

PRESENTATION SCRIPT

Global Themes in Local Context: A Case Study of a Japanese Human Rights Museum

Lisa Mueller

[SLIDE 1]

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, good wishes to you whenever you happen to be viewing this presentation. My name is Lisa Mueller, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University. The title of my presentation is Global Themes in Local Context: A Case Study of a Japanese Human Rights Museum. The museum I am going to be discussing today is the Suiheisha History Museum in Gose City, Nara Prefecture. On the left of the slide there is a photo of a sign in front of a temple complex, and this temple complex is actually located directly across the street from the museum. The sign has the name of the museum on it in Japanese, and it says “Youkoso – Jinken no Furusato”, or “Welcome to the Homeland of Human Rights.” So, in case you’ve ever wondered where the homeland of human rights is, now you know – it’s in Kashihara, Gose City, Nara Prefecture, Japan.

[SLIDE 2]

Before I begin, I would like to walk you through what to expect with this presentation so that you can decide whether or not it will be worth your time, or if you want to skip ahead, or just read the transcript. One nice thing about these on-demand presentations is that you won’t hurt my feelings because if you walk out, I’ll never know! Anyway, I am going to start with some contextual information, particularly about the Buraku people, a Japanese minority group who have established many human rights museums in Western Japan. I will use this context to explain how I came to my research question, which (spoiler alert) is “How is global reorientation in the Buraku movement reflected in the (hi)stories told at Buraku human rights museums?” If that question doesn’t make sense to you, you’ll definitely want to hang on through the context slide! Next I will give a brief orientation to the case study here, the Suiheisha History Museum followed by findings, which focus on how global and local contexts are interwoven at this

museum. If this all sounds good to you, I invite you to come along with me to the next slide.

[SLIDE 3]

Currently in Japan there are an estimated 1.2 million Buraku people, who are commonly thought of as the descendants of Tokugawa-era outcastes, although modern scholarship has argued that Buraku lineage is much more complex. If you're not familiar with Japanese history, the Tokugawa Era was from 1603 to 1868. After Japan was forced to open in 1853, outcaste status was formally terminated by the Emancipation Edict in 1871. However, even though the former outcastes were nominally freed, they continued to face severe discrimination in housing, education, employment, health, etc. The picture on this slide was actually taken in a different museum, one of my other sites, The Henomatsu Museum in Osaka. It is a recreation of what Buraku neighborhoods looked like really up through the 1960s. The alleyway is very narrow, so narrow that you can't open an umbrella in it. These areas would often become flooded, causing raw sewage to occasionally run in the streets, which fueled several outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. However, these conditions were alleviated substantially by the passage of the 1969 Special Measures Law for Assimilation Projects, sometimes referred to as the Special Measures Law or the SML, which was established after years of lobbying by the Buraku Liberation League, or BLL, and other activist organizations.

The SML, which was renewed several times before being allowed to expire in the late 1990s, provided approximately 14 trillion yen in funding for Buraku neighborhoods to improve their living conditions. Because of this, many Buraku neighborhoods today are indistinguishable from mainstream neighborhoods; indeed, when you can tell a difference, it is often because Buraku neighborhoods contain more services and amenities. Since the SML's passage, Buraku people have edged closer to parity with non-Buraku Japanese by reported increases in educational attainment and average wages alongside a decrease in reliance on livelihood assistance.

Shortly after the passage of the SML, Buraku advocacy began to shift to global focus. In particular, the sociologist Kiyoteru Tsutsui has skillfully traced the trajectory of the BLL from an organization advocating for Buraku equality to one with a broader focus on global human rights. While prior to the 1970s the BLL tended to be more insular, the passage by the United Nations of the International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976 changed this dynamic. The BLL saw these covenants as opportunities to place international pressure on the Japanese government to ensure equality for Buraku people, and they therefore began a concerted campaign for ratification.

