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North Korea, Japan and the Abduction Narrative of Charles Robert Jenkins

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In the 1960s, a subculture of Americans became obsessed with alien abductions. Their ur-narrative revolved around the experience of Betty and Barney Hill, a sober, middle-aged, interracial couple who told of being taken from their car one night in 1961 and subjected to medical investigation by extraterrestrials with small bodies and large foreheads. They were not the type to fabulize simply to draw attention to themselves, so their story attracted interest beyond the usual UFO fans. Gradually others came forward with similar tales.

These abduction narratives paralleled the central fears of the Cold War era. Like the Soviets, the aliens were unintelligible. They were capable of other-worldly scientific advances just as Sputnik had dazzled and frightened Americans. They likely harbored designs for taking over the world. And they seemed to hover just beyond our line of sight waiting for an opportunity to put us to some unknown use. Although a small cadre of Americans believed deeply in these UFO abductions, the majority saw no need to displace their dread of communists onto visitors from a more distant world.

For roughly 20 years, the case of North Korean abductions seemed to exercise a similar hold on the Japanese imagination. The stories of missing Japanese rumored to have been abducted by North Korean agents belonged to the margins of political and media discourse. No mainstream media outlet would touch the story. In 1996, a North Korean defector described native Japanese helping to train spies at a North Korean facility, and the abduction narratives gained greater credibility. Still, after Pyongyang launched its Taepodong intermediate-stage rocket over Japan in 1998, most Japanese simply feared North Korea's conventional and potentially nuclear military threat. The abduction stories belonged to the past. They were not confirmed. People disappeared for various reasons: they were killed, they decamped for overseas, they assumed new identities and took up residence far from their homes. The Japanese government was portraying North Korea as a clear and present danger, and this conventional Cold War framework held sway over the more outlandish version of North Korean perfidy.

But in 2002, the abduction narrative in Japan swerved suddenly from the margins to the very center of the policy debate. Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited Pyongyang on September 17, 2002 in an attempt to break the logjam of non-recognition in Japan-North Korea relations. In the course of that visit, Koizumi extracted a confession and an apology from North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens. It was as if a UFO had landed in downtown Tokyo and the earth stood still for the Japanese. A narrative nurtured by a relatively small group of Japanese, particularly the families of the disappeared, had turned out to be true.



