



Left Behind: Japan's Wartime Defeat and the Stranded Women of Manchukuo

By Rowena Ward

The *zanryu fujin* (stranded war wives) [1] are former Japanese emigrants to Manchukuo who remained in China at the end of the Second World War. They were long among the forgotten legacies of Japan's imperialist past. [2] The reasons why these women did not undergo repatriation during the years up to 1958, when large numbers of former colonial emigrants returned to Japan, are varied but in many cases, the 'Chinese' families that adopted them, or into which they married, played a part. [3] The stories of survival during the period immediately after the entry of the Soviet Union into the Pacific War on 9 August 1945, the civil war that followed, and throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution, are testament to their strength. At the same time, the history of how the *zanryu fujin* came to be in China is useful for understanding the Japanese government's colonial policies, its wartime attitudes toward women, and its post war handling of inconvenient war legacies.

Until well into the 1990s, the Japanese government maintained different policies towards the *zanryu fujin* and the *zanryu koji* (abandoned war children) on the grounds that the *zanryu fujin* had 'freely' chosen to remain in China. As the stories of the three women below illustrate, the *zanryu fujin* did not necessarily initially 'decide' to stay in China, but the circumstances they faced often left them with little choice. Some later, after having children who they could not take with them to Japan if they returned, did choose to stay in China. But under the circumstances, it is hard to justify the Japanese government's view that the *zanryu fujin* had 'freely' chosen not to return to Japan. Indeed, their stories highlight a pattern of abandonment by the Japanese government. The lives of the three *zanryu fujin* in the period immediately after the Soviet invasion cast light on the question of choice and the situations that led them and many women to stay in China.

Political Background

It is estimated that at the time of the Soviet invasion of Manchukuo in August 1945, there were more than one million civilians from Japan proper living there. Around 300,000 were the families of agrarian settlers. By that time, many of the agrarian male settlers had been conscripted despite an exemption from conscription forming part of the policies that encouraged emigration. As a result, a large proportion of the civilian Japanese population, particularly in the rural areas, were women, children and the elderly. Whilst most Japanese civilians were repatriated in the three years following Japan's defeat, the process continued intermittently for more than a decade. When the last repatriation boat left China in 1958, more than 10,000 Japanese women and children remained behind (Oba and Hashimoto 1986, 66). It was not until 1972, when diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan were established, that many of these people had any opportunity to visit or migrate/return to Japan, but many remain in China to this day.

Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Japanese government was forced to develop policies to manage the migration of Japanese in China. One complication was that a 1959 ruling which reduced the number of years that a person had been missing before being presumed dead meant that many of those stranded in China had been declared dead. [4] As a result, they were no longer considered Japanese citizens.

In developing its policies toward the Japanese in China, the Japanese government chose a single simple yardstick to determine who would be entitled to government assistance and who would not: age at the time of Japan's surrender. The decision was justified on the basis that those who had 'freely' chosen to remain in China should not be entitled to assistance. In contrast, those who did not decide to stay of their own free will should receive assistance. The government claimed that age alone was sufficient to make this determination. The age of thirteen was set as the dividing line between those who could receive assistance and those who could not. People who were 13 and over at the time of the Soviet invasion and who were registered in a mainland family register were deemed to have 'freely' chosen to remain in China. [5] Therefore they were eligible to receive only very limited levels of government assistance and the number of visits they could make to Japan was limited. When asked on what basis the government had decided on 13 years, a Japanese government official replied, 'The government needed to draw a line somewhere and the age of 13 seemed as good as any.' (Ogawa 1995, 36) People who had not turned 13 years old at the time of the invasion—popularly known as the *zanryu koji* or stranded children—were provided with financial and administrative support to search for their families. [6]

Importantly, gender was not used as a basis for differentiation. However, because few males were found to be in a similar predicament to the women, the word *fujin* (meaning 'wife/wives') came into general use. The scarcity of men in a similar situation is probably because they were able to negotiate their way to repatriation points or were killed by the Soviets.

