

“Grass without Roots”: A Modern Perspective on *Zainichi* Koreans through History and Film

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Abstract

For decades, due to their unique immigration history to Japan, the *Zainichi* Koreans have been a hugely debated topic in both the Korean peninsula and in Japan. Because of their ethnic Korean heritage, the *Zainichi* Koreans were viewed simply as “Koreans living in Japan” by many, and because of this viewpoint, the *Zainichi* Koreans faced many injustices from both Korea and Japan. This thesis aims to analyze the *Zainichi* Korean community through historical and cultural perspectives. The historical perspective will focus on providing a general overview of the *Zainichi* and the history behind the establishment of the *Zainichi* Korean community in Japan by utilizing a number of primary sources from both Korea and Japan regarding the “*Zainichi* Repatriation Project”. The cultural perspective will focus on the analysis of the film *GO* and its characters to uncover the changing cultural and social dynamics within the *Zainichi* community and to explain how the *Zainichi* view the topics of their own nationality and ethnicity. Ultimately, the exploration of both the historical and cultural perspectives of the *Zainichi* community will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the problems surrounding the *Zainichi* identity, and how we, as a global community, should approach the topic of *Zainichi* Koreans.

Section 1: Introduction and Historical Background

Introduction

As people became more conscious of the cultural and political differences around the world, the idea of nations and ethnic groups also began to spread throughout the world. Although it is true that the rise of nationalism also helped promote the horrors of totalitarianism and twisted philosophies of “ethnic purity”, it is also true that such ideas—in some cases—can be a positive influence for the identification and the preservation of culture.¹ For example, Koreans during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea (1910-1945) constantly referenced the collective idea of the “Ethnic Koreans” (*Hanminjok*) and the 5000 year heritage of the Korean peninsula to bolster the spirit and philosophy of the Korean independence movement.

Even in the contemporary period, where geopolitical boundaries and the physical limitations of travelling are gradually disappearing through globalization, such ideas of a “nation” and “ethnic groups” are still commonly used. As a matter of fact, the idea of fixed ethnic groups has arguably become even more complicated in the midst of globalization. This is especially true in the case of United States, a multinational state with a common identification to the legal underpinnings from which it was founded, allowing a complex and integrated ethnic identity such as Korean-American, German-American, etc.²

However, even within these broad definitions of nation and ethnic groups, there are many outlying groups that conflict with, or even transcend the traditional characteristics of ethnic groups. Out of those, the *Zainichi* Koreans, or the permanent ethnic Korean residents of Japan, is

¹ The topic of “nation” and “ethnic groups” is a heavily debated topic, spanning a number of disciplines.

² Although it is true that the United States is commonly viewed as a nation-state due to the common identification of being an “American” as a cosmopolitan identity, the United States better fits the definition of a multinational state in the contexts of this paper.

an especially interesting example, as their unique identity starkly contrasts the general sentiments of the mainland Korean population—who still view the *Zainichi* to be “Koreans” in a holistic sense.

By analyzing both the historical and cultural perspectives of the *Zainichi* Koreans, this paper will aim to provide a general understanding of the complexities surrounding the *Zainichi* during the contemporary period, as well as the ideas behind the “ethnicity” of *Zainichi* Koreans today. The historical analysis will focus on the “Repatriation Movement”, when many Koreans living in Japan were strongly coerced to return to North Korea. For this purpose, I will mainly rely on Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s article “Exodus to North Korea Revisited: Japan, North Korea, and the ICRC in the “Repatriation” of Ethnic Koreans from Japan” and various primary sources related to the repatriation movement, which will help provide an overview of the complex political background surrounding the idea of *Zainichi* Koreans. The discussion of the cultural perspective will mainly rely on the analysis of the film *GO* (2001), directed by Isao Yukisada, and how the director offers a unique interpretation of being a *Zainichi* Korean in modern times. I am aware of the possible discrepancies between representation and reality, especially with sensitive topics such as ethnicity. However, as films are not only expressions of direct narratives, but they also symbolize the surrounding culture and sentiments that brought forth their creation. I believe that this paper will provide a unique insight to connect and merge with historical analyses of the *Zainichi* Koreans.

Who are the Zainichi?

Before discussing the multifaceted analyses regarding the *Zainichi*, it is important to have a clear understanding of what being a *Zainichi* means. In broad definitions, *Zainichi* refers to the ethnic Koreans and their descendants who are currently living in Japan. However, the

conventional usage of the term *Zainichi* refers to the Korean residents of Japan who voluntarily, or forcibly immigrated to Japan with a special permanent residency status before the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965. The Koreans who came after the treaty are referred to as the “New-comer” or “Koreans residing in Japan” (*Ilbon kōju han'gugin*) and they are distinguished from the “Old-comer”, or the *Zainichi* population.³ For the purpose of this paper, the term *Zainichi* will only refer to the original Old-comer *Zainichi* population and their descendants.

The *Zainichi* population can be largely separated into two groups: those who have South Korean nationality are referred to as *Zainichi Koreans* (*Chaeil han'gugin*), and those with “Korean domicile” nationality (*Chosŏnjŏk*).⁴ Korean domicile (조선적) was originally a temporary nationality given to ethnic Koreans living in Japan by the General Headquarters in 1945. Today, Japan officially defines this term as the group of *Zainichi* Koreans and their descendants who did not yet change their Korean domicile status to South Korean nationality—as Japan does not recognize North Korea as a sovereign state. While the Japanese government referred to both of these groups collectively as Korean/Chosŏn (韓国・朝鮮) in their survey of foreign populations, starting from 2015, the Japanese Ministry of Justice began to distinguish the *Zainichi Koreans* and *Zainichi* with Korean domicile status.⁵ Although it may be of interest to further specify and analyze the differing perspective between the *Zainichi Koreans* and *Zainichi* with Korean domicile status, due to their hugely disproportionate numbers (93% vs 7% of the

³ This is a rather brief summary of a complex discussion on ethnic Koreans in Japan. To those who are more interested in learning about these differences, I recommend Jeffery T. Hester’s *Datsu Zainichi-ron: An emerging discourse on belonging among Ethnic Koreans in Japan*

⁴ Not to be confused with *Chosŏnjok* (조선족), the Korean ethnic minority group in China

⁵ 国籍・地域別在留外国人数の推移, 2015

total *Zainichi* population in 2015, respectively), the term *Zainichi* will collectively refer to both of these groups for the purpose of this paper.

Brief History of the Zainichi

The origins of *Zainichi* Koreans date back to the beginning of the Korean Empire (Taehan cheguk, 1897-1910), during which many Koreans began immigrating to Japan for study and work. Despite Koreans' status as second-class citizens in Japan at the time, this immigration continued even after the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula due to Korea's economic problems (Lee, 5). Under Japanese colonial rule Koreans were exempt from the Japanese policy against foreign laborers, and various Japanese companies began to hire brokers to recruit as many Korean workers as possible. For this reason, the number of *Zainichi* Koreans increased dramatically—from 3,918 *Zainichi* Koreans in 1915, to 30,189 in 1920 (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*).

Korean immigration to Japan accelerated further as the result of different colonial policies that impoverished the Korean countryside, including the formation of the Japanese-owned Oriental Development Company and the Cadastral Survey of Korea (*T'ojijosasaŏp*), which lasted from 1910 to 1918. Many Koreans from the agricultural regions of Korea migrated to Japan, mostly from the southeastern Kyōngsang province (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*). In addition, many Koreans from Cheju Island immigrated to Japan instead of mainland Korea to escape high rates of unemployment, because mainland Koreans

discriminated against them.⁶ Also, after the enactment of Free Nautical Travel Laws (*Chayudosangje*) and the opening of direct travel routes from Cheju Island to Osaka, more than 50,000 Koreans from Cheju island immigrated to Japan—which was around a quarter of the total population of Cheju Island at the time (Moon, 2).

The treatment of *Zainichi* Koreans began to worsen after the start of the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945). Because of their broadened war front and increased rate of conscription, the Imperial Japanese government was struck with the severe lack of labor force in Japan, and they sought to counteract this by replacing their labor force with even more Koreans. With the announcement of The Guideline for the Recruitment, Transport, and Treatment of Korean Laborers (*Chosŏnin nodongja mojim min tohang ch'wigŭm yogang*) in September, 1939, the recruitment, or the forcible collection of Korean laborers, officially began (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*). Catalyzed by other historical events such as the Pacific War, the rate of the “recruitment” steadily increased, and by 1945, the number of Korean laborers who were forcibly brought to Japan reached 724,787; in addition, there were 365,263 Koreans who were brought for military reasons, around 120,000 Korean women who were brought as “Voluntary Women Workers”, and around 80,000 Korean women “recruited” to Japan as “Comfort Women” for the Imperial Japanese Military—which meant that there were over a million Koreans who were sent to Japan at the time (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*). Because of the status of Koreans as second-rate citizens, the constant influx of Korean laborers, and generally deteriorating conditions along the Japanese home front, the treatment of Korean laborers in Japan worsened to the point where they were essentially treated as slaves.

