

The University of Chicago

Japan's North Korean Minority in Contemporary Context

International Studies B.A. Thesis

E. Ben Heine

1. Introduction

As even the most casual reader of Japan studies will know, these frequently stress the extreme ethnic and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese society, often putting it at the center of their discourse, be it about history, culture or the structure of Japanese corporations. This, however, does not mean that minorities do not exist in Japan. By far the largest, and in many ways most problematic minority in Japan, is that of its Korean residents. As Papademetriou and Hamilton point out, “the continued presence of Koreans in Japan challenges the dominant myth of ethnic homogeneity that still characterizes Japanese society’s perception of itself.”¹ Nearly all of Japan’s resident Koreans (referred to as *Zai-nichi*, in Japanese) are descendants of Koreans brought to Japan during its period of colonial expansion in the first half of the twentieth century, often as forced labour. By the end of World War II, the Korean population in Japan is believed to have been upwards of two million. Many returned to Korea after Japan’s surrender at the end of the war, but many others were unwilling to leave behind the existence they had created for themselves in Japan, for the uncertainty and political chaos on the peninsula. Still, many others returned to Korea only to move once again to Japan after they were unable to establish themselves in their former homeland. Given the much debated homogeneity of Japanese society and the pressures to conform within it, the Korean minority still remains harder to grasp than minorities in many other societies. Koreans are not physically distinguishable from Japanese, and almost all Koreans use Japanese pseudonyms in everyday interactions with the Japanese to escape the prejudice and discrimination they often face in employment, education, marriage and housing. Many people may even grow up completely unaware that they are not ethnically Japanese. Consequently, the exact Korean population of Japan is not known, with figures varying between the officially registered

¹ Papademetriou, Demetrios, and Kimberly Hamilton, *Reinventing Japan: Immigration’s role in shaping Japan’s Future* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000) p. 43

657,159 nationals of North and South Korea living in Japan in 1996², and estimates including those Koreans who have naturalized, placed at around 800,000 people.

Even though many Koreans seem to have completely immersed in Japanese society, an even greater number of Koreans continue to resist assimilation, and strive to preserve their cultural heritage and language, and to combat the discrimination they face in Japanese society, mainly by joining one of many Korean residents' organizations. Yet, rather than galvanizing the Korean community in Japan, the two largest organizations, Chongryun and Mindan, have actually served more to polarize it, as they represent the political concerns of North and South Korea respectively - the division of the peninsula thus mirrored, at least on the surface, within the microcosm of the Korean minority in Japan. In addition to these two groups countless smaller organizations, acting locally or with a focus on a specific issue or cultural activity, have sprung up around Japan in the last thirty years. Yet, the North Korean affiliated Chongryun in many ways still remains the most prominent organization of Koreans in Japan, largely due to its maintenance of the only significant system of Korean education. Once the largest group, its number of members has continuously declined since the 1960, due to the changing situation of Koreans in Japan, many of whom no longer feel a strong attachment to North Korea.

This paper aims to examine and evaluate the success of Chongryun as an organization for the concerns of Koreans in Japan. Since success is a relative term, it will here be defined as how well the organization has been able to address and assist Koreans in issues of discrimination, and how much it has helped in promoting awareness of Korean culture, and the preservation of Koreans' ethnic identity. More importantly, however, I would like to use the question of success as a framework to examine the underlying assumptions, historical determinants, and mechanisms of cultural identity formation and perpetuation at work in Chongryun. Many readers will likely find it quite contradictory that such a significant portion

² Fukuoka, Yasunori, *Lives of Young Koreans in Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2000) p. 21

of the Korean minority in Japan should pledge allegiance to the communist totalitarian state of North Korea, even though they now lead rather prosperous lives in a democratic and pluralistic Japan. In the first section I hope to clarify how Chongryun was legitimized through its historical role in the struggle of Japan's Korean minority and how the organization has since been able to extend its legitimate identity through strong ideological control and through a unique structure of isolated co-existence within the Japanese state. The second section will examine the perpetuation of Chongryun's discourse of Korean identity in its education system, and how reforms in the education system have affected the stability of this discourse. In the last section the causes of Chongryun's gradual decline as the dominant representative of Koreans in Japan will be examined. Both long term causes related to Chongryun's organizational immobility through its totalizing ideological orientation and short term developments in North Korea-Japan relations that have recently put Chongryun under pressure will be identified.

Although interest in the study of minorities in Japan has recently increased, these groups are still marginalized in most accounts of post-war Japanese history and society, because of the pervasiveness of Japan's monoethnic discourse. Yet, the study of minorities is important as it relates to deep-rooted and unresolved historical questions – such as in the case of Koreans, and provides a groundwork for issues of immigration and labour migration that face Japan since the 1990s and will become even more important – such as the influx of Brazilian labourers in Japan's industry. Moreover, study of the Korean minority in its relation to the Japanese state can render visible some of “the negations and fabrications about [Japan's] origins and essence,” that facilitated its “modern triumph”³ as a prosperous nation state. Examining Chongryun in specific may then also shed light on how similar negations and fabrications can be created by minorities in order to escape a dominant cultural hegemony.

³McCormack, Gavan, “Kokusaika: impediments in Japan's deep structure,” *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*, ed. Donald Denoon, et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 266

2. History and Legitimization of Chongryun

As indicated in the introduction, Chongryun derives part of its legitimacy in the eyes of its members from its direct connection with the struggle of Koreans in Japan against discrimination during the immediate post-war period. Much of the appeal stems from it being the successor to the earlier two Korean organizations in Japan, the League of Koreans and Minjun, and being the only significant nation-wide organization for Koreans up until the mid 1960s, thus holding a right to be the original, if not legitimate representative of the Korean minority in Japan. As Sonia Ryang argues, “in many ways the [League of Koreans] can be regarded as the predecessor of Chongryun ... It would be misleading, however, to regard the league as a North Korean organization. At least in the beginning the league’s identity was not as exclusive as that of Chongryun, which always defined itself as an overseas organization of North Korea.”⁴ Comparing the roles of these original two organizations and Chongryun, we shall see that the latter is much less a kind of civil rights organization than its predecessors, especially the League of Koreans.

The clearest similarities between the league and Chongryun lie in their political orientation, their organizing of repatriation movements, and in the area of education, with Chongryun continuing the educational philosophy of its predecessor and playing a singularly prominent part in this field among all current Korean organizations in Japan. On the other hand, Chongryun officially withdrew itself from trying to effect Japanese domestic policy, not participating in many of the movements for Koreans’ rights after 1955. As we shall see, this policy has created a unique sphere of co-existence for Chongryun, that gives it relative autonomy from the Japanese state, but ironically also denies its members significant paths of interaction with Japanese society. Further, as a specifically North Korean organization,

⁴ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity* (Boulder: Westview, 1997) p. 83

Chongryun contributes to the fragmentation of the community, while raising more than a few Japanese eyebrows with its opaque connections to the regime in Pyongyang.

The League of Koreans was active in a time that presented a great number of opportunities for Koreans in Japan, as the new political order in the country under the American occupation (1945–52) was still open. Since the colonization of Korea by Japan in 1910, increasing numbers of Koreans had been forced, initially through a lack of better economic alternatives in Korea and later through coercion, to relocate to Japan, where they mainly worked as low-paid, unskilled labour in the mining, textiles and arms industry. In most cases they faced insufficient wages, highly unsafe work environments and severe social discrimination, and for this reason communism and other radical ideologies found fertile ground among Korean labourers and students. However, this in turn put Koreans increasingly at odds with the anti-leftist Japanese authorities. State sanctioned xenophobia in Japan reached its height in the aftermath the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, during which police and other authorities found a convenient opportunity to crack down on subversive leftist elements, by helping to “spread rumours that Koreans were poisoning wells and attempting an armed insurrection, which led to ordinary Japanese forming vigilante groups who murdered hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent Koreans.”⁵ Given this starting point, it is easy to understand that a kind of euphoria for a better future must have swept through the Korean population of Japan after the country’s surrender on 15 August 1945, and that any significant movement of Koreans would likely follow a leftist political orientation.

