

Japan's Korean Residents Caught in the Japan-North Korea Crossfire

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By Matsubara Hiroshi and Tokita Mayuko

Introduction by John Feffer

The Asahi Shinbun and the International Herald Tribune recently published a five-part series on Korean residents in Japan. Many of these zainichi - the word literally means "residing in Japan" - have lived in the country for two, three and even four generations. Having been deprived of the Japanese citizenship that they obtained under colonial rule in the years 1910-1945, the 600,000 zainichi are those Korean residents who have not become naturalized Japanese citizens. The series shows that they now find themselves in a crossfire between the North Korean and Japanese governments. The zainichi are the largest ethnic minority in a country that often prides itself, mistakenly, on being homogenous.

The Asahi series, which uses as a news peg the impact of North Korea's nuclear test on the Korean community, is fascinating as much for what it reveals as for what it leaves out. It does bravely delve into some sensitive historical questions: the repatriation of zainichi to North Korea beginning in 1959, including the Japanese government role in promoting repatriation, the role of the North Korea-affiliated organization Chosen Soren (Chongryon) in Japan, and the oft-ignored tale of Korean atom bomb victims, including hundreds who returned to North or South Korea and have been ineligible for Japanese government health care and other



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On other controversial matters, particularly the entrenched discrimination that the zainichi have faced, the series is, at best, glancing in its coverage. For many decades, the path to Japanese citizenship was a difficult one. Those

zainichi who did not, or could not, adopt Japanese nationality, a process which earlier had required changing their Korean name to a Japanese one, not only face discrimination but lack citizenship rights despite having been born and educated in Japan and speaking fluent Japanese. Even today, while certain prefectures have extended certain local citizenship rights to long-term residents, zainichi, many of whom are stateless, continue to face discrimination.

Not all ethnic Koreans living in Japan feel the same way about how to redress these wrongs. Two main organizations - one affiliated with North Korea (Chosen Soren) and the other with South Korea (Mindan) - have taken very different positions toward domestic politics. Chosen Soren has by and large opposed assimilation into Japanese society, emphasizing the preservation of Korean traditions with an eye toward eventual repatriation to Korea, while Mindan has supported the goal of obtaining full citizenship rights.

This history of second-class status helps to explain why some 93,000 Koreans and their Japanese spouses seized the opportunity to go to their North Korea "homeland" between 1959 and 1984, and also why the Japanese government actively promoted this venture behind the scenes. It also helps explain why Chosen Soren has chosen to build a "society within a society" to meet the needs of its members, with separate schools, business associations, banks, and so on.

The series shows that Soren and the pro-North Korea community have fallen on hard times in the wake of revelations about North Korean kidnapping and the rising pressure on North Korea from Japan and the US. It also introduces the experience of the approximately 100 people who fled North Korea to return to Japan, and recent Japanese government efforts to encourage flight from North Korea. It does not, however, provide much insight into how Japanese politicians exploited the issue of North

Korea for their own agenda of pushing through changes in Japan's foreign and military policy. Latent hostility toward Koreans in Japan and especially toward North Korea in the Japanese population made it relatively easy to fan the flames of anti-North Korean sentiment after North Korea's 1998 Taepodong rocket test that passed over Japan. Likewise, the anger and resentment over North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens, which became so prominent an issue after Prime Minister Koizumi's 2002 visit to Pyongyang, was able to grow rapidly, fueled by ambitious politicians such as the current prime minister Abe Shinzo. The problem is that neither of these unsettling events can be comprehended without reference to the Korean colonial experience under Japanese rule or Japan's support for the US in the Korean War, which, after five decades, has not yet ended with a peace treaty.

In the wake of North Korea's missile launches in July and nuclear test in October, 2006, the Japanese government has eagerly pushed ahead with its campaign to isolate North Korea by shutting down all economic transactions and making it difficult and costly for zainichi to visit the country. Indeed, Tokyo's anti-North Korean passions are even stronger than Washington's.

Victims of cold war politics, the zainichi are still pushed and pulled by contradictory forces in Japan and Korea. The Asahi Shinbun articles chronicle the pain, and point to a number of intractable issues, that remain unresolved. That the series was published only in English suggests that Japanese readers may still not be ready to empathize, or that the Asahi may be unwilling to risk the backlash.

Part 1: Korean residents in anguish: Nuclear fallout

By Matsubara Hiroshi

Life just got a lot harder for Korean residents of Japan who have relatives in North Korea. For

that, they can thank Pyongyang--and Tokyo, too.