⁶ Historically, Cheju island was where the literati class (Yangban) of Koreans would be exiled to, and throughout the history of Korea, the residents of Cheju island was viewed as an “inferior”, which still continues somewhat today

Starting from the Victory Over Japan Day and National Liberation Day of Korea on August 15th, 1945, many *Zainichi* Koreans began to return to Korea. According to official sources from the South Korean government, the number of *Zainichi* Koreans who returned to South Korea from August 1945 to March 1946 was 1,004,000 people (qtd. National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*).⁷ However, around 600,000 *Zainichi* Koreans, which was around one-third of *Zainichi* Koreans at the time, still chose to remain in Japan. These *Zainichi* Koreans are believed to be those who had close to no connection with the mainland Korea at the time, and they were mostly from Kyōngsang province, Cheju island, and Jeonra province—which are all in the southern region of Korea (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*).

The main reason why these 600,000 *Zainichi* Koreans chose to remain in Japan was because of the economic restrictions of repatriation and the unstable political situation of Korea at the time. Through an agreement with General MacArthur's Japanese Command, the Japanese government opened the registration for *Zainichi* Koreans who wished to return to the Korean peninsula, but restricted the amount of money that they could bring to one thousand yen (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*). Although the restriction of one thousand yen did not matter for the majority of *Zainichi* Koreans living in poverty at the time, it was harder for *Zainichi* Koreans who had established a certain degree of economic foundation in Japan to give up their possessions and return to Korea – as there was no guarantee of their economic stability in Korea. Furthermore, because of the political and ideological tension in the Korean peninsula at the time, the living condition in the Korean peninsula was very unstable, and the fear of political terrorism and general violence further solidified the remaining *Zainichi* Koreans' decision to stay

⁷ This number does not include those who returned to South Korea with their own money, so the actual number must be much higher than this.

in Japan (National Archives of Korea, History of *Zainichi*). These 600,000 remaining *Zainichi* Koreans were the main victims of the “repatriation project” in the 1950s.⁸

Section 2: The Repatriation Project: Complex Political Background of the *Zainichi*⁹

On December 14th, 1959, the North Korean vessel Mankyōngbong set sail from Niigata port, Japan, transporting 975 ethnic Koreans, 238 families in total, to North Korea in the name of the “repatriation project” (*Puksōngsaōp*) (FLPH, Korean Returnees from Japan, 7). In 1960 alone, over 49,000 *Zainichi* Koreans were “repatriated” to North Korea, and from December 1959 to July 1984, 93,340 “returnees” were shipped from Japan to North Korea (Morris-Suzuki, Exodus to Korea Revisited, 1). Many North Korean sources portrayed an extremely positive interpretation of the event, with sources like the 1960 English-language book *Korean Returnees from Japan* (1960) claiming that all of the “repatriated Koreans” (at least the ones on the first ship) came on their own volition, and enjoyed their stay in North Korea. However, thorough analysis of various documents regarding the repatriation project reveals a more cynical, political quandary which surrounded the incident. Cross-analysis of various North Korean and Japanese documents about the repatriation project reveal many complex underlying political problems, which contrasted with the North Korean government’s glorified rendition of the project.

The North Korean Perspective of the Repatriation Project

Because of the magnitude of the repatriation project, there are many sources from North Korea which comment on the event—mostly in a very positive light. However, there is one

⁸ It is important to keep in mind, however, that the “600,000” is more of a figurative number for the purpose of propaganda and literature. By the time of the departure of the Mankyungbong, the actual number of *Zainichi* Koreans have increased from the Japanese Baby Boomer period, as well as many unconfirmed number of Korean refugees who have escaped from the onslaught of the Korean War.

⁹ For this section only, all uses of the phrase “*Zainichi* Korean” will refer to those 600,000 Koreans involved in the repatriation projects.

account in particular, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, a book published in 1960 in English by Pyongyang Foreign Languages Publishing House containing the various first-hand records of the repatriation project, which will be used as the main source for the North Korean perspective of the repatriation project.

First of all, it is interesting to note that none of the North Korean sources directly reveal the actual motivation behind the repatriation project, aside from the occasional branding of the event as the “sacred duty... to defend the national and democratic rights of overseas Koreans” (FLPH, *On the Situation of Our Country*, 33). However, considering the historical events immediately before the repatriation process, it is likely that North Korea and Kim Il-Sung’s regime viewed the *Zainichi* Koreans as a source of labor to fulfil their goal of setting up infrastructure for heavy industry and communications across North Korea. It is important to note, however, that the *Zainichi* Koreans were generally more affluent and educated than the North Korean population and were also valued for their technical and educational skills.

Before 1956, North Korea was divided into various factions without a clear leading party in power. Although on the surface, North Korea was governed by Kim Il-Sung’s Worker’s Party of Korea, which was backed by the Soviet Union, it was more of an oligarchical society made up of numerous factions and led by key political figures.¹⁰ There were many reason for the disagreement between these parties, but one of the major ones was the steps of rebuilding North Korea following the aftermath of the Korean War: while the Worker’s Party of Korea believed that the restoration should begin with the revival of heavy industry, other parties, such as the Yan’an faction and Soviet-Korean faction, believed that the revival of light industry, for the

¹⁰ This was commonly observed in satellite states of Soviet Union

general improvement of the quality of life in North Korea, should be the focus of the restoration. Kim Il-Sung's preference for the development of heavy industry is well reflected in his later speech "On the Situation of Our Country," in which he comments that "the most toilsome work in our country is the labour in extractive industries such as felling trees, mining coal and ores and conducting geological prospecting. So we are directing great efforts, first of all, to the technical revolution in the extractive industries" (FLPH, *On the Situation of Our Country*, 11). Because of this political instability, North Korea was not in any condition to receive any *Zainichi* Koreans from Japan at the time—which will be discussed in detail later.

However, after the August Faction Incident, in which Kim Il-Sung executed the leaders of various factions in North Korea, all of the opposing ideas regarding the revival of heavy industry were silenced, and North Korea began to funnel most of its resources into bolstering heavy industry. Although this plan seemed great on paper, as many of the factories built by the Imperial Japanese government for the purpose of colonial industrialization was still left intact, it required much more manpower than what was available in North Korea at the time; and the *Zainichi* Koreans was, for the North Korean government, was just a resource waiting to be harvested. Certainly, there were other events which played a crucial role in North Korea's push to accept the *Zainichi* Koreans at the time, such as the desire to receive international recognition by both "doing something that South Korea cannot" and establishing a communications network with Japan; however, based on the events of the August Faction Incident, it seems that the major reason behind North Korea's desire for the repatriation of *Zainichi* Korean was the sheer lack of labor behind the reconstruction plan. In addition, in *Record of Conversation from the Premier's Reception of the Korean Government Delegation (1958)*, Kim Il-Sung comments that although North Korea had been "engaged in cottage industries and small-scale industries, because of labor

shortages,” they cannot “[set up enterprises] in too many areas,” further supporting the North Korean government’s need for more workers in their labor force (Record of Conversation from the Premier's Reception of the Korean Government Delegation, 2).

Aside from the lack of details regarding the motivations behind the repatriation, *Korean Returnees from Japan* retells the story of the 975 repatriated Koreans aboard the Mankyōngbong, and how they were able to successfully integrate into North Korean society. The North Korean government’s desire to portray the successful integration and settlement is immediately noticeable from the titles of the subsections listed on the table of contents: “They Are Home”, “First Repatriation”, “To Pyongyang”, “New Work and New House”, “Changes Beyond Recognition”, “At the University”, “To the Countryside”, “A Real Surprise”, “Professional’s Prospects”, “Hope-filled Artists”, “With Korean Husbands”, and “Hope and Confidence”. Each of these titles seems to reflect the various professions of the first groups of repatriated Koreans from the Mankyungbong; and from the actual process of settlement (New Work and New House), assignment of jobs based on skills (also summarized in New Work and New House, and later chapters), treatment of the Japanese wives who accompanied the repatriated *Zainichi* Koreans (With Korean Husbands), and ending with hopeful outlook of further future repatriation (Hope and Confidence). It is clear that the North Korean government is proud of the process of the first repatriation, and glorifies the event as “a new road of happiness” for “many more thousands of [their] compatriots in Japan” (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 38).

