

HISTORICAL STUDIES AND THE MEMORY OF WAR

(An investigation into the famine in Vietnam in 1945)

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During the past 10 years, together with several Vietnamese historians, I have conducted an investigation into the real situation of the famine in North Vietnam in 1945. The famine was really a disaster during the occupation of Japanese troops in this country. However, this famine has been little known in Japan. One of the main reasons is that we have not had enough records of this disastrous event. The year of 1945 is seen as a momentous turning-point of Vietnam's modern history. Up to the beginning of 1945, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were French colonies. In September 1940, before the Pacific War broke out, Japan brought its troops to occupy this land, but the sovereignty of the French colonialism in this land was still recognized. Predicting that the allied troops would land in Indochina, Japan decided to overthrow the French-backed Vietnamese government. On 9th September 1945, Japanese troops staged a coup d'état and, as a result, snatched their control over the countries in Indochina. Different from what it had done with other Southeast Asian countries, Japan did not establish its direct domination over Indochina, instead it declared that they were independent nations. In Vietnam, King Bao Dai declared Vietnam's independence and,

consequently, a cabinet headed by Tran Trong Kim was set up. However, when Japanese troops surrendered on 15th August 1945, the administrative system of this puppet government collapsed. Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, carried out the August Revolution in 1945, forced King Bao Dai to abdicate the throne, and the subverted Tran Trong Kim-headed cabinet, and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Due to a series of such political events, no government had any intention to record fully and thoroughly the famine in 1945. In addition, Vietnam had experienced nearly 30 years of war since 1945. Therefore, the number of victims who died of the famine is still not clear.

Our method of investigation was as follows: 23 villages from Quang Tri to the Northern part of Vietnam were selected, a census of the total population in each village in 1945 was conducted, households were classified, and the number of the victims in each household was identified. In the villages under investigation, there were very few documents left, so in many cases, the data collected are mainly based on the memory of the elderly villagers. Time is one of the limitations of the

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investigation: over half a century has passed since the famine occurred, therefore what we should do is to record as accurately as possible the real situations of the famine. In 1945, a Report on the famine was published in Vietnamese by the Institute of History.

The famine as seen from the point of view of a Japanese researcher

The famine in 1945 exercised a great impact on the subsequent events in Vietnam's modern history. If we ignore the famine in 1945, it will be difficult for us to explain the rapid expansion of influence by Viet Minh, the August Revolution, and the coming into being of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam afterwards. Therefore, the 1945 famine deserves to be studied by scholars of Vietnamese modern history no matter what nationality they are. That is why I have decided to participate in this investigation as a historian rather than a Japanese citizen.

However, with regards to such a topic, I cannot help thinking that I am a Japanese. The story would be different if I were a British or an American. In an investigation which is concerned with Japan's responsibility for the famine in 1945, it would be irresponsible for a researcher to take part in the investigation on what happened in the past as a mere historian. I came to Vietnam to do this research as a Japanese citizen. During the course of the investigation, if there were any problems I would ask for support from the Japanese Embassy. What is more, I myself am a professor in a public university in Japan, that

means, I am a civil servant of Japan. Therefore, even when I want to put aside this close relationship, it is undeniable that I join the investigation in the capacity as and for the benefit of a Japanese citizen. Japan must take its responsibilities for the Asia-Pacific War, in which the famine in 1945 in Vietnam was one of the events during that period of history. I, therefore, maintain that I cannot escape from the ties and bonds with my nation when participating in the investigation.

In addition, suppose I were obsessed by the idea that I join the investigation purely as a historian, only very few Vietnamese historians would accept and sympathize with my position. Most of the Vietnamese people I have met regarded me as a Japanese, not as an unbiased historian. In collecting data from the people who have experienced and survived the famine, it is important to raise an awareness of the close relationships between the researcher and the informants. The data from the history witnesses were collected in the situations where there was a confusion in perception of the relationship between a farmer and a researcher, and with that between a Vietnamese and a Japanese.