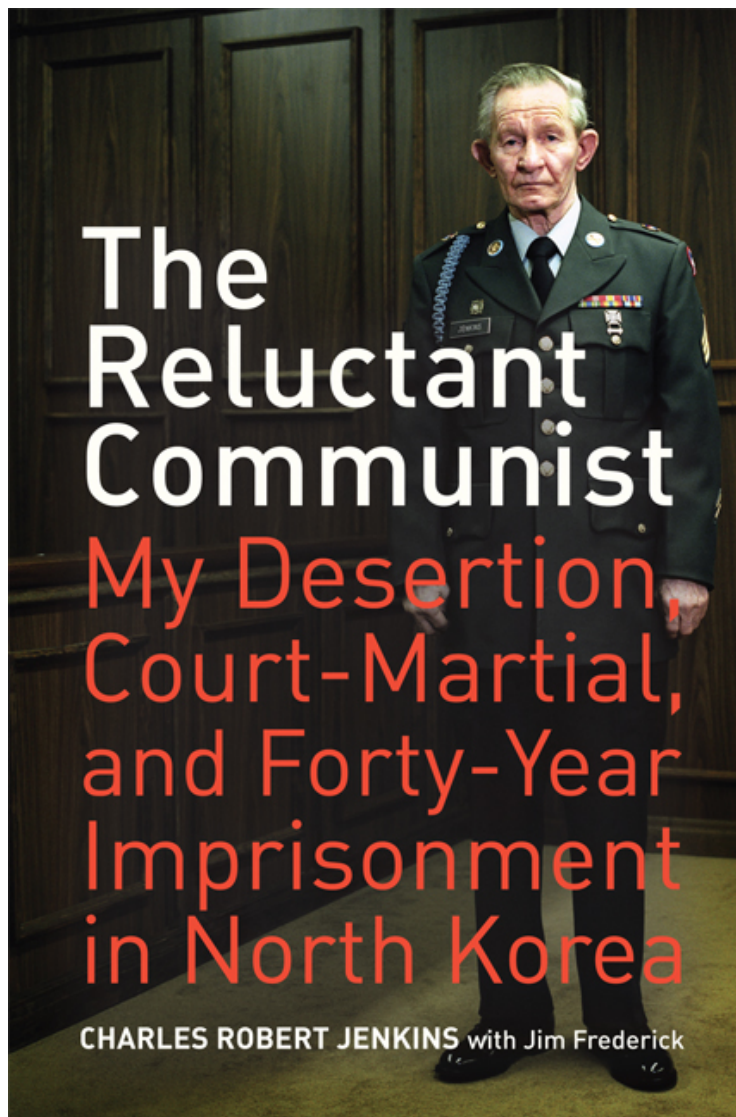
Koizumi and Kim Jong Il

But that was only the beginning of the story. It turned out that there were several true narratives. And the story of Charles Robert Jenkins and his family was one of them.

The Narrative of Charles Robert Jenkins

In the early morning of January 5, 1965, worried that his unit was about to leave South Korea to fight in the Vietnam War, Charles Robert Jenkins made what he later regretted as the worst decision of his life. The 25-year-old deserted from his unit and crossed the Demilitarized Zone into North Korea. He would live for nearly 40 years in North Korea. It was, as he details in his book *The Reluctant Communist: My Desertion, Court-Martial, and Forty-Year Imprisonment in North Korea*, a life of privileged misery.

When it appeared in Japan in 2005, Jenkins's book was an instant sensation. The abduction story dominated the news in Japan after Koizumi's 2002 visit, which opened the way for five of the abductees to return the following month, including Jenkins's wife Soga Hitomi. In 2004, Koizumi paid another visit to Pyongyang and brought back five children of the abductees. Jenkins and his two children followed shortly thereafter, through a third country.



The Japanese media and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party fanned a frenzy of demands for information about the 13 people that North Korea officially acknowledged abducting, the additional four people that Japan officially recognized as abductees, the 19 more that the government "[strongly suspects](#)" were abducted, and the 70-plus people that Japanese abductee organizations claimed were snatched. With a title more fitting for Japan's culture of apology – Kohuhaku or The Confession – Jenkins's book in Japanese translation served up a few heartbreaking nuggets of information about Yokota Megumi, the youngest of the Japanese abductees, whom the North Korean government reported as committing suicide in 1994. Jenkins provides no definitive answers to the Megumi mystery – how did she die? how had she lived? But he does relate the abduction story of Hitomi Soga, whom Jenkins married and lived with for 20 years before they were whisked away from North Korea in as strange and unexpected a manner as they had arrived.

While *The Reluctant Communist* fills in only a few pieces of the abduction puzzle, its more important contribution is the description of life in North Korea. Few foreigners have lived for significant stretches of time in North Korea. Fewer still have written about their experiences: there's Briton Michael Harrold's chronicle of seven years as an editor of North Korean documents in *Comrades and Strangers*, Swede Erik Cornell's description of his diplomatic tenure in Pyongyang in the 1970s in *Envoy to Paradise*, and American Richard Saccone's account of his work with the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization in *Living with the Enemy*. A few North Korean defector narratives have appeared in Korean and several have been translated, most notably Kang Chol-hwan's *Aquariums of Pyongyang*. These books all illuminate small corners of life in North Korea.



Jenkins and daughters in Pyongyang in 2006

Jenkins' book is a low-wattage addition to this literature. His 40-year stay in the country is a narrative of survival. There is pain, mind-numbing boredom, hatred and resignation, and finally some respite in married life. There is also redemption, as Jenkins and his family manage to negotiate their way out of the country and

he atones for his desertion. But Jenkins is neither a dramatic personage nor a keen observer. He confesses a fondness for drink. This understandable weakness helped him survive, but may also have diminished his capacity or his desire to pierce the mysteries of North Korean life. If Jenkins had dictated his story to a North Korea expert, rather than to journalist Jim Frederick, his debriefing might have been more illuminating.

