

The Invitation-Only Zone: The True Story of North Korea's Abduction Project, by Robert S. Boynton. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2016, 271 pp., US\$26.00, ISBN: 978-0374175849 (hardcover)

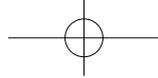
Aggrieved: Japan in the Wake of the North Korean Abductions Episode

NYU journalism professor Robert S. Boynton approaches the several challenging questions that surround North Korea's programmatic abduction of Japanese citizens in the late 1970s and early 1980s with a *shinnichi's* (Japanophile's) leanings and a journalist's ethics. That's not an entirely promising combination given that the largest of his chosen questions—that of North Korea's motive—is much more a function of DPRK mindset than of Japanese outlook. Further, his getting at the questions that can only be answered by the repatriated abductees—How were they treated? What were the protocols of their brainwashing? How did they survive? What happened to those who allegedly didn't survive?—while observing the journalist's imperative to verify his sources' testimony is also a sketchy proposition, given the restored five abductees' transparently post-brainwashed confusions, not to mention their several imaginable motives for lying or altering their stories: trauma, shame, fear of being branded traitors, concern for others still trapped in the DPRK, etc. On the other hand, as a *shinnichi*, Boynton's ears are sensitive to the sensibilities of the Japanese, the people for whom the *nachi mondai* (kidnapping problem) has mattered most in recent years, if not mattered exclusively.¹

Though he might have begun some three decades earlier,² Boynton starts his abductions narrative in the fall of 1977, when Japanese citizens of no discernible stripe began to go mysteriously missing in the northwest shore

1. As I explain below, we do well to remember that the North Koreans have been kidnapping foreign citizens since the late 1940s. Indeed, in the half century that has followed the Korean War's stalemating, they have whisked away far more South Koreans than Japanese. Also they have kidnapped other Asians and Eastern Europeans. For an excellent comparison of Japan's vocalized and South Korea's muted public responses to their respective citizens' abductions by the DPRK, see Samuels 2010b.

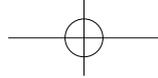
2. See note 1.



areas of Honshu and from the beaches of nearby Sado Island. The disappeared included a vacationing, 52-year-old security guard, an unmarried 29-year-old female office worker, a 13-year-old girl on her way home from badminton practice, and two sets of unmarried couples in their twenties. So odd and so otherwise inexplicable were the disappearances that Japanese authorities and journalists at the time attributed them to the various categories of financial trouble and romantic impulse that sometimes cause people to make themselves scarce. Another theory held that they had been swept up by aliens (Callahan, January 10, 2016). And, thirdly, the least credible guess proposed that they had been kidnapped by the North Koreans. However, this last rumor, whenever it was broached, was immediately dismissed as just another of various nationalist groups' dubious anti-Communist alarms (Feffer, July 2, 2008).

Meanwhile, as Boynton explains, the North Korea to which these abductees were taken was already playing host to other foreigners lured and/or waylaid there. The prior marooned included the nine Japanese Red Army Faction members who in late March of 1970 had hijacked Japan Airline Flight 351, Tokyo to Fukuoka (nicknamed "Yodogo"). Hoping ultimately to get to Castro's Cuba, they told the pilot to take them to Pyongyang, where without difficulty they were received by the Kim Il-sung government. However, instead of sending them on to Havana, the North Koreans insisted that they first acquire a deeper knowledge of North Korean ideology (*juche*) and language. Indeed, they were so long marooned in North Korea that in May of 1977, just months before the inaugural kidnappings in Japan, as a solution to their restlessness, the nine hijackers were married by Kim Il-sung himself to nine Japanese women whose entrance into North Korea remains to this day a mystery (save that many of them had participated in the many *juche* study groups then popular among Japan's disaffected young people). In short, when the absolutely innocent abductees of '77-78 began to arrive, these semi-abducted Yodogo families were living just twelve miles outside of Pyongyang in a fenced-off subdivision called "The Japanese Village of Restoration." For their part, the '77-78 abductees were placed in their own gated community, another fenced-in neighborhood on the outskirts of Pyongyang called "the invitation-only zone." Hence, Boynton's title.

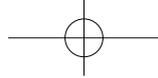
Among the earlier arrivals, too, there were at least four American soldiers who for a mix of reasons—fear of being sent to Vietnam, pending court-martials—had between 1962 and 1965 separately gone AWOL on the DMZ's south side, wandered across into the North, and there been granted "asylum."



In 1978, the second year of the kidnappings in Japan, the soldiers, like the Red Army mutineers, were also given wives—in their cases, a Lebanese, a Romanian, and a Thai woman, each separately lured into the DPRK with variously false promises. Charles Jenkins, the last of the soldiers to defect, and the most famous by virtue of his memoir *The Reluctant Communist: My Desertion, Court-Martial, and Forty-Year Imprisonment in North Korea*, was not given a wife until 1980, when he was encouraged to court Hitomi Soga, the 21-year-old daughter of the mother-daughter pair kidnapped in 1978 from Sado Island.

It was in 1978, too, that Kim Jong-il, heir presumptive to his father's office but then the country's chief of intelligence and most avid film fan, lured separately to Hong Kong and from there to Pyongyang, the ROK's most famous celebrity couple at the time, the actress Choi Eun-hee and her director husband Shin Sang-ok. Kim's plan was for them to educate his insular and sycophantic cadre of scriptwriters, artists, and technicians in the art of film making—a thing that, after some five years of re-education, the two consented to do, and to some perceivable extent actually succeeded in doing. Eventually, in 1986, taking advantage of the liberties granted them as a result of their success, the pair escaped.

And, lastly, not long after the '77-78 kidnappings on Japan's shoreline, there would arrive in the DPRK, an unknown number of young Japanese nationals who had been traveling and studying in Europe. Boynton tells what's known of the stories of two, of Toru Ishioka and Keiko Arimoto. The first, Ishioka, was a young male student traveling in Spain in 1980, when a pair of Red Army Faction wives apparently befriended him, and suddenly he disappeared. The second, a university student and au pair, was similarly lured in 1983 from London, to Copenhagen, to Pyongyang by another of the Red Army Faction wives. Little is known of the lives of these two in North Korea, though an action taken by Ishioka in 1988 was key to Japan's "discovery" of North Korea's abductions program and, thereby, to the vexed necessity of its dealing with the matter. Briefly, in that year, Toru's parents received the sketchiest of letters from their eight-years-lost son with an unexplained picture of him, Keiko, another Japanese abductee and an unidentified baby. The Ishiokas got in touch with Keiko's parents, and, next, the two sets of parents appealed to their government for help. They got nowhere. Worse still, sometime in the mid-1990s, when it had become transparent that many of Japan's disappeared had been abducted by the North Koreans, Keiko's parents were warned by



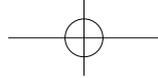
an exasperated Japanese official “that their persistence might endanger their daughter. ‘If we ask the North Koreans about her, she’ll be in danger. That country is capable of anything” (p. 167). Indeed, the next notice of any kind that the Ishioka and Arimoto families received came on September 17, 2002, when North Korea, in its belated admission of guilt in the abductions episode, handed over to the Koizumi administration the supposed death certificates of the eight abductees whom it wished to declare dead. Keiko’s and Toru’s certificates were among them. Their papers said that they had died of carbon monoxide poisoning just weeks after the parents of Toru received his 1988 missive. Transparently, in other words, they had been murdered for his having surreptitiously reached out to his parents without his keepers’ permission.

However, Toru’s message to his parents was not the event that forced on the Japanese government an indisputable awareness of their citizens’ having been plucked by the North Koreans out of their lives as if their wills, rights, persons, and nationalities were of no more consequence than those of fish. The event that made this infuriating realization inescapably public, explains Boynton, was the mid-air explosion of Korean Air Flight 858 on November 28, 1987. Originating in Baghdad and headed to Seoul, the exploded ship’s manifest revealed that two supposed Japanese tourists, Shinichi and Mayumi Hachiya, had disembarked in Abu Dhabi at the conclusion of the flight’s first leg. They were apprehended in Bahrain, where the elder of the two succeeded in getting a suicide cigarette into his mouth before the arresting Bahraini police understood what he was doing. His junior colleague, the 25-year-old Mayumi, was not quite so quick. A fast-thinking Bahraini policewoman knocked her cigarette from her lips before it could complete its deadly business. Mayumi was revived, transported to Seoul and interrogated. Her real name was Kim Hyon-hui, she eventually told the interrogators. She and her deceased partner were North Korean agents. In the year prior to the Seoul Olympics, he and she had been tasked with bringing down KAL 858 as a means of thwarting the Olympics’ success. Importantly as regards the abductees, she also told them that one portion of her training in espionage had consisted in Japanese language instruction given to her by a Japanese woman who told her that she had been kidnapped several years before. “The description of the tutor matched that of a twenty-two-year-old bar hostess and mother of two who had disappeared from Tokyo in 1978. For the first time, the Japanese government had direct evidence of the abductions,” says Boynton (p. 139).



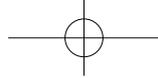
But what would they do with that evidence? As the Ishioka and Arimoto families' experience suggests, for more than a decade they did very little that had any positive effect. Whenever, from time to time in those ten years, Japanese diplomats brought up the issue with their North Korean counterparts, the latter would either leave the room in protest or insist on recalling the hundreds of thousands of Koreans the Japanese had abducted during the colonial and wartime eras. And so would end the conversation. This curious stalemate would persist until 1997 when Japanese negotiators suddenly substituted in the dialogue the phrase "missing persons" for "abductees," and the North Koreans responded by agreeing to investigate the whereabouts of the vanished. Then a year later, the soon-to-become prime minister Yoshiro Mori made yet another ingenious, face-saving proposal. Explains Boynton, "What if North Korea moved any 'missing persons' to cities such as Beijing, Paris, or Bangkok? Then they could come forward and claim they had been living there all along" (p. 181). This proposal seemed to interest the North Koreans; however, before it could be acted upon, its architect, Mori, by now Prime Minister, was, for reasons other than the abductions issue, forced to resign from office. Thus, the abductions dilemma was passed in 2001 to his successor in the Prime Minister's chair, Junichiro Koizumi. He received the vexing issue with just this one promising side note—an understanding that the North Koreans were for reasons recondit looking to put the matter behind them.

Koizumi got his chance to handle the problem at the first Kim-Koizumi Summit of September 17, 2002. At that one-day meeting hosted by Kim in Pyongyang, the large ambition of both parties was the initiation of measures that would normalize the two country's diplomatic relations, something that had not been done in the almost sixty years that had succeeded both Japan's defeat in World War II and the partitioning of the Korean peninsula. For the North Koreans, who earlier in the year had been denounced as an "axis of evil" state by President George W. Bush, the normalization of relations with its neighbor would, among other things, represent no small degree of nation-state legitimacy in the international forum and, along with that legitimacy, the likelihood of increased international aid. For the Japanese, meanwhile, the achieving of normalization without the Americans' official involvement in the process would represent something of a coming-of-age moment in its post-World War II history, for prior to these negotiations Japan had steadfastly maintained a non-assertive, reactive posture in international affairs, ceding—



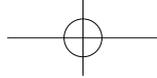
in a policy called *gaiatsu*—its confrontational diplomacies to the Americans, especially when those diplomacies involved the East Asian and Pacific states it had once colonized (Angel 2001, xiii-xv). At the summit's morning session both sides put their insurances on the table. The North Koreans wanted an apology from Japan for its enslavement of the peninsula in the colonial era; also it was asking for reparations. The Japanese were also requiring two things: first, they demanded that the North Koreans address their country's security concerns in the light of the DPRK's provocative 1998 attempt to fly its Paektusan-1 missile over Japanese airspace; and, second, they demanded that the North Koreans come clean on the by-now transparent problem of abducted Japanese citizens. In one of his book's best chapters, Boynton describes the perversity of the "confession" that Koizumi received. Thirteen was the number of abductees, said a DPRK communique received by the Japanese just moments before the start of the summit. Eight were now dead, five alive, continued the communique.

