

Home, Home, Home:

Empire, Displacement, and Belonging for Japanese War Orphans Left Behind in China

Introduction

Just days before the Japanese Empire's unconditional surrender on August 15th, 1945, the puppet nation of Manchukuo capitulated to Soviet Union forces in northeastern China, leaving in its wake over two hundred thousand Japanese settler-colonists. Abandoned by the Japanese state, the colonists faced the chaos and violence following Manchukuo's capitulation as they attempted to return to Japan. Thousands of children were separated from their Japanese parents and left behind in China in the hysteria of evacuation. When the dust finally settled, these children had become war orphans abandoned in a foreign land.

Known in Japan as *chūgoku zanryū hōjin*, or 'Japanese war orphans left behind in China,' many of these children were saved by the local population and raised as Chinese civilians in the tumultuous decades following the war.¹ However, as the two countries began re-establishing diplomatic relations in the 1970s, the idea of repatriating the orphans back to Japan solicited widespread support among the Japanese public and politicians alike. Accompanying the repatriation of such war orphans was the question of identity: for people who were ethnically Japanese but culturally foreign, what did "being Japanese" mean? Despite the welcoming attitudes of the Japanese public, the war orphans' upbringing in rural China meant they did not have the socialization or language ability necessary to assimilate into Japanese society. Furthermore, in the decades since their emigration, the state of Japan had been changed dramatically by its loss in the Second World War; as Japan transformed from sprawling empire to defeated nation, cultural and legal conceptions of 'Japaneseness' ebbed and flowed with its geographical reach. Therefore although many war orphans perceived themselves as Japanese, conventional ideas of postwar Japanese nationality failed — and continue to fail — to include their experiences and identities.

¹ In Japanese, this is written as 「中国残留邦人」.

Manchukuo: Visions of Empire

The creation of Manchukuo was catalyzed on September 18th, 1931, when officers of the Kwantung Army used explosives to destroy several feet of railway belonging to the Southern Manchuria Railway company.² The attack, happening about 5 miles north of the Manchurian city Mukden, was not sanctioned by the government of Japan, but rather part of a conspiracy to initiate conflict by pinning the blame of the attack on Chinese troops.³ Quickly the situation escalated, and the new state of Manchukuo emerged from the conflict by March of 1932.⁴ Though independent in name, the new state was effectively a puppet nation fronted by Chinese figureheads and ruled by Japanese powers. Alongside the Japanese General Affairs Board, which acted as the executive branch of government, the most influential bodies were the Kwantung Army and Southern Manchuria Railway Company.⁵ Although these institutions were an army and a company by name, respectively, they held tremendous amounts of economic and political sway in the development and governance of Manchukuo.⁶ Hence, despite the Chinese figurehead installations, which included the last Qing Emperor Puyi, Manchukuo remained in its essence a colonial holding created for and controlled by Japan.

The making of Manchukuo, however, was not an event that spontaneously burst into being with an explosion and a few conspirators on a September evening; rather, its conception was the product of decades of empire-building in East Asia. The conquest of Manchuria was a realization of military hopes dating back as early as the 1880s, when “the desire for a foothold in

² Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*. (London, England: Longman, 1987) pp. 8.

³ Ibid. Mukden is known today as Shenyang.

⁴ United States Department of State, *FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES DIPLOMATIC PAPERS, 1932, THE FAR EAST, VOLUME III*. (Washington, D.C.: 1932) pp. 586.

⁵ Also known as Mantetsu.

⁶ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 29.

Manchuria... emerged within Japanese army circles.”⁷ The origin of these desires stemmed from the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which ended the tenure of the Tokugawa Shogunate and re-established imperial rule. To consolidate power and build a cohesive national identity, the new Meiji government examined emerging European and American nation-states and, in emulation, sought to introduce these “political institutions of the most enlightened and powerful nations” to Japan.⁸ Naturally following this act was the embrace of imperialism by the Meiji government and populace. Historian Akira Iriye uses the term ‘social imperialism’ to describe how, in the face of emerging civic participation, politicians advocated for expansionism to win the support of the domestic masses; these strategies were so effective that by the 1880s, support of expansionist foreign policy was seen *as* an inherent aspect of Japanese patriotism. In fact, this mindset was so pervasive among the populace that Iriye claims “patriotism, militarism, and imperialism were accepted as necessary conditions for the existence of a nation.”⁹ The building of Japanese national identity therefore existed in something of a positive feedback loop: in order to consolidate support from the masses and thus build a cohesive national identity, the state used the issue of imperialism in order to unify the populace, quelling “preoccup[ation] with internal squabbles,” instead directing mass attention towards “a vision of boundless opportunities overseas.”¹⁰ The “unique history, traditional beauty, and modernizing achievements” of Japan, all fundamental elements of the emerging identity, were then used to justify the “strengths and virtues of the Japanese nation” as the empire expanded outwards, creating conceptions of ‘Japaneseness’ as a vehicle of imperialism.¹¹

⁷ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 24.

