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## **Making and Breaking Family: North Korea's Zainichi Returnees and "the Gift"**

### Abstract

From 1959 to 1984, some 90,000 Koreans migrated from Japan to North Korea as part of the "repatriation movement." Enduring severe deprivation in North Korea, in the last decade some 300 of these individuals have returned to Japan. Based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Japan, this paper asks how gift giving and the attendant obligation to reciprocate impacts on relations between non-profit organizations (NPOs) and the people they seek to help. I answer this question by examining the resettlement of returnees from North Korea, and their relationship to members of Japanese civil society. The organizations working with returnees primarily consist of elderly Japanese men who aid returnees out of guilt for their support in the 1960s and 1970s of the socialist left, North Korea, and the repatriation movement. Their assistance engenders a feeling of debt in the people they help. Returnees try to mitigate this debt by performing acts of "flexible filial piety" toward NPO members. But returnees' attempts to renegotiate the burden of the gift consequently endanger themselves and their families who remain in North Korea.

Key words: gifting; Zainichi returnees; North Korea; Japan; civil society; transmigration

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## **Making and Breaking Family: North Korea's Zainichi Returnees and "the Gift"**

From 1959 to the early 1980s approximately 93,340 Zainichi Koreans<sup>1</sup> and Japanese spouses migrated from Japan to North Korea as part of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)-organized "repatriation movement."<sup>2</sup> At times enduring severe deprivation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), in the last decade some 300 of these individuals have returned to Japan. They commonly resettle in Osaka or Tokyo. Arriving alone or in small kin groups these "Zainichi returnees"<sup>3</sup> often struggle to adapt to modern Japan, facing linguistic, financial, social, cultural, and educational barriers.

In response to the influx of foreigners to Japan in recent years, members of the Japanese public have organized to form advocacy groups to aid new arrivals (Pekkanen 2004: 363-364; Shipper 2008; Masutani 2009). They do this by helping new immigrants access important social services. The duty of caring for returnees from North Korea is shouldered by a handful of civic groups. Members of these groups arrange accommodation and employment, and organise trips to various government offices and Japanese language schools. Non-profit organization (NPO) members invest their own time, money, and effort in helping returnees resettle in Japan.

This paper is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork in meetings and informal gatherings of NPOs in Osaka and Tokyo. I conducted my interviews in Korean. It draws on interviews with the directors and members of these organizations, as well as with returnees from North Korea. I ask how gift giving and the attendant obligation to reciprocate impacts on relations between civic organizations and the people they seek to help. I answer this

question by examining the resettlement of returnees from North Korea and their relationship to members of Japanese civil society.

The organizations working with returnees primarily consist of elderly Japanese men who aid returnees out of guilt for their support, in the 1960s and 1970s, of the socialist left, the DPRK, and the repatriation movement. I argue that NPOs' material assistance and ongoing support in Japan engenders a feeling of debt that returnees try to mitigate through becoming involved in civic groups' activism and nurturing fictive kinship relations with members of the groups. Consequently, people who moved to Japan to escape North Korea often again become involved with the country they left behind through the missions of Japanese civic organizations. Zainichi returnees' attempts to renegotiate the debt they feel subsequently endanger themselves and their family who remain in North Korea.

### **The obligation of the gift**

Although Japan is a signatory to the 1951 International Refugee Treaty, its admission rate for international refugees is far below that of other post-industrial societies. Japan's rejection rate for international asylum seekers is 90%, while Japan does not accept North Korean refugees unless they can prove a link to Japan (Kim 2012: 69-70). Mikyoung Kim explains that the reasons for Japan's recalcitrant approach to North Korean asylum seekers is twofold: not to antagonize China, the DPRK's key ally, and not to encourage a "flood of refugees to Japan" (ibid: 70). Consequently, the burden of assisting North Korean arrivals to Japan falls to NPO groups.

Japanese civic organizations take on a number of tasks when a person arrives in Japan. Many new arrivals require accommodation, employment, access to Japanese language training, and help navigating the state bureaucracy. The Japanese government regards returnees from North Korea as "stateless persons" and initially only allocates a three-month,

short-term-stay visa. During this period, returnees have the right to apply for social security and national medical coverage, but they are not given any special treatment that might be accorded refugees seeking asylum. One interlocutor explained,

North Korean defectors who go to South Korea get a number of benefits including a resettlement payment and housing allowance. But in Japan there's nothing like that. We receive a 'Basic Livelihood Allowance'. But it isn't something especially for North Korean new arrivals. It's the same money they give to people who are too sick or too old to work.

NPO representatives usually accompany returnees to the foreigner registration bureau to apply for a change of status to either a one- or a three-year visa. In order to receive the "Basic Livelihood Allowance," the individual has to have an official address. It is thus necessary for NPO members to arrange an apartment for them. The state payment generally comes to 80,000 yen per month for daily living and then 40,000 yen for housing, in total 120,000 yen<sup>4</sup> per month. This is unlimited. It is possible to get a part-time job while they are receiving social security, but the individual has to declare this to the local government and the state will reduce their social security payment accordingly.<sup>5</sup> The help that NPO groups give Zainichi returnees is essential for their successful resettlement in Japan.