In addition, it is interesting that *Korean Returnees from Japan* seems to support the authenticity of its stories with various photographs of the actual people involved in them. For example, the photograph of “Singer Uda Toyoko of the State Symphony Orchestra”, listed in the appendix of the book, is directly taken from the story of Uda Toyoko listed in the “With Korean

Husbands” chapter, where she is shown being integrated in the North Korean society through the State Symphony Orchestra (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XXXVI).¹¹ Aside from the pictures having to do with the direct events in the book, *Korean Returnees from Japan* is also filled with photographs that seem to emphasize the wealth of the country, such as the newly arrived children being given violins and accordions to practice music with (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XXVII), or one of the returnees going to a hospital with a car that he brought from Japan (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XXXIII). In addition, the pictures such as “Famous Tenor Kim Yung Kil returned on the sixth boat” (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XXXIX) seems to emphasize the blossoming fine arts profession and their stable career in North Korea, which was a serious aspect of consideration for some of the returnees—according to the “Hope-filled Artists” chapter (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 32-33).



Fig.1) Choi Byung Sik goes to hospital in his car that he brought from Japan

¹¹ It is important to note that all the pictures provided in *Korean Returnees from Japan* are from the Foreign Language Publishing House, and therefore, cannot be verified – which opens the possibility of the photographs being photographs of other people

Judging from all of the aforementioned details, although *Korean Returnees from Japan* seems to clearly express the fact that the repatriation was a huge success for both the returnees and the North Korean government, there are few questionable details in the book which cast doubt on the authenticity of this assertion.

First, the identity of the author is never revealed, and all the stories listed in the *Korean Returnees from Japan* comes from the perspective of the author's observation and retelling of the returnee's experience. Throughout the entire book, the identity of the author is thoroughly concealed. In fact, the only section of the book dealing with the identity of the author is the very first chapter, "They are Home", in which the author expresses that he was "forcibly taken to Japan as a labour [sic] recruit" in 1944, and "boarded a small craft and crossed the Korean Straits landing on the shore of [Pusan, Korea]" on September, 1945 (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 5). Throughout the story, the author plays a key role in the story as the unique position as "someone who was present during the various returnee's settling in North Korea". This method and perspective of storytelling is made evident from the very first description of one member of the returnee group, in which the story starts by saying "I¹² knocked at the door of Song Taik Jin's room... Song Taik Jin told me that ... I explained to him that in our country there is no such thing as a day-labourer" – which strongly implies that the story comes from a subjective view of the unknown author's experience of the repatriation project (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 8-9). In addition, the omittance of the author's identity seems even more questionable with the "A Real Surprise" section, in which the author is also present in the apartment of the Li family when Kim Il-Sung visits them as he "wanted to know everything about everyone" (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 26-28). Even without considering the validity of whether or not Kim Il-

¹² The author

Sung actually went around every single housing of the repatriates to “know everything about them”, it seems particularly strange that this unknown author is present in the most opportune timing to witness the important, life-changing events of the repatriates. Unfortunately, no other publications regarding this mysterious author, nor any verifications to the stories were available, which prevented any further research on the author of *Korean Returnees from Japan*.

Another strange detail of *Korean Returnees from Japan* was the fact that the extremely positive recounts of the repatriates’ lives came from the author himself. Although the book gives the illusion of observing the lives of the returnees through their retelling of the story, the language of the book makes it clear through phrases such as “he gave his impressions in the following words” that it is the unnamed author who is transcribing the verbal communication between the characters in the story and himself (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 33).

Because of the nature of this publication, being from Foreign Language Publishing House—a printing company sponsored by the North Korean government, some degree of bias and “corrections” are to be expected from the texts themselves. However, for a text which claims to answer the question of “Why [the *Zainichi* Koreans] did not go to South Korea rather choosing to come to the North”, it can be said that the perspective of the book was purposefully blurred to give the illusion of recording the unfiltered recollections of the repatriates themselves—rather than the filtered observations of an unnamed author. Keeping this in mind, some of the details presented in the story, especially the account of the various agricultural workers, seem to give evidence of the “filtered” nature of the text. The story of Oh Sam Teuk, for example, feels very unnatural after realizing that, although the author stressed the fact that “he wanted to be included in the first batch of repatriates [to] go back to the father land before March”, the majority of Oh Sam Teuk’s words explicitly states that they want to go back to South Korea after the reunification, and even Oh Sam

Teuk's wife continuously stresses that she wants to visit her mother-in-law, who is currently living in South Korea (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 24). In fact, even the picture of Oh Sam Teuk included in the appendix is captioned that: "He wishes to work in his native village after the unification of the country", which further highlights the discrepancy between the author's claims and the words of the repatriates (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XX). However, it may be also true that Oh Sam Teuk's definition of reunification may be that under the North Korean regime. Regrettably, due to the narrative style of *Korean Returnees from Japan*, the reader is only limited to the author's recollection/understanding of the narrative, which makes it impossible to realize the political allegiance of Oh Sam Teuk.

The final questionable detail in *Korean Returnees from Japan* is the missing photographs regarding the housing which was continuously stressed throughout the entire story. In many of the stories listed in the book, the quality of the housing provided by the North Korean government to the returnee serve as a major reason for them to clear their doubt about their new country. In fact, the entire story of Imahuku Yoshie, Japanese wife of one of the Korean repatriates, revolve around her surprise of being assigned a well-furnished house with a "jar brimful of rice", along with a job in the local tobacco factory, after her family's arrival in North Korea (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 35-36). However, while the appendix contains at least one photograph regarding the main aspect of every story, it lacks pictures of the housing received by the repatriates. One of the only two pictures of the housing is "From the Balcony of their New Apartment", from the story of Oh Hi Kyoung, the bookkeeper of the Glass Factory (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XV). However, only the outside of the apartment is shown in the picture, and none of the amenities described by the book—such as the flooring with Korean style heating, can be confirmed by any of the pictures in the appendix (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, 36). Similar to the previous

picture, “Kim Yong Tai and his family in front of their new house” depicts Kim Yong Tai, holding his son, standing in front of a building with multiple doors—which resemble traditional Korean architecture – but does not show any of the amenities of the house described in Kim Yong Tai’s story (FLPH, *Korean Returnees from Japan*, XXI). It is worth noting that in this picture, Kim Yong Tai’s family is feeding a group of chickens, which, considering the state of the Korean peninsula after the Korean War, may be considered as a sign of wealth.



Fig. 2) Kim Yong Tai and his family in front of their new house

Although the *Korean Returnees from Japan* shows its readers the promise of a new and better life in North Korea for the repatriates, the questionable details in the book cast doubt on its reliability. Especially, considering the response of the many agricultural workers and the lack of pictures of their housing, two important questions about the North Korean account of the repatriation can be asked: “Did the *Zainichi* Korean really want to be sent to North Korea?” and “What was the actual economic situation of the *Zainichi* Koreans living in North Korea at the time?” Through the close examination of the various international documents surrounding the

North Korean Repatriation Project, especially the Japanese documents, the unfiltered analysis of the actual events of the Repatriation Project is possible.

Global Perspective of the North Korean Repatriation Project

Before analyzing the various documents regarding the North Korean Repatriation Project, it is also important to discuss the historical background of the Japanese perspective of the Repatriation Project, as it will explain the reasoning behind why Japan ultimately decided to send all of the *Zainichi* Koreans involved in the project to North Korea, and reveal the main acting party behind the whole project—the Red Cross.

After World War II, the Japanese government signed the Treaty of San Francisco with the allied forces, effectively ending the allied occupation of Japan and restoring the Japanese right to rule. However, the Treaty of San Francisco also annulled the citizenship of the *Zainichi* Koreans¹³, and although the *Zainichi* Koreans were no longer citizens of Japan, the Japanese government still had the historical obligation to take care of the *Zainichi* Koreans. Even if the Japanese government wanted to get rid of the *Zainichi* Korean by sending them back to Korea, both North and South Korea at that time were in no condition to accept the *Zainichi* Koreans as they were still affected by the terrible aftermath of the Korean War. In addition, neither North nor South Korea had established any diplomatic connection to Japan, which eliminated the chance of the *Zainichi* Koreans returning to the Korean peninsula at the time. Therefore, although Japan has experienced considerable economic progress because of the financial support from the United States during the Korean War, the *Zainichi* Koreans were still viewed as an outsider in Japanese society, and they mostly lived in a state of poverty. This is why, to ameliorate the situation of *Zainichi* Koreans (and

¹³ As mentioned in the section regarding the Korean domicile status, this annulment technically happened right at the end of the World War II

perhaps, to avoid international criticism), the Japanese government utilized the Japanese Red Cross to start the process of the repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans. It is important to note that, in actuality, the Japanese Red Cross had already started contacting the North Korean Red Cross for the repatriation of the *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea. But this was more so an offer of exchange, the Japanese Red Cross requested the return of Japanese nationals in North Korea in exchange for their assistance in the repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea—instead of South Korea, where most of the *Zainichi* Koreans originated from (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 3).

