

RE-IMAGINING JAPAN – NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

PART 2

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IV. THE THIRD CYCLE: FAMINE, AID AND THE ‘JAPANESE WIVES’, 1990–2001

The ‘Arduous March’ and Japanese Aid

By the second half of the 1980s, there were once again hopes for an opening of North Korea to the outside world. The DPRK’s major allies, China and the Soviet Union had both (in different ways) entered phases of far reaching reform.¹ In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War in Europe, it seemed likely that equally dramatic changes might bring an end to the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula. In September 1991 both North and South Korea were admitted to the United Nations, and in December of the same year the two Koreas signed agreements to work towards political and economic normalization.²

This changing environment opened the way for fresh moves towards the normalization of relations between Japan and the DPRK. In 1989 a delegation of members of the DPRK’s ruling Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) were admitted to Japan for discussions with opposition and government politicians, and in September 1990 a joint delegation made up of politicians from Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the opposition Japan Socialist Party (JSP) traveled to Pyongyang, where discussions between North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, JSP Deputy Leader Tanabe Makoto and the LDP Deputy President Kanemaru Shin (a key intermediary in Japan–Korea relations) produced a Three-Party Joint Declaration on relations between the two countries. The declaration called for Japan to apologize and pay compensation for the wrongs inflicted by its colonial rule, and urged the two countries to move towards normalizing their diplomatic relationship. It also led to the release by North Korea of the remaining *Fujisan Maru* crew members.³

The Three-Party Joint Declaration paved the way for a series of normalization talks between Japan and North Korea in 1991 and 1992; but these soon became bogged down in controversy. One impediment to progress was the deep reluctance on the side of the

¹ Motoi Tamaki, ‘Open Policies of North Korea: Prospects and Political Structure’, in Masao Okonogi ed., *North Korea at the Crossroads*, Tokyo, Japan Institute of International Affairs, 1988, pp. 22–44, particularly p. 30.

² Kang Sang-Jung, *Nicchō Kankei no Kokufuku*, Tokyo, Shūeisha Shinsho, 2003, pp. 100–101; Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Economic Power and Security: Japan and North Korea*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. 70–71.

³ Kang, *Nicchō Kankei*, pp. 102–103; Hughes, *Japan’s Economic Power and Security*, pp. 82–83.

Japan's ruling party to provide any form of compensation to North Korea for colonial rule. Another was growing concern in Japan and its ally the United States over signs that North Korea was seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the talks process was also seriously damaged by the arrest in 1992 of one of its key Japanese architects, Kanemaru Shin, on corruption charges.⁴

There were further efforts to revive the normalization process under the Murayama coalition government in the mid-1990s, but by now North Korea's relationship with the rest of the world was increasingly overshadowed by other problems. From the DPRK's perspective, the end of the Cold War world order had brought with it a drastic decline in the foreign economic and military support on which the country had come to depend. North Korea's sense of isolation and vulnerability was clearly an important force behind its incipient nuclear weapons program. Mounting international concern at this program led to former US President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang in 1994, and the creation of the Agreed Framework, under which the United States and other countries promised to provide crude oil and Light Water Reactors in return for a dismantling of the DPRK's nuclear program. However, over the course of the decade, problems of implementation — including the reluctance of the US Congress to approve the release of funds for the program — led to repeated delays and increased mistrust on both sides.

Meanwhile, the loss of Soviet aid, the transformation of the world order and the growing domestic emphasis on the military all contributed to the crisis which overwhelmed the North Korean economy in mid-1990s. Following the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994, it was widely predicted by outside observers that the regime would collapse altogether. In fact, it survived, but at the cost of terrible economic hardship for most of its people. The most reliable estimates suggest that between 600,000 and one million North Koreans died in the famine of the mid-1990s, an event euphemistically described by the DPRK authorities as 'the Arduous March' [*Gunan ui Haenggun*].

In Japan, the first reports of the North Korean food crisis began appearing in the media as early as the middle of 1992. In July of that month, for example, the *Asahi* newspaper's Seoul correspondent Odagawa Koh (an expert observer of Korean affairs) published a brief report on the DPRK's worsening food and energy shortages.⁵ By early 1994, reports by refugees fleeing to South Korea spoke of chronic hunger even amongst the ranks of the North Korean army. At first, the world was relatively slow to react, in part because the North Korean authorities themselves were slow to call for outside aid. After the situation was further worsened by massive flooding in the middle of 1995, though, the DPRK itself began to appeal for food assistance from wealthier countries including Japan: a country which was in a particularly good position to help, because its protectionist agricultural policies had left it with a substantial rice surplus. Japan's response was prompt. In June 1995, it agreed to provide North Korea with 300,000 tons

⁴ Gavan McCormack, *Japan and North Korea: The Long and Twisted Path to Normalcy*, Washington, US-Korea Institute at SAIS, Working Paper 08-06, November 2008, p. 6.

⁵ *Asahi Shimbun*, 24 July 1992; see also *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 January 1993.

of rice — half of it provided free and half exported on favourable terms. This was followed up by a further export of 200,000 tons on concessional terms in October 1995.⁶

One interesting and little noticed feature of the 1990s North Korean famine was the response that it evoked from Japanese civil society. Despite the decades of tense relations and the negative images of North Korea which abounded in media, some Japanese local governments and NGOs responded with generosity to the crisis. Their efforts were, inevitably, small in practical terms, but suggested possibilities of developing human relationships across the ideological divide. In December 1995, for example, Miki Mutsuko, the wife of former Japanese Prime Minister Miki Takeo, established an NGO to send ‘eggs and fruit’ to North Korean children, emphasizing that, however critical one was of the DPRK regime, the famine was a humanitarian crisis which demanded a response. The following year, in collaboration with former LDP politician Utsunomiya Tokuma and Socialist Party parliamentarian Tanabe Makoto, she expanded this into an aid group called AFM, focusing specifically on the North Korean food crisis.⁷ The local government of the Katsushika district of Tokyo and Kyoto City’s agricultural cooperative also set up programs to send aid to North Korea, as did some Japanese Buddhist groups and a number of NGOs in the city of Kobe, which had recently suffered its own humanitarian disaster — the Hanshin Earthquake of 1995.⁸ Koreans in Japan, of course, also played a very active role in many of these organizations. By 1997, an NGO conference in Tokyo had led to the creation of a loose network of Japanese groups engaged in humanitarian support for North Korea, and Japanese groups were beginning to form links with South Korean aid NGOs. The peak of their activity came in 2000, with the opening of a major NGO symposium on North Korea, which sought to develop plans not just for immediate humanitarian aid but also for longer-term development assistance.⁹

While NGO aid could to some extent avoid the entanglements of international politics, government aid was quickly caught up in a complex web of trade-offs in which (as so often before in Japan–Korea relations) human lives became counters on the bargaining table. In 1996, Japan responded to appeals from the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) by donating \$5.25 million to the WFP’s relief effort in North Korea, and in 1997 its contribution soared to \$27 million, with an additional donation of \$776,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross to support its relief missions in the DPRK.¹⁰ These welcome donations surely saved lives. But the ebb and flow of Japanese aid was also closely linked to progress on other issues on the diplomatic agenda. These included security problems, particularly the nuclear issue and North Korea’s testing of Taepodong missiles in 1994 and 1997. In the middle of the 1990s, however, a particularly

⁶ *Nihon Nōgyō Shimbun*, 30 December 1995; see also *Nihon Nōgyō Shimbun*, 30 June 1995; *Nihon Nōgyō Shimbun*, 4 December 1995.

