

Beyond Borders: Insights from Hiroshima

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1. Daily Life in Hiroshima: Generation Over Nation

My postdoctoral fellowship at the Hiroshima Peace Institute was originally planned for three months, but personal circumstances cut my stay to just forty days. I had been so busy before departure that I arrived in Hiroshima without having learned a single word of Japanese.

Having watched Japanese dramas since my twenties, I had long looked forward to living in Japan. How similar were we, and how different — this close yet distant neighbor? Being placed in a dormitory with undergraduate students turned out to be an unexpected opportunity to find some answers. The language barrier was real, but thanks to the many students who willingly reached out, I settled into the unfamiliar routine more quickly than I had expected.

What struck me most vividly in daily life was the wave of K-pop, K-dramas, and K-food. A general election for the House of Representatives happened to take place during my stay, and one of the campaign posters caught my eye — the model was Fujiki Naohito (藤木直人), an actor from *Hotaru no Hikari*, a drama I had once loved. I asked the dormitory students if they knew him, but every one of them shook their head. Neither the drama nor the actor meant anything to them. Yet they spoke naturally and enthusiastically about Korean idols and dramas. Even the covers of Japanese magazines at the bookstore were occupied by Korean pop stars. What I found particularly striking was meeting a Japanese professor from Fukuyama University who was around my age. Having grown up with the same dramas and music, we connected with an ease that felt almost effortless.

This experience led me to a single thought: it is no longer national borders but generational divides that separate people most deeply. In a world where globalization has made it possible for everyone to consume the same content at the same time, when you were born may matter more than where you were born in determining how well two people can understand each other. I did notice cultural and social differences between Japan and Korea in many ways, but in personal interactions, the generational factor seemed impossible to ignore.

This realization naturally turned my gaze back toward Korea. In a society where generational conflict is deepening, perhaps the reason different generations clash is not that one side is right and the other wrong, but that each has built its own world in a different environment. Understanding begins with acknowledging that gap.

A new semester has started. I will weave what I saw and felt in Hiroshima into my classes and share stories from different countries with my students. But the task I must focus on above all else lies elsewhere. More than where my students come from, the question I face at the start of this new semester is: how do I close the generational gap between us, and how do I learn to resonate with them more closely?

2. Researching North Korea: Insights Gained in Hiroshima

For a researcher of North Korea, Hiroshima is a peculiar place to find oneself. Since declaring the completion of its nuclear forces, North Korea has made nuclear weapons the hegemonic discourse underpinning its entire system — most recently illustrated by Kim Jong-un's reference to "nuclear" over fifty times in his work report at the Ninth Party Congress of the Korean Workers' Party in February 2026. North Korea argues that nuclear capability is the only means of deterring war and guaranteeing the security of its regime. To me, as someone who studies North Korea, Hiroshima seemed at first to stand on the opposite side of that argument.

While making my way through the exhibits at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, I stopped in front of materials I had not expected to find. Among the victims of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were Koreans who had been brought to Japan as forced laborers and conscripted soldiers under Japanese imperial rule. As I continued my research, I also discovered that North Korea had established the *Korean A-bomb Sufferers Association for Anti-Nuclear Peace*, and that in the mid-1980s it had hosted the *Pyongyang International Conference for a Nuclear-Free, Peaceful World*. Hiroshima and North Korea were connected far more closely than I had imagined.

I had initially approached Hiroshima's peace and anti-nuclear discourse as something fixed and settled. But as I read through academic papers and walked through the exhibitions, that assumption quickly changed. Hiroshima's nuclear discourse has in fact been continuously reconstructed — shaped dynamically by the activism of atomic bomb survivors and anti-nuclear civil society, the structural constraints of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and Japan's national development strategies. The recent remarks by Prime

Minister Takaichi calling for the abolition of the three non-nuclear principles are a reminder that this discourse remains very much a live debate.

At this point, I found myself stepping back from a simple framing of Hiroshima versus North Korea as "anti-nuclear versus pro-nuclear." Looking more closely at the roots of both discourses, there is a surprisingly similar underlying logic. Hiroshima says: "Because we are victims of nuclear weapons, we speak against them for the sake of survival." North Korea says: "We must possess nuclear weapons in order to survive." The directions are diametrically opposed, yet both discourses share the same starting point — the anxiety of survival and the fear of insecurity.

Where, then, do they diverge? Hiroshima's discourse expanded the experience of victimhood into a universal language, reaching outward and toward international anti-nuclear solidarity. North Korea's discourse, by contrast, turned the same logic of survival inward, hardening into a tool for regime legitimation. The question I found myself newly focused on in Hiroshima is precisely this process of divergence — why, how, and in what context did North Korea's nuclear discourse come to take the hegemonic form it holds today?

Hiroshima prompted me to look at North Korea's nuclear discourse not as a fixed outcome, but as a process still unfolding. I hope that understanding that process may offer, however modestly, a thread worth pulling in the broader conversation about nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula.