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# **A WORLD WITHOUT AGENCY: THE ABSENCE OF FREE WILL IN TESSA MORRIS-SUZUKI'S *EXODUS TO NORTH KOREA***

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Tessa Morris-Suzuki's *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War* is a travelogue-style attempt to tell the story behind the mass movement of Korean residents of Japan to North Korea. The book aims to explain the institutional forces behind the movement of thousands of Koreans, predominantly from the southern provinces of the Korean peninsula, to North Korea, a region where they had no relatives or roots. Morris-Suzuki musters evidence from a variety of sources to present a story in which the Japanese Red Cross spearheaded the effort to start a repatriation movement, enlisting the support of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and North Korea, as well as documenting the active indifference of the United States and South Korea.

One of the central questions raised by the text is that of whether the vast majority of ethnic Korean residents of Japan who left the country for North Korea between the years of 1955 and 1967 did so of their own free will. This question is asked throughout the book by elements of the ICRC, the US government and finally by Morris-Suzuki herself. A close reading of the text presents us not with a definitive answer of whether those who went to North Korea did so of their own free will, but rather a repudiation of the entire concept of free will. It is stated in the book that in order to be sure that Koreans in Japan had chosen to go to North Korea of their own free will, they would have to have been provided with the means of a material livelihood in Japan that would take them out of the range of desperation. Since many of the Koreans were indeed poor, this is an impossible counterfactual. Morris-Suzuki's attempt to determine the extent to which free will played a role in history succeeds only in laying out a theory of human action in which the concept of free will is steadily encroached upon until, finally, it is circumscribed into oblivion. Not content with merely denying the "returnees" of their free will, Morris-Suzuki unwittingly tells a mechanistic tale in which every actor is so bound by circumstances as to render their every move deterministically dictated from the outside.

It would serve as a solid groundwork for the rest of this essay to start with the clearest example in the text, that of the Korean residents of Japan. Although Morris-Suzuki does not dwell on the ways in which they had come to live in Japan, it is explained that “one quarter of a million Korean laborers had entered Japan ‘by enlistment’ and that nearly 900,000 others had been enlisted in either the army or the wartime workforce between 1942 and 1945 (p. 194).” 600,000, the number of Korean residents of Japan, is cited throughout the book, of which a large portion is assumed to come from this pressed labor pool of “involuntary labor recruits.” The Korean residents of Japan are thus set out as not being in control of the very fact of their existence in Japan. The book places a repeated emphasis on the importance of Chongryeon propaganda and worsening economic difficulties for the Korean population of Japan in forming the popular desire to “return” to North Korea. Morris-Suzuki suggests obliquely, but pointedly does not state, that there may have been a desire for repatriation to Korea that prefigured the emergence of the propaganda. In her formulation, those lured to North Korea responded mechanistically like the air in a steam engine: put the heat on and they will begin to look for a way out of the boiler. Morris-Suzuki’s Koreans made the voyage out of Niigata for a variety of reasons, but each of them was responding not to a free choice made freely, but rather a number of varying stimuli: financial pressure, lack of opportunities and the desire to not live as a foreigner in Japan. Those who Morris-Suzuki interviews who actually made the trip continue to be moved not by free will but by circumstance. One refugee who ends up in Japan is driven to leave North Korea at the behest of others, after being driven over the border with China by brute hunger. In no sense were they ever free: they were, from the moment of their births, hostages to fate.

The book also centers on another hostage to fate, Inoue Masutaro. Inoue, the product of a western education and the Japanese Red Cross representative who fervently pushed for the repatriation of Koreans to North Korea, is first introduced to us as a scholarly type who is “no good at forming social relationships”; a “foreign born outsider” who was outshone by his younger brother. Inoue’s career appears to have been in a sorry state when he was given the post at the Red Cross, having been bumped around from position to position while his cohort’s stars rose. Morris-Suzuki makes feeble attempts to ascribe some internal motive for the zeal with which Inoue attacked the repatriation issue, but she also provides ample evidence to suggest that Inoue’s actions were simply an attempt to carry out the political will of Japanese politicians, plain and simple. The text paints a picture of him as a frantic, nerve-addled hyperactive case who tried the patience of those around him, further underlying the lack of control that Inoue had even over his own self.

The ICRC was also so bound by circumstances that it was unable to act on its own best counsel. Morris-Suzuki does a good job explaining how the ICRC’s lack of expertise and manpower, coupled with the fact that they were consistently fed lines of political propaganda by Inoue Masutaro, led them to get involved in the repatriation scheme. The ICRC attempted to infuse the repatriation process with the

precepts of the Red Cross, but in the end appeared to have failed, again because they were simply unable to muster up the required resources and unwilling to go against the political will of the Japanese government. The ICRC functionaries discussed in the book appear to be so busy, distracted and distant from the scene of the action as to be completely incapable of exerting their own will. In the end, the ICRC itself approves the plan “without enthusiasm,” a nod to the complete impotence of the ICRC.

Intriguingly, Morris-Suzuki superficially presents the hands-off role of the United States as a form of insidious strategic abstention. It is not difficult to assume that the US would make its policy choice known in an issue as contentious as repatriation, but still Suzuki manages to reveal that the US itself was so bound by circumstances as to be completely immobilized. The US, after all, had been conducting similar repatriation activities elsewhere, leaving it in no position to object to the North Korean repatriation project. The issue was the only one upon which both the Japanese left and the Liberal Democrat Party agreed, meaning that the US faced negative repercussions were it to interrupt the process. Here we see the US, like everyone else in Morris-Suzuki’s deterministic clockwork world, trapped by a web of circumstances and doomed to make the most prudent and rational choice presented to it given the information at hand.

The world presented in Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s work is one in which free will and free choice cannot exist as she has defined them. People make the best choices that they can based on the imperfect information that they are given and the circumstances they find themselves in, but can the best choice among a severely limited set of poorly informed options even be called free choice in Morris-Suzuki’s eyes? When only one option appears viable, how can one be said to “choose” it? The ultimate expression of this is Jo-Il, the baby born to returnees on their way to North Korea. Morris-Suzuki knows nothing about the child other than the mere fact of his existence, but he is constantly invoked throughout the book to represent the ultimate powerlessness of the human condition. If the central question of Korean history is one of agency, Morris-Suzuki has done an amazing job of leveling the playing field, not by ascribing agency to her Korean subjects, but by removing it from everyone else.

**PEAR**