrial Patriotic Association
(Sanpō), which was dominated in large enterprises by bureaucrats and company manage-
ment. According to Andrew Gordon, this destruction of labour rights and political acti-
vism signalled the rise of imperial fascism. Any independent worker organization that
evolved by the end of the war arose secretly or out of indigenous local solidarity, some-
thing that emerged among some of the Korean forced labourers at Mitsubishi Hiroshima
if we accept Fukagawa’s account.

**Hiroshima’s Korean Forced Labourers at Mitsubishi—Resistance and Solidarity**

Korean and Japanese workers at the Mitsubishi Hiroshima Shipyard lived in separate
dormitories next to the industrial complex. The Korean dormitory had both Japanese
and Korean supervisors who worked in pairs. Effective control in the workplace at
Mitsubishi relied on Korean leaders of groups of Korean forced labourers, and these
leaders appear to have been drawn from Hiroshima’s longer-term young Korean male
residents who were fluent in both Korean and Japanese.

At the age of 24, Fukagawa had supervisory responsibility in one of the Korean
dormitories, which gave him direct contact with one group of Korean forced labourers. However, he did not enter Mitsubishi until July 1945, barely a month before the atomic
bombing and the end of the war. At the start of the Pacific War he graduated from the
Kaigun Hōjutsu Gakkō (Naval Gunnery School) in Yokohama, and then was transferred
to Chintao, China, under the Imperial Navy. He contracted tuberculosis and was sent
back to Japan, where he spent six months recuperating in a hospital in Shikoku.

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19 NHK, *Kankoku kyōsei renkō no kiroku*.
20 Yamada interview.
21 Yamada interview; Nagasaki interviews; Kure interviews. For working conditions and high security at
Mitsubishi’s Nagasaki Shipyard, see Yoshimura, *Battleship Musashi*.
23 Fukagawa, *Chinkon no kaikyō*, 21; Anonymous Hiroshima peace activist emails, 14 May, 1 June 2006.
1945, all males who could enter the military were required to serve, except those like Fukagawa who had an illness of some type, and were sent into alternative facilities. Fukagawa initially was redeployed to a food centre for the military, and then fulltime to Mitsubishi.

Fukagawa’s Korean supervisory assistant was No Song-ock, whose family had moved to Hiroshima during the early 1930s. By the 1940s, No Song-ock’s family in Hiroshima included his mother, his younger sister, his older brother No Chyangsoo, and three other relatives. Song-ock did not reside at the dormitory, which was surrounded by barbed wire, watchtowers, and patrols, but lived instead in Fukushima-chō in Nishi-ku (Western Ward) of Hiroshima city. Within Mitsubishi he went by the Japanese name of Yoshikawa Hideo. He did not work in the shipyard and was not a forced labourer, but conducted administrative duties (under the title chuītaichō) in the dormitory office.

By July he was working with Fukagawa, who by that time had been transferred. Both of them checked all Korean forced labourers in their dormitory in the morning and evening to ensure all were present. Song-ock’s level of responsibility included being ordered by Mitsubishi to oversee the return of 420 Korean forced labourers during the immediate aftermath of the war. This company directive violated Japanese government regulations that ‘companies employing Korean forced labourers must take responsibility when they are sent from Korea’, meaning that Mitsubishi’s Japanese management, not a Korean, should have leadership over a new group. Regardless of Song-ock’s control function over his fellow Koreans, he appears to have been viewed by them as their leader because they respected his fairness toward them.24

Song-ock’s brother, No Chyangsoo, had lived in Hiroshima since he was 14, and by the 1940s was working as a barber in a local Hiroshima shop. He also had been in the Hiroshima prefecture leadership of the Kyoūwa Kai for a number of years, and had regular contact with police and the military. If Song-ock had been older, he too would have been in the Kyoūwa Kai.25

Although Koreans and Japanese worked together in the workshops and shipyard, with some Koreans performing basic manual labour and others involved in skilled work, the separate living quarters of the Koreans and Japanese seem to have reinforced the deep cultural divide.26 In the last year of the war, resistance developed among the Korean workers against their oppressive conditions, but this resistance grew from their special condition as forced labourers. In his account, Fukagawa gives no indication of Japanese worker resistance to authority, or of Koreans and Japanese making common cause against the company and police authorities. Although the resistance of the Koreans did have a class character, it was fundamentally nationalist, at complete odds with Japanese authority and identity.

