

## Memories of a Zainichi Korean Childhood

Kang Sang Jung

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By Kang Sangjung

Translated by Robin Fletcher

*This extract from Kang Sangjung's autobiography Zainichi (Kodansha, 2004) describes the experiences of first-generation zainichi Koreans in the city of Kumamoto, as seen from the perspective of a second generation child growing up in the Japan of the 1950s. Now a professor at the University of Tokyo, in the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies, where he specialises in politics and the history of political thought, Kang Sangjung looks back at the people and places of his childhood. These personal memories provide a starting point for reflections on identity, 'homeland' and the place of zainichi Koreans in Japanese society and in the wider society of Northeast Asia.*

**Pigs, moonshine and warm-hearted people**

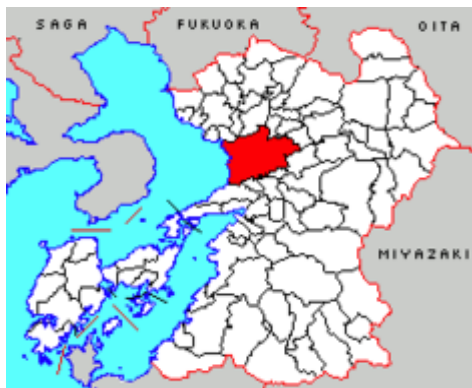
I am supposed to have been born on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1950, the 25<sup>th</sup> year of the Showa Era. But in fact, it seems that this is not my real birthday, since my parents apparently registered my birth according to the old lunar calendar. The sense of time indelibly imprinted on my parents' minds was

that of the lunar calendar. Even today, the customs of the past still live on in my mother's notion of time. By remembering people's birth, growth and death according to the old time of the lunar calendar, my parents perhaps found a way to affirm their connections to their homeland and their ancestors. In any case, I was born right in the middle of the Korean War, in a Korean settlement [1] close to the main station of Kumamoto City in Kyushu. My Korean name is Kang Sangjung. My Japanese name is Nagano Tetsuo. This second name is my 'public name' [*shumei*], and it is the name under which I lived until I came of age. It was not until I was in my twenties that I changed from being 'Tetsuo' to being 'Sangjung'. For me as a second generation zainichi Korean, the change in some ways marked a sharp dividing line through my life. Yet even today, I sometimes feel an odd sort of nostalgia for 'Tetsuo'. It is not simply a false name and a false life to be rejected. It is also an inescapable symbol which says much about the living reality of who I am. Living a life embracing that name is, I think, a significant element of my experience of living in Japan.

Local histories of Japan's prefectures, cities and

villages—and of the police forces —will tell you that in those days, during the Allied occupation of Japan, many members of the Korean community disrupted the Japanese economy by black-market and criminal activities. They were referred to as ‘third country people’ [*sangokujin*] [2], and were seen as destroying public order and morality. There was virtually no recognition of any positive contribution of Koreans to the Japanese economy, society or culture. This was true of Kumamoto, too. Actually, since Kumamoto had been a stronghold of militarism since before the war, prejudice, suspicion and discrimination against Koreans were particularly strong there.

Kumamoto had been home to the largest army detachment in Kyushu, and so sustained massive damage from bombing raids during the war. By the end of the war, almost all the city from the station to the Suizen Temple had been reduced to a burnt-out wilderness. Reconstruction did not get underway properly until around the time of the Korean War, and even when I was born the dark scars of war still lay over the landscape.



Kumamoto in red

The place where I was born—the neighbourhood of Haruhi-machi, near Kumamoto Station—was an area which seemed notably left behind by the reconstruction process. To the west side of the railway line lies Hanoka Hill, famous as the place where 19<sup>th</sup> century westernisers established the ‘Kumamoto Band’.[4] The Korean settlement was crowded together on the gentle incline of the neighbouring Banka Hill. In those days, over one hundred Korean families lived shoulder to shoulder there, all living in shabby makeshift tenements.

The Korean people of the settlement supported themselves by keeping pigs and making ‘moonshine’, illicit liquor [*doborok*]. Scenes reminiscent of Gorky’s *Lower Depths* were played out in the community day after day. The civil war in their mother country had torn away the hopes of the adults of the settlement, and destroyed their dreams of ‘liberation’. They had nowhere to go, and their lives oscillated between sorrow and anger. The atmosphere in the settlement was constantly seething like a pressure-cooker.

Communal life there was coloured by roars of laughter and anger, by lawlessness and misery. Everyone was in a state of despair. Yet still they clung to faint wisps of dreams, and struggled desperately to find some means of subsisting in the harshness of daily work. The only means of

survival left to them were brewing moonshine and keeping pigs.

Occasionally, when I was four or five years old, I would witness raids by excise officers on the illegal brewing operations. For some reason, I vividly remember one scene of a line of trucks coming up the hill towards the rickety huts which served as stills where the moonshine was brewed. The whole settlement was thrown into turmoil, like a hive of angry bees. I can still hear the cries of “*aigo*” [alas!] echoing across the hillside. I shall never forget the sounds of anger and grief in the voices of those people whose meagre means of livelihood were about to be destroyed. In my childish mind, I formed the sense that we were somehow living in an outlaw world.

On that unforgettable day, my mother hurled a stone at one of the excise trucks. Its windscreen shattered, and the vehicle was forced to come to a halt.

My mother, who was by nature the most nervous and sensitive of people, seemed for once to have been seized by a fierce anger. Seeing her rage at the officials who were destroying people’s lives took my breath away, and for a moment I couldn’t utter a sound. Having hurled the stone, my mother’s knees gave way and she fell to the ground, beating her chest with her fists and breaking into sobs. “Why are we forced to endure such sorrow?” That, I think, was the

scream that lay beneath my mother’s weeping.

