

# Japan, North Korea, and the Biopolitics of Repatriation

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**Abstract:** *On December 14, 1959, amidst much fanfare and tears, the first repatriation boat (provided by the Soviet Union) carried thousands of Koreans from Niigata, Japan, to Cheongjin, North Korea. Hailed as a humanitarian project under the intermediation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea continued until 1984, resulting in a total of more than 93,000 repatriates who relocated from Japan to North Korea amidst the Cold War division of the world with the majority never to return to Japan again. This article addresses multiple aspects of this project, looking into the media portrayal of North Korea at the time of the opening of the repatriation and the more recent academic discussion following the de-classification of the International Committee of the Red Cross papers. Based on these, the article frames the repatriation in a new light with the suggestion of possibly thinking about it as a form of human trafficking without reducing it into a one-dimensional political event or conspiracy by one government or another. Instead, the article emphasizes that the structure of power that sustained the repatriation was complex and so were the lives that repatriates experienced.*

**Keywords:** *North Korea, Repatriation, Power, Red Cross, Humanitarianism, Human Trafficking*

## Introduction

On December 14, 1959, amidst much fanfare and tears, the first repatriation boat (provided by the Soviet Union) carried thousands of Koreans from Niigata, Japan, to Cheongjin, North Korea. In the remaining two weeks of December 1959 alone, a total of three trips were made, transporting 2,942 persons to North Korea (Kikuchi 2020: 376). Between 1959 and 1984, a total of 93,340 persons were relocated from Japan to North Korea. This number included Koreans who had moved from Korea to Japan during the colonial period and their descendants, including family members who had been born in Japan as well as some 1,830 Japanese spouses. Counting the descendants of Japanese spouses, an estimated total of about 6,800 Japanese citizens were repatriated to North Korea over the course of this process (Kikuchi 2020: 17). This program was referred to as a “repatriation,” a strange choice of terms when we are reminded that the vast majority of the first-generation colonial immigrant Koreans in Japan originated from the southern provinces of the peninsula which are in today’s South Korea. Technically speaking, therefore, they were not being “repatriated,” given that Korea remained divided into two separate regimes. Moreover, to this day, there are no diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan, meaning that once “repatriated,” none could travel back to Japan, even though Japan was, for many, their

country of birth. After almost thirty years since the closure of this program, the issue of repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea remains an unresolved and ongoing point of contention. In this article, I shall recount historical processes and recent research and indicate lingering challenges of this complex issue.

Arranged through negotiations between the Japanese Red Cross (JRC) and the North Korean Red Cross (NKRC) with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) acting as intermediary and observer, this repatriation was, at the time of its commencement, welcomed as humanitarian measure and supported by the vast number of the Japanese population, Japanese media, and Japanese government and non-governmental agencies, as well as most of the Koreans in Japan themselves. The only entity fiercely opposing this enterprise was South Korea. Seen retrospectively, this repatriation—referred to hereafter as the 1959 repatriation in order to distinguish it from the mass repatriation of Koreans immediately after the war—was a logical outcome of the shift in the mechanisms of power that governed Koreans in Japan in post-imperial and post-Occupation Japan, as I shall argue in this paper.

The public presentation of North Korea in Japan at the time of the 1959 repatriation was pervasively positive. From today's perspective, in which the Japanese media expresses an unequivocally critical, negative, and demonizing perspective toward North Korea, the fact that North Korea was deemed as a good place to relocate to seems extraordinary. In media coverage leading up to the realization of the 1959 repatriation, and for a few more years after that, Japanese journalists and dignitaries visited North Korea, reporting it to be a young, thriving, and promising nation upon their return to Japan. Such visibility went hand in hand with a massive publicity campaign waged by Chongryun, the Korean

organization in Japan that supports North Korea, and North Korea itself, both in perfect sync with the Japanese mass media. Let me, therefore, in the following present a survey of how North Korea was captured in Japan's mass media at the time of the 1959 repatriation.

After decades of silent treatment of this topic, in recent years, we have seen something of a revival of repatriation discourse in Japanese media as well as academe. This has been largely in reaction to Tessa Morris-Suzuki's seminal work, *The Exodus to North Korea* (Morris-Suzuki 2007), which claims that the Japanese government bears historical responsibility for the repatriation and the tragic fate later met by many in North Korea. Morris-Suzuki's study, based on newly declassified ICRC files, led to a strong reaction from Japanese commentators, popular and academic alike. While not trying to be anachronistic, it is nevertheless possible for us to look at the 1959 repatriation in different ways from before—North Korea itself begins to look different too, as I shall also argue in the following. In doing so, I shall frame the 1959 repatriation and its consequences in terms of biopolitics enacted and materialized by state apparatuses involving Japan and North Korea. Once placed in this frame, the oft-applied term toward the repatriation, *humanitarianism* or *jindōshugi*, will look rather different, or more precisely speaking, it will be shown that the 1959 repatriation had nothing to do with humanitarian concerns.

What about actual repatriates and their families? Despite the recent studies, we continue to know very little about the people who were repatriated to North Korea and the family members and friends that are left in Japan. While limited in number, I shall present cases to represent the complexity and ambiguity faced by Koreans in Japan during the repatriation and on to the present day, as the 1959 repatriation, after more than half a century, delivers real and immediate

consequence to Koreans in Japan.

### Who Governs Koreans?

Prior to 1945, Koreans were *de jure* imperial subjects of Japan. This “*de jure*” aspect was heavily conditioned. Being Japan’s imperial subject meant that one was subjected to Japan’s sovereign power, which was, in turn, that of the Emperor, the imperial institute, and the ideology that involved revering and worshipping the Emperor, not simply as leader but also as deity. This was closely connected to the way modern Japan emerged as an imperial power in the late nineteenth century—not via the establishment of a modern statehood, but via a reversion to an ancient order. According to this process, restoration of the imperial reign went hand in hand with modernization of the nation’s political structure and economy, including its colonization policies and strategies (e.g. Gluck 1987).

Japan’s imperial order is unique. Since the very beginning of the nation’s written history, it has been assumed that the imperial house has a singular origin, in turn functioning as the spiritual and non-secular origin of the nation (Amino 2005). All Japanese are supposed to be derived from this imperial lineage, as symbolized by the by the Japanese household registry or *koseki*, which represented each household as the terminal unit embodying the Imperial authority. Such an idea behind one’s family could not be more different from the Korean lineage system, which takes after the classical Confucian model. Each lineage has a discrete ancestral origin, which is at least as important, if not more so, than identification with the sovereign, the King. In the Korean kinship system, therefore, one’s ancestral lineage and the king’s lineage do not overlap unless one is from the king’s lineage itself; in the Japanese lineage system, the Imperial lineage supersedes all authorities of one’s ancestors.

In the colony, from the very start, imperial power was sovereign power, even though the colonization of Korea was done in the form of the annexation, and the intermarriage between a Korean royal prince and a Japanese imperial princess being a justification. The power bestowed in the authority of the Government-General of Korea, by way of the Imperial sanctity, was absolute. Fear of death at the hands of colonial authorities, subjection to violence and intimidation, coercion and extortion, was part of the daily management of the colonized population. The colonized population was subjected to power that was, ultimately, that of the Emperor, and which included “the power to take life” in the name of the Emperor the sovereign (Foucault 2003: 247).

As Foucault emphasizes, sovereign power coincides and is combined, to greater or lesser effect, with biopower in the colony (Genel 2006). For example, in order to make Koreans eligible to serve in the imperial army as the Emperor’s soldiers, the Korean household registry system was reformed. Given that the Emperor was a deity and that all Japanese were deemed to be His children, or *tennōno sekishi*, something had to be done to make Koreans—who did not share with the rest of the Japanese an unbroken imperial lineage—into His children. Only the Emperor’s children could serve in the military to defend His sacred land. This logic was a reflection of the religious and sacred notion that sustained the Japanese empire. Thus, the measure to reform the Korean family registry system to conform to the Japanese one was introduced in 1939 (Mizuno 2008). Following this, in 1941, Korean men began to be conscripted. This measure combined two orthogonally opposed institutions, subjecting Koreans to the non-secular Japanese lineage system (sovereign power) on the one hand and documenting and regulating Korean household units as part of modern population policy (biopower) on the other. This meant that the colonized population

was essentially converted into members of the imperial lineage in full subjection to the imperial sovereign in order for it to be rationally dealt with—statistically and demographically—by way of recruitment, identification, and registration. In this sense, colonial rule completely subjected Koreans to the sovereign power of the Japanese Emperor, yet at the same time, it also required the apparatus of biopower in the form of household registration, demographic statistics, and population management. This combination—the combination of sovereign power and biopower—is to become highly relevant when thinking about the 1959 repatriation.