There were a number of Japanese supervisors in the two Korean dormitories, which had adjacent cafeterias and were designated exclusively for Korean forced labourers. In contrast to other Japanese supervisors, Fukagawa had a deep sympathy for the Koreans under him. Japanese workers (with normal status) slept in two separate dormitories in other locations. Koreans lived and worked under brutal conditions, with company police punishing rule violations with beatings, sometimes using a metal bar. Koreans were confined to dormitory facilities when not on their jobs, and were

24 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 21, 65; Anonymous Hiroshima peace activist email, 30 June 2005, 14 February, 30, 31 May, 1, 2, 17 June 2006.
25 Ibid.
only allowed two holidays a month if permission was granted and their leader followed them.  

The resistance of Koreans inside Mitsubishi resulted not only from bad conditions in the shipyard, dorms, and cafeterias, but also because many Koreans were becoming increasingly conscious of the pending Japanese defeat. No Song-ock was able to have many conversations with Fukagawa about questions that were being generally discussed among the Koreans themselves because they worked together in the office and Song-ock had the relative freedom of not being confined to the company dormitory. Furthermore, the fact that his older brother, No Chyangsoo, held a leadership position in the Hiroshima Kyōwa Kai would have given him protection in what he said and confidence to say it, compared to common forced labourers with no status or independence. Song-ock’s discussions with Fukagawa related to this growing open discontent. How could Japan possibly win, Song-ock argued, given the declining living conditions in Hiroshima, the news that the US had defeated the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy in the Battle of Okinawa, and the fact generally known by all that most Japanese cities had been destroyed by the incendiary bomb campaign beginning in 1944?  

Fukagawa describes arguments and fights that erupted between the Japanese and Korean workers at Mitsubishi, which occurred before his arrival. In one incident, Koreans in the Western Dormitory Cafeteria were told that there were shortages of basic food provisions, including red peppers, rice, and other staples. But some Korean workers talked with food providers for the company and discovered that these items were being held in the storehouse and that Japanese workers were getting full provisions. After arguments between Koreans and Japanese broke out, the company distributed equal provisions to all groups. In the ensuing days, however, Korean workers found that a Japanese cook at the Western Dormitory Cafeteria was continuing to serve Koreans less food by giving them smaller bowls. Then on a Sunday when all workers had a day free from work, four Korean workers passed the time in the cafeteria drinking alcohol. This cook saw them and then secretly telegraphed the police, but some Koreans observed what he was doing through a kitchen window. The police put out a warrant for the arrest of the four, but the Koreans evaded the police. They then confronted the Japanese cook, and a fierce argument followed. The Japanese cook shouted that Japan had the power to kill those Koreans who refused to follow the authorities, but the Koreans yelled back that they could kill far more Japanese than the Japanese could kill Koreans. The Koreans then attacked the cook, resulting in his death.  

No Song-ock’s brother No Chyangsoo heard about the incidents in the Western Dormitory. Out of concern for the Koreans under Song-ock’s supervision, he went to the police to try to negotiate some type of truce, including not arresting those accused of murder. The police listened to him, but went to the Western Dormitory Cafeteria anyway to arrest the four. When the police arrived the scene was completely calm, even though a few Japanese were present among some 500 Koreans eating their evening meal. Chyangsoo came with the police and spoke to them in front of all the workers present. He explained that the cafeteria social environment was peaceful and that everyone was getting along well. The police seemed to have understood that arresting the four would not be wise given their support among of the hundreds of

27 Fukagawa interview; Yamada interview; Anonymous Hiroshima peace activist email, 30 June 2006.
28 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 11–15, 16–21, 48–53.
29 Ibid., 50–53.
Korean workers present. When the police left without making any arrests, all workers in the cafeteria warmly welcomed the outcome for their four free comrades. Fukagawa relates this remarkable account without any disapproval of the Koreans’ actions (though not explicitly supporting the violence either). He portrays these workers as more than just victims by concretely showing how they stood together both as workers and as Koreans.

