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Patriotic Revolutionaries and Imperial Sympathizers: Identity and Selfhood of Korean-Japanese Migrants from Japan to North Korea

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Abstract

Although the outward migration of North Korean refugees has received increasing attention in scholarly circles, little research has been done on migration to North Korea. Drawing on ethnographic and archival research, this article considers the changing political identification of migrants from Japan to North Korea, from 1959 to the 1980s, and their relationship to both the ethnic homeland and the former colonizer. The author suggests that the North Korean state's effort to contain the imagined threat posed by arrivals from Japan was undermined by transnational exchange between divided families. Specifically, women on both sides of the Sea of Japan (East Sea) engaged in kin work that alerted ethnic Korean immigrants to their ambiguous status as both fraternal comrade and outsider in North Korea. This article illustrates how mobility provided opportunities for new identities to emerge, as individuals who considered themselves Korean compatriots developed identifications that translocally connected them to kin and communities in Japan.

Keywords: identity, migration, selfhood, transnational kinship, North Korea, Japan, Zainichi Koreans

We were told that Kim Il-sung cares deeply about Koreans in Japan. That he gives our schools money and welcomes patriots who desire to return to the homeland. I was told that *Ch'ongryŏn*¹ was impressed with my hard work and was offering me the chance to go to college for free in North Korea. Our family was so poor, my father worked in a factory and my mother was a housewife, so it sounded like a great opportunity. I started studying harder. I didn't want to miss this chance.

- Tanaka Sazuka, arrived in Japan from North Korea in 2003²

There are so many rules [in North Korea] and I could never adjust. Every week we had self-criticism sessions and struggle sessions.³ I always found it so stressful. [After finishing high school] I went to film school, but we spent an unbelievable amount of time just reading about the Kims. When we weren't doing that, we had to practice our dance moves for the Mass Games.⁴ This was all instead of actually learning about plays and movies. These government-enforced group meetings were meant to promote unity, "one mind," but I couldn't see the point in it. I hated being told what to do and never felt like I

fitted in North Korea. It happened gradually, but one day I decided that I'd had enough and I wanted to leave.

- Ko Hye-rim, arrived in Japan from North Korea in the early 2000s

Although the outward migration of North Korean refugees into China, the Republic of Korea (hereafter, South Korea), and Japan has received increasing attention in scholarly circles (Lankov 2006; Bell 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2016; Jung 2013; Kim 2013; Song 2013; Koo 2016; Song and Bell 2018), very little research has been performed on emigration to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter, DPRK or North Korea), the motivations for moving to one of the most closed societies in the world, and what happens to the people who move there. In the postcolonial, Cold War era, competing ideological blocs used the movement of individuals from one side to the other for propaganda purposes. Beyond strengthening claims of state superiority and political legitimacy, the migration of displaced persons that resulted from the redrawing of national boundaries also had a profound effect on how those who moved identified themselves. The 1945 division of the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel had an impact on already complex ideological and kinship alliances, rupturing communities and shaping new opportunities for belonging for those who moved and the people they left behind.

In this article, I look at the ways in which the mass movement of Zainichi Koreans⁵—former subjects of the Japanese Empire—from Japan to North Korea between 1959 and the early 1980s influenced migrants' political identities and their relationship to the ethnic homeland as well as Korean communities in Japan. I suggest that the North Korean state's effort to contain the imagined threat to the national body posed by new arrivals from Japan was undermined by transnational exchange between divided families.⁶ Women on both sides of the Sea of Japan carried out “kin work” (di Leonardo 1987, 442) that acted as a reminder to repatriates of their ambiguous status in North Korea—as both fraternal comrade and untrustworthy representative of Japan.

This article addresses the reshaping of migrant identities through *micropolitical* and *macropolitical* forces. The micropolitics primarily comprise intra-ethnic relationships, the development of transnational migrant networks, and domestic family life. The macropolitics consist of developing interstate relations and postcolonial ideologies in the Cold War era. The feelings of rejection and alienation that emerged for repatriates in response to their troubled relationship with representatives of the North Korean state and citizenry provoked a transformation in repatriated Koreans' sense of self and belonging. The experiences of

repatriates to North Korea serve to illustrate that people who experienced the bifurcating politics of the Cold War firsthand often internalized these ruptures in complex, contradictory ways that shaped their understandings of themselves and their communities.

In the sections that follow, I challenge concepts of identity and belonging in relation to broader debates about selfhood and migration. I explain the motivations of individuals who migrated to North Korea and consider how the idea of North Korea as home changed over time. My research illustrates that the responses of repatriated families to North Korean state imperatives and social exclusion provoked repatriates to carve out transnational spaces that reconnected them to people and places they had left behind. Mobility provided opportunities for the emergence of new understandings of belonging, as individuals who considered themselves Korean compatriots developed “translocal” identifications (Conradson and McKay 2007, 168) that connected them not to the nation of Japan, but to communities within Japan where they had strong emotional and familial attachments. My findings underline the significance of kin work and “multi-sensorial engagements” for nurturing transnational relationships with the sending country (Svašek 2010, 868). I argue that these factors contributed to the emergence of what Edward Said described as a “plurality of vision” (2001, 186), in which the new arrivals from Japan identified with aspects of both the old and the new, the sending country and the host country, concurrently.

The North Korean state attempted, with varying success, to discipline repatriates from Japan using political education and the threat of violence. Repatriates responded ambivalently to the ethnic-nationalist ideology promoted by the North Korean state, experiencing a heightened sense of difference to indigenous North Koreans. Subsequently, many were motivated to reexamine their understanding of home, and to reimagine their relationship with aspects of Japan in a more positive light. In considering how repatriates responded to the technologies of state power and the stigma of association with Japan, my analysis illustrates that life in North Korea unraveled repatriates’ conceptions of a postcolonial Korean identity that rested on the individual’s ethnic and political identification with revolutionary North Korea.

