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**The North Korean Abductions...
and the rewriting of Japanese history**

by Takashima Nobuyoshi

The return to Japan last October of five citizens who had been abducted by North Korea sparked extraordinary media attention, both as human interest story and as a topic of heated political discussion. The return of the five and their reunions with family and friends after more than two decades of absence generated great sympathy, especially for the suffering of the families. Conservative forces in Japan have attempted to utilize this outpouring of sentiment to further their own political agendas. As journalist Fukatsu Masumi commented, the right is "taking advantage of the unusual passions surrounding the abduction issue . . . to mount an offensive aimed at destroying the liberal wing," especially through revision of the fundamental law on education. Of particular interest is the link between abductee-support organizations and the ongoing effort to rewrite Japan's history and social studies texts, which is described here. Takashima Nobuyoshi is a professor of education at Ryukyu University. He is the plaintiff in the Takashima textbook suit. The article appeared in Kinyobi 24 January 2003.

The abduction issue has reached a state of complete deadlock. Three months have passed without a hint of progress since the Japanese government's adoption of the hard-line approach that the five abductees, who were originally set to return to North Korea at the end of October, would be detained in Japan. This course of action was proposed by the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea.

During these months, every movement of the returned abductees has been reported by the media, with total disregard for their privacy. At the same time, unrestricted direct interviews with the five have been virtually prohibited. Most information has come through the organizations that surround the abductees, and it has been transmitted with little effort to verify it.

Chairman Sato's Instigation

It was anticipated that the Japan-North Korea summit last September would greatly relieve the tension that was caused by the U.S. targeting of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil." However, after North Korea acknowledged that eight of the abduction victims had died, with the increasing volume of anti-Pyongyang voices within Japan, negotiations between the two governments have remained suspended.

The freeze came about when the Japanese government announced it would not negotiate until the matter of the abductions was resolved, reflecting the position of the families association and the Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea. North Korea has not responded to this demand.

Chairman Satï¿½ Katsumi of the latter association, which is closely tied to the families' group, has publicly discussed these developments on a number of occasions, often sounding as if he were issuing a declaration of victory. For example, he made the following comments during a speech in the city of Gifu on November 10 last year (reported in the December issue of the Japanese Youth Association journal Patriotism and Youth (Aikoku to seinen).

On the very day (October 15) that the five abductees arrived in Japan, Satï¿½ suggested to the families that the five should not be allowed to return, and the families unanimously "affirmed their commitment that they absolutely not be allowed to return." At the time Satï¿½ told one family, "Your son is coming home, so you can just refuse to let him go back. There will be a tug of war between Japan and North Korea over the families remaining in North Korea. The other side wants money. Japan can provide money. Who do you think will win this fight?" Satï¿½ asked the families. The families responded, "Of course Japan will win. That's right, let's go with that plan." They agreed right away, he said.

According to Satï¿½, he told the families that "We'll send word from Tokyo when it's time to go public with the position that you won't let them go back. Until then, just feed your children their mothers' miso soup and pickles. There's no need to talk about difficult issues."

Again, in the January issue of Choices for Tomorrow (Ashita e no sentaku), published by the Japan Policy Research Center, Satï¿½ wrote that he told the families, "We'll choose the right time and then issue the call. At that point, you'll announce your position that you're not going to let them go back. You can't let this leak out. Timing is everything." It was decided that October 22 was the moment, and the announcement was made under the joint names of the association of families and the rescue association.

The result, Satï¿½ stressed, was that "the families were saying they would not let their own sons and daughters go back, which meant that the government could not insist on their returning. . . . At that moment, our movement shifted the government's position for the first time. It was a historic moment that determined the

direction of the negotiations, with the government accepting the families' position 100 percent."

It is clear from these articles that the families association was induced to simply follow the plan drawn up by the rescue association.

The Political Aims of the Rescue Association

Satï¿½ was operating on the assumption that the Bush administration would apply military pressure on Pyongyang by dispatching an aircraft carrier to the waters around North Korea, and that this would lead to the undermining of the DPRK government. At that point, the collapse of North Korea would begin, and "support should be given to the activities of anti-government forces and dissatisfied elements in North Korea, driving the situation to the point where Kim Jong Il will have to resign," Sato wrote. "Now is the very time that money should be used to aggressively pursue political operations that are aimed at domestic collapse."

