

CHINA VETS' WAR MEMORIES SHOCK ARCHIVIST

China vets shock archivist with 'horrible things they did'

By EDAN CORKILL

Staff writer

In 1999, Sinitirou Kumagai dropped out of university, got on his motorbike and set out to begin what he now calls his "life work" — traveling from one end of Japan to the other to record the testimonies of former soldiers stationed in China between the 1930s and the end of World War II in 1945.

Kumagai, now 32, first became aware of those veterans when a friend gave him a copy of a magazine called Chukiren, which publishes the recollections of former soldiers who are members of a group called the Chugoku Kikan-sha Renraku Kai (Network of Returnees from China).

Kumagai said he was shocked to discover how, 70 years ago, normal young Japanese citizens like himself had been turned into monsters.

"The veterans are all normal people. They are good people. But



Nightmare vision: Takao Hiyama was a war artist with the Imperial Japanese Army in China. After the war he became an art teacher and also made pictures depicting his experiences on the front lines. Before he died in 1988, he left dozens of his paintings to Chukiren, a network for returnees from China. SINITIROU KUMAGAI

when you read their stories, you realize they did some horrible things — really horrible things," he explained.

Kumagai, who had his own share of problems — constant fighting and smoking saw him expelled from high school — decided to help the old soldiers publish their testimonies. Many were in their late 80s and were determined to "tell all" before they died, he explained.

Unlike most young Japanese who record the testimonies of former soldiers, Kumagai has not spent a lot of time overseas. Nevertheless, he understands his work is crucial for improving Japan's regional ties.

"This was a war that Japan conducted overseas, so the general population here simply doesn't know what happened," he said.

The Chinese and Koreans, of course, remember, he said. "Unless the Japanese people know what the Japanese army did, we can't hope to communicate properly with them."

Of the 200-plus former soldiers who Kumagai has interviewed so far, the testimony of Hiromichi Nagatomi is particularly shocking.

Nagatomi was a direct student of Mitsuru Toyama, one of the most ardent proponents of the Pan-Asianism movement on which Japan's expansionist policies were based.



Man with a mission: For 10 years, Sinitirou Kumagai, 32, has been recording the testimonies of former

Nagatomi was made a member of the Tokumu Kikan (Special Services Section), an elite group tasked with a variety of missions, including intelligence-gathering and various kinds of counter-insurgency work.

"I was training

Japanese soldiers who served in China. EDAN CORKILL Chinese spies," he told Kumagai. "We would capture Chinese farmers to seek information from them about the enemy. . . . We put the Chinese we caught in cells, didn't give them food, made them go to the toilet in their cells until they reeked, beat them with clubs, tortured them using water and fire and, later on, killed them in vacant land behind the cells. . . . In this way, I personally killed well over 100 Chinese people."

Before dying in 2002, Nagatomi gave Kumagai several old photographs and records of his service. In many of them he is seen with a long beard and wearing civilian Chinese clothes — trademarks of an undercover agent. Other interviewees have given Kumagai paintings they made to try to come to terms with what they did.

The testimonies of former soldiers who fought in China are often the subject of debate. After Japan's defeat, many were detained in China, for up to six years, and were made to detail and recant their past deeds.

"When they came back to Japan," explained Kumagai, "people started saying that they must have been brainwashed (by the Chinese), because they all seemed to express their remorse in similar ways."

But Kumagai denies the testimonies he records are tainted.

"If it was brainwashing, it has lasted for 60 years, so it was amazingly effective," he laughed dismissively.

"The problem with the people who talk about brainwashing is that they jump from there to the conclusion that we shouldn't listen to these men at all," he said.

"That is not right. Maybe they were brainwashed, but we still have to listen to what they are saying."



Since 2002, Kumagai has been conducting his interviews under the auspices of the Fujun no Kiseki wo Uketsugu Kai (Association to Carry on the Miracle of Fushun). Named after the location of one of the internment camps where Japanese soldiers were allegedly brainwashed, the group comprises about 400, mostly young, members.



Lives apart: Hiromichi Nagatomi in the guise of a Chinese (above), while serving in the Japanese military's Special Services Section in China in the 1930s, and in a Tokyo nursing home before his death in 2002. SINITIROU KUMAGAI

Kumagai said he believes the veterans find it easier to talk to young people.

"When I first went to Chukiren, they were thrilled that a young person wanted to help them out," he recalled.



"They can assume we know nothing about war, that we have no idea why they went to war or what they did there. They want to explain it," he said. "They want to make us understand."

Kumagai never met either of his grandfathers, who both died before he was born.

However, he says that his mother's views have influenced him.

"She was born in Manchuria, so she had to be repatriated after the war," he explained. "She hates war."

His mother also hated the Soviet Union.

"Whenever we talk about politics, she always tells me

to stay away from the Reds," he said.

Kumagai put his parents at ease considerably around two years ago when he took a "day job" at publisher Iwanami Shoten.

"Up until then they were worried that I was just a delinquent riding around on my bike and talking to old men," he laughed.

Kumagai said he wants to continue recording testimonies for as long as there are former soldiers alive who are willing to talk. He admitted, though, that now his wife is expecting a baby, spare time is becoming more and more difficult to find.

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