⁸ Akira Iriye, “Japan’s Drive to Great-Power Status,” in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *The Emergence of Meiji Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) : pp. 283.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 309.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

Japan emerged onto the world stage as an imperial power at the turn of the 20th century, annexing Taiwan in 1895; Korea followed soon after, being first established as a protectorate in 1905 before being formally annexed in 1910. Accompanying these acquired territories was the expansion of what it meant to belong in the empire; following annexation, local versions of the Japanese Nationality Act were quickly applied to Taiwan and Korea, bringing the new colonial subjects beneath the umbrella of people considered ‘Japanese’ under the law.¹² Although Japan’s expansion began under influence of the European colonial model, its perspective on Euro-American powers had shifted by the end of World War I. Claiming to be a vanguard against the clutches of the West, Japan envisioned itself as a ‘civilizing’ power that would guide Asia towards modernity through a glorious vision of Pan-Asianism. Ishihara Kanji, an officer involved in the Kwantung Army conspiracy, wrote of Japan as “the champion of the East” mere months before the creation of Manchukuo in 1931, claiming that their actions sought to overturn the archaic warlords and bureaucrats of old Manchuria and establish a new, just nation.¹³ The freshly christened Manchukuo therefore became the crown jewel of the Japanese empire as “a model State based upon morals peculiar to the Orient.”¹⁴

Manchukuo also served a practical economic purpose to the Japanese empire. Chinese politicians and intellectuals had previously recognized the vast resources of Manchuria, and relied on the region for food, mining material, and land to settle a swelling population.¹⁵ Ishihara, the Kwantung officer, described these resources as economic incentive to take Manchuria, writing that “agriculture in the... region is sufficient to solve the problem of food supplies for

¹² Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Beyond Racism: Semi-Citizenship and Marginality in Modern Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015), pp. 72.

¹³ Ishihara Kanji, “A Plan to Occupy Manchuria” in “Empire and War,” in William Theodore De Bary, et al. eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two 1600 to 2000, Part Two: 1868 to 2000* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940), pp. 2.

¹⁵ Quentin Pan, “Manchuria as China's "Life Line,"” *The China Critic* Vol. V No. 32., (August 11, 1932) pp. 818.

[the Japanese] people,” and that specifically “iron from Anshan, coal from Fushun,” alongside other raw materials, would help feed the growing Japanese industrial machine.¹⁶ The relationship between Manchukuo and Japan would be that of a colony and mother country, with Manchukuo playing the part of the colony by supplying raw goods and materials. In addition, alongside raw materials, Manchukuo also served as a ‘testing ground’ for economic theory beginning in 1933; the bureaucrats’ hope was that if economic policies worked abroad, they could also be implemented in Japan.¹⁷ To accomplish this the Japanese state invested heavily, establishing new companies and pumping 1.2 billion yen into the region between 1932 and 1937.¹⁸ Manchukuo henceforth was not only a realization of ideological desire, but also an enabling arm of Japan’s empire-building.

Settler-Colonialism in Manchuria

In the popular Japanese imagination, Manchukuo was painted as a vast, empty plain of farmlands and natural resources, uninhabited by any person of consequence before the Japanese settlers. An English-language guidebook published by the Southern Manchuria Railway’s *The Manchuria Daily News* in 1940, even dubs the settlement of the region “consonant to the spirit of American pioneers.”¹⁹ The idea of Manchuria before the settler-colonists was one of desolation, with the guidebook describing to international audiences a “forlorn region” removed from culture and modernity. The book claims that “almost all Manchus were illiterate and were left

¹⁶ Ishihara Kanji, “A Plan to Occupy Manchuria” in “Empire and War,” in William Theodore De Bary, et al. eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition, Volume Two 1600 to 2000, Part Two: 1868 to 2000* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 43. Presumably if the policies failed, only the residents of Manchukuo would face the worst consequences.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 42.