### Are Koreans Humans?

Following its defeat, Japan was placed under the Allied Occupation administration. Thus began the road to Japan's reconstruction—transforming it from the existential enemy of the US to a staunch US ally worthy of investment. The 1945-52 Occupation also witnessed a fundamental adjustment in Japan's governance over the former colonial population remaining in Japan proper, in that they became administered by Occupation authorities. These authorities initially treated the Korean population in Japan with ambivalence. About three-quarters of the total of more than two million Koreans in Japan were repatriated to southern Korea immediately after Japan's defeat. This movement took place in a chaotic manner, mainly due to a near-complete absence of support—both administrative and financial—from Japanese or Occupation authorities (Chong 2022).

The Occupation authorities were not necessarily disparaging in their treatment of the 600,000 Koreans remaining in Japan—at least not initially. While they showed no consideration with regards to the precarious position occupied by the former colonial

subjects, they did occasionally deal with Korean representatives directly. This gave some degree of negotiating power to Korean political organizations, including the League of Koreans, a left-leaning mass organization. However, such treatment was hopelessly limited in its application. In April 1948, the League of Koreans-operated schools for Korean children resisted incorporation into the Japanese public school system, which would have led to their prohibition from teaching Korean language. In response, the Occupation authorities did not waste any time in declaring martial law, the only occasion on which such a measure was taken during the entire seven-year occupation of Japan (Koshiro 1999; O 2009: 141-165). Things clearly changed after the summer of 1948, following the establishment of separate regimes on the peninsula. The League of Koreans, showed enthusiastic support for the northern regime, even though the majority of Koreans in Japan originated from the provinces of Gyeongsang, Jeolla, and Jeju in South Korea. In 1949, the League was purged: its property confiscated, its bank accounts frozen, and its leaders issued with arrest warrants, driving them underground (O 2009: 91-104).

On many levels, the Occupation authorities worked to show the Japanese government how to manage and govern “unruly” or “irregular” populations, such as the Koreans. In 1947, one day before the declaration of the new Constitution of Japan via the final imperial decree by the Showa Emperor (who, following the Constitution, would no longer enjoy such power), Koreans were defined as being outside the Japanese national population, or *kokumin*. Thus, Koreans were left out by definition from enjoying the basic human rights guaranteed by the American-made Constitution of postwar Japan. This decree is interesting. On one level, it was a renunciation of the residue of the Imperial sovereign power over those Koreans remaining in Japan. On another level, it also banished Koreans from the civil sphere, rendering their humanity questionable. At the



same time, the 1947 decree left the Japanese government with a dilemma: since Koreans were placed outside Japan's imperial sovereignty while also not being absorbed into Japan's new "democratic" sovereignty, exactly where did they exist? This dilemma was addressed, insufficiently, in 1952, upon the signing of the San Francisco Treaty with the US. Koreans remaining in Japan became finally and unequivocally stateless as *heiwaajōyaku kokuseki ridatsusha*, or persons having lost their Japanese nationality as a result of the peace treaty. Precisely echoing what Arendt surmised regarding the figure of the refugee in the aftermath of WWII, the Korean in Japan was, once again, a bare human, because basic human rights in a modern democracy are granted only when a human is a national (Arendt 1973). These events were to provide a perfect alibi for the unraveling of the 1959 repatriation.

### What To Do with Koreans?

In post-Occupation Japan, Koreans were no longer primarily marked as disgruntled and inferior imperial subjects, as they had been during the late colonial period, nor as lives the termination of which did not amount to homicide, as they had been in the aftermath of the 1923 earthquake in Tokyo (see Ryang 2007). While continuing to be subjected to extra layers of surveillance, Koreans in Japan were becoming "normalized," even though their status was made exceptionally precarious. Perhaps it was because they had been rendered stateless that they had to be "normalized." Once placed outside the category of *kokumin*, stripping them of Japanese nationality, Koreans were no longer eligible for veteran's benefits, social security, or access to national health services. They were subjected to abject poverty and lived in hovel-like ghettos with shared outhouses and no running water or electricity, their children half-naked and bare-footed. Most

of the adult population was either unemployed or underemployed, often in the gray sector. Koreans were eligible, however, for one type of benefit, called "basic livelihood protection" or *seikatsu hogo*, and a disproportionate number of Koreans were recipients. As of 1952, 14.32 per cent of Koreans in Japan were receiving the livelihood protection benefit, a proportion six times larger than was the case for the Japanese population. This rate had jumped to 23.2 per cent by 1954, compared to 2.11 per cent for the Japanese population, leading to an estimate that one in five Koreans in Japan was receiving this benefit. In 1956, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare spent more than 239 million yen in support of the livelihood of Koreans (Kikuchi 2020: 187, 266). One can see that Koreans were creating a material impact on Japan's national budget, and thus emerged as a population category that the Japanese government needed to deal with.

Koreans in Japan needed to be dealt with on a political level as well. Following the suppression of the League of Koreans in 1948, sections of the Korean population continued to maintain faith in North Korea. The dominant understanding of the day was that the partition of Korea would be only a temporary phenomenon and that, even though they were southerners, once the Korean states reunified, they would soon be repatriated to the Korean peninsula. Their preference for the form of governance being North Korea's had less to do with Koreans in Japan being communist or pro-Soviet as it did with their dislike for how the American Military Government had inherited the colonial political apparatus and was brutally dominating the South (Ryang 1997: Ch.3). After the suppression of the League of Koreans, Koreans organized themselves inside the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), which had not been suppressed, forming Minjeon, an organization with the goal of supporting North Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953).

Following the Korean War ceasefire, North

Korea and Japan each had to deal with the issue of Japanese nationals remaining in North Korea from the colonial period and their repatriation to Japan, while South Korea and Japan were trying to reach a post-colonial settlement and diplomatic normalization, in addition to resolving the issue of the deportation of Koreans detained upon their illegal entry to Japan after 1945; interestingly, while South Korea strenuously refused to accept any deportees from Japan, North Korea showed interest in reaching out to Koreans in Japan (see the following section). In Japan, the JRC was assigned to handle the issue of those Japanese remaining in North Korea, in part due to the Japanese government's concerns about provoking South Korea's resentment. In a January 1954 telegram from the JRC to its North Korean counterpart, the NKRC, the possibility was mentioned for the first time that, in exchange for repatriation of Japanese nationals remaining in North Korea, Korean nationals in Japan, if they so desired, could be repatriated to North Korea. This triggered an enthusiastic response from Minjeon (Kikuchi 2020: 179). From the JRC's perspective, repatriation of destitute Koreans was desirable, as stated by Inoue Masutarō who, as the JRC official, oversaw the entire process of the negotiation with North Korea:

Moreover, to get rid of poor Koreans from Japan would mean to improve the lot of the remaining Koreans in Japan. Furthermore, it would mean the possibility of *sekika* [making something red, i.e., placing something under the communist influence] [of Koreans] would be reduced and we will see more Koreans in Japan sympathetic for South Korea [rather than North Korea] (Inoue 1956: 11).