⁷ *Asahi Shimbun*, evening edition, 12 December 1995; *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 July 1996.

⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 May 1997; *Tokyo Shimbun*, 23 September 1997; *Asahi Shimbun*, 12 October 1995

⁹ Yi Yeong-Chae, ‘Nihon no NGO ni yoru Jindō Shien no Genkyō to Tenbō’, in Okonogi Masao and Isozaki Atsuhito eds., *Kita Chōsen to Ningen no Anzen Hoshō*, Tokyo, Keiō Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2009, pp. 217–239, see particularly p. 225.

¹⁰ UN World Food Program Emergency Report no. 27, 1996, ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’; *Daily Yomiuri*, 28 September 1997; United Nations Department of Public Information press release 15 October 1997; Australian Broadcasting Company news 9 October 1997.

important focus of debate was the question of the so-called 'Japanese wives' — Japanese women who had gone to the DPRK with Korean husbands under the mass repatriation program of the early 1960s.

The Problem of the 'Japanese Wives'

Having failed to respond positively when North Korea pushed the issue of cross-border travel for 'returnees' in the mid-1960s, the Japanese government itself had now become deeply concerned about the plight of these women. By the 1990s, many of the Japanese citizens who had migrated to North Korea in the 1960s were ageing, and in some cases their families in Japan were desperately lobbying the government to secure an opportunity for a reunion. The Japanese government began to press North Korea for details of the fate of Japanese nationals in the DPRK early in the 1990s, and in 1993, when North Korea criticized Japan before the United Nations Committee on Human Rights for its failure to address the 'Comfort Women' issue, Japan responded by criticizing North Korea for its failure to provide information on the 'Japanese wives'.¹¹

Anxiety about the fate of those repatriated to North Korea was certainly justified, for by the 1990s, stories brought out of the North Korea by a growing flood of refugees suggested that many, including some Japanese nationals, had suffered human rights abuses including incarceration in labour camps. But the issue of Japanese migrants to North Korea also raised problems of nationality, ethnicity and gender.¹² The issue is generally referred to in Japan as the problem of 'the Japanese wives' [*Nihonjinzuma*], and the Japanese Ministry of Justice in the early 1990s estimated the number of these wives at around 1,800. But, the number of Japanese nationals who had migrated to North Korea under the repatriation program was in fact over 6,000. Red Cross figures from the 1960s show that just over half of these people were children at the time of their migration, while the rest were either adults or in their mid-to-late teens. Of those born before 1950, about 20 per cent were men and 80 per cent women.¹³ The definition of the issue as being one of 'Japanese wives' means that other Japanese nationals who had gone to North Korea (husbands, children, adopted family members, naturalized Japanese nationals) are excluded, though the grounds for this exclusion have never been made explicit.

One particularly vexing problem surrounds the issue of the 'Japanese wives'. As mentioned above, oral testimony from numerous participants in the repatriation indicates that Japanese wives (and possibly also others with Japanese nationality) taking part in the mass repatriation to North Korea were assured that they would be allowed to make home visits to Japan after three years. The promises appear to have been made by *Sôren* officials, but it seems somewhat unlikely that Japanese government and Red Cross

¹¹ *Asahi Shimbun*, 7 March 1993.

¹² See Kang Sang-Jung, "'Satogaeri'" ga Nihon ni tsukitsukeru mono', *Asahi Shimbun*, 15 October 1997.

¹³ Of the 6,331 Japanese nationals who had left Japan for the DPRK as of May 1964, 3,318 (1,789 boys and 1,531 girls) had been born after 1950. Of the 3,013 born before 1950, 659 were men and 2,354 women. The oldest were 10 Japanese men and 25 women born in the nineteenth century, and thus already in their 60s when they migrated to North Korea. See Immigration Control Bureau, Justice Ministry, 'Monthly Report on Repatriation to North Korea, no. 53, 31 May 1964', (English translation) in ICRC Archives, B AG 232 105-030.01, *Monthly reports on the repatriation to North Korea*, 31.03.1961-31.12.1964.

officials could have been entirely unaware of these commitments.¹⁴ The assurance of future home visits almost certainly influenced the decision of some Japanese nationals to relocate to North Korea, but in the end the promises proved hollow. As in the case of the 1950s negotiations on repatriation, a particularly important part in negotiations on the ‘Japanese wives’ was played by the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross Societies, who (as we have seen) played such a central role in the original mass migration. On 10 September 1997, the two societies reached agreement on the ‘Japanese wives’ issue, and one month later (and unmistakably as a *quid pro quo*) the Japanese government announced its major commitment of aid to famine-stricken North Korea via the World Food Programme and the ICRC.¹⁵

Two visits by Japanese wives from the DPRK took place, one in November 1997 and the second in 1998. The women stayed for a week, and most were able to return to their old hometowns for emotional reunions with friends and families. ‘This is my longtime dream’, one of the first group told reporters, ‘It’s been difficult to sleep because I’ve been so excited at the prospect of seeing my family again’. However, the wives had also apparently been carefully selected for reliability, and (doubtless mindful of their families in the DPRK) were careful to express nothing but praise for the North Korean regime.¹⁶ A further group visit was planned for May 1998, but by now, the atmosphere of Japan–North Korea relations was again souring. This time, the central problem was the growing suspicion in Japan about the abductions. In the late 1990s, the DPRK heatedly denied the accusation that it had been responsible for any kidnappings, and sought to turn the tables on Japan by criticizing its government for seek to exclude Japanese wives who had renounced their Japanese nationality from taking part in the group visits back home. As these acrimonious exchanges intensified, further planned visits by Japanese wives were abandoned, to the bitter disappointment of some relatives of proposed participants.¹⁷ In early 2010, the new Hatoyama government expressed its commitment to taking up the issue once more¹⁸, but following Hatoyama’s resignation in mid-2010, the issue once again appeared to fall from the political agenda. More than ten years on, the visits have yet to be revived.

¹⁴ Material contained in the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross makes it clear that Japanese police were receiving detailed reports on *Sôren*’s repatriation strategies from informants within the organization throughout the early stages of the repatriation.

