



Nemuro Retreat: Journey to the Past, Path to Tomorrow

After the successful and groundbreaking first contact of the worldwide border studies communities in Sapporo, our party of 30 participants trekked further east to host the Borderland Forum in the “easternmost border city” of Nemuro. The first thing you notice when you get off the puddle hopper at Nakashibetsu Airport is the scent of manure—ah, yes, we have come to the hinterland of Hokkaido; mind you of Japan for that matter. A big question mark appeared in my head: why did we travel all the way across Hokkaido to a small windy city of 30,000, when it was apparent that Sapporo would be the more appropriate venue in terms of size and access? My first impression of Nemuro was that it is no different than any other small municipalities in Hokkaido. But I stood to be corrected. Nemuro has a past, a forgotten history. The Nemuro Retreat (as we have decided to call it) was our opportunity to travel back in time—the realities of families torn apart, possessions taken away and memories left behind remain vivid in the eyes and voices of the former residents of the northern territories¹. This is where our journey to the past began.



Puddle hopper that just arrived at Nakashibetsu Airport

¹ The “issue of northern territories” refers to the territorial issue between Japan and Russia regarding the four islands off the northeast coast of Hokkaido including Shikotan, Habomai, Kunashiri and Etorofu. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs page on the northern territories is as follows: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/>



(photo courtesy of Mr. Yamagami of the Japan Society of Island Studies)

Our party arrived in Nemuro on the morning of Dec. 20th, and were scheduled to go on an “excursion” that afternoon. The 20 of us, including the foreign guests and the members of the Japan Society of Island Studies, got aboard a small patrol boat at Habomai Port to go on a cruise to the provisional line, or better known as the McArthur or Brezhnev Line, a line drawn back in 1945; our first stop in our journey to the past.



Patrol boat at Habomai Port (photo courtesy of Mr. Yamagami)

One of the 3 veteran fishermen of the Habomai Fisheries Cooperative operating the boat told us that the sun would be setting in an hour, so they kicked in the gear and the boat rushed to the border line. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, hardly any wind or wave, but the motion sickness prone person that I am was literally feeling the ride in my stomach. About 20 minutes, the fishermen yelled out that we were at THE line, but I was in for my first surprise. It was just a stretch of water, no markers, no buoys, no signs, no body builder look-alike coast guards. What was I expecting? Well, let me just kindly remind you that there are only so many borders that I can go on as reference. The two borders that I have been to are, one, the Peace Arch Border Crossing between my hometown Vancouver, Canada and Blaine, Washington in the U.S. For those who have never been, it is one of those “procedural” borders where an immigration officer asks for your documents and the purpose of the visit and if you manage to pass off as someone who does not pose as an enemy of the state then you simply drive through to your next destination. The other border that I have been to is a kind



that of the other extreme; Panmunjom in the demilitarized zone that straddles the border between the two Koreas. It is almost a “surreal” border with barbed wires, heavily guarded gates and “home to the most dangerous golf course” in the world². So, a big surprise to see just a calm body of water staring back at me—no visible marker, no guards, no “actual” border but just couple of seagulls riding the wave minding their own business.



Seagull swimming along the McArthur Line³



GPS on the boat; red line at the bottom left of the screen is the McArthur Line

² James Taylor, “The Ultimate North-South Divide: Fore! Welcome to the World’s Most Dangerous Golf Course,” *The Independent*, 4 April 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-ultimate-northsouth-divide-fore-welcome-to-the-worlds-most-dangerous-golf-course-443211.html> (last accessed on Jan 6th, 2010)

³ Photos courtesy of the writer unless otherwise noted.



It reminded me of what one of the speakers said at the symposium the previous day: “borders” are “subjects of our conceptions of ‘the other’ and of everyday socialisation as they are products of public political processes⁴.” Indeed, a line or not, it made me think of those people on the “other side” watching the same beautiful sunset that was before me, before us.



Sunset at Nemuro

The next stop in our journey to the past was a special talk given by four former residents of the northern territories, Mr. Iwata, Mr. Nakata, Mr. Kakegawa and Mr. Takeuchi. They were the storytellers of the past, a forgotten past; their narratives took us back to their childhood—living memories of what life was like on the islands.

⁴ Ilkka Likkonen, “From Post-Modern Visions to Multiplex Scales of Bordering: Recent Trends in European Study of Borders and Border Areas,” presented at the Global COE Symposium “First Contact: Bringing Together the Worldwide Communities of Border Studies” 19 December 2009.



Special talk by four former residents of the islands (photo courtesy of Mr. Yamagami)

Their life on the islands was not easy, living conditions were quite harsh especially during the winter but they had their family, their house and their daily lives. One day, without any warning everything was taken away; they were stripped of the place they called home. The four gentlemen were forcefully deported to the nearest town of Nemuro, a place they would be living in for the next few decades. While you could detect their agony and sorrow in their voices, I was in for my second surprise. Although they all wished for nothing more than the return of the islands, they had a bigger, more grandeur vision— the possibility of the coexistence of former and present residents of the islands. The idealist that I am (and all social scientists should be) felt a glimmer of hope that the journey to their past could open the path to tomorrow. I learned a valuable lesson here in Nemuro: sharing the “realities” of the past can lead to new possibilities in the future.

My experience in Nemuro reminded me of a John Denver song where the lyrics go something like, “The radio reminds me of my home far away... country roads take me home, to the place I belong” (and yes, I am not ashamed to admit that I am a Canadian with a heart for American country music). Sadly, there are no country roads that will take these gentlemen home. But the memories they carry remind them day in and day out of what was once their home in a not so far away place (since the islands are merely 40km off the coast at the closest point). While borders are imaginary as they are created, drawn and redrawn over time, perhaps even home is something of the imaginary—because home ultimately remains in our heart. The “imagined communities” that we live in today were created or socially



constructed by us humankind; thus, it is also up to us to build more solid and real communities founded on mutual friendship, fraternity and solidarity. Yup, it’s the “dreamer” in me talking, but after the retreat I am convinced that, “I’m not the only one.”

(Written by: Naomi Chi)



(Left) Cape Nosappu, easternmost point of Japan; (Right) Sunset at Habomai Port