A transactional element underlies the relationships of new arrivals from North Korea with NPOs in Japan. Marcel Mauss ((1925) 2000) argued that exchange between groups encourages the emergence of a social bond between the interested parties. The value, timing, and handling of the gift, in Mauss's term, are all significant factors in a relationship perpetuated by an obligation to reciprocate. In his rethinking of Mauss' theory, James Laidlaw postulated that gifts do not always entail a reciprocal bond between the giver and the receiver. Laidlaw gives the example of the lengths almsgivers and Shvetambar Jain renouncers in India go in avoiding moral entanglement with each other (2000: 630). He

demonstrates that, in this instance, giver and receiver behave as strangers towards one another to mitigate the obligation that the act of giving produces. The givers of these alms go to great efforts to consciously distance themselves from the alms they provide, in order to fulfil their spiritual obligation to give freely without thanks or reward. In so doing, Laidlaw claims, they remove the social bond of obligation between giver and receiver.

Altruistic behaviour often has unintended effects, and a range of motivations may lie hidden beneath acts of benevolence. Kennan Ferguson (2007) discusses the 2003 U.S invasion of Iraq to show that gift giving, even when the gift is an abstract concept like freedom, inevitably comes with obligations. Ferguson argues that the givers, who are convinced of their own benevolence and immense generosity, often misunderstand such gifts. The recipients, however, are not so naïve: they look to the history of cross-civilization gift giving and the embeddedness of civilizing gifts in colonialism and imperialism. In regards to gift giving between European colonizers and native peoples, Ferguson notes, “Poison has long been indistinguishable from the gift. These presents were freely given, and sometimes freely received, but they often built relationships that were lethal to the recipients” (2007: 50).

Civic groups play an important role in helping North Koreans both in China and in the countries in which they resettle. But these groups are by no means purely altruistic entities in the lives of North Korean refugees; the organizations and the individuals working within them are motivated by a range of different ideologies that they use to justify putting themselves and their charges at risk. Ju Hui Judy Han argues that the religious narratives of conservative Christian networks involved with aiding the migration of North Koreans through China, to South Korea produce, “a profoundly confining and disciplinary passage” (2013: 359) that Han refers to as a “political theology of custody” (ibid.).<sup>6</sup> Although the

groups in Japan that work with returnees from North Korea are not religious in character, a similar ethic of parental duty informs the groups' missions.

The recipient of the gift is not merely passive in the relationship that emerges. Asylum seeking refugees make choices as to where they want to migrate to and in their relationships with representatives of the new host society. Aihwa Ong describes this negotiation in her discussion of Cambodian refugees in the United States. Ong (2003) shows that refugees are subject to controlling regimes, in the form of state-funded professional service providers – public health, welfare officers, and the legal system – intent on disciplining them to the norms and rules of society. Nevertheless, newly arrived men and women learn to cope with the directives of the state apparatus, accepting some demands while rejecting others. Ong's interlocutors were subject to a paternalistic citizen-making process, through which the technologies of government endeavored to orient and reshape the everyday behavior of the refugees, transforming them from backward, foreign entities into modern and familiar citizen-subjects.

In contrast to the experience of Ong's interlocutors, the Japanese government does not seek to make Japanese out of returnees from North Korea. New arrivals' contact with state representatives is limited and there are no facilities in place to assimilate them into Japanese society. The foreigner is an entity to be controlled, but not by the state. Instead, the state allocates this task to civic groups that mediate what little interaction there is with state representatives – immigration and welfare officials. These groups manage the new arrivals, attempting to facilitate resettlement but not citizen-making. Zainichi returnees exhibit agency during the migration process and in how they negotiate the support they receive from civic organizations. In contrast to the participants in Laidlaw's research, returnees actively foster social intimacy with NPO members in an attempt to repay the help they receive. But the bond

that consequently emerges between returnees and civic groups is rooted in an inequitable relationship in which power remains with members of these NPO civic groups.

### **Japanese civil society and the DPRK**

The post-surrender years in Japan and the economic recovery of the 1950s and 1960s saw deep social divisions and class conflict as Japan negotiated its position within the peace and security arrangements made with the United States (Jansen 2000: 704). In the years following the reconstruction of Japan, student activists and intellectuals looked across the Sea of Japan and saw two Koreas: one largely unknown but led by a Korean, ostensibly independent and calling for a united country for Koreans under the socialist banner. In post-war Northeast Asia, the DPRK appeared to be forging a genuinely autonomous path, all the more impressive given the destruction wrought by the Korean War (1950-1953). In contrast, many Japanese regarded the Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) as led by an anti-democratic government propped up by the US. This was the climate in which young Japanese ideologues joined together with students in South Korea in protesting what they saw as an oppressive, hawkish dictatorship in South Korea. Tadashi Matsumoto, a journalist based in Osaka, recalled,

I was a student activist, here in Japan, in the 1980s. Like most people I was left wing. At that time I didn't know about North Korea. Japanese leftist activists were completely focused on opposing the anti-democratic South Korean government. There wasn't such an interest in North Korea.

Almost half a century after the social unrest and political bifurcation that threatened to derail the reconstruction of Japan, the students who became politically conscious during this turbulent post-war period are approaching the end of their working lives. Age, it seems, has



not dampened their activist spirit, and individuals who have spent a lifetime building up political and social networks draw upon these connections in rallying support to their cause. There are currently a large number of civil society actors in Japan working with documented and undocumented immigrants (Roberts 2000: 276). These groups often have transnational ties to similar civic groups overseas (Kim et al. 2007; Kim 2008).