That day, my mother was taken away to the police station. I stayed close to my father, and, sensing from his anxiety that something terrible was befalling us, could not stop myself from crying. I cannot now remember exactly why—perhaps it was because the truck driver had fortunately not been injured—but mother was soon allowed to return home. The incident shows the courageous side of my mother. In these lower depths, life was driven by constant desperation, but for some reason the grown-ups always treated me with kindness and I received much affection. At least as far as I am concerned, that place conjures up only fond memories.

It may have resembled the impoverished marginal communities depicted in Kumai Kei’s film *Apart from life* but I had the good fortune to experience the love and kindness of the adults, and so the impression I formed of the archetypal *zainichi* landscape was of a kind and warm community made up of unfortunate people.

### **How my parents became ‘first-generation *zainichi*’**

Not far from the settlement, there was a small construction company called Takadagumi. My father worked there as a watchman. Takadagumi had operated since the prewar period, using hired construction workers. Our home was a tiny free-standing house in the midst of the settlement, towards the bottom of the hill. There I

was born, and there our family of four lived – my mother and father, a brother four years my senior, and myself. My father had come to Japan in the early 1930s, at the time of the Manchurian Incident.[3] He was fifteen at the time, and came to Japan by himself, with just the clothes on his back. My father was the eldest son of a typical poor tenant farming family from Namsan Village, Kyangwon District in the South Korean province of Southern Kyongsang. He arrived in the ‘colonial mother country’ in response to the pressures of poverty. It was a classic exile’s story.

According to the prominent US historian of modern Korea, Bruce Cumings, during the 1930s with the impact of the economic depression and the forced industrialisation of the Korean peninsula, the majority of Korea’s farm population left agriculture and moved to cities and industrial areas. As the boundaries of the Japanese empire grew dramatically following its war with China, the flow of Korean migrants began to be directed overseas. By the year before Japan’s defeat in the Asia-Pacific War, around twenty percent of Korea’s total population was living away from their place of origin. Most of these were people of working age, between twenty-five and forty years old, so that in effect, forty percent of the adult population was living away from their birthplace. Cumings suggests that there is perhaps no other country which has experienced such a dramatic change in its population. The Depression and the

concentration of land ownership drastically affected the agricultural population, and a massive workforce was created from the surplus. Kyongsang Province was a particularly important source of this outflow of people.

My father was just one young man from a poor farming family who was caught up in the sufferings of this vast and chaotic movement of people. The heavy burden of the times lay on his shoulders, condemning him to a harsh future. My father’s youth in Japan was so unsettled that I don’t know how many times he shifted from one place and one job to another. Finally he moved to Tokyo where he got a job in a munitions factory. By this time, the national mobilisation system had been imposed on Korea as well, and forced labour was being recruited. Under the slogan ‘integrating Japan and Korea’ [*naisen itta*], forced assimilation was proceeding apace, and finally the door was opened to the enlistment of colonial subjects in the Japanese army. In order to look after his younger brother, who was climbing this ladder of ‘advancement’ within the colonial system, my father worked day and night, barely snatching time to eat and sleep.

Father looked like the peasant farmer he was, stockily built, unsophisticated, and, perhaps weighed down by the burden of unremitting hard work, relatively short. By contrast, his younger brother (my uncle) was a tall and imposing young man with a handsome face.

Remarkably for a person from the colonies, he studied law at university and eventually became a member of the Japanese military police [*kempeitai*], serving in Kumamoto. As I will explain later, his urge for self-betterment had an influence on my life.

In the year the Pacific War broke out, my mother came over from her village of Chine, near the southern Korean city of Pusan, to visit her fiancé, my father. She embarked alone on the ferry in Pusan and arrived in Shimonoseki at the very time of the outbreak of the war that would bring disaster to Japan. She had nothing to guide her but my father's address, and after travelling from one place to another she finally reached the district of Sugamo Sancho in Tokyo, where father was living in the quarters where the factory lodged its workers. There she began her married life. She was just eighteen years old.

My mother had been deprived of chances for education as a child and she was illiterate, unable to read or write Japanese or even her mother tongue. This devoted new bride, dressed in traditional *chima-jeogori* [5] and barely able to utter a few words of broken Japanese, seems to have been a figure of curiosity to those around her. Apparently she was often surrounded by groups of neighbourhood housewives making scathing comments about her clothing, and all she could do was stand there burning with embarrassment. The joy and sorrow of *zainichi* existence settled like a sediment in my mother's

heart, from time to time bursting forth in the form of mournful songs or of rushes of passionate emotion.

As the war situation grew worse and air-raids on Tokyo intensified, my parents, together with my father's younger sister and her husband, were evacuated to Ichinomiya in Aichi Prefecture. Soon after, my parents' first child was born. They named him Haruo—'haru' [spring] being also part of my mother's Japanese name, 'Haruko'. However, the family's life was full of troubles. The air-raids caused my father's sister to lose her sanity, and Haruo, my family's first-born son, died. My mother clung to her dead baby for several days, as if she had gone mad, refusing to let his body be taken away from her. To this very day, when she is eighty, my mother has never once missed commemorating the day of Haruo's death. The way she speaks of him makes me think that perhaps for her the tragedy still seems like something which happened yesterday, and I cannot help feeling that far from memories fading with time, on the contrary they actually recur more vividly than ever.

Taking their son's ashes with them, my parents moved from Ichinomiya through Osaka and Hiroshima, eventually arriving in Kumamoto. By that time, Japan was already close to defeat. Apparently my parents were intending to return to Korea, and wanted to say their farewells to my uncle, who was stationed in Kumamoto with the military police. They were there when Japan

surrendered. In the end, my parents gave up the idea of returning to their homeland, and my uncle returned alone. My parents ended up staying in the *zainichi* settlement.