⁵ Tipton, Elise K., *Modern Japan: A social and political history* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 99

2.1. Choryun - The League of Koreans in Japan

Shortly after Japan's surrender, the first organization for Korean residents in Japan, called the League of Koreans in Japan (kor. *Chaeil Chosunin Yunmaeng*, or *Choryun*, jpn. *Zai-nichi Chosenjin Renmei*, or *Choren*), was formed under the American occupation, which considered Koreans 'liberated nationals' as former colonial subjects of Japan⁶. Indeed, during its first two years the Occupation was highly tolerant of all hitherto suppressed social groups and political movements, in an effort to 'democratize' the nation by radically usurping the old imperial order that had allowed for Japan's path of militarist expansion. Under this policy the organization was able to retain some considerable power, having been given the responsibility to distribute relief rations to the Korean population, deal with Korean criminals, and having received funds from the Japanese Ministry of Finance to support its operations. At this point the League first began establishing Korean language schools throughout Japan, although this topic will be specifically looked at in the next chapter. The other main functions of the league at this time, was to organize and facilitate the repatriation of Koreans, who numbered around 2.4 million in Japan at the time, all though repatriation became increasingly less attractive, with the political and economic situation in Korea remaining far more chaotic than in Japan, and Koreans allowed to only take 1000 Yen and a maximum of 250 pounds worth of belongings out of the country.⁷ SCAP (Supreme Command of Allied Powers), the headquarters of the American occupation, eventually took over the repatriation campaign in 1946, as well as becoming increasingly undecided about the legal status of Koreans in Japan. As it eventually turned out, the Occupation seems to have continued many of the patterns of discrimination from the Japanese. A statement was issued declaring that Koreans remaining

⁶ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid* (Sidney: Ashgate, 1997) p. 24

⁷ Chin, Hee-gwan, "Divided by Fate: The Integration of Overseas Koreans in Japan," *East Asian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2000, p. 3

in Japan would be treated as Japanese citizens until their nationality was recognized by the legitimate government of Korea.⁸

Naturally, this statement was met with heavy protest by the League of Koreans, but to no avail. Later in the year, the league protested a new capital levy tax, introduced to compensate for some of the economic losses incurred during the war, as Koreans did not see themselves responsible for the war.⁹ The protest was disbanded by SCAP, with several of the leaders being deported to Korea. During the same time, the league also protested the Alien Registration Law, designed to curb illegal immigration, but in effect requiring all Koreans to be registered and photographed, and unsuccessfully demanded voting rights for Koreans, while supporting the election campaign of the Japan Communist Party (JCP). The League of Koreans, with many of its members on the far left, had already been in close touch with the JCP, but as Inokuchi explains, at this point the league's "communist orientation became increasingly prevalent as exemplified by the expulsion from its executive committee of non-communist members."¹⁰

In 1948, the league had successfully organized protest against a draft ordinance on the Acquisition of Property by Foreigners. This ordinance would make all possible aspects of business activity subject to application to, and approval by the Foreign Capital Commission. The protest was also supported by Chinese residents' groups and some Japanese small business owners, and eventually succeeded in amending the ordinance, so that Koreans of residency in Japan as of September 2, 1945, would not be considered foreigners.¹¹

After the crystallization of the Cold War in Europe and the imminent collapse of China's Nationalist government at the hands of communist forces, the Occupation changed its priorities in 1947, and under the government of conservative prime minister Shigeru Yoshida

⁸ Inokuchi, Hiromitsu, "Korean ethnic schools in occupied Japan, 1945–52," *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 146

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147

¹¹ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid*, p. 30

the so-called *reverse course* was introduced, in which the Occupation suddenly ‘reversed’ its prior policy of tolerance for fear of the political left gaining too much strength. With the subsequent crackdown on socialists, communists and other supposed subversives, such as the putatively troublesome Koreans, the league was also banned in 1949. In fact, the league had become increasingly radicalized to the left, and a report by the Japanese Ministry of Justice maintained that the league’s “action plans included securing weapons “in order to cope actively with the forthcoming revolution in East Asia””.¹²

2.2. Minjun - The Democratic Front for the Unification of Korea

After the dissolution of the League of Koreans and the beginning of the Korean War, radicals of the former group established the underground Democratic Front for the Unification of Korea (kor. *Chaeil Choson Minju Tongil Minjun*, or *Minjun*, jpn. *Zai-nichi Chosen Minshu Toitsu Sensen*, or *Minsen*) in 1951, a paramilitary group designed to participate in the conflict on the side of North Korea. Activities, however, soon normalized, as the group became a subordinate part of the Japan Communist Party and was legalized after the Occupation withdrew in 1952 and the new Japanese constitution took effect. During the following few years the group was engaged in a prolonged internal struggle between supporters of communist internationalism who strove towards revolution in Japan and all of East Asia, and the so-called nationalists, who wanted to resist assimilation in Japan and were in favour of focussing activities first and foremost on Koreans and the unification of the peninsula under the North Korean initiative.¹³ The most prominent spokesman for latter group was Han Duk-su, who had been an activist since coming to Japan as a student in 1927, had been jailed numerous times for political protest, and had been a leading figure in the League of Koreans. Although the debate initially did not run in favour of the nationalist group, a sudden shift

¹² Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 82

¹³ Gohl, Gerhard, *Die koreanische Minderheit in Japan als Fall einer „politisch-ethnischen“ Minderheitengruppe* (The Korean minority in Japan as a case of a “political-ethnic” minority group) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976) pp. 56-57

came in 1955 when the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) announced its intentions to normalize relations with Japan. Only a few months earlier it had issued a communiqué declaring that all Korean residents of Japan were entitled to North Korean citizenship. This now meant that Koreans who were participating in the JCP's struggle for revolution in Japan were effectively working against their own government's plans to establish diplomatic relations with Japan. The path of the leftist Korean movement in Japan had thus been set: "It would henceforth renounce the social-horizontal efforts towards participation in the political decision-making process of Japanese society on a whole"¹⁴ and follow, what Gohl calls "an entirely ethnic-vertical orientation".¹⁵ The Democratic Front eventually split from the JCP, and was finally disbanded on May 25, 1955.

2.3. Chongryun - The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan

On the same day that the Democratic Front was disbanded, a new group, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (kor. *Chaeil Chosunin Chongryunhaphoe*, or *Chongryun*, jpn. *Zai-Nippon Chosenjin Sorengokai*, or *Chosen Soren*, or *Soren*), in other words, the organization which mainly concerns this paper, was founded. Han Duk-su was elected as its chairman, and he served in this position until his death in 2001 at age 94. Although democratic elections for the post of chairman and the members of Chongryun's Central Standing Committee were supposed to be held periodically, members are in reality appointed top-down according to their loyalty to the organization and the chairman was simply confirmed every three years by an informal show of hands by the committee members. This allowed Han to remain in power for such a long time, notwithstanding the apparent physical and mental impediments of his old age.¹⁶ The system of appointments is also part of what ensured that Chongryun and its members never strayed too far from the original policy

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60 (my translation)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62 (my translation)

¹⁶ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 91

platform, and is one of the factors that contributed significantly to the institutional immobility that still characterizes Chongryun.