There were other types of resistance by Korean forced labourers at Mitsubishi not detailed by Fukagawa. One example involved the well respected family of Choi Il-chul. All of the Chois were free Koreans living in Hiroshima during the militarist and wartime eras. Il-chul’s oldest brother was a highly paid engineer in a military factory. His father was fluent in Japanese and helped Koreans living in the city to read and write Japanese. At the same time, his father also made their large house into a secret hiding place for Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers who had run away. Il-chul’s second floor room became the best place for these workers to hide until his father could find them road construction jobs in other cities. His mother also regularly gave rice to the forced labourers who suffered from food shortages in the factories. The No family, with No Song-ock as a Mitsubishi dormitory supervisor and No Chyangsoo as a Kyōwa Kai leader working with the authorities, and the Choi family, with their middle class respectability, both played a dual role essential to Korean resistance against the Japanese police and zaibatsu management. Fukagawa’s identification with the Korean resistance in Hiroshima is just as significant, because in it were the seeds of the radical Japanese labour movement that would overtake Japan by 1946. Fukagawa identified with the Koreans not only on the basis of their being oppressed as Koreans, but also because they were workers who resisted the police and military, and the control of big business managers who profited from the labour of the Koreans who were treated as no more than slaves.

From the Atomic Bombing to the Departure Home to Korea

When Hiroshima was hit with the atomic bomb on 6 August 1945, the Mitsubishi shipyard and factory were 4 kilometres from the hypocentre. That morning, Fukagawa and No Chyangsoo were talking together in the West Dormitory supervisors’ office. At 8:15 an intense, soundless flash lit everything up around them. Seconds later, the full force of the atomic wind from the blast hit the buildings as both Fukagawa and No Chyangsoo cried out in amazement and terror. This one moment in time—experiencing the horrible atomic bombing of Hiroshima together in that office—created a bond between the two men that could not be severed.

The main structures of the industrial plant, offices, and dormitories were not damaged, but the force of the blast shattered all window glass and created havoc inside the buildings. Many Mitsubishi workers suffered from glass injuries, but none died in the immediate explosion because of the plant’s distance from the hypocentre. Fukagawa recalls that after the blast he immediately went to the dormitory and gathered all the workers together and then waited in a protected area for a number of hours. Later in the day, Fukagawa and others ventured out into the destruction in search of their family members. About half of the Korean workers took advantage of the confusion

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30 Ibid.
32 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 12.
and escaped, while the rest stayed near the dormitories back at the shipyard. As he walked through the devastated city, Fukagawa saw ‘crowds of living, walking dead’. This ‘living dead’ image pervades Japanese hibakusha testimonies, but it contrasts significantly with the Koreans’ complex feelings at that time of both desperation and liberation.

That evening Fukagawa returned to the dormitory to discover that the Korean workers under his supervision were celebrating their freedom around burning metal oil drums, a scene at total odds with the catastrophic suffering in the surrounding rubble and firestorms of Hiroshima city. When Fukagawa retold this story in a 2004 interview, he clearly understood the Koreans’ sentiment, even if it was the opposite of the terror and devastation felt by the Japanese of Hiroshima, including himself. The Korean workers suffered mainly from serious glass injuries from the explosion, which required medical attention, as Hara Hiroko, a young Japanese nurse working in the nearby infirmary servicing Mitsubishi, recalls. She also remembers that the Korean workers received inferior treatment after the atomic explosion, as they had before the bomb was dropped.