For the colonies, Japan's defeat in the war was a joyful day of liberation. The hearts of *zainichi* Koreans were seized by a burgeoning and enduring hope that they would be able to return to their homeland. But in 1948 the Republic of Korea was established in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North, and finally the Korean War broke out, with unprecedented massacres and vast numbers of victims. The devastation of their homeland was a crushing blow for the *zainichi* people. For those who had found shelter in the *zainichi* settlement where I lived, the road home had been closed. Once again, they had to steel their hearts to endure the experience of ethnic discrimination.

The settlement was looked on as a kind of ghetto, an alien space in the midst of Japan. First-generation *zainichi* at that time all bore their own particular deep sorrows, growing bleary-eyed with the struggle for survival. Finally, the movement for repatriation to North Korea took off, and people from my settlement were among those who returned in large numbers to the North. From 1959 onwards, more and more people left for the North. In the midst of it all, my parents were urged to repatriate to the North, but they never agreed, choosing instead to stay in Kumamoto. I am not sure precisely why they

were reluctant to repatriate to North Korea, but I think there must have been two reasons. First, my uncle, who had served as a judicial staff officer during the Korean War, had strongly warned them against repatriation. My uncle's absolute feelings of anti-communism and hostility towards North Korea made my parents stand their ground. The second reason was that they felt they could not abandon my father's family's ancestral graves, which were in the South. Particularly for my mother, who had a powerful sense of respect for the ancestors, to move to the North would have been an immoral betrayal. So my parents remained in Japan.

### **Life amidst people of the 'lower depths'**

When I was six, our family left the settlement where I had been born, and moved to the foot of Mount Tatsuta, from which you can look down on the campus of Kumamoto University. We laid out the little money we had to buy a plot of land just about big enough to swing a cat, and set up in business as 'Nagano Trading Company', a tiny family scrap business, collecting and recycling garbage. Mount Tatsuta is a spot from which you can see the whole of the town centre, and a place where the citizens of Kumamoto like to come for recreation. It is also the hill that appears in Natsume Soseki's famous novel *Sanshiro*.

Unlike my mother, my father was not entirely illiterate. He could read and write some Japanese. All the same, it was really difficult for him to get



a driver's licence. I still recall the resolute expression on my father's face as he sat in bed first thing in the morning struggling with the questions for the test. Every adult is supposed to be able to apply for a driver's licence, but for first-generation immigrants burdened with the handicap of dealing with a foreign language, acquiring a licence was undoubtedly a painfully difficult hurdle to clear. On his second try, my father, remarkably enough, was successful and soon after our family acquired a little three-wheeled vehicle called a 'Midget'. After that, every day my father would leave home at the crack of dawn and not return until late at night. Day after day, he silently laboured away at his tough job.

For me, life in this unfamiliar place was a big change. I was cut off from the communal life of the *zainichi* settlement and plunged into the midst of a wholly Japanese environment. I felt alone, as though I had somehow become trapped on a remote island. For some reason, I missed the odours of pig-swill and dung, and the smell of brewer's yeast. The environment and the people had changed, but all the same a remarkable assortment of people made their way in and out of our family's garbage collecting business. Looking back, it truly seems like a human tragicomedy. I think I became almost painfully aware of the sighs of people who were relegated to the very bottom of society and were desperately trying to keep body and soul

together. This, moreover, was a 'lower depths' different from that of the settlement where we had lived before. The difference was that the main characters who appeared in our lives were now 'Japanese'.

My mother, who could not read, had to take on a whole range of tasks, from calculating the items and numbers and value of the scrap that was collected to single-handedly conducting business negotiations. For this purpose, she worked out a system of symbols which only she understood, and which she memorised in place of Japanese characters. I think her excellent powers of memory were probably the result of desperate efforts to make up for the handicap of illiteracy.

So, little by little, our family's scrap business got underway. This precisely coincided with the start of Japan's period of high economic growth, following a postwar economic recovery spurred on by the 'windfall' of Korean War procurements.

One thing that remains firmly fixed in my memory is the mass of military swords, helmets and other discarded weaponry which was heaped up in front of our house. It seemed uncanny to see so many swords rusted reddish-brown together with bloodstains. They bore the unmistakable smell of war. My mother, perhaps following Korean purification rites, would sprinkle salt around them, murmuring prayers as she did so. Memories of war, reeking with blood,

lingered on even in a place like this. It was the business of garbage collectors to clear away the brutal carnage left by history. I am sure my mother instinctively understood this.

My parents' struggling family business was also sustained by another first generation *zainichi* who came to live in our house as part of the family. This man, whom I knew from my early childhood as 'Uncle', had sworn an oath of brotherhood with my father, and thus become part of our family. 'Uncle' became as much as or even more than a second father to me. Later, after 'Uncle' had died, I learned for the first time that he had left a family of his own behind in Korea and come to Japan by himself, his lot thereafter that of a man with no home of his own. He had knocked about in the world of outlaws, and had at one stage apparently been quite an influential figure. Subsequently he had fallen on hard times, though just how he had ended up living with our family I do not know. However, as I shall explain later, 'Uncle' played an enormous part in my education.

'Uncle' was just one of the wide variety of people whom I encountered in the world around me at that time. They all had their share of hardship, and it seemed to me that they all lived with desperate intensity. Even today, I cannot forget them.

Across the street from our house was a man who could have stepped straight out of the textbook

ballad of "The Village Blacksmith". In his roaring furnace he heated iron and shaped it to his will, producing reaping hooks and hoes and other farm implements before your very eyes. He was immensely skilful, and his wares were of the highest quality. He was a big, uncouth-looking man, but a very gentle person. Every now and then, from over the other side of the road we would hear an astonishingly loud sneeze, which told us that the blacksmith was busy at work again today. It was somehow a reassuring feeling.