Besides, another reason that prompted me to join the investigation is that I wished to make a shift in the understanding of a Japanese about the Vietnam famine in 1945. The investigation was carried out in the period when the diplomatic ties between Vietnam and Japan had overcome their stagnation and had been developed. While the 1945 famine in Vietnam is known to everyone as a matter of

course, it is almost unknown in Japan. It is my view that if this situation were still going on, it would be hard to have a constructive relationship between Japan and Vietnam. To change the situation in Japan, it is important to carry out such an investigation, which might bring positive changes in the Japanese people's awareness and understanding.

The aforementioned is what I expect from the investigation as a Japanese historian.

Is concealment of truth a shame?

What I expect from the investigation this time as a Japanese historian has confronted me with completely reverse doubts. I have heard from many different sources that it would not be a good thing for the Japanese to broach their mistakes, and that such an investigation may damage the ameliorating relationships between the two countries.

A Vietnamese friend of mine has raised the issue of the latter opinion. Since 1991 Vietnam has proposed its diplomatic policy: "Close the past and look ahead to the future." I think that it is in the present period of time when the Japan-Vietnam relationships are being improved that we are capable and in need of mentioning and examining the famine in 1945 – an issue which has not yet been made clear in the two nation's ties. Vietnam's diplomatic policy "Close the past and look ahead to the future" toward Japan means that in the history of World War II the famine in 1945 was only an event in that period, which will not

affect the development of the existing diplomatic ties between the two countries. It is my view that this diplomatic policy has a positive meaning for the investigation. Based on this, we are able to conduct the investigation rather independently of the diplomatic issues.

I entirely disagree with the former opinion. I think that because I am a Japanese I have to make clear and expound the Vietnam famine in 1945. However, a question may arise. Whatever my way of thinking is, "because I am a Japanese, I should not dig from unpleasant things done by the Japanese in the war," or "I have to carry out an investigation because I am a Japanese etc.", is it true that we share the same opinion of building a Japanese history, a Japanese-centered one?

My thinking "because I am Japanese ..." does not aim to build a kind of history in which the Japanese should have some share (a history for the Japanese), because I think that I cannot turn a blind eye to Japan's responsibilities for the famine in 1945. In my opinion, when the Japanese take into account their responsibilities in the war, we participate in a common issue that people around the world are concerned with, such as denouncing mischief that colonialists and wars have caused to human beings etc. What I wish is that the relationships between Japan and Vietnam are placed on the same level as these issues. We carry out the investigation not for the purpose that accepting war responsibilities will facilitate the diplomatic ties and Japan's investment in Vietnam.

Through the narrations of the elderly in the selected villages, we have learnt of other tragic stories besides the 1945 famine. After World War II the Chinese Nationalist Army came in to disarm the Japanese troops. For ordinary people, this undisciplined army was a nightmare. In the resistance war against the French (Indochina War I), many villages in the North of Vietnam became the battle fields. In the resistance war against the US (the Vietnam War), although North Vietnam was not an immediate battle field, many young people were recruited to go to the front in the South and sacrificed their lives there. That is why many old people said to us: "We show our hatred not just to the Japanese."

However, I think that it is unreasonable to regard the famine simply as part of the disasters caused to the Vietnamese people in the twentieth century. If the Japanese do not bear their responsibility for the famine in Vietnam in 1945, it will have no right to track down the responsibility for the wars waged by the French and the Americans in Vietnam. The point I would like to raise here is that if the Japanese want to do so, they must keep in mind that the number of the famine victims in 1945 is much greater than the number of people who scarified their lives in the period of 30 years of war afterwards.

Methods of investigation

As mentioned above, the narrations of the elderly people play a very important role in the investigation. When we came to the selected

villages, we were introduced to village folks who could remember the situation of their villages in 1945. Skipping over personal stories, the overall picture of the villages was reframed thanks to the memory of those who were over 70 and were just over 20 in 1945.

First, we helped them recall the households in their villages. Those who have a good memory could count nearly 100 households, even in some cases, we were really astonished by their accurate memories of the whole village. After we understood something about the structure of the village and the number of people in each family, we surveyed the number of people who died in the famine. Then the collected data were shown to the other elderly people for a double check. In addition, we also asked the existing families to attest the accuracy of the information relating to their neighbors and kindreds. Our main method of investigation is to bring forward the most reliable information and data based on what is collected at that moment.

