

Japan Through the Eyes of a "Quasi-Refugee"

Suh Kyungsik

Japan Through the Eyes of a "Quasi-Refugee"

by Suh Kyungsik

Translation by Nakano Makiko and Ann Sherif

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A QUASI-REFUGEE

I first became aware of the relevance of the idea of refugee to my own life when I read Ghassan Kanafani's writing in the late 1970s. Kanafani (b. 1936), a Palestinian refugee, was a spokesman for the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In 1972 he was assassinated in Beirut by a car bomb. Kanafani's work, which appeared first in Japanese and then in Korean translation, also played an important role in the South Korean pro-democracy movement during the 1970s. Korean movement leaders such as Paik Nak-Chung were inspired by Arab literatures of resistance, and called for South Koreans to define their own struggles as part of a global Third World liberation movement.

At the time, this claim resonated with me, a resident Korean in Japan, for several reasons. First, my elder brothers had been jailed and horribly brutalized by the despotic regime of

South Korean leader Park Chung Hee for political crimes. And there was also the question of national identity.

I can name several of Kanafani's works that have had a large impact on my thinking: his critical essay on the literature of resistance in Occupied Palestine and his fiction "Returning to Haifa" and *Men in the Sun*. It was through these writings that I realized that I came to understand the notions of "Third World identity" and "refugee self identity." Indeed, through Kanafani's works, I came to the realization that I myself am a refugee of sorts.

In "Returning to Haifa" (1969), Kanafani tells the story of a married Palestinian couple who, during the 1967 Six Day War, return to the home in Haifa that they had been forced to flee during the First Arab-Israeli War in 1948. They find immigrants from Eastern European living there. Not only has their former home been occupied, but the Israeli couple has also adopted their eldest son Khaldun, who they had inadvertently left behind when they fled Haifa twenty years earlier. As they leave, the Palestinian man says to his wife, "The homeland is where none of this can

happen." About their second son Khalid, who was born in a refugee camp, he says "For Kalid, the homeland is the future." In other words, home is less a matter of territory, land, blood, or even a particular culture or tradition. Home is a conscious decision about the future made under specific political conditions.

These insights have helped me to resolve my long struggle over the idea of homeland. As a resident Korean born and raised in Japan, I came to conceive of a future homeland where certain things "are not supposed to happen." I confess feeling a keen interest in the son in Kanafani's story, a man who had been raised as an Israeli and thus was an enemy of his own Palestinian biological parents and brother. We Resident Koreans are constantly torn in our loyalty to two cultures, like the two brothers in Kanafani's story.

Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* illustrates forcefully the dilemma of the refugee. During the First Middle East War, three Palestinians attempt to enter oil-rich Kuwait in their desperate search for work. Due to the national boundaries established by the colonial powers earlier in the century, they now face the problem of being branded as illegal aliens. The three men, vividly evoked by Kanafani, suffocate inside an oil truck just as they are being smuggled over the border.

In this story, Palestinians become the people on

whom horrible deaths are visited. This straightforward image of death becomes a rallying point for Palestinian identity. In its resonance with numerous actual incidents of refugees from China, from Morocco, from Africa, dying in this same way, Kanafani's story has taken on a universal meaning for the plight of the refugee.

PHOTOGRAPHING EXILE

We can understand the notion of refugee better if we consider it in contrast with the idea of the citizen. The nation guarantees to its citizens the rights of life and liberty. Such is the promise of the modern nation state. Refugees, in contrast, are those people who are excluded from this contract between state and citizen. Accordingly, restricting the definition of refugee only to those people who live in refugee camps obscures the true significance of the idea of refugee as I have defined it here.

Among the international community of artists who deal with the idea of the refugee are photographers Sebastian Salgado from Brazil and Boris Mikhailov of the Ukraine. For part of his career, Mikhailov worked under myriad restrictions in the former Soviet Union. The state banned all sorts of things: shooting photographs from above a certain height, photographing nudes, and focusing exclusively on a single subject. After the fall of the Soviet Union,

Mikhailov was freed from these restrictions. He used his new found freedom to interesting ends. I was especially moved by his series of photographs called "Case History," in which he focuses on homeless people in the Ukraine.

According to Mikhailov, the homeless is a new social "class" that came into existence after the fall of the Soviet Union (as did its opposite, the nouveau riche). As in any country, the homeless are people who have fallen outside of the social welfare system. In the Ukraine, they are literally abandoned on the street. Mikhailov reports that passersby freely kick, punch, and abuse them, as a way of letting off steam. Sometimes, he writes, you can hear their bones break, and you see them dead on the streets.

