

Talk by Andrew Horvat of The Asia Foundation on “Overcoming the Negative Legacies of the Past” at The George Washington University, September 29, 2004

Andrew Horvat, Japan Representative, The Asia Foundation, spoke at The George Washington University’s Sigur Center on September 29, 2004 on “Overcoming the Negative Legacy of the Past: Why Europe Offers Positive Examples for East Asia.” Mr. Horvat’s talk was the first in a series of planned events sponsored by the Sigur Center on the general subject of memory and reconciliation in the Asia-Pacific.

In beginning his presentation, Mr. Horvat first illustrated the present day relevance of history’s impact on Japan’s relations with its Asian neighbors by offering a litany of existing sore points between Japan and China: Chinese fans booing a Japanese soccer team; the Senkaku/Diaoyu island territorial dispute; the leaking of World War II-era poison gas canisters in North China; the Japanese prime minister’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine; the controversies over Unit 731, the Rape of Nanjing, and so on. Contentious issues continue to trouble the Japan-Korea relationship as well (notably over the issue of Korean “comfort women”), but there are also some more recent hopeful signs: the popularity of a Korean soap opera in Japan has led to demand for Korean language lessons and increased Japanese travel to Korea.

But Mr. Horvat noted that the contrast between Asia and Europe on matters of reconciliation remains striking. In Europe, the European Union, NATO, the European Parliament, and the International Court are all signs of genuine regional integration, as contrasted with Asia where no such institutions exist. Moreover, in Europe there has been a conscious decision to “share the past”—as evidenced by longstanding efforts to engage in coordination on the content of history textbooks, which have come to reflect a shared historical understanding of the past.

So what can we learn from Europe? Mr. Horvat argues that what is needed is, first, a vision from government leaders on the goal of reconciliation (Europe’s leaders were motivated by the desire to overcome the devastating effects of three wars) and, second, efforts of non-governmental organizations to do the actual work of promoting programs for reconciliation. Non-state actors can play a particularly significant role in striving for breakthroughs on difficult issues.

About the speaker: Mr. Horvat is the Japan Representative of The Asia Foundation, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization founded in 1954. Mr. Horvat implements programs aimed at promoting public policy discussions on domestic and international issues related to Japan and overseas projects encouraging the growth of Japan’s civil society sector. Mr. Horvat is the author of *Japanese Beyond Words* (Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, 2001).