

Transnational collaborative work and the *arpillera* collection at the Oshima Hakko Museum, Japan

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1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to present an outline of the *arpillera* collection of the Oshima Hakko Museum (大島博光記念館, hereinafter OHM), Nagano Prefecture, Japan, and its transnational collaborative work. *Arpilleras* are hand-sewn wall-hangings made of old cloth that started to be made during the military dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990). OHM, a private museum dedicated to the work of the poet Oshima Hakko, owns around 120 *arpilleras*. OHM *arpilleras* have been exhibited locally, domestically, and internationally since 2013. What brought such a large collection of Chilean political textiles to this small private museum in Japan? If their *arpilleras* impress people in Japan, how do they do so? Some keys lie in transnational collaboration, communication, and the will for solidarity found on the trail of *arpilleras*. These factors were seen during the dictatorship as well as today, though they might have had a different focus and scope each time.

2. What are *arpilleras*?

Arpilleras are three-dimensional appliqued wall-hangings. They started to be made in around 1974 in some areas in Santiago de Chile. In their early stage of history, they were made mostly by women in poor neighbourhoods. A major theme of *arpilleras* is everyday hardship and mutual help in the community. Figure 1 is an *arpillera* depicting ‘*Comprando juntos*’, which means ‘buying together’ in Spanish. This is a co-operative purchase group that people in poor communities developed in which, possibly, the maker of this piece was involved. Soup kitchens and community laundrettes are also popular subjects.

Political violence by the state and people’s resistance against the oppression was also a common theme. This type of violence was indeed an important part of everyday scenes in poor communities during the dictatorship, as in some of the poor neighbourhoods in Santiago, where many people had supported the opposition parties. In these cases, the community as a whole became the target of the counter-insurgency operation of the military. Many *arpilleras* depict actions by relatives of the disappeared who went missing after being arrested or abducted. Some sew *Cueca Sola*, women in black and white dancing the Chilean dance *Cueca* alone, which is traditionally danced in pairs of men and women. This is a well-known non-violent direct action performed by women of the Association of Detained and Disappeared. Some *arpilleras* have a pocket on the backside of the piece that has a small paper sheet with the maker’s personal message and testimony written on it.



Figure 1.
Buying Together /
Comprando juntos,
Anonymous, Chile, c.
1990, 49 cm x 40
cm,
Oshima Hakko
Museum Collection,
Photograph by
Michihiro Saga



Figure 2.
Cueca Sola / *La
cueca sola*,
Gala Torres, Chile,
1990,
Oshima Hakko
Museum Collection,
Photograph by
Tomoko Sakai



Figure 3.
A message pocket
on the backside of an
arpillera.
Oshima Hakko
Museum Collection,
Photograph by
Michihiro Saga

Arpilleras were made in workshops, sometimes in communities and sometimes inside churches. At the beginning stage in the mid-1970s, most *arpillera* workshops had advisors sent from churches or charity organisations who assisted the makers to determine subjects to depict and provided them with sewing techniques¹. The workshops gradually became more autonomous. Women who gathered at a workshop sat around the table and took scraps of old cloth collected at the centre of the table. Each made her *arpillera* as they shared scissors, threads, and what they had been through. In this process, women also found that their personal experience of hardships was part of a larger collective story. In this sense, what are depicted in their textile pieces are the social and political experiences of the community and stories about personal grief, fear, joy, and affection at the same time.

Arpilleras were sold internationally through churches and charity organisations. This not only brought the makers a modest income, but also delivered valuable testimonies about the social and political condition in Chile under the Pinochet regime at the time of strict speech control.

3. *Arpillera* collection at the Oshima Hakko Museum

The Oshima Hakko Museum, a private institution in Matsushiro-cho, Nagano Prefecture, was built in 2008 in memory of poet and researcher of French/Spanish language literature, Hakko Oshima (1910–2006), who was born and raised in the town. It is an important cultural centre for locals: It not only offers information about the poet Hakko Oshima, his works, and the time in which he lived, but it also provides a space for various activities. It organises music concerts, film screenings, flower festivals, and lectures with social and historical themes, and has been a venue for poetry clubs, to mention a few such activities. Most of their events and activities are prepared by local volunteers.