So there Koizumi had his confession. But what a perverse admission of wrong-doing it was. Eight deceased was far more than the Prime Minister had anticipated going into the meeting. How would the admission of eight dead, five alive, and several other credible abduction cases disavowed play back home? Not well. Further, how would Koizumi's feigning amity, signing papers, and smiling for photographs with the perpetrator of such an offense to his nation's sovereignty play, should he go forward with the summit? This would play still worse. Clearly, the circumstances seemed to compel the Prime Minister to cancel the meeting and go home. Indeed, that's what Koizumi threatened to do in the summit's first hour if he didn't get from his host an apology. Such was the low, low, face-saving bar that the Japanese Prime Minister in his compromised position demanded Kim clear if the summit's business was to go forward. And, again, he got from the Dear Leader, not a helpful version of what he required, but a perverse variant. Said Kim in his afternoon statement: "Decades of adversarial relations between our two countries provided the background of this incident. It is my understanding that this incident was initiated by special mission organizations in the 1970s and 1980s driven by blindly motivated patriotism and misguided heroism" (p. 195). In other words, Kim couched his apology in a galling reminder of Japan's imperial over-reach in the first half of the 20th century. Further, he disavowed both his own personal and his government's direct involvement in the kidnappings. Neither he nor his state had abducted the innocent Japanese citizens, but, instead, a maverick, rogue



faction of his administration had executed the abductions. Indeed, Kim said, “As soon as their scheme and deeds were brought to my attention, those who were responsible were punished.” Lastly, Dear Leader Kim apologized for “the regrettable conduct of those people” (p. 195).

Such was the “apology” Koizumi received—a few measured expressions of regret sandwiched between a scapegrace disavowal of the apologizer’s responsibility for the crime his underlings had committed and a reminder of Japan’s far more egregious misdeeds in times past. Historians are still arguing over whether Koizumi did right or wrong in going forward with the summit and in signing the Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration of 2002 with its pledge of an “early realization of normalization of diplomatic relations” (“Japan-DPRK Pyongyang Declaration” 2014). In any event, to his clear credit, one month later, Koizumi succeeded in bringing back to Japan the five surviving abductees identified by the North Koreans, and, nineteen months further on, he secured the release of their children. And, thus, from the North Korean perspective, so ended the “regrettable misfortune” of the abductions saga. However, as Boynton’s last chapters suggest, the incident continues to do more than rankle with the Japanese: “Within a week [of the Declaration’s signing], public support of Koizumi’s government plunged from 81 percent to 44 percent” (p. 215). Credible for many Japanese was the rumor that their LDP government had known about the abductions for longer than it let on and was now playing feckless catch-up in the security game it had lost years before. Further, the Koizumi administration’s secondary and tertiary efforts to get the matter right all came in far shy of the Japanese people’s expectations and, thus, stoked rather than quelled the public’s discontent. Though, for example, the people were briefly cheered later in the year by the return of the five abductees whose survival North Korea had acknowledged, they were infuriated when they came to understand that the five had been accorded no more than a two-week visit, had been required to leave their children behind, and, as a result of the latter, had been compelled to speak positively about their captors. Nor did either their government’s assertive refusal to return the abductees at the end of the fortnight or its negotiating the release of the other family members at a second summit in 2004 satisfy popular sentiment. As far as the Japanese were concerned, their government had permanently disgraced itself in its toothless dealings with North Korea in the long half-century that had preceded the abductions, and now it was time, not to normalize relations with its delusional

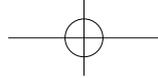


neighbor, but to make it pay for its barbaric offenses. Boynton records, too, the ambivalent, fatalistic, and staunchly pacifistic notes that more than faintly sounded in every and all vituperative expression of the public's post-9/17 outrage—notes that are part and parcel of its enduring post-WW II mindset—also, however, as do most observers of contemporary Japan, he emphasizes the grievousness of the abductions issue in the contemporary Japanese psyche.³