### The Birth of “North Koreans” in Japan

In February 1955, the then North Korean Foreign Minister Nam Il publicized a communiqué expressing that North Korea was prepared to discuss the possibility of entering into normal diplomatic relations with Japan (Park 2012: 109). This sent shock waves through Minjeon and its members, since this development would necessitate a review and revision of their position, aligned with that of the JCP, opposing the current Japanese administration. If North Korea were to acknowledge and fully negotiate with the Japanese government then in power, any subversion against the latter would hinder the former's efforts. After months of internal discussion, involving at times furious disagreement and dissent, the North Korea-supporting Koreans reorganized themselves into Chongryun, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, in May 1955. The new organization issued a definitive declaration that the Koreans in Japan were overseas nationals of North Korea. This was, needless to say, merely a statement of political identification. Since these Koreans had been made stateless in 1952 and no formal diplomatic relations existed between Japan and North Korea, no Korean in Japan was a North Korean citizen (Ryang 1997).

Following the establishment of Chongryun, the desire to be repatriated to North Korea grew among Koreans in Japan, leading to a whole new level of enthusiasm and organizational mobilization. In the course of a few years, a systematic and energetic campaign by Chongryun resulted in the number of individuals expressing a desire to be repatriated swelling from a few hundred to several thousand, the repatriation itself becoming a reality in 1959, as we shall see in detail in the third section of this paper (see Matsuura 2022: Ch.7).

We may recognize here that there was a

dramatic shift in the mechanism of power governing Koreans in Japan from sovereign power (colonial and imperial) to biopower. This did not mean that one completely replaced the other; rather, their residual effects overlapped for decades and, in some ways, continue to do so in Japan today. Throughout this process, shifts also took place in how the Japanese government and its agencies responded to North Korea's existence. Additionally, we can observe that Japan's relationship with North Korea was shielded during the Occupation. Once it was over, North Korea did not emerge as an existential enemy of Japan, as it had done in the eyes of General MacArthur. Rather, it became a potential partner in the pursuit of rational biopolitical concerns, based on statistical calculations and demographic strategies, and not merely derived from hostility against Koreans or a desire to achieve ethnic cleansing.

### Paradise on Earth

In retrospect, North Korea appeared in the post-Occupation Japanese media as an unknown, perhaps suspicious, yet altogether "good" country, and it had to be portrayed as such. This was shown when North Korea, during the decade from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, became in the representation of the Japanese main stream media the destination for a *humanitarian* relocation of Korean repatriates and their Japanese spouses. It is prudent to remember that public discourse in Japan during the 1950s was more left-leaning than it is today, romanticizing Communism on one hand and espousing anti-establishment views on the other, opposing militarism and dictatorships. Even though Japan emerged as a US ally in the East Asian Cold War, anti-US forces led by students and intellectuals had a strong presence in Japan, not least because of the US's continuing occupation of Okinawa and domination in Asia

through its military interventions. Japanese public opinion was uninterested in a proper postcolonial resolution or justice vis-à-vis the peoples of Japan's former colonies and the rest of Asia. However, the nation's defeat in WWII after suffering the damage and devastation of the atomic bomb attacks in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as an overall reaction against the prewar and wartime militarism, culminated in a unique combination of perpendicularly competing aspirations: peace and rearmament, international solidarity (as would soon be witnessed during the Vietnam War) and a tighter alliance with the US. This resulted in the emergence of the 1955 system, whereby mutually antagonistic ideological pillars, represented by the JCP and the Socialist Party on the one hand, and the conservative Liberal Democratic Party and its fluid variety of allies on the other, reached a tacit *détente* preserving mutual coexistence. Public language in the Japanese political sphere was thus altogether more tolerant toward different opinions, including left-leaning ones, than what we find in Japan in the twenty-first century.

Taking this environment into consideration, the friendly language Japan's main media outlets used toward North Korea in the 1950s is not surprising. What is surprising is that both so-called progressive or left-leaning and conservative and right-leaning politicians and commentators participated in generating concerted praise of North Korea, justifying the repatriation as a benevolent act of humanitarianism or *jindōshugi* on the part of Japan. Prior to the commencement of the 1959 repatriation, prominent leftist Japanese writer Terao Gorō visited North Korea and published a report titled *Sanjūhachidosenno kita* or "North of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel," its pages filled with glowing praise for North Korea. Terao predicted that the North Korean economy would soon surpass that of Japan, and that anyone who arrived there from Japan would have no reason to be concerned about building a new life there (Terao 1959). At the same time,

his comments were not propaganda-driven, and he was even critical about many aspects of North Koreans' everyday lives. For example, he thought North Korea offered very little in the areas of attractive consumer goods or amenities, noting that the blankets and sheets in his hotel room were all made in China, and adding that the bathroom was constantly out of order (Terao 1959 60-70; cited in Kikuchi 2020: 575). However, the fact that Terao's book contained a mixture of realistic criticism and rosy predictions was perceived as proof of its authenticity, turning it into an instant bestseller (Kikuchi 2020: 575). Koreans in Japan who were interested in repatriation avidly read the book, and many of them were directly influenced by it when making up their minds to be repatriated to North Korea (Takasaki 2005a).

### Humanitarianism without Postcolonial Justice

Following the January 1959 Japanese cabinet decision to embark on the repatriation of Koreans to North Korea, major newspapers such as the progressive *Asahi* and the conservative *Sankei* began intensive coverage of this topic. According to Takasaki Sōji, on the whole, the papers adopted a line justifying Japan's stance as righteous and humanitarian or *jindōteki*, and that of South Korea, for opposing the repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea, as anti-humanitarian or *hijindōteki* (Takasaki 2005b: 288). When these outlets spoke of the reality of Koreans in Japan, they highlighted the abject poverty Koreans suffered from, featuring headlines bearing phrases such as: "*kaesuhōga otagaino tame*," which can be translated as: "It would be better for both of us [Korea and Japan] to let them repatriate" (*Sankei* February 2, 1959; cited in Takasaki 2005b: 289). Upon the departure of the first repatriation boat on December 14, 1959, *Asahi* reported on one repatriating

couple, Li Ryonggang and Ji Jeonghwa, whose minds were filled with the hope of being able to provide their children with a happy future (*Asahi* December 14, 1959; cited in Takasaki 2005b: 298). The newspaper's evening edition on the same day quoted NKRC deputy president Kim Juyeong, who assured repatriates that there would be nothing to worry about, since North Korea would take care of their housing, food, and clothing (*Asahi* December 14, 1959, evening edition; cited in Takasaki 2005b: 298).

Both *Asahi* and *Sankei* dispatched correspondents to North Korea. On December 20, *Sankei's* Sakamoto Ikuo wrote about a Japanese spouse who had accompanied her Korean husband and told Sakamoto that all her worries had disappeared once she arrived, the article titled: "North Korea: Joy Filling the Entire Land" and "'Humanitarianism' Remarkably Came True," while in a December 21, 1959 article, *Asahi* correspondent Irie Tokutarō quoted a repatriate who was "overwhelmed by the dream-like reality" in North Korea (both articles cited in Takasaki 2005b: 299). In a later article on January 9, 1960, Irie wrote that North Korea enjoyed a sophisticated level of technology in both its industrial and agricultural production, commenting also on Kim Il Sung's "good looks" (Takasaki 2005b: 299).

In 1960, based on the 1959 visit to North Korea by Japanese journalists, a comprehensive report was published under the title *Kitachōsenno kiroku—hōchōkishadanno hōkoku* or "Documenting North Korea—Reportage by the Japanese Journalists Who Visited North Korea" (Hōchō kishadan 1960). According to the reporters, when they requested to visit prison and police headquarters, the North Korean authorities refused on the basis that there were not many criminals, especially political criminals (those who opposed the government) in those days. The reporters were told that even though there were political



criminals, most of them would have reached the prisons or re-education facilities after they had already undergone a process that involved criticism and mutual criticism held by local communities, meaning that by the time they reached the prisons, they would be already nearly rehabilitated. Based on this response, the reporters concluded that they imagined political dissidents would be treated in a tolerant manner (Hōchō kishadan 1960, quoted in Kikuchi 2020: 585). Here and on other occasions, reporters parroted the comments of the North Korean authorities, rather than attempting to gather data themselves in the field.