Hard Knocks, North Korean-Style

Jenkins was accustomed to austerity. He came from a poor North Carolina family where “when we had enough spare butter to spread right onto our bread, that was a good day.” He joined the Army and came to enjoy the drills and duties. If the rumor of his unit shipping out to Vietnam had not touched his deepest fears, he would have likely become career military. So, on reaching North Korea, he was not the type to grouse about a little hardship. But he faced a good deal more than standard hardship.

Jenkins was thrown in with three other deserters, whom he describes as “pretty much total fuck-ups as soldiers.” Their living conditions were typical of rural Korean life in the 1960s: outside toilet, no running water. Still it was a life of privilege. They didn’t have to work very hard. And they usually had enough to eat. They were, however, subjected to daily propaganda sessions. “We studied about ten or eleven hours a day,” he writes. “If we didn’t memorize enough or were not able to recite portions of our studies on demand, we were forced to study sixteen hours a day on Sunday, which was usually our only day of rest.” This crash course in ideology enabled the four to catch up to average North Koreans, who had been studying the precepts of North Korean communism, more precisely Kim Il-Sungism, all their lives. There are occasional descents into greater hardship – for instance, when a North Korean doctor removes Jenkins’ U.S. Army tattoo without anesthesia – but for the most part the story is of drudgery and boredom and workaday austerity.

Jenkins sees North Korea as “little more than a giant prison.” After several ill-fated attempts to escape, he and his compatriots eventually resign themselves to getting by. They teach English, work on a military dictionary, translate lines from English-language movies, even star in North Korean movies when Western actors are needed. Ultimately they become citizens. They are rewarded for their good behavior not by reduced sentences but with conjugal visits. Each is matched with another foreigner. Jenkins, 40 years old in 1980, is introduced to the 20-year-old Soga Hitomi, and, after some initial wariness, they are married and have two children.



Jenkins and Soga

Jenkins was entitled to certain privileges, but that didn’t include the ability to travel around the country or meet a wide variety of people. He presents a narrow slice of North Korea life. Still, there are some intriguing asides to the main narrative. Jenkins tells of an Ethiopian who slips him Western movies on videocassettes. He describes various market activities, such as his sales of honey to augment his family’s meager rations. He chronicles the rise of corruption with the decline of the economy. As the food crisis sets in during the mid-1990s, Jenkins and his family must take shifts to guard their corn plot to prevent pilfering from thieves. One day, a soldier comes to the door and asks for food. “That shocked us. It was one thing for the army to steal. But for a soldier to beg? That is something that never would have happened in decades past, when the country could at least feed itself.” The school where they send their two children demands that all students bring supplies: a kilo of lead, rabbit skins. And then, of course, there is the omnipresent nationalism that shapes North Korea more deeply than communism ever did. Jenkins and the soldiers are paired off with foreigners, for their blood must not be allowed to taint the “pure” Korean population. Similar sentiments can be found among some in South Korea, but the version of ethnonationalism that persists in the North embodies a much more unselfconscious racism.

Jenkins also provides the occasional glimpse of the human side of North Koreans. There are the cadres whom he more-or-less befriends and who look the other way when, one drunken night, he calls Kim Jong Il a dog. As Jenkins struggles with the choice to leave the country to visit his wife in a third country – he worries that he’ll end up in a U.S. brig if he gets out or in a North Korean prison if he doesn’t – his North Korean minder leans over to say quietly to him: “If you don’t come back, there is nothing we can do.”

A few intriguing details aside, Jenkins’ narrative provides no unexpected revelations about North Korea. His story corresponds to what we more or less know about the country. There is only one part of the story that is controversial. Jenkins alleges that one of his American compatriots, Joseph Dresnok, beat him 30 times over a 7-year period. In the first one, and presumably some that followed, a North Korean cadre bound Jenkins’s hands behind his back and instructed Dresnok to administer the beating. For reasons that Jenkins still can’t fully fathom, Dresnok complied willingly. In the documentary *Crossing the Line*, which features interviews with Dresnok in Pyongyang, the last American deserter left in North Korea denies the charges.