Mikhailov chose to photograph his homeless subjects in the nude, or partially clothed, thus revealing the true figure of people who have been pushed out of the promises of the nation. These are people who became refugees when the Soviet state dissolved. They are in exile, though they still dwell within the borders of the land where they were born. They are exiles who are deprived even of the opportunity to cross borders in search of a better life. It would be arrogant of me to claim identity with them, yet Mikhailov's work has encouraged me to believe in the broader definition of refugee that I proposed above—a person who has been excluded from the nation.

RESIDENT KOREANS AND EXILE

Learning about my own family's history has been part of my awakening to the relevance of the idea of refugee status to resident Koreans. When my grandfather came to Japan, he brought along my father, who was a small child at the time. Thus, my grandfather, father, and I represent three generations of Koreans in Japan. When Japan was defeated on 15 August 1945, more than 2,300,000 Koreans resided in Japan. Among them, approximately 1,500,000 people had come to Japan as either a direct or indirect result of Japan's policy of Total War.

After the war, the majority of these people returned to the Korean peninsula, the land of their birth. Only about 600,000 remained in Japan, for a variety of reasons. My father, then in his twenties, was among those who stayed in Japan to work, while his parents chose to take their other children back to their hometown in the southern part of the peninsula. Grandfather had spent seventeen years in Japan, and it proved difficult to re-establish his life in his homeland. The growing political confusion that arose from the division of the peninsula at the 38th Parallel rocked society as a whole.

In 1948, the same year that the state of Israel was founded, two nations were created on the Korean peninsula. Only a few years later, the Korean War erupted. My grandfather, plagued by

poverty and war, had little choice but to send his second son back to Japan to be with his older brother (my father).

Under Japanese colonialism (1910-1945), Koreans were made subjects of the Empire of Japan. This compulsory status did not, however, guarantee them the same rights as subjects who were members of the "Yamato race." On the contrary, Koreans were objects of harsh discrimination. Of the many Koreans who went to work in Japan during this period, only some moved of their own free will. The vast majority was brought to Japan forcibly as laborers. Due to Japan's militarism and expansionism in East Asia from the mid-1920s, Koreans found themselves living far and wide, from Manchuria to Japan. Their living space was fractured again after the war, due to the division of the peninsula during the Cold War.

Between Japan's defeat in 1945 and the San Francisco Peace Treaty, former colonial subjects living in Japan were still considered Japanese. In April 1952, with the ratification of the Peace Treaty, however, the Government of Japan declared that former colonial subjects no longer had claim to Japanese citizenship.

I was born in Kyoto in 1951, the year prior to the treaty ratification, and thus was a Japanese citizen for only one year. Though long-term residents of Japan, my parents were also stripped

of their citizenship. Similarly, those Koreans who had returned to Korea after the liberation (Japan's defeat), such as my grandparents, were banned from re-entering Japan freely. In 1947 the Government of Japan enacted the Alien Registration Act, by which means it defined Koreans and Taiwanese as aliens. Thus Koreans who had been forcibly taken to Japan were now excluded without prior consultation.

At that point in time, the Korean peninsula was in flux politically. Therefore, when long-time Korean residents of Japan were made to register as aliens, many of them identified themselves as "Chosen," a word that designated only their ethnicity, and not a nation, because there was no country called "Chosen." Thus, they became refugees. Japan bears the principle responsibility for making Resident Koreans into refugees. I doubt that the majority of Japanese people understand the significance or even the fact of that transformation.

My own uncle spent three days in an oil drum in a suffocating cabin on a boat, trying to find his way back to Japan, unaware of the precarious status of his own citizenship. (Needless to say, when I first encountered Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*, I could not help but recall my uncle's journey.) Once back in Japan, he quickly learned that he had become an illegal alien. Still a child, he avoided attending school, out of fear of being discovered by the authorities. He stayed in Japan

and eventually married under an assumed Japanese name. After fathering three children, he was able to receive special immigration status. Several years ago, he ended his own troubled life. His experience is not, unfortunately, atypical. For Resident Koreans, life in Japan is still characterized by both legal inequities and discrimination.

Even now, prominent politicians such as Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro continue to voice opinions that make clear the widespread prejudices that still pervade Japanese society. Until quite recently Resident Koreans were excluded from social services of which all Japanese citizens can take advantage, such as National Health Insurance, the national pension plan, employment at national universities, and civil service. Equality under the law has still not been fully achieved.