In the 23 villages under investigation, the proportion of those who died of hunger to the whole population in 1945 is distributed from around 8.37% to 58.77% (In fact, Bui Xa is where there is the highest proportion. Here, our final figure is 73.7%. Due to the quick process of migration of this village, we could only recover the number of the families whose members died of hunger. As a result, the data does not reflect the real proportion of the famine victims to the whole population in the village in 1945. That is why we do not list the

figure of 73.7% here.) Of the 23 villages, 6 villages had over 40% of the population who died in the famine, equivalent to that of the famine in Edo's era in Japan.

I think that for the time being this is the only possible method to gain access to the real situation of the famine in 1945, and that the figures we have attained are highly reliable. However, there are some limitations to this method. The biggest one is that it is impossible to collect accurate information from the families that had no or almost no survivors at the time of investigation (almost 100% members of those families died of hunger). In those villages we had a common problem: it is really hard to identify exactly how many people there were in the households with no or almost no survivors where the survivors had migrated to. Sometimes there were disputes among the people under interview. For instance, some said that there were 4 people in a family while others refuted that there were 5 people in that family because of a new-born child.

Furthermore, whether the mortality was caused mainly by the famine is also a big problem. If we ignore the number of people who were confirmed to have died of diseases or injuries by the interviewees, our investigation would stop at the conclusion that the mortality rate in 1945 was much higher than the annual average mortality rate in that period. Additionally, the reason for each famine victim has not been identified.

Although the data were based on the memories of the old villagers, our investigation attempted to reflect the real state of the famine in 1945 as accurately as we could. This is an investigation based on the positivist point of view.

The reason that made me choose this method is that through investigating each village, we could show specific evidence of damages and losses caused by the famine in Vietnam in 1945 as compared with that in Thien Minh years in Japan. Only in so doing can we put to an end the prejudice held by the Japanese that the 1945 famine in Vietnam was an unreliable event.

Such events as Nam Kinh massacre (12 Dec 1937), which have been attracting much attention from the Japanese society, are in fact, a tip of an iceberg, as seen from the point of view of expanding Japan's responsibilities of war. There are still many cases which have been known to only researchers, not to the ordinary people. Due to the lack of recorded data, we must rely on the narrations of old villagers and consider them to be the primary source of data for this investigation. Half a century has passed since World War II ended, this also means that the data based on the memories of old people will come to an end. In this situation, I think that we should not underestimate a positivistic method of study, including the data collected from the memories of the old people.

In the first place, we attempt to publish our findings in the form of a report in

Vietnamese in Vietnam in August 1995. At that time, I thought that report in Japanese would be of great importance, but until now what I had in mind has not yet come true. By the time my report was published in Vietnamese, only some of my essays and some of the articles by Japanese journalists working in Vietnam were published in Japanese. As a result, our investigation is said to have changed the debates in Japan about the Vietnam famine in 1945.

Our investigation was conducted in 23 villages in North Vietnam. Although it is conducted in a limited area, through the hunger mortality rate of 8% and the fact that the famine happened on a very large scale, it is possible to say that the 1945 famine has brought about many serious damages and losses. Thus, after the report was published, it has put to an end the debates about whether or not there was a real serious famine in North of Vietnam in 1945. The debate topics have turned to the issues of how much damage the famine had and who would be responsible for the famine.

These two issues are beyond the scope of our investigation as the aim of the research is to re-create the real state of the famine and we are unable to come to any definite conclusions concerning them.

I myself have put much thought about the criticisms for not giving definite conclusions to these two issues. But as a researcher, I think I must study carefully in order to re-create the historical truths as accurately as possible and

make a contribution to solving controversial problems. This is also the aim of the investigation.

Different stories

One of the results our investigation has gained is a big difference of the mortality rate of the hunger-victims among the regions under investigation - from 8% to 58%. This shows the diversity in the degree of damages and losses caused by the famine. The differences occurred among the investigated villages, but also among different parts of a village. The narrations by the old villagers were vivid and abundant, and many of their stories relating to the famine were verified.

Here, I would only like to consider the stories related to Japan. First of all, it should be noted that there was a little chance for the villagers to communicate with Japanese troops. This is because in 1945, although Japanese troops came to Indochina under the agreement with the French colonialists, the French were responsible for the gathering of food from the people, not the Japanese. In fact, almost no Japanese troops came to the villages for the gathering.