¹⁹ *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940), pp. 2.

behind by over-advancing times” before Japanese presence, implying the Chinese government neglected the Manchurian population.²⁰ The idea that the previous Chinese government was not fit to rule was further pushed by claims of ethnic oppression of Korean inhabitants in the region, publicized by the Japanese press with incidents such as the 1931 Wanpaoshan Affair.²¹ This image was framed in contrast to the multi-ethnic ideals of the Japanese empire, which in theory promised belonging and peace across the diverse peoples of the region. Indeed, Manchukuo meant to do away with all these old grievances, uniting the Han Chinese, Manchu, Mongol, Korean, and Japanese people under one five-striped flag of racial unity.²² Propaganda posters of the time depict plump, smiling children and pretty, qipao-clad women waving Japanese, Chinese, and Manchurian flags, accompanied by slogans like “peace on Earth” and “build a new paradise.”²³

A modern, shining paradise was on the horizon: beginning in 1931, over 5,300 kilometers of new railway were laid in Manchukuo, and 48 new plans for Manchurian cities, equipped with modern facilities such as electricity, gas, and telephones were planned for Japanese settlers.²⁴ Foreign publications, such as the aforementioned *Manchuria Daily News* book, broadcasted to the world images of economic and cultural prosperity: grand, sprawling urban centers, school children skating on shimmering ice rinks, and the towering spires of temples and cathedrals.²⁵

Interestingly enough, however, absent from advertisements of the glittering cities were “the

²⁰ *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940), pp. 9.

²¹ The Southern Manchuria Railway Company, *Answering Questions on Manchuria* (Hibiya Park, Tokyo: The Herald Press, 1936), pp. 65. The Wanpaoshan Affair was a 1931 incident over land between Chinese and Korean farmers.

²² *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940), pp. 2.

²³ See appendix A.

²⁴ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 243-245.

²⁵ The Southern Manchuria Railway Company, *Answering Questions on Manchuria* (Hibiya Park, Tokyo: The Herald Press, 1936); *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940).

Chinese urban masses [kept] out of sight.”²⁶ Manchukuo’s promises of peace and unity between different ethnic groups had fallen short of reality.

In order to farm the lands, dig the mines, and truly integrate Manchukuo into the empire, Japanese immigration was necessary; the ideal of a multi-ethnic empire was, after all, to justify Japanese rule and settlement. In recognition of this, in 1936 Prime Minister Hirota Kōki’s cabinet pushed Manchurian colonization as a key national policy, establishing multiple organizations meant to help settle Manchuria with Japanese emigrants such as the administrative Colonization Bureau and the paramilitary Patriotic Youth Brigade.²⁷ Ambitiously, the government aimed to make the population of Manchuria 10% Japanese and planned to send about 5 million people to the continent.²⁸ Additionally, the government also planned to settle 80,000 Korean residents from 1936-1951, all while severely restricting Chinese immigration.²⁹ The majority of Japanese immigrants to Manchuria were originally rural tenant farmers, often inhabiting the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder in their villages. Potential emigrés, therefore, often had very few prospects or choices other than accepting the elite bureaucracy’s plans to resettle in Manchuria.

Upon arrival in Manchuria, Japanese settlers experienced a rapid transformation of social standing, rising from “a rural underclass to a colonial elite” through what historian Louise Young deems “imperial privileges,” one major example being massive grants of 10 hectares of farmland per family.³⁰ However, a large portion of the 20 million hectares acquired by the Japanese government was taken on unfair or even non-consensual terms; intentionally incorrect land

²⁶ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 15.

²⁷ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 355-357.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 4.

²⁹ The Southern Manchuria Railway Company, *Answering Questions on Manchuria* (Hibiya Park, Tokyo: The Herald Press, 1936), pp. 65-66.

³⁰ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire : Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 400-401.

evaluations, as well as the threat of violence (often from members of the Kwantung army sent to intimidate), forced local people to sell their land for low prices, if not simply forfeiting it.³¹

Because of the difference in scale of agriculture the colonists took up, settlements often faced severe manpower shortages, and ultimately relied on exploiting the labor of Chinese and Korean people to farm their lands.³² Furthermore, the colonial regime strongly pushed the idea that Manchuria was filled with “bandit hordes,” branding anyone from anti-Japanese insurgents to civilians as members of “organized banditry.”³³ In response, settlers routinely reacted with brutality to Chinese civilians perceived to encroach on their territory, with hundreds of violent incidents documented by colonial police authorities.³⁴ These incidents were seldom prosecuted.

In addition to material and physical privileges, settler-colonists also experienced legal privileges in Manchukuo and beyond. Historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki describes the family registration system implemented throughout the empire, *koseki*, as a perpetrator of “many layers of civic inequality.”³⁵ The purpose of the system, established in the 1870s, stemmed from the Edo-era population registers: *koseki* determined who was and who was not Japanese. Although all formal colonial subjects were included under the umbrella of Japanese nationality, *koseki* drew clear delineations between colonial subjects and people of the home islands, and issued different forms of registration, with ‘*gaichi koseki*’ designated for colonial subjects and ‘*naichi koseki*’ for the ethnically Japanese. The main purpose of this distinction, Morris-Suzuki notes, was to enable “discriminat[ion] between the rights of coloniser and colonised in the various

³¹ Ibid, pp. 401-402. Young notes that “in 1941 only 10.8 million of the 20 million hectares in Japanese possession had been paid for.”