Policy

Initially, Japanese government policies concerning migration of all Japanese citizens abandoned in China (*chugoku zanryu hojin*) required that returnees have a personal guarantor in Japan who was willing to cover resettlement expenses. Finding a guarantor was naturally very difficult for many, and some *chugoku zanryu hojin* who sought to return to Japan were unable to migrate because no one was willing to act as guarantor. In 1989, the requirement for a guarantor was replaced by that of a supporter, or someone who agrees to sponsor the migration of a returnee but does not assume the same level of financial responsibility as a guarantor. This change made it significantly easier for the *zanryu hojin* and their families to migrate to Japan.

Until 1991, short-term visits by the *zanryu fujin* had to be partially self-funded as the Japanese government only provided the return airfare to Japan. From 1991 onwards, the Government has also provided accommodation expenses. Short-term visits by the *zanryu fujin* were also limited to one in every 10 years, with a lifetime cap of two visits by each *zanryu fujin*. In 1993, the government increased the number of visits allowed by an individual *zanryu fujin* to once every five years, and in 1995 it agreed to fund annual visits to Japan. In comparison, from the late 1970s the Japanese government provided administrative assistance to *zanryu koji* searching for their biological families. In 1981, it also introduced a program whereby *zanryu koji* could travel to Japan on fully-funded short-term visits for the purpose of looking for their biological families. [7]

How Did *Zanryu Fujin* Come to Be in Manchukuo?

In the years 1931-45, the Japanese government promoted emigration to Manchukuo. This policy was integral to Japan's Asia-wide development strategy. Around 270,000 migrated as agrarian settlers or members of so-called Pioneer Groups, which were formed under the Government's 1936 plan to have the Japanese population comprise 10 per cent of the population of Manchukuo within 20 years. Around 50 per cent of Pioneer Groups were sent to areas close to the Russian border (Kinoshita 2003, 23). Given Japanese-Soviet tensions, they became in effect human shields. Many of the women who became stranded in China had migrated with their husbands or families as members of Pioneer Groups or as members of a women's volunteer group. The rationale behind the formation of the latter groups, sometimes referred to as *hanayome* (bride) groups, was to provide wives for single male settlers.

In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion, large numbers of Japanese died in battle, of starvation, or in attacks by the Soviet soldiers or local 'bandits'. Others underwent repatriation, some after years of internment. An unknown number of women who survived the initial invasion married local men. Some of these women were married to men who had been conscripted. Left without means of support, and unable to learn whether their husbands were dead or alive, some chose marriage as a survival strategy. Others became separated from their families or the groups they were travelling with in the chaos of trying to escape.

The Narratives

The following narratives outline the women's lives in the period immediately after the Soviet invasion. Each of these women returned to live in Japan in the 1970s and 80s. Their stories are illustrative of the lives and tribulations of those *zanryu fujin* who returned to live in Japan. These stories include women who had migrated as members of pioneer groups as well as members of volunteer groups. The women came from different parts of Japan and were of different ages at the time of their migration to Manchukuo. Of course, many *zanryu fujin* never visited Japan again at all, or never returned permanently to Japan.

Kurihara Sadako's Story [8]

Sadako migrated to Manchukuo from Okayama Prefecture as a member of a women's volunteer group in 1944. She was just 17 years old. Sadako decided to go to Manchukuo in response to a call for volunteers made on behalf of the Emperor. Her decision was opposed by her family. Nevertheless, she went with the intention of returning to Japan at the end of the eight-month enlistment period. However, one of the main assumptions behind the formation of the women's volunteer groups was that the members would marry and stay in Manchukuo. When Sadako received a marriage proposal from a man from Miyagi Prefecture, she found herself with little alternative but to accept, despite repeatedly insisting that she should be allowed to return to Japan because she had promised her mother that she would return. Sadako was married in a mass wedding ceremony in the grounds of the Boli administrative offices in late 1944, six months after her arrival in Manchukuo.