Instead, they did come to some villages to chase the remnants of French troops during the March 1945 coup d'état and then to pursue the Viet Minh. However, in North Vietnam where the famine occurred the places where the Japanese carried out such military operations were limited.

In one of the villages we were told that Japanese troops encircled it and some villagers were killed: This is Cam Pho village in Quang Tri province. When the French and Japanese troops fought each other during the coup d'etat, six villagers were killed. It is also confirmed that in Kha Ly village in Bac Giang province, there were tortures of the local people by the Japanese troops. This village is located near Viet Bac where Viet Minh had its active operations. In addition, this is a place where hungry folks robbed of the rice as tax collection stored in the house of one of the village dignitaries. The nearby Japanese unit, therefore, was sent there "to restore order." An old villager said one day he was beaten at the village gate by Japanese troops on his way back from the market (selling fire-wood), for being suspected of having supplied food to Viet Minh.

Although the stories relating to the Japanese troops we heard from the old people in some villages are indirect ones, the common impression on the villagers left by the Japanese troops was "frightening". There was fear among the people that the Japanese would come and punish severely if local people did not contribute a sufficient amount of rice or did not grow jute as demanded.

Others said that the local people were scared of the Japanese troops at first, but after some direct communication, the Japanese were not so scaring. After the war ended, on the way to Hai Phong, one unit of the Japanese troops stopped at Phuong Thong village, Hung Yen

province. In this village, the Japanese troops were said to strictly obey the disciplines. They even shared rice with the villagers. Thanks to their help, the famine in the village was alleviated.

The stories by the old villagers are, thus, diversified. The point is how to interpret these stories. An example of Phuong Thong village I have just mentioned above might be generalized as a symbol of the friendly relationship between the Japanese troops and the Vietnamese people. I disagree. The Japanese troops encamped in Indochina had drawn experience from the Chinese battle fields and tried to avoid direct confrontations with the Vietnamese people. Most of the units which had conflicts with local people were sent from China before and after the coup d'etat. However, considering the status of the Japanese troops in Vietnam, these were their real efforts. They were a foreign army, "uninvited guests" with the dominant military power which would frighten ordinary people.

On the other hand, I also think that it would be unreasonable if we skipped over the events in Phuong Thong village. If we did not take such events into account, it would be easy to depict the 1945 famine as a result of the war waged by the Japanese. During the process of collecting corroborations from war victims, it would be dangerous if the collector too much sympathized with the victims and let the image of the victims similar to what he had imagined. Once a book on the evidence of the cases like those in Phuong Thong village appears, people

will be doubtful of a book which is concerned mainly with killing and torturing of the Vietnamese people by the Japanese troops while ignoring their friendly relationship side as the case of Phuong Thong village.

Apart from that, when listing contradictory corroborations, a possibility of doubt over their truthfulness may occur. This logic sometimes makes people only use unilateral evidence like the events in Phuong Thong village (arguing that the opposite evidence provided from other places is unreliable) and. This leads to the suspicion of the famine. But it is clear that the stories are not actual facts. Although what is told can be verified through cross-checking with others, it is extremely difficult to identify the impact of the Japanese troops on those who had no direct contact with them. Accordingly, it is possible to consider the impact of the historical and political education on the future.

However, through this investigation, we have learnt that the memory of the 1945 famine in Vietnam needs recalling. While serious losses of life in the two wars of resistance against the French and Americans were seen as "glorious devotion for the Fatherland's Independence", and were repeatedly mentioned and there is always a "War Memorial" in a village, there is no mention of the 1945 famine victims in public places. Half a century has passed and this was the first time the old people had told their stories about the famine to the complete strangers. This also means that what is related to the 1945 famine are not official stories to be told in public places time

after time. At that moment, the information provided by the famine witnesses contains in itself their subjective thinking, and is quite contradictory. If we do not realize the fact that there are contradictory points in these stories, we may be doubtful of their truthfulness which, in turn, may lead us to suspect the nature of the famine itself.