¹⁵ On the link between food aid and the ‘Japanese wives’ issue, see for example *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo edition), 10 September 1997.

¹⁶ Nicholas D. Kristoff, ‘After Isolation in North Korea, Japanese Wives Visit Homes’, *New York Times*, 9 November 1997.

¹⁷ *Asahi Shimbun* (evening edition), 8 June 1998

¹⁸ ‘Kita Chôsen Nihonjinzuma: Kikoku Jitsugen ni Doryoku’, *Tôoku Nippô*, 16 March 2010.



Sleeping woman, North Korea
(this woman sleeps under a home-made tent of plastic, constructed to keep in the warmth
on nights without heating)
(Drawing by North Korean refugee)

V. THE FOURTH CYCLE: FROM PYONGYANG DECLARATION TO ICE AGE, SINCE 2002

The Pyongyang Summit and its Aftermath

Prime Minister Koizumi's historic visit to Pyongyang in September 2002 seemed, for a moment, to hold out the prospect of a further breakthrough in Japan–North Korea relations: the greatest yet. The visit occurred against the background of South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung's 'Sunshine Policy' and the 2000 meeting between 'the two Kims' (Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il), but Koizumi's trip to Pyongyang still took all but his closest advisers by surprise.

The 'Pyongyang Declaration', signed by Koizumi and Kim Jong-Il on 17 September 2002, committed both countries to moving towards normalizing their relationship. It contained an expression of remorse from the Japanese government for the damage caused by colonization, together with a Japanese promise of large (but unspecified) amount of development aid, and North Korea's formal agreement that it would waive claims for compensation in return for this aid. This renunciation of Korean

demands for compensation in return for a commitment of development aid echoed the concession from South Korea which led to the normalization of relations between Japan and the ROK in 1965.¹⁹ The Pyongyang Declaration included a promise that both countries would sincerely discuss ‘the issue of the status of Korean residents in Japan’. It said nothing about the Japanese abductees; however, during private discussions held at the same time, Kim Jong-Il admitted that thirteen Japanese citizens had been kidnapped by North Korean agents, and stated that the ‘overzealous’ agents involved had been punished for their actions. The North Korean authorities reported that five of the thirteen were still alive, and eight had died as a result of illness or accidents. At the same time, the North Korean leader also apologized for the actions of a North Korean ship which had entered Japanese waters in 2001, apparently on a spying or smuggling mission, and been sunk by Japanese forces.

The admission about the abductions represented an astonishing backdown by North Korea, which had until then had vehemently denied any knowledge of the issue. North Korea’s formal renunciation of claims to compensation for colonialism was also in marked contrast to earlier demands.²⁰ In return for these concessions, Kim Jong-Il clearly anticipated a substantial inflow of Japanese development aid, which would support a transformation of North Korea’s ailing economy. According to some estimates, the sum discussed was in the \$5–10 billion range.²¹

In the meanwhile, the five surviving Japanese abductees were to be allowed to make a visit to their families in Japan, after which they were supposed to return to North Korea (where their children were living) to work out their long-term futures. After the experience of the home visits by the ‘Japanese wives’, all of whom had (reluctantly or otherwise) returned from their trips to Japan at the height of North Korea’s famine, the DPRK government clearly expected that the abductees would indeed go back to North Korea. However, once they touched down in Japan on 15 October 2002, the surviving abduction victims were greeted by an enormous wave of public emotion, and the Japanese government (responding in part to demands from the abductees’ families and the media) decided that the five would not be given the option of returning to North Korea, for fear that they would never be allowed out again.

The North Korean authorities, unfamiliar with the workings of the Japanese media, had evidently believed that, in return for the concessions they had made, the Japanese government would be able to persuade public opinion to accept the implausible accounts which the DPRK had given about the fates of the other eight abductees. On the contrary, however, the brief and uninformative North Korean statements, according to which two of these relatively young people had died of heart attacks, one of liver cirrhosis, two in car accidents (in a country with very few cars), two of poisoning from a heater and one by suicide, simply fuelled the Japanese media furor over the issue. The response of Japanese media and public opinion to the issue has indeed been so intense as to surprise

¹⁹ Manyin, ‘Japan-Korea Relations’, 2007, pp. 5–10.

²⁰ Kang, *Nicchō Kankei*, 2003.

²¹ ²¹Mark E. Manyin, ‘Japan-North Korea Relations: Selected Issues’, Washington, CRS Report for Congress, RL32161, p. 9.

even some of those familiar with the workings of a free press, and deserves closer attention (see following section).

Despite the shock of the news about the abductions, negotiations between Japan and North Korea continued throughout 2003 and 2004, not least because there was now great pressure within Japan to secure an agreement which would allow the five returned abductees to be reunited with their children, and enable the American defector husband of kidnap victim Soga Hitomi to join her in Japan. Meanwhile, at an international level, Japan was also participating in the multilateral negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue which, in 2003, evolved into the Six-Party Talks. In May 2004, Prime Minister Koizumi made a second visit to Pyongyang, where a further agreement was reached in an effort to salvage the Pyongyang Declaration. On this occasion, Japan promised humanitarian aid to North Korea, and agreed to address the issue of discrimination against Koreans in Japan, while North Korea agreed to allow the children of the surviving abductees to leave for Japan, to cooperate in arranging a meeting of Soga Hitomi and her husband in a third country, and to 're-examine' the deaths of the other Japanese kidnap victims. This agreement succeeded in reuniting the families of the former abductees, but all the remaining parts of the agreement were still-born.

On this occasion, the key sticking point proved to be the 're-examination' of the deaths of the abductees conducted by North Korea. When the North Korean government reported the results of this investigation to Japan late in 2004, it merely reiterated the explanations already given about the deaths. Although some further documents and clarification were offered by the DPRK these, far from satisfying the Japanese side, merely provoked further anger. The most contentious issue was the return to Japan of what North Korea claimed were the ashes of the youngest kidnap victim, Yokota Megumi. The Japanese government subjected these remains to DNA testing in two laboratories. Of these, one laboratory reported that no conclusive result could be produced, while the other concluded that the remains did not contain Yokota's DNA, but only the DNA of two other unknown people.

This finding was subsequently subject to serious scientific criticism, most notably from the journal *Nature*, which published an article highlighting the difficulty of reaching any conclusions based on very small bone fragments cremated at high temperature, and pointing out the likelihood of contamination.²² In other words, the *Nature* article suggested that it is impossible to say whether the remains are or are not those of Yokota Megumi. The Japanese government, on the other hand, has continued to insist that the DNA tests prove 'the remains belong to other individuals',²³ a position which the editors of *Nature* have criticized as scientifically unwarranted and crossing the 'boundary of science's freedom from political interference'.²⁴ The image of North Korea

²² David Cyranoski, 'DNA is Burning Issue in Japan and Korea Clash over Kidnaps', *Nature*, vol. 433, 3 February 2005, p. 445; for a detailed discussion of this issue, see McCormack, *Japan and North Korea*, 2008, pp. 12–13.

