Loyalty versus Location: the North Korean Nationalism of Japan's Zainichi Minority

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Introduction

After the liberation of the Korean peninsula from Japanese control in 1945, over two million Koreans who had traveled to Japan in search of labor, or as sex workers for the Japanese military, remained in the nation. By 1947, over a million of these Koreans returned to the Korean peninsula. However, the 600,000 Koreans who remained in Japan entered into a stateless existence as internal foreigners.[1] After a second mass migration of over 93,000 Koreans to North Korea in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this community of *Zainichi,* Koreans residing in Japan, has grown to more than 700,000 and is now chiefly comprised of Japanese-born Zainichi of Korean descent.[2] Since 1945, the community has divided into the 75 percent of Zainichi who claim South Korean nationality, receiving permanent-resident status in Japan, and the 25 percent who remain loyal to North Korea and maintain membership in the *Chongryon*, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. These Zainichi loyal to North Korea remain stateless in

[1] Hester, Jeffry T., "Datsu Zainichi-ron: An Emerging Discourse on Belonging among Ethnic Koreans in Japan," In *Multiculturalism in the New Japan: Crossing the Boundaries Within*, edited by Nelson H. Graburn, John Ertl, and R. Kenji, Tierney, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, 140.

[2] "Koreans in Japan," Encyclopedia of World Cultures Supplement, *Encyclopedia.com,* (December 10, 2017), http://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/koreans-japan.

Japan. Though they do not hold any political connection to North Korea and live an ocean apart from their proclaimed homeland, the Zainichi cling to their North Korean identity. This essay explores why certain Zainichi remain so loyal to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) despite their lack of individual political connection to the nation.

I deconstruct the loyalty of these Zainichi to the DPRK through the lens of their precarious statelessness in Japan, including their need for identity, belonging and connections to heritage within the Zainichi community. I argue that the limits of these Zainichi's nationalism, or the compromises they make with regards to their ideology, constitute the community's process of meeting its own needs for belonging, security, and identity.[3] This North Korea-oriented nationalism is both consciously and subconsciously created as an answer to the Zainichi's feelings of alienation in Japan, however limited in respect to their political association with the DPRK government itself. Finally, due to the fact that Zainichi identity rests within their national identification with North Korea, but their material security and livelihoods remain in Japan, these Zainichi exist in a liminal state between their Japanese locatedness and national loyalty to North Korea.

I approach this issue by first providing the framework of my analysis, "Needs talk," which I adopt from Hae Yeon Choo in her essay "The Needs of Others."[4] I then use "Needs talk" as an interpretive method to examine how the Japanese government has regarded the Zainichi as an illegitimate constituency, treating them as sojourners and undesirable temporaries as opposed to permanent members of society. Furthermore, this frame demonstrates how the Zainichi have consequently developed into 'internal

[3] I refer to "nationalism" as loyalty or devotion to a nation, (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v,* "nationalism," accessed December 9, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism.).

[4] Choo, Hae Yeon, "The Needs of Others," in *Multiethnic Korea?,* edited by John Lie. Berkeley,

CA: University of California Press, 2014.

others' outside of Japan's carefully protected boundaries of ethnic homogeneity. Since the Zainichi's need for a homeland and belonging cannot be met through loyalty to Japan, I argue that the Zainichi are loyal to North Korea in the form of an imagined community.[5] The documentary *Dear Pyongyang* (2005), directed by Zainichi director Yonghi Yang, serves as a case study in this analysis. I have selected *Dear Pyongyang* (2005) because it exemplifies the contradictions that Zainichi loyal to North Korea experience between their material existence in Japan and national connection to North Korea.[6]

"Needs talk" as an Intellectual Framework

The conceptual tools used by Hae Yeon Choo in her essay "The Needs of Others" provide a framework for analyzing Japan's understanding of the Zainichi constituency as illegitimate, and for analyzing the Zainichi themselves in pursuit of satisfying needs associated with their identity. In her writing, Choo draws upon the works of critical theorist Nancy Fraser to define "Needs talk" as a state or civil society defining, interpreting, and meeting the needs of certain constituencies.[7] Satisfying these needs involves actors of power first determining whether to regard a constituency as legitimate, and consequently ignoring or satisfying the needs of such a constituency on that basis. Choo uses this framework to analyze how South Korean churches employ this method of interpretation with regards to the needs of minority communities such that South Korean ethnic and cultural

[5] This refers to Benedict Anderson's argument that the nation is an "imagined community," or a community of people who imagine themselves connected to each other and a nation-state through shared language and perceptions of history, culture, and current events (Anderson 2016).

