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Bridging the Gap: Dark episode of history not forgotten

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Bridging the Gap: Dark episode of history not forgotten

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By HIROSHI MATSUBARA, Staff Writer

This is part of a series of interviews in which people with wide cross-cultural experience in Japan and China discuss their work, problems and hopes for the future. BY HIROSHI MATSUBARA STAFF WRITER

Long before she would learn the meaning of the expression "germ warfare," Wang Xuan had heard rumors about how Japanese soldiers had poisoned her family's ancestral village during World War II.

In all, close to 400 people died in Chongshan village in China 's Zhejiang province in the early 1940s of bubonic plague and other deadly diseases.

At first the villagers had no idea why they had suddenly been afflicted by one epidemic after another. It wasn't until a generation later that villagers learned about the ghastly experiments that had been carried out by the Japanese military on Chinese civilians.

Wang, 54, was sent to live in the village for five years from 1969 during the Cultural Revolution. She was told that eight of her relatives, including her uncle, had died of the plague.

Years later, as an adult living in Japan , she would make it her mission to bring the Japanese government to account for the crimes.

Wang first came to Japan at the height of the economic boom, enrolling in Mie University in Mie Prefecture in 1987. Her husband had enrolled at the university a year earlier.

After finishing a master's degree in teaching at the University of Tsukuba in Ibaraki Prefecture , Wang set up a trading company with her husband and Japanese partners in Himeji , Hyogo Prefecture .

Despite the collapse of the asset-inflated economy in 1991, the business, which trades industrial parts between Japan and China , steadily expanded, taking advantage of the rapid integration of the two markets.

Wang had met many warm-hearted people since coming to Japan, including her university teachers and neighbors, who volunteered to teach her Japanese, invited her for dinner or took her sightseeing.

But as her relationship with the country deepened, Wang had trouble reconciling the Japan she knew and liked with the Japan of the past.

"It became very frustrating to see Japanese people talking to a Chinese person without feeling awkward at all," Wang said.

"Then I realized that many just naively think that the historical issue between Japan and China had been cleared up long ago.

"As I got closer and closer to Japan and its people, our gaps in perspective on history somehow became

harder to overlook."

Things began to change in 1995 when Wang came across a story in a newspaper about two Japanese activists who had visited her home town to research the use of biological weapons by Japanese wartime forces.

She immediately invited them to her apartment in Himeji .

A year earlier, the pair had visited Chongshan village to research the experiments carried out by units 731 and 1644. The units are notorious not only for testing biological weapons on the population but also for using thousands of Chinese civilians as laboratory rats in deadly medical experiments.

One of the two researchers was Masataka Mori, 64, a lecturer at Shizuoka University . Mori's open acknowledgement of the war crimes came as a relief to Wang. He told her, "Unless Japanese people truly face up to past crimes, we will never be trusted by the rest of Asia ."

Mori, then a junior high school teacher, had been researching Japan 's war crimes in China on his own initiative since the 1980s.

"His words set me free from my frustration as a Chinese," Wang said. "And that was the moment when I realized that helping Japanese people acknowledge the country's past crimes is necessary for the two countries to promote a true friendship."

In the following year, Wang worked with villagers and their Japanese supporters to uncover evidence about the germ warfare experiments.

After they researched public documents and interviewing several hundred people, a total of 108 plague survivors or families of the dead filed a damages suit at the Tokyo District Court in 1997. They asked for an official apology and 10 million yen each in compensation from the Japanese government.

During the trial, two former servicemen of unit 731 testified about the plague bacillus experiments and the use of biological weapons on Chinese civilians.

One of the witnesses, a former military pilot of the unit, seemed nervous before he entered the witness box. Wang told him that she would tell Chinese people about his courage to speak the truth, and he seemed to breathe easier, she said.

"It is not only the victims but also the offenders who suffer from heinous war crimes, and I thought it is what Chinese people must also know to deepen our mutual understanding."

Representing the plaintiffs, Wang delivered a victim's statement to the court in 1998. "This trial aims to create a common perception between Japanese and Chinese on history that it was Japan 's war of invasion against China , because it must be the precondition on which we can create a true friendship."

In its ruling in August 2002, the court acknowledged that the Japanese military spread disease by releasing plague-carrying fleas from airplanes and poisoning wells with cholera in Zhejiang and other provinces between 1940 and 1942. However, it denied compensation. The Tokyo High Court again rejected the compensation demand last July, and the ruling is still pending in the Supreme Court.

Wang's sense of frustration prompted her to set up a private fund with other Chinese activists last year to support similar damages suits filed against the Japanese government by Chinese and to research Japan's war crimes in China. She said she especially welcomes donations from Japanese corporations and individuals.

"It does not aim to fuel Chinese people's antipathy to Japan but to help Japanese people share a common perspective on the past atrocities on Chinese by the Japanese military," she said.

Wang's work means she now spends most of her time in Shanghai . Yet, she still spends two months a year in Japan , catching up with old friends, and meeting new ones, whom she has met through her work on tracing Japanese war crimes.

"I believe the only way for us to overcome the growing distrust is to share a common view of history, which has been the largest thorn between the two countries," Wang said.

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