They are caught in the diplomatic cross-fire that erupted after North Korea conducted its first nuclear weapons test on Oct. 9.

In protest over the test and a flurry of earlier missile launches, Japan imposed a range of sanctions aimed at further isolating the reclusive and impoverished state.

Until recently, Koreans could periodically take a ferry from Niigata back to their homeland. But Tokyo banned its entry in July in response to the missile launches.

For a group of 200 senior students of Tokyo Korean High School planning to visit their ancestral homeland, it meant a sudden adjustment to travel plans in late November and early December.



The Korean high school, Tokyo.

The first group of 80 students flew to Dalian Zhoushuizi International Airport in China in late November to switch to a chartered Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang.

Wearing their school's blue athletic tracksuits, many students cut a pathetic sight with luggage weighed down with food items and clothing. The gifts probably would have been especially welcome, given reports that North Korea this winter could fall into the grip of famine.

The school, located in Tokyo's Kita Ward, canceled a planned sea voyage for 200 students in July after the Japanese government banned port visits by the North Korean passenger ferry Man Gyong Bong-92, which used to call in at Niigata Port every few weeks or so.

With no easy means of traveling to North Korea, the school launched a fund-raiser to cover the cost of chartering two medium-sized aircraft to fly in from China.

It was a tense moment as the Japanese government was moving to impose harsher sanctions, including a ban on re-entry by Koreans who visit North Korea.

Recalling the moment of their departure from Pyongyang, an 18-year-old male student said, "We all were overwhelmed by emotion and in tears, wondering if we would ever have the chance to visit our homeland again."

Sanctions taken by Japan that fall outside of those imposed by the United Nations and the United States are unlikely to have a major impact on North Korea, other than to deprive the regime of various luxuries. But it's another story for Korean residents in Japan.

Suddenly, they are having to be more ingenious about making travel plans to North Korea and finding new ways to send food, money and clothing parcels to relatives.

In recent years, as sentiment against North Korea worsened in Japan over the abduction issue, Korean schools run by the pro-Pyongyang Chongryon (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) tried to distance themselves from the regime by removing portraits of Kim Jong Il and his father, the late Kim Il Sung, from classrooms.

Students of the Tokyo Korean High School said their recent trip helped strengthen their affinity and solidarity with their homeland.

School officials said the hastily arranged flights cost 20 million yen more, but many parents, school graduates and local Korean residents donated money to cover the additional cost.

"Many parents initially opposed the school trip due to the worsening image of North Korea,

even among Koreans here, after the nuclear test," said an 18-year-old student. "Still, I'm grateful for having seen that the people who live there (North Korea) are leading normal lives."

Japan's relationship with North Korea was already very shaky when Pyongyang test-fired seven missiles in the Sea of Japan in July. When it followed up with its first underground nuclear test in October, Tokyo flexed its diplomatic muscles and announced a series of sanctions.

With the tightening of the economic screw, the operator of a Korean restaurant in Saitama Prefecture approached the school about allowing the students to carry five cartons of fresh food, along with cash, for delivery to a Pyongyang eatery that had fallen on hard times.

Since the ban on port calls by the Man Gyong Bong-92, the second-generation Korean resident has entrusted fellow Koreans visiting the North to deliver supplies from Japan.

The shipment made it as far as Dalian Zhoushuizi International Airport. There, customs officials said domestic regulations did not allow the party to bring frozen food items, mainly mackerel fillets, salmon roe and Chinese dumplings.

The school officials had to abandon the cartons, which resulted in a loss of about 200,000 yen to the restaurant operator.

"After Pyongyang's nuclear test, it has become even harder to find people who are visiting North Korea. I had no option but to ask even the students," said the woman.

The restaurant, Ariran Shokudo (dining), opened inside a Pyongyang hotel two months after Japan and North Korea signed their Joint Declaration in September 2002.

Shortly before the first North-South presidential summit in 2000, senior officials of North Korean

Workers' Party asked her to open a restaurant that would cater to foreign visitors, whose numbers were expected to increase in the seemingly growing era of detente, and help North Korea earn foreign currency, she said.

The woman explained that she invested about 50 million yen in the venture, bringing kitchen equipment, karaoke machines and furniture from Japan aboard the Man Gyong Bong-92.

She also procured beef, fresh seafood and seasonings in Japan before the sanctions, she added.