Joseph Dresnok walks past a statue of Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang

Abduction Narrative Revised

The narrative of alien abduction that Betty and Barney Hill unleashed on America sent UFOlogists scrambling to find examples of similar incidents in history. After all, it just wasn't credible that aliens had appeared in the past but had only decided to escort humans into their ships to conduct medical examinations during the Kennedy years. The abduction aficionados found what they were looking for: earlier cases in Brazil, in France, elsewhere in the United States. As the cases multiplied, different camps also emerged, for now there were competing narratives to reconcile – what did the aliens look like, where did they come from, were they having sex with their human captives? Also, too, there were a range of different explanations for the phenomenon, from the literal to the psychological to the mythic. In a way, UFOlogy resembled Kremlinology: labored interpretations and heated disagreements based on scant evidence acquired at considerable remove.

By contrast, after Koizumi's visits and the publication of the narrative of Charles Robert Jenkins, the truth of North Korean abductions would appear to have been firmly established. But as many mysteries remain as have been resolved. North Korea is still a black box, at least in terms of the actions and motivations of the leadership. Was the abduction campaign simply part of an effort to train North Korean operatives to better impersonate Japanese citizens? Why did Kim Jong Il make his revelation in 2002? How much will Pyongyang compromise on this issue in order to win the ultimate prize of diplomatic recognition and a financial package in compensation for Japanese colonial rule that could be worth as much as \$10 billion to the impoverished nation.

Some basic facts also remain unclear, for instance the number of abductees. North Korea is rumored to have informed the United States of several Japanese abductees it has hitherto denied, and expressed willingness to send them home. But there remains a gap between the 15 or so that North Korea might admit to, the 36 on the "strongly suspect" list of the Japanese government, and the much larger list of the abductee organizations. Controversies continue to rage over the documentation that North Korea provided – death certificates, traffic accident reports – as well as over the purported remains of Megumi Yokota. The Japanese authorities have [asserted](#) that the bones delivered by the North Koreans are not those of the young woman, but other independent assessments, notably a report in the journal *Nature*, [suggest](#) that the Japanese scientific assessment methods are flawed. Meanwhile, Jenkins provides tantalizing glimpses of abductees from other countries – a Thai woman, a Romanian woman, people from Hong Kong that he is sure were "snatched."

The greatest divergence in the abduction story is not so much in the particulars but in their reception. The abductions have become as great a public obsession in Japan as the Monica Lewinsky scandal was in the United States, but with much greater impact on the conduct of Japanese foreign policy. The abduction issue became so prominent that it eclipsed Japan's traditional realist orientation, which focused on North Korea's military threat and the economic benefits of trade and aid to the country.

And yet, outside of Japan, the abductions have not achieved anywhere as much attention. South Korea, which lists a far greater number of its citizens abducted by the North, has tiptoed around the issue, though associations of victim families are trying to emulate their Japanese counterparts in forcing a shift in the new Lee Myung Bak government. Meanwhile, in the United States, conservatives [are aghast](#) that the Bush administration – and presidential candidate Barack Obama – have failed to link the removal of North Korea from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list to the case of Kim Dong-Sik. The North Korean government allegedly abducted Kim in 2000. The case remains so far below the media and political radar in the United States to be almost non-existent (the same can be said of the alleged abduction of another American citizen, actress Susan Richardson, which the media really does treat like an UFO abduction story).