²³ See Government Headquarters for the Abduction Issue, 'Points of Contention with the North Korean Position', www.rachi.go.jp/en/mondaiten/index.html accessed 19 December 2008.

²⁴ 'Politics versus Reality', *Nature*, vol. 434, 17 March 2005, p. 257.

fraudulently handing back some unknown person's ashes to Yokota's parents, who have already suffered such terrible anguish, of course served to further enrage Japanese public opinion.

Against this background, Japan's humanitarian aid package for North Korea was abandoned in mid-stream, and Japan's policy towards North Korea became increasingly hard-line, particularly after Prime Minister Koizumi stepped down and was replaced by Abe Shinzô, who was known for his close links to the abduction victim support groups and his hostility to the DPRK. Abe's tenure as Prime Minister lasted less than a year. Nonetheless, by 2005, the Japanese government had reached a position in which, although still a participant in the Six-Party Process, it was, of all the parties other than North Korea (China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the United States) the most reluctant to engage with or make concessions to the DPRK.

Politics, Media and the Abduction Issue

In December 2007, as the Six Party Talks appeared to be making some progress towards the goal of North Korean de-nuclearization, *Time* magazine noted that, from Japan's point of view 'these diplomatic successes are threatening another of its most tenaciously held foreign policy goals: discovering the fate of 17 Japanese civilians kidnapped by the North between 1977 and 1983.'²⁵ Ever since the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons, and more generally the task of bringing the DPRK into the community of nations, have been the most serious security problems confronting Northeast Asia. Much has been written about the Six- Party Process, and about its repeated cycle of advances and retreats. Here I shall not attempt to delve into the complexities of that process, but rather to consider some reasons why Japan adopted a position that has put it out of step with the other participants in the Six-Party Talks: a position in which the abduction issue has become so central to Japan's concerns that signs of progress in de-nuclearization could be seen as a 'threat', because they conflicted with Japanese diplomatic strategies on the abductions.

The tragedy of the abductions provides an intriguing, though troubling, case study for examining the intersection of domestic public opinion with international relations. The first rumours of the abductions began to circulate in the Japanese media after a North Korean woman using an assumed Japanese identity, who had been arrested for involvement in the bombing of the Korean Airlines passenger plane in Baghdad in 1987, claimed to have been trained by a Japanese citizen who had been abducted by North Korea some years earlier. Until the mid-1990s, the families of the 'disappeared' initially found it difficult to interest the media or the Japanese government in their relatives' plights. In May 1995, however, the *Asahi* television station broadcast a documentary on stories of the disappearances²⁶, and from early 1997 the issue being taken up ruling and opposition party politicians, notably parliamentarians such as Ôguchi Hideo and Nishimura Shingo from the small (and since defunct) Democratic Socialist Party [*Minshatô*]. Interest in the problem was also stimulated by the writings of activists from

²⁵ Coco Masters, 'Japan's Problem with North Korea Talks', *Time*, 17 December 2007.

²⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, 25 May 1995.

groups such as the Modern Korea Institute — a think tank previously (under its earlier title the *Chōsen Kenkyūjo*) sympathetic to North Korea, but by the 1990s intensely critical of the Pyongyang regime.²⁷ By 1998, the Japanese media were also beginning to report the issue on a regular basis, and the problem was being raised with by the Japanese government in its talks with the DPRK, but without results.

After Kim Jong-II's surprise confession about the abductions in September 2002, and the arrival in Japan of the five surviving abductees, the media reporting on the abductions reached fever pitch. With media desperate for interviews with the abductees, and the abductees themselves needing privacy to recover from their traumatic experiences, a network of very closely inter-related abductee support groups came to play a key intermediary role, channeling information from the victims to the press. The most important of these groups were the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea (AFVKN, generally known in Japanese by the abbreviation *Kazokukai*, founded in 1997), the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea (NARKN, commonly known in Japanese as the *Sukuukai*, founded in 1998), and the Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese Probably Connected to North Korea (commonly known in Japanese as *Chōsakai*, founded in 2003). The groups provided a focal point where families of the abductees could share their anxieties. The parents of the abducted teenager Yokota Megumi quickly became the most recognizable public face of the AFVKN and NARKN. The groups, however, also received strong support from a variety of researchers, political activists, think tanks and politicians. A number of Japan's leading strategic think-tanks, it should be noted, have particularly close links to the abductee support groups. Araki Kazuhiro, head of the Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese Probably Connected to North Korea, is also founder and leader of the relatively influential Strategic Intelligence Institute Inc. [*Senryaku Jōhō Kenkyūjo KK*], while another important body, the Okazaki Research Institute (originally founded with the support of the giant public relations firm Hakuodo) is headed by former diplomat and outspoken anti-abduction campaigner Okazaki Hisahiko.²⁸ In the world of politics, meanwhile, from 2002 onward Abe Shinzō, the rising star of the Liberal Democratic Party, took up the abductees' cause in a very public manner which, given the public response to the problem, won him much popularity.

The way the abduction story came to be told in the Japanese media, therefore, was strongly influenced by political issues, including rivalries between various sections of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. It would, however, be a mistake to see the astonishingly powerful media response simply as a product of political pressures. Rather, this response must also be seen as arising from the nature both of the issue itself and of the Japanese media. As well as being a terrible violation of human rights, the abductions were events

²⁷ See for example *Mainichi Shimbun*, 3 February 1997; *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 3 February 1997; *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Tokyo), 3 February 1997.

²⁸ See Araki's homepage, <http://araki.way-nifty.com/about.html>, accessed 3 September 2007; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Tokyo, 27 May 1999; see also <http://www.okazaki-inst.jp/okazakibio.eng.html> accessed 10 September 2009; <http://www.okazaki-inst.jp/official/okazaki-inst/> (accessed 3 February 2010); also Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 'Refugees, Abductees, "Returnees": Human Rights in Japan-North Korea Relations', in Sonia Ryang ed., *North Korea: Towards a Better Understanding*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2009, pp.129–155.

that readily tapped subliminal fears. Every parent's worst nightmare is the fear of their child's disappearance. The stories of the abductees, plucked from mundane existences in quiet regions of Japan in such extraordinary circumstances, evoked both fascination and anger. Not only was the story one filled with intrinsic human interest: it also had a clearly identifiable villain — North Korea, personified in the figure of Kim Jong-Il. At a time when Japan often faced criticism from media in other parts of Asia for its failure to compensate the victims of its colonialism and wartime expansion, this was a story in which Japan was unequivocally the victim.