The newlyweds moved to Heilongjiang Province where the Ryuko Pioneer Group, of which her husband was a member, was located. Her husband was conscripted in July 1945 and less than a month later, the group leader ordered everyone to evacuate. Together with other members of the group, Sadako walked for four days to Boli where she boarded a freight train headed for Mudanjiang. Shortly after the train's departure, it was attacked by the Soviets and everyone on board fled toward the hills. They walked at night and hid during the day because of a fear of attack. After one attack, Sadako found herself alone. She was discovered the next day by some Chinese who took her to a Japanese camp that had been appropriated by Guomindang forces. A guard beat and tormented Sadako until a Chinese officer came and stopped him. Sadako was at the camp for about a month before being sent to a Soviet-managed camp in Boli. Not long after, she and three others escaped from the camp. Around October, she found herself at the house of a landowner in Qitaihe who allowed her to farm in exchange for food. Unable to contact Japan, Sadako had no idea whether her husband was dead or alive. One day, a Mr Kim, a Korean living nearby, advised her to marry. Thinking that she needed to at least ensure that her unborn child survived, Sadako agreed to marry a local farmer. Ten days after moving in with her new husband and his family, Sadako gave birth to a son. Although the boy was not biologically his own, the farmer was jubilant at the birth and daily fetched milk for him. Sadako had five more children with her husband.

She learnt Chinese and became a member of the family and the community. Sadako's husband encouraged her to visit Japan when diplomatic relations were established in 1972 and in 1975, Sadako and one daughter made a visit. In 1980, accompanied by two daughters, Sadako migrated permanently. Her husband had passed away in the meantime.

In summary, in the initial months after the Soviet invasion, there was no opportunity for Sadako to make contact with other Japanese, still less return to Japan. She tried a number of times to escape the region but was unsuccessful. About to give birth and with no means to contact Japan, she decided to marry a Chinese man. To assume that Sadako freely chose to remain in China is to ignore the circumstances that kept her in China.

Yamada Tami's Story [9]

Yamada Tami was born in Nagano Prefecture in 1927. [10] Her father migrated to Manchukuo as a member of the Yomikaki Pioneer Group in the spring of 1939. [11] The rest of the family followed in the summer of the same year. Tami was 12 years old.

On 9 August 1945, a telephone call to the village office declared that all men between the ages of 18 and 45 years were to be conscripted immediately. With this call, the villagers learnt that the Soviets had entered the war. To the background of 'Banzaï', the men were farewelled the next day. Tami's father, eldest brother and second-eldest brother were all conscripted.

On the evening of 11 August, a telephone call from the police ordered the remaining members of Tami's family to evacuate to Mudanjiang. Tami and her mother collected a few valuables and with a younger sister on her back, Tami joined her family in heading toward Mantetsu's Yanjia Station. [12] About 3,000 people gathered on the platform waiting for the order to board a train that was standing at the platform. After some time, Tami suggested that they should get on, but when a few people made a move to do so, someone yelled 'Hikokumin!' (un-Japanese!) (Hayashi 1986, 26) at them and they dared not board. The train left the station shortly afterwards with no one aboard. Tami and her family returned to their home to find that it had already been taken over by a local family.

On 14 August, following a second evacuation order, the family gathered at the local administration office once more. On 16 August everyone headed into the mountains. But losing their way, they ended up walking in circles. Her mother wanted to commit suicide, but Tami encouraged her to keep going. [13]

Carrying her five-year-old sister on her back and with her younger sister carrying their one-year-old sister, Tami and her family kept walking. Her mother was unable to nurse the baby so Tami chewed any food possible and fed it to the baby to keep her alive.

In crossing one river, all the family's clothes got soaked, and since all other clothes had been lost in the turmoil of an attack, the family was forced to walk naked. Tami found some clothes beside the road, which she made the family wear. Since she was short, Tami was able to wear boys' clothes. This proved fortuitous as she was not recognised as a girl and therefore was not targeted, as were many other females, for rape by the Soviet soldiers.

Upon leaving the mountains, the group was attacked from the air by Soviet planes. Sometime in early September, Tami was captured by Soviet soldiers and put in a camp. At night Soviet soldiers shot people indiscriminately and raped the women, but as Tami was not recognised as a female, she was not targeted. The camp became the venue for the buying and selling of women and children to local Chinese families. Due to the lack of food Tami decided, against her mother's wishes, to become the wife of a local man on the proviso that her family could live with her. Tami thus became the wife of the second son of a very poor family. Her husband was a ratbag who regularly beat and raped Tami, who gave birth to nine children. The villagers were initially quite antagonistic towards Tami, but as she worked hard and helped with various chores, they eventually began to support and protect her. Yet, as a Japanese, she was extremely vulnerable. Once when her husband was taken in for questioning, Tami requested a divorce but the authorities refused. Tami believes it was because she was Japanese and had no registration papers. Therefore, not knowing what else to do with her, the authorities ignored her request.