In the postwar Japanese Constitution, authored by the Occupation authorities and inspired by the U.S. Constitution, the Japanese term used for the word "the people" is "kokumin" (or, the people or citizens of a nation). In retrospect, it appears that this identification of the "people" as only those who have a certain identification with the nation has been used as a rationale for denying human rights to permanent residents, the majority of whom are resident Koreans. Many Japanese people seem to concur in this narrow interpretation of what constitutes the

"people." This particular brand of nationalism has, however, been contested over the years through the legal system.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH JEWISH REGISTRATION CARD

I am very interested in the life of the talented German painter, Felix Nussbaum (1904-1944). His companion, Felka Plateki, whom he later married, came from Poland. They were both Jewish, so when the Nazis came to power in Germany, they migrated to Belgium. In Brussels, they lead a precarious existence--not allowed to work, yet required by the authorities to prove financial self-sufficiency every six months in order to extend their visas. They had income only because a relative in London sent them money on a regular basis. Every six months, they would take their alien registration cards to the city hall and hope for the best.

Although our historical situation is totally different from those who suffered under the Nazis, resident Koreans often recognize aspects of their own experiences in the many stories told by survivors of the Holocaust. We are subjected to various regulations. From the time I was fourteen, I was required to carry an alien registration card. We also had to be fingerprinted, as if we were criminals. Our existence was precarious, not knowing when we might be expelled from Japan.

As with many migrants, as with Nussbaum, we faced many financial difficulties. Immediately after the war, my father sent money to his family back in Korea on a regular basis. Rather than wiring money through a bank or other regular channels, he likely relied upon the services of other Koreans who traveled back and forth between Japan and our hometown in Korea.

Nussbaum first moved to Belgium in 1935. In May 1940, the Nazis invaded Belgium. Suddenly, Nussbaum was transformed from a resident German to an "enemy alien." He, along with other German Jews living in Belgium, was sent to Saint Cyprien, a concentration camp in the south of France. By June, 1940 both Belgium and France had been defeated by the Nazis. Nussbaum then returned to Belgium, where his wife was still living, but then the Germans stripped all Jews of their German citizenship. Nussbaum was thus rendered stateless, literally a man without a country. Subsequently, the Nazis ordered all Jews in Belgium to register and to carry Jewish identity cards, in order to facilitate their removal to concentration camps.

Nussbaum and his wife hid from the Nazis, and Nussbaum even managed to continue painting. He told the Belgian friends who were giving them shelter that he hoped that his paintings would survive, even if he himself perished. In the end both Nussbaum and his wife were shipped to Auschwitz, where both lost their lives.

Fortunately for us, his paintings did survive. One work that I find most suggestive is his "Self-Portrait with a Jewish Identity Card." The painting shows a man trapped on a dead-end street, holding up his ID card to an unseen viewer, perhaps an official. On his coat is sewn a yellow Star of David, and his ID card bears a stamp that says "JEW" in bold, red letters. The painting is not an exploration of Jewish identity, or Jewish ethnicity and spirituality. Rather, it portrays a refugee who has been categorized as a Jew by virtue of the violence of the nation-state. This is a portrait of a migrant, an exile.

What does this painting have to do with resident Korean identity? My sense is that the majority of Japanese people do not grasp the intimate connection between the self and the nation. That is, they do not understand that the nation has the power to determine the citizenship and the identity of the people living within its borders. We resident Koreans, in contrast, have been living with this reality for much of the modern period.

EXILE FROM THE MOTHER TONGUE

I have learned a great deal about the complex links between language, nation, and exile from reading the biographies of European Jews who survived the Holocaust. Some Jewish people lived completely assimilated lives in Austria and Germany, knowing no Yiddish or Hebrew, and

barely conversant in Jewish culture. They were excluded from the majority once the Nazis annexed Austria. Only when they were exiled from the mainstream did they realize that the Germanic culture and German language that they so loved had been brutally occupied by the Nazis. Jewish people were no longer allowed claim on Beethoven, Strauss, or any element of Germanic culture. One Austrian writer in this predicament called himself a man without a home. For him, the idea of home had nothing to do with place or geography. Rather, home was an identity built around language and culture. Ironically, it was anti-Semitism that forced such people to identify themselves as Jewish.

Paul Celan, an Eastern European, was another of the many Jewish writers whose mother tongue was German, though he was fluent in several languages. Celan survived Nazi slave labor, but both of his parents perished in the concentration camps. After the war, other writers criticized Celan for writing in German, as it meant employing the language of those who had murdered his own mother and father. Celan, though, felt justified in using German, because he felt he could only express his own truth if he wrote in his native language. Late in his life, Celan visited Israel, where he felt utterly alienated from the majority of Jewish writers there who wrote in Hebrew. In 1970, he drowned himself in the Seine.

