Japan: Abducted by Its Abductions Saga

By Asger Røjle Christensen

The murky circumstances surrounding the Cold War abductions of 13 Japanese citizens by North Korea have proven to be a major stumbling block to diplomatic progress in Northeast Asia.

After researching the issue, Asger Røjle Christensen finds the Japanese unwilling to discuss all aspects of the abductions openly, while North Korea refuses to come clean on what really happened to all the victims.

JAPAN HAS BEEN “abducted by the abduction issue,” the North Korean ambassador for relations with Japan told reporters in Tokyo in October 2010 as he outlined his country’s official view on the thorniest issue separating Pyongyang and Tokyo, that of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s.

“We have admitted the abductions and taken every possible and sincere measure to address them,” Song Il-ho told Japanese news agency Kyodo. “But Japan has only grown more and more suspicious and created all kinds of obstacles between the two countries ... I think relations will get better if Japan shifts even one-tenth of the attention it pays to the abductions to the settlement of the past.”

I am not a diplomat from any side. I am just a journalist from distant Denmark trying to understand a complicated issue, but sometimes I am inclined to agree with the ambassador. After several years of research, I published a book last year on one of the Japanese victims and her captors.

Bortfort I København — Japanske skæbner i Nordkorea (“Abducted in Copenhagen — Japanese destinies in North Korea”) is the story of Keiko Arimoto, who went for a supposed job interview with North Korean representatives and agents in the Danish capital in the summer of 1983 and the following day voluntarily flew to Pyongyang. At a summit with Japan’s Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, in 2002, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il acknowledged Keiko as one of 13 Japanese citizens that he admitted had been abducted. (It has long been widely believed that the true number may run into hundreds, but I will confine myself in this essay to the 13 acknowledged victims).

I am aware that many Japanese officials have tried to resolve this emotional issue, but the way Japanese society as a whole has reacted may be one reason why these terrible incidents that happened to a few people long ago remain unsettled. Instead, the abductions have for many years been allowed to hold East Asian diplomacy hostage. My book details the destinies of four people,
Yodogo” group of Japanese radicals known for the hijacker. at least, Yao identified them as the kidnappers in her 2002 book Shazui Shimatsu (“I Apologize”). The Japanese police believe this version, and it is the basis of an international arrest warrant for Abe issued through Interpol.

During two visits to Japan, I met authors, family members, diplomats, and journalists and I was able to paint a personal picture of the four main characters, none of whom I have met. The mystery starts in the famous Chinese restaurant where the job interview is alleged to have taken place. But contrary to a fictional crime novel, the main suspense is that gradually the reader’s doubts grow about how the events took place and whether it was four persons who were present. Faced with the events, I had hoped to get my book translated into Japanese but I was politely — and repeatedly — turned down. I was usually told that there were too many North Korean books on the market or that it would simply be “quite difficult” to publish the book in Japan. But some publishers were more straightforward, telling me the abduction issue was "highly sensitive," and that even a single word or phrase could cause the victims’ families or their supporters to react negatively. Publishers generally stay away from the issue to avoid trouble.

Keiko herself and the three supposed captors she met at that fateful “job interview” in a Chinese restaurant in Copenhagen 30 years ago. None of the players were huge personalities, or particularly good or bad; they simply became pawns in a cynical Cold War game, with the three abductors performing remarkably cynical acts themselves.

I researched the fates of Keiko and the three conspirators, Kim Yu Chol, a North Korean diplomat and agent; Kimihiro Abe, a member of the “Yodogo” group of Japanese radicals known for hijacking a Japanese passenger jet to Pyongyang in 1970; and Megumi Yao, the wife of another Yodogo hijacker. At least, Yao identified them as the kidnappers in her 2002 book Shazui Shimatsu (“I Apologize”). The Japanese police believe this version, and it is the basis of an international arrest warrant for Abe issued through Interpol.

Keiko's unfortunate parents and the bitterness they feel after many years of struggle. I tried to convey that. However, when I met representatives of the North Korean community in Japan and the Kyuen Renraku Center, an activist group that serves as an unofficial contact office for the radical Yodogo group, I honestly tried to understand their position as well. But is hard to discuss or debate the abduction issue in Japan, other than through official channels. It is extremely difficult to get new information to the public or to introduce fresh angles on the issue as a whole. According to my sources, several capable journalists from the Japanese media are working hard to dig out new information, but their editors are extremely cautious. That might be part of the reason why many Japanese, especially young Japanese, have lost interest in the issue. It is always just the same old story, again and again. Nothing new ever seems to come to light.