Currently three NPOs dominate the landscape of civil society working on issues related to the DPRK and returnees from North Korea. These organizations are, Save Returnees to North Korea (SRNK), started in 1994 and headed by Akio Kawashima; Providing for North Korean Refugees (PNKR), established in 2002 and led by human rights campaigner, Isamu Hayashi; and No Camps in North Korea (No Camps),<sup>7</sup> established in 2008 and led by Kichiro Funai and Masanori Hattori. These individuals' influence extends transnationally through their human rights campaigning, and into state interests.

The agenda of each of these organizations converges on the issue of human rights in North Korea in a manner succinctly expressed on the "About us" page of the PNKR site,

How many North Korean refugees can be saved by this small, weak citizens' group in Japan? It is said that the North Korean refugees number possibly into the hundreds of thousands. If the North Korean state were to collapse, then we could conceivably see twenty-two million refugees. These figures, though overwhelming, do not mean we should simply give up. What could we say to those who cry out to us for a helping hand? It is the warm humanitarian rescue efforts of each individual member of this citizens' group that stands as a beacon of hope for the suffering refugees who have fled North Korea.

The above quotation highlights how these groups regard both themselves and the North Korean people. Japanese civic organizations understand themselves as striving to rescue destitute individuals who have nowhere else to turn. North Koreans are framed as hapless, helpless individuals in need of saving from a tyrannical government that is permanently on

the brink of collapse. The claim that twenty-two million refugees could one day be seeking asylum in Japan is used as an incentive to alarm Japanese into supporting the organization.

## **NPO networks**

The website of each organization clarifies the inter-connectivity of these groups. Each provides links to the others, as well as to Japanese and South Korean NPOs working on matters pertaining to human rights and the promotion of democracy in North Korea. The wide-ranging connections of these organizations became further apparent to me while attending NPO meetings. Attendees at a No Camp meeting would also be present at a SRNK meeting. It was widely known among Zainichi returnees that Isamu's PNKR was the organization to talk with in Tokyo, while Akio's SRNK was at the center of things in Osaka.

The leaders of these groups and many of the members have dedicated years of their life and their own money to sustaining and growing these organizations. Akio explained,

Our intention, when the organization [SRNK] was founded in 1994, was to encourage more people to join, which would lead to more financing coming in. We hoped that the funding would come from membership fees – 5,000 yen per year – and donations. But these only make up part of the funding needed; most of the funding comes from our own pockets.<sup>8</sup>

At a SRNK meeting in Osaka, Mi Fukuhara, an elderly Japanese woman who had travelled from Yokohama with her granddaughter, told me her own motivations: "I've been volunteering for several years. Many people in North Korea have lost contact with their families here in Japan. So they either send letters to the NPOs or directly to me, and I try to find their family in Japan to deliver the letters." Mi is representative of many of the organizations' members who feel a genuine calling to help North Koreans.

Collaboration between these organizations on the matter of North Korean human rights is transnational in scope. Nobu Sakamoto, an elderly Zainichi returnee who had migrated with his family to the DPRK in 1961, explained, “I’m the head of the Kanto North Korean Refugees Co-operative and a member of No Camp. In 2013 I went to London and demonstrated with other North Korean refugees in front of the North Korean embassy,” he told me, a smile spreading across his face.

As transnational connections have grown, domestic connections between the organizations and their members have also become more robust. Subsequently, the actions of the groups’ leaders have attracted attention from the South Korean and Japanese state security services, which occasionally dispatched officers to keep an eye on proceedings. At one such meeting I was approached by two individuals who introduced themselves in English as “Japanese Coast Guard security intelligence.” They began to quiz me, in some detail, as to my relationship to the organizations, to Japan, and to North Korea.

The relationship of NPO leaders to the state is exploited by both parties in exchanging information on North Korean refugees known to be in hiding in China and in keeping an eye on those who return to Japan. Lately, this relationship has also taken on a more public form, with NPO leaders lobbying the Japanese government to pressure the DPRK into resolving the abductee issue,<sup>9</sup> an issue considered of great import to Japanese politicians and the public alike.

Within these groups a tension exists between those at the centre and those on the periphery. During a coffee break at an NPO meeting, Dong-hyeun Sun, who went to the DPRK with his family in the mid-1970s, only returning in the last five years, told me about his own experiences working in Japanese civic groups:

I feel like the NPOs don’t really do much good here in Japan. They don’t cooperate well with returnees from North Korea. So I decided to start my own organization with others from North Korea. To do this

we decided to align our Zainichi returnee organization with other North Korean defector organizations around the world – South Korea, the UK, and the US.

Dong-hyeun's sentiments highlight the tension that exists between members in the groups, the involvement of returnees from the DPRK, and the transnational networks of the North Korean human rights movement. Chang-dae Lee, a Zainichi Korean who worked in these organizations in the early 2000s, echoes Dong-hyeun's disappointment with the groups. Chang-dae lamented, "Zainichi Koreans were never really welcomed in these Japanese, conservative organizations and we were gradually squeezed out." The leaders of the groups understand themselves as having a special connection to the lives of individuals who emigrated to the DPRK as part of the repatriation movement. For NPO members, the historically rooted, imagined intimacy with returnees from North Korea justifies the groups' often heavy-handed approach.

