

**In memoriam Shiba Nobuhiro (1946-2021) scholar, colleague, friend.**

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On May 28 this year, Shiba Nobuhiro, eminent historian of Yugoslavia, the Balkans, and more broadly Eastern Europe, passed away suddenly at the age of 74. Professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo and professor at Jōsai International University, he was in the middle of both immediate and long-term projects.

Shiba-san and I first met in 1978 at a Yugoslav Embassy reception in Tokyo. He had just returned from two years at the University of Belgrade where he had studied Yugoslav history. As for me, I was back in Japan at Osaka University of Foreign Studies (better known as Osaka Gaidai), studying Japanese linguistics having recently switched from mathematics.

As Shiba-san was interested in the culture of my country and I in his, on top of which we both had lived in each other's homeland, we immediately bonded. Incidentally, a renowned film critic and scholar, Hirano Kyoko, a contemporary of Shiba-san at the University of Belgrade where she had done research on Yugoslav films, was also present at the reception.

After completing my studies at Gaidai, I proceeded to a Ph.D. program at the University of Tsukuba. As both Shiba-san and I were living in Tokyo in the 1980s, we met frequently. This was a time when there was considerable interest in Japan among progressive intellectuals in the Yugoslav system of self-management. With its more humane and relaxed approach to building a socialist society, Yugoslavia was seen as an alternative to the authoritarian Soviet and Chinese approaches. All the same Shiba-san's chosen field, contemporary Yugoslav history, was not something that had great market value in Japanese academia at the time. Especially after Tito's death in 1980 when economic problems surfaced, Yugoslavia came to be seen by many Japanese as just another problem-plagued East European communist country. As a young researcher, struggling for some time to find a permanent teaching position, Shiba-san keenly felt the change in attitude. Yet he did not give up in the face of adversity, continuing steadfastly to do serious research, publishing works related to Yugoslav history, society and culture.

After completing my Ph.D. at Tsukuba, I spent the last few years of the 1980s back in Slovenia, much the same way as Shiba-san in Tokyo, struggling to find a secure academic

position in my chosen field. At this time, Shiba-san regularly visited Yugoslavia of which Slovenia was still then a part. He liked the Alpine scenery of Lake Bohinj and its surroundings. Whenever he had the time, he would spend some days at a tourist farm there. It was in the summer of 1988 that we had a pleasant reunion there, during a holiday with his family.

The late 1980s were marked by growing internal instability in Yugoslavia. The economy was in a shambles due in part to the burden of foreign debt. Inflation was spiralling. This was a time of rising nationalism, inter-ethnic friction both within and between Yugoslav constituent republics, especially between Serbia on one side, and Slovenia and Croatia on the other, as well as within Serbia between the metropolis and the Autonomous Province of Kosovo. Reports published abroad about events in Yugoslavia tended to be rather confusing as the lines of division were too complex to disentangle for the uninformed.

Shiba-san's sound and balanced explanations of the Yugoslav political system, with its multi-ethnic and multilingual complexities contributed greatly toward enlightening Japanese specialists as well as the general public during these chaotic times. His publications on developments in Yugoslavia included several in the Iwanami booklet series aimed at lay readers, while his work on the socialist Yugoslav political system and the nationalities question was intended for experts. Providing helpful commentary in those polarised times was a very difficult goal to achieve, but in his work Shiba-san managed to avoid taking sides on the basis of either nostalgia or ideological affinities.

In the spring of 1990, I was back at the University of Tsukuba, this time as instructor. The following year, with Slovenia's independence, the demise of Yugoslavia began. The Balkans suddenly became a topic of serious foreign policy debate, as a result of which the value of the expertise accumulated by Shiba-san finally came to be recognised. In 1992 he moved to the University of Tokyo, where he remained until retirement. In the new, better endowed academic environment, and with the evolving situation in former Yugoslavia continuing to generate wide interest, Shiba-san's output, aimed at both scholarly and general audiences, received a new impetus. The list of Shiba-san's publications is impressive.