All these factors help to explain why the media and Japanese public opinion reacted to the story with an outpouring of emotion which few other events in Japanese history have evoked. And once these emotions surfaced, the structure of the Japanese media served to magnify them. On the one hand, Japan's highly competitive and rather lurid weekly magazines competed with one another to publish the latest revelations on the issue. On the other, the more serious but very cautious daily newspapers were reluctant to publish any stories that questioned the stance taken by the abduction support groups, for fear of evoking a backlash from their readers.

However, the intensity of the media reaction was perhaps less important than its content. Within a year or so of Koizumi's 2002 visit to Pyongyang, a *particular* version of the abduction story — the version favoured by the AFVKN and NARKN — had come to dominate Japanese media reporting of the issue. The most important element of this version is that it not only rejects the North Korean account of the deaths of eight abductees as false, but also (as reflected in the images of the 'girl in the ice-cube') insists that *all* the abductees are still alive, being held against their will in North Korea, and must be sent home. At the same time, the Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese Probably Connected to North Korea has undertaken the task of scouring Japanese missing persons cases going back to the 1940s for evidence that they are connected to the North Korea²⁹, and media broadcasts have frequently re-told the stories of unsolved disappearances, similarly suggesting that the hidden hand of the DPRK was at work, and sometimes also alleging possible links to Koreans in Japan.

It is, of course, very understandable that the families of abductees whose deaths have been reported by North Korea should cling to the hope that their loved ones are still alive, particularly since the information provided by the DPRK leaves so many questions unanswered. Some may indeed still be alive in the North Korea. The North Korean government's 2002 admission failed to mention the fate of Soga Miyoshi, the mother of Soga Hitomi, who vanished at the same time as her daughter, and the DPRK has continued to deny knowledge of her. It defies belief that North Korean agents were not responsible for Soga Miyoshi's disappearance, and thus it seems clear that there is at least one case for which North Korea has yet to account (and there may well be more). The problem with Japanese media reporting on the issue, however, is that a single version of events — an insistence that all abductees are still alive and that all will return home — has become so powerful that reasoned debate on the issue in the mainstream media has

²⁹ See the *Chōsakai* website, <http://chosa-kai.jp/listsyukei.html>, accessed 2 September 2007, which suggests a figure of some 470 or more abductions of Japanese by North Korea.

become very difficult. There is, for example, hardly any public discussion of the possibility which many observers undoubtedly entertain in private — that some of those reported by North Koreans as dead may indeed have died, but in circumstances which the DPRK authorities wish to conceal.

Meanwhile, the Japanese government itself has taken up this AFVKN/NARKN version of events and now presents it as uncontroverted truth to the outside world and to Japanese domestic opinion through government-sponsored advertising campaigns. There is therefore a self-reinforcing information feedback loop between the media and government, and this loop is strengthened by the Japanese government's recent policy initiatives. The more negotiations on the issue with North Korea became bogged down, the more the Japanese government has turned its attention to information strategies directed at its own population and the wider world. Information is disseminated both by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the special Headquarters for the Abduction Issue, which was created in September 2006 and is attached to the Prime Minister's Office. In addition to its multilingual website, which disseminates pamphlets, videos and a recording of Noel Stookey's 'Song for Megumi', the Headquarters also runs its own dedicated online video channel, broadcasting advertisements and cartoon films such as the 25-minute *anime* Megumi.³⁰ It is also currently offering grants of up to 100 million yen to individuals and groups which create educational material, art exhibitions, videos, translations etc. aimed particularly at 'raising the awareness' of Japanese young people and international audiences about the abduction issue. One condition of the grants is that the information contained in the works produced must conform with the Japanese government line on the abductions.³¹

In other words, the more the abduction issue is debated, the narrower the terms of debate have become. The consequences are worrying. A thorough and credible investigation of the abductions is urgently needed, but this is extremely difficult when not only the North Korean but also the Japanese governments are prepared to accept just one predetermined outcome. Having been told so many times that all the abductees are still alive and will some day come home, how will Japanese opinion react if it turns out indeed to be true that some have died years or decades ago? The stance taken by the Japanese government on the issue has, indeed, begun to disturb some of the relatives of the abductees themselves. In June 2008, Hasuike Tôru, a former senior official of AFVKN and brother of surviving abductee Hasuike Kaoru, published an interview expressing strong criticism of the Japanese government's approach, which he now sees as having politicized the plight of the abductees for ulterior ends. Hasuike speaks eloquently of the pain of the abductees and their families, but criticizes the government for failing to attempt to understand North Korean views of Japan, and for doing nothing reduce tensions by addressing problems of the memory of colonialism.

As Hasuike rightly points out, the hardening of the Japanese position around a set of factually debatable assertions about the abduction has not helped to solve the problem, nor to relieve the suffering of the individuals involved. What it has done is to freeze

³⁰ See www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/abduction/index.html and <http://rachi.channel.yahoo.co.jp>

³¹ See www.rachi.go.jp/jp/shisei/keihatsu/index.html

progress on all other aspects of the Japan-North Korea relationship. It has also diverted public attention from a growing nexus of problems in that relationship — problems which, sooner rather than later, will have to be confronted. The Democratic Party government which took power in Japan in July 2009 has moved very cautiously on the abduction issue. It is well aware of the intense sensitivities involved, and of the presence of politicians in its own ranks who are adamantly opposed to a shift away from the existing line on North Korea. Prime Minister Hatoyama, during his brief tenure of power, showed clear signs of wishing to develop a new approach to the issue. After paying his New Years respects to the Ise Shrine at the beginning of 2010, for example, Hatoyama spoke to accompanying media about the need for discussions with North Korea on the abduction issue, and expressed his willingness to travel to Pyongyang himself for that purpose, although he also remarked that ‘unfortunately, now is not the right timing’ for such a visit.³²

Even more unfortunately, since then the demise of the Hatoyama government, pressing domestic problems within Japan and worsening tensions on the Korea Peninsula have all contributed to a lack of new initiatives on the North Korean problem. By late 2010, however, the situation had reached a point of crisis where such initiatives were urgently needed.

VI. BEYOND THE ICE-AGE: THE LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

The Hungry Neighbour

In a relationship beset by uncertainties, one thing is sure: Japan and North Korea are neighbours, bound together by geography, history and social ties. Their destinies are not separable, and no amount of mutual mistrust and avoidance will make them so. At the time of writing, the future of the DPRK’s political and economic system is obscure. Leader Kim Jong-Il is ageing, and appears to be in failing health. His youngest son Kim Jong-Eun has been identified as his chosen successor, but even amongst those with a relatively good knowledge of the North Korean system there is doubt whether the younger is capable of exercising real political leadership, or whether he will become essentially a ‘puppet’ controlled by others such as his uncle, the powerful technocrat and Central Military Commission member Jang Song-Taek.