[6] *Dear Pyongyang*, Documentary, Directed by Yang Yonghi, Japan: Cheon, Inc., 2005,

http://emory.kanopystreaming.com/video/zainichi-story-koreans-postwar-japan.

[7] Choo, Hae Yeon, "The Needs of Others," in *Multiethnic Korea?*, edited by John Lie, Berkeley,

CA: University of California Press, 2014, 121.

boundaries remain intact. Furthermore, "Needs talk" is an especially useful analytical tool for understanding exclusionary Japanese policies that attempt to keep Japan's own ethnic boundaries intact.

Choo observes the South Korean church as a pivotal actor in how South Korean society frames North Korean migrants and Filipino migrant workers as legitimate constituencies in South Korea. Once the legitimacy of these groups is established, "the needs of the migrants are produced, interpreted, and contested by migrants and church leaders" within the space of the church.[8] The church's approach to Filipino migrants is most useful in this analysis, interpreting the position of Filipino migrant workers as "...brothers and sisters in need of help and protection as sojourners," offering them sympathy, shelter, and a place to "share vulnerabilities" during their finite time in South Korea.[9] The church comforts the migrant workers with the assumption that they will invariably return to the place whence they came. As a result, the church maintains South Korea's ethnic boundaries by interpreting and reinforcing whether particular ethnic groups are allowed a permanent place in South Korean society and which remain temporary sojourners. Government and civil society in Japan similarly interpret the Zainichi as an illegitimate constituency, enacting exclusionary policies that keep the nation's ethnic and national boundaries intact, reinforce the insecurity of the Zainichi, and ignore the basic needs of the community, including freedom from discrimination. While I root my analysis in the framework of "Needs talk," I also look beyond the Zainichi's statelessness in this regard and argue that the Zainichi meet their need for homeland and identity through loyalty to the DPRK.

The Japanese Government and Zainichi Identity

As Choo states in "The Needs of Others," the first step a nation takes before interpreting the needs of a certain constituency is to determine if such

[8] Ibid, 122.

[9] Ibid, 135.

a constituency is legitimate in the context of the nation.[10] Since 1945, Japan has interpreted the Zainichi constituency as illegitimate, pursuing the preservation of its ethnic homogeneity by avoiding obligations to the Zainichi community, such as ensuring its stability and granting it the privileges of citizens or permanent residents. As sociologist John Lie points out, prior to 1945, Koreans in Japan had suffrage and could even become elected officials.[11] Furthermore, rhetoric from the Japanese government promoted ideas of a unified, multi-ethnic Asian empire in which Koreans were legitimate members.[12] After 1945, however, Koreans quickly lost their status as members of Japanese society. As Japan separated itself from its colonial past, the nation moved from being a multiethnic empire accepting of Koreans towards simply expressing a façade of such multiculturalism.[13] In 1947, Koreans lost their residential registration and became subject to alien registration.[14] Regardless of whether they had lived the majority of their lives in Japan, following Korean liberation, Zainichi became internal, illegitimate others within Japanese society. Not only were the Zainichi distinctly Korean, they were distinctly non-Japanese. Moreover, Japan did not recognize either South or North Korean nationality until the Japan-ROK (Republic of Korea) treaty in 1965.[15] Until that time, all remaining Koreans were stateless, and viewed as temporary sojourners who would soon repatriate. After 1965, any Zainichi who could claim South Korean nationality could gain permanent residence; Zainichi loyal to North Korea,

[10] Ibid, 121.

[11] Lie, John, *Multiethnic Japan*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 113.

[12] Lie, *Multiethnic Japan*, 113.

[13] See Lie (2004) for further details regarding Japan's move from perceptions of multiethnicity to mono-ethnicity, including description of this process in relation to Japan's treatment of other ethnic minorities.

[14] Ryang, Sonia, "Introduction," In *Diaspora Without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, edited by Sonia Ryang and John Lie, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009, 7.

[15] Ryang, "Introduction," 9.

however, could not claim permanent residence and remained aliens without a homeland.

Japan's subsequent policies regarding specialized residency for foreigners seemed to open the door for Zainichi to assert their place in Japan through permanent residency, however, specialized permanent residence only demonstrates Japan's protection of its boundaries and the Zainichi's continued statelessness. Japan's refusal to allow the Zainichi permanent residency until 1965 demonstrates how Japan began from the starting point that Zainichi were unwelcome foreigners. In 1992, Japan allowed Zainichi able to trace their presence in the nation to the colonial period, including those loyal to North Korea, to become permanent residents.[16] They received benefits such as "improvements in residential status…," including more lenient policies regarding deportation in the case of felonies.[17] However, these allowances did not alter the fact that North Korean-loyal Zainichi had been alien residents with no protection of rights for nearly half a century. Furthermore, permanent residency in Japan does not provide for naturalization, such as it does in the United States, but is solely an official acknowledgment of presence in Japan that provides benefits such as leniency with regards to deportation.[18] As Sonia Ryang, a professor of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Iowa, aptly points out, Zainichi with permanent residency cannot even be referred to as 'second-class citizens,' of Japan because they are, in fact, not citizens of Japan at all.[19]

Japan's interpretation of Zainichi (especially those loyal to North Korea) as internal others bound to repatriate is reflected in Japanese

[16] Ryang, Sonia, "Introduction," In *Diaspora Without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, edited by Sonia Ryang and John Lie, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009, 11.