³² Ibid, pp. 403.

³³The Southern Manchuria Railway Company, *Answering Questions on Manchuria* (Hibiya Park, Tokyo: The Herald Press, 1936), pp. 60.

³⁴ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 404-405.

³⁵ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Beyond Racism: Semi-Citizenship and Marginality in Modern Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015), pp. 73.

overseas territories” through legal means.³⁶ One example of such discrimination manifested in Manchukuo, as well as Taiwan and Korea, in the form of school segregation, with Japanese children partitioned and educated separately from their peers. The aforementioned Mantetsu guidebook even touts its separate schools for “Manchu, Mongolian, and White Russian children,” proudly informing the readers that despite segregation, “Japanese language is ... a common subject” in all schools’ curricula.³⁷ Despite their socioeconomic origins, the settler-colonists had transformed from the subjugated into the privileged subjugators in Japan’s empire.

Taking Empire Apart

For all its visions of glory, the short-lived state of Manchukuo capitulated a little over a decade after its inception as the tides of war turned against Japan. The situation in August 1945 was grim as Soviet troops from the North closed in on Manchuria. Despite previous assurances from the imperial regime that male colonists would be exempted from the military draft and that settlements would be protected by the Kwantung Army, by 1944 Japan’s increasing losses in the Pacific had slowly pulled Kwantung troops away from Manchuria and called upon previously exempted settlers to join the draft. On August 9th, 1945, the Soviet military launched an attack on Manchukuo, swiftly cutting through the region and prompting the evacuation of the army and government from the state capital Xinjing just three days later.³⁸ Coupled with the dropping of the atomic bombs on August 6th and 9th on the Japanese homeland, the situation for the empire was bleak. The colonists, who had been previously ordered not to flee Manchukuo, were issued

³⁶ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Beyond Racism: Semi-Citizenship and Marginality in Modern Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015), pp. 73.

³⁷ *Manchoukuo Gives Birth to New Culture: Questions and Answers* (Hsinking, Manchukuo: The Manchuria Daily News, 1940), pp. 10.

³⁸ Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 409.

sudden evacuation orders starting on August 9th and began frantically making their way to the designated locations. Lucky evacuees used the railways before they ceased service or were destroyed; the rest fled with wagons or simply on foot. In the immediate wake of Japan's capitulation, documentation from across 75 Japanese settlements tallied 9,662 violent deaths during the evacuation period from August to September; of that, 4,395 deaths were by suicide, 2,761 by battle, and the rest a combination of the two aforementioned factors. An estimated 11,520 settlers died in this manner. Ultimately, of the 223,000 Japanese settler-colonists originally in Manchuria, 83,000 never returned to Japan.³⁹

Across the expanse of the crumbling empire echoed similar issues of repatriation and return; at the time of Japan's surrender in August 1945, 6.9 million citizens and soldiers — almost one-tenth of the 72-million-strong population — were situated outside of the borders of Japan proper.⁴⁰ The following Allied occupation of Japan would oversee, from September 1945 to the end of 1946, the repatriation of over 5 million overseas Japanese and the simultaneous deportation of over 1 million ex-colonial subjects from the home islands.⁴¹ These deportations, which were conducted based on an individual's identity, were a far cry from the multi-ethnic empire of the past, seeking to strip ex-colonial subjects of any vestiges of "Japaneseness" formerly bestowed upon them and contributing to the precedent "that one could determine, unequivocally, whether a person was Japanese or not."⁴² This framework to arbitrate nationality, beginning after Japan's loss, would become a recurring idea echoed throughout postwar legislation. However, it was not only ex-colonial subjects that were excised from conceptions of Japanese identity: discrimination and stigma cloaked many citizen repatriates as they returned to

³⁹ Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 410-411.

⁴⁰ Lori Watt, *When Empire Comes Home: Repatriation and Reintegration in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 6.