During the five years I spent teaching at the University of Tsukuba I had many discussions with Shiba-san concerning developments in Yugoslavia. We did not always agree about everything, which is only natural, but Shiba-san showed his wide and profound understanding of Yugoslavia's complexities and maintained a coherent view.

The 1995 Dayton Agreement, in spite of its flaws, brought peace to former Yugoslavia with the exception of Kosovo. As for Slovenia, it had not been as badly affected by war as the other

former constituent republics. In the autumn of the same year, the University of Ljubljana launched its Asian Studies program consisting of Chinese and Japanese Studies, and I returned to Slovenia to assume the position of department head. Since then, Shiba-san became a regular visitor to the different countries that had sprung from the ashes of former Yugoslavia, including Slovenia and once again we were able to continue our friendship.

At the same time, Shiba-san helped the University of Tokyo establish for the first time a Slovene language course as well as courses in the languages of other former East Bloc Countries. Among the alumni of these courses is Nomachi Motoki, a leading member of the younger generation of Slavonic Studies scholars, who now teaches at Hokkaido University.

The 1990s also saw the publication of two seminal works by Shiba-san, *Yūgosuravia gendaishi* (『ユーゴスラヴィア現代史』 *Contemporary History of Yugoslavia*, Iwanami-shoten, Tokyo, 1996) and *Barukan no minzokushugi* (『バルカンの民族主義』 *Nationalism in the Balkans*, Yamakawa-shuppansha, Tokyo, 1996). Shiba-san regularly updated both of these works. The 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the Balkan book came out in 2015 and the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of *Contemporary History of Yugoslavia* in 2016. He was working on the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of the latter work when he passed away. As always, Shiba-san tried to make knowledge about his area of specialisation accessible to the general public. The outcome of his efforts was *Zusetsu barukan no rekishi* (『図説バルカンの歴史』 *Illustrated History of the Balkans*, Kawade shobō-shinsha, 2001, revised 2015.)

Another area of active engagement for Shiba-san was the question of how to arrive at “Common history,” to go beyond regional historical conflicts. One of the roots of “Common history” writing was the joint French-German history textbook project which started with the process of reconciliation between France and Germany. The Franco-German model served as inspiration, among others, for the quest for common history of two other areas of conflict, the Balkans and East Asia. Shiba-san’s contribution to the writing of common history in both regions can be found in *In Search of a Common Regional History: the Balkans and East Asia in History Textbooks*, (University of Tokyo, 2006) and in “How to Construct Regional Histories in the Balkans and East Asia: From Historiography toward History Education” (*European Studies* ヨーロッパ研究 7, University of Tokyo, 2008.)

From the start of his work as research scholar, teacher, and editor, Shiba-san was eager to encourage a younger generation of scholars to take an interest in his chosen field. His efforts resulted in the publication of numerous monographs on Yugoslavia, the Balkans and the Eastern European region as a whole, many of which were later incorporated into publications

aimed at a general readership, such as the *Motto shiritai* series (*Motto shiritai Yūgosuravia* 『もっと知りたいユーゴスラヴィア』 *Know more about Yugoslavia*, Kōbundō 1991) and the *Rokujū shō* (「60章」 *Sixty Chapters*) series published by Akashi-shoten. Four of the latter series were devoted to Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In 2009, when Shiba-san came to the University of Ljubljana to deliver the keynote speech at an international symposium on Japanese Studies in the Balkans, sponsored by the Japan Foundation, he told me he was pleasantly surprised that our Department of Asian Studies offered subjects such as the History of East Asia, and Introduction to East Asian Studies, and other similar courses that covered the whole region and not just individual countries. His comment reflected the importance Shiba-san attached to the understanding of history in a regional context, and not as something packed in containers called individual countries. At the time I wondered why Shiba-san was so surprised but then it turned out that he had been right. In many universities, East Asian Studies consisted of the study of individual countries with not much effort made to stress the historical and cultural connections that linked them to each other.