### **Repatriation and redemption**

One of many young Japanese to become politically active during Japan's road to economic prosperity was Akio Kawashima, now a teaching professor at an Osaka university. Akio's story is exemplary of the experiences of many young Japanese intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s. Over coffee in a campus cafeteria, he explained:

When I was a high school student, in the mid-1960s, I felt a strong influence from my teachers and also from a book I read at that time by Leo Huberman, a socialist theorist. William Foster, another socialist thinker, also had an important impact on my thinking. Because of these influences I started having more interest in socialist North Korea. I was gazing across at North Korea and I thought that it looked like a bold, young country with an impressive new leader, Kim Il-sung. On the other hand, South Korea had a terrible image as a powerful dictatorship, under which so many people were suffering. So my sympathies lay with North Korea. At that time the repatriation project was already

well underway and, one after another, Koreans were returning to their own country [from Japan]. When I look back at that time, I think to myself that, if I were a Korean resident in Japan, certainly I would have chosen to return to North Korea. After a while observing North Korea, the power started to move entirely to Kim Il-sung. He was awarded a large number of accolades in the form of titles, such as “Great Leader,” as if he were divine. For these reasons, I started to question my feelings of compassion towards North Korea. I started thinking, what is this country?

One of the things leading me to get involved in direct action on North Korea was when I met Zainichi Koreans in Osaka. They told me stories of family members and friends who had gone to North Korea and subsequently been victimized by the North Korean state. So, after these experiences I felt sorry. This was a country I had put hope in; I came to realize I had to do something. Since then I’ve been involved in movements that try to do things to help these individuals [in North Korea]. I still have it in mind that I want to do anything I can to help them.

Akio’s explanation of how he came to be involved in NPO-coordinated activism reveals tropes common to participants I met at seminars and organization meetings in Osaka and Tokyo. The shift in Akio’s view occurred with a number of troubling incidents that came to light regarding the actions of the North Korean state: state terrorist attacks<sup>10</sup>; the elevation of Kim Il-sung to deific status; and tightening state control over North Korean citizens.

What makes Akio’s story particularly interesting is that his politics shifted from a point at which, had he been a Korean resident in Japan he would have chosen to return to North Korea, to a conservative position, politically right of center. As this ideological shift occurred, his political activism also changed focus. It is with a sense of sorrow regarding his initial support of the North Korean government and the repatriation movement that he now spends so much of his time and money making amends for the younger, idealistic version of himself. Akio is far from being alone in having weathered a crisis of his political faith that led him to his current role as a civic leader and activist intellectual.

**Figure 1: Niigata, Japan: A Russian ship about to embark for the DPRK. On board, “repatriating” passengers wave to friends and family. ©Photo courtesy of the ICRC.**

Isamu, the leader of PNKR, voiced similar reasons for becoming involved with the North Korean refugee issue in an interview with *AI-Journal*, the monthly magazine of Amnesty International:

When I was a high school student, one of my friends was a Korean resident in Japan. My Korean friend was highly talented and capable, but could not get a job at a major company...not even as a teacher at a primary school, although he fully deserved employment. In the 1960's, North Korea generated lots of propaganda praising socialism, saying, "North Korea is a paradise on earth." Back then, Japanese society had severe racial discrimination against Korean people, so Koreans in Japan found it extremely hard to get jobs even if they were well qualified. Utterly believing the North Korean propaganda, I encouraged him to go to North Korea, telling him that he would even be able to go to Moscow University. He and his family went to North Korea in 1960. He wrote me twice, but I lost contact with him after that. Although I do not think that my own words were what convinced him to go to North Korea, the advice I gave him back then still tortures me. I believe it is my mission to do my best to help as many North Korean refugees as possible and encourage them to recover hope and live happier lives.<sup>11</sup>

Akio and Isamu's politics shifted from sympathizing with the North Korean government and supporting the goals of the repatriation movement to a critical, conservative position as a result of the information coming out of North Korea during the 1970s and 1980s.

One Sunday afternoon in April 2014 I was invited to the annual meeting of the SRNK organization, held in Tokyo. Among the attendees were several familiar faces, including Tadao Sakaguchi, the vice-chairman of SRNK, Tokyo University professor emeritus and deputy leader of No Camp NPO, Haruhisa Okuda; and two Zainichi returnees. The turnout was underwhelming, the meeting peaking at just 12 members, all but one male and all, with

the exception of the researcher, over 50 years old. This is a problem shared by all the civic groups in Japan working on North Korea-related issues. “There are no young people involved in these organizations, they simply have no interest. Young people don’t understand about socialism and capitalism, or about why people would have wanted to return to North Korea,” lamented Haruhisa, as biscuits were passed around during the break. Brushing crumbs off the table, he continued:

For us, for the members of these organizations, we believed in the possibilities of socialism, we had hope in Marxist ideas and that the people going to North Korea would have a good life. We supported it and contributed to the [repatriation] movement and now we feel responsible for those who went to North Korea. So we have to work in this organization. It’s a movement tied to history and ideology and we have to help.

Haruhisa’s comments reflect the feelings of regret and guilt that are woven into the moral fabric of organizations working with returnees. The story of the leaders, such as Akio and Haruhisa, and many of the members of these organizations, is a story of redemption: redemption for supporting an ideology, a social project, and the North Korean state, all of which time has proved rife with contradictions. The immediate problem that now faces these organizations is that young Japanese cannot relate to their cause. North Korea and the North Korean people are imagined as a growing threat to Japanese national security. As such, North Korea is more likely to induce antipathy, rather than a will to volunteer with local civic organizations. This represents a challenge not only for the group, as it attempts to avoid dying out with its members, but also for the leadership of men such as Akio. Facing a crisis in terms of the aging membership of the groups, the members are attempting to solve this crisis by means of what I term a “lateral shifting of dynamics” of the groups’ underlying guiding

principles. This term refers to how NPO groups are changing how they engage with North Korean human rights issues to try to appeal to the younger generation in Japan.

