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'As Japanese, we wish to live as respectable human beings':

Orphans of Japan's China war

by Nishioka Hideko

[Modern wars always produce large numbers of orphans, nearly all from the invaded nation. Japan's China War of 1937-45 is no exception. That war generated not only hundreds of thousands of Chinese orphans, but also large numbers of orphans of Japanese and Korean settlers in Northeast China. This article examines the fate of a subgroup of orphans, the *zanryu koji*, who were orphaned (or separated from their relatives) soon after Japan's capitulation in 1945, and were raised by Chinese adoptive parents only to be 'discovered' by their Japanese families more than a quarter of a century later. In a sense, they had fallen in the cracks of the system of modern nation-states in the wake of war. The Japanese state quickly forgot them, officially declaring them dead. When the voices of *zanryu koji* began to reach Japan in the mid-1970s, however, the Japanese State and many people were forced to reflect anew on the enormity of the last war that had deprived not only tens of millions of Chinese of their lives and hopes, but also on the fate of the *zanryu koji* bereft of their nationality and even identities.



PIC Japanese WW II orphans returning from China march in protest in Tokyo, March 2, 2005.

Zanryu koji, a term created by the Japanese State and media, literally means "orphans who have remained behind [in China]." They are the children of Japanese parents, mostly agrarian colonists in Manchuria, who were left behind at the time of Japan's capitulation. According to the Japanese State, they were left in China "against their will". Until 1993, *zanryu koji* did not include those thousands of Japanese women who married Chinese citizens in order to survive the turmoil created by Japan's 1945 capitulation. The Japanese state interpreted the latter as people who chose to remain in China "of their own will." Here *zanryu koji* is translated as "orphans," while noting that in 2005 these are aging adults most of whom were raised by adoptive parents in China prior to their return to Japan in recent decades. Indeed, "orphans" serves as a powerful metaphor for the state of forlornness, of those who were abandoned. The title of this article, "As Japanese, we wish to live as respectable human beings," suggests that *zanryu koji* have in a sense remained "orphans" who are still unable to belong to their "proper" families, caught as they are between nations.

While the article is about those orphans who demand that the Japanese state treat them as full-fledged citizens of Japan, it must be noted that some orphans have different desires: they wish to be "flexible citizens", maintaining allegiance both to their birth nationality and to the land and people of China that nurtured them as orphans. In this sense, they could provide a bridge to help overcome the continuing deep rifts that divide the two countries because of the inability to reconcile issues left unresolved from a war that ended sixty years ago, but whose antagonisms continue to reverberate today. Even while retaining the Chinese nationality of their family members, that is, spouses and children, they try to respond to current conditions in Japan that make it difficult for them to live decently as Japanese. For example, some try to earn enough money in Japan to fulfill the dream of opening new businesses in China. Whether they choose to live as Japanese or Chinese, or to embody the joint experience of the two nations whose war shattered their lives, one thing is quite clear. These orphans have been seeking for a life in which they are entitled to have "identities, rights and a place to die." Mariko Asano Tamanoi.]

In 2002, "Japanese who had been orphaned in China" (*Chugoku zanryu koji*) filed a lawsuit against the Japanese State before the Tokyo Metropolitan Circuit Court. Since then, orphans have brought similar lawsuits before the lower courts in fifteen locations throughout Japan. The number of these plaintiffs has now reached 2,025. In Osaka, 111 orphans brought a suit before the district court in 2003. On July 6 th, 2005, the court will hand down a verdict to the first thirty-two plaintiffs. Their average age is sixty-five. As they age, they become increasingly dependent upon welfare. They claim that, due to the Japanese state's neglect, they have suffered materially and emotionally. Their experiences, some of which this article chronicles, are indeed miserable.