Having been rescued by the Japanese, Jenkins is appalled by this discrepancy: "Why is Japan the only country that is – rightfully – making the return of abducted citizens or citizens who are being held against their will in North Korea a large part of their diplomatic dealings with that country? It is a tragedy, in my opinion, that more countries don't investigate further or take the stand that Japan has, because this should not just be Japan's issue to fight alone." Most painful of all for the Japanese government has been the U.S. indifference to the abduction issue in the late June decision to remove North Korea from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list as part of the Six Party Talks. U.S. negotiators in these talks pledged their support for Japan's position even as they refused to allow the issue to block resolution of the nuclear issue. South Korea has focused on economic cooperation with North Korea. The United States and Russia are focused on denuclearization. Only Tokyo has made its relationship with Pyongyang contingent on a resolution of the abduction issue. Representatives of the abductee families [blasted](#) the Fukuda government for its failure to persuade the United States to link the abduction issue to removal of North Korea from the terrorism list; opposition leader Ozawa Ichiro echoed their sentiments but laid the blame directly on Washington.

Transformation of Japanese Foreign Policy

The biggest mystery, however, is how the abduction issue will figure in the transformation of Japanese foreign policy. Like their U.S. neoconservative counterparts, Japanese neonationalists have long been angling to shift the country's international orientation. The abduction issue is their September 11. It has been an opportunity to assert victimhood, to dust off plans to drive up defense spending, and embark on a new brand of militarism that (at least for the time being) functions within the U.S.-Japanese alliance. Koizumi, for all his post-modern flourishes, was committed to this project, his successor Abe even more so.

The abduction has not only frozen Japanese-North Korean relations. It has frozen the very image of North Korea for Japan. The country that abducted Japanese citizens and those of other countries was a great deal more powerful than it is today, its marginal nuclear capacity notwithstanding. North Korea in the 1970s was still competing head-to-head against South Korea. It took a shot at the leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement. It sent military trainers, development money, and propaganda to various Third World countries. Its abductions were not so much acts of desperation as part of an asymmetrical campaign to best South Korea and establish a leading role in international affairs. That North Korea was indeed a mysterious and powerful force that sent emissaries to Japan to extract its citizens for its own purposes.

But that North Korea no longer exists. Jenkins, in his occasional asides, tells the story of this decline. "The troops are starving along with the rest of the people," he writes of the difficult period of the 1990s. "The enlisted men are little more than kids in rags, and the officers are totally corrupt. And no one knows the first thing about military subjects anymore." In short, North Korea in recent decades has become but a shadow of its former threat.

For the purposes of pushing the re-militarization of Japanese foreign policy, the actual truth of North Korea's military capacity or the intentions of its leadership are largely irrelevant. North Korea is a ladder that can be kicked away once the objective of a "normal" Japanese military is reached. The abduction narrative played a critical role in this process. It made it easier for the Japanese to forget the stigma of Japan's much larger campaign of abducting Koreans during World War II – the thousands and thousands of "comfort women" as well as those forced to serve in the military and to labor in factories. It asserted a powerful threat at a time when a full-scale demonization of Beijing was problematic in the context of growing Japanese-Chinese economic cooperation. Even the gaps in the abduction narrative were helpful for, like a good mystery novel, the audience in Japan hung on to each new installment to learn the answers to the remaining riddles.

The trajectory of Japan's foreign policy seems clear, even though there has not yet been a change in constitution, a dramatic increase in military spending, or a ratcheting up of rhetoric. Quietly, Japan has acquired new offensive capabilities, participated in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars with the dispatch of ground and maritime self-defense forces, and prepared the foundation for a rejection of the pacifist past. Perhaps that is why current Prime Minister Fukuda Yasuo feels more comfortable showing flexibility on the abduction issue than his predecessors, Koizumi and Abe. Fukuda has resumed bilateral negotiations with North Korea, and extracted a [surprise promise](#) from Pyongyang to reinvestigate what it had previously declared was a closed issue. In return, Japan has promised to partially lift sanctions if this new inquiry makes progress. This might also open the way for Japan to provide food aid during what is shaping up to be a second major agricultural crisis for North Korea.

If the two countries do finally establish diplomatic relations, and the abduction saga is laid to rest, North Korea will no longer be an alien force for the Japanese. But Pyongyang will have helped to create, with its abductions, exactly the opposite of what it wanted: a Japan unshackled from its recent pacifist past and armed to the teeth.