Not long after she married, her mother, sister and younger brother all died. Her second eldest brother, who had been conscripted in August 1945 and was subsequently captured by the Soviet forces, managed to escape and find his way to where Tami was living. He got a job in forestry and lived nearby. In 1953, he decided to take the opportunity for repatriation and returned to Japan, taking their younger brother with him. Tami's younger sister was very ill at the time and couldn't go with them. She died soon after. Although her brother returned to Japan, Tami remained in China for the sake of her own children, knowing that she could not take them with her to Japan. [14] Her brother wrote from Japan to say that her father and eldest brother had died. This was the first news she had heard of them since they were conscripted in August 1945.

In sum, Tami decided to marry a Chinese man in order to keep her family together. Later, she chose to remain in China for the sake of her children whom she knew she would not see again if she returned to Japan. It is hard to conclude that either of these decisions were freely made.

Ikeda Hiroko's Story [15]

Ikeda Hiroko was born in 1930 in Kagoshima Prefecture. She migrated to Manchukuo in the summer of 1944 with the other eight members of her family as part of the Ikantsu Pioneer Group. On 9 August 1945, the villagers headed into the mountains and left for Harbin on 15 August. After 20 days of walking, the guard accompanying them said that it was too dangerous to go any further and ordered everyone to return. The return journey was more difficult and the group was repeatedly attacked by locals. Just before reaching their original departure point, a number of Soviet soldiers allegedly looking for women appeared. Hiroko escaped into a field of millet and waited until morning. The group reassembled the next day and continued their journey. When they were close enough to see their village, they found that it had become a refuge for other Japanese groups and so they could not return to their homes. Instead they slept in the fields, digging a hole in the ground for warmth. To keep alive, people stole guns, food and cooking utensils from a former Kwantung Army warehouse nearby. Once when Hiroko and a few others went there to obtain food, everyone except Hiroko was caught by Soviet soldiers who raped and/or killed the women.

Food was scarce. With her mother close to death and her sister unable to stand after giving birth to a baby which died after 13 days, Hiroko sold herself in exchange for two cobs of corn to a man who became her father-in-law. Shortly afterward, her second youngest sister and only surviving brother died. Her mother also died.

Hiroko's husband was 23 years old and although a kind man, he was physically very weak. He had worked in a Japanese aircraft factory during the war. Within about five months, Hiroko could converse in Chinese. Nevertheless, she felt lonely: she had sold herself to save her family but nonetheless, most had died.

The village where she lived was the scene of intense fighting between Communist and Guomindang forces. In the summer of 1946, the Communists took control and Hiroko and her husband fled deep into the mountains. They returned to the village in 1947 to find that their house had been destroyed. Hiroko's father-in-law and her husband were captured and imprisoned. Her husband was badly beaten and as a result was unable to work for sometime thereafter. Hiroko was interrogated about the location of weapons and the family's finances. Although repeatedly answering that she did not know anything, Hiroko was sentenced to death. At the time she had a three-month-old daughter. Upon hearing the death sentence, her sister started crying. Speaking in Japanese, Hiroko told her sister not to cry. On hearing her speak Japanese, the cadres started calling her a 'Japanese imperialist'. When asked whether she had a last request, Hiroko asked that they also kill her sister but spare her daughter since she was part Chinese. A leader who heard the verdict stepped in and said that 'Japanese imperialism is evil but since she was a member of a civilian pioneer group, she is in fact a worker and therefore should live' (Hayashi 1986, 109). As a result, the verdict was overturned.

For about a year after his beating, Hiroko's husband was unable to work, so Hiroko begged for food to support the family. In 1948, the family started to receive food from the interim government and with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, her husband received land and became a farmer. Hiroko worked at home and had three children.

In summary, Hiroko made the choice to marry a Chinese for the sake of her family. Although many of those family members later died, their deaths did not free Hiroko from her decision to marry for their sake. In short, Hiroko was never in a position to choose whether to stay in China or return to Japan.

