

Meiji Institute for Global Affairs

MIGA COLUMN GLOBAL DIAGNOSIS

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Short Curriculum Vitae: Seiji Hagiwara

Joined the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) in 1980 after graduating from the Faculty of the Americas, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tokyo. Graduated from a master's (MPA) course at Princeton University (where he acquired a master's degree), then served as Director of the APEC Division, Director for Policy Planning in the Minister's Secretariat, and Director of the Information Policy Division in the Commerce and Information Policy Bureau, before resigning from MITI in 1998 at his own request to become a candidate in the mayoral election in Okayama City. Elected Mayor of Okayama City the next year, then elected as a member of the Lower House in 2005. Since 2010 has served as a Professor at Teikyo Heisei University and Professor of Scholastics at Hosei University. Joined MIGA as Visiting Researcher in 2013, before taking up his current post in 2014. Elected and currently serves as Mayor of Mimasaka City since March, 2014.

A fuss over Ho Chi Minh

This September, significant symbolic progress will be made in international exchange in the city of Mimasaka, where I serve as Mayor. The Vietnamese government has decided to donate to Mimasaka a bronze statue of Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Vietnam's liberation and its first president upon the country's founding in September 2, 1945. We will be receiving a visit by a ministerial-level Vietnamese government representative and plan to hold an unveiling ceremony by the end of the year.

Thus far, the Vietnamese government has donated statues of Ho Chi Minh to 18 countries around the world. Naturally, these recipient countries are countries friendly to Vietnam. The initial recipients were mainly former communist countries such as Cuba, Hungary, Russia, and Mongolia. More recently, the list has come to include ASEAN countries such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Laos as well as Western countries such as France, Germany, and Australia. It might be added that no such donation has been made to China.



(Conceptual image of the statue once in place)

We believe that this donation is being made in recognition of our programs of exchange with Vietnam over the last three years. These programs include welcoming the Vietnamese women's national soccer team training camp and our efforts to improve the welfare of Vietnamese nationals residing in our city. The city of Mimasaka is extremely delighted and honored to receive such donation. We also hope that the donation will prompt Vietnamese in Japan to pay a visit to our city going forward. The city council as well as our citizens generally welcome the statue.

Nevertheless, some have voiced deep-seated misgivings about it. At a plenary session of the city council, one council member made a case against the statue stating that, "The statue is essentially undesirable. Disputes have arisen in the United States over the

removal of statues of Civil War Confederate generals. Relations between Japan and Vietnam might deteriorate at any time.” This argument focuses on the historical importance of the representative or emblematic function that statues possess. This is an issue requiring certain consideration in cases containing a representation of some sort of confrontation, or if it includes what the Koreans call “han” (meaning resentment), like that of the Korean Statue of Peace, which is taken in Japan to be a statue of a comfort woman.

In certain areas and cultures, we see behavior aimed at complete destruction of items representative of invaders or other opposing groups. In contrast, there are other cases in which confrontation is taken as just that, and efforts are made to curtail removal or destruction of such items. If anything, these areas and cultures are oriented toward cultural properties and may even preserve and make use of these items. The former may be exemplified by the Taliban, who destroyed the Buddhist statues at Bamiyan, and those in South Korea who have continued to remove cultures and institutions representative of Japan ever since the end of the war. Similarly, Japan also has a history of trying to erase cultures and institutions representative of the United States during the war.

The latter may be exemplified by the Alhambra Palace in Granada. Even after the Reconquista, Spain made use of this representation of Islamic culture. The history of European languages similarly shows how what could be termed the mixture or overlapping of languages by opposing groups and countries, and conquering countries, laid the foundation for the ensuing rich development of their languages. It is definitely not the case that the enemy language was eliminated.

With the exception of certain extreme cases (such as the aforementioned movement to eradicate the enemy’s culture and the movement to abolish Buddhism in the Meiji era), we Japanese continue to accept foreign or opposing cultures in a carefree manner. Even in extreme cases, these movements met the tacit resistance of the people and ended up

being incomplete. In my view, this may very well be one of strengths Japan has for assuring its security. It is part of Japan's character to react flexibly to and accept different cultures and ways of thinking. Although it has some drawbacks, I believe this trait is something we absolutely must not lose for the peace of Japan.

Such are the thoughts that occurred to me in this little fuss over the donation of the statue of Ho Chi Minh.