By the late 1970s, Buraku advocates were attending United Nations forums, where they forged alliances with advocates for other marginalized groups around the world -- alliances which came with the expectation that Buraku organizers would participate in global human rights advocacy. This allowed the BLL to reframe its mission; no longer was Buraku discrimination viewed as a unique quirk of Japanese history but rather as a Japanese example of the myriad human rights abuses occurring globally. With participation in international human rights activities becoming a BLL core mandate by the late 1980s, the appellation of "human rights museums" for Buraku-founded museums can be seen in part as resulting naturally from the change in BLL mission occurring during the time of their founding.

As human rights museums are largely a postmillennial concept, the Japanese case, in which a large number of human rights museums were established in the 1980s and 1990s, is rather exceptional. Japanese human rights museums commonly have large exhibits dedicated to Buraku issues; in some cases, entire museums are dedicated to this theme. As of 2015, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs had listed 32 museums dedicated to this theme, 22 of which focus solely or mostly on Buraku issues. All human rights museums focusing exclusively or partially on Buraku issues are concentrated in western and southern Japan; there are none in Kanto (the area around Tokyo), northern Japan, or Hokkaido.

[SLIDE 4]

Because this global turn has been so well documented by researchers, I was curious to see whether I could see evidence of it in these Buraku-focused human rights museums. So, for my master's project, I chose three Buraku human rights museums to examine with the question, "How is the global reorientation in the Buraku movement reflected in the (hi)stories told at human rights museums in Japan?" For the purpose of this presentation and time constraints, I am going to focus on one of those museums, the Suiheisha History Museum, but if you are curious about the others, there will be a modified version of my master's project in the next edition of *Museum Anthropology*, so please do check it out.

[SLIDE 5]

The Suiheisha were a pre-war advocacy organization dedicated to advancing Buraku equality, the predecessors to the Buraku Liberation League. The Suiheisha History Museum is a two-story, free-standing building located in a rural area. The museum was established in 1998 to preserve the history of the area after an urban development project spurred concerns from local residents about the drastic changes taking place in the landscape which, in the words of the founders of the museum, “decreased the Suiheisha spirit among the people.” Three founders of the Suiheisha organization claimed this tiny village as their home, a source of pride for local residents. Since opening, the museum has received 335,000 visitors.

As mentioned in the beginning, the museum has dubbed the area surrounding the museum “The Homeland of Human Rights”, a phrase which adorns all of their promotional materials. *Furusato*, the word translated by the museum in their English materials as “homeland,” literally means *old village* and connotes recollecting or reliving bygone days. Jennifer Robertson traced the resurgence of the word *furusato* to the 1970s and argued that the term carries the nostalgia of “achieved dominance”, noting that although Chinese characters exist for *furusato*, it is commonly written in the Japanese hiragana script, giving it an aura of soft nationalism. By using the term *furusato*, the museum, and by proxy the village whose history it ostensibly represents, stake a claim on the area. It is a show of defiance to would-be urban developers: “This land belongs to human rights.” The picture on the right is of a map that the museum distributes, and in Japanese it says “The Homeland of Human Rights Map.” The map contains local areas of interest connected to the founding of the Suiheisha.

The museum’s main focus is to tell the Suiheisha’s formation story, explaining historical discrimination, liberation groups formed before the Suiheisha, how the Suiheisha developed, and profiles of Suiheisha leaders. The picture on the left, which shows a series of black and white photos and accompanying text under museum lighting, is a typical display. The museum also includes a holographic presentation, which is meant to allow visitors to feel as if they are present at the organization’s founding, and there is also an “epilogue” section seemingly aimed at children with various games and optical illusions communicating messages related to human rights or the Suiheisha. Outside of the epilogue section, little connection is drawn to present-day Buraku or other human rights issues.