In the weeks that followed, a group of 240 Koreans from the West Dormitory who had remained in Hiroshima made departure plans to return to their homeland. Their leader was No Song-ock, who had supervised their dormitory with Fukagawa. Song-ock decided to leave in advance of the group in order to try to locate a boat that would take them over to Pusan, Korea. On the evening of 12 September, he wrote to Fukagawa about his plans and that he intended to leave for Shimonoseki on the morning of the 13th. The group of 240 Korean workers left Mitsubishi’s West Dormitory at 10:00 am on 15 September, and after a long walk met No Chyangsoo, the two brothers’ mother, their younger sister, and three other No family members. Fukagawa also met the departing group. No Chyangsoo stayed behind as the 1:30 pm Shimonoseki-bound train left the station. This was the last that Fukagawa would know of the 246 Koreans, until 1973 when he again located No Chyangsoo, who had departed later for Korea.

Two Decades Later—Fukagawa’s Investigation Begins

In the aftermath of World War II, Fukagawa was able to retain his position at the Mitsubishi Hiroshima Shipyard. Like many working class intellectuals of the immediate postwar period, he was drawn into the leftwing trade union and political movements. The Hiroshima Shipyard became one of the centres of trade union organizing in the city, with its main leadership coming from new Japanese Communist Party (JCP) members. In 1949 and 1950, however, businesses acting with the approval of the Japanese government and the American-led Occupation authorities under General Douglas MacArthur carried out extensive ‘red purges’, mass firings of any workers suspected of supporting the left. In Hiroshima, Fukagawa and others in the recently formed peace and anti-nuclear weapons movement became involved in the protests against Japanese government support for US-led forces in the Korean War. Fukagawa and many others lost their jobs at Mitsubishi as a result, but continued their activism on behalf of the labour and peace movements.
Political activism and creative and artistic writing have been intertwined in Fukagawa's career since the end of World War II. At that time he began writing poetry, as well as political pamphlets and articles, some of which were published by Akahata (Red Flag), the JCP national newspaper, and some of which were published independently. His political perspective was very broad, however, and his writings supported all aspects of the peace, trade union, and anti-nuclear weapons movements rather than any particular ideological position. In later years, his elder brother, who worked for the regional newspaper Chūgoku Shinbun, helped him get articles published. From the 1950s on, he continued to write his particular form of tanka poetry that dealt with the experiences of ordinary people and the tragedy of war, written in an accessible style known as tsuji shi ('street poetry'). His published account of the Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers’ fate, with a number of his poems interspersed in the prose text, is an example of his writing style and makes the work far more than just a narrative of events and individuals.

By the late 1960s, Japan became swept up in the international protest movement against the American role in the Vietnam War, increasing the number of those involved in peace activism in Japan. Fukagawa’s continued connections with Japanese workers that went back to the 1940s, as well as his connections to Korean rights organizations, led him in 1967 to play a key role in getting the Hiroshima Peace Movement to seriously investigate the situation of Korean forced labourers during the Pacific War. As a result, he returned to the problem of trying to solve the mystery of the Mitsubishi Korean workers under his supervision who had disappeared in September 1945.

Fukagawa began his investigation by searching for documentary evidence related to all the Korean forced labourers at Hiroshima Mitsubishi. He first researched through Mitsubishi’s annual reports on the shipyard, which included employee statistics. After the atomic bombing, the company claimed in their reports that they had difficulty in fully ascertaining how many of its employees had been killed in the explosion and aftermath, but it estimated that some 500 Koreans working for the company eventually died. This would have to have been from radiation, not the immediate blast and fires of 6 August, given eyewitness accounts and physical evidence indicating minimal casualties due to the plant’s distance from the hypocentre.