How did the self-identification of individuals who migrated from Japan to North Korea shift in response to the symbolic and actual violence of the state, and subsequent feelings of social alienation? The opening quotations in this article illustrate two prominent tropes that emerged in my conversations with interviewees who had repatriated to North Korea: hope that life in North Korea would offer Korean compatriots upward social and

economic mobility denied them in Japan, and disappointment when it became clear that it would offer neither improved opportunities in education and employment, nor a homeland in which to develop a sense of belonging. I examine what happened to migrant identity at the intersection of hope and disappointment. Specifically, I reveal how the reality of living in North Korea as a politically low-status migrant provoked a renegotiation of repatriates' sense of self and their relationship to both the communities from which they departed and those in which they were received. Examining the discourses of returnees from North Korea, this article focuses on an ambivalent sense of identification, and on the process of remaking that identity in public and in private. For example, many individuals I interviewed recalled a pre-repatriation fervor. They recalled the desire to be part of an independent state built by and for Koreans—ethno-nationalist, revolutionary, and anti-imperial in character. Emotions of longing and belonging shifted in North Korea, as tensions between the native population and the newcomers became more salient.

Drawing on the life narratives of my key interlocutors,⁷ this article illustrates how the self-identification of immigrants from Japan shifted through living in North Korea; how these individuals identified before the repatriation movement, and why this identification later changed; how concepts such as home, the self, and belonging became destabilized; and the role of the North Korean state in this process. The feelings expressed by Hye-rim, quoted in the opening of this article, exemplify the sense of displacement and feelings of distrust and anxiety that often emerged between local North Koreans and immigrants from Japan. Contradictory emotions, from ethnic pride and loyalty to the state to feeling like a foreigner in the ethnic homeland, has motivated some repatriates to escape North Korea and return to Japan starting in the early 2000s.

Methodology

This article is part of a broader, ongoing project that I began in 2010 in Seoul, South Korea, on the migration of North Koreans throughout Asia and Europe. I use qualitative methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to investigate the experiences of migration and resettlement for North Koreans in South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The data for this article came from research I carried out in Japan from 2014 to 2015. In order to illustrate the complex motivations behind the mass migration to North Korea, life in North Korea for repatriates, and the transformation in ethnic

identification and political selfhood that took place, I draw on interlocutor responses from interviews and conversations with thirty returnees from North Korea in Osaka and Tokyo.

During my research in Japan, I spent eight months living in Koreatown in Tsuruhashi, Osaka, home to a large ethnic Korean population. It is also a space in which many returnees from North Korea live and work immediately following their arrival in Japan. I interacted with returnees from North Korea on a daily basis, through studying at a language school in which most returnees study Japanese after their arrival, volunteering at a nongovernmental organization (NGO) involved with returnees, attending social events held by *Mindan* (Korean Residents Union in Japan)⁸ and *Ch'ongryŏn*, and eating and drinking with returnees on a social basis. Interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted in Korean, though several of my interlocutors mixed Korean and Japanese. The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that they were open in format and the interviewee was permitted to speak about his or her experiences of migration and life in North Korea with limited guidance. My participant observation and interviews contributed to my understanding of how multiple migrations, across several generations, shape the migrant's self-understanding and his or her relationship to the sending community and the host society. I coded the results of my interviews and conversations using a "superindex," in which each interaction was tagged with five or six keywords, for example, *gender roles*, *transnational exchange*, *famine and survival*, *NGO support*, and *intra-ethnic friction*. Following my fieldwork in Japan, I spent a month at the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, Switzerland, searching through official state and ICRC documents pertaining to the repatriation movement. This period of research helped to historically contextualize the voices of the individuals I worked with in Japan, and gave me an understanding of the macro-level, structural forces that led to and sustained the mass movement of Koreans, and some Japanese, to North Korea.

Migration, the Self, and Identity

From 1959 to the early 1980s, 93,340 individuals—approximately 6,500 Japanese and 87,000 Koreans—migrated from Japan to North Korea as part of a postcolonial repatriation project.⁹ The ICRC, the Japanese government, and the DPRK government organized the mass emigration of Japan's largest ethnic minority at that time.¹⁰ Since the early 2000s, some three hundred repatriates have returned to Japan, and this number continues to grow. Research into the lives of this group of forced migrants offers a window into the everyday experiences of

postcolonial, nation-state building in Northeast Asia and also presents clues as to how countries in the region might respond to crisis-driven migration in the event of a collapse of the North Korean regime.

Migration and Self-Identification

Migration shapes emotional processes¹¹ and understandings of the self for people who relocate, those who remain behind, and members of the receiving community. I take as a starting point studies concerned with the relationship of migration to emotions (Baldassar 2007, 2008; Gray 2008; Skrbiš 2008; Svašek 2008, 2010; Andits 2015), identity (Ahmed 1999; Brubaker and Cooper 2000), and the self (Whittaker 1992; Walkerdine 2006; Conradson and McKay 2007; Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Andits 2010). These studies underline the significance of inner life processes for reflecting moments of both crisis and daily experience (cf. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007) and note that the self is “a multiple, relational being-in-the-world,” embedded within its surroundings and engaging with the past, present, and future (Svašek 2010, 868). “Self” and “identity” are often used synonymously to describe an innate character that exists out of sight but is nevertheless foundational to a person’s being in the world. But the self, as a “relational being-in-the-world,” is not the same as identity. Whereas the self shares “hidden qualities with such concepts as mind, ego, soul, spirit, and psyche” (Whittaker 1992, 200), identity is commonly referred to as something multiple, in that people may have an infinite number of identities that they deploy to their advantage and that are vulnerable to structures of power. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that the prevailing understandings of identity have led to a crisis in the social sciences in which identity is used so commonly as an analytic category that it has lost all meaning. Consequently, identity can mean too much, too little, or nothing at all: “If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere” (2000, 1). Although Brubaker and Cooper concede that powerful entities, such as the state, are “identifiers” with the capacity to impose categories and classificatory schemes, they argue that the state is far from the only identifier that matters (2000, 16).