For one reason or another, the blacksmith and 'Uncle' got on well together. They didn't have much to say to one another, but they seemed to understand each other nonetheless. "Tetsuo, that uncle of yours is a good'un. True enough, he calls you 'Teshio, Teshio'. But he's still a good'un." 'Teshio' was as near as 'Uncle' could come to pronouncing my name, and I think maybe the blacksmith, who really understood 'Uncle's' true nature, was trying to comfort me. Not long after, however, the kind-hearted blacksmith was suddenly struck down by a heart attack and died. The sound of hammer on metal and the mighty sneezes fell silent.

It was Mr Iijima who gave me a glimpse of the horrors of the adult world.

In those days, wild dogs roamed around everywhere, and were a major nuisance. We used to call the person who was employed by the dog



pound to round them up ‘the dog killer’. The phrase contained feelings of both fear and contempt. Mr Iijima, with his little moustache, seemed amiable enough, but when he came to our house our pet dog seemed to be overcome by terror. It would make low whining noises and crouch ready to hide under the floor. “That there dog knows a thing or two! It’s years since I was the ‘dog killer’, but I reckon the smell still hangs about.” The events of a certain night made me wonder whether the smell of human blood, as well as that of dogs, clung to Mr Iijima. He was very drunk, and began recounting how during the war in China, he had raped a young woman and tortured her to death. There was a bitterness about Mr Iijima’s mouth as, grinning but seemingly ill at ease, he made this confession. Afterwards, I had a sense of regret that I had heard something I should not have, and could not help shuddering at the knowledge of the cruelty within the adult world which surrounded me.

When I came to understand the memory of war as a political problem, I found myself often thinking of Mr Iijima. It seems to me that the war memories of ordinary soldiers were carnal sensations of slaughter remembered with great force throughout their bodies, and that when the war came to an end, such things were not to be spoken of openly—at the most, they could be vented as a sort of confession in the midst of the droning nonsense which drunkenness allows.

There was no sense of guilt, but also no powerful sense of self-affirmation, just a sentimental attachment to a sad and shabby experience, one which was only loosed by alcohol, history recalled as a transient memory.

I don’t know what happened to Mr Iijima after that.

Writing of unforgettable people reminds of ‘Kaneko-san’, a good friend of ‘Uncle’s’. Perhaps because ‘Kaneko-san’ was from the same *zainichi* background, he was in and out of our house all the time.

To the north of our house, on the way to Yamanaga, was Keifuen, the famous leprosarium. The *Precautionary Measures against Leprosy*[*Raiyoboh*] have now been repealed but in those days the policy of isolation was in force and it seems that Keifuen even had rooms constructed for solitary confinement as a disciplinary measure. Surprisingly enough, however, despite the rigorous isolation policy of the times there were occasions when the inmates went outside. One of my playmate’s parents ran an *amazak*[6] and steamed bean-cake shop, and there were patients from the leprosarium among their customers. My friend’s parents were good, kind people, so a particular incident made an immense impression on me. My friend’s mother used chopsticks to take a hundred yen note that a customer with Hansen’s Disease held out between two fingers, and then put it in the

steamer. I think she also handed over the bean-cake in some sort of little bamboo basket. This was forty years ago, but I remember the scene as if it were yesterday. I was absolutely stunned that a usually admirable adult could behave so cruelly to those who in those days were literally treated as ‘untouchables’.

I seem to remember, though, that when ‘Kaneko-san’ came to our house, I would always scurry off and take refuge in the back room. I didn’t know why, but some ill-defined fear just seemed to chase me away.

It was completely different with ‘Uncle’ and my parents, though. My father and ‘Uncle’ were quite comfortable about collecting garbage from the leprosarium, never showing the slightest fear or hesitation. On occasion, they even shared the inmates’ meals, helping themselves from the same dish. They often invited them into our home, too. It seems to me that they felt sympathy or something like kinship, perhaps because they shared the unfortunate consciousness of living as ‘outsiders’ in Japan. They possessed an innate courage that made them unafraid of contact with things the world considered ‘unclean’ or ‘unsightly’. Their kindness of heart was certainly not erased by the harsh circumstances being *zainichi* indeed, the very fact that they had to live in that harsh environment may actually have strengthened their fellow-feeling with the unfortunate.

Both my father and ‘Uncle’ have passed away, and my mother, now eighty, spends much of her time in bed. I hear that ‘Kaneko-san’, though, despite the Hansen’s Disease which used to be feared as an incurable, is still hale and hearty and seems set to live to a ripe old age. The *Precautionary Measures against Leprosy* were repealed and the nation apologised, but prejudice and preconceptions linger stubbornly in people’s minds, and it does not look as if they will be overcome in ‘Kaneko-san’s’ lifetime. If I could meet ‘Kaneko-san’ again, I would like to apologise sincerely for my own past—and I have come to wish that the two of us could together retrace our memories of my father and ‘Uncle’.

#### **A way of living as ‘zainichi’**

It was from the woman from Shimonoseki that I received the strongest image of ‘ethnicity’ at that time. She was what is known as a *mudang*, or spiritualistic medium, similar to the *itako* of northeastern Japan.[7] Most *zainichi* people had reverence for their ancestors, and the *mudang*’s repertoire of rituals were a type of shamanism, originating in ancestor worship, fused with Buddhist forms. My mother was a deeply devout woman, and the *mudang* was summoned from Shimonoseki each year, along with two or three other women who provided the traditional wailing accompaniment. They were all *zainichi* people.

The woman from Shimonoseki was very tall, and

you could imagine from her clearcut features that she would have been a head-turning beauty when she was young. She held herself very straight, her movements were crisp and energetic, and her gait deliberate and unhurried. One felt she was a personality to be reckoned with. Her sidelocks were arranged to perfection, and she dressed in a spectacular *chima-jeogori* and white rubber shoes called *geomjeong*. And thus she would arrive in state at our house. It was undoubtedly a bizarre spectacle for the watching Japanese. I found it unendurable, and when she was due I would run away as far as I could.