[17] Ryang, "Introduction," 23.

[18] Ibid, 11.

[19] Ibid, 16.

rhetoric. Japanese names for the Zainichi are *zainichi chosenjin* and simply *zainichi*.[20] Prior to the usage of *zainichi*, *zainichi chosenjin* described Koreans residing in Japan, literally meaning 'remaining in Japan.' The Japanese usage of the word 'remain' reveals the expectation of the Japanese that, once the two Koreas reunified, the Zainichi would return to the Korean peninsula. However, for the *zainichi chosenjin* who did not repatriate (and for those born to the Zainichi in Japan) the term reflects their inability to claim permanent place in the nation. Ryang notes that the name implies the Zainichi's temporality. The use of the word *chosenjin,* derived from the title of the Joseon dynasty, a Korean dynasty that has since ceased to exist, further contributes to this notion of Zainichi temporality.[21] Referring to Koreans in Japan by *chosenjin* overtly ties the people with a nonexistent nation, reinforcing their statelessness. The term *chosenjin* has now come to refer exclusively to the North Korean-loyal Zainichi, directly implicating these Zainichi's rootlessness.[22]

Zainichi Precariousness

Considering Japan's interpretation of the Zainichi as illegitimate, the Zainichi need for national identity remains unmet. As a result, some Zainichi satisfy the need for this identity through nationalistic identification with North Korea. The documentary *Dear Pyongyang* exhibits one Zainichi family's loyalty to North Korea through imagined dependencies.[23] For director Yonghi Yang's parents, their loyalty is rooted in the emotional connections they hold to their kin in Pyongyang. The limit to their loyalty is political in nature, because Yang's parents fulfill solely their emotional needs for belonging and kinship through nationalism because political

[20] Ibid, 11,

[21] Ibid, 7,

[22] Ibid, 11.

[23] *Dear Pyongyang*, Documentary, Directed by Yang Yonghi, Japan: Cheon, Inc., 2005, http://emory.kanopystreaming.com/video/zainichi-story-koreans-postwar-japan.

affiliation with the DPRK offers them no material benefit or security. Moreover, Yang's parents are aware that the DPRK does not sufficiently meet the needs of their family in Pyongyang. For Yang's parents, the most powerful aspect of their connection to the DPRK is their ties to their loved ones in Pyongyang. Such emotional connection provides a basis for their nationalism powerful enough to bridge gaps in the logic of being loyal to a nation which offers no actual support. From pictures and letters, Yang's parents know that their family members are not well-fed, that their grandchildren get frostbite in the winter, and that their friends and family would struggle to survive without the support that Yang's parents provide. As a result, the Yangs send enormous packages to North Korea filled with supplies for their family while still attributing this action to the 'fatherland's' provision.

The conclusion of the documentary sheds light on this phenomenon. After Yang explains to her father that the lack of recognized nationality in Japan creates for her significant problems, Yang's father agrees to allow her to claim South Korean nationality in order to access its associated benefits in Japan. Yang is shocked, as her father had never before compromised on this issue, but realizes that, to her father, Yang's well-being and marriage is important than his allegiance to the DPRK. Yang asks her father, "You won't change yours, Dad?"[24] to which he replies, "Never! Not even if I die."[25] As he lies on a hospital bed, Yang suggests to her father, "Let's go to Pyongyang again to see our family," and he tearily, but eagerly, nods his head in agreement.[26] Beyond any political ideology, Pyongyang is dear to him because his family awaits him there, along with his Korean heritage. Further demonstrating the importance of Korean heritage and ethnicity beyond political identification is Yang's father agreeing to allow Yang to

[24] *Dear Pyongyang*. Documentary. Directed by Yang Yonghi. Japan: Cheon, Inc., 2005. http://emory.kanopystreaming.com/video/zainichi-story-koreans-postwar-japan.

[25] *Dear Pyongyang*. Documentary.