Japan, othering them to the margins of society. Although many had experienced hardship in the colonies and on the journey back, the reconstruction of the war in popular consciousness held “only narratives of Japanese suffering that took place on the home islands of Japan qualified as legitimate,” while the stories of repatriates and those left behind “were not adopted as part of the national story of suffering.”⁴³ Rather, they were looked upon with suspicion. In the years immediately following surrender, women returning from Manchuria and men returning from Siberia experienced particular hostility; the women were regarded as ‘unchaste’ and “threatening the future of the Japanese race” by bearing mixed-race children, while concerns about the men centered around Soviet indoctrination and bringing Communist ideologies back into Japan.⁴⁴ In both cases the repatriates threatened establishments of the new Japan: the women, the idea of a racially homogenous nation; the men, the threat of Communism to American-occupied Japan at the beginning of the global Cold War. Though these people initially migrated as the Japanese empire expanded, they were left behind by its surrender and subsequent reform as a postwar nation, contributing to the sense of abandonment repatriates felt from their government.⁴⁵

For the war orphans, who were ‘abandoned’ in multiple *literal* senses, the end of the war was nothing short of nightmarish. Several thousand Japanese children were separated from their parents as they fled Manchuria amidst the panic of evacuation. In interviews recorded later on in their lifetimes, the war orphans recount a variety of circumstances that lead to their division: abandonment, illness, forced separation, and, of haunting frequencies, violent death. These war orphans, officially defined as Japanese children aged 13 or below on August 9th, 1945, were eventually taken in by Chinese civilians who raised the children as their own.⁴⁶ Though the

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 112, 134.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 10.

⁴⁶ Robert Efrid, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 373.

stories of every war orphan are unique, each is undercut with universal undercurrents of fear, helplessness, and grief as they recount struggling to survive in a collapsing nation.

In a video recorded by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare in 2018, 75-year-old Wakayama Takako recounts her abandonment in Manchuria as a three-year-old in soft, clear Mandarin Chinese.⁴⁷ Wakayama's father was a Japanese technician sent to manage coal mines in Manchuria, prompting her family's immigration; when Manchukuo capitulated, her father was captured by Soviet forces and sent to Siberia, while her pregnant mother, fleeing the Red Army with her and her three siblings, "shaved her head bald like a man." Two of her brothers, neither older than three, died of disease in the months following. "I was almost dead too," she says in the video, explaining why her mother chose to leave her behind. Ill and malnourished, Wakayama says her foster Chinese parents saved her life by taking her in at her biological mother's request. Aoki Misako, another war orphan, describes a similar state of helplessness in her own interview, conducted in 2019.⁴⁸ Only one year old in 1945, she recalls simply waking up one day and discovering she had been abandoned in her home. "I was just sleeping," she says quietly to her interviewer, her gaze fixed somewhere behind the camera, "and after I woke up I looked in this room and that in our big house, but there were no people there." Eventually, Aoki's to-be foster mother found her in the house and took Aoki to her own home.

Many orphans also directly witnessed the violence and confusion following Manchukuo's capitulation. Akiba Kyuei, aged 7 at the end of the war, describes in his 2017 interview the ominous day he was told to evacuate.⁴⁹ "In school, we weren't really told about the war," he says. "We weren't told, 'Japan has lost.'" One day, he recalls, he was simply told there would be

⁴⁷ Wakayama Takako, 「[中国残留邦人 ～家族との別れ 再会の嬉しさと悲しさ～ 若山 孝子 終戦時2歳 神奈川県](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, May 2018.

⁴⁸ Aoki Misako, 「[中国残留邦人 ～帰国への強い思い 苦難を乗り越えて～ 青木 美沙子 終戦時1歳 大阪府](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, March 2019.

⁴⁹ Akiba Kyuei, 「[中国残留邦人 ～孤独を生き抜いた少年 命運を分けた選択～ 秋葉 久栄 終戦時7歳 山形県](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, September 2017.

no school because “it was time to go home.” When he returned home to his parents, he heard them listening to a radio broadcast instructing evacuees to go to Harbin to return to Japan. That afternoon Akiba’s family set out with several other Japanese families with horse carriages. While on the road they heard the sound of aircraft and guns, causing panic in their traveling group. In the chaos, Akiba and his older brother were separated from the rest of the group, and many members of his family perished. He recalls the burning of his father and grandmother’s bodies, as well as his older brother’s death due to starvation soon after. “He just keeled over in the soybean field,” he says, “I was seven... I was the only one left.” Afterward Akiba survived by wandering and foraging alongside other Japanese refugees in Manchuria. He retells a vivid story of hiding in fields at night:

If you entered a village other people would say, “this is a Japanese child,” and you would be killed. So you didn’t dare go into villages. You just stayed outside in the cornfields. That entire month, it rained every day. After I heard an old man say that in war the Soviets wore big yellow coats, and they stood in rows as they marched forward. In the evening when the moon came out, the corn looked like soldiers under the moonlight. We were so scared the Soviets had come, we didn’t dare move, we didn’t dare come out. Afterwards, we looked in the daylight. It was just corn.