However, Fukagawa needed actual employee names, not just company statistics. In Mitsubishi’s 1962 and 1964 annual reports, he discovered that the company kept a detailed registry of Korean forced labourers’ names in their records warehouse titled hanto ochoyoshi, literally meaning ‘peninsula [Korea] conscripted men’. He also discovered a ‘white paper’ kept secret during the war that listed those who worked in a place codenamed ‘Hiro 8501 Factory’, the company’s Hiroshima complex, which no doubt included the wartime name registry of hanto ochoyoshi. He then found that the authorities kept records on Korean discontent and incidents at Hiroshima Mitsubishi. However, when the company’s 1968 annual report was issued he read that Mitsubishi claimed it routinely disposed of the hanto ochoyoshi registry kept for decades. Mitsubishi could therefore say that after 1968 it had no knowledge of what happened to the 240 missing Koreans who had worked in the Hiroshima complex.

During the 1960s, Koreans living in Japan who had been exposed to the atomic bomb increasingly raised protests and legal cases and formed organizations to address

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38 Fukagawa interview; Anonymous Hiroshima peace activist email, 17 May 2006.
39 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 30.
40 Ibid., 53, 54.
41 Ibid., 16–21, 53, 54.
the Japanese government’s failure to fully provide for their medical care and compensation, benefits which were automatically given to Japanese hibakusha. As a result of these efforts, during the early 1970s many Korean atomic bomb victims who had returned home after the war came back to Japan seeking medical treatment. Fukagawa, Yumi Aihara, and many other peace activists in Hiroshima tried to help these Korean visitors by creating more public awareness of their difficult situation. In early 1973, Fukagawa decided to move beyond documents and reports in Hiroshima by retracing the route taken by the 240 Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers and six No family members who had vanished in September 1945. His journey drew on eyewitness accounts from people who had lived in locations where the 246 might have been and on the company and newspaper documentary evidence he had researched. He evaluated various hypotheses, some put forward by these eyewitnesses, to test which were probable and which were not.

While Fukagawa knew that the Koreans had planned to travel by boat back to Korea after their departure from Hiroshima, he had doubts regarding their port of departure. No Song-ock had told him that they planned to leave from Senzaki Harbor on the southwestern coast of Yamaguchi prefecture, and that they were going to travel there by rail from the major Honshu city of Shimonoseki just opposite Kyushu. The small port of Senzaki was a major point of departure for many Koreans at the end of the war. An American naval vessel that landed at the harbour in August 1945 after the Japanese surrender had encountered many former Korean forced labourers who were trying to return home. When Fukagawa arrived at Senzaki in 1973, an elderly Japanese man told him that the Korean refugee camps of that time were virtual concentration camps ‘overflowing with people’. This man believed that this chaos must have led to many individuals getting lost and would have explained the disappearance of the Hiroshima Korean workers. Thousands of Koreans used the confusion of the early Occupation period to remain in Japan under changed identity, while thousands of others in Korea found their way into Japan in search of jobs. Fukagawa, however, dismissed this theory as illogical given the group cohesion of the 246 and their determination to return home together. From others at Senzaki he heard that there had been a motorized boat disaster at that time, but he got differing accounts of where this ‘disaster’ had occurred, and he could locate no records of any such incident. Nevertheless, this alternative theory of a boat disaster seemed far more plausible to him.

Fukagawa found that his speculation about the Koreans boarding an ill-fated boat coincided with stories from older Japanese in Hiroshima prefecture, but initially these were little more than fragmentary rumours and distorted memories. These included one person who claimed that the boat had been hit by lightning, while another who asserted that there had been a rebellion in ‘the repatriation boat’, confusing the Koreans at the Hiroshima Mitsubishi Shipyard with a different event involving Korean forced labourers from Hokkaido.