In 2009, many *arpillera* pieces were donated to this museum. This happened in relation to Oshima Hakko's involvement in Chilean issues. Together with French poets such as Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard, Hakko also introduced the works of Pablo Neruda and translated them into Japanese. After the military coup in Chile in 1973, Hakko became an active member of *Comité Japonés de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Chileno* (チリ人民連帯日本委員会、the Japanese Solidarity Movement with Chilean People, hereinafter CJSPC), a group founded in

¹ For more details about how *arpillera* workshops developed in Santiago, see: Marjorie Agosín (1996) *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994*, University of New Mexico Press; Jacqueline Adams (2013) *Art against Dictatorship: Making and Exporting Arpilleras under Pinochet*, University of Texas Press.

1974, aiming to support the people in Chile. The group, which maintained efforts to report the reality of dictatorship in the Japanese language, continued its activities until the end of the Pinochet rule. It also sold *arpilleras* in Japan in the late 1980s.



In 2009, Masa'aki Takahashi, a researcher of Latin American studies and a member of CJSPC, donated around 90 *arpilleras* to OHM along with CJSPC historical documents. Since then, the museum has held five special exhibitions focussing on *arpilleras*: 'Meeting with Chilean *Arpilleras*' in 2013, '*Arpillera*: People's Life under the Dictatorship' in 2017; 'Chilean Women's Lives and Struggles under the Military Dictatorship' in 2018; and 'The Coup d'État and Political Oppression in Chile' in 2019. At this moment (in the summer of 2020), a new exhibition, 'Dancing Resistance: Cueca Sola', is on display. Takahashi donated 23 additional pieces to OHM in 2015, which brought the number of *arpilleras* in the collection to around 114.

The first exhibition in 2013 was triggered by a research and curatorial visit of Roberta Bacic, the Chilean human rights activist, and the curator of Conflict Textiles, Northern Ireland, who had held *arpillera* exhibitions worldwide since 2008. She studied all the OHM *arpilleras*, checking and inferring when they were made and the maker's signature and backside messages, and categorised them according to the subjects they depicted. The exhibition 'Meeting with Chilean *Arpilleras*' was based on this study.

4. Collaboration with Conflict Textiles, Northern Ireland

Conflict Textiles² is a collection and online archive of textiles related to the theme of political violence. It is now an associated website of the Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN) at Ulster University, Northern Ireland, and archives the information of over 370 *arpilleras* and other textiles. In 2008, Roberta Bacic, the archive curator living in Northern Ireland, was involved in the exhibition 'The Art of Survival International and Irish Quilts' held in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, which focussed on the way textile makers in Ireland, Latin America, and other parts of the world had dealt with their experiences of political violence. Conflict Textiles has its origin in this event, and since 2008, it has organised and been involved in nearly 190 exhibitions and associated activities.

Bacic came to know about OHM through myself, Tomoko Sakai, who shared the information about the museum with her. Bacic had been invited as the guest curator of the exhibition I had facilitated earlier in 2010, 'Stitching Resistance', held in the Museum of Osaka University. The relationship between OHM and Conflict Textiles did not end with the OHM exhibition 'Meeting with Chilean *Arpilleras*' in 2013. They were the two institutions from which the pieces were exhibited in the 2017 exhibition, 'Stitching Resistance', which was held in three venues in Japan, mostly came. In 2018, OHM and Conflict Textiles exchanged some *arpilleras* so that each collection would widen their historical, social, and international scopes. For a mutual donation, OHM sent 'Cueca Sola' (Violeta Morales, 1989) to Conflict Textiles, which was collecting a wider range of pieces made by the well-known *arpillerista*. In response, OHM received two *arpilleras* from Conflict Textiles titled 'Repression of Street Vendors' (anonymous, c. 1985) and 'NO to the Antiterrorist Law 2' (Aurora Ortiz, 2015). The two pieces expanded the historical scope of the OHM collection, whose pieces had been mostly made between 1988 and 1990. 'NO to the Antiterrorist Law 2' also serves in the collection as a recent example showing that people still make *arpilleras* in order to think about, and to express their feelings about, ongoing social and political issues.