It should be mentioned that Shiba-san played a key role in establishing the cooperation agreement between the University of Ljubljana and the University of Tokyo, one that has turned out to be very fruitful. I am especially grateful for his role as thesis advisor of one of my former students, Boštjan Bertalanč, an arrangement that resulted in interesting discoveries of connections between Japan and Slovene lands during and after the WWI.

During his visits to Slovenia Shiba-san, the open-minded, sincere and curious person that he was, forged strong ties with Slovene historians and social scientists. Especially profound was his friendship with Peter Vodopivec, senior research fellow at the Institute of Contemporary History at Ljubljana, out of which grew two bilateral projects, undertaken between 2011 and 2016, the first focusing on depictions of history in textbooks in Japan and Slovenia, and the second on historiography. I was invited by both Peter Vodopivec and Shiba-san to participate, even though my field of expertise is linguistics, specifically Japanese linguistics. For me, working with historians and social scientists was a mind-expanding experience that allowed me to see how the perception of a nation's language is influenced by history. And as Shiba-san and other participants said, it was interesting as well for them to see that linguistics can play a role in thinking about history. The five-year research project offered more opportunities for intensive exchanges with Shiba-san, which I am happy to say allowed us to deepen friendships between our families. The fruits of this joint research are two

monographs co-edited by Shiba-san, issued under the titles, *School History and Textbooks: A Comparative Analysis of History Textbooks in Japan and Slovenia* (Institute of

Contemporary History, Ljubljana, 2013) and *The 20th Century through Historiographies and Textbooks, Chapters from Japan, East Asia, Slovenia and Southeast Europe* (Institute of Contemporary History, Ljubljana, 2018).

Starting around 2008, another, less scholarly, but because of the content, very lively cooperation, began. This was the project Cinema (post) Yugo. The three guests who met at the Yugoslav embassy national day reception in 1978 were thus reunited. Film critic Hirano Kyoko was the prime mover of the project together with Shiba-san's former student Yamazaki Shinji, also a Yugoslav film buff and Shiba-san himself. Other active participants included Slovene language lecturer Biba Sethna, Serbo-Croatian lecturer Alma Okajima and me. The aim of Cinema (post) Yugo was to educate viewers by showing them the gems of Yugoslav film production, and then to follow up with developments in different post-Yugoslav countries.

Preparatory meetings have left me with vivid memories of Shiba-san. Competent, well informed, eager, curious, full of positive energy, kind, but also prone to human weakness -- smoking. With a shy smile, he would excuse himself in the middle of meetings and go outside for a cigarette, or in more recent years, for the electronic smokeless substitute. He reminded me so much of my late brother with whom Shiba-san also established a warm relationship during his visits in Slovenia. Both were smokers, and neither would give up their one bad habit.

As I have chosen to remember Shiba-san as friend and colleague as well as scholar, I could only touch on Shiba-san's work from my own very subjective and therefore limited perspective. He will be remembered by his many students and many more readers for his pioneering work in Japan in the field of Yugoslav and Balkan studies.

But Shiba-san also leaves behind the legacy of his work on the international stage. He maintained close relations with researchers from the former Yugoslav region, not only from Slovenia, but also Croatia and Serbia, specifically the University of Zagreb and the University of Belgrade. In 2010 while a Visiting Professor at the UN-founded European Center for Peace and Development in Belgrade, Shiba-san organized a series of conferences and symposia bringing together eminent international researchers to tackle issues close to his heart.

Shiba-san can best be called "an engaged intellectual," one not content with life in an ivory tower. His bibliography, extending to nearly 20 pages, reflects the legacy of one who has sought to tackle key issues of his times. Shiba-san was also an active mentor, who helped launch the academic careers of many young scholars, who today continue his work.

In 2017, for his “*contribution to informing the Japanese public about the historical and social circumstances of Slovenia’s path to independence,*” he was awarded the *Medal of Merit* by the President of Slovenia, Borut Pahor.

But I think that all of us who had the privilege to know him personally and work with him will remember his warm personality, his positive energy and his shy smile when he slipped out of a meeting for a smoke.

May his soul rest in peace. ご冥福を祈ります.