No Chyangsoo’s Report and Fukagawa’s Reunion with Him

In September 1973, Fukagawa happened to read a newspaper story that included a letter by a Korean, none other than No Chyangsoo. Fukagawa had not seen him for 28 years and

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42 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 295, 296; Anonymous Hiroshima peace activist email, 12 February 2006.
43 Fukagawa, Chinkon no kaikyō, 54–60.
44 Ibid., 60–63.
had no idea where he lived. Chyangsoo’s story detailed his memories of the 246 Koreans, including the 240 forced labourers from Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima Shipyard, who had perished at sea after World War II trying to return home. Chyangsoo’s brother, No Song-ock, had written to the family back in Korea about their return travel plans. This correspondence indicated that Song-ock and the others had not departed from Senzaki Harbor on the western coast of Yamaguchi prefecture, as originally planned, but instead had met at Shimonoseki and from there had searched for an available departing boat. This information was entirely new to Fukagawa, since he had been unable to trace their return route after the dead end leads at Senzaki Harbor.45

One of Chyangsoo’s acquaintances had met Song-ock at Shimonoseki, and through this friend Chyangsoo learned of what Song-ock had encountered and what his alternative travel plans were. Song-ock had found that there were no boats they could board at Senzaki Harbor to take them over to Korea because of the huge demand at that port, and that no vessels would be available for at least a week. Song-ock knew that his group would have no money left by then, so he travelled back to Shimonoseki where he met the other 245 travellers at the rail station. They could not find an available boat at Shimonoseki either, and decided to cross over to the port at Tobata on Kyushu, a short distance west of Shimonoseki. At Tobata Harbor they found a captain of a fishing vessel weighing less than 100 tons who was willing to take them across to Korea. This boat would have been too small to safely hold 246 people and the crew, but in Japan during the early days of the Occupation people were desperate to make money, so this problem must have been ignored. Chyangsoo could find no one who knew the exact date of their Tobata departure, but he was certain that the entire group met at Shimonoseki and intended to remain together until they arrived home.46

After reading the newspaper account, Fukagawa telephoned Gimcheon City, South Korea to speak directly to Chyangsoo. When they spoke to each other, Chyangsoo remembered Fukagawa well, even though he could not recall his face. Chyangsoo indicated his appreciation on hearing from a Japanese person whom he could trust and explained that he had been conducting his own investigation into the disappearance of his brother and the other 245 Koreans.47

On 17 September 1945, a powerful typhoon, the infamous Makurazaki Typhoon, hit northern Kyushu, and later southern Honshu, with full force. Within days of the storm, Chyangsoo had learned that thousands had died at sea and on land. Among the dead were some from the Kyoto University research team who were in the first group in Hiroshima assigned to measure soil radiation from the atomic bombing. As a result of the typhoon’s torrential rains and wind, the soil effects of radiation on Hiroshima could not be—and subsequently never have been—effectively measured.48

When no one from his family returned to Korea after 20 days, Chyangsoo (who was still in Hiroshima) decided to search on his own. Initially, he wanted to find out exactly what had happened to his family and the workers, but he was reluctant to publicly make inquiries, perhaps because his association with the Japanese-collaborationist Kyōwa Kai had been so deep and now might be seen as traitorous to Koreans who had

45 Ibid., 63, 64.
46 Ibid., 63–65.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 65–67.
finally thrown off the yoke of Japanese militarism and colonialism. He explained his dilemma in a letter to Fukagawa shortly after their September 1973 telephone conversation.

I’d like to speak a little about my situation. I had been in the leadership of the Hiroshima Kyōwa Kai for many years, so I had been engaged in many social organised events of many types [for the Japanese authorities]. One such organised event was the [1940] festival [matsuri] commemorating the 2,600 years of the Japanese Era, where I was given a testimonial for social services I had performed. Thanks to this testimonial, I was asked by the special officer of the Hiroshima government to work on behalf of the Mitsubishi dormitory boarders. I handled the relationship with the dormitory head, and this involved cooperative assistance [with the authorities and company].