Since 2008, internal processes in the DPRK, coinciding with the advent of the conservative Lee Myung-Bak administration in the ROK, have led to a drastic retreat from the policies of economic opening which had been evident during the previous ten years. Rising tensions culminated in 2010 in the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* and the cross-border exchange of artillery fire on 23 November. In the longer term, though, it seems clear that the DPRK cannot continue to exist indefinitely in a state of isolation from the rest of the world. Whenever and however its reintegration into

³² NHK News, 4 January 2010.

international society occurs, this will have profound long-term implications for Japan. Yet there is very little evidence of serious public discussion within Japan about these implications.

During 2008-early 2009, North Korea was saved from the spectre of renewed mass famine mainly by the fact that the weather was good and there were no major floods. Despite these fortunate circumstances, a food survey conducted by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FOA) and World Food Programme (WFP) found that food production had fallen for the third successive year, as a result of soil exhaustion and shortage of fertilizers and fuel.³³ In 2010, widespread flooding swamped large areas of arable land and displaced an estimated 15,000 families.³⁴ With aid from South Korea suspended following the November military clash, the spectre of famine is again very real. The FOA/WFP estimates that already over one third of children aged under six have stunted growth, and around one third of mothers of small children suffer from malnutrition. Since malnutrition has lasting effects on human development, the impact of hunger on this generation of North Korea's children will still be being felt in the middle of the twenty-first century.

The government of the DPRK clearly bears the main responsibility for the crisis of the nation's economy. The emphasis on the military rather than the civilian economy, and the reluctance to open the doors more widely to trade and international investment, are key causes of the chronic hunger and material hardship that plague the country. But the current economic situation is also closely interwoven with the DPRK's international relationships. Neighbouring countries, including Japan, therefore cannot simply wash their hands of all responsibility for or association with these developments in North Korea. The situation in North Korea represents a profound humanitarian crisis, and it is one that affects many thousands of people in Japan directly, since they have close relatives living in the DPRK. Yet unlike the situation during the 1990s famine, when Japan was a significant aid donor and Japanese NGOs responded with concern to the North Korean famine, since 2004 the Japanese state has refused to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea (despite an appeal to its government from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on the eve of the Hokkaido G-8 Summit in July 2008³⁵).

Japan, following the lead of the United States, seems to be adopting a strategy euphemistically known as 'strategic patience', but in this case perhaps better described more bluntly as 'waiting to see what happens'. The absence of Japanese initiative in relation to North Korea has, indeed, led to some cynicism even on the part of South Korea, which currently enjoys a generally warm relationship with Japan. Recently leaked US documents reveal South Korea's Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs observing that

³³ UN Food and Agricultural Organization / UN World Food Program, *FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 8 December 2008.

³⁴ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Floods*, Geneva, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 27 August 2010.

³⁵ Deutsche-Press-Agentur Press release 1 July 2008.

'Japan's preference' was to keep Korea divided, though he added that Japan lacked the leverage to prevent re-unification if North Korea were to collapse.³⁶

Whether collapse and violence or gradual and peaceful reintegration occurs, the greater the wealth gap between the DPRK and the surrounding countries becomes, and the more the economic and social fabric of the DPRK unravels, the greater will be the difficulties encountered when North Korea finally begins to be truly integrated into the regional and international system. The long-term reintegration of North Korea will also be complicated by a factor which is often neglected or misunderstood by the media. North Korea is commonly depicted as a rigidly controlled society where all power rests in the hands of a centralized leadership; but this perception is only partly correct. Though society is indeed highly policed, and opposition to the regime totally prohibited, a surface level of totalitarian control covers a grass-roots society permeated by corruption, selective application of the rules and (often) general confusion.

Evidence both from refugees and from *Zainichi* Koreans who regularly visit relatives in North Korea, for example, reveals that restrictions on movement from place to place can sometimes be circumvented by access (or payments) to the right officials. During the famine of the 1990s, workers often checked in at factories in the morning and then left their workplaces to trade on the black-market — a practice which in part explains more recent efforts by the North Korean state to control market trading, particularly by working-age males. Driven by economic desperation, many people in remoter parts of North Korea have carved unauthorized private farm plots out of mountain forests and used them to grow food. The authorities, who understand the economic necessity which impels this practice, have often turned a blind eye. However, a side effect of the practice is increased deforestation and land-erosion. As a result, the DPRK government is now endeavouring to curb the practice. Meanwhile, in a country where all land is state owned, an unofficial real estate market is beginning to flourish, as residents (seeking to escape houses and apartments that lack the most basic of amenities) exchange cash for access to better housing. In this context it is likely that internal conflicts in North Korea, at least at local level, may be driven less by ideological factors than by competition between individuals or organizations to control the gains that flow from corruption and the 'grey' economy.

These 'bottom up', informal transformations have other interesting aspects which also bring with them complex social challenges. Since men are more closely intermeshed with the formal economy, a disproportionately large share of the informal economy is run by women. Border-crossing from North Korea into China is also more often carried out by women than men, and indeed around 80 per cent of the 20,000-odd North Korean refugees now living in South Korea are women. Future social change is likely to bring with it even larger-scale internal and cross-border migration, with significant impacts on social cohesion, local gender balances and family structures.

The burgeoning of this grey economy — the world of illegal or semi-legal production and trade — is thus both a harbinger of change and a potential source of

³⁶ Telegram from Ambassador Kathleen Stephens to State Department Washington, 22 February 2010.

future social tensions. For North Korea's neighbours, the most desirable future is one in which the DPRK gradually opens its economy to the outside world, generating forces which will stimulate long-term social and political change. Abrupt regime collapse in a country riven by hunger and chaos would be disastrous both for North Koreans and for their neighbours. But, however change comes, the demise of the current DPRK regime will not provide any instant solutions to North Korea's massive social and economic problems, nor will it magically transform an impoverished North into another prosperous South. Japan, which was once a leading trading partner of and aid donor to North Korea, has retreated from this role, leaving China and to a lesser extent countries like Russia to fill the gap. A new perspective is urgently needed: one which begins by assessing possible future scenarios for social and economic change and humanitarian crisis in North Korea, and putting in place realistic and flexible policies to prepare for these scenarios.

Japan and the Invisible North Korean Refugees

One immediate consequence of the immense wealth gap between North Korea and the rest of the region is the problem of emigration. As the gap widens, the pressures of human movement intensify, despite efforts by the North Korean government to prevent people from leaving. The plight of North Korean refugees in China has received some attention from researchers and media, and a growing number of studies have also highlighted the challenges faced by North Korean refugees in South Korea. The Japanese dimension of the refugee issue, however, has received remarkably little attention even in Japan itself. Yet it provides yet another example of the reasons why Japan can afford neither to ignore North Korea nor to condense its relationship with the DPRK into the single issue of the abductions.