Niigata, the point of departure in Japan for the repatriation boats, became a hub for coverage of the enterprise, the local media depicting repatriates waiting their turn to board in the Red Cross facility. Due to the explosive popularity of repatriation in the early months, the facility was running at full capacity. Such coverage was carried in the *Niigata kikoku kyōryūkai nyūsu* or the “Niigata Repatriation Cooperation Society Newsletter,” and was filled with the joyous stories of families awaiting their exciting departure and Japanese local communities congratulating the Koreans on being able to return to their homeland (see Kojima 2017). In 1960, the Repatriation Cooperation Society, a non-profit organization formed by Japanese supporters of the repatriation in 1958 with the former Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō as its first president, published a booklet entitled *Sokokuni kaetta hitobito* or “Those Who Were Repatriated to the Fatherland” (Zainichi chōsenjin kikoku kyōryūkai 1960). Writing in this booklet, conservative member of parliament Iwamoto Nobuyuki and progressive member of parliament Hoashi Kei are unanimous in acknowledging and praising the fast pace of North Korea’s economic development, referring to the repatriation as a journey from *jigoku* or hell, denoting Japan, to *tengoku* or heaven, denoting North Korea (quoted in Kojima 2017:

88).

It is well known that North Korea and the North Korea-supporting Chongryun waged an all-out propaganda campaign, referring to North Korea as “paradise on earth.” What is interesting to observe is that such massive propaganda was not seen as such—rather, it was seen as supporting information validating the reports of Japanese correspondents. Not only did they not contradict each other, they were in unison, the latter marveling at North Korea’s miraculous recovery from the ashes of the Korean War, and praising its generosity in accepting returnees from overseas, meeting all of the latter’s basic needs, including housing, employment, medical care, and children’s education.

The public discourse on display in Japan at the height of the repatriation zeal was unanimous in asserting the repatriation as a win-win situation for Japanese society and Koreans in Japan. North Korea would not be covered with a similar vigor by Japanese media outlets until the aftermath of the 2002 revelation by none other than Kim Jong Il himself that North Korea had kidnapped Japanese citizens from the shores of Japan, smuggled them into North Korea, and forced them to carry out state-allocated assignments. This news shocked not only for the Japanese public, but also Koreans in Japan, particularly those who had until then supported North Korea. The Japanese media immediately adopted a tone of all-out criticism and denunciation targeting North Korea and Koreans in Japan affiliated with Chongryun, an organization which, it is interesting to note, was at that point no longer either effective or trustworthy in the eyes of its Korean followers. However, prior to Kim Jong Il’s 2002 admission, during those years in the late 1950s and early 1960s, North Korea, Chongryun, and the Japanese media were co-participants in creating and propagating positive media representations of the repatriation enterprise and the lives of those repatriated following

their arrival in North Korea. While stories of negative outcomes of repatriation began leaking out early on, such information did not form a sustainable body of public discourse, instead remaining as isolated voices of protest and denunciation. Their accounts were not taken seriously until the post-2002 eruption of North Korea-bashing (Pak 1994; Seki 1997).

Conspicuously absent was reflection on postcolonial justice and redress for North Korea and Koreans remaining in Japan, while South Korea and Japan had normalized their diplomatic relations in 1965 without clearly addressing postcolonial settlement. Furthermore, the role played by the national governments and international agencies involved was never seriously questioned, with a blind eye turned to important questions, such as: how it could be humanitarian or benevolent to ship poor Koreans to North Korea, away from Japan, out of Japan, effectively banishing them? And why did Japan, the former colonizer, not provide its former colonial subjects with basic human rights, security of life, and future prospects? Several years later, this situation was to be partially rectified through one book's intervention.

### **New Discussions**

Based on newly declassified documents housed at the Headquarters of the International Committee of Red Cross in Geneva, Tessa Morris-Suzuki published *Exodus to North Korea: In the Shadows of Japan's Cold War* in 2007 (Morris-Suzuki 2007a). The book was and continues to be seminal on a number of levels. Firstly, Morris-Suzuki tapped into a repository of relevant document files at the ICRC, access to which only became available in 2004, to produce a substantial research monograph. Secondly, her book is a multi-angle analysis of events leading up to the 1959 repatriation and raises the important question of why so many Koreans and their Japanese spouses, who had

no ancestral or family connections in North Korea, chose to be repatriated there. Thirdly, Morris-Suzuki, for the first time, reveals the role played by the Japanese government and its agencies, including the Ministry of Health and Welfare and, more importantly, the JRC, based on the actual correspondence they generated. In 2003, former Chongryun officer Chang Myeongsu published a book denouncing a "conspiracy" by the JRC to banish Koreans from Japan, and in 2005, former Chongryun cadre Han Gwang Hee (pseudonym) published an exposé based on his personal experience in behind-the-scenes Chongryun operations facilitating North Korean intelligence-gathering activities concerning Japan by exploiting the opportunity afforded by the repatriation enterprise (Chang 2003; Han 2005). As Morris-Suzuki's was the first example of academic research concerning the repatriation to be published in English, this event struck the Japanese public and academic milieu like a thunderbolt. In fact, translated versions of Morris-Suzuki's articles had already been provoking a strong response from popular and academic Japanese commentators alike (Morris-Suzuki 2004; Morris-Suzuki 2005; Asakawa 2005; Kurokawa 2009; for a different take, see Matsuura 2022). Building on such a background, the publication of her 2007 book (translated into Japanese in the same year; see Morris-Suzuki 2007b) became a watershed moment in Japan's academic discourse on the 1959 repatriation.

As stated previously, it was in January 1954 that the possibility of repatriating Koreans in Japan to North Korea was first mentioned by the JRC. According to Morris-Suzuki, by September 1955, the JRC was referring to the problem caused by the Koreans in Japan in its correspondence with the ICRC. By the spring of 1956, JRC officials were speaking of a "return of 60,000" Koreans from Japan to North Korea (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 32). At that time, Chongryun's estimate of the number of Koreans in Japan wishing to be repatriated to North

Korea was 30,000, but neither the JRC nor Chongryun clarified on what basis they came up with these numbers (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 92-93). Interestingly, when Chongryun representatives took the issue to the Japanese Parliament, they provided yet another figure, much more specific and far smaller, of 1,424 Koreans wanting to be repatriated. This number included 1,100 individuals wishing to be relocated to North Korea for livelihood-related reasons, 120 individuals seeking to be reunited with family members, seventy-one individuals who were detained in the Ōmura migrant detention camp (see below), and 133 students wanting to pursue higher education in North Korea (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 95-96). Of more interest is the fact that at the time, North Korea itself was proposing that about 700 Koreans from Japan be repatriated (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 110).

The inclusion of the Ōmura detainees was important, since this group came to be politically instrumental for the forces advocating the repatriation of Koreans to North Korea. While all Koreans in Japan became stateless in 1952, some were worse off than others—those who had committed felony offences, mostly in violation of immigration laws, especially after the 4.3 Uprising of 1948 on Jeju Island, which resulted in a large number of Koreans illegally entering Japan, were detained in the Ōmura migrant detention camp in Kyushu, western Japan while awaiting deportation to South Korea. Additionally, as South Korean President Syngman Rhee strenuously refused to accept the return of “criminal” Koreans, some Korean detainees were concerned they would face harsh punishment upon their repatriation to South Korea under anti-Communist laws, with the repercussions of the 4.3 Uprising, labeled as a communist insurgency, still lingering. As of May 1956, there were 1,467 Koreans interned at Ōmura, of which 140 were minors, including 31 unaccompanied children. The predominant majority consisted of people who had been

arrested for illegal entry to Japan. On both material and hygienic fronts, as well as in terms of its administration, conditions within the camp itself were deplorable (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 125). When ICRC representatives visited Japan in 1956, the issue of the Ōmura detainees emerged as an urgent problem that needed addressing. Their repatriation to North Korea, as long as the detainees themselves were willing, appeared to be a good solution.