Satï¿½ argued that it was North Korea that would suffer from the suspension of negotiations. "It is unfortunate that the abductees and their children are unable to see each other, but there is no great damage to be suffered by Japan as a state," he declared. The state takes precedence over the love between parent and child. Here we see, perhaps, his true colors.

Connections to the New History Association

The rescue association supported the families association during the time of its greatest isolation, for which the latter is said to feel a debt of gratitude. However, while Satï¿½'s forecasts have proven to be a great miscalculation, the political aims of the rescue association have come to the fore. Following Satï¿½'s plan at this point cannot even assure the safety of the abductees' families back in North Korea. Moreover, while Japan-North Korea talks are trapped in a cul-de-sac, US-North Korea talks and North-South negotiations are developing apace.

Meanwhile, the Japanese media has shrunk from the story since Kinyï¿½bi was "bashed" for running an interview with abductee Soga Hitomi's family in North Korea. Yoneda Kenzï¿½, a member of the Diet and Assembly Members Alliance for the Speedy Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, went so far as to write a glowing account in the weekly Spa! of the desperate efforts of Kyodo News and TBS television to avoid doing an interview with the children of abductees Chimura Yasushi and Fukie.

On the other hand, this same Chimura said at a press conference that "I am fully prepared that my children might appear in [the media] at some time," while fellow abductee Hasuike Kaoru said, "If they appeared that way, at least we'd know that they're all right." Soga, recently cheered by reports that her family is doing fine, has expressed the strong desire to see them. In this manner, fissures have begun to appear between the abductees and the rescue association.

At the same time, in December the rescue association formally participated in a symposium sponsored by the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform, thus making clear the connection between the two organizations. The society was responsible for writing the New History Textbook (published by Fuso Publishing) that has come under severe criticism from other Asian countries as a text that "glorifies aggression." Likewise, key members of the Modern Korea Research Institute, which is effectively the parent organization of the rescue association and where the association has its offices, have in the past joined with the writers of the textbook reform society in the movement to have accounts of military comfort women removed from junior-high textbooks.

The symposium had every appearance of a veritable muster of hawkish political forces assembled under the pretext of the abduction issue.*

The textbook reform society takes pride in the fact that its junior high social studies text was the first to include an account of the abduction incidents, but this text was approved during its authorization three years ago only after such phrases as "suspicious events" and "if this is the case" were added to the account. In standard practice, an account of unconfirmed events would not be authorized for inclusion in a text, so it is clear that there was political intervention. At that point it was the Sankei Shimbun newspaper company, of which Fuso Publishing is an affiliate, that played the role of applying political pressure.

Sankei Shimbun not only reported on the symposium the next day, but it also ran an article pointing out that this was "the first time the rescue association and textbook reform society had engaged in coordinated activity."

Sankei Shimbun also ran a long, signed article by the rescue association's Satï¿½ on December 4. In addition, the January issue of Seiron, a monthly published by the same newspaper company, appealed to readers "in the name of the magazine" to provide donations to support the financially stressed Modern Korea Research Institute, mentioned above. In all of this one can detect the adhesion between the rescue association and the Sankei Shimbun company.

Further, given that the abduction incident was included in the social studies text, Sankei Shimbun (September

23) called for this issue to be dealt with by the schools as part of a "true human rights education." As one involved in social studies education, I will continue to monitor, with a strong sense of alarm, these developments that are thoroughly steeped with political purpose.

Translated by John Junkerman

* Editor's Note: The symposium entitled "A Meeting to Hear from the Families of the Kidnapping Victims," was held in Tokyo on December 26, 2002. There, the key words "family, state, and patriotism," and the importance of teaching these to children, were stressed. Tanaka Hidemichi, chairman of the textbook reform society, noted that "sympathy for the families of the abductees had shown us in a personal way the source of the Japanese way of thinking,...the incident made clear that the role of the state is to protect the people,...and brought home the criminality of socialist states." Another director of the textbook reform society declared that "this problem presents an opportunity to restore Japanese national consciousness and fraternal consciousness, and it should thus be more widely addressed [in the schools]." Yokota Shigeru, father of one of the abductees who has been declared dead, encouraged teachers to use the incident to "discuss what the Japanese state should be and, in broad terms, stress such issues as defense and the prevention of spying. I would like to see students learn patriotic love for Japan, and be taught about the ideals of the family." (Details from accompanying Kinyyobi article by staff writer Takeuchi Kazuharu).

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