

“Communicating History through Exhibitions” Speech Abstract

Keynote Speaker: Junko Kanekiyo

The Kyoto Museum for World Peace* is a university-operated peace institution, established in 1992. Its exposition encompasses the history of the 15-year war (1931–1945) and seeks to provide an objective perspective of the history of the era by representing the viewpoints of both the aggressor and the victim, while majority of Japanese peace museums focus on the victim side to indicate the misery of war to induce the sentiments of “never again.” The permanent exhibition comprises three parts: first, the 15-year war lasting from 1931 to 1945; second, the history of the cold war era up to 2005, focusing on the evolution of methods of conflict and people’s movements for peace; and third, the current global circumstances that pertain to issues such as child labor and climate change. Regardless of the effort, exhibition narrative cannot include every aspect and every voice of history. How can museum exhibition be a catalyst for communicating history, then?

The Asia Community Leadership Seminar’s visit to the Kyoto Museum for World Peace may indicate a possibility. A 3-week summer program for students from Kyung Hee University, Korea, Tamkang University, Taiwan, and Ritsumeikan University, Japan, applies project-based learning to promote a comprehensive understanding of Asia in participating students; enhance their multicultural communication skills, and induce creative and innovative thinking on the concepts of “peace,” “Asia,” and “the future.” Within this project, students visit the museum and engage in a 2-hour discussion following up their exhibition tour.

During the discussion, students share honest opinions, openly discuss emotions, and ask questions about the history that is exhibited and that which is not. Students from former colonial territories often point out the lack of perspective in the exhibition such as, the impact of the history on the colonized, the context of the historical deeds, questions about Japanese experience, voices of the suffering, Japanese response to history. What makes this visit special is not what they learn from the exhibition but how they share questions and their reactions to the history with their peers. Students from formerly colonized countries and from the colonizing nations are exposed to each other’s reactions. The purpose of post-visit discussions is not to engage students in a

historical debate but to let them feel the way their peers in Asia react to history, and hopefully, the purpose is for them to learn how they should listen to discrete views and communicate with the holders of those views.

This experience highlights the importance of bringing visitors from different backgrounds into museums of difficult history and engaging them in post-visit discussions. Often, museums strive to induce communication between visitors and exhibitions. However, exhibitions can also act as catalysts to induce communication among their visitors. Also, the students' comments and questions are critical suggestions for the Kyoto Museum for World Peace, for its future exhibitions.

* Note: Kyoto Museum for World Peace is a modest size museum focusing on the history of the 15 year war (1931-1945) and modern warfare, and contemporary issues surrounding peace. Over 70 years after the war, communicating history with young generation is becoming harder every year. Junko tackles this challenge through various museum venues. In 2018, she produced a special exhibition "August 6" which questions automatic projection of misery of war and importance of peace on war relics through artifact provenance. Through collecting voices from international students' discussion over the exhibition, she is striving to find a way to use exhibition as a tool to induce communication of history among young generations in Japan and Asia.