Consequently, the self is not an atemporal, bounded repository for a person’s understanding of the world, into which experiences are passively accumulated; rather, it is in an ongoing relationship with the world, continuously shaped through interactions with others, and with the material environment, memories of the past, and imagined futures. Transnational trends remake our inner processes, including our emotions, cognitive styles, memories, and

deepest sense of self (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007, 55). A person does not have to exist in one place or time for an experience to profoundly shape his or her self. For instance, my interlocutors often recalled family members they had lost during the North Korean famine. Deceased family continued to exercise a strong pull on their living kin after the survivors left North Korea, influencing attitudes toward ritual and everyday practices. For example, one interlocutor told me that during ancestral worship ceremonies in her Osaka home, she felt the presence of her father who had died several years earlier in North Korea. Such recollections were associated with a mixture of emotions, including a nostalgia for the simple life in North Korea, guilt for leaving family behind, fond memories of family gatherings and “making do” with whatever resources were available, and betrayal by a state that had failed to protect them from the effects of the 1990s economic collapse.

With these considerations, this article posits that identity is best understood as a process of ongoing social interaction in which people are agents in shaping their identification through a dialectic process with other actors and the material world around them. Shifting the focus from a bounded, static, analytic category of “identity” to an action of identification underlines the agentive, communal, and processual elements involved. The process of identification demands a temporal and spatial contextualization, shaped through individual and collective actions.

Ethnic Identification and Political Self-Understanding of Repatriated Koreans

Migration complicates the concept of home for those who move, communities affected by migration, and family members who both benefit from and struggle with the social and economic consequences of human mobility. Issues of gender and class crosscut the relationship to home(s) for those who move and those who stay put. The experience of leaving home threatens to generate a perpetual feeling of being out of place, out of time, and out of the skin. Shaping the self is an ongoing “hybrid achievement” (Conradson and McKay 2007, 167) that involves multiple influences and connects the migrant to people, localities, historical changes, and emotional states. The narratives of multiple migrants moving between Japan and North Korea span several generations and create overlapping identifications between localities in both the sending and receiving countries.

In 1951, the Allied Powers and Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty. This agreement came into effect the following year and returned control of Japan to the Japanese government. For minorities in Japan, this was a defining moment in their relationship with

the former colonial power. Previously, as part of the Japanese Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, minorities in Japan were afforded basic privileges, such as access to public services and social security. Once the Japanese government was reinstated, however, it rescinded these rights (B AG 232 105-002). Koreans, Taiwanese, Chinese, and other former colonial subjects officially became aliens in Japan¹² and were no longer able to access benefits provided by the central government. Discriminatory practices against former colonial subjects were also common, with loans available only at higher rates than for Japanese borrowers, unequal employment opportunities, and constraints on wages, education, and housing (B AG 232 105-025, 20.) Institutionally discriminated against in terms of employment and welfare, the number of “needy Koreans” grew from 74,911 in September 1952 to 138,972 in December 1955. This increase marked a rise from 13.12 to 24.06 percent of the Korean population classified by the Japanese government as “persons in need of special state economic assistance” (B AG 232 105-002, 14). The Japanese government’s denationalization policies created a push factor compelling former colonial subjects to leave Japan.

In the years leading up to the mass emigration to North Korea, members of *Ch’ongryŏn* disseminated North Korean propaganda at public events and door to door in areas of Osaka and Tokyo that were home to Koreans. According to returnees from North Korea who recalled the events leading up to the repatriation movement, *Ch’ongryŏn* printed fliers and pamphlets urging Zainichi Koreans to return to the homeland, and *Ch’ongryŏn* supporters drove around Korean areas of Osaka projecting greetings from Kim Il-sung and promising a better life across the sea. Constant messages from powerful sources fostered an imagining of North Korea as a place in which Zainichi Koreans would live free from the marginalizing practices in Japan.

Prospective repatriates arrived at Niigata port from all over Japan (figure 1). Whole families prepared for interviews with ICRC staff with suitcases stuffed full of clothes and personal belongings.¹³ Among the predominantly Korean repatriates, about sixty-five hundred were Japanese. Most Japanese who emigrated to North Korea were the wives of Korean repatriates; women and children followed the instructions of their husband or father, even if this meant uprooting their lives entirely and against their will. Yamamoto Hiroko, a Japanese woman who emigrated to North Korea in 1961, recounted her experiences in the Niigata ICRC screening center, prior to departure.¹⁴ On the day she was due to be interviewed, ICRC staff invited her whole family into the interview room and asked them, as

a group, if they wanted to leave for North Korea. “The only person who could answer, however, was my father-in-law,” she told me. “He replied, ‘Yes, we want to go.’ He was the head of the family, so we had to follow him.”



Figure 1. Koreans leaving for Japan alight from buses at Niigata port to board the passenger liner for North Korea, early 1960s. Photographer: s.n. *Source*: ICRC archives. Used with permission.



Figure 2. Emotional farewells in Niigata harbor as people aboard the passenger liner wave goodbye to family. Photographer: s.n. *Source*: ICRC archives. Used with permission.

The journey to North Korea took three days and two nights (figure 2). Once the ship docked at Ch'ŏngjin port in North Korea, the call to disembark sounded through the ship's loudspeakers, and passengers crowded the deck for their first view of North Korea. Many raised their hands in celebration, crying out, "Hurrah!" (K. *manse*). But not everyone was excited to see the new home. Standing on the deck of the passenger ship, some stared in a mixture of wonder and horror at the state-organized greeting party. Kim Hyŏn-chae recalled his parents' first impressions of the greeters: "My mother told me how distressed she was by their appearance. Their skin was black and worn...their clothes were drab and unkempt. They looked like they'd had very hard lives." Hyŏn-chae's mother's reaction to seeing the locals for the first time is consistent with that of others who recounted their arrival stories to me. Their first impressions unsettled the ethno-nationalist identity that had emerged among many Koreans in Japan. In the eyes of the new arrivals, the people gathered together at the end of the gangway, lackadaisically waving DPRK flags and holding flowers, appeared vastly different from the passionate, healthy young patriots they had seen in North Korean propaganda leaflets.