Yet, how is it possible that, given figures such as 1,465 (the number of Ōmura detainees), 1,424 (the number proposed by Chongryun to the Japanese Parliament), 30,000 (the estimate by Chongryun of the number of Koreans wishing to be repatriated), 60,000 (the JRC estimate), or indeed 700 (the North Korean estimate), no fewer than 93,000 individuals were repatriated from Japan to North Korea over the course of the twenty-five-year period from 1959 to 1984? As previously stated, Morris-Suzuki is attentive to the actions taken by the JRC and the Japanese government, including their energetic support for the repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea. The Japanese authorities believed that the involvement of the ICRC in this enterprise would neutralize any South Korean opposition. She writes:

The language of the letters [of the JRC officials to the ICRC] was confusing [....] Phrases about “humanitarianism,” “the welfare of the Koreans,” and the “deep desire of North Koreans in Japan to return home” were interspersed with jolting descriptions by the Japanese Red Cross of Koreans in Japan as being “very violent” and “acting as a fifth column” in Japanese society. One report by a Japanese Red Cross official advised Geneva that “Japan has had no experience hitherto of being embarrassed by the question of minority and lacks knowledge how to handle it.”

(Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 33)

In Morris-Suzuki's view, the key player on Japan's side was Inoue Masutarō (mentioned above). Fluent in French, Inoue worked in the intelligence section of the government before moving to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and was eventually assigned to the JRC in mid-1955 (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 78). It is certain that Inoue was well aware of North Korea's harsh and materially deprived living standards. He made comments to this effect upon his visit to Pyongyang during repatriation negotiations (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 104-105), but never made them public. He went on to reason to the ICRC that Japan was too poor to take care of the nearly 100,000 Koreans who were receiving basic livelihood protection in Japan, stating, "The economic situation in Japan is not yet adapted to the conditions following the end of the Pacific War and, accordingly, the livelihood of Japanese themselves is very hard" (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 109). According to Morris-Suzuki, the ICRC was aware that there was little humanitarianism in the hearts of the members of the Japanese government and that, instead, Japan wished to rid itself of the Koreans. Even so, the presence of the Ōmura detainees more or less forced the ICRC to act as intermediary for the repatriation project (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 119). Morris-Suzuki is clearly of the opinion that multiple agencies and actors were involved, but she also states:

The first push for a mass repatriation of tens of thousands of *Zainichi* Koreans clearly came from Japan—from the Japanese government and Red Cross, working in close collaboration. Their motives were economic and security concerns, enhanced by a large infusion of prejudice. They hoped to rid the country of those they saw as subversive and a welfare

burden. But as time went on, another concern became increasingly important. In an era when Japanese politics were deeply polarized between right and left, repatriation brought both sides together. This issue was a vote winner, popular with media and the public alike. It helped sustain the popularity of the Kishi regime when other foreign policy issues—above all the deeply controversial renewal of the Security Treaty with the United States—were placing it under growing pressure. (Morris-Suzuki 2007a: 199)

## Reactions

While commending the work of Morris-Suzuki, Park Jung Jin refocuses our perspective on North Korea, particularly on North Korea's efforts to woo Japan in its post-Korean War diplomatic offensive. In his massive and comprehensive study of Japan-DPRK relations during the period from 1945 through 1965, Park, similarly to Morris-Suzuki, raises a specific question regarding the peak years of repatriation zeal from 1958 to 1961: "What was the reason why close to 100,000 Koreans desired to be repatriated in these years and where did this desire stem from; why did all of them want to go to North Korea (as opposed to South Korea), and how was this made possible?" (Park 2012: 328). Regarding this question, Morris-Suzuki places substantial weight on the eagerness and clearness of initiative taken by the Japanese government and the JRC. Park agrees with this, focusing on the ICRC document in which Inoue Masutarō emphatically writes (as we saw above) that the only way to solve the livelihood problems of Koreans in Japan is to send them to their fatherland, meaning North Korea in this case (Park 2012: 332). However, Park questions Morris-Suzuki's emphasis on Japan's initiative by problematizing one document: the statement made by Foreign Minister Shigemitsu on



December 16, 1955, in which he refers to Japan's wishes to help as best as it could to facilitate the repatriation of Koreans to North Korea, if they so desired. While Morris-Suzuki characterized this as evidence of a new direction in Japan's policy toward Koreans (Morris-Suzuki 2006), Park rejects this interpretation to instead focus on North Korea.

Based on his own archival research utilizing newly discovered Soviet sources among others, Park proposes that it was North Korea that truly desired the mass repatriation of Koreans from Japan. In doing so, Park denies the existing assumption that this was mostly due to North Korea needing labor power in order to proceed with its post-Korean War reconstruction, and thinks this formed only part of North Korea's calculations (Park 2005: 191-193). A more important point, according to Park, was the overall strategic direction being taken by North Korean diplomacy, specifically that of *jinmin gaikō* or *inmin wegyo* (people's diplomacy). As regular communication and exchange routes were opened up between non-government sectors of Japan and North Korea, the repatriation of a massive number of Koreans on the basis of humanitarianism emerged as an ideal project (Park 2005: 196; Park 2020). Park substantiates his point by referring to a number of important moves that North Korea made at that time. In 1956, Kim Il Sung issued DPRK Cabinet Order No. 53 On Stabilizing the Living of the Korean Citizens Returning from Japan. Later, in October 1958, North Korea's Vice Premier Kim Il issued a statement guaranteeing the cost of providing repatriation boats as well as other transportation costs pertaining to the repatriating Koreans (Park 2012: 237). Thus, it seems North Korea was no longer working on the basis of its initial estimate of 700 repatriates; it was now anticipating repatriation on a much larger scale.

Where Park approaches the problem of the repatriation from the perspective of diplomatic

history, Kikuchi Yoshiaki provides yet another perspective by presenting this topic as an issue of immigration. Unlike Park, Kikuchi displays a more visceral objection to Morris-Suzuki's assertions. According to him:

... "The Japan Conspiracy Theory" [i.e., the view that Japan had intentionally banished poor Koreans from Japan to North Korea] has an empirical challenge, because it stands upon an anachronistic position viewing the repatriation from today's perspective, whereby we are aware that those who repatriated faced an inhumane (*hijindōtekina*) situation and the blame gets put on Japan. Furthermore, this view disregards the situation in Japan at the time of the commencement of the repatriation [the 1950s/60s] and adopts today's [negative] image of North Korea in a facile manner, generating equations that North Korean repatriation = evil [and] efforts to materialize repatriation = conspiracy (*sakuryaku*). I must say that [Morris-Suzuki's] interpretation is ahistorical, arbitrary, and unidimensional. (Kikuchi 2020: 694; my translation)

Kikuchi, similarly to Park, focuses on North Korea's role and intention, but his angle is different from Park, whose main concern is North Korea's diplomatic strategy. The reader's attention is drawn to "a sudden expansion in the scale of the repatriation movement" that occurred on August 11, 1958, following a Chongryun meeting at the sub-branch level in the Kawasaki area. This meeting adopted a resolution to promote repatriation to North Korea, leading Kikuchi to interrogate the motives and operational methods of Chongryun, led at the time by its chairman, Han Doeksu, whose home turf was Kawasaki (Kikuchi 2020: 315ff.). According to him, prior to this date, Chongryun had other priorities,

making only meager propaganda efforts in their representation of North Korea. However, starting from August 1958, the organization's propaganda began to fill up with headlines promoting a "paradise on earth." This development was accompanied by an all-out mobilization of local workers, who waged a campaign to encourage potential repatriates. Kikuchi concretely connects this shift to directives sent from North Korea to Chongryun (Kikuchi 2020: 316).