Although only two groups of 'Japanese wives' from North Korea were able to visit Japan in the 1990s, the twelve members of the second group, who said their tearful farewells to relatives at Narita Airport in January 1998, were not in fact the last survivors of the 1960s repatriation to set foot on Japanese soil. Ever since the late 1990s there has been a small and quiet trickle of former 'returnees' who have escaped across the border from North Korea to China and, by one route or another, made their way back to Japan. It would be easy to overlook the existence of these 'returnee-refugees', for their presence is only occasionally reported by the media and is almost entirely missing from Japanese government reports and statistics. There are no official statistics on the number accepted, although in October 2010, responding to a parliamentary question, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Minister Matsumoto Takeaki confirmed that the number was 'over one hundred'.³⁷ They are absent, too, from the database of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which shows that between 1995 and 2007, just three people originating from the DPRK applied for asylum in Japan, and that all were rejected. Yet by the end of 2008 the number of these invisible refugees had probably reached around 200, and there is every reason to believe that it will rise substantially in coming years.

³⁷ 'Dappokusha Nyūkoku 100-nin chō', *Iwate Nippō* (morning edition), 21 October 2010. The estimate of almost 200 comes from NGOs working with refugees.

The 200-odd people who have been resettled in Japan are all survivors of the repatriation of 1959–1984, or spouses and children of these survivors. Though a few are ethnic Japanese, most are Koreans who have close family members living in Japan. In every case they have been accepted on a discretionary basis, which explains their absence from the official refugee statistics, and the difficulty in obtaining accurate information about them. From anecdotal evidence, however, we know that some crossed the border between North Korea and China repeatedly to trade before finally taking the risky decision to attempt to reach Japan.

This attempt may involve a further long and perilous journey to a third country, such as Mongolia, Laos, Thailand or Vietnam. In some cases, however, refugees, after spending some time in hiding in China, manage to get into a Japanese consulate in that country. In 2002, the world was shocked by pictures of North Korean refugees being dragged away from the Japanese Consulate in Shenyang, where they had attempted to appeal for asylum. What is less well known, however, is the fact that some returnee refugees do manage to make it into Japanese diplomatic posts, in China and elsewhere.

This, however, is a very sensitive issue, and one which the governments involved avoid publicizing. The problem, of course, is that China, as a ‘friend’ of North Korea, officially treats all North Korean refugees on its soil as illegal ‘economic migrants’, and hands them back to North Korea, where they face imprisonment, often in terrible conditions. However, it is evident that the Chinese government is not always very officious about tracking down refugees. If this became a widely debated issue, though, China might feel the need to enforce its official policy and clamp down on the practice.

Entering a Japanese diplomatic mission is no easy matter for these people. One returnee refugee to whom I spoke contacted a Japanese diplomatic mission in China and only to be told that they could not help him. For him, it required a long journey through Southeast Asia before he could reach Japan. Once inside a Japanese diplomatic mission, many remain for months, while their identities are checked and the Japanese government negotiates their exit. The main aim of the identity check is confirm that they are really ‘returnee refugees’: that is, people who once lived in Japan. Well-informed people in Japan to whom I have spoken say that since early 2008 Japan has become more restrictive and wary of granting entrance, apparently fearing that the system is being exploited by ‘fake returnee refugees’. This, however, is also impossible to confirm, since Japan has no official policy on the issue, and no information on the decisions is made public.

After the returnee refugees arrive in Japan, the new arrivals rely heavily on the support of NGOs. Perhaps the most important source of assistance, at least for ethnic Korean returnee refugees, is the South Korean-affiliated Korean Residents Union in Japan (known in Japanese as *Zai-Nihon Taikanminkoku Mindan* or *Mindan* for short), which has close links to the South Korean government. Mindan’s International Section provides arriving returnee refugees with a one-off grant of 100,000 yen (about \$1,000) to buy basic essentials, and helps them find work or apply for Livelihood Protection (the

basic form of government welfare given to those without other means of support). Mindan also provides other forms of psychological support, such as organizing get-togethers for returnee refugees, and seeking out trauma counselors (though refugees in Japan, like those in Korea, are often reluctant to seek psychiatric help because of the stigma attached to psychological disorder in both Korea and Japan). There are also two Japanese NGOs which focus specifically on the problems of returnee refugees: the Society to Help Returnees to North Korea [*Kita Chôsen Kikokusha no Seimei to Jinken o Mamorukai*, or *Mamorukai* for short], created in 1994, and the Japan Aid Association for North Korean Returnees [*Kikoku Dappokusha Shien Kikô*, abbreviated below to *Shien Kikô*] set up in 2005 by the recently retired head of the Japanese government's Immigration Bureau, Sakanaka Hidenori.

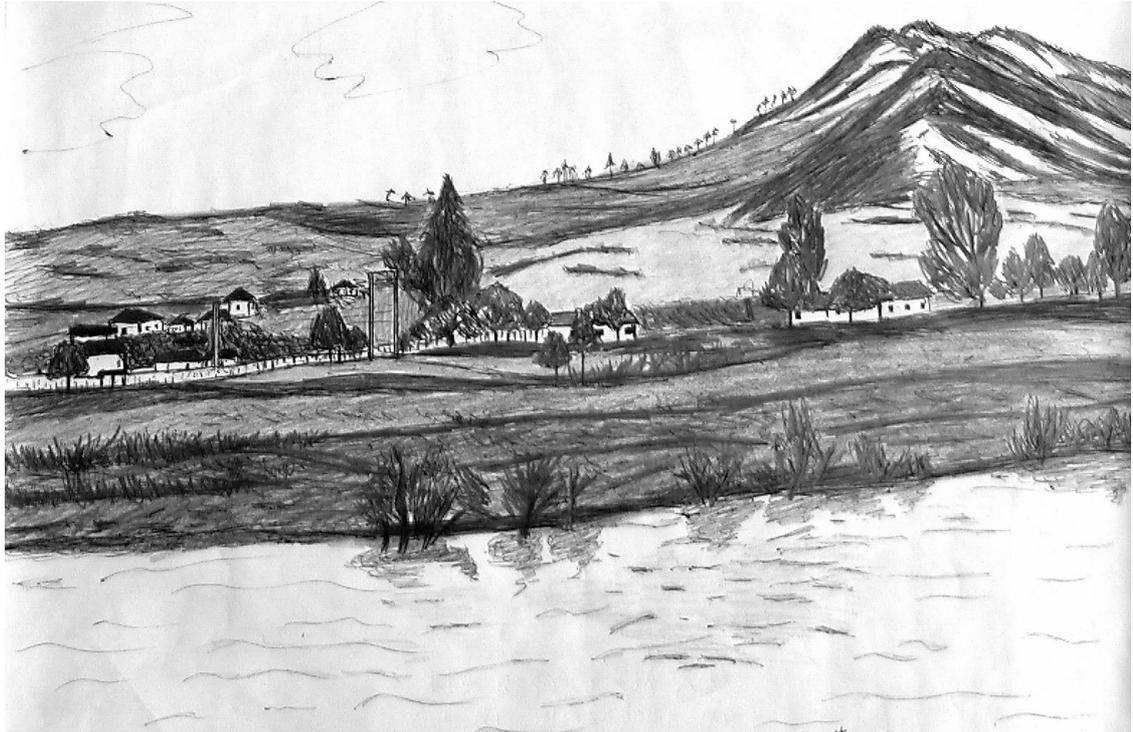
The Japanese government, however, provides no specific support for these returnee-refugees, who face enormous challenges adjusting or re-adjusting to life in Japan. Children born in North Korea generally speak no Japanese on their arrival, and parents as well as children often feel a need to conceal their pasts from neighbours and potential employers because of the extreme hostility in Japan to anything or anyone connected to North Korea. While the Japanese government has been vocal in its criticism of the DPRK's human rights record, and in 2006 passed its own 'North Korea Human Rights Act'³⁸, which refers to the need to support refugees, it has failed to develop any clear policy to assist the returnee-refugees. One factor behind this failure may be that the Japanese government is alarmed at the prospect of a possible future refugee flood. Indeed, in 2006 a government security think-tank suggested that as many as 100,000 to 150,000 North Korean refugees might arrive on Japan's shores.³⁹ Though this prediction seems highly implausible, a figure of returnee refugees in the thousands is not improbable.⁴⁰