Chongryun's new policy platform can be summarized through the most important points of its first official agenda:

1. We shall organize all the Korean compatriots in Japan around the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea.
2. We shall fight to achieve the peaceful reunification of the fatherland.
3. We shall institutionalize our own education among the Korean children in Japan.
4. We shall safeguard firmly our honour as overseas nationals of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea.¹⁷

To this day Chongryun has officially functioned as an association for overseas nationals of North Korea. As such, all further activities became subordinated to the policy directives set forth by the DPRK, including the personality cult of Kim Jong-il and adherence to the principles of North Korea's guiding ideology of *Juche* (self-reliance). The organization officially declared it would recognize Japan's sovereign and not try to interfere in Japanese domestic politics. In effect this new policy meant that Chongryun Koreans were now placed in a position of self-contained co-existence with and within the Japanese state, in which they would keep interaction with Japanese authorities to the absolute required minimum. This has allowed Chongryun a reasonable degree of autonomy, as we shall see, for example, in the area of education. However, it has also denied Chongryun Koreans a number of social benefits and the refusal to engage in direct political protest has often prevented Chongryun from effectively combating discrimination against Koreans. As George Hicks points out, "[Chongryun] carefully hewed to [its] stated policies, even refraining as much as possible from accepting the limited state welfare benefits available to Koreans"¹⁸, largely avoided active participation in the campaign against the fingerprinting of foreign residents, which was still required for obtaining an alien registration card, during the 1980s, and opposed the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90

¹⁸ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid*, p. 31

granting of municipal voting rights to foreign residents in the 1990s (in this case partly out of fear of assimilation)¹⁹. Sonia Ryang also explains that the call of Chongryun for all its members to abide by Japanese law is part of a twofold strategy. On the one hand having members abide by Japanese law will not provide an occasion for Japanese authorities to persecute Chongryun, on the other hand the exaggerated warnings of deportation by the Japanese of Chongryun members to South Korea, where they would subsequently be imprisoned increased loyalty to the organisation.²⁰

As opposed to the League of Koreans, Chongryun actually had very little tangible effect in helping Koreans in Japan in everyday relations with the Japanese state. Advances made were mostly in the way the Japanese government dealt with North Korea, or Chongryun as an organization. As such Chongryun unsuccessfully tried to block the normalization treaty between Japan and the ROK. More successfully, Chongryun was able to lobby against several bills, aimed at restricting political activities of foreign residents in Japan, putting foreigners' schools under the control of the Ministry of Education, and various measures limiting the ownership of Pachinko game parlours many of which are owned by Koreans, and constitute a major source of income for Chongryun.²¹

2.3.1. Issues of Citizenship

It was, however, not solely because of Chongryun's stated policy aims that the organization's relative isolation from, and parallel co-habitation with mainstream Japanese society came to persist until this day. Part of the reason can also be found in a shift in national consciousness and the legal definition of citizenship in Japan, after World War II and the Occupation. During Japan's period of colonial expansion, the notion of a national body had gradually expanded from one focussed only on the archipelago and its people, to one that

¹⁹ Higuchi, Naoto, "Political Participation of Foreign Residents," diss., Tokushima University, 2000, p. 5

²⁰ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 90

²¹ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid*, p. 31

included all imperial subjects in a more open notion of nationality, based largely on the acceptance of a common culture and ideology. This conception of the nation is probably best embodied by the writings of Kita Sadakichi from the 1920s, who suggested in his journal *Minzoku to rekishi* (Ethnicity and History) that the strength of Japan lay in its ability to reconcile and assimilate differences into one unified national body. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki explains:

[This] interpretation achieved two things. It took hold of certain features of the modern Japanese nation state – the striving for linguistic uniformity, the exaltation of the emperor, etc. – and essentialised them, projecting them back upon history as the eternal features of the Japanese people. At the same time, it offered the people of Japan’s expanding empire ... the possibility of acceptance as ‘Japanese’, but only at the cost of their total submission to a prescribed set of cultural, linguistic and ideological norms.²²

Indeed, it was this kind of theoretical framework that served to legitimize Japan’s increasingly assimilationist colonial policies up until its defeat in 1945, such as forcing Koreans to worship at Shinto shrines, adopt Japanese names and prohibit Korean instruction at schools.

After the Occupation and the drafting of Japan’s new constitution in 1947, however, a sudden shift in the conception of the nation state occurred. Cultural and ideological assimilation as a subject of the Japanese emperor were now no longer the deciding factor of ones ‘Japaneseness’ – after all, the pre-war emperor cult and state Shintoism were now defunct, and the multiethnic population had been reduced considerably. Instead nationality would now be construed in monoethnic, if not racial, terms. As John Lie²³ suggests, the manifestation of monoethnicism as the dominant national discourse coincided roughly with the establishment of the so called ‘1955 System’ of political stability, which refers to the continuous rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from 1955 until its electoral defeat in 1993. The discourse grew even more prominent during the period of high economic growth of the late 1950s and throughout the 60s, and the subsequent emergence of right-wing

²² Morris-Suzuki, Tessa, “A Descent into the Past: the frontier in the construction of Japanese history,” *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*, ed. Donald Denoon, et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 89

²³ Lie, John, *Multiethnic Japan* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 2001) pp. 125-128

intellectuals such as Shintaro Ishihara and Yukio Mishima, and *Nihonjinron* (Theories of the Japanese), a kind of pop-anthropology that emphasizes the supposed homogeneity of Japan and highlights specific traits of the Japanese that are held to be the key to their economic success. Citizenship in post-war Japan should be understood at least partly in light of this shift in the conception of the nation.

Indeed, Koreans living in Japan were not automatically granted Japanese citizenship through the 1947 constitution, which had a number of discriminatory side-effects, such as it now removed the Japanese government from the responsibility of giving pensions to Korean veterans of World War II. Nonetheless, it appears that Japanese citizenship carried so much colonial baggage, that few Koreans protested not being granted it. Further, naturalization to Japan had now become a complicated bureaucratic process, and required a degree of assimilation that was unacceptable to most Koreans (such as changing to a Japanese name).²⁴ In this situation Koreans naturally drifted towards identification with their 'homeland' at an early stage, and the creation of the similarly monoethnic Chongryun in opposition to Japanese hegemony – which just happens to coincided with the beginning of the 1955 System – seemed the only viable option. While Koreans were thus able to resist assimilation and safeguard the identity they had created for themselves, this in turn only served to underscore the vicious circle of the monoethnic discourse of the Japanese nation. Since Chongryun Koreans were no longer Japanese citizens, they were no longer considered an ethnic minority but merely foreigners living in Japan. “The putative non-existence of ethnic minorities legitimized passivity on the part of local and national government. The ideology of monoethnicity, in other words, released the Japanese government from addressing the demands of various minority groups.”²⁵

²⁴Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p.121

²⁵ Lie, John, *Multiethnic Japan*, p. 139

2.3.2. Chongryun and Mindan

The issue of the citizenship of Koreans in Japan, however, is not only problematic from a Japanese standpoint, but also in view of the divided Korean peninsula. Two different terms for Korea are used on Japanese alien registration cards, “Chosen” and “Kankoku”. Chosen was the name used for all of Korea before the end of World War II, and the term was continued in the name of the North Korean state, *Chosun Minjujuui Inmin Konghwaguk*. Kankoku is the Japanese reading of the new name of the South Korean state, *Taehan Minguk*, or *Hanguk* in short. Statistics of the Japanese Ministry of Justice show that in 1950 92.6% of Koreans in Japan were registered as citizens of “Chosen”, even though 95% of the Koreans had come from provinces in the south of Korea. The remaining 7.4% were registered as citizens of “Kankoku”.²⁶ Several reasons for this distribution can be identified. One was the fact that many Koreans believed the division of the peninsula to be only a temporary arrangement, and refusing to chose a side, they still held to Korea’s traditional name Chosen. Another reason is the popularity of the leftist League of Koreans that was ideologically connected with the North. Finally, the newly established anti-communist South Korean government of Lee Seung-man declared in 1948 that only Koreans in Japan who were affiliated with Mindan, the Union of Korean Residents in Japan (kor. *Chaeil Taehanmiguk Koryumindan*, jpn. *Zai-nichi Daikanminkoku Kyoryumindan*), were eligible for South Korean citizenship.²⁷ The tiny organization had been formed in opposition to the League of Koreans, in October 1945, but it was continuously marred by internal factionalism and its power over the Korean community was essentially negligible until the mid-1960s.²⁸ After North Korea’s declaration that all Koreans abroad would be regarded as citizens of the DPRK, this naturally led to a stronger commitment to by Koreans in Japan to “Chosen” rather than “Kankoku”.