Slowly the refugee group made their way to Jiamusi, a city 400 kilometers north of Harbin, where they discovered the road to Harbin had been blocked by Soviet forces. He remembers crying hopelessly despite others telling him to hush, fearing they would get caught and killed by Soviet soldiers. That night they slept north of the river near Jiamusi, but when Akiba woke up he discovered many members of his group missing. Later, he recalls, he was told those missing people chose to drown themselves in the river. As he continued to wander, he came across a sympathetic family surnamed Li, who took care of him and several other Japanese orphans before finding adoptive homes for them.

Growing Up in China

The decades following Japan's retreat from China were rocky, tumultuous years as the final throes of the Chinese Civil War rolled over the country, followed by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. It was before this backdrop of social and political upheaval that the war orphans grew up in the care of their foster parents. The Chinese civilians that took in the war orphans often had myriad reasons to adopt; often the adoptive parents were poor farmers, and wanted children when they had none of their own. Other times, the parents, viewing the war orphans as innocent, simply had a desire to help the children. Although relationships between adoptees and their parents differed widely between individuals, their upbringing by Chinese civilians meant that despite their Japanese roots, the orphans were culturally socialized through their upbringing as rural Chinese during a time of monumental change.

As there was no singular orphan experience growing up, the childhoods of war orphans encompassed a broad spectrum of experiences. For example, education and economic status varied widely between each person. Wakayama Takako, for instance, said that although her adoptive family was poor, her adoptive parents prioritized her education over all else, while Aoki Misako noted that she was not able to attend school for more than a year because her help was needed with housework.⁵⁰ Similarly, as most of the civilians were farmers, the economic backgrounds of the adoptive families before the Cultural Revolution varied from land-owning people to subsistence farmers and herders, although the majority were considered members of the peasantry. Furthermore, some children were too young at the time of Manchukuo's capitulation to even remember being Japanese, and so a fair proportion grew up believing they

⁵⁰ Wakayama Takako, 「[中国残留邦人 ～家族との別れ 再会の嬉しさと悲しさ～ 若山 孝子 終戦時2歳 神奈川県](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, May 2018; Aoki Misako, 「[中国残留邦人 ～帰国への強い思い 苦難を乗り越えて～ 青木 美沙子 終戦時1歳 大阪府](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, March 2019.

were born to Chinese parents. Parents often claimed the orphans as their own children and treated them as their own to protect them from community ostracization and bullying. When Wakayama was bullied at school for being Japanese, she asked her adoptive mother about her origins. Indignantly, her adoptive mother responded, “You aren’t Japanese! Don’t listen to them,” and went to reprimand the teachers at her school for allowing bullying to occur.⁵¹

In the years following the Second Sino-Japanese War, anti-Japanese propaganda was used as a tool by first the Guomindang and then the Communist Party to seek unity and a common sense of patriotism among a fractured Chinese populace.⁵² However, the resentment towards the country of Japan and the Japanese government did not always translate directly into hostility towards war orphans; even in cases where a child’s Japanese identity was known, treatment of the children varied drastically from positive and sympathetic to negative and hostile. Some orphans were able to integrate themselves into Chinese society, even acquiring local leadership and good standing with the Chinese Communist Party, while others were ostracized and shamed in their local communities.⁵³ One war orphan named Sugawara Enkichi recalled being publicly humiliated during the Cultural Revolution and forced to march around the streets identified as an “official undesirable,” alongside being sentenced to a winter of labor and bouts of banishment.⁵⁴ This dramatic duality between experiences can be regarded in the context of the CCP’s application of Marxism, which framed the Japanese war orphans as children of settlers who were taken advantage of “by the exploiting classes of capitalist Japanese society, diminishing their image as pillagers from prior to 1945.”⁵⁵ This situated the war orphans into a position akin to the

⁵¹ Wakayama Takako, 「[中国残留邦人 ～家族との別れ 再会の嬉しさと悲しさ～ 若山 孝子 終戦時2歳 神奈川県](#)」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, May 2018.

⁵² Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), “Opening to Japan.”

⁵³ Jiaxin Zhong, *Japanese War Orphans: Abandoned Twice by the State* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 46.

⁵⁴ Robert Eford, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 382.

⁵⁵ Jiaxin Zhong, *Japanese War Orphans: Abandoned Twice by the State* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 51-52.

Chinese peasantry, which fit into the CCP's larger narrative of class struggle between exploitative landlords and helpless peasants. However, this class struggle narrative could also be interpreted differently by local communities, such as in the case of Sugawara, whose supposed crime during the Cultural Revolution was of being "the 'filial sons and obedient grandsons of the Japanese imperialists.'"⁵⁶ In his case, Sugawara was identified as the subjugator, rather than the subjugated. Despite government ideology, how war orphans were received by their community varied on a case-by-case basis.