There are also some *arpillera* pieces currently under the care of Conflict Textiles, on loan from OHM, which are shown at exhibitions and other events. For instance, 'Women Banging Their Pots' (Felicia, 1988) appeared on the flyer of 'Stitched Voices', the 2017 exhibition at Aberystwyth University. Together with the donated piece, such *arpilleras* from OHM enable

² Conflict Textiles website: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/>.

A detailed description of the background, objective and activities of this archive can be found in E. Doolan's article, 'Conflict Textiles', at Oxford Research Encyclopedias (<https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-796>)

Conflict Textiles to present a transnational expansion of the solidarity movement against the dictatorship in Chile, and of the created network of *arpilleras*, which includes not only North American or European countries but also East Asian countries like Japan.

5. Exhibitions in the Community and Other Areas Inside Japan

Arpilleras at the Oshima Hakko Museum have been displayed in many different regions of Japan. In 2015, an exhibition titled '*Arpillera: Chilean Appliques that Narrate in Silence*', held at the Iwaki Performing Arts Center, Fukushima Prefecture, focussed exclusively on OHM *arpilleras*. Iwaki is a city to where many residents of areas that were directly hit by the nuclear disaster in 2011 evacuated. Many of those who were displaced by the disaster still live in the city today. The exhibition was designed in an anticipation of the thought that *arpilleras* would show some insight to the people living and staying in Iwaki City who live in the midst of post-disaster social uncertainty.

OHM *arpilleras* were central to another exhibition that aimed at connecting different types of historical experiences. As noted earlier, OHM *arpilleras* were major exhibits in the 'Stitching Memoryscape' exhibition in 2017 that I organised with Conflict Textiles. The exhibition, held in Sendai, Kyoto, and Nagasaki in Japan, attempted to create a space for considering and perceiving the potentials of textile art to cope with and communicate violent experiences. Among the 25 Chilean *arpilleras* exhibited, 15 were from Conflict Textiles and 10 were from OHM. Having Chilean *arpilleras* at its centre, the exhibition showed textiles depicting political violence experienced in several places in the world, such as Germany, Spain, Catalunya, and England. At the same time, textiles related to historical experiences that may look different in nature from some perspectives were juxtaposed in the exhibition rooms. In Sendai, another focus of the exhibition was on the experience of the triple disaster in 2011 (the massive earthquake, tsunami, and failure of the Tokyo Electric Power Co. nuclear plant), which permanently altered communities and many people's lives. Among the exhibits were two *kakashi* (scarecrows), life-sized dolls made by women living in Naraha Town, which is close to the nuclear plant that had a meltdown. Also exhibited was a piece of embroidery from India depicting an enormous earthquake in 2001. In Nagasaki, an important focus was placed on the atomic bombing in 1945. Gingko nut dolls and hand-painted wall-hangings by poet and *hibakusha* (victim of the atomic-bombing) Sumako Fukuda were also displayed. Some feedback from visitors noted that they found themselves connected to *arpilleras* as well as textiles and handicrafts related to their local historical experiences. Some also noted that they were impressed by how *arpilleras* had travelled globally, and how hand-sewn pieces made by ordinary poor women formed a global network.