Yoji Gomi, one of the most experienced Japanese journalists in this field, who had his interviews with Kim Jong Nam, the older brother of the new North Korean leader, published recently by the conservative Bungeishunju publishing house, explained: “We cannot comment freely on this issue these days.” Gomi elaborated in an e-mail interview with me: “A politician said a few years ago that the abduction issue is only a crime, but the missiles and nuclear bombs which North Korea has made are national security issues. Therefore, we should tackle the security issues first. After this remark, the people who care about the abduction issue criticized this politician. They denounced him for making light of Japanese lives.” However, Yoji said he does not believe new pieces of significant information are going unpublishied because of cautious editors. “Actually, there is no new information about the abductees,” he said in his e-mail. “Information about Japanese abductees must be top secret for North Korea.”

Kotsumi Nishimoto, the editor at Bungeishunju behind the Kim Jong Nam book, insisted that news items are not being withheld from the Japanese public. Journalists, he said, “are always eager to get a scoop.” Political sensitivity is not stifling debate, Nishimoto said, that is just a claim made by “those who are close to North Korea, left-wing people.”

Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki, an expert on Japan-Korea relations at Australia National University, follows the abduction issue closely and says emotion dominates rational discussion. “The issue has had a strange and important effect on the whole nature of media debate in Japan,” she said in an e-mail. “The emotions surrounding the issue ran so high that media felt unable to freely debate certain aspects of the abduction problem.”

Rumor and speculation that Keiko and others are still alive and are still working as brainwashed secret agents for North Korea appears in the Japanese press from time to time.
The Japanese express continuous furor about 13 millions of Koreans were forced to move to Japan in the 1930s and 1940s to work as forced laborers. This is the ‘big abduction.’

demanding that North Korea take actions such as immediately returning the victims and providing a full account of those victims whose safety is unknown, based on the premise that all victims whose safety is unknown are still alive.”

Morris-Suzuki said it could be difficult to challenge such ideas. “Many Japanese journalists privately doubt that this is true, but feel unable to express their doubts in public because their editors fear a public backlash.” That is certainly my impression. At first instance, one might reasonably assume that Keiko and the other seven officially recognized abduction victims who never returned are now dead. Maybe not exactly in the way or at the time that North Korea claimed at the 2002 summit, but still dead.

Shigeru Yoshizawa, an editor at TV Asahi who has worked on the issue for many years, is inclined to that view. However, if any of the “eight dead” are alive, he thinks the most likely survivor is Keiko. “She might be alive,” he told me during an interview in 2010. “In fact, she was abducted by a Japanese group. There is no reason to kill her. North Korea might blame the Japanese group.”

Rumor and speculation that Keiko and others are still alive and are still working as brainwashed secret agents for North Korea appear in the Japanese press from time to time. “I suppose that the abducted people have already been brainwashed. Still, they must be working as agents or executives,” Bungeishunjū editor Kotsuma Nishimoto told me by e-mail. “It will only be after a revolution that the North Korean government releases them.”

While there has been no definitive news on the issue for some time, a number of journalists keep trying to solve the issue. One of them lowered his voice and told me during my research that he knew that Keiko was alive and lived in an apartment in Pyongyang; he just lacked a courageous source inside North Korea who could obtain a sample of her DNA for him. From time to time, there are rumors that one or several of the abductedees have been seen alive in North Korea, and each time this happens Japanese politicians emerge to quote these rumors as a way to keep the issue on the agenda.

In contrast, others say that the Foreign Ministry knows that at least some of the officially alive abductedees have simply died, but they dare not say anything for fear of public opinion. In the most widely reported case, well-known journalist and television host Soichiro Tahara in April 2009 said on TV Asahi that Keiko Arimoto and Megumi Yokota, another of the abductedees, had died, basing his report on a diplomatic source at the Foreign Ministry. In the face of public anger, both Tahara and TV Asahi were forced to issue a public apology a month later.