The woman from Shimonoseki would come once or twice a year without fail to tell our fortunes for good or evil. For two or three days, my mother would dance to the accompaniment of gong and drums, moving about the house in a trance-like state, murmuring the words that would ward off misfortune and foretell the course of events. At this one time, women were at the centre of all the rituals; men were pushed aside into odd nooks and corners, sitting in formal posture and trying to make themselves as small as possible. When misfortune was forecast, my mother would be deeply afraid, and in order to avert it would set out for Mount Kinpo, where she would perform religious austerities in a waterfall. This may have been because it was believed that Mount Kinpo, which soars above Kumamoto in the distant west, had the appearance of a sacred mountain.

The neighbourhood gossip was that there was

something odd about young Tetsuo's family—all those gongs and drums. Perhaps his mother had a screw loose ... All I could do was will those few days and their ceremonies to be over as quickly as possible.

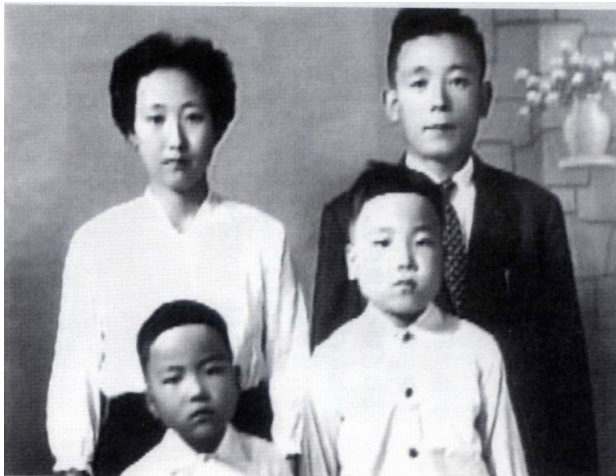
In my twenties, I discovered my name and that of my elder brother engraved on the small shrine at nearby Suigenchi. This epitomised my mother's concern for the security and good fortune of her two children, and brought home to me once again how deeply she loved us. Years later, the woman from Shimonoseki died and was succeeded by her adopted son-in-law. When my father died, it was this 'she man' who made the final farewells at his cremation. It may at the same time have been a message from the woman from Shimonoseki. At that moment, all my former opposition was transformed into something akin to sympathy.

One can view this world of my mother, the woman from Shimonoseki and the others as a sacred space governed by folkloric tradition, accessible only to women, who were otherwise forced to submit to the patriarchal system of the *zainichi*. It was a space charged with their deep love for family and their feelings for their homeland. Was this not perhaps for them the very way of living as *zainichi*?

The rituals did not end there. That is to say, regularly as clockwork, when the correct season came, the woman from Shimonoseki would

arrive. For a full two or three days, my mother would have worked around the clock preparing mountains of special delicacies to be used as offerings. While feeling great nostalgia for these intensely *zainichi* memories, at the same time I was also driven by a desire to distance myself from them. They were bitter-sweet experiences.

The people engraved on my memory, bound up in these complex feelings ... When I look back now, I see how they gave shape to my memories. It may be that my 'homeland' is to be found in memories like these.



Kang Sangjung (front left) and his family

**A member of the *zainichi* 'elite', who became a military policeman**

In writing of my life so far, I cannot possibly neglect to mention my two uncles.

As I wrote briefly earlier, one of them was my father's only younger brother, and so my uncle

by blood; the other was not a blood relative, but the 'Uncle' who was virtually a second father to me. Both were first-generation *zainichi* but their life circumstances could scarcely have been more different.

My blood uncle, extraordinarily for a Korean during the war, received a Japanese university education. The year before the war came to an end, he joined the military police and was stationed in Kumamoto. When defeat was at hand, my uncle decided he would kill himself. He had a Japanese wife and a little daughter. It was not until I was at university that I saw the family photograph taken at the time he made his decision. In dull sepia, it shows an imposing youth in military uniform, wearing the armband of the military police and a sword at his hip, and next to him, a baby in her arms, an anxious-looking woman in Japanese dress.

For a colonised people, the day of Japan's defeat should have been a joyful day of liberation, but for my uncle it was instead the ill-starred day he would meet his death. Although he felt cornered and as if he had no alternative but death, perhaps because he nevertheless could not bring himself to renounce the attractions of the world, my uncle let himself be talked out of it by my father and hid himself in the Mount Mannichi air-raid shelter to escape the pursuing army of occupation. I don't really know how it came about that my uncle returned to the family home....

Not long afterwards, my uncle returned to his homeland to ascertain how things were in his mother-country. He went alone. The old country which my uncle encountered had been thrown into the tragic chaos of ‘contemporary history’ [*gendaishi*], disorder which lasted from the day of liberation until the bitter civil war and the birth of the divided nation now known as the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Caught up in this, my uncle again donned army uniform, becoming a judicial staff officer and taking up military duties. Amidst the chaos and ruin, he gave up hope of ever seeing his family again. After the Armistice, he became a lawyer, establishing a practice in Seoul. Whether it was due to the vitality with which he wrestled with adversity and his indefatigable hard work or to his extraordinary adaptability, before long my uncle married the daughter of an affluent family. They were blessed with children, and his feet were set on the path to a happy and successful life.

When the Osaka Expo took place in 1970, my uncle returned to Japan for the first time since the war. He searched for the wife and child he had left behind in Japan twenty years earlier, but without success. I was never far from his side during his visit, and he told me of his life since his return to Korea. It was almost in the nature of a confession.