With tensions rising, it became increasingly difficult to send supplies to the restaurant. The imposition of sanctions virtually sounded the death knell for the venture.

"Whether I can retrieve my investment now is anyone's guess," the woman said. "Japan's sanctions by themselves won't cause much a problem to ordinary North Koreans, given Pyongyang's growing trade ties with China and South Korea. But they certainly hurt Korean residents here who are trying to maintain ties with their homeland.

"I have already become disillusioned with the current (Pyongyang) regime to some extent, but it seems wrong to cut all existing ties as long as there is hope for an improved relationship between the two countries."

According to a senior Chongryon official, 2,380 Korean residents in Japan visited relatives in North Korea in 2005, half the 4,729 who went in 2002.

From January to October, 2,106 Koreans visited North Korea, including 883 aboard the Man Gyong Bong-92.

The sanctions forced the 58-year-old operator of a trading firm in Fukuoka, which specializes in auto exports to North Korea, to suspend her business.

In the peak year of 1998, the company sold about 300 cars and trucks worth 170 million yen. Since September last year, it has not exported a single vehicle, the operator said.

"Our business partners are relatives who immigrated to North Korea," she said. "Despite various hardships stemming from the lack of normalized diplomatic ties, we had managed to maintain the business to help them earn a living."



Several escapees from North Korea have voiced concern that more severe sanctions by the international community will make life even harder for families that are already struggling in North Korea.

A resident of Chiba Prefecture who fled from North Korea in December 2005 said a day does not go by when she doesn't think about the four children she left behind.

The woman, who is in her 50s, said that shortly after Japan imposed more sanctions in October, she received a phone call from her son, who said his family was in desperate need of money as the harsh winter approached.

She said her son had no idea that North Korea had conducted a nuclear test.

"Poverty, discrimination and persecution are what face those who emigrated from Japan," the woman said. "When I think of my children, I feel I have no choice but to wish for a more friendly Japan-North Korea relationship."

Part 2: Money Game

By Matsubara Hiroshi

Chon Wol Son

For soprano Chon Wol Son, it was to be the performance of a lifetime: She was invited to her ancestral homeland to sing in Pyongyang before North Korea's Great Leader, Kim Il Sung.

The now 49-year-old Son, recalling the envy of fellow artists from the Korean community in Japan, says that in spite of the honor bestowed on her she found it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand.

Coming face to face with Kim in 1985, Chon was unable to banish memories of her four brothers, who settled in the reclusive state between the ages of 10 and 17 in 1960.

Chon, a second-generation Korean in Japan, harbored a terrible secret that she had dared not to share until after her mother's death in February 2005.

All four brothers vanished in North Korea. Three died after years of persecution and poverty. Chon does not know what happened to her youngest brother.

"My mother died in anguish with a strong sense of guilt about the fate of my brothers," she adds.

The boys accompanied relatives to North Korea, lured by Pyongyang's promise that they would find "paradise on Earth." Before long, Chon's mother began receiving numerous letters in which her sons complained bitterly about their lives.

Every letter contained a request to send food and money.

Chon's mother finally visited North Korea in 1980 and was reunited with three of her sons.

It was then she learned that they were sent to a labor camp in 1969, accused of spying for Japan. The second-oldest son was tortured repeatedly and died a year later. The other three were released in 1978. The oldest and second-youngest died in 1990 and 2001, respectively, of unknown causes.

After the 1985 performance in front of Kim, Chon met her surviving three siblings in her hotel room. They shied away from talking about their lives for fear the room was bugged, Chon says.

Since then, she has refused Pyongyang's overtures to return.

Mourning the death of her mother, and frantic to learn more about her brothers, Chon published her memoirs in December. The book is titled "Kaijyo no aria" (Aria over the strait), the word aria referring to an expressive solo in an opera.

"Her death convinced me it is time to speak out about the true tragedy of Korean residents in Japan, whose agony is no less grave than that of families of Japanese nationals who were abducted by North Korea," she says.

Chon's book is testimony to the cold-hearted manner in which Japan encouraged tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans to take advantage of a repatriation program to North Korea. Those who survived have given harrowing tales of human rights abuses and deprivation.

The repatriation program was based on an agreement between the Red Cross societies of Japan and North Korea and financially backed by the Japanese government. More than 93,000 Koreans and their Japanese spouses settled in North Korea between 1959 and 1984. The pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) also encouraged Koreans to leave.