Given the Japanese and Japan Red Cross Society's role in the original repatriation, there is a strong case for arguing that both have a moral responsibility to provide a network of assistance and support for the returnee-refugees in Japan. Neither has yet shown a willingness to accept this responsibility. The abduction issue, then, is just one of a number of intersecting social and human rights problems in the Japan-North Korea relationship. A broadening of the focus is needed in order to open a new channel for dialogue between the two countries, while also creating a framework in which the Japanese government might address both long-standing problems of *Zainichi* Koreans and the newly-emerging problem of North Korean refugees in Japan.

³⁸ The full title of this law is the 'The Law on Countermeasures to the Abduction Problem and other Problems of Human Rights Violations by the North Korean Authorities' [*Rachi Mondai sono ta Kita Chôsen Tôkyoku ni yoru Jinken Shingai Mondai e no Taikô ni kansuru Hôritsu*]

³⁹ *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 January 2007.

⁴⁰ *Tokyo Shimbun*, 22 July 2007.



*The China–North Korea Border
(drawing by returnee-refugee now living in Japan)*

Towards a New Agenda

A future generation of historians, looking back at the early twenty-first century, may well come to see current events on the Korean Peninsula as a catalyst that crystallized the shape of post-Cold War East Asia. If so, will they see it as a catalyst for increased regional tension and military rivalry or for a new phase of cooperation? It is still possible that the heightened tensions experienced in 2010 may prove to be the opportunity for a fresh and more collaborative regional approach to North Korea. But for crisis to become opportunity, a significant re-imagining of relationships will be needed.

For Japan, three steps seem particularly important:

1. *A serious commitment to engaging with all countries of the region in the search for solutions.* A stable solution to the problems of North Korea can only be found if all the major countries of the region are able to work together in a common direction. The worst possible outcome of current tensions is that they should lead to a radical divergence between the Chinese strategy towards the Korean Peninsula and the strategy pursued by Japan, South Korea and the United States. For the period from 2002 to 2008, while South Korea committed itself enthusiastically to the Six Party Talks and North–South reconciliation, Japan stood on the sidelines, paralyzed by anger and frustration at the abduction issue. Now, as South Korea moves away from dialogue towards an emphasis

on military preparedness, it becomes vital for Japan to take up an increasingly active role in seeking out avenues for regional dialogue.

2. The development of realistic strategies to prepare for change in North Korea. The Japanese government, in cooperation with NGOs, academic experts and others (domestically and internationally), needs to develop long-range scenarios for the alternative possible developments in North Korea over the next decade. As emphasized throughout this series, the precise nature of these changes is uncertain, but the likelihood that they will have a profound impact on neighbouring countries is very high. Some likely features of the course of change can be defined. Problems of chronic poverty in North Korea will persist, and will be associated with issues of hunger, malnutrition, land degradation and the spread of diseases such as (among others) multiple strains of TB. These humanitarian issues affect North Koreans first and foremost, but have spill-over effects for the people of neighbouring countries as well. Any move towards economic liberalization in North Korea will inescapably involve relaxed controls on the movement of people, both domestically and across national borders. Neighbouring countries need to be ready to introduce appropriate and humane policies in response to these flows. Japan's wealth of technological know-how could be applied to developing future solutions to North Korea's massive agricultural and energy problems. Positive visions for the future are essential if North Korea (with or without the Kim dynasty in power) is not to remain an ongoing site of gross social deprivation, and an ongoing source of instability to the region. An approach to regional change that seeks 'security' simply by boosting military spending in preparation for a possible armed attack from the DPRK provides no meaningful security in the context of the problems discussed above, and serves only to fuel and emerging regional arms race.

3. The re-establishment of channels for dialogue with all parts of the region, including North Korea itself. As argued above, sanctions have had little effect on the North Korean regime, and have instead served mainly to inflict 'collateral damage' on others, including Korean residents in Japan and Japanese with relatives in North Korea. Of course, the aggressive and unpredictable behaviour of the North Korean regime makes it difficult for sanctions, once introduced, to be removed. However, a complete absence of communications channels between two neighbouring countries serves no-one's interests. The Japanese government should seek the first viable opportunity to re-establish connections — perhaps by once again taking up neglected humanitarian issues such as the situation of Japanese wives and of Korean 'returnees' who seek closer contacts with their relatives in Japan. Japan should also reconsider its freeze on aid to North Korea, and look for ways to provide sustainable and monitored nutritional and medical assistance. Eight years of frozen relations have resolved neither the abduction issue nor the nuclear issue. It is time — and not yet too late — for a new approach.

4. Japan should make use of its social ties to North Korea to deepen understanding of the DPRK and preparedness for its future destiny. Despite the difficulties and pain that have beset the Japan–North Korea relationship, the history traced here is a reminder of complex links that have been created between the two countries over the past half-century: links that to some extent endure despite the present official freeze in relations.

The presence of ethnic Koreans and others with close relatives living in North Korea means that there are substantial numbers of people in Japan who may not be academic experts, but who in fact have as good a knowledge as any expert about the practical realities of life and social change in the DPRK. Too often, those with links to the DPRK are regarded with fear and suspicion by mainstream media, academia and government. However, this knowledge is a vital resource which should be welcomed and mobilized as, a century after the annexation of Korea and fifty years after the Korean War, Japan looks to the long-term future of its relationship with both halves of the Korean Peninsula.



What Future for North Korea's Next Generation? (photographed by the author near Wonsan, 2009)