Soon after, *Chaeilbonjosŏninch'ongnyŏnhap'oe* (Association of *Zainichi* North Koreans), commonly known as the *Chongryon*, was formed on May 1955, which also helped to accelerate the talks for the repatriation project.¹⁴ During this time, *Chaeilbondaehanmin'gungMindan* (Community of *Zainichi* South Koreans), commonly known as *Mindan*, was also established. However, at the time of the repatriation, *Mindan*'s influence was much weaker than the *Chongryon*'s influence, which may explain the reason why North Korea was selected as the destination for repatriation. The *Chongryon*, using the Japanese Red Cross's exchange proposal as a leverage, made “‘hostages’ of the weakness of these Japanese” in order to pressure the realization of the repatriation project (Nikkan Kokkō Seijōka Kōshō no Kiroku, 103).¹⁵

However, the real deciding factor for the repatriation movement was the Japanese government itself, as they realized that the newly formed *Chongryon* had similar goals as their

¹⁴ The *Chongryon* essentially served as a North Korea's Representative Office in Japan, as Japan never acknowledged North Korea as a sovereign state, even today. The organization also periodically send money to North Korea, and act as one of North Korea's foreign source of income.

¹⁵ It is important to note that one of the reasons why North Korea was so determined to advocate itself as the destination of the repatriation project is to improve its political image. Because North and South Korea was in a state of rivalry during the Cold War, any sort of political leverage such as this would immensely benefit North Korea in terms of political recognition.

own national interest—of getting rid of the *Zainichi* Koreans from Japan. This is why on December 15, 1955, the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asia Bureau produced a draft "Plan for Resolving the Problem of Sending Volunteers for Repatriation to North Korea,"¹⁶ which was the first official, detailed proposal for the repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 10).

From this point on, The Foreign Ministry of Japan viewed the *Chongryon* as a partner in the repatriation project, "requesting the cooperation of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (*Chongryon*)" in implementing the project for repatriation; and even offered to pay the travel costs of the returnees within Japan (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 10). They also asked the Japan Red Cross to undertake negotiations with the North Korean Red Cross to make sure of the following facts:

- “1. The people to be repatriated shall be impoverished people only.
2. The North Korean side shall be consulted as to whether the repatriates can be accepted or not.
3. The repatriation will be carried out on the basis of a register of names provided by *Chongryon*.
4. The North Korean Red Cross will send repatriation ships to ports designated by the Japanese side (The costs of this will not be born by the Japanese side).
5. *Chongryon* will conduct a survey of impoverished people who wish to be repatriated to North Korea, compile a register of all those wishing repatriation, and present this to the Japanese Red Cross.

¹⁶北鮮への帰還希望者の送還問題処理方針

6. The repatriation to North Korea of people not included in the register under this process will be firmly prohibited. (Translated by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 11)”.

With the details of the repatriation coming into place, the Japanese government began to push the project even more. For example, Shigemitsu Mamoru, the Foreign Minister of Japan at the time, explicitly stated intentions to explore the possibilities for the solutions of the repatriation issue; to which the Foreign Affairs Committee of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party also agreed that “Koreans in Japan who want to go home should be sent back,” and further encouraged the Japanese Red Cross to continue their work with the North Korean Red Cross (Nikkan Kokkō Seijōka Kōshō no Kiroku, 98).

However, as the repatriation project showed signs of success, the original plan of only returning those who clearly showed an interest in being repatriated had begun to change into a plan of “mass repatriation” —planning to send over 60,000 *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea. Although the Japanese sources claimed that only the *Chongryon* was directly involved with the planning of such mass repatriation before 1958, the analysis of Japanese documents reveal that the Japanese Foreign Ministry, indeed, already had plans for the large-scale movement of *Zainichi* Koreans since December 15th, 1955 (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 12-13). For example, the later Japanese documents from 1956 had changed the expression “impoverished” in the guidelines for repatriation to “certain Koreans residing in Japan”; and furthermore, a report from Inoue Masutaro, a representative of Japan Red Cross, states that he continuously argued for the “necessity of mass repatriation” of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea

with Leopold Boissier, president of all-Swiss International Committee of the Red Cross (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 13).¹⁷

It is interesting to note that Inoue Masutaro's *The Repatriation Problem of Certain Koreans Residing in Japan* greatly stresses the need for the repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans in rather harsh words, stating that: "frankly, it is for the interest of the Japanese government to get rid of these troublesome Koreans. The Japanese government is spending yearly about 2.4 billion yen to support their livelihood. No country is obligated to keep a foreigner at the expense of its national treasury. A foreigner unable to earn his living is generally deported," and further states that "as a democratic country, Japan cannot simply deport impoverished Koreans en masse, but a voluntary repatriation of such Koreans is presented as being very much in Japan's interests" — essentially meaning that this "mass voluntary repatriation" will be the perfect replacement for involuntary repatriation, which may cause international criticism (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 14).

Lobbying and endorsement of the mass repatriation project continued until a demonstration from a group of would-be returnees to North Korea ignited the first direct involvement of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in this matter. On April 1956, a group of 48 *Zainichi* Koreans started a demonstration in front of the Japan Red Cross building by setting up a tent and demanding their return to North Korea (Lee, 341). Through this event, Inoue and the Japan Red Cross sought out the support of the ICRC for the case of their repatriation; as stated by declassified Japanese government documents: Inoue made great efforts to achieve the repatriation of these 48 people. His idea was that if this succeeded, using the method of ICRC travel documents,

¹⁷ Masutaro mentions the figure of 60,000 *Zainichi* Korean during his argument for the mass repatriation and claims that this numerical figure was from the *Chongryon*. However, I was unable to find any documents from *Chongryon* using this numerical figure for the support of the repatriation within this timeframe (1955-1958).

self-funded exit from Japan and foreign ships, the number of people could be steadily increased, and more and more volunteers could be repatriated. Eventually he even envisaged that the [Japanese ship] Kōan could be re-registered as a Swiss vessel, and a large number of repatriates could thus be shipped [to North Korea].” (Nikkan Kokkō Seijōka Kōshō no Kiroku, 63-64).

With the aforementioned events, ICRC created the foundation of the repatriation project through continual correspondence with the North Korean Red Cross, approaching the Soviet Union to secure vessels for the repatriation, and energetic lobbying of the Japanese government through the Japanese Red Cross to draft set of guidelines for ICRC involvement in the mass repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans to North Korea (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 16). Through this foundation, by the early 1957, the Japanese side alerted the North Korean government of Japan’s serious interest in the mass repatriation project to North Korea, and opened up negotiations to settle the shipping route which was ultimately used for the *Mankyungbong* to ship the first group of returnees (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 16-17). With the process of the repatriation thoroughly outlined, it is now possible to answer the questions raised in *Korean Returnees from Japan* by using various documents from the Red Cross—one of the main actors in the Repatriation Project.

To answer the question of whether the *Zainichi* Koreans really wanted to be repatriated to North Korea, it is necessary to analyze the Japan Red Cross’s definition the “Confirmation of Free Will”. When the ICRC and the Japan Red Cross were working on the foundations for the repatriation process, they supposedly ensured that “Confirmation of Free Will” was to be carried out to every returnee before they embarked on their journey to North Korea—which helped some potential repatriates to reconsider their journey back to North Korea (Yoshiaki, 303). However, the documents regarding those who changed their minds before the actual repatriation clearly states

The question of the economic status of North Korea during the time of repatriation is also directly answered by Red Cross documents, which reveal that the ICRC was completely aware of the harsh economic situation of North Korea, yet did not take any steps to prevent further repatriation. Through the declassified document *Information for Judgement of North Korean Situation*, it is stated that the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by August 1961, was secretly sharing the letters sent by the returnees in North Korea with allied governments, which often depicted the harsh living conditions of North Korea (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 20). The letters included in the documents often contained pictures drawn by the returnees, such as a drawing of a women drawing water from the well and sending it up an apartment, which further highlights the poor economic infrastructure of North Korea at the time – which may explain why *Korean Returnees from Japan* did not include any pictures regarding the actual status of the housing.



Fig.4) Drawing done by a repatriate woman, depicting the hauling of water to top of an apartment block.

