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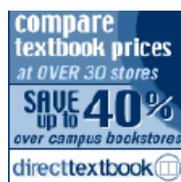
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Japan's Hidden Role in the "Return" of Zainichi Koreans to North Korea

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By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

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The slow and troubled journey towards a future normalization of relations between Japan and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK - North Korea) is shaped by two radically different visions of the past. Both Japanese and North Korean governments demand a "settling of accounts" for past history. For Japan, however, the "account" in question is the fate of the Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korea. For the North Korean side, on the other hand, it is the older and larger history of Japanese colonialism in Korea.

Meanwhile there is one aspect of the shared history of the two countries which has been neglected by both sides, and where responsibilities for the past remain to be addressed. This is the issue of the "return" to North Korea of some 93,000 people – the overwhelming majority of them *Zainichi* Koreans (although the number also included some Japanese spouses of North Koreans). This "return" of Koreans living in Japan began in 1959 and continued, with interruption, until 1984. 74,779 people were repatriated between December 1959 and the end of 1961 alone. Many of the surviving returnees are still living in North Korea today; others have escaped across the border into China, while some have vanished into prison camps, never to be heard from again.

New Light on a Hidden History

The causes of this return movement have long been debated by historians in Japan, and recent crises in the relationship between Japan and North Korea have encouraged further research on the issue. [1] At the end of the Pacific War there were over two million Koreans in Japan, including hundreds of thousands recruited as forced laborers during the war. Though the majority returned to Korea immediately after liberation, some 600,000-700,000 remained in Japan. As former colonial subjects, they were Japanese nationals under international law, and remained so throughout the Occupation period, although the authorities increasingly treated them as foreigners. On the day after Japan regained autonomy at the end of the Occupation, the Japanese government unilaterally abrogated their Japanese nationality, an act arguably at odds with the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: "No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality." [2] As foreigners in 1950s Japan, members of the

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Korean community not only faced social discrimination but were also debarred by law from all forms of public sector employment (including teaching in state schools, manual work for local governments etc.) and ineligible for public housing, pension schemes etc. (although as an act of discretionary "benevolence", the government did allow destitute members of the community to continue receiving support under Japan's Livelihood Protection Law).

Over 97% of Koreans in Japan originated from the south of the Korean peninsula [3], and most therefore had no friends or family in the North. Despite this, there can be little doubt that in the late 1950s and after many indeed made a conscious personal choice to leave Japan in search of a new life in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. From August 1958 onwards the North Korean affiliated General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (generally known by the abbreviation *Chongryon* in Korean or *Soren* in Japanese) promoted a mass return movement, encouraging returnees to believe that they would be taking part in the creation of a peaceful, united socialist homeland. If the Japanese government had simply allowed those who asked to return to do so, there would be no reason to criticize their actions. However, the previously secret documents show that they did much more than that.

The documents in question were declassified in 2004 by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, which acted as an intermediary in the return process) They reveal that more than two years before the start of *Soren*'s 1958 return movement, the Japanese government and the Japanese Red Cross had begun to cooperate in energetically lobbying the ICRC to help undertake a mass repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea. The key figure in this process was Inoue Masutaro, a former senior Foreign Ministry official with strong connections to the intelligence community, who had joined the Japan Red Cross Society in 1955 as the head of its Foreign Affairs section.

As the diary of former Japanese Prime Minister Ashida Hitoshi indicates, in January 1956 a meeting of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's Foreign Affairs Committee debated the issue of the repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea. Following this meeting, Ashida raised the matter over the phone with a leading official of the Japan Red Cross Society. [4] Three days later, on 19 January 1956, Inoue Masutaro wrote, in a tone of some excitement, to inform the International Committee of the Red Cross of "an indication that the Japanese Governmental party, the Conservative Party [i.e. LDP] would start a movement to support the repatriation of Koreans. Such influential members of the Conservative Party as Mr. Hitoshi Ashida (former Prime Minister) and Mr. Katsuo Okazaki (former Foreign Minister) have informed us unofficially that if the Koreans really wish to go back to North Korea, they will materialize a policy to help those Koreans in Japan." [5]