[Slide 6]

Before covering my findings, I wanted very briefly to introduce my methods. In order to get at the heart of my research question, I undertook a qualitative content analysis of the museum's brochures and handouts, triangulated by fieldwork in the museum and its surrounding area so that I could gain a sense of how the contents of the museum compared with the handouts. If you are unfamiliar with qualitative content analysis, very briefly, it involves thick analysis that takes into consideration the latent contextual meanings and subtexts of the text, not just its manifest content. So, why the brochures and handouts? Well, because incorporating every item on display in museums' permanent and special exhibitions in their brochures is usually impractical, decisions are generally made with care regarding which items to include in brochures and how these items are described. This makes brochures a good index of what the museum deems important for guests and prospective guests to know about their collections. While changing museum exhibits -- particularly permanent exhibitions -- is costly and often fraught with bureaucracy, updating a brochure is a relatively inexpensive and streamlined process. In this way, it can be argued that brochures are often a more up-to-date reflection of museum values and philosophy than the contents of the museums themselves.

First of all, it's abundantly clear that the Suiheisha History Museum is very locally rooted. Although the Suiheisha was a national organization, its local roots in Kashihara are emphasized throughout the museum's publications. The museum's longest document available for visitors, the 35-page English translation of museum exhibits, contains the word "Kashihara" 50 times; for reference, the words "history", and "museum" are used 16 and 11 times, respectively. The three local founders are repeatedly referred to as "the three young men of Kashihara". The bundling of local landmarks into a distinctive "homeland" for human rights is the museum's most outstanding characteristic of its engagement in the local community, which is why I also included a photo of the front of the map on this page. The SHM's Homeland of Human Rights Map lists Saikouji Temple with the following description:

Saikouji Temple... is the birthplace of Mankichi Saikou..., the drafter of the Suiheisha Declaration. Saikouji was established in 1748, when the village had 38 households to support it.

Not only does the description connect the Tokugawa-era temple to the birth of the Suiheisha almost 200 years later, but it also hearkens back to a time of communal spirit when 38 households banded together to support the temple. In this way, the museum (re)writes Kashihara's history as one of collective values, and any dissent that occurred is not included in the story.

By emphasizing the surrounding area as the "furusato" of human rights, the museum attempts to erase the boundaries between the physical building and the surrounding locality. The entire area is transformed into a *lieu de memoire* defined by human rights, represented by the founding of the Suiheisha.

[SLIDE 7]

Despite this local rootedness we see in the museum's contents, the museum's handouts tell a decidedly more globally oriented story. The SHM's promotional brochures are small, just two-sided A4-sized trifolds. The English-language brochure, a direct translation of the Japanese language brochure, contains just 1,000 words to describe the entire museum. To reiterate, the museum's exhibits are intensely locally focused. Kashihara is mentioned repeatedly, and recognitions of human rights struggles outside the Buraku -- let alone outside the country -- are rare. However, every single connection the museum draws between the Buraku human rights struggle and the outside world, no matter how tangential, is mentioned in the brochure, despite limited space. On the front page, the museum confidently makes the rather dubious assertion that the 1922 Suiheisha Declaration is the first human rights declaration made by a discriminated minority *in the world*. While the Epilogue features a variety of interactive exhibits, the only one described in the brochure is also the only internationally focused one, which allows participants to "sit among the audience" via virtual reality to watch Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. A small exhibit featuring correspondence between officials in the Hyeongpyeongsa -- a former advocacy group for a caste-based minority in Korea -- and the BLL is highlighted due to the exhibit's inclusion in the UNESCO Memory of the World program. The brochure even uses some of its precious space to explain that "The outside wall of the theater features the horizons (suihei-sen) in different parts of the world."

It is instructive that while the brochure included each one of the museum's few references to the outside world, other more extensive exhibits (e.g. exhibits on glue making, labor unions, etc.) received barely a word. Recalling Trouillot's assertion that the making of an archive inherently requires including some material and excluding others, reflecting the power of the decision maker, I assert

that the items highlighted in the museum's brochure reflect a similar process, which in this case reflects an emphasis on the importance of global human rights connections.