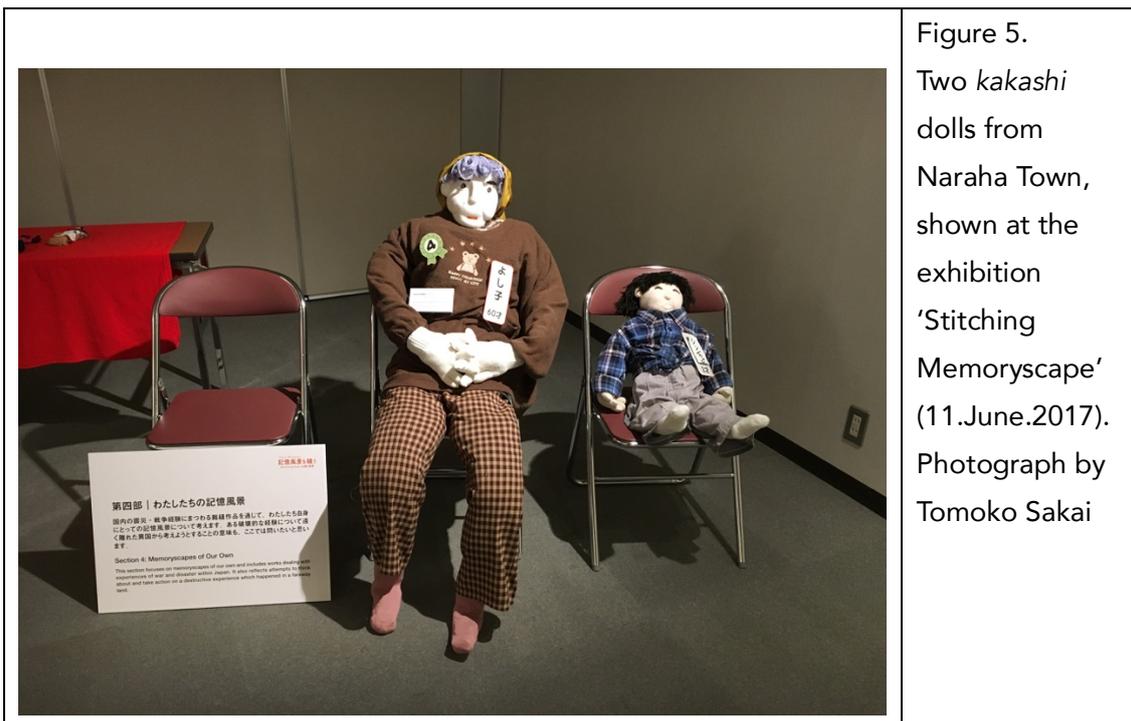


Figure 5.
Two *kakashi* dolls from Naraha Town, shown at the exhibition 'Stitching Memoryscape' (11.June.2017). Photograph by Tomoko Sakai

Like other textile works dealing with violent and difficult experiences, *arpilleras* 'arouse our sense of touch and shape our feeling towards them'³. Although it is important to notice differences in the nature of various historical experiences, it turned out, through the exhibition, that there is a commonality in the ways people cope with everyday difficulties through mutual community support and by coming together for sewing or crafting by hand. As anthropologist Michael Lambek writes referring to Hanna Arendt, the ordinary can be compared to Aristotle's concept of actuality, in which one can see the unity of means and ends⁴. Against a backdrop of *arpilleras'* transnational expansion lies their potential to connect people with different backgrounds because they appeal to, through their tactile and domestic nature, the ordinary in the midst of a crisis.

Apart from exhibitions, some OHM *arpilleras* have been lent to local junior high schools in Nagano. They have contributed to the development of young people's interests in history in different regions of the world and to spread ideas about alternative ways to express one's experience and opinions. In such a way, OHM *arpilleras* have delivered their messages along with the art of communication through textile language and handicraft.

³ Christine Andrä, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Lydia Cole & Danielle House (2019) 'Knowing Through Needlework: curating the difficult knowledge of conflict textiles', *Critical Military Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 3-4, p8.

⁴ Michael Lambek (2010) 'Introduction', in Michael Lambek ed. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, Fordham, p3.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Roberta Bacic and Breege Doherty of Conflict Textiles, Tomomitsu Oshima, and Masa'aki Takahashi for their long-term help, advice, and co-operation and for checking the draft of this paper. This paper is an outcome of the enduring relationships with the people above, and it owes much to all the work of the staff and people who targeted their efforts toward the mentioned exhibitions.

This research was funded by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17K13588.