Regardless of his personal situation, Chyangsoo tried to find the remains of his family and the workers. He searched in ports along northern Kyushu and on the islands along Nagasaki prefecture. He heard that along the coasts thousands of Korean bodies had been found. On Iki Island off Nagasaki prefecture, some kind people temporarily buried the bodies. Chyangsoo vowed to pursue the full story of the fate of the 246 by searching for family addresses of some of the deceased. Many Korean families who had lost family members in the typhoon had placed bereavement notices in newspapers, which made Chyangsoo, whose wife became sick and died just after the war, very discouraged. Then his health deteriorated after he developed a serious heart condition, and after three months he gave up and returned home to Korea. Then during the late 1960s’ revival of interest in Korean compensation from the Japanese government, Chyangsoo resumed his search, which led to his published account and to the renewed contact with Fukagawa, who was still in Hiroshima.

This new information shocked Fukagawa and confirmed his initial investigations. He and Chyangsoo made plans to meet face to face and to jointly continue their search for the remains of the Koreans and the full history of their story. Before travelling to Korea, however, Fukagawa first decided to return again to Tobata Harbor to verify the details of this new evidence.

From Tobata Harbor to Iki Island—Locating the ‘Straits of Dead Souls’

Fukagawa checked records of possible storms for late September 1945 at the Shimonoseki Weather Observatory and found detailed meteorological records of the Makurazaki Typhoon of 17 September. On the afternoon of 15 September, when the 245 Koreans departed from Hiroshima Station to meet No Song-ock at Shimonoseki, the wind averaged less than 7 km per hour. By midday of the 16th, when the group arrived at Shimonoseki, the wind had increased to only 25 km per hour. Song-ock, who met them at Shimonoseki Station, would then have taken them to nearby Tobata Harbor for a boat that could take them across to Korea that day. Chyangsoo told Fukagawa that there was only light rain on the 16th, ‘which was the reason they continued’. The group therefore would have been at sea, almost midway between Japan and Pusan, Korea, on 17 September when the typhoon finally hit Kyushu and the straits to the

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49 Ibid., 65, 66.
50 Ibid., 65–67.
51 Ibid., 63–67.
west with winds of more than 230 km per hour, conditions that were impossible for a small overloaded fishing vessel to survive.52

Fukagawa then crossed over to Tsushima Island, halfway between Korea and Japan in the straits, and from there to Iki Island to the east where he located probable burial sites of the bodies. From there he travelled to South Korea, meeting No Chyangsoo in Gimcheon, the hometown of the No family. Then Fukagawa and Chyangsoo went to Seoul to speak with the Japanese ambassador so that agreement between the Japanese and South Korean governments could be obtained to repatriate the remains of No Song-ock and the other 245 Koreans from Japan’s Iki Island.53

Fukagawa and No Chyangsoo prepared a report for the Japanese and South Korean foreign ministries based on their findings up to this point, but they also sent the report to newspaper and television media sources. News of the discovery of the probable remains of the Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers on Iki Island and their ill-fated journey toward home spread from the Korean media to Japanese news outlets, with NHK featuring it in a news special on its regular morning television program. Fukagawa and Chyangsoo continued to gather more evidence among local villagers in Korea about their experiences as forced labourers, and even recovered a forced labour rule book from one person. Many of these Koreans also had been in Hiroshima at the time of the atomic bomb and testified about their experiences. Fukagawa and Chyangsoo came to realize that it was essential for them to try to calculate the actual number of Korean atomic bomb victims, especially because this basic statistic had been ignored by the Japanese government.54 Fukagawa also learned how the Japanese colonial authorities tried to sever marriages between husbands in Hiroshima and wives still in Korea by giving the male forced labourer a different Japanese name (described by Fukagawa as ‘separating people by first separating their names into two distinct characters’).55