Welfare Cuts and Repatriation

The correspondence shows that at that time the Japanese government and Red Cross officials were already thinking in terms of the possibility of a repatriation of at least 60,000 *Zainichi* Koreans. The motives behind the official enthusiasm for repatriation are clearly revealed by Inoue Masutaro, who described Koreans in Japan as being "very violent" [6], "in dark ignorance" [7], and operating as a "Fifth Column" in Japanese society [8]. "Japan", he wrote bluntly, "has no experience hitherto of being embarrassed by the question of [a] minority and lacks knowledge how to handle it". [9] The authorities were also evidently eager to find a way of reducing Livelihood Protection payments to Koreans. In a conversation with a visiting ICRC official in May 1956, Inoue is reported as explaining that the Japanese government wanted to "rid itself of several tens of thousands of Koreans who are indigent and vaguely communist, thus at a stroke resolving security problems and budgetary problems (because of the sums of money currently being dispensed to impoverished Koreans)" [10]. In this context it is worth noting that this was not the first move to rid the country of Korean residents regarded by the authorities as "Communists" or "subversives". In 1950, soon after the outbreak of the Korean War, the Japanese government had drawn up a Deportation Ordinance for this purpose, but had been dissuaded by the US occupation authorities from putting into effect. [11]

Most significantly, the newly released documents provide evidence which suggests that in the second half of the 1950s the Japanese government actively sought to persuade *Zainichi* Koreans to choose repatriation to North Korea over the option of remaining in Japan. In his conversation with the ICRC official in 1956, Inoue is reported going on to say that the government had "decided to undertake repatriation, if necessary by provoking individual demands to go to the North". [12] Precisely how the government intended to "provoke individual demands" is not clear. It should be noted, though, that precisely when this conversation was taking place, the Ministry of Health and Welfare was conducting a campaign to slash the very limited



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welfare benefits available to Koreans in Japan. Some 60,000 *Zainichi* Koreans had their welfare payments reduced or cancelled: a move which undoubtedly made the prospect of life in North Korea look more attractive than it would otherwise have seemed. [13]

The Politics of Humanitarianism

However, to conceal these motives and to avoid antagonizing the South Korean government (which was vehemently opposed to the return of any *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea), the Japanese government decided to pursue its objectives through the intermediary of a humanitarian and supposedly apolitical NGO – the Red Cross. To understand the complex political maneuvers surrounding the repatriation policy, it is necessary to consider the wider framework of Cold War international relations within which these moves took place. The central problem, from the point of view of the Japanese authorities, was this. In the latter part of the 1950s, the Kishi government was eager to pursue the normalization of relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK -South Korea). However, if diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea were established, it seemed likely that the South Korean government would seek to claim all *Zainichi* Koreans as its citizens. This would make the repatriation of Koreans to North Korea both legally and politically very difficult. Since the South Korean regime showed little enthusiasm for accepting a large-scale return of Koreans from Japan, the Japanese government might thus become unable to fulfill its goal of “ridding itself of several tens of thousands of Koreans”.

Certain key figures within the government were therefore eager to carry out mass repatriations to North Korea while preliminary negotiations with South Korea were still underway, but *before* moving on to the formal talks which would lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations with the ROK. A plan to repatriate *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea was also a powerful bargaining tool which could be used to extract concessions from South Korea. In the words of a revealing letter from Inoue to the ICRC, if negotiations with South Korea became deadlocked, it would be “advantageous to take up the problem of repatriation to North Korea for the purpose of breaking the deadlock”. [14]

The development of a humanitarian cover story for the repatriation plan was pursued at the highest levels. For example, in a letter sent to the Japan Red Cross Society's Vice-President by Prime Minister Kishi on 20 September 1957, Kishi (writing in his concurrent capacity as Foreign Minister) argued that, to avoid angering South Korea, it was important to choose the “appropriate time and method” for the repatriations to North Korea. He went on to suggest that the ICRC was the body best placed to pressure South Korea into acknowledging the “humanitarian” nature of repatriations to the DPRK, and he urged the Japanese Red Cross to continue lobbying the ICRC to exert that pressure. [15]