Repatriates' experiences varied according to their loyalty to the state, age, gender, and transnational relationships to family in Japan. Some of the new arrivals had been educated in *Ch'ongryŏn* schools in Japan, where they had studied DPRK revolutionary history and the Korean language, but others possessed little knowledge of either. A small number had been offered the choice between time in a Japanese jail or deportation to North Korea. As they disembarked from the ship, state officials handed out food and directed them into a large warehouse. Cadres ordered people to find a place to wait. Each new arrival's information was recorded: place of origin in Japan, occupation, age, special skills, and family composition.¹⁵ The wait at the processing center could take anywhere from five days to a month, depending on how prepared officials were for each new batch of arrivals and how many people disembarked from the ferry. On the day of their onward journey, state officials directed them out of the warehouse and onto trains. Individuals who knew the right people, had political connections through *Ch'ongryŏn*, or carried enough money to bribe the officials, were sent to the capital, Pyongyang, a favorable location in terms of infrastructure, employment, and proximity to power. Those who lacked the desired revolutionary credentials, had no connection to *Ch'ongryŏn*, or were known to have family in South Korea were processed by state officials and put on trains bound for the northern provinces of the country.

For most new arrivals, the hope for a better life in the ethnic homeland quickly turned to disappointment. Although many were unaware of it at the time of their arrival, their association with the former colonizer, Japan, marked them as symbolically polluted individuals, embodied representations of Korea's subjugation under Japanese rule. Despite their initially enthusiastic reception by the North Korean state, the propaganda value of immigrants from Japan and their usefulness as an economic conduit connecting North Korea to Japan did not compensate for state suspicions that they differed little from the Japanese. With the exception of a select few, the treatment repatriates received from the state and the local populations provoked a distinct shift in how they identified themselves, from compatriots and ethno-nationalists to "Koreans from Japan."

Life in North Korea

The majority of repatriates arrived in North Korea between 1959 and 1964,¹⁶ but a one-way movement of Zainichi Koreans and some Japanese continued, with the occasional pause, until the early 1980s.¹⁷ New arrivals' everyday experiences in North Korea were affected by political and economic changes taking place at the global and regional levels. Three events in particular had an impact on the experiences of immigrants from Japan: the establishment of a regular ferry service between North Korea and Japan in late 1971 and a loosening of restrictions on family visitations,¹⁸ the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent famine in North Korea,¹⁹ and the political fallout that arose from the 2002 Japan-North Korea summit as a result of abduction revelations.

In North Korea, the state organizes the population into three main groups (*sŏngbun*): "hostile forces," "neutral forces," and "friendly forces." These categories are hereditary and prevent the upward social mobility of most individuals.²⁰ New arrivals from Japan were organized according to the government's assessment of their family background, political activism, and financial contributions to the state. Association with the former colonizer and the southern origins of most new arrivals tainted repatriates. Their "hostile forces" status constrained their prospects for social advancement within North Korean society and defined their broader relationships to the state and the native population. For many repatriates, these categorizations limited their prospects for marriage and for advancing their careers. Lee Sun-hyŏng, who returned to Japan from North Korea during the early 2000s, lamented, "Because of our low political status, there was no chance of improving our lives."

Throughout the country, cadres of the Korean Workers' Party attempted to discipline the new arrivals by means of political meetings and self-criticism sessions, state-directed surveillance through a vast network of informants,²¹ and the threat of state-sanctioned violence in the form of extra political education, exile to the northern provinces, and, in some cases, corporal punishment. Throughout the 1960s, Kim Il-sung carried out a series of purges of political opponents as part of a broader effort to secure a monolithic ideological system and strengthen the solidarity of the party (Buzo 1999, 59). Although these party purges largely ceased during the 1970s, the disappearances of politically suspect individuals continued. During the 1970s, the state confiscated the wealth of many repatriated families before sending them to labor camps.²²

The efforts of party cadres to shape the new arrivals into compliant citizens included discouraging them from acting in ways that might be considered Japanese. Many repatriates had spent their entire lives in Japan, and they arrived in a society that was still in a war-ready mentality and hostile to outsiders. Consequently, the response of North Koreans to individuals who, in their eyes, hardly differed from imperial sympathizers, aggressively targeted their Japanese characteristics; clothes, behavior, and language were all cause for concern as they highlighted the newcomers' differences from native North Koreans. Even the repatriates' comportment set them apart from the locals. Kim Hyŏn-chae told me that in Pyongyang it was possible to spot Koreans from Japan by the way they moved and acted. For example, locals walked quickly, bent over at the waist and staring straight ahead. Hyŏn-chae explained, "There was no way of getting around, so they all had to power walk. And no one wanted to risk attracting the attention of state security, so they'd focus on the ground ahead of them." By contrast, repatriates walked in a slower, relaxed fashion, as they had done in Japan. These characteristics became a focal point for repatriates' reformation, as they strove to diminish aspects of their public presentation that differentiated them from the locals.

Prior to their arrival in North Korea, some Zainichi Koreans considered repatriation the ultimate act of loyalty to the North Korean state and its leader, Kim Il-sung. By no means were all those who migrated to North Korea staunch revolutionaries, but for many prospective emigrants, repatriation meant giving up life in Japan and taking a risk in an unknown land. After they moved, individuals who had been made painfully aware of their Korean status in Japan were considered too Japanese in the ethnic homeland. State authorities directed repatriates to send their children to local schools. Japanese was not permitted in schools, in workplaces, or in public. Talking about Japan was forbidden. Children who had

attended ethnic Korean schools prior to leaving Japan could often speak some Korean, but their accents were noticeably different from those of the local children. Other young repatriates, however, spoke little or no Korean and struggled to understand what was happening in class. Chang Mi-chōng told me that when she arrived in North Korea at the age of seventeen, she did not speak any Korean. She was sent to a local school and stayed in the dormitory. “If we spoke Japanese, we’d be disciplined. They’d hit us. This was good to learn because later, if we spoke Japanese as adults, we’d have been seriously punished,” she explained, making a throat-slitting gesture with her hand.