On September 8, 1958, during his speech at a mass rally celebrating the tenth anniversary of the founding of the DPRK, Kim Il Sung expressed enthusiastic support for the repatriation of Koreans from Japan, and guaranteed that all conditions would be met in order for repatriating Koreans to start new lives in the fatherland (Kikuchi 2020: 316). On September 15, 1958, Foreign Minister Nam Il issued another communiqué expressing concern about the living conditions of Koreans in Japan, young Korean men and women's desires to receive a higher education, and the substandard conditions faced by the Ōmura detainees. He demanded that the desire of Koreans in Japan to be repatriated to the fatherland (North Korea) be swiftly realized (Kikuchi 2020: 317). Also, as mentioned above, in October 1958, North Korean Vice Premier Kim Il guaranteed that all of the transportation expenses connected with the repatriation would be shouldered by North Korea. Kikuchi regards these and the other efforts by North Korea to reach out to Chongryun and Koreans in Japan, both overtly and covertly, as part of a North Korean strategy to demonstrate its superior social system. Against the backdrop of Cold War propaganda war vis-à-vis South Korea, Kikuchi surmises that this was an effective strategy (Kikuchi 2020: 490-492). Kikuchi further stresses North Korea's plan to build a strategic base for dealing with South Korea, claiming that Chongryun provided an ideal vehicle for achieving this goal (Kikuchi 492-493). Indeed, the repatriation boat not only

shipped Koreans from Japan to North Korea, but also brought North Korean publications, school textbooks, and above all, cadres to Japan, facilitating the transmission of directives from the Workers' Party of Korea to Chongryun in a manner undetected by the Japanese authorities, further augmenting the effects of indoctrination within Korean communities affiliated with Chongryun.

### **The True Intention of the Government?**

Even though Morris-Suzuki, Park, and Kikuchi disagree in their assessments of how each entity viewed the repatriation in terms of its diplomatic, immigration, and racial strategies, it is clear that the governments of North Korea and Japan, the Red Cross organizations of North Korea and Japan, the ICRC, and Chongryun, along with Japanese media outlets, regardless of their intentions (if any), were all involved in a concerted effort to transport a large number of Koreans from Japan to North Korea with no possibility of them ever returning to Japan. Not only did they have no chance of returning—they also had virtually no means of communicating with the outside world right up until the end of the twentieth century. Postal items sent from North Korea to nearby Japan typically took months to arrive after being routed through Eastern Europe. Families were thus separated by the Iron Curtain, and individuals cut off from their birthplaces in Japan and South Korea.

In my view, what the agencies' *shini* or true intentions were, a question which Kikuchi and Park ask repeatedly, is not so important. Moreover, it would be impossible to establish causality amongst the behaviors of the agencies and governments involved. Japan may have taken the initiative, but that did not trigger or cause North Korea's reaction, since North Korea was also strategizing. Chongryun leadership, too, saw in the repatriation project an opportunity to elevate its profile and

authority and strengthen its grip over the Korean population in Japan. The ICRC, for its part, was aware that Japan's desire to rid itself of Koreans had nothing to do with humanitarianism, yet nevertheless went along with playing the role of intermediary. What is particularly interesting is the way in which both Japan's leftist and rightist forces welcomed this development, the former seeing it as a just outcome for the formerly colonized people to return to their homeland, and the latter seizing the opportunity to rid Japan of members of an unwanted and inferior foreign race. No one, not leftist intellectuals nor the Korean leaders, raised the question of why Japan was not offering to better protect and improve the livelihoods of Koreans in Japan, the destruction of which was a direct result of Japan's past colonial rule.

Ultimately, there emerged a structure whereby the concerns, calculations, and strategies of the various governments and agencies involved, no matter how mutually contradictory they may have been, were orthogonally woven into a singular outcome that involved the shipping of tens of thousands of Koreans and their Japanese spouses to North Korea. In other words, tens of thousands were banished to a territory where they were confined upon arrival. Furthermore, the information that was given to the repatriates was neither thorough nor truthful. There was no land of abundance and no guaranteed livelihood. On the contrary, Korean repatriates faced even worse constraints, both in material and other senses, in North Korea. Overall, there was nothing humanitarian about the repatriation. The irony here is that North Korea, as far as its capacity to participate in negotiations through the Red Cross as well as through government measures, declarations, and communiqués was concerned, was a robust partner to Japan throughout the process of making the repatriation happen.

## Repatriated or Trafficked?

Even though the governments and agencies involved in the 1959 repatriation project may have had their own intentions, when the repatriation was realized, Koreans in Japan participated in the project as eager stakeholders. Most of the Koreans who signed up for repatriation did so because of the severe poverty that they faced in Japan. They hoped that they would be able to secure a basic living in North Korea, with roofs over their heads, food on the table, medical bills paid, and children sent to high schools and possibly on to higher education. Others wanted to live in North Korea in order to pursue specialized courses of study, such as medicine, eventually contributing to the nation-building of their own motherland. Qualified scientists, specialists, and well-known performing artists, including opera singer Kim Yonggil and painter Cho Ryanggyu, were repatriated, in hopes that they could produce art for their own people, helping their own nation advance in the fields of science and technology as well as fine and performing arts. For them, North Korea was unmistakably their motherland: a place of hope where they could reclaim their authentic identity as Koreans.

The discrepancy between what the Japanese media and Chongryun had reported and what the repatriates saw as the boat approached Cheongjin pier, however, was staggering. The Koreans aboard the repatriation boat had imagined a land of material abundance. Even though there had been a few negative, cautionary tales concerning the material situation in North Korea, Chongryun's powerful campaign had projected visions of affluence and material security that awaited them in North Korea. Thus, when they saw the half-clad children with bare feet in the middle of winter, the emaciated faces of adults in shabby clothing, and the gray and sparsely constructed harbor town with hardly any buildings taller than one story, their jaws dropped. Some even

tried remain on the boat, with commotions erupting here and there (Ishimaru 2002: 96-98).

The officials on the ground in North Korea, in their turn, were shocked to see how well the Koreans from Japan were dressed and how well-nourished they appeared compared to the North Koreans. They were also bewildered, as they had understood that the Koreans who were repatriating from Japan were poor and had been exploited in the capitalist land. According to O Giwan, who was in charge of accepting the repatriating Koreans in Cheongjin (and later defected to South Korea), shock was felt in both directions (Abe 2002: 37). Indeed, it was a challenge for the local communities and organizational units in North Korea to provide the repatriating Koreans with basic necessities. O recalled that, while at the reception facility in Cheongjin, even though they were given white rice three times a day—accompanied by more side dishes than the regular rations for North Korean citizens, in addition to condiments that utilized sugar, an extremely rare ingredient in North Korea at the time—the Koreans from Japan complained bitterly about the food. Their behavior was seen as ungrateful by the North Koreans, who themselves were struggling to make a living following the devastation of the Korean War. The Koreans repatriated from Japan were in for a surprise, because the Cheongjin facility had a separate budget that other local communities did not have (Abe 2002: 38).

The reality was that the majority of these Koreans were not really returning to their ancestral land, since North Korea was not their place of origin, save for a handful who originated from the northern Korea during the colonial period. This place was also far poorer, and life was vastly more materially constrained than what they had experienced in Japan. Moreover, save for the first-generation Koreans, most returnees did not understand Korean. As it turned out, there was no socialist

paradise waiting for them (Pak, 1994; Okonogi 2004; Sakanaka, Han, & Kikuchi 2009; Yang 2013; Kojima 2017).

Once in North Korea, the “population” of Koreans in Japan once more became individual bodies as they were subjected to the new regime. This does not mean that they were enslaved, oppressed, and exterminated, or any other radical verbiage might have; instead, life came with complex dimensions—as indeed it would anywhere else. The repatriates had to be disciplined and re-made into North Korean citizens, though many were unable to adapt well to North Korean norms and were thus unable to join the workforce in an effective manner. Yet, many were also able to pursue their career goals and raised family. Their origin or *seongbun* led to their classification as part of a suspicious social stratum, precluding them from becoming, for example, party members or diplomats. Yet, many found the way to find an alternatives such as becoming a university professor or engineer. As is known, many of them were arrested for known or unknown causes, later perishing in the nation’s concentration camps (e.g., Kang 2005). Yet, it is also true that many repatriates have gone on to live their lives fully, contributing to the North Korean society as citizens. In other words, it would not be possible to use a shorthand and say that they were all perished or they suffered or say that they all lived happily in the bosom of the fatherland. Life’s contingencies are far more complex, as they are in any other societies.