This was, however, not enough to avoid more controversy. Keiko’s parents filed a civil lawsuit against the TV host, seeking compensation for the pain he had caused them. He was ordered by the Kobe District Court to pay one million yen ($13,000) in damages. The judge said that while the remarks by Tahara “deserve to be protected as political speech, they are incorrect, and there were no reasons for him to believe the content was correct.” The judge went on to say that Tahara was at fault because he “damaged the feelings of the plaintiffs, who hope their child would be alive.”

Tahara paid the damages and apologized publicly in front of the courthouse, but the incident seriously damaged his career, according to Morris-Suzuki — and there was more to come. A “human rights panel” established by the Japanese media concluded that Tahara’s words were “undocumented” and “inappropriate.” Critics have said he was systematically silenced. “The resultant process of self-censorship has had a dampening effect on free media debate in Japan, which has affected other areas of political debate as well as discussions directly related to the abduction issue,” said Morris-Suzuki in an e-mail.

During my research, I encountered several examples of such self-censorship, including an interview I conducted with a lawyer who represents several members of the Yodogo group. The interview was also covered by a TV crew from national broadcaster NHK, which apparently found the oddity of a Danish journalist traveling to Japan to dig out this old story a good story in itself. The lawyer, Kazuko Kawaguchi, thought the presence of the NHK crew would help her reach the Japanese public with a version of the truth they would normally not hear. Kawaguchi argued that she could get fugitive Kimihiro Abe, who is accused of kidnapping Keiko, acquitted in a Japanese court because of what she called the flawed testimony of Megumi Yao from 2002. Looking into the camera, she said, “We feel that our words are never reported in either the Japanese or foreign media.” She turned to me and added, “You come over here — but they never interview us. I will guarantee you that they will not use these recordings.”

She was right. Television footage of the interview was never broadcast. The NHK journalist later explained to me that his editor found the lawyer’s arguments too vague and unconvincing. That editor might very well be right, but this was an opportunity to hear a different voice on a subject of national and international significance and it was not deemed worthy of any airtime. Why not air it and then ask an official source to comment? That’s a story.

This state of over-caution in the media has led many outside observers to agree with the North Korean diplomat that the Japanese really have been abducted by the abduction issue. “In my opinion, the abduction cases are incidents that are just too ‘good’ not to be used, by the Japanese right wing in particular,” Said Geir Helgesen, the director of the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen.

DERAILING THE SIX-PARTY TALKS

The abduction issue has, of course, had a major impact on the Six-Party talks on the North Korean nuclear program. In the years after the 2002 Pyongyang-Tokyo summit, the talks took place in Beijing from time to time, and every time the other five parties — the United States, China, Russia, and the two Koreas — sat down to discuss the deadly serious agenda of the nuclear threat, Japan raised its hand and demanded to have the abduction issue discussed at every meeting, which was irritating not only to North Korea but also to the Chinese hosts and everybody else present. Even Japan’s close ally the US found it difficult to keep a straight face. When the Six-Party Talks met a total impasse after the last round in 2007, it was hardly Japan’s fault alone. However, the Japanese had certainly done little to avoid it.

Setting aside the immediate nuclear issue, Japan’s obsession with the abductions borders on the absurd. The Japanese express continuous furor about 13 individuals when the fact is that millions of Koreans were forced to move to Japan.
in the 1930s and 1940s to work as forced laborers. This is the “big abduction.”

Wikileaks in 2010 published secret diplomatic notes on the issue and it came to light that a Chinese diplomat as late as 2009 told an American colleague: “The Japanese obsession with the abduction issue reminded him of the old Chinese proverb about the man who was too weak to make something work, but yet strong enough to destroy it.” I understand this criticism of the Japanese hysteria, but I wonder if other countries would not respond in much the same way if their citizens were the ones being kidnapped. Basically, there is no point in being irritated with Japan. The tensions around the abduction issue will not disappear anytime soon, because the human appeal of the issue is too strong.

ALL TOO HUMAN

I remember clearly the scene when the five surviving abductees returned to Japan in October 2002. The whole country was watching. My wife, who is Japanese, and I were sitting in our living room in Denmark following the event on satellite TV along with millions of Japanese. There they were: the abductees, with Kim Il Sung badges on their jackets, stepped out of the plane and set foot on Japanese soil for the first time in 24 years. They looked more than a little perplexed.