Since 1996, about 100 have returned. Of the rest, many are believed to have died or are barely able to survive. Likely, many still dream of being able to return to Japan one day.

Through the program, Koreans in Japan became bound to North Korea in what Chon calls an "endless love-hate relationship."

"We know better than anybody that the Pyongyang regime is wicked," she says. "But like my mother, we are still tied to the country through deep personal affection for our families."

Like Chon's mother, families of returnees send money and food parcels to relatives in North Korea. Chongryon, North Korea's de facto embassy in Japan, also asks for donations on a "voluntary basis" from time to time.

Until Tokyo slapped a ban on port visits by the North Korean passenger ferry Man Gyong Bong-92 last July, donations typically were sent by sea.

According to the Finance Ministry in Tokyo, 16.8 billion yen was officially registered under the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Control Law in remittances to North Korea between 2001 and 2005.

More than 90 percent of the funds was carried in cash by travelers.

Chongryon, working in tandem with North Korean agents in Japan, is believed to be actively engaged in arranging money transfers to the North.

A North Korean who joined the repatriation program in 1972 and fled to Japan in 2002 offered an insight into the way funds are raised.

He said that when his mother in Japan was invited to attend family weddings in North Korea in 1981 and 1982, respectively, she was forced to pay 1 million yen for each trip.

Inviting returnees to make brief visits to Japan is even more costly. A resident of Saitama Prefecture said her family invited a relative from North Korea when Pyongyang authorized temporary visits to Japan in the 1980s.

The woman said the family "donated" 100 million yen to Chongryon to cover "costs" of the one-week visit.

In 2005, 10 relatives visited Japan. This time around, Chongryon lowered the mandatory donation to several million yen per person, the woman said.

"The discount is believed to have resulted from North Korea's decision to set new monetary targets for 'donations.' North Korea is now trying to make returnees bring cash from Japan, especially when they have inherited property and through negotiations with other families, since their parents' generation is dying off," she said. "Returnees are no more than hostages for North Korea to earn precious foreign currency."

A former official of a Chongryon-affiliated organization said that after he quit, North Korean agents he had previously never seen contacted him repeatedly to request millions of yen in donations to the ruling (North) Korean Workers' Party.

A typical gambit is to show the person letters and photographs of his or her family in North Korea. In such cases, no threatening words need to be uttered. On other occasions, he said they promise the money will be spent to transfer family members from labor camps or help them move to Pyongyang, where living conditions are much better than in the countryside.

Former Chongryon officials involved in the repatriation project acknowledge deep feelings of guilt.

Kim Gyu Il, the 68-year-old former chairman of Chongryon's student union, had a direct hand in making arrangements for about 400 young Koreans to settle in North Korea during the first three years of the repatriation program.

"I was ordered to send as many students as possible," Kim says. "But I didn't need to persuade them because young Koreans at the time had no career prospects in Japanese society."

Before long, Kim said that he, too, began receiving letters of protest from the students.

In one, a graduate of a topnotch Japanese university complained that he and his fellow students were forced to do forestry work.

In another, a college graduate claimed that some returnees had no choice but to live in caves.

The letters stopped coming after a few years, leading Kim to suspect they were all dead or held in labor camps.

Kim tried to persuade Chongryon leaders to suspend the project, but they refused. Kim left the organization in 1966.

And still the heartache continues.

In 2002, a 54-year-old Tokyo resident was stunned to get a phone call from a former classmate who settled in North Korea in 1972. The friend said she was visiting Japan for the first time in 30 years and wanted to look her up.

The friend was among a group of bright Korean students who were selected to go to North Korea in 1971 as part of celebrations to mark the 60th birthday of Kim Il Sung in 1972, the woman said.

Meeting for the first time in three decades, the women fought back tears as they reminisced.

Still, the woman said, things got awkward because of her friend's reluctance to speak about her experiences in North Korea.

"She did not say and I could not ask, but her silence eloquently spoke of what her life is like," the woman said.

Later, she learned from the friend's family that they had to hand over 3 million yen to Chongryon for the two-week trip to Japan.

Kim Gyu Il said the system of donations had helped keep the regime in Pyongyang solvent.

"North Korea could not have survived to date without decades of donations from Koreans in Japan," Kim says. "And Chongryon would have lost its raison d'être a long time ago without the repatriation program."



Leaders of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) celebrate the organization's 50th anniversary in Tokyo in May 2005.

Part 3: Korean residents in anguish/ Broken dreams

By Matsubara Hiroshi