²⁶ Chin, Hee-gwan, “Divided by Fate: The Integration of Overseas Koreans in Japan,” *East Asian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2000, pp. 4-5

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6

²⁸ Gohl, Gerhard, *Die koreanische Minderheit in Japan als Fall einer „politisch-ethnischen“ Minderheitengruppe* (The Korean minority in Japan as a case of a “political-ethnic” minority group), pp. 46-47

From the perspective of the Japanese authorities, however, there was not much difference between either of the two terms, as Japan had no formal diplomatic ties to either of the Koreas. This changed in 1965, when Japan and the Republic of Korea normalized relations. As part of the normalization treaty Japan recognized the ROK as the only lawful government of Korea. The treaty also included a stipulation that South Koreans in Japan would be granted permanent residence status. Under this status they would be guaranteed protection under Japanese law, they would be exempt from deportation and would be able to join the national health insurance. This does not mean that these benefits had not been available before, as they depended mainly on decisions by local authorities who had generally granted them, but now they were prescribed by law.²⁹ Koreans would be able to adopt South Korean citizenship through the offices of Mindan, and they would thus gain access to consular services and be able to leave Japan for travel. After the treaty was signed, “not surprisingly, [...] the majority of Korean residents gravitated to Mindan, which could provide practical assistance on a day to day level.”³⁰ Indeed many Koreans began officially changing their citizenship, and by 1970 the number of Koreans registered as “Kankoku” had increased to 52%³¹, with the figure growing to this day.

Naturally, this development was met with strong antagonism from Chongryun Koreans.³² In the meantime, they continued to exist in a kind of legal limbo until 1982, when Japan created a new category of permanent residence for them, called “exceptional permanent residence”, after ratifying the International Covenant on Human Rights in 1979.³³ Japan, of course, does not officially recognize North Korean citizenship. Although Pyongyang declared Koreans in Japan citizens of the DPRK, its citizenship laws are largely unknown, no consular

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

³⁰ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid*, p. 33

³¹ Gohl, Gerhard, *Die koreanische Minderheit in Japan als Fall einer „politisch-ethnischen“ Minderheitengruppe* (The Korean minority in Japan as a case of a “political-ethnic” minority group), p. 87

³² Chin, Hee-gwan, “Divided by Fate: The Integration of Overseas Koreans in Japan,” *East Asian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2000, p. 7

³³ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 125

services have ever existed and no passports have ever been issued, neither have Chongryun Koreans ever voted in North Korean elections, nor have they been conscripted into the North Korean army. “In a word, there exist hardly any tangible legal regulations or precedents that would establish Chongryun Koreans as North Korea’s nationals abroad.”³⁴ The North Korean nationality of Chongryun Koreans is thus an entirely manufactured and symbolic identity based on ideological conviction.

2.3.3. Legitimization of Chongryun

With no legal basis for DPRK citizenship and without a particularly strong engagement in furthering the rights of Koreans in Japanese society, how then was Chongryun able to so successfully maintain its emotional tug and keep a loyal base of members? Several reasons can be given. Firstly, Chongryun’s network of support can be given credit for allowing its members relatively secure and prosperous lives, while maintaining their Korean identities in a hostile environment. The organization’s main activities since its inception have been the establishment of an ethnic Korean education system, the organization of the DPRK-sponsored repatriation movement of the 1960s, creating a Korean owned system of banks and credit unions (*Chosen Ginko*, the Bank of Korea³⁵) and the DPRK-Japan Trade Association, maintaining its own publishing houses (including its daily newspaper, the *Chosun Shinbo*, The People’s Korea in its English language edition, available at <http://www.korea-np.co.jp>), and acting as a media representative of North Korea through the Korea News Service (<http://www.kcna.co.jp>). For many first-generation Koreans, who remember life in pre-war Japan, these are considerable achievements, and they consider Chongryun the natural continuation of the League of Koreans’ struggle in the immediate post-war. Sonia Ryang has interviewed several first-generation members of Chongryun, and all shared similar feelings about Chongryun, Chairman Han Duk-su and North Korea. One woman stressed the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124

³⁵ Fukuoka, Yasunori, *Lives of Young Koreans in Japan*, p. 304

significance of Han Duk-su's breaking away from the JCP and the importance of being loyal to him and the leaders of North Korea:

Comrade chairman was a courageous young man when he defended our patriotic movement from the reactionaries. Our movement would have been gravely endangered had we not been led by the Great Leader [Kim Il-sung]. And it is comrade chairman who followed faithfully the guidance of the Great Leader. Throughout my ideological training along the path of loyalty to the Great Leader, comrade chairman has always been my model.³⁶

Another interviewee stated:

You may not believe this, but we were prepared to fight for Japan against the Americans. And some Koreans had already volunteered for the front. I cannot believe it myself. But I had received nothing but imperial education. I was even disappointed when Japan was defeated. Dreadful! But thanks to the wise guidance of the Great Leader, I have recovered my human dignity and done away with my humiliating colonial past.³⁷

It is important to note the language used by these individuals. The leadership of Chongryun and especially of North Korea is continuously referred to only in almost messianic praise. Further, there seems to be a sudden jump from Koreans as colonial subjects to citizens of the DPRK, quite contradicting the uncertain and sometimes tumultuous history we have just explored. It appears the identity of Chongryun Koreans as North Korean nationals was only retroactively affixed to their history.

As Ryang notes, the North Korean identity of Chongryun Koreans “took years to become fixed and further decades to be reinforced, involving systematic training of individuals and the implementation of control through study meetings and other tactics.”³⁸ Kim Il-sung worship and strict adherence to the rhetoric of his *Juche* ideology, in fact, only reached its prime during the 1970s and 1980s, when it became necessary to solidify the logical necessity of his leadership. This entailed everything from hanging Kim's portrait in every room of a Chongryun building, to the chanting of praise at the beginning of discussion

³⁶ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 78

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107

sessions and study groups.³⁹ An example of positive reinforcement through the use of language is Chongryun's newspaper, *Chosun Shinbo*, in which North Korea is only referred to in glorifying terms, while negatives are solely reserved for "enemies", such as Japan, the United States and the South Korean "puppet government". Similarly, problems in North Korea or within Chongryun are simply omitted from the news. The codification of language even goes so far that Kim Il-sung must always be written with his full title *wonsunim* (Marshal), be printed in a bold typeset and may not be interrupted by a break in line.⁴⁰

This system of ideological forming and language control has legitimized Chongryun's claim as the true representative of Koreans in Japan and solidified Chongryun's members' identity as North Korean nationals. Especially first-generation Koreans, who remembered life in pre-war Japan, found it easy to identify Chongryun as the natural continuation of their post-colonial struggle, having grown out of the League of Koreans and Minjun. However, "by internalizing Chongryun's discourse, the majority of first-generation Chongryun Koreans lost alternative language to represent themselves"⁴¹, as participation in the organization automatically precludes criticism thereof. In the next chapter we shall see how Chongryun is able to perpetuate its ideology among those members who did not experience life as colonial subjects, through its Korean education system.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-101

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107

3. Chongryun and education

In June 2003, during my study abroad in Kyoto I had the opportunity to visit the East Osaka Korean Middle School (*Higashi Osaka Chosen Chukyugakko*). Arriving at the school I was immediately struck by what little overt difference there was between this institution and Japanese schools I had visited. Although I was immediately greeted by a mural of the Pyongyang skyline in the entrance hall, it appeared that the symbols of North Korean ideology had been generally pushed aside and replaced with more diffuse notions of Koreanness and Korean unity, such as maps of a united Korean peninsula. Chollima (a flying horse symbolizing North Korean self-reliance) trophies were catching dust in dim showcases, and contrary to the photos in *North Koreans in Japan*, from the mid 1990s, the ubiquitous, stern portraits of the Great and Dear Leaders, Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, above the blackboards had now been relegated to a position on the side of the classroom's back wall. The images now depicted only either one of the Kims, surrounded by a crowd of bright-eyed, smiling Young Pioneers. Meanwhile, the students in the classroom resembled anything but the children in these socialist realist visions. Many of them wearing Nike or Adidas sneakers and displaying Hello Kitty pencil cases on their desks, they seemed exactly like any Japanese teenager. In the state-of-the-art computer lab a group of giggling students were looking at pictures of South Korean pop idol BoA on the internet, every time their teacher turned away from their screens, instead of working on their geometry assignment. While the female teachers still wore traditional Korean *chima-choguri* dresses, about half of the girl students had switched to Japanese/Western style plaid skirt and blouse uniforms, sadly because of the danger of assault facing Korean looking students on the way to and from school.