In addition, in an interview conducted by ICRC with a defected North Korean official responsible for looking after the returnees, the official states that “the first reaction of the repatriates is generally disillusionment”, further commenting that “it is painful to witness the disillusionment of the returnees. It is accompanied by rage and words of insult towards the Red Cross and towards the ‘humanitarianism’ of which it always speaks, and which does nothing but send them down the slope to a miserable country and a miserable situation” (Morris-Suzuki, *Exodus to North Korea Revisited*, 20). Furthermore, it is also stated that many of the repatriated *Zainichi* Koreans were labelled by the North Korean government as “unreliable citizens” or as spies; which led to many of the returnees being “sent over the mountains” —which can mean anything from being sent to a remote village in an exile, or being imprisoned in one of many labor camps

The returnees’ trouble with the North Korean ideology is further highlighted by the reports from the Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry (1960), in which Karoly Prath, the ambassador of Hungary to North Korea, explains the cultural struggle of the returnees living in North Korea. In his report, Prath states that:

“The repatriates—as I already related in my previous report—get jobs and can work right after they have settled down. Nevertheless, their adaptation to life here is not smooth. For one thing, their circumstances of life were better in Japan [than in the DPRK], and they are not completely satisfied with the conditions here. According to what the repatriates say, there were more opportunities for entertainment in Japan. Initially, the [North Korean] way of life, which is fundamentally different from what they got accustomed to under capitalism, is certainly foreign to them. They have not heard about concepts like voluntary work, meetings, and pledges up to now. As a consequence, they are loath to participate in them. When the official working time is over, they try to go home immediately in order to change their clothes and seek opportunities for entertainment” (Prath, 1).

This analysis of the returnees and Prath’s continuous stressing of the returnees’ “difficulty complying with work discipline”, clearly contradicts the life of the returnees as described by *Korean Returnees from Japan*, where all of the returnees listed in the book successfully integrated

into the North Korean society. However, it is also true the Prath states that the returnees were able to “get jobs and work right after they have settled down”, which was one of the major points advertised by *Korean Returnees from Japan*.

Section 3: Cultural perspective of *Zainichi* through the analysis of *GO*

Complex Identity of “*Zainichi*”

While the discussion of official documents regarding the repatriation movement makes it relatively clear that the *Zainichi* Koreans who were involved in the movement faced political injustice from both the North Korean and Japanese government, it is hard to understand the societal/cultural problems surrounding the repatriation project, especially regarding their identity, from the historical documents.

One source that can help uncover *Zainichi*'s perspective of their own identity is *Chaeiltongp'oŭi yŏksawa han'gungMindan* (The History of *Zainichi* Koreans and the *Mindan*), a documentary film produced by the *Mindan*—the association of *Zainichi* South Koreans in Japan.¹⁸ Although this documentary is mainly focused on explaining the history behind the founding of *Mindan*, it also contains many interesting perspectives on the identity of the *Zainichi* Koreans—which was one of the major reasons behind the founding of both *Mindan* and *Chongryon*.

While the documentary highlights the fact that *Mindan* was created to bolster the “ethnic gains”¹⁹ and the acknowledgment of the *Zainichi* Korean's right to reside in Japan, it also recognizes that global political ideology shaped both *Mindan* and *Chongryon* as we know it today

¹⁸ Although there are documentaries focusing on the founding of *Chongryon*, none of them were directly created/funded by the *Chongryon*, and were created by foreign producers.

¹⁹ 민족적 이익 (Minjokchŏk iik)

(韓国民団, 06:06). The importance placed in both the ethnic and political concerns in establishing the *Mindan* shows that political motivations were a crucial aspect of *Zainichi* identity during the mid-1940s~1950s, when both *Mindan* and *Chongryon* were first established.

However, when the documentary begins to focus on more recent aspects of the *Zainichi* community (from early 1970s to early 2010s), the complex nature of the *Zainichi* identity, as well as the generational gap within the *Zainichi* community, is brought in to question. Throughout the video, the *Mindan* seems to express the idea that most of the *Zainichi* Koreans have connections with South Korea. For example, their commentary on the “Motherland Business” (韓国民団, 19:38)²⁰ and their segment on the reasoning behind the official title of *Mindan* (韓国民団, 23:59) all operate under the premise of “*Zainichi* being ethnically Korean”. But when the documentary switches its focus to the newer generation of *Zainichi*, it starts by stating that they are: “Our children of the 3rd~4th generations, born in Japan, speaking Japanese, and contemplating about their ethnic identity...”—revealing the differing perspective of the “*Zainichi* identity” even within the *Zainichi* community (韓国民団, 26:15). Therefore, it can be said that while understanding of the history of *Zainichi* is important, without the proper recognition of the modern *Zainichi* perspective of their identity, comprehensive understanding of the various perspectives and feelings on *Zainichi* identity would not be possible.

Film as a Window to Culture

There are many mediums in which one can analyze the feelings of an individual or a group, such as memoirs, letters, interviews, and films. Out of these, the medium of film is,

²⁰ 모국 사업 (Moguk saöp) is a series of events hosted by the *Mindan* where it sent many *Zainichi* Koreans affiliated with the *Chongryon* to South Korea in order to experience “the Motherland”.

perhaps, the best medium through which to research the Japanese sentiments towards *Zainichi* Koreans, as it provides not only an analysis of individual stories, but also a look at the conditions which permitted the movie to be made in the first place.

Before analyzing a film as a representation of the modern perspective on *Zainichi* Koreans, it is necessary to discuss why films can be an effective means of discussing the history of a culture. When thinking of the medium of film as a way to analyze historical or cultural information, it is easy to assume that the main point of interest is the direct visual or aural evidence related to the social existence at the time (such as a news reel footage). However, it is also important to understand that films can provide not only direct information regarding a certain history or culture, but also indirect testimony regarding the trends, prejudices, moods, and neuroses of that time (Dudley, 181). Furthermore, even fictional films can be used to study historical trends, as any film can be analyzed to understand the indirect reconstruction of history: that is, “the conditions of representation that permitted such films to be made, to be understood, even to be misunderstood” (Dudley, 186). Thus, films can be used as a candid and valid source of historical and cultural analysis through their indirect, rather than direct, reconstruction of history.

The topic of *Zainichi* Koreans, and the discrimination and struggles they face, is not popular in Japanese and Korean cinema. Although it is true that movies dealing with the *Zainichi* Koreans are still being made in recent times (*Yakiniku Dragon*, 2018), movies that directly portray the problems surrounding the *Zainichi* Koreans are rather uncommon, as most of the movies on this topic (especially Korean movies) focus on the injustice of the Japanese imperial military, and nationalism.

Because of the sensitivity of this topic, only a handful of films related to *Zainichi* Koreans have received both favorable critical and public reception. Out of these films, *Dear Pyongyang* and *GO* are the most well-known, and they are often referenced in various academic settings in either Japanese or Korean culture studies. However, for the purpose of this paper, I chose *GO* as the main film to be analyzed due to its focus on the modern perspective of the new generation of *Zainichi*.²¹ Furthermore, not only does *GO* provide its viewers with a general perspective of the problems faced by *Zainichi* Koreans, it also expresses specific ideas related to more modern problems in the *Zainichi* Korean community through the development of its main characters. Analyzing the main characters' development allows for the discussion and understanding of specific issues surrounding the modern *Zainichi* Korean community.

***GO*: A Simple Love Story?**

GO begins by introducing the main protagonist of the movie, Sugihara, who is actively ostracized by his classmates because he is a *Zainichi* Korean. The movie asserts that this story is about Sugihara's love story, and abruptly begins to introduce Sugihara's family. Sugihara's father, Hideyoshi, who used to be a national ranking boxer, but is seen running a pachinko-goods trade store. Furthermore, it is revealed that, although Hideyoshi was a long-time supporter of North Korea and the regime, he forfeited his North Korean citizenship and obtained South Korean citizenship in order to go to Hawaii with his wife.

²¹ I am, by no means, claiming that *Dear Pyongyang* is an inadequate source of understanding the perspective of the *Zainichi*. However, *Dear Pyongyang* is a documentary film. Considering the debate surrounding the medium of documentary regarding its efficacy in preserving the "ideal history" despite the concurrent and contradictory need to find meaning in documentaries, *GO* became the ideal film for my paper, as it would both save the need to explain various theories in film history (which is not the focus of this paper) and discuss a more relevant topic. To those who are interested in learning more about the debate surrounding the medium of documentary, I recommend Philip Rosen's *Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts*

The movie then shifts focus back to Sugihara's life, and how Sugihara ultimately ends up dropping out of his North Korean school²² to study at a Japanese high school with the support of his friend, Jong Il, who defended Sugihara by saying that "We never had what you call homeland". The movie then returns to the opening scene, asserts the viewers again that this is Sugihara's love story, and explains how Sugihara's school life was filled with constant fighting and ostracization due to his *Zainichi* Korean status. One of his many fights happened to be with a son of a yakuza boss, and Sugihara is taken to the yakuza's headquarters to be punished for his action, only to end up befriending the yakuza's son. Afterwards, the yakuza boss's son invites Sugihara to his birthday party, and in the party, Sugihara is approached by a Japanese girl named Sakurai, where the movie reminds the viewers that this film is about Sugihara's love story for the final time.