My uncle had wiped out all memories from before the war, of having been a member of the

‘pro-Japanese faction’ military police, of the wife and child he had left behind in Japan. By burying his own past, he had been able to build a successful new life in his homeland. The sacrifice this had required, though, had been separation from his family and the erasing of his memories. Such was the ‘buried past’ of an ‘elite’ colonial subject, able to survive by obliterating half his own life. Another person who after liberation had a similar ‘buried past’ was, it goes without saying, the great dictator and former president of South Korea, Park Chunghee.[8] My uncle, though nowhere near as much of a ‘big shot’ as Park, was clearly also a ‘mutant’ driven across the boundaries of Japanese and Korean history. Such ‘mutants’ were excluded from the body proper of Japanese history and unable to find a place to exist peaceably within ethnic history. Even now, it is as if they are hovering on the periphery. They have passed away, and history moves uncaringly on.

After my father’s death, my uncle seemed eager to follow him. His family scattered, and his spent his last years lonely and alone. How, I wonder, did those expunged memories of his time in Japan return to my uncle in his final hours?

I cannot find it in my heart to condemn my uncle’s ‘anti-ethnic’, ‘pro-Japanese’ past. Even without such condemnation, the past has certainly exacted appropriate revenge through the burden of sad memories he bore throughout his life. While accepting this, I have thought that



even so I would like to bring to light once again the memories and history that my uncle blotted out, and throw into relief the nuances of the intricate cross-grained relationships between the ‘defeat’ and ‘liberation’, and Japan and the Korean peninsula. I regard this is the weighty task that has been left behind for me.



Kang Sangjung (centre) with his uncle (left) in Seoul, 1972

### ‘Uncle’ who lived as an exile in the shadows

In striking contrast was the life of my other ‘Uncle’. Unlike my father’s younger brother, ‘Uncle’ had no education to speak of, and remained illiterate all his life. He had been a *yakuza* and active in the outlaw world in his

youth, but eventually his life fell apart and he finished up in my house despite being no relation. Always having time for me, he stood in for my busy father.

‘Uncle’s’ name was Yi Sangsu. His Japanese name was Iwamoto Masao. For almost thirty years I was completely unaware of ‘Uncle’s’ original name. He was always there, occupying such an incalculable place in my memories that it just never occurred to me to inquire about him. Sadly, it was only when ‘Uncle’ died that I learned of Yi Sangsu for the first time. I am sure my father felt with painful intensity that he wanted ‘Uncle’, who had no relations of his own, at least to be buried under his ‘real name’. This encapsulates the heartbreak of first generation *zainichi* like my father and ‘Uncle’, who did not speak openly about ethnicity. When I learned that ‘Uncle’ was Yi Sangsu, I felt a deep sense of shame at my own lack of awareness, and wept as I understood the depth of their sorrow.

It may well be that ‘Uncle’ was so good to me because he saw in me a trace of the child he had left behind in the homeland.

‘Uncle’ was vigorous and tough, a man of few wants. Even so, at times his face would be melancholy, shadowed by loneliness. When I think about it now, I am sure that at such times he was looking back with regret at the man who had abandoned wife and child and lost his home. ‘Uncle’ did not grumble about his hard lot,



however; his dauntless personality probably did not permit it. I think he probably accepted it as something he would have to go on enduring stoically, and determined somehow or other to work his way through. Even so, his pent-up feelings would sometimes burst out with passionate emotion—"My country has come to this ... my life has come to this ... and yet I still feel ...". As his words came to a halt and he fell into silence, I think 'Uncle' was mourning bitterly.

More than anything, 'Uncle' loved politics. When he talked about politics, 'Uncle', face flushed, was in his glory. He would often be found lecturing 'Kaneko-san', whom I mentioned earlier. 'Kaneko-san', with his good will for the 'North', and 'Uncle', who believed in the possibility of change in the 'South', were both concerned about the well-being of their families as they intently discussed the future of the mother-country. As I watched them from a distance, I felt there was something remote about the two absorbed figures. This 'adult' face was quite alien to the 'Uncle' of every day.

'Uncle' sometimes told us about social conditions or international relations, based on the store of information he had picked up from here and there. Such-and-such a politician was in a class of his own... this politician was really somebody ... there was no politician nowadays who could pull off a thing like that ... and so on, and so on. In

general, 'Uncle's' interest was in the person, and based on that he added to his store of knowledge of events and circumstances. It seems to me his critiques were often sufficiently accurate to take even a political analyst aback. He certainly had a real political intuition.

It wasn't only political lectures—'Uncle' was also my guide to an unfamiliar world. At a time when entertainment was scarce, when television was a luxury only to be dreamed of, movies were the window onto the world of pleasure. 'Uncle' was a huge fan, and many a time he took me along. Whenever I perched on the front of 'Uncle's' bicycle as we headed for the cinema, my heart would beat with such excitement I could hardly breathe. And as we made our way along the dark road home, 'Uncle' and I would grow quite heated as we discussed whatever film we'd just seen. As 'Uncle' pedalled cheerfully along under the bright moon, myself in front, there was a kind of warmth deep in my heart.

'Uncle' worked alongside my family, collecting garbage and feeding the pigs. I stuck to 'Uncle' like glue, and loved helping him look after the pigs. The daily routine of preparing the food and cleaning was hard physical work, but 'Uncle' toiled on, silent and intent. His compassion for living things was very evident when the sows were farrowing. His careful ministrations as they groaned in their labour pangs made a lasting impression on me.

'Uncle's' compassionate kindness was also directed to animals that met untimely deaths. Our house faced a national highway, and was often littered with the pathetic carcasses of dogs and cats that had been hit by cars, victims of the rapidly rising volume of traffic. Everyone else would avert their gaze, but it was always 'Uncle' who would unobtrusively go and pick up the bodies and carry them in a straw mat to the bank of the nearby river, where he would give them a dignified burial. Did 'Uncle' perhaps identify with the lifeless bodies of those 'dumb creatures' which had met with a sudden, meaningless death? It made my heart ache to watch him the time he returned from the riverbank after burying a dog he'd particularly loved, smoking in stony silence.