From looking at the interior life of the school, it seemed clear to me, that Chongryun exists in an inherent state of contradiction, the acceptance of which cannot be easily understood by someone outside of the organization. This section will look specifically at

Chongryun's education system, and will try to extrapolate from there the mechanisms of constructing – or rather, “imagining” in the Andersonian⁴² sense – a Korean nation, diaspora and identity, and explore how seemingly contradictory ideologies can be reconciled by members of this organization, through the switching of codes inside and outside of the organization, as Sonia Ryang has shown.

As previously mentioned, Chongryun's autonomous school education system is one of, if not the most, important areas of activity for the organization. This is due, firstly, to the fact that running a system of schools constitutes one of Chongryun's oldest activities and is in its establishment inexorably linked to one of the worst single incidents of anti-Korean discrimination in post-war Japan (the Kobe incident of 1948). Further Chongryun's schools constitute the only viable way for Korean children to receive Korean language education, as there are only a few Mindan schools, and Korean ethnic education at Japanese schools is rare, and if available at all, more a symbolic extracurricular activity.⁴³ Thus its education system legitimizes Chongryun not just through its content, but also through its direct embeddedness within the struggle for Korean rights in Japan.

Secondly, an institutionalized system of education is presumably the most viable mechanism for the reproduction of those cultural signifiers (the most important being language), which Chongryun deems necessary for the preservation of a Korean identity, and more specifically, an identity as overseas citizens of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea. However, more than just reproducing a desired cultural hegemony, the education system also guarantees the survival of the organization itself, as its ideology is perpetuated and Chongryun itself is necessitated in the eyes of the students. In a more literal sense, one can observe that most of the graduates of Chongryun's Korea University in Tokyo go on to work as officials within Chongryun.

⁴² Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

⁴³ Aoki, Eriko, “Korean children, textbooks, and educational practices in Japanese primary schools,” *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000)

Thirdly, periodic changes within the school curricula may reflect more overlying, general tendencies of change in the organization. From changes in the curricula, we can therefore glean how certain priorities for Chongryun are changing, and how its position to, and relationship with mainstream Japanese society may be changing.

3.1. History of Korean Education in Japan

In the previous chapter it was argued that the succession between the predecessor organisations of the difficult immediate post-war period and the current Chongryun is one of that organization's main sources of legitimacy. Indeed it can be argued that the most important line of succession between the league and Chongryun lies in the area of education.

The first schools established by the League of Koreans had the primary aim of educating people for repatriation. As it became increasingly clear, however, that many Koreans would remain in Japan for the time being, the aim was to guarantee the preservation of Korean culture and language within the community in Japan, and the education system was expanded under the famous slogan "Let's establish our schools, those with money providing money, those who can labour providing labour, those with knowledge providing knowledge!"⁴⁴ The league "developed its own curriculum and educational materials, which emphasized Korean history and geography. Japanese colonialism and its assimilationist ideas were criticized, and Korean nationalism was promoted in its place."⁴⁵ In many cases local governments even contributed to the establishment of these ethnic schools, as was the case in Osaka and Kobe, cities with particularly high numbers of Korean residents.⁴⁶

Initially, these schools attracted little attention from the Japanese Ministry of Education. However, once SCAP announced that Koreans remaining in Japan would be treated like Japanese citizens, the ministry required all schools to follow curricula determined

⁴⁴ Hicks, George, *Japan's Hidden Apartheid*, p. 27

⁴⁵ Inokuchi, Hiromitsu, "Korean ethnic schools in occupied Japan, 1945–52," *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, p. 148

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147

by Japanese law. This meant that the language of instruction in all schools would have to be Japanese, with Korean language instruction relegated to extracurricular status. As no compromise could be reached amid heavy protest by the league, two major rallies were staged in Osaka and Kobe. In Kobe the prefectural office was stormed on April 24, 1948, and the governor and mayor were forced to sign an agreement on the continuation of Korean schools. The Allied occupation, however, which was now presented with a convenient opportunity to crack down on the pro-communist Korean community⁴⁷, quickly moved in and declared a state of emergency, arresting thousands and killing two. Thus the disbanding of the League of Koreans in 1949 served as a final death blow, at least for the time being, to an ethnic Korean education system in Japan.

Korean ethnic education was only resumed after 1955, when it became part of the agenda of the newly formed Chongryun. Further, under the new Japanese Constitution, the education of foreigners' children in Japan could proceed independently from the Ministry of Education. Korean schools were accredited by the Ministry of Education as 'miscellaneous schools' (*kakushu gakkou*)⁴⁸, and therefore lost the right to financial assistance from the Japanese government, while, paradoxically to the occupation period, also remaining free from interference. At first financing for these schools was heavily subsidised by the North Korean government, but the contributions have now stopped. The greater contribution has been in terms of ideology and education materials, which means "the teaching of the Korean language used in North Korea, the North Korean version of Korean history, and knowledge of North Korean society."⁴⁹ Prior to a drastic revision of the curriculum in 1993, the education in Chongryun schools was significantly based on a North Korean system including the personality cult of Kim Il-Sung. The curricula now generally follow the Japanese education system, albeit with a heavy slant towards Korea in history and geography classes, and the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154

⁴⁹ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 24

language of instruction remains Korean. Today the Chongryun education system encompasses about 14,000 students, in one university, twelve senior high schools, 43 junior high schools, 65 primary schools, and three nursery schools, comprised in a total of 76 different institutions.⁵⁰ The students are almost all third, and fourth generation Korean residents of Japan, whose native language, and language spoken at home is Japanese. Korean is essentially only learned, studied and used in school and at other functions related to Chongryun. The peculiarities of this kind of bilingualism will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

The aforementioned accreditation of Chongryun schools as “miscellaneous schools” by the Japanese Ministry of Education persists to this day, and essentially places them in the same category as driving or cooking schools. The Ministry of Education does not regard graduates from a Chongryun high school as eligible to sit for the entrance examinations of state universities, although all private universities do. Students wishing to enter a state university must take an additional exam, which puts them under further academic stress. In February 2003 the ministry issued an ordinance giving all foreign high schools that teach in English full accreditation. This blatant act of discrimination caused a massive wave of protest, not just from Koreans and Chinese, but also many Japanese citizens and international human rights groups.⁵¹ In July 2003, the Ministry released a memorandum, stating that it would review its decision, but so far the issue has not been resolved. Interestingly, schools of the South Korean affiliated Mindan – of which there are very few, and who are mainly visited by the children of South Korean expatriate businesspeople – have received full accreditation from the Ministry of Education. Although class in these schools is also conducted in Korean, classes pertaining to the history, geography and culture of Korea are all elective and held

⁵⁰ <http://www.chongryon.com/japan/school/j-school.htm> (April 4, 2004)

⁵¹ Arita, Eriko, “Japanese Discrimination against Korean and other Ethnic Schools,” *Japan Times*, April 30, 2003

apart from regular teaching hours⁵². It seems clear that the discriminatory practice of the Japanese Ministry of Education underlies an apparent paranoia of institutions that stray too far from the desired hegemonic construct of the Japanese nation. This paranoia is only spurred by recent problems in relations with North Korea, such as the admission by Pyongyang of having kidnapped at least thirteen Japanese civilians.

As the analysis of Chongryun's early history has shown, the restructuring of the Japanese national polity in the immediate post-war rejected more viscous imperial notions of nationality that allowed all Asians to become "Japanese" as subjects of the emperor, in favour of a more rigid definition in terms of racial homogeneity. Under this new hegemony it was not problematic to give North Korean schools legal sanctioning, as long as North Koreans actually remained apart from the Japanese mainstream.

3.2. Education at Chongryun schools

3.2.1. Pre-1993 Curriculum

Under severe political pressure and economic difficulty in the late-1940s to 1960s, the strategy adopted by Chongryun to resist assimilation under the new Japanese cultural hegemony and preserve a Korean identity, was to create its own strict cultural hegemony based on that perpetuated by the new North Korean regime. A fixed curriculum was first established in 1963, and reforms were to be made every ten years. In the 1983 curriculum, which will be discussed here, subjects such as Korean, Korean history and geography were highly controlled and censored by North Korean education officials, who had been consulted. In addition there was a mandatory class for primary school pupils called the Childhood of Father Marshall Kim Il-Sung and one in middle school, called the Revolutionary Activities of the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung.