Since the early 2000s, these civic groups have been striving to link North Korea's abductions of Japanese that took place in the 1970s-1980s to the repatriation movement.<sup>12</sup> Akio and Tadao argue that Japanese and their children in North Korea are in fact hostages, and the repatriation movement was a large-scale kidnapping. They believe that as repatriated individuals are not permitted to leave North Korea the Japanese government should consider the repatriation issue as one and the same as the abductions. The organizations made their stance clear in an open letter from "Five Japanese and Korean NPOs to Prime Minister Abe." The letter is a "Request for the Permanent Resettlement in Japan of all Japanese Spouses and Family (including grandchildren) of Ethnic Koreans 'Repatriated' to North Korea on the occasion of the Stockholm Agreement<sup>13</sup> between Japan and North Korea." It calls for, among other things, the return of kidnapped Japanese and Japanese spouses of ethnic Koreans who went to North Korea during the repatriation movement. Although the resettlement of these individuals in Japan is described in the letter as a challenge, the organizations emphasise that,

After 2-3 years they can expect to live full and enriching lives in Japan. Therefore, in order to facilitate their smooth integration into Japanese society, we ask you to use the former facilities for the Japanese orphans left behind in China<sup>14</sup> to provide a minimum level of Japanese language instruction and job training in preparation for their settlement in Japan.

The letter illustrates how these civic groups connect the repatriation issue to matters of contemporary geo-political import, otherwise separated by time and space. It further points to the racialized aspect of the groups' aims, as they emphasize returning Japanese and their children to Japan, but make no mention of returning ethnic Koreans who emigrated to North Korea, many of whom endured the same prejudice accorded Japanese "repatriates." The



organizations' pursuit of what has become a highly emotive issue in Japan raises their profile in the public eye. Further, it shifts the focus of their mission, making it more topical and, in their eyes, more palatable to young Japanese.

The work of NPO leaders and members has evolved over the last ten years, from dramatic and highly risky “embassy crashing” – charging the gates of foreign embassies in China with North Korean refugees– and smuggling North Koreans to Japan,<sup>15</sup> to taking legal action against North Korea’s representation in Japan, as I will shortly discuss.

### **The debt and pseudo-kinship**

The concept of filial piety helps us to understand the relationship between NPOs and returnees from North Korea. Filial piety has long been at the centre of Korean and Japanese child-parent relations (Hashimoto 2004; Sorensen and Kim 2004).<sup>16</sup> The dynamics of filial piety orders the relationship of child to parent. A child is in its parents’ debt from birth. The magnitude of this debt means that the child is required to spend the entirety of its life obligated to its parents. A life of obligation is a life spent demonstrating indebtedness through acts that reflect well on the family, obedience to the parents’ wishes, and continuous small favours exhibiting gratitude.

Ethnographic studies of Korean filial piety show that everyday practices often differ from teachings in classical texts (Sorensen and Kim 2004: 159-160). For example, Sorensen showed that as the South Korean government mechanized farming practices in the 1960s-70s, the reliance on family labour lessened, subsequently pushing young people to migrate to urban areas in greater numbers. Divided between urban and rural areas, with the younger generation disciplined to the life cycle of the factory, many families had to adapt their filial practices accordingly. Other research confirms that although filial piety is still important in modern Korea, practitioners change the rituals to suit their changing circumstances (Janelli

and Janelli 2004; Sorensen 1990). Such modifications are specific to the economic, cultural, and social capital of the family and the individual (Sorensen and Kim 2004: 159).

The debt owed by Zainichi returnees manifested itself in the everyday interactions between returnees and NPO members. In accepting the symbolic position of child and the attendant obligations to their fictive parents, Zainichi returnees performed acts of what I term “flexible filial piety.” One manner in which returnees performed flexible filial piety was through their willingness to be interviewed. One particular meeting with a recent arrival from the DPRK made this apparent: “I don’t like talking about my past. I don’t want to remember, but Kawashima-sensei asked me to speak with you, so here I am,” the young woman told me. Similar to Sorensen and Kim’s interlocutors, who pragmatically adapted filial practices, Zainichi returnees creatively perform their filial duties. Unlike Sorensen and Kim’s interlocutors, however, the individuals I worked with had greater agency in choosing to opt out of the relationship if either they found an alternative way of supporting themselves in Japan, or they purposefully disappeared from the sphere of activities organized by the groups. They would often explain this by simply saying, “The burden is too much.”<sup>17</sup> Because of the difficulty of resettling in Japan, however, and the central role of the NPOs in the nascent returnee networks, opting out was sometimes not an option.

When Hyeon-jae Kim arrived in Tokyo in 2007, he had neither money nor a place to stay. As a result, he slept on the floor of NPO leader Isamu’s spare bedroom that doubled as the organization’s office. Hyeon-jae explained,

When I arrived in Tokyo I couldn’t do anything – eat, make money, speak without their help. Hayashi-sensei was like a father, telling me to do this and to do that; he was quite stern actually. But he helped with everything, finding a place to live and with matters of everyday life. He’s helped my family and many others to get out of North Korea; if it weren’t for Hayashi-sensei, I wouldn’t be here; we wouldn’t have been able to live.