GO then focuses briefly on the newfound romantic relationship between Sugihara and Sakurai. However, the movie abruptly reveals through a graphic sequence that Jong Il was brutally stabbed to death by a Japanese youth in a railway station because he was trying to defend a female Korean student from the Japanese youth. Sakurai, wanting to comfort Sugihara, attempts to make love with him, but Sugihara, under extreme stress after Jong Il's death, confesses to her that he is Korean. Sakurai freezes and gets visibly shaken by Sugihara's revelation, which makes Sugihara, who understands her concern about his ethnicity, leave her and end their relationship.

²² Chōsen gakkō (朝鮮学校, or 조선학교), are Japanese schools which are sponsored by the Ch'ongryŏn and North Korea for Korean students to receive education. GO does a fantastic job of capturing the oppressive and controlling nature of the school, such as being forced to learn about the leaders of North Korea rather than homeroom time, or being physically punished for speaking Japanese within school premises.

Soon after his breakup, Sugihara receives a call from his dad, who claims that he is too drunk to return home by himself and asks for Sugihara's help. In the taxi ride home, Hideyoshi reveals to Sugihara that his younger brother, who returned to North Korea during the repatriation movement, died in North Korea. Sugihara then suddenly blames his father for his misfortune, claiming that it is his own weakness and sentimentality making everything worse for himself – and for the entire older *Zainichi* community. Sugihara's comments provoke Hideyoshi enough to the point where they decide to settle this dispute with a boxing match, which ends in Sugihara's defeat. After returning home, Sugihara begins to understand the actions of his dad better, and the true intentions behind why Hideyoshi was able to change his nationality without much hesitation.

Six months after the fight between Sugihara and his dad, which happens to be on Christmas Eve, Sugihara is seen studying diligently in preparation for the Japanese College Entrance Examination—as it was what Jong Il always wanted Sugihara to do. Suddenly, Sugihara receives a call from Sakurai, who asks him to come to the place of their first date to talk about an important matter. Sugihara and Sakurai share their bottled up emotions with each other, clarify their actions and thoughts, and manage to regain their mutual affection. In the ending seen of the movie, Sugihara and Sakurai are seen leaving to an unknown place together as the camera pans away.

At first glance, *GO* seems to be about Sugihara's love story and his journey to overcome the bias in Japanese society associated with *Zainichi* Koreans with Sakurai, however, the movie also attempts to paint a more specific picture regarding the change within the *Zainichi* community—and how the *Zainichi* communities today are more than just “Koreans who voluntarily/reluctantly resided in Japan before the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965”.

Story of the Father: “The Old Generation *Zainichi*”

One of the central themes of GO is the change in both the Japanese and *Zainichi* community. More specifically, GO focuses on how the older generation of *Zainichi* and the younger generation of *Zainichi* attempts to work with changing society and political values. Because of this, rather it is important to first understand the character of the Sugihara's father, Hideyoshi, who represents the culture and the mindset surrounding the older generation of *Zainichi*. As a character, the two most important characteristics of Hideyoshi is his career in boxing, and his struggles related to keeping his North Korean nationality. These two qualities make it possible to explore the mindset and the pains experienced by the older generation *Zainichi* Koreans.

The fact that Hideyoshi was a national-ranking boxer is repeatedly brought up and stressed throughout the movie. The most important scene involving Hideyoshi and boxing can be found in the middle segment of GO: a flashback scene in which Hideyoshi is seen explaining his philosophy of boxing to young Sugihara.



Fig.5) Hideyoshi explaining his philosophy behind boxing to Sugihara

In the figure above, Hideyoshi explains that boxing is about protecting your “circle”, or however far you can reach by swinging your arms around. The fact that he says “You’re as big a man as the circle you made with your fist” seems to imply that his philosophy about boxing is also intended for the development of Sugihara’s character.

Based on his background story, it seems likely that Hideyoshi is stressing the point of “being big a man as the circle you make with your fist” because he was able to secure the livelihood of his family through his abilities—literally with his two hands. Furthermore, “scary guys coming inside of your circle” seems to hint at the various encroachments from the Japanese and North Korean governments experienced by the *Zainichi* Koreans. Considering these points, Hideyoshi’s philosophy seems to highlight the fact that, although there is still discrimination against the *Zainichi* community, unlike the 1940s~1970s it is possible now to secure a way of living, or even become financially successful. Hideyoshi himself is the living example of this, as he was able to own multiple pachinko gift exchange stores to financially supporting his family in Japan after his success as a boxer.



Fig.6) Hideyoshi shares his memory about Tae-Hyun, his younger brother, and laments

Another important detail, is Hideyoshi's exchange with the embassy worker during the passport scene:

(After watching a television commercial about Hawaii, and hearing his wife's desire to travel)

Hideyoshi: I don't need these (North Korean medals and ideology books) anymore. I want a passport.

Embassy Worker: You can go as a North Korean these days, okay?

Hideyoshi: Hey, I'm a true Marxist. I could be a spy... a spy! you know?

Embassy Worker: God, you're talking nonsense. It's not an issue anymore. Just go as you please!

Hideyoshi: It's useless. I can't get a single word through him.

Hideyoshi's Wife: I'm okay as long as we can go to Hawaii.

Hideyoshi: Change it! I don't know what's going to happen in Hawaii. Change my passport, change it, please.

Sugihara: My father, who was a North Korean *Zainichi*, changed his nationality as a South Korean just for a trip to Hawaii. (Translated by John Cho, original dialogue in the appendix)

Because of the comedic nature of this segment, and Sugihara's comment, it is easy to mistake this scene as Hideyoshi changing his nationality just because he wanted to travel to Hawaii—especially because of the previous segment. However, by paying close attention to the actual conversation being exchanged, it becomes clear that the trip to Hawaii is not an end-goal of changing his nationality, but rather, an excuse to change his nationality.

It seems strange that Hideyoshi pushes the fact that he is a Marxist and a spy (common stereotype associated with *Chongryon* members), even after the worker asserts him that he can go

as a North Korean—as if Hideyoshi wanted him to deny his entry to Hawaii. If, as Sugihara claims, Hideyoshi just wanted to change his nationality for travel purposes, his actions to deliberately sabotage his chances by advertising his potential dangers does not make any sense.

Thus, the best interpretation of this scene is that Hideyoshi wanted to use the Hawaii trip as an excuse to change his nationality. When Hideyoshi first started talking to the embassy worker, he probably expected him to change his nationality right away—because to him, it must be unthinkable that the embassy would allow a North Korean to travel to the United States. However, because the embassy worker told him that he can go as a North Korean if he wants to, Hideyoshi suddenly lost his excuse to change his nationality. Therefore he pursued his argument by highlighting the stereotypical dangers associated with *Chongryon* members and calling himself a spy. Even when the embassy worker rejects him the second time by saying that his nationality is not an issue anymore, Hideyoshi stubbornly continues his argument by saying that there might be potential dangers in Hawaii due to his North Korean status—to which the embassy worker finally submits. Considering these facts, Sugihara's comments of "just (*takaga*) a Hawaii trip"²³ and the overall comedic nature of this scene was to mask Hideyoshi's desire to give up his nationality.

However, this scene does not answer the most important question regarding Hideyoshi's actions: Why did he even want to change his nationality to begin with? This question is answered through Sugihara's monologue in the end, where he realizes that the reason why Hideyoshi changed his nationality was not for himself, but for Sugihara to be "free from his shackles" of North Korean politics (1:47:38). Although Hideyoshi knew that by changing his nationality, he would be able to help Sugihara's future, he also knew that because he was a wealthy successful *Zainichi*, the

²³ *Takaga* (高が) means “just”, “only”, or “merely”, usually used for highlighting the insignificant nature of an event. However, this usage of *takaga*, based on the information provided by this scene and the latter scenes, is used as an ironic sarcasm—as Sugihara already realized his father's intentions.

Chongryon would attempt to change his mind. To prevent this, Hideyoshi put a picture of him and his wife enjoying their time in Hawaii at the front of their doorway to deter any *Chongryon* activists. Because Hawaii, quoted by Hideyoshi himself, is "a symbol of corrupt capitalism", the display of this picture sends a strong message to the *Chongryon* activists that Hideyoshi completely embraced a capitalist mindset.

Because this movie takes place in the late 1990s, one can draw insights of the general political sentiments around the world of this time. The late 1990s to the early 2000s was filled with a certain sense of hope, as the Cold War has recently ended—opening myriads of possibilities of world peace. For this reason, the embassy worker repeatedly assures Hideyoshi that it is okay for North Koreans to travel to Hawaii, in other words, caution and fear against the North Korean government at the time was not as severe as Hideyoshi thought. However, in current times, North Korea has become one of the most hated countries in the world due to their constant displays of aggression with nuclear weapons. Now, it is impossible for anyone with North Korean passport to travel to most of the countries world-wide—let alone Hawaii—showing that "these [good] days" of being able to travel with North Korean nationality is over.