Even if war orphans wanted to return to Japan, the tense political situation between China and Japan prevented them from doing so. In 1958 China closed diplomatic relations with Japan; during the same time, the Japanese cabinet under Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke adopted a "policy of hostility" towards China laced with suspicion of communist infiltration.⁵⁷ Diplomatic relations between China and Japan would not be re-established until 1972, effectively stranding the war orphans in China for much of their young adult life. However, despite these restrictions, many war orphans still dared to dream of one day seeing Japan again. "Even if I couldn't find my relatives," Aoki Misako said in her interview, "I still wanted to communicate with the government that I want to return. Because I'm Japanese. Disregarding everything else, there's lineage."⁵⁸

Return to Japan

Though Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei normalized the formal relationship between Japan and China in 1972, the two countries did not fully open to one

⁵⁶ Robert E. Fird, "Japan's 'War Orphans': Identification and State Responsibility," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 382

⁵⁷ Jiaxin Zhong, *Japanese War Orphans: Abandoned Twice by the State* (Routledge, 2021): pp. 55-56.

⁵⁸ Aoki Misako, 「中国残留邦人 ～帰国への強い思い 苦難を乗り越えて～ 青木 美沙子 終戦時1歳 大阪府」, interview by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, March 2019.

another until 1978, when Deng Xiaoping visited Japan and oversaw the signing of the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship.⁵⁹ With the re-establishment of diplomatic relationships came the opening of avenues to return to Japan for war orphans left behind in China; although there were orphans that sought to return to Japan or find their Japanese families prior, most attempts before 1972 had been unsuccessful.⁶⁰ Following the opening of relations, the first successful attempt to reunite war orphans with their families was in 1974, where Japanese volunteers collected letters and photographs from war orphans seeking their relatives and published them in the nationally circulated *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper.⁶¹ The massive outpouring of support from the Japanese civilian population contributed to highly publicized advertisements and national campaigns as well as government-sponsored “relative-seeking” tours of Japan beginning in 1981. Many war orphan supporters, it turned out, were ex-Manchurian colonists and veterans who empathized with the innocent children left behind, uniting across the political spectrum to advocate for repatriation.⁶² Hence the issue of war orphans was received warmly across Japan, soliciting widespread sympathy among national feelings of victimization.

The war orphans left in China were no longer children, and had since 1945 established roots of their own in China through their own careers and families. Some had familial obligations that prevented them from returning to Japan during the initial re-opening, whether it was elderly parents to care for or children to raise. Regardless, many war orphans chose to return to Japan for myriad reasons: some out of a desire to find their natal families, others in pursuit of identity and homeland, and finally some simply for economic opportunity. However, due to their cultural

⁵⁹ Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), “Opening to Japan.”

⁶⁰Robert Efird, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 369.

⁶¹Robert Efird, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 369.

⁶²Ibid, pp. 371.

differences, having been raised Chinese, as well as their language background (or lack thereof) in Japanese, many struggled to find employment and integrate into Japanese society. Often they would be relegated to hard labor jobs, if they could find any at all; even war orphans that accomplished the strenuous move were expected to live off meager 37,000 yen-per-month welfare payments post-retirement due to their late start working.⁶³ Compounding these hardships, the government placed the crux of caring for the repatriated people entirely on their biological families, who were predominantly from the rural prefectures the original Manchurian settler-colonists had emigrated from. These communities often were not equipped with the resources to help the orphans cross the cultural or linguistic barriers required to properly assimilate into Japan, contributing to the reluctance — and sometimes refusal — of many identified families to serve as guarantors for the returning orphans.⁶⁴

But what of blood? Even with the cultural and linguistic divide, many war orphans still identified themselves as Japanese based on their heritage. However, in the decades following Japan's defeat in the war, the boundaries on the concept of "Japaneseness" had narrowed dramatically, from what Morris-Suzuki describes as a transformation from "imperial citizenship" to "Japanese nationality."⁶⁵ In 1899 Japan passed its first Nationality Law, which identified a set criterion in order to be identified as a Japanese national; put simply, "Japaneseness" was inherited by blood, as determined by patriarchal standards. The Nationality Law passed by the Diet in 1950 did little to modify the 1899 legislation, but rather served as a point of reinforcement that postwar Japan was to be an "ethnically and socially homogeneous group of

⁶³ Robert Eford, "Japan's 'War Orphans': Identification and State Responsibility," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 365. This was in 2001 yen and would be about 300 USD.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 372.

⁶⁵ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Beyond Racism: Semi-Citizenship and Marginality in Modern Japan," *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015), pp. 74.