Hyeon-jae invoked kinship terminology to highlight the role that Isamu had played in helping his family to resettle in Japan and the intimacy he felt towards this man. Isamu and his organization had been instrumental in teaching Hyeon-jae “how to speak” in Japan. He had learned how to express himself, how to make money, and the importance of swift adaptation to his new life. Isamu had also used his networks to help Hyeon-jae move to Osaka, find work, and connect with Akio. Akio’s organization then helped Hyeon-jae’s wife migrate from North Korea to Japan. Once his wife arrived, Akio’s wife found her employment in an Osaka business. The work was menial but along with Hyeon-jae’s income, the couple had enough money to move into their own apartment.

Learning the Japanese language is an important part of resettlement and again, NPO groups play a central role in facilitating this process. Akio and Isamu often introduce new arrivals in Kansai to Ayako Akiyama’s Japanese school, located in Ikuno-ku, Osaka. Ayako teaches Korean to Japanese and Japanese to South Korean and North Korean immigrants:

The language school is my space and I make it so that students from North Korea are away from the politics and the “noise” that surrounds them. In the classes they can meet people from South Korea and from Japan who help them find work.

Ayako ran her finger down a list of names of North Koreans that had studied in her school. “I’ve tried to create a space where people can just be themselves. It’s what [Akio and I] hoped for from the very beginning.” Ayako was always conscientious in her relationships with returnees. She avoided using honorific titles in class and used Korean names for the Korean students. This was in contrast to some of the NPO leaders, who referred to returnees using the Japanese pronunciation of returnees’ names.

Lessons with Ayako are 26,000 yen per month, an inexpensive sum for the few South Korean students, but new arrivals from North Korea sometimes struggled to pay this. If a returnee is unable to afford the fee, Akio pays it for them. One interlocutor was shocked to discover there were fees at all, “I thought the lessons were free until my friend told me otherwise. I found out that [Akio] Kawashima-sensei had been paying for my tuition without telling me.”

NPO members help new arrivals from the DPRK find their feet in Japan. In return NPO leaders ask them to attend organization meetings and contribute to groups’ activities. This could mean finding work for another newly arrived returnee, contributing testimonies to NPO websites, or relating their experiences to audiences of curious Japanese.

On occasion, the pseudo-kin relationship is performed in a more salient manner. Song-gwan Kim was a homeless orphan prior to escaping North Korea. In 2009, Isamu and the PNKR helped Song-gwan migrate to South Korea, where he met and fell in love with a young woman also from North Korea. Soon after, they arranged to marry and invited Isamu to the ceremony. During the wedding, conducted in Seoul, Isamu played the symbolic role of father to Song-gwan. In a symbolic act of filial piety, Song-gwan deferentially poured a cup of sake for Isamu, his “father,” and his bride fed Isamu traditional Korean candy. Through everyday acts of collaboration with NPO members, returnees from North Korea attempt to transform their position as debtors in a transactional relationship to a form of intimacy approaching pseudo-kinship. In doing so, they acknowledge that without people such as Akio, Isamu, and Ayako – without their Japanese father or mother – they might not be able to survive in Japan.

## **The danger of the gift**

In addition to aiding North Koreans in their migration to Japan and subsequent resettlement, Akio and the SRNK organization have been at the forefront of two lawsuits attempting to sue Chongryon,<sup>18</sup> North Korea's unofficial representation in Japan. Akio explained, "Our experiences working with defectors who returned to Japan convinced us that from the very beginning the repatriation project, led by Chongryon, was a large-scale kidnapping case. It was certainly a criminal activity."

SRNK's legal activism is a strategy to popularize the group's mission to the broader national and international community. Both attempts at suing Chongryon have ended in failure. Nevertheless, Akio and his NPO's members are steadfast in their commitment to find a newly-arrived Zainichi returnee from North Korea to champion their cause. Akio told me,

The first person that stepped forward to make a court case with us against Chongryon was Kim Kwang-min. He was the very first man who escaped to South Korea after repatriating to North Korea from Japan, in 1964. The minute he arrived in North Korea he thought, "I can't live in this place," so he escaped. He entered South Korea in 1966, crossing the 38th parallel through the snow and land mines after spending 575 days in North Korea. After entering South Korea he was interrogated by South Korean authorities that suspected him of being a spy. His book was published using records of the interviews.<sup>19</sup> Information on what happened during the repatriations encouraged us to build a case against Chongryon. After we put together the court case and presented it to the Japanese courts, however, they ruled against us. They declared that there's a statute of limitations of three years for the kinds of activities we were accusing Chongryon.

The next case we put together was with Sun-hyeong Lee. In the case of Lee, put to the courts in 2006, we learned from our past experiences, and the group attempted to present it within three years of Sun-hyeong entering Japan. This trial was different from the last one in that we aggressively pursued our claims that this was a hostage case. However, although we put the case together and presented it within the time required, it was also dismissed because of a time limitation issue. We're now in search of somebody, a returnee, who can be at the head of the next case. In the next trial we're intending to

accuse not only Chongryon, but also the North Korean government. The hardest thing of all is finding a person who is willing to do this, as all the case records and everything during the legal process has to be done using real names. A defector who enters Japan has to be willing to be at the head of a case presented within six months of their arrival. That's a completely new arrival to Japan and they'll probably still have family in North Korea. They'll have to have a strong will to make a strong case.

