

Ginkgo Tree Project Summary

Background

In the spring of 2024, eight ginkgo tree saplings were planted on the lawn between the E. Craig Wall, Jr. Academic Center and the Sculpture Garden outside the Little Library. As the descendants of trees surviving the atomic blast in Hiroshima, they were donated by Green Legacy Hiroshima in Japan, an organization committed to sharing a “double message” about the “dangers of arms of mass destruction and nuclear weapons in particular” and “the sacred character of mankind and the resilience of nature.”¹ It has been working on the grassroots level to bring together people who suffer from conflicts and share a message of peace, coexistence, and hope.²³

In 2016, Dr. Kristi Multhaup, Vail Professor of Psychology at Davidson College, connected with the organization during her participation in the ASIANetwork seminar in Japan and launched the initiative to bring seeds from these Ginkgo trees to the Davidson campus. This effort involved a cross-department collaboration that stretched from the Biology and East Asian Studies Department to Physical Plant to the Offices of the President and Vice President for Academic Affairs.

The tree planting event made efforts to acknowledge a broader history of World War II in the Asia-Pacific region beyond the atomic bombing in Hiroshima. However, while providing important background about the Ginkgo trees themselves, the initial news report on the project did not capture the full complexity of this history. Students and alumni of Chinese and Korean backgrounds expressed frustration that their perspectives were not represented, and they raised concerns that the Ginkgo trees alone did not convey the multifaceted nature of the roles that Japan and other countries played in World War II.

Education about World War II in the United States often emphasizes the tragedy of the atomic bombings, with limited attention to the Imperial Government of Japan’s invasion of Burma, China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and other countries in the region. As a result, students without personal connections to these countries may have a narrower understanding of this period and not appreciate the complex roles that different actors played in the war. A more nuanced, inclusive, and historically-informed appreciation of these complexities would help everyone reflect on the effects of war and the need for efforts to preserve peace between nations.

¹ Green Legacy Hiroshima. <https://glh.unitar.org/en/about/>.

² Legacy of A-bombed Trees, ANT Hiroshima Asian Network of Trust, accessed Nov 11, 2024. https://ant-hiroshima.org/project.php?hdn_cmd=DETAIL&id=9&lang=en.

³ Tomoko Wanatabe’s Interview, The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History, accessed Nov 11, 2024. <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ranger/tour-stop/tomoko-watanabes-interview/>.

The Project

Dean of the Faculty Shelley Rigger asked the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI), together with interested student organizations, departments, and faculty members, to help organize a deliberative process for Davidson students, faculty, staff, and alumni to develop interpretive materials related to the Ginkgo trees that were planted in Spring 2024 between Chambers, Wall, and the Little Library. The idea emerged to develop signage about the trees that provide more context about the Ginkgo trees and why they were planted. This language could be displayed as signs, text, or in more creative ways using audio recordings, QR codes, or other interpretive materials.

This initiative aims to focus on WWII in the Asia Pacific as a case study of the pain and harm of war, without focusing on specific historical disagreements, controversies, and questions of blame and fault. Beyond presenting the historical context related to the Ginkgo trees, this project hopes to inspire reflection and foster meaningful conversations among students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members about the horrors of war that lead to profound losses of human dignity and personhood.

The central question the project— together with interested student organizations, departments, and faculty members – helped our community engage with was the following:

- What should we say, as a community, about the legacies of WWII in the Asia Pacific region that captures the universal experience of harm to human beings in war and respects the diversity of perspectives on this question?

To this end, the DCI hosted a Deliberative Forum in the Spring of 2025 to explore this question and chart a path forward on this project. The project team drafted recommended text for the Ginkgo tree signs based on input received from participants at the forum. It then sought out and received feedback on this draft text from the forum's participants and incorporated it into a final version that was submitted to the Vice President of Academic Affairs. If you have any questions or are interested in getting involved in this project, please reach out to Keya Zhou (kezhou@davidson.edu), Graham Bullock (grbullock@davidson.edu), or Shelley Rigger (shrigger@davidson.edu).