Repatriates often suspected local North Koreans of being agents of the state and, when possible, kept a distance from them. People who arrived in the DPRK as adults learned from experience that the public sphere was for “Korean behavior” and the private was for “Japanese.” On the surface, indigenous North Koreans and repatriates were differentiated by language and day-to-day practices. These differences were emphasized by the expressions they used to refer to one another.²³ Those who arrived from Japan referred to Korean-born people as “Apache.” This expression echoed the use of a term they had seen in American television shows and Japanese history books. It reflected their perceptions of North Koreans’ “savage manners and dress,” which they equated with white North American depictions of indigenous Americans. The local North Koreans employed the term “Pig’s Trotters” for the newcomers, referencing a Japanese style of footwear that, in their eyes, resembled cloven hooves.²⁴ North Korea’s citizen-making project, however encompassing it may have seemed, was undermined by its reliance on goods and capital from Japan. Prior to the 1970s, there was comparatively limited movement of goods or people between Japan and North Korea: between 1963 and 1971, for example, the Japanese government granted only twenty-four Zainichi Koreans reentry permits allowing them to visit family in North Korea and return to Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2009, 9). This limitation changed when the Japanese government eased restrictions on movement, allowing Zainichi Koreans to travel to and from North Korea.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant an end to the economic assistance the DPRK had previously enjoyed from its primary benefactor. Unable to borrow money from the global credit markets, the North Korean economy crumbled.²⁵ As the Public Distribution System that provided rations to the population ground to a halt, food shortages emerged across the country.²⁶ The North Korean government was slow to respond to the crisis. When it did, it encouraged citizens to embody the Juche spirit and fend for themselves.²⁷ The result was mass starvation, internal migration, and the mass movement of hundreds of thousands of

people across the Chinese-Korean border in search of food, employment, and medicinal supplies. Repatriates who had lost contact with family in Japan, or whose families were too poor to continuously furnish them with parcels were, in the words of one interlocutor, “the first to die during the famine.” The North Korean state recognized that repatriated Koreans had a distinct pecuniary value during periods of dearth. Consequently, the state put enormous pressure on immigrants from Japan to extract as much from their overseas kin as possible. Acting on state directions, *Ch’ongryŏn* organized capital and goods that contributed to sustaining the struggling North Korean economy and, in some cases, were used to line the pockets of the Korean Workers’ Party elite. Although migrants from Japan were politically untrustworthy, local North Koreans coveted the products they imported. As a reward for contributing to the national economy, the state allocated some repatriated Koreans high-status employment as skilled laborers and members of national sports teams.²⁸ A select few were even allowed to join the Korean Workers’ Party, thereby moving into the inner circles of the ruling elite.

The economic hardship experienced by most repatriated families was compounded in 2002, when Kim Jong-il confirmed that North Korean agents, ostensibly operating without his knowledge, had abducted thirteen Japanese: five from Europe and the remaining eight from Japan. Encouraged by a furious public, the Japanese government imposed economic sanctions that blocked the exchange that had been a lifeline for many repatriates in North Korea. Although it was still possible to informally send money and everyday items to family in North Korea, the days of shipping automobiles, bicycles, refrigerators, washing machines, stereos, and pianos in bulk were over.²⁹

Transnational Kin Work

Instead of migrating to North Korea all at once, some families tried to spread the risk of relocating by sending only one or two family members. For those cautious of what awaited them, dividing one’s family was also a financial gamble based on the hope that they would benefit from the trade that they imagined would emerge once Japan and North Korea normalized relations. In such cases, selected family members stayed in Japan and waited to hear about conditions before deciding to follow. Interviewees told me of secret messages, composed on the back of stamps or encoded into the text of letters home, that warned remaining family not to follow. “I let my parents know that I was well and that I would see them when my brother was ready to get married. My brother was a still a child, however, and

they understood that I was actually warning them not to follow me to North Korea,” one interlocutor told me. The family ties connecting those who moved to those who stayed could mean the difference between life and death when food was scarce.

Wealthy and politically connected families had greater access to goods imported from Japan. Families with connections to the pachinko business, for example, had access to regular remittances sent by those who had stayed behind.³⁰ But for the majority of repatriate families—those without political or economic capital—relationships to family in Japan were created and maintained by the kin work of women. Cultural anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo argues that understanding kin work requires fusing domestic work and labor perspectives to recognize that maintaining broad kinship networks is also a socially necessary and economically pertinent form of labor. Kin work, and its role in the maintenance of kinship systems, can act as “vehicles for actual survival and/or political resistance” (1987, 441), and neither legal nor political borders limit the significance of this work. The long-distance kin work of families divided by the repatriation project was gendered, because Korean men and women regarded the upkeep of kinship relations as “women’s work,” alongside other nurturing duties that fused activities inside and outside the home.³¹ Existing outside the formal structures of state diplomatic relations, long-distance kinship relations and the flow of goods they facilitated continued in spite of trade sanctions.

In ordinary times, the emotional longing for loved ones left behind is enough of an impetus to encourage transnational practices that contribute to the emergence of long-distance relationships. These circumstances are magnified during times of crisis, for example, when the support of family and friends in the homeland is required as a means of survival. Today, the most common practices include making phone calls, sending letters and packages, sending text messages and emails, and using web technology to establish a feeling of co-presence (Baldassar 2008, 256). Repatriated families, by contrast, had limited options at the time of their resettlement in North Korea. Families living in urban areas could send and receive mail, including parcels, and make telephone calls from the workplace or the local calling center, but the state attempted to monitor correspondence. Letters were censored, telephone calls were monitored, and, according to interlocutors, packages sometimes arrived missing items. However, surveillance was always partial, undermined by officials’ susceptibility to bribes and the state’s inability to oversee all communication between North Korea and Japan.³² Those wishing to communicate without arousing the state’s interest had to do so clandestinely. The most common means of doing so was to wait for family to visit from

Japan and orchestrate a moment out of the earshot of state cadres. However, for most repatriates, reunions were infrequent, largely due to the difficulty and expense of traveling to meet family in North Korea.³³ Consequently, letters and parcels took on heightened significance as a lifeline for families divided between Japan and North Korea.