Story of Sugihara: “The New Generation *Zainichi*”

There are number of scenes in *GO* that highlight Sugihara’s unique perspective regarding the problem of being a *Zainichi* Korean, which seem to be a reflection of the modern cultural view shared by the “New Generation *Zainichi*”, or the children of the old generation *Zainichi* Koreans. Out of his many scenes, those that depict Sugihara running and his fixation on the concept of name most aptly captures the image of the New Generation *Zainichi* expressed by Sugihara.

The first important image of Sugihara that the viewers are introduced to is the image of him running. In fact, immediately after the opening scene of GO, Sugihara is seen participating in “The Super Great Chicken Race”, a game invented by Tawake, a senior at the North Korean school, in which the participant has to outrun an incoming train by running the entire length of the subway platform. Rather than being a display of his athletic capabilities, Sugihara’s running is closely tied with the image of the New Generation *Zainichi* Koreans “running away” from the question of their ethnicity.



Fig. 7) Juxtaposition of Sugihara running and marching away from other North Korean students

Shortly after the scene where Hideyoshi gives up his North Korean citizenship (which happens to be right after “The Super Great Chicken Race” scene), Sugihara is seen running away from the police with Tawake and another student because Tawake smashed a police car window with a brick. During this scene however, the image of Sugihara running is constantly juxtaposed with the marching practice scene at the North Korean school, and as Sugihara begins to overtake his friends and run the fastest, Sugihara also begins to walk away from the rest of his classmates marching. Furthermore, in the running scene, Sugihara runs faster and faster until he begins to

float up in the air; this in combination with the marching scene begins to emphasize the Sugihara's internal debate over deciding either his North Korean or South Korean citizenship.



Fig. 8) Jong Il sees the image of Sugihara running as he slowly dies

Interestingly, the action of running, once again, becomes an important imagery during the middle segment of the movie dealing with Jong Il's death. Before Jong Il gets killed by a delinquent Japanese student, a flashback scene reveals Sugihara asking Jong Il about Tawake, while mentioning how he was the only other person to successfully complete "The Super Great Chicken Race". Then a following scene reveals that Tawake also gave up his North Korean citizenship for South Korean citizenship after a traumatic event associated with mandatory fingerprinting for *Zainichi* Koreans. The image of "The Super Great Chicken Race" is brought up again for a final time immediately after Jong Il gets brutally stabbed by a delinquent Japanese student in a subway station. As Jong Il was slowly dying, he reminisces about the image of Sugihara successfully completing the race. Because Jong Il was seen talking to Sugihara about his bravery and his ability to let go of his North Korean citizenship without much hesitation, it can be said that Sugihara and Tawake, who was able to "run", can continue living on as a South Korean, while Jong Il, who

could not “run” met a tragic ending due to stereotypes and discriminations associated with *Zainichi* Koreans.²⁴ Thus, the image of running in GO can be interpreted as an expression of the modern *Zainichi* Korean’s desire to run free from the stereotypes associated with being *Zainichi*.

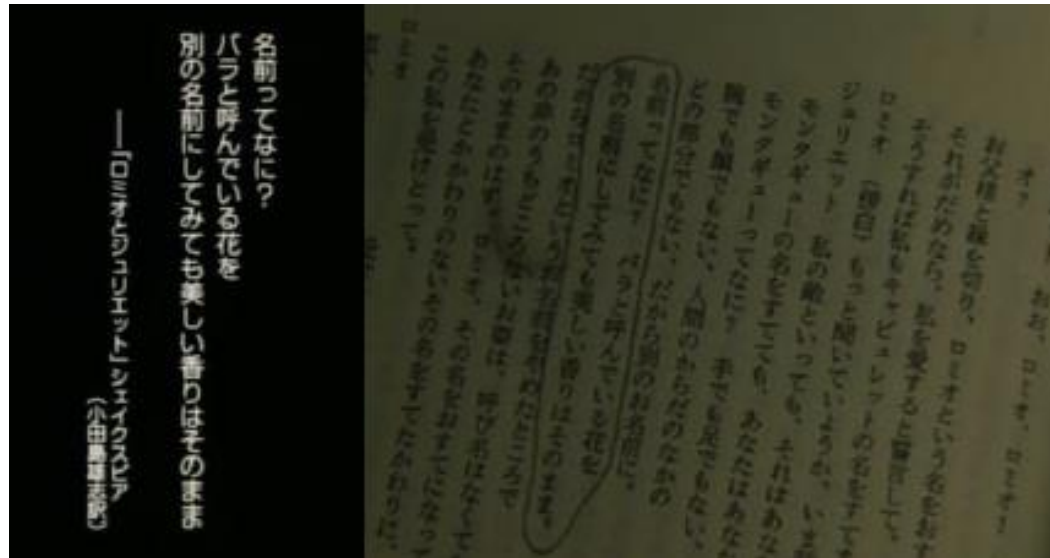


Fig. 9) Opening quote of GO, later revealed to be from Jong Il’s gift to Sugihara

Another important piece of imagery that expresses the modern problems faced by New Generation *Zainichi* Koreans is the idea of the importance of names. The opening quote of GO is a direct quote from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* which reads: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet”. This quote, and the questioning of the values inherent to a name, becomes one of Sugihara’s biggest struggles, and can be also applied to modern *Zainichi* Koreans.

²⁴ During the scene in which Jong Il dies, it can be observed that the Japanese student who was bothering the Korean student was actually carrying out a dare from his friend, which Jong Il interpreted as Japanese student bothering a *Zainichi* student for no reason. While it is true that this kind of dare is still extremely low and unnecessary, Jong Il’s death is also partly due to this misinterpretation stemming from the stereotypes associated with Japanese treatment of *Zainichi*.



Fig. 10) Sugihara discusses his name with Sakurai

The most direct example of Sugihara's concern with his name is the scene where he confesses his Korean name, Lee Jong-ho, to Sakurai. This scene is particularly interesting, as not only is Sugihara revealing his Korean identity to Sakurai, but he is also revealing the fact that he was always scared of Sakurai viewing him as a foreigner. However, although this scene seems to express Sugihara's viewpoint of his own identity, it can be also interpreted that this revelation was only instigated by the death of Jong Il, which might have heightened Sugihara's hatred towards the Japanese public at the time.

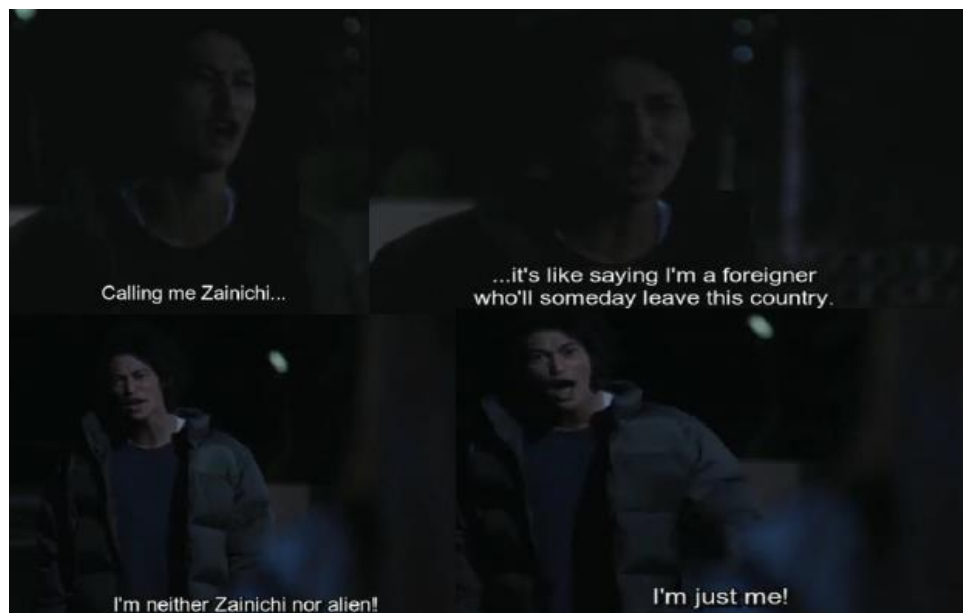


Fig. 11) Sugihara reveals his understanding of "name" and identity

The final scene of *GO*, where Sugihara wholeheartedly explains his position as a *Zainichi* to Sakurai, reveals both Sugihara and the New generation *Zainichi*'s perspective on their name and identity. As one can see from the figure above, Sugihara makes a striking comment to Sakurai, claiming that calling him a *Zainichi* is equivalent to viewing him as a foreigner who will someday leave Japan, implying that Sugihara himself views himself as either an individual entity, free from all nationalistic or ethnic attachments, or as a "Japanese citizen" and part of the society. This idea of the uncertain identity is also extremely reflective of the modern community of *Zainichi* Koreans, who grew up witnessing the history of the Old generation *Zainichi* Koreans and the treatment they received from both Japanese and mainland Korean society. According to an interview with Hyeok-su Yu, Professor of International Social Science in Yokohama University who also happens to be a New generation *Zainichi* Korean, Yu asserts that: "The identity of the Old generation *Zainichi* Korean... The essence of the identity which allowed to maintain the Korean nationality throughout five generations was the resistance against discrimination. [The New generation *Zainichi* Koreans] also maintained their nationality through resistance against discrimination, but as this discrimination began to subside, their identity also began to falter..." (YTN, 2). Yu also claims later in the interview that "third generation *Zainichi* Koreans' identity is completely different from that of the first and second generation *Zainichi* Koreans, as the process of assimilation has been continuing for that long..." (YTN, 2), which, paired with the previous discussion of the character of Sugihara, allows the interpretation of this scene as not only Sugihara's personal grudge against Sakurai, but also the general sentiment of the newer generation of *Zainichi* Koreans.