⁵²Hester, Jeffrey T., "Kids between nations: ethnic classes in the construction of Korean identities in Japanese public schools," *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 181

For example, Korean textbooks were highly ideologically infused, with almost all readings having some sort of political slant. As Sonia Ryang explains,

The content of the 1983 edition of Korean textbooks for primary and middle school can be divided into four topics: (1) love and care stories about Kim Il-Sung and “loyalty education”, (2) attraction and strength of the socialist fatherland, (3) organizational lives of Chongryun and the Young Pioneers, and (4) the necessity for the reunification of Korea under the North Korean initiative.⁵³

Only three out of a total of twenty four lessons were fairly devoid of ideology. Similarly, the teaching of the Korean language in class was extremely politicized. Apart from the most basic everyday vocabulary, such as the words for objects and verbs, children would also be taught the correct forms of address for the leadership of North Korea from grade one. They would learn to speak of Kim Il-Sung only with “our Father Marshall” or “the Respected and Beloved Leader” preceding his name. The epithets for the other members of Kim Il-Sung’s family, such as “mother of Korea, Mrs. Kang Ban-sok” for his mother and “revolutionary and patriot of iron will, Mr. Kim Hyong-Jik” for his father, were also taught at this stage⁵⁴. In the class about his childhood pupils would also have to memorize a number of poems and songs in praise of Kim Il-Sung, that would often include archaic congratulatory terms such as *mansu mugang* (long life), that are no longer used in contemporary South Korea, or North Korea for that matter, apart from addressing Kim Il-Sung.⁵⁵ The point of this kind of education, as Sonia Ryang quotes a Chongryun teacher, is that...

...the lesson of the childhood gives basic skills for the future life in Chongryun’s organizational units. Without knowing how to call the members of the revolutionary family, the cradle in which our Great Leader was born and brought up, no one can sufficiently and successfully participate in Chongryun’s patriotic activities and our cause of the reunification of the fatherland.⁵⁶

Indeed, the Korean language education at Chongryun schools was not simply aimed at providing students with the vocabulary necessary to become a functioning member of the

⁵³ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 31

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28

Chongryun community, but was almost exclusively limited in this respect. Several problems and possibly unintentional side-effects arose out of this kind of education, seriously questioning the success of Chongryun's attempt to preserve Korean national identity among its members. Mainly, students never actually became as fully proficient in Korean as a native speaker. One of the reasons for this is that the Korean taught at Chongryun schools was and still is almost entirely text-based, and spoken forms are highly formalized. The use of text based language is a common trait in almost all schools, as children must be taught how to read and write sentences correctly, however, the written language in Korean, and also Japanese, differs from the spoken language to a greater degree, than in English, for instance. Further, as opposed to English, Korean and Japanese are languages that both change grammatically depending on what social setting they are used in. For example, a Korean or Japanese will use a much more formalized and polite form of conjugation when addressing a superior at work or a teacher, than when talking to a close friend or a member of the family. As students in Chongryun only learn how to use Korean in the formal setting of the school or the organization, and use Japanese in informal settings, such as at home or when playing with friends after school, they never learn how to use informal and casual Korean. The language they speak thus sounds very stilted and overly formal to most native speakers of Korean, and oftentimes as if a written document were being read, as a Korean-American student who visited the school in Osaka with me confirmed.

Another problem is the highly restricted vocabulary that many students at Chongryun schools acquire as a result of this kind of education. Chongryun schools actively discourage the use of Japanese at school, including during the recesses and other events related to school life. The school offers rewards and reprimands to students for the correct usage of Korean, and wages such campaigns as the "100% Our Language Movement" and the "Let Us Correct the Wrong Word Campaign", in which lists of commonly used Japanese words to be avoided during the week are posted every Monday, or in which a yellow and red card system as in

soccer is used by the teachers. However, these campaigns “teach children to be technicians of language-switching rather than good Korean speakers”⁵⁷, as they will simply avoid uttering a word completely, if they do not know how to say it in Korean. For example, when Sonia Ryang asks some nursery school children if they own a *Famicom* – the Japanese name for a Nintendo video game console – and what it is called in Korean, one of them responded, that they did not need to know, because they only used them at home and not at the nursery. Another child added that they could not say the word in school, if they did not know it in Korean. Thus, the type of language education and usage at Chongryun schools creates two distinct language realms: The personal realm of Japanese usage, outside of the influence of the organization, but very much under the influence of the Japanese mass media and consumer culture, and the realm of usage of a very circumscribed Korean language, that follows a very formal grammatical structure and has a very limited vocabulary, mostly of North Korean political/ideological terms and words used in the context of school. Since the social context and appropriate vocabulary of these two realms do not significantly overlap, and students learn to distinguish them from an early age, they are later able to effortlessly shift between these two codes, without it seeming especially odd to them, that they might contradict each other ideologically.

These techniques of code switching become even more accentuated at a later age. When Sonia Ryang interviews two students at Korea University about the prospects for Korean reunification they are able to respond with a series of eloquent, yet extremely vague and inconclusive statements laced with many stock phrases of North Korean dogma. When asked about their private plans for summer vacation, one of them says he is going to travel to Hawaii to take English classes, while the other is planning to visit Austria⁵⁸.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40

If language is the most potent signifier of a national body, then the usage of the Korean language by young Chongryun Koreans shows the extent to which Chongryun has been able to resist assimilation of Koreans into the Japanese cultural mainstream and preserve for them a sense of precisely this Korean national body. Since Chongryun is only able to enact this imagination of the nation in certain institutions, such as schools, and not all levels of society, the Korean national imaginary is only significant to young Chongryun Koreans in certain places and at certain times, but not constantly.

In an effort to remedy the apparent awkwardness of the Korean language used in Chongryun schools and the ideological contradictions associated with following the dogma of the North Korean regime, while living and working in a post-Cold War democratic hyper-capitalist society, Chongryun has drastically changed its schools' curricula in 1993 to 1995.

3.2.2. Post-1993 curriculum

The two most important changes made in the new curricula were a drastic reduction of the ideological content, including the personality cult of Kim Il-sung, and a stronger emphasis on teaching spoken Korean. The subjects Childhood of Father Marshall Kim Il-Sung and Revolutionary Activities of the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung have been abolished and replaced with a weekly young pioneers' hour that is purely extracurricular and not graded.

Consequently students tend not to take the class very seriously and are usually not very disciplined during the hour, chatting and playing, as Ryang observed.⁵⁹ The different texts in praise of Kim Il-sung, formerly used in Korean language education, have now been replaced with broader forms of patriotism that run independent of Kim Il-sung and the *Juche* ideology, such as highlighting the need for reunification, Korean history and Korean cultural achievements. For example, the sixth-grade English textbook I read at the East Osaka Korean Middle School had a chapter dealing with the deaths of Korean forced labourers in the atomic

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61

blasts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Apart from a general softening of the ideological slant, lessons now include more aspects useful to life in Japan. For example, Japanese history is taught from an earlier age, and Sino-Japanese characters are usually included in science and social science textbooks, to facilitate easier study for various Japanese academic exams.