'Uncle' got drunk on so little that his one indulgence was cigarettes. There was always a packet of 'Peace' jammed into his back pocket. I loved 'Uncle' when he was smoking, most of all as he sat tranquilly in a corner of the extensive stadium at the University, puffing away as his gaze wandered idly over Mount Tatsuta before him.

'Uncle' and I would go each day to pick up leftovers from the kitchens of the student dormitories at Kumamoto University to feed the pigs. We emptied the scraps into two kerosene tins, put the tins in the panniers of 'Uncle's' bicycle, and wheeled it home. 'Uncle' would always park the bike in the corner of the

University stadium, sit in the shade of a tree, and light up a 'Peace'. As he exhaled with a deep sigh, the purplish smoke would dance in puffs and disappear into the skies. As I chased after it, for some unknown reason I was absurdly happy. It may be that I had never known such a feeling of boundless joy in my life. I still recall that scene sometimes today.

When I think about it now, though, I am sure that 'Uncle's' heart was full of homesickness as he gazed silently into the deep recesses of the mountain.

'Uncle' died in hospital with a deep sigh, as if to breathe out all the hardships of this world. I broke down and wept.

I want to meet 'Uncle' once again. I was not able to ward off his sadness—even if I knew Iwamoto Masao, I did not know Yi Sangsu. There are times when I am haunted by the thought that it could be said that I never met the real 'Uncle'. I want to meet Yi Sangsu, once again. Surely the only way to do so is to 'go forward' by facing the past. It seems to me that this feeling will grow stronger with the years. It may even be that the motivation for my actions in speaking on social issues is the strength of this feeling.

When 'Uncle' died, he had virtually no possessions. He left behind a pair of gumboots encrusted with food scraps and pig dung, and a jar containing a few cigarettes. As I gazed at them, I asked myself over and over again what

'Uncle's' life had been, indeed, why on earth he had even been born. An exile from his homeland, 'Uncle' had lived out his life quietly in the shadows. When he was suddenly felled by a stroke, he tried to brush away the helping hands, surely signalling that he had had enough of living.



'Uncle' in Kumamoto

The two uncles who influenced me so deeply... When I compare their widely-different lives, I finish up reflecting on what it meant to live as a first-generation *zainichi*. It is fine, as far as it goes, to say that it was a cruel life imposed on them by historical forces. But it seems to me that although battered by life, they both survived, doing the

best they could with the means at hand. My ongoing wish is to ensure that the memory of those 'mutants' who survived the rigours of their lives does not disappear from the places where they lived.

### Torn into pieces time and again

As one follows the traces of my two uncles, the misery of their lives, torn to pieces again and again, surfaces. Their misery is intertwined with feelings of powerlessness and loss. But although they were stricken with grief, they got on with their lives.

One thing they were denied was seeing their country united. What of second generation *zainichi* like myself, who live on with memories of them? I have still not had the opportunity of seeing my 'homeland' united. When I say 'homeland', it does not of course have the same sense of 'native place' [*patrie*] as it did for my uncles. My 'native place' is Kumamoto, where I was born and grew up. A 'homeland' which is not one's 'native place' is a nebulous, insubstantial thing. It does not make sense for me to write of the Korean peninsula, whether 'North' or 'South' as my 'homeland'.

And yet, I want to take the plunge and write of the Korean peninsula as my 'homeland'. By doing so, I wonder whether I may be able to re-discover bonds with my uncles. I wonder whether perhaps I will be able to discover my 'homeland' in their memories. Of course, they are

no longer alive. Even so, the actuality of the division which was responsible for their misery still continues. Might it not be that when that stark reality is confronted and ended, I will be able to meet my uncles again and begin to say “at last the time has come when your heartache (*han*) [9] can fade away.”

Today I am a university professor and have achieved a certain degree of public esteem. The contrast with my uncles is obvious. I cannot rid myself of a feeling of shame that I perhaps never really met them, and even now I have not had the joy of seeing a unified Korea. I am comforted by the demonstration my parents and my uncles gave me, a supremely ‘human’ way of being in the face of adversity. This is perhaps what Cumings’ meant by “the Korean peninsula has both acquired much, and lost much” and that “it is a story remarkable for human triumph over adversity”.



Kang Sangjung 2003

By the time I was in upper primary school, there was an intangible sense in society at large that there was something almost criminal in the very fact of being *zainichi* and even worse was the hard fact of division. Why was my parents’ and my uncles’ mother-country being divided? Why was it fighting? Was the Korean race belligerent by nature? When I thought about it, I had to admit that many of the first generation wore their hearts on their sleeves; they were aggressive, abusive and quarrelsome—and so I supposed it might make sense that the country was divided and members of the same race were killing each other. What a ‘barbaric’ people! Images and concepts like these formed one after another, leaving me always heavy-hearted.

History and modern society lessons at school were truly wretched experiences for me. I was



seized by a feeling of desolation, as if I had been left all alone in the classroom. Why was I a *zainich*? Why were we 'at the bottom of the heap'? Such misgivings troubled me deeply, but there was no friend or teacher in whom I could confide. I had no alternative but to bury my anxieties deep within myself, and as a result, it was as if a dark cloud of disquiet hung over me.

I was good at both schoolwork and sport, and probably seemed a cheerful, mischievous boy. But at times the cheerfulness would be erased by melancholy and disquiet. There was no real knowledge of or insight into the significance or the origins of division, but it definitely cast a dark shadow. *Zainichi*—rootless like tumbleweed, deprived of the protective carapace of 'nation', fighting among themselves even when in a foreign country, the country to which they should return split in two. In the popular mind, they were nothing short of 'the dregs of history'. Even the well-meaning people around me were probably unable to imagine how dark a shadow this negative image cast over my young heart. And yet the division was not unrelated to Japanese history.