Zainichi Korean film director Yang Yǒng-hǔi has made multiple visits to her family members in Pyongyang, each time taking armloads of items with her.³⁴ Since her three older brothers migrated to North Korea in 1971 while Yang Yǒng-hǔi and her parents remained in Japan, her mother regularly speaks with the brothers over the telephone and sends packages of food, clothes, and other supplies.³⁵ Her mother's indefatigable attitude helped her brothers and their families survive the 1990s famine that had such disastrous consequences for so many other repatriates. Speaking to me in Osaka, Yang explained that her mother sends money via the local post office in Tsuruhashi. "The process costs 10 percent of the money sent. In the early days, sending things this way wasn't reliable. The boxes would arrive with things missing. But, it's gradually improved," she told me.³⁶ Once the parcel is registered on arrival, the post office in Pyongyang calls the registered recipients and they go to pick it up. Recipients are required to open the packages in front of postal officials, who check for illicit materials.

Letters and parcels, exchanged largely by women in North Korea and Japan, were the primary means of communication for divided families such as Yang Yǒng-hǔi's. For families who were able to maintain them, letter writing and phone calls—the technologies of long-distance kin work—fostered a co-presence with family in Japan, reminding those who had stayed behind of their obligation to needy kin in North Korea. In exchange, money, books, stationery, clothes, and luxury goods provided repatriates with items for personal use or to bribe officials when required.³⁷ Food products were particularly useful, both in terms of their symbolic value for trading with local North Koreans and as multisensory reminders of life in Japan. The tastes and smells, along with the act of cooking foods imported from Japan, reminded immigrants of their lives before the move to North Korea. Curry flavoring, for example, along with other quintessentially Japanese food items, was an item popular with both repatriate families and local North Koreans. Versions of ramen and udon noodles followed repatriating Koreans to North Korea, packed into parcels sent by family members who had stayed in Japan. Svašek and Skrbiš note that items sent from home increase a migrant's sense of belonging and emotional well-being (2007, 377). Such items take on

intensified meaning for individuals unable to return to the sending country. Culinary products are also efficacious in producing new feelings of belonging, divergent from the host society.

Once in North Korea, repatriate families either traded imported foodstuffs for local products or gave them away to strategically gain favor with individuals in power. One unintended effect of the goods exchanged between Japan and North Korea was that they contributed to cultivating favorable associations with Japan. Interlocutors told me that Japanese food, foreign music, and eye-catching clothes had an exotic allure. Further, the quality of the products was considered to be higher than locally made goods. These items helped foster a positive image of Japan for the generations born to repatriated Koreans in North Korea.

Although letters connected families across time and space, they also created feelings of debt between the members of divided families. With the help of an informant in Osaka, I gained access to a cache of letters sent from repatriates in Ch'ŏngjin and Pyongyang to family members in Japan between 1981 and 2014. The letters were affixed with North Korean stamps, showing they had been sent through official channels. A feeling of barely maintained restraint permeates the lines of each page, most written in Korean but interspersed with occasional Japanese and Chinese characters. Several themes recur throughout the seventy letters: Death, the weather, and health concerns fill up many pages. Many include requests for financial support for medical expenses, weddings, funerals, and ancestral worship ceremonies. Repatriated women request very specific amounts of money, promising to “meet again someday” and repay all that has been taken. “My husband is dying,” one woman pleads before requesting Japanese yen from her kin. “I cry every day at the thought of losing him. We sold everything we own to pay for his treatment.” The repatriated members of divided families sent letters narrating their hardships and requesting support over many years. Under the weight of the ongoing emotional and financial burden, some family members in Japan broke off contact with those in the DPRK. Even after relatives in Japan ceased replying to their letters, many women in North Korea continued to write, hoping the letters would reach their intended recipients.

The Family as the Locus of Ambiguous Identification

Behind closed doors, in intimate spaces, repatriates embarked on a divergent kind of identity-making. In their homes, families nurtured their own particular self-understandings that hinged upon long-distance relationships with kin and friends in Japan, a country in which

they had also been foreigners. “We’d get together with other repatriates, eat Japanese food, and speak Japanese, talking about the life we’d left behind. We had to be careful though, because if any of the natives heard us we’d be reported and punished,” Chang Mi-chŏng told me, making a gesture to demonstrate her wrists being bound together. During social gatherings with other repatriates, they defied the state’s insistence that they rid themselves of their Japanese cultural markers, building mutual trust and divergent belonging in the domestic sphere.

Repatriate families’ home lives filled a lacuna of knowledge regarding experiences in Japan. In keeping with traditional childrearing practices, children in North Korea were customarily raised under the watchful eye of grandparents. Frequently it was the grandmother’s duty to supervise the household and its inhabitants while one or both parents were at work. The elderly thus became instrumental in maintaining group cohesion and nurturing emotional connections to the past. With mother and father working in a state factory or on a collective farm, returnees I spoke with recalled that it was the grandmother who cooked for the family and disciplined the children. Many repatriates used imported ingredients and cooked food in the style they had learned in Japan. In times of celebration, grandparents sang Japanese songs and retold folktales from southern Korea and Japan to their grandchildren. Park Ok-cha told me that her parents and grandparents sang Japanese songs to help her fall asleep. “And when there was a power shortage, which was often, my father would get his guitar and we’d all sing together. I didn’t always understand the meaning of the song, but the sound was beautiful,” she remembered.

These childrearing methods transmitted memories of an alternative time and space to the places where repatriates had resettled in North Korea. The memories acted like a bridge, stirring desire and connecting younger individuals to a life they had not themselves lived, yet to which they felt an intense pull. In this way, nostalgia for life in Japan emerged among repatriate families. Elderly repatriates who yearned for life in Japan transmitted memories inflected with regret for leaving and nostalgia for the past to their grandchildren. “Heaven on Earth,”³⁸ as state propaganda had fostered the imagining of North Korea in the minds of prospective repatriates, shifted from symbolizing North Korea to representing Korean community life in Japan.