At this juncture, I want to draw your attention to the picture on the right, the small piece of white paper with the drawing of the globe on it. Coincidental to my visit to the SHM, all May visitors were given a souvenir "seed paper", a 54mm piece of paper that when planted becomes a flower, in celebration of the museum's 20th anniversary. The gift was presented with a letter, coauthored by the museum's president and the chairman of the Nara Foundation for Human Rights Culture, explaining its symbolism:

This anniversary gift is a seed paper with a globe motif, symbolizing our hope for respect toward all human beings as well as equality in society and global peace and happiness. Seeds from the alyssum flower are inside of it. Alyssum's flower meaning is "peace", "happiness", etc., carrying the image of the Suiheisha's philosophy and ambition -- the future of human rights culture in the form of tiny flowers that bloom densely and spread like a carpet.

The manufacturer of the seed paper, a company called Greensticks, has according to their website 69 different shapes of seed paper available at an equal or lower price point than that of the globe shape, and some of these shapes might seem a better representation of the museum's mission. For example, since the Suiheisha Declaration's opening words are "Let there be light in all humanity," a phrase that is quoted throughout the museum and even in the very letter presenting the seed paper, the candle shape might seem a logical choice. However, this letter shows that much thought was put into the symbolism behind both the design and flower choice of the seed paper, and the symbolism of human rights throughout the world "like a carpet of flowers" was deemed the message to send on the 20th anniversary of the SHM.

In conclusion, along with Tsutsui's findings, these museums do display the beginnings of a global turn in Buraku identity, one that places Buraku history within the context not only of Japanese history but also within the history of discriminated minorities around the world. The SHM serves as an excellent example not only of how feedback between local Buraku movements and global human rights movements has shaped the postmodern Buraku identity but also of how varying strategies are utilized to bring this reorientation to local communities

SLIDE 8

In Japanese, we always end presentations by saying ご清聴ありがとうございました, or “Thank you for your attention,” so I will end in this way as well. If you’d like to see a list of sources, they are available on the transcript of this presentation.

SELECTED REFERENCES:

- Amos, Timothy D. 2011. *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Bondy, Christopher. 2015. *Voice, Silence, and Self: Negotiations of Buraku Identity in Contemporary Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carter, Jennifer, 2015. “The Museology of Human Rights.” In *The Idea of a Human Rights Museum*, edited by Karen Busby, Adam Muller, and Andrew Woolford, 208-226. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Davis, John H., Jr. 2005. “Blurring the Boundaries of the Buraku(min).” In *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*, edited by J. S. Eades, Tom Gill and Harumi Befu, 110-122. Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press.
- Hankins, Joseph D. 2014. *Working Skin: Making Leather, Making a Multicultural Japan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Inazumi, Shinjiro. 2014. “What is the Status of the Dowa Problem?” (「同和問題に、今、何が問われているか」) Accessed 11/15/2019.
<http://www.moj.go.jp/content/001156780.pdf>.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1952. “The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 16 (4):631-642.
- Kuckartz, Udo. 2014. *Qualitative Text Analysis: A Guide to Methods, Practice & Using Software*. London: Sage.
- Mayring, Philipp. 2000. “Qualitative Content Analysis.” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1 (2), Art. 20.
- Mutafchieva, Rositsa. 2009. "From Subnational to Micronational: Buraku Communities and Transformations in Identity in Modern and Contemporary Japan." Ph.D diss., McGill University (Canada).
- Neary, Ian. 1989. *Political Protest and Social Control in Pre-war Japan: The Origins of Buraku Liberation*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- . 2003. “Burakumin at the End of History.” *Social Research* 70 (1):269-300.

- Prasad, Bammidi Devi. 2019. "Qualitative Content Analysis: Why is it Still a Path Less Taken?" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20 (3): 1-21.
- Robertson, Jennifer. 1991. *Native and Newcomer: Making and Remaking a Japanese City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Suiheisha History Museum. n.d. 水平社博物館 [Suiheisha Museum]. Accessed November 15, 2019. <http://www1.mahoroba.ne.jp/~suihei/index.html>.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 1995. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Tsutsui, Kiyoteru. 2017. "Human Rights and Minority Activism in Japan: Transformation of Movement Actorhood and Local-Global Feedback Loop." *The American Journal of Sociology* 122 (4):1050-1103.