Later, when I was studying in the former West Germany, I was aware that the division of Germany cast a deep shadow on its people. There was no mistaking that people who live in a divided country have to bear in the roots of their being the burden of negation.

One could perhaps in a way regard the division of Germany, with the weight of the dark legacy of Nazism bearing down on it, as history's revenge. But the Korean peninsula had been the victim of long-term forcible colonisation, and for that very reason, the history of division was all the more heartbreaking and its influence the more profound.

When I retrace my childhood memories, I feel a melancholy deeper than simple nostalgia, a melancholy that has continued as I grow older. Why, I wonder? I cannot help but think that the answer lies in the circumstances of being *zainichi* of which division is the symbol.

There is a complex emotion in *zainichi*. Some of the younger generation talk of there being two streams within themselves—the country they love most in the world is Japan and that they most dislike is the Korean peninsula. Yet at the same time, the country they most love in the world is the Korean peninsula and that which they dislike most is Japan. It is an extreme form of expression, but I find similar feelings within myself—Japan is at once my favourite country, the one I should love, and at the same time the country I most dislike; the Korean peninsula too is the country I most dislike and that which in a certain way, I should love. Why does such a state persist in this way?

I think my melancholy usually arises from this sense of division. Division must be healed

through reconciliation, not force. It may be, indeed, that reintegration can never be fully achieved. Yet surely it is possible to dispel insecurity by allowing the 'other' to enter oneself and co-exist with that 'difference'? It may be that in the final analysis, it is simply impossible to speak of fundamentally dispelling insecurity. But surely even if the insecurity cannot be dispelled, the heart may be lightened by confronting its source, accepting it, embracing it?

I somehow feel that when even some small reconciliation takes place between the divisions between 'zainichi' and 'Japan', 'zainichi' and 'North/South', 'North/South' and 'Japan', I will at last be able to meet my uncles.

The unification and co-existence of North and South is not simply a matter of bringing together a divided country. The process of reconciliation is itself of great importance. Reconciliation of North and South will necessarily also be bound up with simultaneous reconciliation with Japan. When this happens, we will surely be able to farewell the cruel years of the twentieth century and face the new century. It will be a difficult assignment and there will doubtless be many ups and downs, but I want to be on the spot when such reconciliation occurs. Born as I was during the Korean War, this is my dream.

#### **Translator's postscript**

The aging of the first generation of *zainichi* Koreans who are the main subject of this essay

brings sadness and the vanishing of individual histories, but also sometimes opportunities for remembering. On 3 April 2005, Kang Sangjung's mother U Sunnam passed away peacefully in Kumamoto. She was 80 years old. Shortly before, on a visit to his hometown, Kang Sangjung had been able to make contact again with 'Kaneko-san', who is now very elderly but still has vivid memories of the days described here. They met again after many decades, and were able to share happy and sad recollections of the times and places described here—a corner of postwar Japan which is often invisible in the big narratives of the nation, but whose traces still exert a powerful influence on the Japan of today.

#### **Notes to the translation**

[1] Korea was annexed by Japan as a colony in 1910. In the 1920s, there were periods of relatively unrestricted entry for Koreans to Japan, and there was a great increase in the number of Koreans working in Japan. Most were single men, employed on construction sites, in mines and factories. Gradually their families joined them. They faced considerable racial discrimination and many came to live in settlements of Korean people. Hundreds of thousands of Koreans were forcibly relocated to Japan with the passing of the National Mobilisation Law (April 1938) and the accompanying ordinance on the immigration of Korean labourers (effective September 1938). By



the end of World War II, the number of Koreans living in Japan, including those brought over forcibly during the War, had increased to over two million. (*Translator's note*)

[2] The General Headquarters of the Allied Powers (GHQ) declared that Koreans resident in Japan, whether of Northern and Southern origin, were neither citizens of the victorious countries nor of the defeated countries, but were described as 'third country nationals'.

[3] When a bomb of unknown origin ripped the Japanese railway near Shenyang (then known as Mukden), in September 1931, the Japanese Kwantung army guarding the railway used the incident as a pretext to occupy South Manchuria. This led to the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo. (*Translator's note*)

[4] In 1871, American teacher Leroy Lansing Janes established a school in Kumamoto, the Kumamoto Yōgakko, which offered a Western, Christian education. In 1876, thirty-five students pledged themselves to the Christian faith and to missionary work among the Japanese. They were known as the 'Kumamoto Band'. (*Translator's note*)

[5] Traditional dress for Korean women consists of a short upper-body garment, folded in front similar to a kimono (*jeogori*), and a pleated long full skirt, gathered above the waist (*chima*). (*Translator's note*)

[6] A sweet drink made from fermented rice, sometimes flavoured with ginger. (*Translator's note*)

[7] *Itako*, blind female shamans or spirit mediums, are renowned for their capacity to speak for the dead, through a ritual process known as *kuchiyose*

[8] Park Chunghee (1917-1979) was president of South Korea from 1961 to 1979. He had served the Kwangtung Army (part of the Japanese Army) in Manchuria in colonial times. Park led a military coup in 1961. In 1971, he declared a state of emergency and suspended the constitution. The following year, he introduced a revised constitution which increased his power to the extent that it made him a virtual dictator. Having survived an assassination attempt in 1974, Park was assassinated in 1979. (*Translator's note*)

[9] Broadly definable as a sense of deep sorrow and a desire for restitution invoked by the sufferings and oppression of history, *han* is often seen as one of the defining elements of modern Korean culture. (*Translator's note*)

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#### **Note on the translator**

*Robin Fletcher received her PhD from the Australian National University in 2005, for a thesis entitled*

*'Yaeko Batchelor, Ainu evangelist and poet'. In translated a number of Japanese works, including the addition to researching Japanese history, she has collected works of Yaeko Batchelor.*