Conclusion

In this article I have examined the mass migration of Koreans displaced by the demands of the Japanese Empire and discussed how former colonial subjects internalized the ruptures of postcolonial citizen-making and Cold War ideologies in complex, contradictory ways that shaped their understanding of themselves and their communities. The frictions that emerged between repatriated Koreans and North Korean society forged opportunities for new identities to emerge among repatriates. Individuals who identified with the DPRK's ethnic nationalism developed translocal identifications to kin and community in Japan. These long-distance relationships sustained them for many years following their arrival in North Korea. The relationships that developed between divided families presented a means to survive the sporadic food shortages that characterized life outside the urban centers of North Korea, but these relationships were vulnerable to the decline in DPRK-Japan relations. Long-distance relations were sustained largely by the kin work of women on both sides of the Sea of Japan. Through mnemonic devices—songs, stories, and commensality with others from Japan—repatriates fostered a different kind of belonging, divergent from the DPRK citizen-making project. In building a communal repository of translocal memories from which they could draw when in each other's company, repatriates shaped alternative identifications to those propagated by the state. But transnational kinship networks also marked these families as having divided loyalties. The comparable material wealth of some immigrants from Japan invoked envy among local North Koreans, who regarded their influence as subversive to state security. The sociopolitical tensions underlying the relationship between the host society and the newcomers' bodies and selves destabilized connections between the ethnic and nationalist identities of newcomers. Being Korean and being loyal to Kim Il-sung's North Korea, two things that many repatriates had formerly conceived of as inseparable, now diverged, and it was possible to be Korean while longing for a time and place outside the Korean peninsula.

The kin work of women in North Korea and Japan sustained repatriate families and contributed to the emergence of repatriates' translocal identification with the sights, sounds, and smells of Korean communities in Japan. By speaking Japanese at home, cooking Japanese dishes, wearing clothes imported from Japan, singing songs, and telling stories that recalled life prior to arriving in North Korea, repatriate families carved out spaces in which nostalgic memories connected them to friends, family, and Korean communities in Osaka, Tokyo, Kobe, and beyond. Many families emigrated to North Korea with hopes that it would provide them with opportunities that had eluded them as marginalized former subjects of the

Japanese Empire. But in North Korea, the host society regarded Zainichi Koreans as hardly different from the former Japanese colonizers. The reality of life at the bottom of the DPRK's sociopolitical hierarchy provoked a shift in how repatriates identified with the host society and with communities they had left behind. Further, the flow of letters, capital, and goods contributed to a desire to return to Japan among the new generations born to repatriates. In escaping North Korea and migrating to Japan, returnees are again required to renegotiate their ethnic and political selves, this time in the face of Japanese prejudice toward Koreans. Many are asking similar questions to the ones their parents and grandparents had asked after seeing the natives on the docks of Ch'ŏngjin for the first time: "Who are you? Who am I? Is this home?"

Markus Bell is a lecturer in Korean and Japanese studies at the University of Sheffield. He would like to sincerely thank his North Korean interlocutors for their invaluable help with his research, although he is unable to acknowledge them by name. Further thanks go to Ishimaru Jiro and Yang Yŏng-hŭi, for their help during fieldwork, and to Jean Do, Sandra Fahy, and Sarah Son, for their comments on an early version of this article, presented at the 2016 Kyujanggak Symposium for Korean Studies. Finally, sincere thanks go to the anonymous Cross-Currents reviewers for their helpful suggestions, and to Christine Knight and Rosita Armytage for offering useful comments and feedback.

Notes

- 1 The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (K. *Chae-Ilbon Chosŏnin Ch'ongryŏn haphoe*, or *Ch'ongryŏn*) is one of two main organizations formed by Koreans living in Japan; it has close ties with North Korea. *Ch'ongryŏn* functions as North Korea's de facto embassy in Japan.
- 2 Pseudonyms have been used for North Korean research participants. The McCune-Reischauer system of romanization has been used, except for familiar names and places, such as Kim Il-sung, Pyongyang, and Seoul.
- 3 All North Koreans must undertake such ideological training in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the state and party.
- 4 "Arirang" is the name of a traditional folk song popular in both North and South Korea. It is also the name of North Korea's mass gymnastics performance.
- 5 I use the term "Zainichi Korean" to refer to Koreans who migrated to Japan from the start of the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) until the end of the Korean War (1953). In Japanese, *zainichi* means "foreigner residing in Japan."
- 6 Most Zainichi Koreans who migrated to North Korea as part of the so-called repatriation movement were originally from the southern part of the Korean peninsula. Subsequently, they were not, technically, repatriating to North Korea. For simplification, in this article I refer to these people as "repatriates."
- 7 I categorize my interlocutors into "natal returnees" and "imagined returnees." Natal returnees were born in Japan and emigrated to North Korea. These individuals return to the land of their birth. Imagined returnees are individuals who were born in North