I think those different stories about the Japanese troops should be fully interpreted. This is not intended to show both the positive and negative sides of the presence of the Japanese troops in Vietnam. It is my viewpoint that it is impossible to write up a history by merely listing those stories. The capacity of a historian can be shown in the way how he judges and treats those stories from the point of view of the contemporary historical context.

The "legend" of a nation

As mentioned our investigation is not an exhaustive one, it was limited to 23 villages. Therefore, the investigation does not attempt to show any conclusion of the scale of losses of the famine – the frequently mentioned 2 million victims.

As stated above, the reason why the number of 2 million victims was known is because of the fact that it was mentioned in the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Later, in the negotiations on war reparations between the Japanese and Vietnamese governments (i.e. the former Saigonesse government), the Japanese side said there were "three hundred thousand victims"

while the Saigonese side said there were "one million."

This made the administration of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam indignant. This is because, as they said, the Saigonese regime was not the true representative of the united Vietnam and they doubted the numbers of the famine victims put forward by both sides. That is why the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, currently the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, considered this as "the conspiracy cooked up in order to alleviate the crimes of the French colonialists and the Japanese fascists."

This is an obstacle for the clarification of the 1945 famine. If it is difficult to change the number of 2 million, why carry out an investigation of the real situation of the famine? In the late 1990s, the policy of "Doi moi" was initiated in Vietnam. This marked the beginning of the process of re-examining the traditional method of presenting historical issues in modern Vietnam. The idea whether or not clarifying the real situations of the famine is more important than the intolerance with the number of 2 million victims among the Vietnamese historians emerged in this period.

Our investigation is carried out with the cooperation of both Japanese and Vietnamese colleagues. We were in mutual agreement that the investigation should not begin with the number of 2 million, but with an aim of clarifying real facts of the famine in 1945. Within such a limit, it is extended to the investigation that faces one of the legends

which has been existing in Vietnam for many years.

Among Vietnamese researchers there was a debate about the correlation of the investigation outcomes and the number of 2 million famine victims. Professor Van Tao, a representative of the Vietnamese side, in the summary of the report in Vietnamese, based himself on the figures of the investigation to average and offer the hypothesis that the proportion of the famine victims to the whole population could reach 15%. This hypothesis implied that the investigation supported the number of 2 million victims. On the contrary, some other researchers claim that if based on the investigation outcomes, the number of 2 million would be doubtful. It is natural that opinions differ. This is because our investigation does not start with the number of 2 million victims and does not offer any conclusions about the total damages and losses of the famine.

If in Vietnam the number of 2 million famine victims has become a legend, in Japan there has existed an opposite legend claiming that this number is unbelievable. Our investigation had to face with "the legend" in Japan. There seems to be no compromise between the two standpoints. On the one hand, due to the fact that the number of witnesses has been decreasing year after year, we, therefore, cannot anticipate whether the situation would be better, or it would sink into oblivion. This investigation means a "small" breakthrough to clear this situation.

I think that the investigation has faced with the two opposite “legends” in Vietnam and in Japan. However, this does not mean that the Vietnamese and Japanese stories are absolutely the same. I suggest that we should make a distinction between the story by the perpetrator and that by the sufferer.

It would be an undeniable disaster if we ignored the number of 2 million Vietnamese victims of the 1945 famine. This number has existed partly due to the memory about the frightening degree of the disaster of the people who have experienced the famine. It is possible that some Japanese, on hearing that 2 million Vietnamese people had died of hunger, may find it hard to believe. But no one was offended by the story. Moreover, that the Japanese think that “2 million Vietnamese famine victims is an unbelievable story” not only blurs their war

responsibilities but also shows their extremist attempts to rebuff what Vietnamese people had to suffer from the famine and to conceal this event. Thus, it is impossible to put these two stories on the same par.

I think, with regard to the issues of the responsibilities of war, the perpetrators should, first of all, have their clear attitude toward the legend in their country. If they cannot do so, they have no right to raise a question about the legend of their victims. If this point is ignored, it will lead to a situation in which the stories by the perpetrators and the victims are put on the same par. This will also lead to the dispute and mistake that there is almost no difference between the two sides, and each side claims the other’s story is wrong. And, for this reason, the real problems of the 1945 famine in Vietnam will never be solved.

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