Returning once more to Iki Island, Fukagawa found that people there were afraid to speak to him because of the history of police surveillance and intimidation on the island. An old man who had been head of the island’s agricultural association in 1945 told Fukagawa that he saw the bodies washed ashore and reported it to the police, but the police told him and other witnesses to not talk about what they had seen. The corpses were then quickly buried. Fukagawa retraced the history of the disaster on the shores of Iki Island by finding the exact locations where the bodies were found, and discovered there were many burial sites. He could only think of these straits between Iki Island and the Japanese mainland as Chinkon Straits, which literally means ‘straits where dead souls eternally rest/repose’. Through researching in old editions of the local newspaper, Iki Daily, Fukagawa learned that a South Korean association dedicated to memorializing Koreans who died in the war had located one burial site in 1967 that was believed to hold over 100 unknown Koreans who died at sea. The association built a memorial and held a memorial service where Korean family members of the deceased spoke in anger with a torrent of ‘heated thoughts’.56

Fukagawa returned again to South Korea after his inquiries on Iki Island, and stayed for four months assisting No Chyangsoo and others. Eventually, family members of the

52 Ibid., 63–67, 71–75.
53 Ibid., 67–94.
54 Ibid., 93–114.
55 Ibid., 115–152.
56 Ibid., 153–164.
deceased Koreans formed the Survivors’ Association that was dedicated to remembering the 246 who perished; to developing awareness about Korean hibakusha and the history of forced labour; and to working for compensation for survivors. Fukagawa led the subsequent effort to fully exhume and scientifically examine the remains of the Koreans buried on Iki Island. By 1990, the remains were returned to Korea for proper burial. Fukagawa’s investigation helped initiate compensation negotiations between Mitsubishi and Korean survivors.57

Conclusion

Full publication of Fukagawa’s story led to greater awareness of how Koreans were treated during World War II within Japan, especially in war industries that created profits for big companies like Mitsubishi. Fukagawa revealed in detail how Hiroshima’s World War II experience was more than the official version of what the atomic bomb did to the Japanese people. Rather than detracting from the terrible suffering of Japanese at Hiroshima, however, his account of the Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers shows how this suffering went beyond just one nationality. Furthermore, his story is an indictment of both Japanese and American militarism.

The legacy of Fukagawa’s pioneering investigation into Korean forced labour and the concealing of the fate of the 240 Korean workers at Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima Shipyard has also assisted the broader social movement and legal cases involving medical treatment and compensation for Koreans exposed to the atomic bomb who have been denied these rights due to their returning to Korea after the war.58 Fukagawa has provided a case study of Korean workers at Mitsubishi’s Hiroshima Shipyard, but it is a case study that spans the history of Japan’s colonial control of Korea, its wartime role in providing Mitsubishi with forced labourers, and its subsequent concealing of the fate of a large group of these workers who tried to return to their home. By implication, the evidence presented in his work also raises broader questions about the Japanese wartime system. Did its level of brutality and exploitation in fact make it a fascist system? Did this system operate as a fascist political economy that was dependent in part on forced labour, defined in international law today as a variant of slave labour?59 Is continued official prevarication on compensation in fact a failure to fully acknowledge this history, and the criminality of the political economy on which wartime Japan was based? The answers to these larger issues may involve a rethinking of history, but just as important is the need for researchers, whether in academia, in the community, or in the legal cases demanding just compensation, to fully reveal the details of the voices of those who tried their best to survive a brutal imperialist regime.

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57 Ibid., 164–192; Chūgoku shinbun, 14 August 1976. To date, Mitsubishi has refused to take any financial responsibility for the situation of Korean forced labourers it employed during the war.

58 On the issue of Japanese government-paid medical treatment and living allowance for Korean forced labourers exposed to the atomic bomb, see, for example, Yamada, ‘Mitsubishi Jūkōgyō’.

59 See, for example, Bales, New Slavery, 3, 4, 115–169. Bales argues that the key defining characteristic of slave labour is total control, including coercion, over a person, not exclusively ownership of that person, which allows for a definition with modern application that goes beyond traditional chattel slavery.
read earlier versions of this article. Fukagawa Munetoshi also provided details and clarifications on earlier drafts that went beyond his published account of the Mitsubishi Korean forced labourers’ disappearance. Partial funding for research conducted in Japan was provided by a Social Sciences Faculty grant from Flinders University, Adelaide.

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