Throughout 1958, preliminary negotiations on the normalization of relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea continued, with the Japanese side deploying the threat of repatriations to North Korea as a bargaining chip. Meanwhile, the mass movement in favour of repatriation had begun within the *Zainichi* Korean community, headed and coordinated by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. This movement clearly had the prior approval of the North Korean government, which promptly announced its willingness to accept the repatriation and provide employment, education and welfare to all “returnees”. By February of 1959, the Kishi government had evidently decided that the “appropriate time” had come, and an official decision by the Japanese cabinet initiated a flurry of negotiation between the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross Societies on a joint repatriation plan. A draft agreement on repatriation was agreed between the two countries on 24 June 1959. The next step was to ensure the international respectability of the scheme by obtaining the official blessing of the ICRC, whose role would be to confirm that the returnees were leaving of their own free will.

Japan's Confidential Guarantees

The International Committee of the Red Cross was troubled by suspicions about the motives of the Japanese government, and about the conditions awaiting “returnees” in North Korea. Some members of the Committee seem to have been strongly opposed to involvement in the repatriation scheme. As a result, in 1959 the ICRC agreed to supervise the repatriations only after demanding a series of confidential guarantees from the Japanese authorities via the Japan Red Cross Society. One of the most important of the seven guarantees sought by the ICRC was an assurance that the Japanese government would “publicly inform *Zainichi* Koreans of the status of those who remained in Japan, and inform the ICRC in advance of the details of that status”. [16] In other words, the International Red Cross sought to ensure that *Zainichi* Koreans were being offered a genuine

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choice between remaining in Japan or leaving for North Korea. To this end, they wanted the Japanese government to give Koreans in Japan a clear commitment about their rights to residence and welfare in Japanese society.

The Japanese Red Cross, replying on behalf of the government, assured the ICRC that this condition would be met. However, the government in fact not only failed to ensure that the Korean community in Japan received the information it had promised, but also provided the ICRC itself with an extremely rosy and highly questionable image of the actual status of Koreans in Japan. Amongst other things, the international body was assured that Japanese law prohibited employment discrimination against *Zainichi* Koreans and provided them with full rights to unemployment insurance. [17] Information given to the ICRC on the authority of the government emphasised the “many facilities” and specially “favourable treatment” given by the government to the Korean community in Japan. [18] On the basis of this information – and of a verbal assurance from Japan Red Cross Society Vice-President Kasai Yoshisuke, who stated that the responsibility for the repatriation scheme rested “squarely on the shoulders of the Japanese Red Cross and Japanese government” [19] – the ICRC agreed to lend its name to the project, and to send a team to Japan to supervise the repatriations.

Many aspects of this complex story remain to be fully analyzed. These include the motives of the North Korean government for accepting such large numbers of repatriates; the significant behind-the-scenes role played by the Soviet Union; and the attitude and influence of the US government. A closer look at the history of the repatriation program and its consequences is particularly important because it sheds fresh light on the historical background to today's troubled relationship between Japan and the DPRK.

Even this brief survey of information from the newly revealed archives, however, makes two points clear.

1. The Japan Red Cross Society, which was supposed to adhere to the international Red Cross principle of independence from political interference, in fact allowed itself to be used as an instrument of government policy in pursuing some very dubious political aims.
2. The Japanese government was far more actively involved in the repatriation plan than has previously been realized, and this involvement was deliberately concealed both from the Japanese public and from the *Zainichi* Korean returnees themselves. In the light of the new evidence, it is necessary to reconsider the responsibility of the Japanese, as well as the North Korean, government for the ultimate fate of the returnees.

This also implies that the Japanese government must now take seriously its responsibility to accept those former *Zainichi* Korean returnees who today are seeking to leave North Korea and return to Japan.

FOOTNOTES

[1] For example, Kim Yongdal and Takayanagi Toshio eds., *Kita Chosen Kikoku Jigyo Kankei Shiryoshu*, Tokyo, Shinkansha, 1995; Okonogi Masao ed., *Zainichi Chosenjin wa naze Kikoku shita no ka*, Tokyo, Gendai Jinbunsha, 2004; Takasaki Sôji, “Kikoku Undo to wa nan datta no ka” Part 1, *Ronza*, May 2004, pp. 114-143; Wada Haruki, “Kikoku Undo to wa nan datta no ka” Part 2, *Ronza*, June 2004, pp. 132-143; Kang Sang-Jung, *Niccho Kankei no Kokufuku*, Tokyo, Shueisha Shinsho, 2003, pp. 70-79; Kawashima Takane of Meiji Daigaku has also recently discovered new Japanese archival material on the topic. His articles can be viewed at <http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~takane/> One of the few English language works to discuss the “return” in any detail is Sonia Ryang, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1997, particularly pp. 113-115.