His book tells us, then, that the limits of Japan's quiescent posture in the enduring post-World War II era that two decades into the millennium continues to be Asia's basic reality were tested by the abductions incident. This is a valuable notification in the midst of the second Abe administration when the largest check on his party's militaristic brand of nationalism is thought to be the public's reluctance to repeat its World War II experience (Lewis and Gpover, August 30, 2015). Boynton's text also wants to tell us that the tenor of the Japanese response to the abductions—outrage seasoned with resignation—is symptomatic of the Japanese public's tiring, post-Imperial, post-War, and vexed regard for all things Korean. To explain this fatigue, he devotes an early chapter of his book to the Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula in the Imperial era—a colonization subscribed by racial theories of Korean-Japanese kinship—and he devotes another, almost antithetical chapter to the repatriation between 1959 and 1984 of some 93,000 ethnic-Korean residents of Japan ("Zainichi Koreans," as they are called) to the DPRK. Mobilized to move westward by Japan's stripping them of their Japanese citizenship in 1952 and by Kim Il-sung's subsequent Cabinet Order 53 of 1956 inviting them to come "home,"⁴ these Zainichi Koreans emigrated into a ghastly, nightmarish dystopia many times worse than the ghettoized lives they had left behind in Japan. Alarums of the hellishness of their DPRK experience—frequently heard in the early 1980s by the 650,000 Zainichi Koreans who remained in Japan—ought to have alerted the Japanese of that decade to the lunatic thuggishness of the Pyongyang regime, and alerted them, too, to the likelihood of the North Koreans' involvement in the mysterious disappearance of their compatriots. However, by virtue of some admixture of a pervasive economic focus in Japan,

3. See, for example, Samuels 2010a; Haggard June 2, 2014.

4. Boynton's quotation marks, signifying a dubious application of the word "home," given that 90% of the Korean population in Japan originated in the peninsula's southern half (p. 90).



of a foreign policy bureaucratically impervious to inconvenient news, and of a lack of connection between Japan's majority and minority populations, those alarms were never heard. Thus, says Boynton, the revelation of North Korean agency in the Japanese disappearances and the partial restoration of the gravely altered abductees in 2002 constituted for the Japanese an awakening "akin to Freud's 'return of the repressed'" (p. 236).

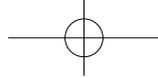
Sadly, though it is one of his study's key takeaways, Boynton does not explain precisely what he means by this, his Freudian reading of the Japanese response to the fraudtly evolving abductions drama. I'll offer, therefore, my own two understandings of his reading's likely meanings, for I take the thought to be helpful. First, he may be discerning in the revelation of the abductions a bolt to the Japanese conscience, which on some level had known all along of its compatriots' helplessness in the hands of its enemies, but had failed to acknowledge that awareness for lack of will to deal with the issue militarily. Or, more scarily, his "return of the repressed" sentence may suggest that the abductions episode has taken the Japanese down into the dungeons of their own psyche where, notwithstanding their commitment in the post-War era to amity all around themselves, they have kept under lock and key an enemy whom they despise, mistrust, and would wish to annihilate. That shadowy enemy's most proximate real-world materialization is, of course, the Koreans, both those who live on the Sea of Japan's/East Sea's other side and those who live among them as neighbors. Yes, Boynton's text drills deep into the Japanese mindset and finds a dangerous magma.

As for the question that most intrigues Boynton—why the North Koreans conducted the abductions—his text comes up short in as much as it closes with the same incredulousness with which it begins. In other words, rather than take as purposes the usages to which the abducted were actually put—as negotiations' chips, as spies in training, as trainers of spies, as "testifiers" in propaganda materials, as spouses for foreigners already serving the regime's interests, and as possessors of skills in short supply in North Korea (The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea 2011)—Boynton chooses to remain so astounded by the high-handedness of the kidnappings that he fails to see them as "rationally" conceived. He is in this regard, if I may inject a distant comparison, less helpful than the unnamed journalist who (mythically, perhaps) asked Willie Sutton why he robbed banks. For, having received Sutton's answer—*because that was where the money was*—that mythic journalist put aside his incredulity, saw