A problem not mentioned by any of the Japanese NPO members regarding their legal activism is the psychological toll that putting oneself and one's family in clear danger has on the returnee who joins them. The returnee who agrees to be the figurehead of a lawsuit against Chongryon and the DPRK government risks her life and the lives of her family in publically exposing herself.

Sun-hyeong Lee, a petite woman in her mid-fifties, appeared anxious each time we met; her speech was jittery and she would often speak of her poor health. She explained that the stress of living in North Korea, of starting her life over in Japan, and of working with Akio's group had provoked stomach ulcers that continuously troubled her. Her deteriorating health was a result of the strain she was under and the price that she had paid in joining the legal battle of the Japanese NPOs against the representatives of Chongryon. "A lot of people ask me, 'What's the point of it all?' Why did I want to sue Chongryon for the repatriation movement?" Sun-hyeong recalled during an interview with me in Osaka.

It's because I can't forgive them for their actions, for sending people to North Korea. So, with Kawashima-sensei, we decided to take them to court. We approached the United Nations to try and put a case together. I went to Washington and testified about life in North Korea, why people went there, why I left, and the role of Chongryon in all of it.

The point was to inform the Japanese people, to tell them about North Korea and Chongryon through the United Nations. It wasn't possible to speak directly to the Japanese public, and people still believed that Chongryon had done a good thing in organizing the repatriation movement. We had to go through the United Nations so the world, and Japan, would know the reality of the repatriation and my

own experiences. But our case failed and now we are waiting for another person to come from North Korea and we can try again to sue Chongryon. The difficulty with this is that there is a law in North Korea that states that the whole family is punished for the mistakes of one person.<sup>20</sup> Many of my family members are still in North Korea. Because of what I did, the government sent them to state labour camps. I don't even know what's happened to them. My children can't forgive me for getting involved and causing so much trouble for everyone. They think I was being selfish and didn't consider how it might affect their lives in Japan.

Since Sun-hyeong's arrival in Japan, SRNK had helped her find work in a hospital and accommodation in Osaka. The organization always invited her to NPO meetings. Sun-hyeong's desire for retribution merged with SRNK's mission for redemption, but it was also a means for her to repay the ongoing support of the organization. Her actions, however, led directly to North Korean police arresting and detaining in labor camps family who remained in the DPRK. The stress of not knowing their fate and the guilt of having possibly contributed to their demise has taken a toll on her mental health and driven a wedge between her and her children, also now in Japan.

In addition to the high-profile legal roles that NPOs ask some new arrivals to perform, the relationship with NPO members compels returnees to open up the intimate details of their lives to the scrutiny of the NPOs. For returnees without family in Japan, or individuals deemed unable to take care of themselves, the Japanese state requires that organization members act as guarantors for their safety and conduct. In taking responsibility for these individuals, NPO leaders ensure that their charges follow a path they approve of. Particularly, the younger arrivals from North Korea are expected to keep organization members regularly updated as to their personal progress in Japan.

One young returnee, Hye-rim Ko, living on the outskirts of Tokyo, explained to me that Isamu is her guarantor and, although she receives no money from PNKR, Isamu "receives all

my college updates through the mail. So I have to study hard because he sees my grades before I do.” Her progress, since arriving in Japan, had also been tracked and reported on the group’s website. Hye-rim is attending a teaching college and is regarded by NPO leaders as a model of success for the organization and Zainichi returnees as a whole. This was a position that Hye-rim managed carefully. Over lunch she introduced me to her Japanese boyfriend. Pausing between bites, she momentarily switched from Japanese into Korean, “Things are going well between us,” she said, gesturing to her boyfriend, who was trying to figure out what she was saying. “We’re planning on moving in together. Maybe even getting engaged. But I have to keep it a secret as I’m sure Isamu-sensei would disapprove.”

The role of NPO leaders as pseudo parents who guide new arrivals through their new life in Japan becomes more apparent in the cases of younger returnees such as Hye-rim. They have the power to both reward and admonish the younger returnees, giving or withholding their approval where they see fit. But in the same way that many teenagers grow apart from their parents, young returnees negotiate their own space, outside of the control of the NPO groups.

## **Conclusion**

The Japanese government’s hands-off approach to returnees from North Korea has created a void that is filled by Japanese civic organizations. In an age of ideological extremes, activists who once looked to socialism for leadership shifted their aims to a conservative, right wing agenda set on destabilizing the North Korean government. The mission of Japanese NPOs involved in resettling returnees is underpinned by the desire of members to attain redemption for mistakes they made in the past, and ensure that their organizations continue after they die.



These groups present returnees with both freedom and bondage. Freedom comes with the chance to begin a new life, away from the tyrannical state apparatus of the DPRK. Bondage, on the other hand, is the inevitable result of the violence imparted by a gift that can never be repaid. In an effort to renegotiate this debt, returnees continuously do small favours for NPOs and engender flexible pseudo-kinship relationships to underline and reframe their intimate relationship with organization members.

Returnees' efforts to mitigate the poison of the gift is not, however, always successful. Continuous interactions and exchanges with NPO members lock Zainichi returnees into a relationship with Japanese civic organizations. Over time, the relationship thickens as strands of trust reach out and wrap around the initial bond of obligation. But instead of the relationship becoming durable and robust, the relationship infantilizes the returnees and puts their consanguine family who remain in the DPRK in danger.