The leader of the Osaka plaintiffs is Matsuda Toshio (age, 68). In 1941, responding to the Japanese State's call for "One Million Japanese Farm Families to Manchuria," his entire family of ten left home and settled in one of the agrarian colonies in Northeast China. After the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on August 9 th, 1945, they began a long march of evacuation, heading toward Harbin. They walked more than four hundred kilometers without much rest and food. Finally, they reached Harbin to find the conditions of the shelter for Japanese refugees miserable. With temperatures falling to thirty below zero (centigrade), and without adequate food and proper clothing, many suffered from typhoid. Matsuda lost his grandparents, parents and sister to the epidemic. When he was finally entrusted to Chinese adoptive parents, he recalls, he could not even walk.



Matsuda Toshio

In his childhood, neighborhood children constantly teased Matsuda calling him "little Japanese devil." His adoptive parents were so poor that he could not complete elementary school. During the Cultural Revolution, he lost his job after being accused of being "a Japanese spy". Wearing a tag that says "counter-revolutionary element," Matsuda was subjected to mass criticism at a mass meeting of seven hundred people. Recalling these days, he says, "I often entertained the idea of killing myself." In 1971, his adoptive parents and wife died of the emotional stress of this incident. To prevent his children from experiencing the same fate, Matsuda decided to return to Japan. With no aid from the Japanese state, he returned to Japan in 1976, and began a new life in Kushiro, Hokkaido. However, with five children and no knowledge of the Japanese language, he could not but rely on public welfare during the first three years. After studying Japanese, Matsuda visited a local employment security office, only to be told to return when he had "mastered" the language. He was eventually employed by a subsidiary of Japan Railway. But when the Japanese economy slowed, he was the first to be laid off. He then moved to Osaka where he found a job at a quarry. Since retirement, he has been receiving a monthly pension of about 160,000 yen [1,600 dollars], but must pay rent and health insurance out of this pension amounting to about 40,000 yen [400 dollars]. Matsuda now lives with his second wife and one of his sons. He says that life is harder than it was under welfare. "There is a limit to what I can do to substitute for my lack of education. This is because the Japanese state abandoned me for many decades. Yet, no one has taken responsibility for what I am today," Matsuda told this reporter.

The Wall of the Japanese Language

At the end of the Asia-Pacific War, the Japanese state abandoned its overseas citizens. For this reason, deaths among the agrarian colonists stranded in Manchuria skyrocketed. In 1958, when Kishi Nobusuke, who had been a high-ranking official in Manchuria, formed a cabinet, he deliberately antagonized China as Japan's enemy so that the Chinese government suspended the repatriation of Japanese. In 1959, the Japanese state removed the names of these Japanese from their household registers in Japan. In other words, the state changed their official status from "missing" to "dead." Tanaka Yasuko (age 63) is one of them, despite the fact that, in 1959, China officially notified Japan that she had survived the postwar turmoil and was alive in China. In 1945, she was in Shenyang (Mukden). Since her mother was then quite ill, Yasuko was entrusted to a Chinese couple. Although she finished compulsory education, she was constantly bullied by schoolmates who called her "little Japanese." When the school showed a movie about China's anti-Japanese resistance, her classmates told her to go back to Japan, shouting "Death to the Japanese." It was at this time that she began longing for permanent return to Japan.

In 1974, Yasuko wrote a letter to the governor of Osaka, asking him to search for her Japanese relatives. When Japan's national newspapers published her story, her relatives immediately acknowledged their relationships with her. In 1978, she temporarily returned to Japan and met relatives whom she had not seen for more than thirty years. At this time, she conveyed to Japanese officials her strong wish to return to Japan permanently. However, she later discovered that these officials had falsified the record by indicating that she wished to remain in China. "The Japanese state never officially inquired into where I wish to live. I wonder why the state wrongly assumed that I would want to live in China," Yasuko told this reporter.

Although Japan normalized diplomatic relations with China in 1972, it was not until 1981 that it invited the first group of orphans to visit Japan. Even then, until recently, the state treated these returnees as "aliens" for, unless their parents or other relatives took the initiative to restore their Japanese nationality, they could not settle in Japan permanently. These problems of state policy further delayed the return of orphans.