[2] Article 15a, *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

[3] Ryang op. cit., p. 3.

[4] Ashida Hitoshi, *Ashida Hitoshi Nikki* Vol. 6, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1992, p. 68.

[5] Inoue to Boissier, 18 January 1956, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-002. *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier I : généralités*, 17.2.1953-11.10.1957.

[6] Inoue to Boissier, 11 January 1956, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-002.

[7] “Fundamental Principles on the Solution of Question of North Koreans in Japan”, confidential essay by Masutaro Inoue,

appended to letter from Inoue to Boissier, 18 January 1956, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-002.

[8] Inoue Masutarō, "Recognition of Korea: An Essay from the Standpoint of Geneva Conventions", in ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-006, *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier VIII : année 1958*, 13.11.1957-15.12.1958. :

[9] "Fundamental Principles" op. cit., p. 1.

[10] Michel to ICRC, 23 May 1956, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-002.

[11] A senior official of the Japanese Attorney General's office is quoted as noting that Prime Minister Yoshida was particularly "anxious to hurry up the matter on deportation"; Memorandum for Colonel Napier, "Deportation of Korean [sic] Issue", 9 March 1951, held in GHQ/SCAP archives, box no. 2189, "Immigration, Feb. 1950-Mar 1952", held in National Diet Library, Tokyo, microfiche no. GS(B) -01602. See also untitled memo outlining GHQ/SCAP's views on deportation, initialed "MU", held in GHQ/SCAP archives, box no. 2189, "Immigration, Feb. 1950-Mar 1952", held in National Diet Library, Tokyo, microfiche no. GS(B)-01603; Jiji Press, "Communist Koreans May be Ordered Deported", evening bulletin 24 December 1950, English translation held in GHQ/SCAP archives, box no. 2189, "Immigration, Feb. 1950-Mar 1952", held in National Diet Library, Tokyo, microfiche no. GS(B)-01603

[12] Michel to ICRC op. cit.

[13] See for example *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 24 May 1956 ; *Tokyo Shimbun*, 24 May 1956, translations of articles in ICRC Archives, B AG 323 105-004, *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier III : rapatriement de 48 Coréens en Corée-du-Nord*, 18.5.1956-03.12.1957.

[14] Inoue to Boissier, 31 May 1957, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-005.01, *Généralités : Correspondance avec les Sociétés nationales du Japon, de la République démocratique populaire de Corée et de la République de Corée au sujet du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon et du retour des pêcheurs japonais détenues en République de Corée*, 01.08.1956-29.12.1957..

[15] See French translation of letter from Kishi to Shimazu, 20 September 1957, forwarded by Shimazu to Boissier, 1 October 1957, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-005.01

[16] Gallopin to Inoue, 24 July 1959, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-011.03, *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier X : décision du CICR de prêter son concours à la Croix-Rouge japonais dans la question du rapatriement des Coréens (Aide-mémoire transmis à la Croix-Rouge japonais et projets de communication, réponses)*, 03.07.1959-12.08.1959.

[17] Inoue to Gallopin, 30 July 1959, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-011.06, *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier X : décision du CICR de prêter son concours à la Croix-Rouge japonais dans la question du rapatriement des Coréens (Notes et procés-verbaux d'entretien avec Masutaro Inoue, directeur du Département de Affaires étrangères de la Croix-Rouge japonais, lors de son séjour à Genève)*, 01.07.1959-13.08.1959

[18] Inoue to Gallopin, 3 August 1959, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-011.06.

[19] Angst to ICRC, 22 July 1959, ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-010, *Problème du rapatriement des Coréens du Japon, dossier IX: Généralités concernant la période juillet-août 1959*, 02.07.1959-29.06.1959.

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