While the changes in curricular content have directly affected the perpetuation of Chongryun's dominant ideology, the changes made to the teaching of the Korean language may have subtler, yet ultimately more significant consequences. In order to teach a Korean that sounds more natural and is closer to that of a native speaker, and to counteract the pervasive usage of Japanese outside of schools and the organizational context, Chongryun's education board decided to focus more on teaching "colloquial, informal Korean".⁶⁰ However, Korean language teachers, most of which belong to the second and third generation, generally grew up learning the formal Korean of the pre-1993 curricula and are not especially qualified to teach the colloquial version of the language. While retraining programs were started, teachers essentially have to learn the language they are meant to teach together *with* their students. In the classroom this means that the informal version of Korean is taught through the recital of texts written in colloquial language and the repetition of North Korean language tapes, since the teachers cannot really *speak* this form of the language themselves. "Colloquial, spoken Korean is taught as text to read out – but not to be spoken; no matter how colloquial it may be, written text is learned as text to read, not as language to speak. Indeed in this way Chongryun's Korean language is increasingly made an artform – a performance – rather than the language for daily use."⁶¹ Lacking the copious ideological vocabulary and stock phraseology of the pre-1993 curricula's Korean that sounded stilted and peculiar, but nonetheless functioned as a performative code within the structure of the organization, the Korean language now taught at its schools has deprived Chongryun of a powerful tool for social reproduction. Students no longer take an identity as "loyal children of Kim Il-sung" as

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65

a point of departure, “as the language to form it is no longer imposed on the children and internalized by them.”⁶² Thus, the 1993 curricular reform has had the opposite effect of contributing to the erosion of Chongryun’s linguistic foundation. This, in turn, could be seen as symptomatic of more general changes in Chongryun’s position in the Korean minority and in Japanese society, as will be explored in the next chapter. In the meantime, it remains to be seen how Korean language education will develop after the curricular reforms that began last year.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 66-67



A musical practice room at the Kanagawa Korean School. The sign reads: "Let's practice hard and be the best music group!" The word for music group ("sojo") is specific to North Korean usage and is not normally understood by South Koreans.
<http://www.pekdu.ac.jp/> (April 4, 2004)

4. Transition and Change

In 2000 the prestigious Naoki Prize for Japanese literature was awarded to the young Korean author Kazuki Kaneshiro for his novel *GO*, which was later also made into a highly successful film. The largely autobiographical work tells the coming-of-age story of a young Korean man, who was born and raised in Japan in a relatively well to do family, but nonetheless faces discrimination once he switches from a North Korean to a Japanese high school, and his Japanese girlfriend's family becomes aware of his Korean heritage. In the beginning of the novel his father, a leading member of Chongryun, switches from North Korean to South Korean citizenship after witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall, in order to be able to travel to Hawaii. "Money can buy you a citizenship, boy! Which country do you want?"⁶³ he tells his son jokingly. Later in the story, after his girlfriend wants to quit their relationship because of her father's disapproval of Koreans, the novel's hero asks her to accept him without any notions of nationality and race, all though he understands that this may still be too difficult in Japanese society. He tells her:

I'm neither "Resident Korean", nor "South Korean", nor "North Korean", nor "Mongoloid". Stop pushing me into such narrow categories. I'm *me*! No, "I'm me" is no good, either. I also want to be free from having to be me. I'll look for a way to forget that I'm me, and I'll go anywhere to find it. If it's not in this country, I'll leave it, just as you [Japanese] had hoped all along. But you can't do that, can you? You'll die, always having been bound by the nation, land, title, convention, tradition, culture and so forth.⁶⁴

Indeed, he begins learning Spanish, after his father describes his impasse, by teaching him the sentence "No soy coreano, ni soy japonés, yo soy desarraigado" (I am not Korean, I am not Japanese, I am uprooted).

⁶³ Kaneshiro, Kazuki, *GO* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2001) p. 12 (my translation)

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 246 (my translation)

During my visit to the East Osaka Korean Middle School, I asked Principal Pu Yon-uk what he made of the recent success of *GO* and the individualistic orientation of young Koreans portrayed therein. “It’s really a shame that some Koreans think like that, since without our nation, we lose part of our identity, and we will invariably become indistinguishable from Japanese. For us being Korean is an essential part of what we are. Therefore preserving our Korean culture, language and heritage is worthwhile and very important.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Chongryun Schools are experiencing declining enrolment, and as we have seen, its mechanisms of social reproduction and ideological extension have already been significantly weakened. Further, Chongryun has been experiencing an increasing loss in membership and more and more Koreans in Japan are switching to South Korean citizenship. Some long-term reasons for this development can already be established. One is the greater practicality of South Korean citizenship with regards to travel and access to legal protection and social welfare in Japan. Another is the emergence of South Korean economic prosperity in the 1980s and democratic civilian rule in the 1990s, in opposition to North Korea’s economic decline and increasing international isolation, especially after the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and China’s move towards a market economy.

This chapter will examine other recent factors in the decline, such as the apparent failure of the repatriation movement, and the institutionalized obstruction of reform, by Chongryun’s leadership and its most loyal members. Further, developments in Japan-DPRK relations, since fall 2002, have only accelerated Chongryun’s loss of members, are increasingly putting Chongryun under pressure from the Japanese government and making it a target of xenophobic attacks. All this has significantly affected the way Koreans in Japan perceive Chongryun. Consequently, the organization has slowly begun to change some of its policies and stances, all though these changes, ironically, only serve to further weaken the ideological hold over its members.

⁶⁵ Principal Pu Yon-uk of the East Osaka Korean Middle School, interview by author, June 27, 2003

4.1. The Myth of the Korean Homeland

As mentioned, Chongryun was instrumental in organizing a second, DPRK-sponsored wave of repatriation to North Korea during the 1960s. Repatriation found particular favour among the poorest members of the Korean community, who regarded this as an opportunity to make a new start in a socialist utopia. It is important to note that during the early 1960s North Korea's economy was growing faster than that of the South. Further, the removal of South Korean President Lee Seung-man from power after massive protests in 1960, put many Koreans under the impression that reunification was just around the corner.⁶⁶ Repatriation under the slogan of "the great transportation from capitalism to socialism" began in 1959 and reached its height the following year. By 1976 a total of 92,749 people had been repatriated, although the movement was interrupted between 1967 and 1971, and only an infinitesimal number left for the North thereafter, partly due to the rapid economic growth Japan had experienced during the 1960s and the subsequent raise in the standard of living of Koreans.⁶⁷

Life in North Korea did not necessarily turn out to be all it had been bargained for, as the economy began to slow significantly during the 1970s with the country's increasing isolationism, and food shortages became commonplace. Further, many Koreans from Japan fell under increasing suspicion of disloyalty to the North Korean state and were persecuted for any number of reasons real or imagined. Although there is little information about the inner workings of the North Korean state, reports by defectors indicate a complete totalitarian apparatus of terror. Kang Chol-hwan, who managed to escape to South Korea, spent ten years in a concentration camp after his grandfather, a repatriate from Japan, was accused of spying and executed.⁶⁸ Recently a number of Koreans in Japan have also denounced the DPRK, after they learned that relatives, with whom they had lost contact for many years, had actually died

⁶⁶ Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, pp. 113-114

⁶⁷ Ryang, Sonia, "The North Korean homeland of Koreans in Japan," *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, ed. Sonia Ryang (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 38

⁶⁸ Kang, Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2000)

in prison camps.⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, this kind of information has adversely affected the image many Koreans in Japan have of the DPRK. The planning and organization of the repatriation campaign had once been a great source of legitimacy for Chongryun, but is increasingly having the opposite effect. The Japanese ministry of justice now allows repatriated Koreans to enter Japan in order to visit relatives, but permission for the visits must also be granted by the North Korean government. In 2002 Pyongyang only permitted 162 people visits to Japan.⁷⁰ As it turns out, the DPRK is making permits dependable on how much money the relatives in Japan have donated to North Korea through Chongryun, which has caused resentment among many Korean residents, and contributed to a negative image of Chongryun.⁷¹ In fact, explicitly anti-Chongryun and anti-DPRK organizations for Koreans in Japan, such as the Antidictatorship Anti-Kim Il-sung Democratic Front and Rescue the North Korean People! Urgent Action Network (RENK), have recently also been founded – in many cases by the relatives of repatriates.