The question remains: why, even after it became apparent that life in North Korea was extremely challenging, did Koreans keep moving there? The answer is inevitably complex. Firstly, there was a fear of having to live in Japan in poverty, suffering from chronic unemployment and ethnic discrimination, and with no hope of getting ahead one way or another. In the early years of the repatriation campaign, Chongryun aggressively focused on



poor Koreans, visiting them daily, showing them shiny picture books on North Korea, encouraging them to move their families to North Korea. While some Chongryun officers were genuinely sympathetic to the circumstances of their poor fellow Koreans, many just wanted to meet their organizational recruitment quota (Han 2005: 58-64). Then, there was the serious concern felt by many parents regarding their children's future. Parents of gifted children in particular were encouraged to seriously explore the possibility of sending their children to North Korea, regardless of their wealth. In fact, wealthy parents were more attracted to this route, since they would be able to continue materially supporting their children after the latter had moved to North Korea. No small number took this route, since in Japan, their children would face enormous obstacles if they wanted to become lawyers or medical doctors. They were worried that even if their children were smart, or indeed, *because* their children were smart, the Japanese system would fail them unfairly on the basis of their ethnicity or their lack of possession of Japanese nationality. There was also a third, much smaller group of Koreans who had committed felony offences, including violations of immigration law, notably by illegally entering Japan from South Korea. They often desired to be relocated to North Korea rather than being punished by the Japanese criminal justice system, or deported back to South Korea. These were the main reasons why Koreans continued to board the repatriation boats.

As time went by, the nature of the repatriation itself shifted. By the 1970s, the Chongryun leadership routinely used repatriation as a way to eliminate rivals and dissidents. Sometimes, even the problematic offspring of Chongryun officials themselves (those who had become delinquent or those born with disabilities, for example) were sent to North Korea (data from informants). Chongryun also utilized the repatriation route to ship prestations to Kim Il

Sung and the North Korean establishment. For example, in 1972, upon the sixtieth birthday of Kim Il Sung, Han Deoksu decided to send, among many other valuable goods, such as late-model Mercedes Benz vehicles and large color TV sets, "human gifts." He selected 200 bright students from the Chongryun-operated Korea University and sent them to North Korea on a repatriation boat. They never returned to Japan again (Hong and Kim 2004; Yang 2013: 48-54). As mentioned above, the regular visits of North Korean repatriation boats carrying party cadres offered opportunities for the Chongryun leadership to receive party directives and in-person guidance from North Korea away from Japanese surveillance, referred to as *seonsang jido* or on-board guidance (Kim 2004). This was a particularly effective way to maintain communication between North Korea and Chongryun until the 1980s, when the Chongryun Koreans became eligible for permanent residence in Japan, thereby enabling them to travel to North Korea and return to Japan.

If we were to focus solely on the early years of the repatriation, and especially the way in which it was first introduced to Koreans in Japan, one image lingers. If, as shown in the works of Morris-Suzuki, Park, and Kikuchi, the government agencies, international NGOs, and community organizations were engaged in promoting, facilitating, and encouraging the mass repatriation while knowingly generating (or at least not denying) false information about North Korea's living standards to instead depict it as a paradise on earth, thereby deceiving a total of 93,340 individuals to forever leave Japan to repatriate to North Korea, where these individuals were categorically confined, then this would be considered by today's language human trafficking. I do not mean to assert necessarily that this was an international crime. Rather, my contention is that the way in which the repatriated Koreans were removed from Japan and moved to North Korea strongly resembles

and conforms to the social scientific understanding of human trafficking.

The Palermo protocols, which by no means provide a perfect tool to comprehensively understand human trafficking, nevertheless define trafficking in persons as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring [*sic*] or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (Stickle, Hickman, and White 2020: 6)

Much of the simplistic approach to human trafficking has been critically evaluated and we are now in a better position to be able to think about human trafficking as a comprehensive phenomenon. While severe forms of trafficking in persons may include sexual slavery, debt bondage, involuntary servitude, and other, directly coercive examples involving the transportation of persons, non-severe forms typically include deception rather than coercion. In such instances, “dreams” (like the American dream) and “hopes” (falsified or baseless) are instilled in the minds of others by overeager recruiters whose rewards may not always be monetary, but immaterial or ideological, especially when political capital is at stake (Weitzer 2014). In these less obvious and less directly coercive cases, traffickers and the trafficked often do not fit into rigid definitions casting the former as criminal figure and the latter as victim, exploitation itself becoming difficult to clearly define, since extra-economic factors, such as favor or familiarity, may interfere (Keo, T. Bouhour, Broadhurst,

and B. Bouhours 2014). While human trafficking is not synonymous with migrant smuggling, trafficking does not require physical bondage or violent kidnapping.

Seen in this way, it is not so much of a stretch to conceptualize the 1959 repatriation as human trafficking, occurring in broad daylight, with government agencies and reputable NGOs working as the traffickers. I am not necessarily arguing for the 1959 repatriation to be redefined as human trafficking, but I would suggest the possibility of thinking about it as such. This is of no small consequence, considering that at least some sections of repatriates were “sent” to North Korea by Chongryun’s organizational decisions against their will (see above on youth delegation; see Yang 2013).

### **Lives That Matter**

Setting the historical definition of repatriation aside, when one turns one’s gaze to the lives of individuals and families that were repatriated to North Korea from Japan, one encounters an array of diverse and sometimes contradictory stories told about the repatriates by their families and friends remaining in Japan. In this final section of the article, I introduce a few of such stories in order to remind us that these were living human beings whose lives took a particular course once they landed in North Korea. I do not mean characterize repatriation as wholly good or bad for any Korean repatriate. By introducing these stories, I show that the repatriation was ultimately a complex undertaking, the process and consequences of which touched thousands of lives across Japan Strait. Due to the sensitive nature of the cases, I present only a summarized account of each.

### ***The Y Family***

The Ys had owned and operated a rather stable retail business in central Japan. Despite their location, which was isolated from the sites where the politics of those Koreans in Japan played out, the family supported North Korea as opposed to South Korea. Their children were educated in the local Japanese public schools as they lacked access to Chongryun's Korean schools. Once the children left for (Japanese) college, Mr and Mrs Y decided to sell the property and relocate to a smaller place. When they conducted the property survey, it turned out that their store had been built upon the neighbor's land, unbeknownst to them. They were going to be fined in retrospect and the estimated amount was beyond their means. The Ys, rather than go through legal and financial trouble, decided to be repatriated to North Korea.

### ***Ms. A's Brother***

Ms. A is from a wealthy family. Her parents were enthusiastic supporters of North Korea and regularly gifted large amounts of money to Chongryun, especially its schools. Her older brother was top of his class and their proud parents decided to entrust his future to North Korea's higher education. He was repatriated and enrolled in the foreign language university. After his graduation, due to his background being "impure," because of his repatriation from Japan, his dream of becoming a foreign service worker could not be realized. Instead, he became a key translator at a centrally-positioned publishing house. Many decades later, he was even allowed to visit Japan for a family reunion, but he was not interested in returning to Japan even if it were possible. Instead, he happily took a flight to Beijing, from where he took a North Korean plane back to Pyongyang.

### ***My Old Classmate K***

My classmate K was repatriated when I was a six-grade student in Chongryun's elementary school. The whole class went to the nearby railway station to chant "long live" and hand him small gifts, "celebrating" his departure. His father, a scientist, had represented North Korea in an international conference and had already left Japan on a one-way ticket, since the Japanese government did not permit re-entry—this became a possibility only a few decades after K's repatriation. Thus, after the conference, K's father was relocated to North Korea. K, his brother, and his mother joined his father in Pyongyang. Some months later, the class received a letter from K, who had become a middle school student in Pyongyang. The class listened to the letter read by the homeroom teacher: K's school, according to the letter, had brand-new gym and orchestra, an image unthinkable from our pre-fab Chongryun classrooms. A few years later, we heard the rumor that his father was purged and committed suicide. No one has heard from or about K or his family to this day.