Conclusion

The stories of these women indicate that the Japanese government's assumption that the *zanryu fujin* 'freely' chose to remain in China is difficult to justify. It is true that some women may have chosen to remain in China, but many had few choices other than to marry local men if they wished to survive or to help family members survive. [16] Once married, many of the women had children and became focused on their 'Chinese' families. If the option of returning to Japan did arise, as it did for some in the 1950s, they could not take their children with them. At the same time, the remoteness of the villages where they lived meant that many never heard about repatriation programs, particularly during the civil war years. And for those who did, in the midst of civil war, it was difficult to transit to places where the *zanryu fujin* could repatriate.

Had the Japanese government's initial policies governing return not been based on an arbitrary distinction between citizens whom it judged to have 'freely' chosen to remain in China and those who had not, some might have migrated earlier. In effect, the Japanese government's lack of concern for them, and its late response, made the *zanryu fujin* triple 'victims' of Japanese government policy: first in being pressured to migrate to Manchukuo, second in being abandoned by Japanese forces and officials, and finally in being prevented from returning to and/or visiting Japan in the early years after diplomatic relations were restored.

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[See also](#) Ichikawa Miako, "Child Survivor of Forced Mass Suicide in Manchuria Still Loves Hero Who Saved Her."

[Also](#), Mariko Tamanoi, "Japanese War Orphans and the Challenges of Repatriation in Post-Colonial East Asia."

Notes

[1] The term *zanryu fujin* is not used by the Japanese government but is popularly used to distinguish between the women stranded in China and the *zanryu koji* (abandoned war children). The usual translation of the term is 'war wives,' but I have chosen to include the word 'stranded' so as to reflect the reality of the women's circumstances.

[2] Manchukuo was the official name of the Japanese-created state in the area now known as 'Northeast China'.

[3] The official repatriation program ran from 1946 to 1948. An additional repatriation program, under the auspices of the Japanese and Chinese Red Cross, was in place from 1953 to 1958. This program was terminated following an incident in Nagasaki in which a Chinese flag hanging outside an exhibition of postage stamps was pulled down. The "Nagasaki Incident" shattered the already fragile diplomatic relations between the two countries and the PRC refused to allow further repatriations.

[4] As a result of this change in law, the number of officially listed non-repatriated civilians fell from 77,000 to 31,000 (quoted in Beatrice Trefalt 2003, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan 1950-1975*, 32).

[5] Births, deaths and marriages of Japanese citizens must be registered in family registers located in local administrative offices. Emigrants to Manchukuo continued to maintain registers on the mainland.

[6] Due to their young age and/or the circumstances surrounding their separation from their families, many *zanryu koji* could not remember anything or possessed nothing which could be used to identify their Japanese names or family details.

[7] When the proportion of positive identifications fell, the original program was replaced by a more restrictive and less costly one in 2000.

[8] This Kurihara Sadako is not the famous poet. This biography combines information in Kurihara's biography in Oba and Hashimoto 1986, 58-76.

[9] Abridged translation of Tami's story in Hayashi 1986, 12-14, 25-53.

[10] Almost 12 per cent of the emigrants to Manchukuo were from Nagano Prefecture. Figures from Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire*, pp. 329-330.

[11] Pioneer Groups were often named after the districts in Japan from which the members originated. Yomikaki Village merged with two other villages in 1961 and is now part of Nagiso Town.

[12] Mantetsu is an abbreviation of Minami Manshu Tetsudo Kabushiki-gaisha or South Manchuria Railway Company.

[13] An unknown number of people committed suicide, often by drinking cyanide, rather than be caught by the Soviets or local bandits. For a survivor's account of a group suicide [see](#) Ichikawa Miako (2005).

[14] Under Japan's patrilineal citizenship laws at the time, Tami's children, should they have been able to accompany her, would not have been entitled to Japanese citizenship because their father was Chinese.

[15] Abridged translation from Hayashi 1986, 103-112.

[16] For example, one of Mitome Tadao's interviewees – Yasuda Fumiko – chose to remain in China even when her son moved to Japan (Mitome Tadao 1988, 102-111).

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