It is interesting to note that what makes Sugihara's character a convincing reflection of the modern *Zainichi* Korean community is not the scenes that imply his connections with them, but rather, his delinquency and desire for freedom. Multiple scenes of *GO* show that Sugihara is not a

one dimensional character who fixates solely on the political and cultural strife of being a *Zainichi* Korean, but a rather plain high schooler who worries about “normal high schooler things” such as his education, love interest, and friendship. Though it can be argued that all of his worries are connected with his problems with his ethnicity to a certain degree, the rebelling yet carefree personality of Sugihara seems to show that the question of ethnicity to him is just an extension of his normal worries as a high schooler. Thus, the analysis of the character of Sugihara seems to point at the fact that although Sugihara suffers discrimination for being a *Zainichi* Korean, Sugihara is as “Japanese” as the others around him—which also shows director Yukisada’s recognition of the stereotypes and problems associated with modern *Zainichi* Korean community.



Fig. 12) Sugihara’s response to his dad’s laments, which aptly captures the character and beliefs of both Sugihara and the new generation of *Zainichi* Koreans.

Conclusion

By analyzing both the history and the modern cultural reflection regarding the *Zainichi* community, it is possible to understand two important ideas regarding the perspective of the modern *Zainichi*. First, the identity of *Zainichi* and its transformation is induced not only by the changing societal structure of Japan and the *Zainichi* community, but also through complex political changes such as globalization and the possibility of the development of Japan-South

Korea relationships—as well as the possibility of the amelioration of the Japan-North Korea relationship. Such transformations can be best explained as the *Zainichi* Korean's progress from a zero-sum game of choosing one nationality and rejecting the other in the name of multiculturalism, to acceptance of their unique identities in a global society pushing towards cultural pluralism. This also shows that, to the *Zainichi* population, the ideas of "nationality" is a symbol of coercive forces of assimilation and exclusion, while their "residency" (*Zai*) is a symbol of legal acceptance of the *Zainichi* Koreans to pursue their unique lives in the Japanese society.

Second, it is important to understand that the term *Zainichi* to the *Zainichi* Koreans represents not only their first-hand experience of the psychological detachment from Japanese society, but also their yearning for individualism and autonomy that originates from ideas such as the desire to escape from the antagonism between North and South Korea. Essentially, the modern *Zainichi* presents themselves as neither Japanese nor Korean, but as an entirely different group of people. To them, the term "*Zainichi*" is a subjective expression of their pursuit for individualistic identity free from the division of the Korean peninsula and the classifications from the Japanese society (YTN, 1). More specifically, it is an expression of composite identity that transcends the belongingness to groups such as North Korea, South Korea, *Mindanao*, or *Chongryon*, while refusing to coalesce with Japan.

To summarize, in our modern society, where geopolitical notions of “ethnicity” and “nationality” are blurring through the transition towards a global, post-nationalistic society, it is important to understand that forcing a certain heritage to the young, modern *Zainichi* Korean community is not only degrading, but pointless to pursue.

Thus, it can be said that, for the *Zainichi* community, having an ethnic identity/heritage as a “Korean” and having a “Korean nationality” are two separate things. Therefore, in order for anyone to better understand, communicate, and coexist with the *Zainichi* community, it is necessary to drop the antiquated idea of understanding the *Zainichi* as “originally Korean citizen, therefore always Korean”, but rather, to view them as “ethnic Koreans who went, or were sent, to Japan due to various political complexities, and sharing the same cultural contexts as Koreans—regardless of their nationality”. By doing so, we will be able expand our horizons to view the various issues faced by the *Zainichi* Korean community, not as a mere remnant of past political strife, but as a serious issue which transcends both the traditional concepts of nation and ethnicity.

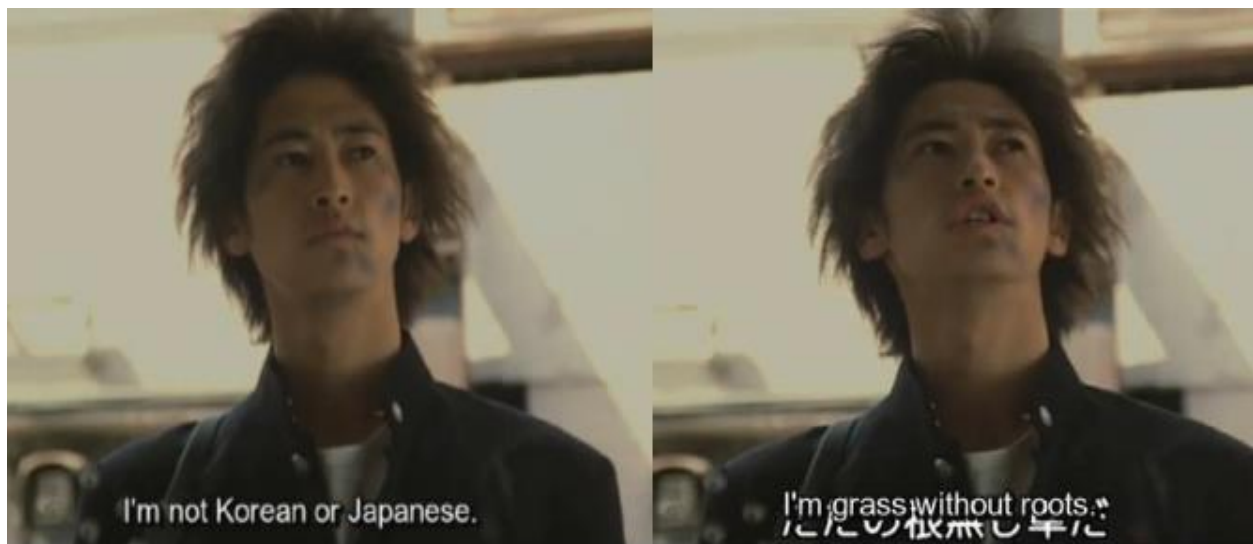


Fig. 13) Sugihara claims that he is a “grass without roots”, which expresses the modern concerns related to the *Zainichi* Koreans

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- Fig.5) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 00:41:55
- Fig.6) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:39:09
- Fig.7) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 00:17:05
- Fig.8) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:12:38
- Fig.9) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:16:43
- Fig.10) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:28:10
- Fig.11) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:53:10
- Fig.12) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:41:07
- Fig.13) GO (2001, Isao Yukisada), 01:48:26

Translated Works

(*Chaeiltongp'oŭi yŏksawa han'gungMindan*, from 26:15)

일본에서 태어나 일본어로 말하며 자신의 민족적 정체성에 대해 고민하는 우리의 3-4 세대 자녀들...

(*GO*, from 00:11:19)

Hideyoshi: 이걸 이제 필요없어. 여권이, 여권이 꼭 필요해

Embassy worker: 요즘은 북한 국적으로도 하वाई 갈 수 있어요. 알았어요?

Hideyoshi: ホラーお前、俺はバリバリのマルクス主義だ。つまり。。간첩인지, 간첩인지 모르잖아? 응?

Embassy worker: 쓸데없는 소리 자꾸하고 있네. 아, 문제없다니까! 勝手に行けばいい!

Hideyoshi: だめだ、あの野郎じゃ話にならないや

Hawaii talk: あたしはハワイに行ければいいんです。

Hideyoshi: 역시 바뀌! ハワイに何があるかわからないから 바뀌! 바뀌, お願いしますよ。

Sugihara: 在日朝鮮人だった親父はたかがハワイ旅行のために新しい国籍を手に入れ、在日韓国人になった。