A few days earlier, many Japanese had been still uncertain about whether to believe the abduction stories. Now, everybody sat glued to their television screens for hours. The abduction problem had become a common cause for all Japanese people. It transcended politics and diplomacy. “It would be a mistake to see the astonishingly powerful media response simply as a product of political pressure,” Morris-Suzuki wrote in an article in 2011. “As well as being terror violations of human rights, the abductions were events that readily tapped subliminal fears.

Every parent’s worst nightmare is the fear of their child’s disappearance. The stories of the abductees, plucked from mundane existences in quiet regions of Japan in such extraordinary circumstances, evoked both fascination and anger. The media and Japanese public opinion reacted to the story with an outpouring of emotion which few other events in Japanese history have evoked.”

This issue has had many victims: the captives and their families, plus the captors (who in some ways were victims themselves of political abduction) and a number of politicians and diplomats.

Many have seen their dreams shattered and their careers derailed. Considering the story’s unique emotional appeal, it is easy to understand the strong influence the abductions have had on East Asian politics. You do not need to be Japanese to understand that.

The fact is the abduction issue is far from over. But why does North Korea seem to be prolonging the agony?

WHERE IS THE TRUTH?

In 2002, Kim Jong Il took the painful step of acknowledging the abductions and apologizing. The consequences have been enormous, but the humiliation is public and the embarrassment remains, even many years later. Why not tell Japan and the world what you know about the eight remaining abductees and provide the necessary documentation, so that all parties can move forward?

I posed that question to an open-minded young diplomat in the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Does North Korea still have something to hide? Is it that they don’t really know what happened? Or does Pyongyang still expect to use revelations about the eight in some future diplomatic deal with Japan? The young diplomat smiled and replied: “All three explanations may well be true simultaneously.”

In response to the same question, Morris-Suzuki said: “Like everyone else, I can only speculate on this.” She told me in an e-mail: “The Japanese media and abduction support groups argue that all the remaining abductees are still alive, but are in important positions or possess some kind of secret knowledge about North Korea, so the North Korean government is unwilling to allow them to return to Japan. However, another logical supposition would be that some (or even possibly all) of the remaining abductees are dead, but died in circumstances that the North Korean government is unwilling to disclose, and that North Korean authorities therefore created fictionalized stories about the circumstances of their deaths.”

Experts interviewed for this article tended to agree that the only way to solve the issue is to dramatically improve Tokyo-Pyongyang relations. “If the Japanese government and media are truly concerned about not creating a similar tense situation between Japan and North Korea as in the past, when the abductions took place, they should do what is necessary to bring North Korea in from the cold,” Geir Helgesen suggested.

Morris-Suzuki said this could be done “by initially focusing on other issues” than the abductions. “Since early this year, the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross societies have been in negotiations about the return to Japan of the remains of Japanese who died in North Korea during and immediately after the colonial period. If agreements could be reached on such issues, that might eventually open the door to improved relations, creating an atmosphere in which further progress could be made on the abduction issue,” she said.

Negotiating with North Korea is not easy, however. “When some parts of the North Korean governing system are given a green light to negotiate, they have to deliver. A breakthrough that brings no results or negative results will only strengthen those in the system who all along were skeptical,” Helgesen explained.

Anyway, everybody seems to agree that the way forward is to work on the diplomatic front and create trust between the two governments. Only then can both sides move away from the current stalemate. “Otherwise North Korea has to collapse,” the veteran journalist Yoji Gomi harshly suggested.

I agree that the human appeal of this issue is so strong that the issue cannot be solved by just waiting for the Japanese to come to their senses and start talking about something else. The issue won’t be solved before a credible truth emerges about what happened to all the abductees, no matter how painful it must be for both the Japanese families and the North Korean authorities. Other issues might disappear from public attention as time goes by, but not this one. It will not simply be forgotten.

Progress is possible, especially with a new regime in North Korea. But it won’t be easy. In the meantime, it is no help at all for the media to not dare to tell what they actually know — however understandable the caution might be. That can only prolong the agony even more.

Asger Røjle Christensen has followed affairs in Japan and Asia for 30 years. He is currently editor of the online front pages at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation and serves as senior fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.