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- Korea to migrant parents from Japan. They do not actually return but are moving to a place that previously existed as a homeland only in their imagination.
- 8 The Korean Residents Union in Japan, or *Mindan*, as it is commonly known (K. *Chae-Ilbon Taehan Min'guk Mindan*), was established in 1946 in Tokyo. This organization is loosely affiliated with the Republic of Korea.
- 9 Records show that as of December 1964, 76,273 Koreans, 6,385 Japanese, and 7 Chinese had emigrated to North Korea. Two Indonesians had also applied for “repatriation,” although their applications were later cancelled (B AG 105-030.01, 2–5).
- 10 See Ryang (1997, 2000) for ground-breaking treatments of ideology and identity for Koreans in Japan.
- 11 For a thorough treatment of the anthropology of emotions, see Leavitt (1996).
- 12 For a detailed account of how Koreans in postwar Japan were both aliens in Japan and unwanted in South Korea, see Caprio (2008).
- 13 Prospective repatriates were required to confirm their free will in migrating to North Korea. This process proved to be highly problematic. For more on the ICRC’s difficulties in establishing the free will of repatriates, see Morris-Suzuki (2007, 188–189).
- 14 ICRC-employed translators were tasked with establishing the free will of prospective repatriates. In reality, however, there was little guarantee of a fair assessment (see Morris-Suzuki 2007, 192).
- 15 ICRC records on the first fifty-one ships to depart Japan for North Korea (up until December 16, 1960) illustrate the range of occupations of the 12,021 adult males on board: 2,800 were classified as “day laborers,” 1,016 as “factory workers,” 469 as “chauffeurs,” 432 as “farmers/fishers,” 424 as “clerks,” 731 in “commerce and industry,” and 4,476 as “non-occupation” (B AG 232 105-019.01).
- 16 According to the monthly reports by the Japanese Immigration Control Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, which recorded applications, detainees, and successful repatriates to North Korea, 189 individuals (166 Koreans and 23 Japanese) left for North Korea on board the 121st ship in December 1964. In total, by the end of 1964, 82,665 people had “repatriated” to the DPRK; this number constituted 88.6 percent of the total 93,340 who emigrated to North Korea before the repatriation project was officially discontinued, in 1984 (B AG 232 105-019.01, 5).
- 17 A report by the Japanese Immigration Control Bureau of the Ministry of Justice posits that numbers decreased due to the reluctance of prospective repatriates to go to North Korea during “the severe cold season” (B AG 232 105-019.01). It is also significant that, according to my interviewees, reports were coming out of North Korea that conditions were much harder than expected. Further, at this time the Japanese economy was noticeably improving. These factors likely deterred some individuals from emigrating to North Korea.
- 18 Prior to the Japanese government easing restrictions on movement between Japan and North Korea and the establishment of the Man’gyōngbong ferry, it was virtually impossible for Zainichi Koreans to visit their families in North Korea. For more on this subject, see Morris-Suzuki (2009).
- 19 For more on the North Korean food crisis, see Haggard and Noland (2007) and Fahy (2015).
- 20 Russian scholar Andrei Lankov further explains that the status a person was attributed depended on his or her family background, with those individuals who could trace their family to revolutionary fighters or former poor peasants being put in the

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- “friendly forces” category; “hostile forces” included former landholders, those whose family were pro-American or pro-Japanese, Chinese-Koreans, and Zainichi Koreans who arrived in the 1960s. This system still exists today (2007, 67–68).
- 21 North Korean state agents monitor citizens suspected of having divided loyalties.
- 22 Morris-Suzuki notes that repatriates from Japan were disproportionately represented among the victims of the North Korean political purges, and large numbers of them were sent to Yodök prison camp (2007, 239).
- 23 It is important to note that, according to my interlocutors, in many cases relations improved between local North Koreans and the second- and third- generation repatriated Koreans. Interviewees in Seoul informed me that they had friends whose parents had migrated from Japan.
- 24 The straps on sandals (*zori* 草履) and clogs (*geta* 下駄) divide the big toe from the second toe, making the foot similar in appearance to the hoof of a pig. This insult is also used in South Korea to refer to Japanese or ostensibly Japanized individuals.
- 25 For more on the impact of the North Korean economic collapse, see Smith (2015, 136–164).
- 26 The Public Distribution System is the means by which the DPRK state distributes food to citizens by a quota system in which food allocation is determined by age, gender, occupation, and political status.
- 27 Juche (K. *Chuch'e*) is the official political ideology of the DPRK. It emphasizes self-reliance for the North Korean people and independence for the DPRK from the influence of foreign nation-states.
- 28 During my fieldwork, I met North Koreans who had represented the DPRK in a variety of sports, including ice hockey, soccer, and baseball. The point about status should not be overstated, however. An interlocutor who was previously a member of the Korean Workers' Party estimated that fewer than a thousand repatriated Koreans were granted membership in the party.
- 29 A report compiled by the Japanese Red Cross lists the following cargo on board the 108th ship to leave Niigata for North Korea, in July 1963: 244 tons of baggage, 4 vehicles (2 small sized cars, 1 light van, 1 Nissan Cedric, all used), 124 bicycles, 31 refrigerators, 42 washing machines, 12 stereos, 14 television sets, and 83 electric lighting fixtures (B AG 105-030.01, 5).
- 30 For a fictional account that highlights the significance of the pachinko industry to Zainichi Korean families, see Min Jin Lee's best-selling novel *Pachinko* (2017).
- 31 Di Leonardo makes this point explicit, saying that kin work is similar to housework and childcare in that “men in the aggregate do not do it” (1987, 443).
- 32 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that in North Korea, as in other postcolonial systems, state control and propaganda are real but always partial.
- 33 Interlocutors told me that it could take up to five days to get from Niigata port to their family homes in North Korea. This included three days crossing the Sea of Japan and one or two days on North Korean trains.
- 34 Following the release of *Dear Pyongyang* (2005), the North Korean government banned Yang Yöng-hŭi from visiting North Korea. For more, see Adam Hertzell's interview with Yang: <http://koreanfilm.org/yangyh.html>.
- 35 Over the years, her mother also sent items such as stationery, warm clothes, hand warmers, instant noodles, and money to family friends.
- 36 Interview with Yang Yöng-hŭi, July 2014. See Yang's documentary films (2005, 2009) for detailed and touching expositions of the lives of families divided between Japan and North Korea.

- 37 A report by the Japanese Immigration Control Bureau of the Ministry of Justice lists the following items on board the 121st ship to leave for North Korea in December 1964: 160 bottles of ginseng wine, 47 kilograms (103.6 pounds) of dried sea cucumbers, 100 kilograms (220.5 pounds) of eggs, 26 cases of sugar, 338 cases of cigarettes, 7 cigarette cases, 26 cases of candies, and 29 cans of canned fish (B AG 232 105 030.01, 6).
- 38 According to one interviewee, North Korea was referred to as “Heaven on Earth” in *Ch’ongryŏn* propaganda used to recruit repatriates.

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