[26] Ibid.

marry a South Korean, stating that "South Koreans are Korean too."[27] It is evident that Yang's parents' identification with the DPRK stems from their emotional, rather than political, connections. Yang's parents are naturally tied to their families by blood, and, by extension, they can imagine themselves naturally tied to Korea from the perspective of ethnic heritage.

Not only does Yang's parents' emotional attachment to their family in North Korea demonstrate their national identification with the DPRK, it is also evidenced in their rhetoric when describing North Korea as the fatherland. In connecting the entity of North Korea, with which they have no true political connection, to their family members in Pyongyang, the emotional attachment they feel to their kin is transferred to the nation. In other words, the Yangs address their need for a homeland while living as aliens in Japan by tying North Korea to their own family. For example, when Yang's mother gives thanks to Kim Il Sung, or when Yang's father passionately declares his unbending loyalty, the same words emerge from their dialogue: "our fatherland" and "our great father Kim Il Sung."[28] As Thomas Erikson states, "Kinship terms are frequently used in nationalist discourse..., and the abstract community postulated by nationalists may be likened to the kin group;" Erikson argues that, through the use of such terms, members of a nation are imagined to be a large family.[29] A nation is thus allowed to demand obedience from its subjects like a parent would of their children. In Yang's attachment to North Korea, there is another aspect of the family-metaphor which grants the idea of North Korea such authority: feelings of belonging, loyalty, and love. In Yang's parents referring to North Korea and Kim Il Sung with kinship terms such as "our father" and "our fatherland," we see a space in which they foster a deep emotional

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[27] Ibid

[28] *Dear Pyongyang*. Documentary.

[29] Eriksen, Thomas H, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives,* London: Pluto

Press, 2014, 130.

attachment to North Korea and feel a sense of belonging wholly lacking from what they experience in Japan, where they are regarded as aliens and undesirable temporaries. This emphasizes their reliance on the 'fatherland' as an imagined dependency. At each positive turn in Yang's parents' lives, such as the well-being of their children in harsh winters or their safe arrival in Pyongyang, they display depths of gratitude to their benevolent North Korean 'Fatherland,' regardless of the DPRKs clear disconnection with these events.

The DPRK as an Imagined Dependency

Yangs loyalty is both created and justified by an imagined dependency on Kim Il Sung's goodwill. When Yang's parents send packages of supplies to their family in Pyongyang, Yang's mother tells her friends, "My family lives well because our leader takes good care of them," despite knowing that North Korea has not sufficiently provided for their family.[30] Similarly, when praised during his birthday celebration for sending supplies, Yang's father restates that his acts were only by the grace of 'the Fatherland.' Despite the disconnect between their kin's survival and North Korea, Yang's parents continually express immense gratitude towards the regime and Kim Il Sung. Further evidencing the notion of the Yangs' nationalism as an imagined dependency, their vocalizations of gratitude rely on the notion of the 'Fatherland' for protection, necessitating their loyalty while giving them an imagined protector to cling to. To Yang's parents, loyalty to North Korea is synonymous with loyalty to their family and heritage. Though they address the limits of their loyalty and imagined fatherland by remaining in Japan, their vocalizations of gratitude foster an emotional loyalty which identifies a benevolent protector in North Korea. By asserting this benevolent protector in the DPRK, their precarious stateless position and their associated needs in Japan can be fulfilled or mitigated.

The process by which the Yangs satisfy their need for national identity through an imagined dependency on North Korea echoes Hae Yeon Choo's

[30] *Dear Pyongyang*. Documentary.

discussion of churches in South Korea. Due to the fact that the family-metaphor is only a rhetorical tool, its power has inherent limits. North Korea does not offer the Yang family the protection of a 'father,' much like the DPRK does not offer the Yang family in Pyongyang sufficient food. Therefore, Yang's parents' loyalty is limited to the confines of emotional attachment absent of any strong political affiliation. This non-political connection is further demonstrated by the fact that Yang's parents have achieved a prosperous life in Japan that North Korea could not provide, and, as a result, explains why they did not move back to the peninsula. Just as the South Korean church urges migrant workers to surrender to the will of a greater power in the face of uncertainty, [31] Yang's parents similarly surrender themselves to the greater power of the 'Fatherland' in light of their social insecurity in Japan. Just as the Filipino migrant workers and church leaders attribute their comfort and livelihoods to God, surrendering to his will and giving thanks to Him, Yang's mother attributes her well-being and that of her family to a similar figure in the benevolent Kim Il Sung. As a result, nationalism to the DPRK satisfies Yang's parents needs for kinship, national identity and belonging.

[31] Choo, Hae Yeon, "The Needs of Others," in *Multiethnic Korea?*, edited by John Lie, Berkeley,

CA: University of California Press, 2014, 134.

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