The orphans who were finally able to return to Japan permanently often face what this reporter calls "the wall of Japanese language." For example, after Japan's wartime defeat, Ase Chieko (age, 67) lost her mother at a shelter in Fangzheng county, Heilongjiang. She also lost contact with her siblings, and was adopted by a Chinese couple. They were so poor that they welcomed her as a source of labor. Chieko took care of their children and did all the housework. Consequently, she did not receive adequate school education. When in 1970 she returned to Japan with her husband and four children, there was no opportunity for her to learn Japanese. Although a job became available for her as a hospital receptionist, she could not take it as she was unable to speak Japanese. Her children were bullied at schools, for Chieko was unable to communicate with their teachers. When one of her children was a fourth grader, a group of older kids tied his hands and legs and rolled him up in a thick blanket. Although Chieko was infuriated, she could not report what had happened to his son's teacher. All she could do was cry. Even today, she says, she cannot read the names of railway stations so that she is afraid of taking trains alone. "I was not able to attend even an elementary school. My youth was ruined. I most regret the fact that I am still unable to read or write," says Chieko.

In 1984, the Japanese state began providing returning orphans with temporary lodgings and language instruction. By then, however, they were over forty. In addition, the state refused to allow them to return with their entire families (except for immediate family members), so they were forced to leave them in China. In order to invite other family members to join them in Japan, orphans had to find jobs, leaving little time to learn Japanese. Ioriya Iwao, the former head of the National Organization to Assist Zanryu Koji, said:

The Japanese state had long regarded the problems of orphans as their problems, not as problems caused by the state. Even though in 1994 the state implemented Legislation to Promote the Independent Living of Orphans, the state did not reformulate the basic policies for that end. At the same time, the state failed to create an effective network of state institutions that are concerned with the welfare of orphans.

In August 2004, the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare sent questionnaires to 1,846 orphans who had filed lawsuits. Among them, 1,692 responded. Just one percent indicated that they were comfortable with the Japanese language. Indeed, the wall of the Japanese language prevents orphans from becoming economically independent. Hence, most of the aged orphans are forced to rely on welfare after arriving in Japan. In Osaka, for example, an orphan who is over sixty and has one dependent, receives a monthly pension of about 120,000 yen [less than 1,200 dollars]. If living alone, the monthly pension is only about 80,000 yen [800 dollars]. They are prohibited from sending part of their pension to family members remaining in China. And if they temporarily return to China, for example to pay respects to the tombs of their adoptive parents, they are not paid during the time they are away from Japan.



A scene from a Japanese language class for zanryu koji, Kyoto, 2005.

Yamada Naoko (age 63) returned to Japan permanently in 1978. She enjoyed living again with her father, who had searched diligently for her for many years and warmly welcomed her into his family. However, after his death in 1993, Naoko was caught in an ugly battle over inheritance with her siblings. Eventually, the court denied the biological relationship between her and the second daughter of her biological father. "My life has been totally ruined. I wonder whose daughter I am," says Naoko, describing her situation as one "without identity, rights and a place to die."

I conclude this report with a statement by Sugawara Kosuke, the lead lawyer of the first group of orphans who brought suit against the Japanese state in Tokyo.

The orphans were stranded in China because of the errors of the Japanese state. Thus, it is the responsibility of the state, and its adult citizens, to save their lives. The orphans cannot live another life. To leave them alone is a violation of humanity.

Translator's note

On July 6 th, 2005, the Osaka District Court handed down the following verdict to zanryu koji:

The Japanese state should have better coordinated the permanent return of zanryu koji to Japan. However, the Japanese state has made tremendous efforts toward this end and such efforts should be acknowledged. The Japanese state is under no obligation to provide welfare to assist zanryu koji to live in Japan. Rather, the administrative agencies of the state should explore ways to enable them to live in Japan as independent citizens.

Nishioka Hideko is a freelance writer. This article, which appeared in Shukan Kinyobi on July 1, 2005, was translated and introduced by Mariko Asano Tamanoi, associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the editor of [Crossed Histories: Manchuria in the Age of Empire](#).

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