### ***Mr. E***

Mr. E was a refugee, having illegally entered Japan fleeing the persecution of Jeju Island. After the April 3 Uprising of 1948 and its aftermath, which outlasted the Korean War, Koreans from Jeju continued to reach Japan through informal routes. E was one of them. Once repatriation to North Korea became possible in 1959, E voluntarily reported to the police office and requested that he be sent to North Korea. Surprisingly, the local police officer was sympathetic and in fact helped E travel to Niigata, the port from where the repatriation boat would disembark. Upon arrival, E was assigned to a factory in Wonsan. After some years of work, he applied to a university and was accepted. Having qualified as an engineer, he returned to his original factory, and remained working there his entire

life until his death in the early 2000s. He wrote to his relatives in Japan over 80 letters in total, none of which showed even a glimpse of complaint. He died a man who fulfilled his dream of dedicating himself to his motherland.

The families and friends of the repatriated are on the whole not forthcoming when it comes to their repatriated members and friends in North Korea. In part, this reflects our generally heightened sensitivity toward surveillance and information leakage in the age of smartphones, but their reticence may also reflect their reluctance to say anything that might implicate their relatives and friends, even inadvertently. Perhaps the family members remaining in Japan now have a business that necessitates them to travel frequently to South Korea, or perhaps the friend in Japan may withhold some information that could implicate other people in Chongryun's orbit, even though many years have passed. It is often heard (without material substantiation) inside Chongryun circles that a so-and-so who had repatriated became untraceable not necessarily because he was sent to reeducation camps, but more likely because he was working for the government as an agent. The circumstances of repatriation can also be quite diverse. Some families had their older children repatriated following the remarriage of the father (with the arrival of new mother), leaving only the younger ones in the care of the step-mother, in order to alleviate her burden, while others may have had their children repatriated since they became delinquents and were going to get into legal trouble in Japan. Some repatriated following bankruptcy in Japan. Still others repatriated, just like Kang Chol-hwan's grandparents, after donating the entirety of their possessions to Chongryun, only to end up in North Korea's concentration camps (Kang 2005). Some lived and died miserably there; others lived and died happily with pride. Some continue to live happily in North Korea, having achieved their personal goals of becoming an artist or medical doctor while others struggle

to find ways to get out.

In light of such diverse, unpredictable, and micro-differentiated circumstances as well as consequences of repatriation, the heated discussion of who and what caused losses immediacy. The key questions of many researchers—*shini* or the true intentions of the governments involved—may occupy one level of reality, but the lives of repatriated Koreans and Koreans remaining in Japan go on, regardless of what the governments truly intended. Evidently, human rights were and are violated in North Korea, including those of the repatriated Koreans, just like how human rights were and are violated in Japan, including those of Koreans living there. This does not cancel out any government's crime against their citizenry, but trying to measure one government's wrongdoing against another, ranking them by the severity of their cruelty, or asking whether Japan was worse than North Korea or vice versa, renders itself an unproductive exercise lacking meaningful inquiry.

### Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, some researchers in Japan, reacting to Morris-Suzuki's research, have insisted that it was not the Japanese government's intention or motive to banish poor Koreans from Japan (e.g., Kikuchi 2020; Kurokawa 2009). I am not concerned with the government's motives or intentions, as they are likely more numerous and more complex than has been outlined to date. Rather, structurally speaking, the repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea, starting in 1959, was a phenomenon whereby the Japanese state, holding biopower, acted directly upon its desire to manage and regulate Koreans in Japan, focusing on the poor elements of this stateless population. This biopolitical measure was at once also predicated upon the general population of Japan and its long-term



wellbeing, as can be seen in the Japanese government's concerns over the long-term revenue implications caused by the ongoing payment of subsidies to poverty-stricken Koreans in Japan.

Was this a racist project of ethnic cleansing? As has been said earlier in the paper, Foucault does not place sovereign power and biopower in chronological sequence. Rather, they permeate each other even though they may not exist on the same level, and they can function simultaneously. Biopower utilizes new mechanisms that intervene with life on the level of generality, including statistical estimates and forecasts (see Foucault 2003; Genel 2006). It is here that a dangerous undercurrent of the mechanism of the modern state manifests—in racism. According to Foucault: “The juxtaposition of—or the way biopower functions through—the old sovereign power of life and death implies the workings, the introduction and activation of, racism” (Foucault 2003: 258). Racism is a way of “establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (Foucault 2003: 255). Such a mechanism manifests in colonialism, war, military occupation, immigration policies, all the way down to more mundane and seemingly innocuous policies such as mortgage lending, zoning, or college recruitment, for example. But, in hostile conflict, the killing of the other (the race other than one's own) becomes a biological necessity—the more you kill the other, the more likely you will survive and thrive. This is the logic of war: not only one's survival, but also one's prosperity in posterity depend on killing the other. If not in this extreme form of zero-sum game, the logic behind shipping tens of thousands of Koreans out of Japan overlap with the concern of Japan's own survival—in the words of the JRC representatives, due to the WWII devastation, Japan being materially ill-equipped to take care of poor Koreans was mentioned repeatedly. It should be noted that the Japanese government

waged an emigration campaign targeting poor Japanese, using enticing references such as “tropical paradise” and “the unlimited provision of farming land,” which resulted in the Japanese relocation to Dominican Republic, Brazil, Bolivia, and other destinations during the 1950s. As such, I hesitate to simply label the 1959 Korean repatriation as racist. I believe the picture is more complicated, although the clear involvement of deception and selected targeting of poor sections of the population strongly allude to the possibility of human trafficking by the hands of the government, itself part of the biopolitical governmentality. Even though the Japanese emigrants were “free” to return to Japan, their poverty and the oppressive regimes of their destination countries prohibited them doing so, not unlike those Koreans who were repatriated to North Korea.

It is useful to refer here to what Giorgio Agamben proposes as a compliment or corrective to Foucault's biopower. Agamben is interested in times of national crisis and the way such crises reveal those humans that are not counted in the main national population, or what he calls *homo sacer* (Agamben 1995). The existence of *homo sacer*, or killable life, the life that is at once sacred yet accursed and cannot be sacrificed but can only be killed, is closely connected to the nature of modern democracy. According to Katina Genel's summary, Agamben's view is that “The specificity of modern democracy, differentiated from the democracy of antiquity, is the fact that it approaches its opposite, totalitarianism” (Genel 2006: 53). Agamben's focus is thus on the aporia of the modern, or more precisely on *national* democracy. This manifests most vividly in times of crisis through the figure of the refugee, who has no nationality or citizenship in the events which we so frequently witness whereby non-nationals are excluded from assistance, rescue, and protection, even in the most dire natural disaster or human-made crisis (Agamben 1999).

As Agamben envisioned, biopower in postwar Japan worked as a *national* power; it is even more uncanny to realize that as soon as Japan became a “democracy” in the mold of the postwar US Occupation and the Constitution it granted, “refugees” were born from within Japan in the form of the (unwanted) Koreans who were poor and/or criminal. Unlike colonial projects, which bore the mission of converting Koreans into the Emperor’s children, the 1959 repatriation of Koreans from Japan to North Korea was a rational management strategy of the Japanese government in its overall population planning. However, it is unmistakable that it also bore the deep-seated ideological subtext of banishing unwanted Koreans. It is striking to see that the Japanese authorities did not create a comprehensive list of persons who were repatriated. Once the boat left Niigata pier, anyone aboard was no longer the concern of the Japanese immigration authorities, having gone outside of its national biopolitical sphere. There were many dubious cases where unaccompanied minors were repatriated, for example. No alarm was raised and the Japanese authorities were happy to rid their nation of this element of the population, an element that was an economic burden, of uncertain political affiliation, a security threat, and a national irregularity, as seen from the perspective of postwar Japan’s nation re-building. As such, we can appreciate how sovereign power and biopower overlapped and, in all likelihood, continue to do so today.

The image and visibility of North Korea and its transformation within Japan’s media and public perception need to be understood, along with Japan’s postwar nation re-building and its biopolitical concerns, in order to grasp how North Korea has gone from a partner in the repatriation project that allowed Japan to rid itself of poor Koreans, to an enemy nation which kidnapped Japanese citizens from their own shores. In substance, these stand on historical continuum. In the meantime, lives of Koreans in Japan and those of Koreans who

were repatriated to North Korea continue, bearing witness to the ebb and flow of national and international relations of power that comes with unexpected or unpredictable consequences and impacts on human lives.

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