In making pseudo-kinship relationships with Japanese civic group members, returnees from North Korea risk breaking their real kinship relations. The poison of their gift creeps outwards along returnees' kinship networks, threatening to rupture familial ties to loved ones left behind in North Korea. In her foreword to Mauss's *The Gift*, Mary Douglas eloquently stated, "Charity is meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources. Though we laud charity as a Christian virtue we know that it wounds" (2000). Similar to the mistakes of the repatriation movement a generation earlier, the help of NPOs risks harming individuals who involve themselves in high-profile activism with these groups. As such, to paraphrase the words of philosopher George Santayana, the members of these organizations may be condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past (2011: 172).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In Japanese “Zainichi” means “foreigner residing in Japan.” However, the expression “Zainichi Korean” has been appropriated by long-term ethnically Korean citizens of Japan to distinguish them from the Japanese population and from later waves of “newcomer” migrations from South Korea.

<sup>2</sup> 帰国事業’ in Japanese, and ‘북성사업’ in Korean. For more on the Repatriation movement see Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s (2007) *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan’s Cold War*.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term “Zainichi returnee” to refer to Koreans who moved to North Korea during the Repatriation movement (1959-1984) and later escaped the DPRK, returning to Japan. I acknowledge that this term is contentious, however, as some Zainichi returnees would prefer to be known as North Korean, some as North Korean refugees, and some simply as Zainichi Korean. Some of these individuals are ethnically Japanese. Official discourse on the subject of North Korean refugees often lump North Koreans in South Korea and North Koreans in Japan into the same category. However, this oversimplifies the situation, as the Japanese government does not consider individuals who were part of the repatriation movement as refugees. Yet, contradictorily, these individuals become stateless once they arrive in Japan.

<sup>4</sup> \$998 USD per month, as of April 2015.

<sup>5</sup> If a person works part time and earns 50,000 yen a month, half of that will be deducted from their social security income.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the resettlement of North Korean refugees in South Korea see Markus Bell’s (2013) “Manufacturing Kinship in a Nation Divided.”

<sup>7</sup> The names of the participants in this paper and the organizations under discussion have been changed to protect the identity of those who kindly gave their time and expertise.

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<sup>8</sup> Akio Kawashima continues to finance various initiatives for Zainichi returnees, including paying for the travel expenses of those attending Japanese languages class and financing the development of an agricultural project designed to create employment for unskilled and elderly returnees.

<sup>9</sup> ‘拉致問題’, in Japanese.

<sup>10</sup> In November 1987, Korean Air flight 858 exploded mid-air. Two North Korean agents were subsequently arrested for the bombing. One committed suicide; the other, Kim Hyon-hui, admitted acting on orders from the North Korean government. For more on this subject see Kim Hyon-hui’s (1993) *The Tears of My Soul*.

<sup>11</sup> “I Believed North Korea’s Propaganda,” in Amnesty International AI Journal (Original in German).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the abduction issue see Robert S. Boynton’s (2016) *The Invitation Only Zone: The True Story of North Korea’s Abduction Project*.

<sup>13</sup> The Stockholm Agreement was signed between the DPRK and Japan in May 2014. In this agreement Japan sought a resolution to the “Abduction issue” in exchange for the normalization of diplomatic relations.

<sup>14</sup> Thousands of Japanese civilians were left behind in Manchuria following the Japanese defeat and withdrawal from Northeast China. Some of these individuals have since returned to Japan. For more on Japanese war orphans in China see Yeesan Chan (2011), *Abandoned Japanese in Postwar Manchuria*.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Greenhill (2011) argues that South Korean and Japanese civic groups pursued these methods as a means of drawing international attention to North Korean human rights violations and attempting to provoke regime change via the mass outward migration of North Korean refugees (See Greenhill, chapter five)

<sup>16</sup> Sorensen and Kim (2004) write, “Filial piety has long been fundamental to Korean ethics. During the Buddhist Koryo dynasty (918-1392), the Sutra of Parental Grace was popular, but it was Confucianizing reforms, introduced at the beginning of the chosen dynasty (1392-1910), that made Confucian family ethics central to Korean elite culture” (Sorensen and Kim: 155). Hashimoto explains, with reference to Japan, “The

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values of obedience and deference toward parents central to koko (filial piety) [in Japan] have been subjected effectively to this method of transmission, especially as long-standing virtues deeply rooted in the Confucian and moral education of Tokugawa Japan (1603-1868) and the nationalist education of late Meiji (1868-1912) through early Showa Japan (1926-89)” (2004: 182-197).

<sup>17</sup> “부담이 너무 많아요”

<sup>18</sup> ‘The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan,’ Chongryon (총련) in Korean and *Sōren* (総連) in Japanese, is one of two main organizations for Koreans in Japan. Chongryon functions as North Korea's de-facto embassy in Japan.

<sup>19</sup> The book is titled “Nightmare 575 Days.” Akio came across this book as a university student.

<sup>20</sup> This is a ‘guilt by association’ law, whereby three generations of a family are punished for the political crimes of a single family member.

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### **Notes on contributor**

Markus Peter Simpson Bell is a lecturer at the University of Sheffield's School of East Asian Studies (SEAS). His research examines contemporary and cold war migration between North Korea and Japan. He has published extensively on the topic of North Korean migrants in South Korea and in third countries. He can be contacted at [Markus.bell@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Markus.bell@sheffield.ac.uk).

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