These experiences of Jewish writers and their relations with language resonate in certain ways with those of resident Koreans in Japan. For the thirty-five years during which the Japanese Empire occupied the Korean peninsula, it suppressed Korean language and culture. Even decades after liberation, Korea still remains scarred by this linguistic and cultural silencing. Many resident Koreans who were born and educated in Japan similarly have an ambiguous relationship with the language and culture of the land of their birth.

Why, given this uncomfortable relationship we have with Japanese, don't we simply learn Korean and adopt it as a new native language? This is a question that has been put to me more than once. From my point of view, however, a native language is not something that one can change. Celan's anguish over his relationship to Germanic culture serves as a dramatic example of exile from one's native language and culture. Although quite different from the experiences of resident Koreans, their cases elucidate for me the extent to which the language and culture that one grows up with is absolutely integral to personhood, despite enforced exile which might be brought by extreme political and historical circumstances. We grew up speaking Japanese, and the majority of our readers are Japanese. Nonetheless, we have a unique and somewhat alienated relationship with Japanese, one that is common to refugees everywhere. Refugees,

while sharing a native language with the majority population, possess a different understanding of their historical ties with that language and culture.

QUASI-REFUGEES AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

During the post-Cold War years, Japanese intellectuals have often debated the question of Japanese war responsibility. Within this debate, resident Koreans offer a unique perspective as a people who have become quasi-refugees. At the same time, I feel acutely uncomfortable at a simple claim of refugee status for resident Koreans, if for no other reason than that I, for one, do not suffer from the many deprivations that the vast majority of refugees do, such as lack of food, housing, and medical care. How, therefore, am I justified in comparing my situation and identity with those of refugees in Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Occupied Palestine, who face starvation and the violence of war on a daily basis?

It is possible to view refugee status sentimentally as freedom from the nation state. First and foremost, however, a refugee is someone who has been expelled from the nation, and, in most cases, who has been excluded from the fundamental rights of citizens. We must not trivialize the notion of exile, or of the refugee. In any case, when invoking the concept of the

refugee, historical specificity is imperative.

I am not, furthermore, a man without a country. I do hold a Republic of Korea passport. Possession of this passport, however, does not give me the right to vote in South Korea. Nor can I vote in Japan, even in local elections. In short, Japan regards me as non-Japanese, and Korea sees me politically as a quasi-Korean. This leaves me to confront the question of my own political responsibility toward these countries.

THE FUTURE OF QUASI-REFUGEES

Resident Koreans face many complex issues due to the political and legal ambiguity of their identities and the historical change that defines modern Korean and Japanese history. First, we wrestle with the North-South divide of the Korean peninsula and the prospect of reunification. We also face the fundamental question of the validity of promoting nationalism. I do not advocate the alternative of the Japanese nation simply granting full citizenship to resident Koreans. Rather, it is incumbent that resident Koreans engage in a thorough reexamination of the meaning of the nation state, and the perils of nationalism. What I envision is that resident Koreans should be guaranteed fundamental rights without being forced to choose between countries, whether North Korean, ROK, or Japan. We could then embrace a regional identity. Those living in Japan

must gain the right to vote in local elections. Resident Koreans would then be able to help construct a unique political agency that transcends national boundaries in East Asia.

Some resident Koreans have chosen to become Japanese citizens. Others of us have not. I would like to see all peoples of Korean heritage who live in Japan, whether Japanese citizens or not, value the political and cultural perspectives that we have gained through what I call "refugee self consciousness." This identity is derived from the historical processes through which we and our ancestors have lived: colonial domination, wars of invasion, and the Cold War. While retaining this consciousness, we must gain equity with "full citizens" and also challenge the blind nationalism dominant in this age.

It is difficult for me to be optimistic about the future. In order to transcend our present

limitations, we must hear and learn from the many voices of those in exile: the fragmented, opaque poetry of Celan, the questions posed by Nussbaum's gaze, questions that language cannot express, the cries of the refugee. I will continue to listen to those voices, and attempt to broaden the audience who can hear them and try to understand.

Suh Kyungsik was born in Kyoto in 1951 to Korean parents and graduated from Waseda University with a major in French literature. His numerous writings include two major books on Zainichi Korean issues and works on the Holocaust. He is a member of the faculty of Tokyo Keizai University. This article, which appeared in *Gendai shiso* Vol. 30, no. 13, (November, 2002), pp. 60-79, was translated and edited for Japan Focus by Nakano Makiko and Ann Sherif.