‘nationals’,” in accordance with the “idealized image” of a modern nation-state.⁶⁶ Compounding this intention was the 1947 implementation of an alien registration system by the American occupation authorities, which required Korean and Taiwanese residents in Japan — formerly defined as Japanese citizens, albeit a less privileged subclass, under the Japanese empire — to register as foreigners and carry identification cards, as well as the 1952 decision by the Japanese government to revoke the Japanese nationality of said ex-colonial subjects residing in Japan.⁶⁷ The *koseki* system, furthermore, which had once been used to create “states within a state” to encompass colonial subjects into the fold of Japanese nationality, was reworked once again, as without colonial subjects there was no need for a *gaichi koseki* registry.

Since Japanese nationality, as defined by the 1950 Diet legislation, was by blood, one would expect the war orphans to be accepted by law as legally Japanese. However, in 1959, under the Kishi cabinet’s implementation of the Special Measures to Unrepatriated Persons Act, 33,000 unrepatriated Japanese people in Manchuria were declared dead and purged from *koseki* registers, with their families offered about 30,000 yen to hold a funeral for each person.⁶⁸ Hence by *koseki*, which determined legally whether or not a person was Japanese, the war orphans were not Japanese because they no longer existed in the register. In order to be recognized as Japanese citizens by the government, biological relatives had to claim and sponsor orphans upon their return; for people who could not find their relatives or were refused by them, however, the path forward was unclear. Eventually, the process of registering oneself for *koseki* became available, but even then war orphans were still treated as lesser citizens: despite reinstating themselves in the *koseki* system, the Ministry of Justice still required all registered ‘unclaimed’ orphans “to

⁶⁶ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, “Beyond Racism: Semi-Citizenship and Marginality in Modern Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 35, no. 1 (2015), pp. 74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Robert E. Fird, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 374.

register as foreigners out of a concern that this group may also include some foreigners (i.e., non-Japanese).”⁶⁹ Given that the war orphans were already rigorously vetted by both the Chinese and Japanese governments, this requirement was described as “irrational pure-bloodism.” Indeed, as postwar conceptions of “Japaneseness” narrowed into an ethnically and culturally homogenous population, repatriated war orphans were relegated to the periphery of society and participation as second-class citizens. The callousness of this treatment can be comprehended only by the political intention behind it; to acknowledge the repatriated orphans as fully Japanese was to acknowledge the existence of the multi-ethnic empire that moved them in the first place, which undermined the present imagination of Japan as a perennially unique, homogenous nation.

Conclusion

Japan’s transition from a multi-ethnic empire to a homogenous nation in the wake of World War II was marked by a dramatic shift in the boundaries of Japanese nationality. For many ex-colonial colonial subjects and Japanese repatriates from abroad, living in postwar Japan was marked by a newfound marginalization to the fringes of Japanese society. One particular group that received such treatment was Japanese war orphans left behind in China at the end of World War II, who faced myriad social, cultural, and legal challenges upon returning to Japan. In the present day, 2,818 war orphans have been repatriated to Japan from China through the combined efforts of civilian advocates and national governments.⁷⁰ Conditions have improved too from the situations the earliest repatriates faced in the 1980s, as advocacy groups and communities formed in Japan and pressed the government for greater recognition and support. The continued

⁶⁹ Robert Efrid, “Japan’s ‘War Orphans’: Identification and State Responsibility,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 376.

⁷⁰ Sekiya Satoshi, “War orphans in Japan continue decades-long search for family,” NHK World-Japan, (March 31, 2021), <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1569/>. Numbers are as of 2021.

reluctance of the government to acknowledge the plight of — and the state responsibility towards — the war orphans, however, is indicative of the larger issues surrounding World War II that still persist today: questions of colonial and wartime responsibility, as well as acknowledgement of Japan's imperial past, continue to haunt modern politics and national consciousness. The story of the war orphans clearly illustrates the fact that empires and national borders are mutable, and every time they shift there are those that suffer the consequences. Ultimately, however, it must be stressed that this is not just a story about victims.

In her interview, Wakayama Takako speaks with urgency when asked to give advice to younger generations. “Listen to me!” she says. Her voice is soft but firm. “Don't let other people tell you what to think. You must have humanity! What are you going to do? What kind of person will you be? You should have thoughts of peace in your heart. Let all the world advance, and everyone in the world live well.”

Rather, very simply put, this is a story about people.

Appendix A



The two posters above were produced between 1932-1945 by Japanese-sponsored sources, and were intended for a Chinese-speaking audience in Manchuria. The poster on the left reads, in full: “May all people work hard to build a new paradise,” while the poster on the right reads, “Peace on Earth with Japanese, Chinese, and Manchurians working together.”⁷¹

⁷¹“Japanese Propaganda Posters,” Frank Mt. Pleasant Library of Special Collections and Archives, Chapman University Digital Commons, accessed April 8th, 2022 at https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/japanese_propaganda_posters/.

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