4.2. The Change in Leadership

A factor that resulted in significant changes in Chongryun's organization was the landmark succession of Chairman Han Duk-su, by the moderate Su Man-sul, after the former's death in 2001 at age 94. It appears that Han Duk-su was in many cases personally responsible for the organizational immobility that has long characterized Chongryun. Sonia Ryang explains that he would in fact repeatedly, and quite literally, shout down any suggestions for change during plenary sessions of the Central Committee, and that he even refused to pass on his post as chairman, after it had been suggested he do so by Pyongyang. It has recently also become public, that Han had ordered the formation of secret "learning

⁶⁹ Ryang, Sonia, "The North Korean homeland of Koreans in Japan," *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin*, pp. 45-46

⁷⁰ "Point of no Return/One-way ticket: Many Korean residents who went to North Korea under repatriation programs find they cannot visit their relatives in Japan," *Asahi Shimbun*, available at <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200403100157.html> (4 April 2004)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

groups” within Chongryun since 1957. Only members deemed most loyal to the organization were invited to join. These groups regularly held meetings at which the teachings of Kim Il-sung were studied and discussed, and members were responsible for ensuring that other Chongryun members remained dedicated to the organization and adhered to the policy directives given by the DPRK. Former members of the learning groups have also claimed that they were asked to recruit South Korean citizens in Japan as spies for the North in the late 1970s to 1980s.⁷²

Nonetheless, the late 1990s saw an increasing movement towards reconciliation with Mindan, mainly through the efforts of leading deputy officials, such as Su Man-sul, and there are now a number of joint Chongryun/Mindan sports and cultural events held every year, throughout Japan.⁷³ After Su’s appointment as chairman, he announced the need to de-emphasize political ideology and to reform Chongryun into a pragmatic organization that is able to deal with specific day-to-day needs of all Koreans in Japan.⁷⁴ In the wake of this decision the secret learning groups have also officially been disbanded, although it is unclear whether this is actually the case.⁷⁵

4.3. The Abduction Crisis

On September 17, 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, in the first meeting between a Japanese and North Korean head of state, in order to work towards the normalization of relations, a settlement in the issue of nuclear arms development in the DPRK, and clarification of the whereabouts of 13 Japanese citizens that were suspected to have been abducted by North Korean secret agents. The DPRK had

⁷² “Secret society: A group of dedicated individuals ensured that Chngryun members never drifted from Pyongyang’s policies,” *Asahi Shimbun*, available at <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200403110132.html> (4 April 2004)

⁷³ Chin, Hee-gwan, “Divided by Fate: The Integration of Overseas Koreans in Japan,” *East Asian Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2000, pp. 9-14

⁷⁴ “Chongryun head wants to reach youth, offers olive branch to Mindan,” *The Japan Times*, June 23, 2001

⁷⁵ Lintner, Bertil, “It’s Hard to Help Kim Jong Il,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 27, 2003

previously denied the abductions and Chongryun denounced them as a Japanese hoax, used to put pressure on North Korea and North Koreans in Japan. In a surprise move, however, Kim Jong-il, personally admitted to the abductions, contradicting what Chongryun Koreans had hitherto believed. Eight of the abductees had died under unclear circumstances; the remaining five have been allowed to return to Japan, where they now remain. To make matters worse, North Korea admitted in October 2002 that it had secretly resumed a nuclear weapons program, in violation of the 1994 nuclear non-proliferation treaty signed with the United States and expelled UN inspectors, severely worsening relations with Japan.

These developments have caused a drastic increase of xenophobic attacks against Chongryun Koreans by Japanese. After September 2002 the East Osaka Korean Middle School experienced almost three times as many assaults, both verbal and physical, against its students (especially girls wearing Korean-style school uniforms), than during the year before.⁷⁶ Further, deterioration of DPRK-Japan relations has provided the Japanese government with a reason to crack down on some of Chongryun's activities. In June 2003 Japanese authorities blocked the departure of the Chongryun-operated ferry *Mangyongbong-92*, which makes a trip to North Korea about every two weeks, claiming that it was suspected in smuggling money, and technology for military use.⁷⁷ These claims have not yet been corroborated, and Chongryun has protested that the ferry is used primarily for transport of passengers and humanitarian aid. Similarly, the Japanese Justice Ministry has pressured banks to suspend remittances to North Korea⁷⁸, and the Ministry of Education's refusal to accredit Korean schools should be understood in the same light.

The abduction issue has drastically undermined trust in Chongryun by its members and caused a dramatic rise in changing affiliation. In 2002 about 7,500 people changed to South Korean citizenship, and 6,300 made the switch during the first half of 2003 alone. The

⁷⁶ Principal Pu Yon-uk of the East Osaka Korean Middle School, interview by author, June 27, 2003

⁷⁷ Lintner, Bertil, "It's Hard to Help Kim Jong-Il," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 27, 2003

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

number of Koreans now registered under “Chosen” in Japan is now reported to have fallen below 100,000.⁷⁹

While many of the recent reforms at Chongryun schools can be attributed to the softening of Chongryun’s ideological stance under Chairman Su, as well as the rapidly declining enrolment of students, the abduction crisis has especially acted as a catalyst for change. As mentioned earlier, the Kims’ portraits no longer hang prominently in classrooms and North Korean ideological rhetoric has largely been removed from the school environment and replaced with more agreeable signifiers of Koreanness and Korean unity. As one school official, from Niigata puts it: “So far we have given a too strong impression that we are favouring North Korea. From now on we must create a school that can be attended by all Korean children, irrespective of whether they are pro-Pyongyang or pro-Seoul.”⁸⁰ Another school in Tokyo has recently sent children on an exchange program to South Korea under pressure from parents, despite protests from some senior Chongryun officials.⁸¹ Especially this last case is indicative of the overall internal struggle currently facing Chongryun – the need to reform the organization into one less attached to North Korean ideology, while at the same time maintaining a strong hegemony within the organization, to ensure its perpetuation.

⁷⁹ “Picking a homeland: As North Korea loses its allure, more Korean residents in Japan are seeking registration with South Korea,” *Asahi Shimbun*, available at <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200403130132.html> (April 4, 2004)

⁸⁰ “Grip Loosens/Real Face of Chongryun: Class action: Anger against Pyongyang and dwindling enrolment have forced Chongryun-supervised schools to change their ways,” *Asahi Shimbun*, available at <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200403120154.html> (April 4, 2004)

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Next year Chongryun will have served as an organization for Korean residents of Japan for 50 years. Its achievements during this time have been substantial: It has built and maintained a system of Korean education, protected the Korean identity of its members from assimilation and has generally ensured the loyalty of its members. To this end it has been highly successful. However, this success also came at the price of isolation in the Japanese society. As discrimination against Koreans remains a real and tangible problem in Japan, it can be argued that Chongryun should have done more to help its members in concrete ways with life in Japanese society. At the same time, however, it seems almost impossible, in hindsight, to judge whether Chongryun could have realistically made any different decisions about the nature of its organization and life in Japan. Given the continued history of discrimination against Koreans throughout Japan's colonial empire, the American Occupation, and to this day, it can indeed be difficult to be critical of Chongryun without also addressing its overarching social context. However, this does not mean that all of Chongryun's actions and its support of North Korea's dictatorial regime can be justified

As we have seen, Chongryun's continued and virtually unchanged existence could eventually only be maintained through a system of ideological indoctrination and language control (such as through its schools) that had become severed from the original significance of Korean subaltern movements. Sonia Ryang has described this phase in Chongryun as:

A transitional process in which what used to be a conviction has been transformed into the corpus of technical discourse: Chongryun's legitimate discourse outlived its meaningfulness; Chongryun's ideal ceased to be plausible and attractive for all, yet it survived as a sociolinguistic norm, proper social code, and performative skill to perpetuate Chongryun's existing social relations.⁸²

I would argue that Chongryun has now entered a new phase, in which the contradiction between the necessity for change, in view of declining membership, and the need to conserve

⁸² Ryang, Sonia, *North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology and Identity*, p. 185

the organization's ideological base, in order to necessitate it in the eyes of its members, can no longer be reconciled through the adopting of performative codes. Indeed, code-switching is no longer even becoming possible for young Chongryun Koreans, as the language they now learn is not one that can be actively used within the organization. Since fourth-generation Chongryun Koreans are no longer imbued with the ideological vocabulary of Chongryun's loyalty to North Korea, Kim Il-sung and *Juche*, it is likely that they will also no longer take their affiliation with Chongryun for granted, either.

As Chongryun increasingly comes under pressure to transform itself into a less ideologically constricted organization, any attempts at reform will also invariably mean the unravelling of its mechanisms of cultural perpetuation. It is likely, however, that Chongryun's leadership will therefore continue to resist any significant changes that go too far against its connections with North Korea. Assuming that the division of the Korean peninsula remains intact, for the time being, Chongryun will therefore either become highly factionalized over time, or simply shrink into relative insignificance, if it cannot find a way to reinvent itself into an organization that can meaningfully address the problems of Koreans in Japan.

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