Sutton's crimes as purposeful, and knew better the customer he was dealing with when he spoke to and wrote about the bank robber. Such post-incredulity is vital in the abduction issue's regard too, for the less the incredulity of the international community, the greater that community's hold on the fact that the abductions were a state-sponsored program and the greater the chance the Kim regime will one day be held accountable for them. Tellingly, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, which is interested in the regime's prosecution, comes up quickly with the list of motives I've offered above. Also, more so than does Bolton, the Committee thinks of the Japanese abductions in the context of the DPRK's several decades of kidnapping practice in territories other than its own. The Committee and other NGOs like it remind us that since the outbreak of the Korean War, thousands of South Koreans have been dragnetted into the North, and since the famine-inspired breakdown of DPRK border controls on its northern frontier, hundreds of ethnic Korean Chinese have been swiped away from their home territories ("Abductions Carried Out Internatyonally [sic] by North Korea"). Boynton speaks for a few pages about these thousands of non-Japanese abductions and recalls helpfully in those pages Kim Il-sung's charter abductions statement of 1946, "On Transporting Intellectuals from South Korea" (p. 62); however, in his book's conclusion he reverts, as I say, to an unhelpful incredulity fed in part by his narrow focus on the Japanese abductions.

Indeed, he never adequately explains why he chooses to focus almost exclusively on the Japanese abductions nor why, within that narrow frame, he limits his discussion to the thirteen cases acknowledged by Kim Jong-il. The just mentioned Committee for Human Rights in North Korea says that the accurate numbers of kidnappings and of countries from which they were taken are 180,000 and 12 respectively (Park, "North Korea's Legacy of Terror"). Meanwhile, another NGO, the National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, estimates that the Kim regime has kidnapped some 100 Japanese ("North Korea Abductions Victims Worldwide"). And, lastly, I'll mention too that in February of 2016, as North Korea announced the halting of its investigations into the Japanese abductions phenomenon (Choe, February 13, 2016), the American news agency Breitbart, citing a now disappeared Kyodo News Agency posting, offered 886 as the number of Japanese whom the Japanese government deems likely to have been kidnapped (Martel, February 29, 2016). Clearly some of these numbers are more reliable than others. Clearly,

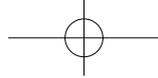


politics enters into each group's counting. In any event, *The Invitation-Only Zone* would have been well served, had its author paused to explain the framing of his research.

As for Boynton's achievement in understanding the abductees' experience in North Korea, other reviewers of *The Invitation-Only Zone* have thought him successful in this regard (Moloney, November 7, 2015). Writes, for example, James McNamara in *The Spectator*:

Boynton's interviews with abductees offer a rare picture of life in this closed state. Japanese abductees were better off than North Koreans, living in 'Invitation-Only Zones'—'gated communities' (of sorts). They were under constant surveillance. Minders oversaw every aspect of their lives, escorting them to shops, their children to school, and requiring a journal to be written to give the minder access to [their] thoughts'. Abductees woke each morning to 'the loudspeaker that is installed in every North Korean house'. Rations were delivered three times a week—the regime's primary means of social control'. They maintained 'ideological health' by 'weekly "lifestyle reviews"', during which each member of the community reflected publicly on his shortcomings—a kind of upside-down PMQs. Abductees lost all hope of returning home. (McNamara, February 13, 2016)

I, for my part, however, find *The Invitation-Only Zone* curiously deficient in its rendering of the abductees' captivity experience. There are large gaps in Boynton's recordings of the abductees' stories, interstices in which they are clearly withholding aspects of their ordeal or, just as likely, so traumatized by them that they cannot speak meaningfully about them. Save in the most general terms, for example, none of the abductees whom he interviews speaks of the harrowing dark nights of abandonment that they must have endured. None speaks of the compromises of conscience and of patriotism that their survival required of them. None has anything to say about the abductees whom the North Koreans claim are dead. Again, none reflects on the violations to their humanity that the kidnappings constituted, nor on what it means to go forward in a life so violated. What, for example, does it mean in hindsight to have been married by Kim Jong-il underlings? To have for many years deceived one's children about their family's origins? If Boynton has put these sorts of indelicate question to his interviewees, his narrative does not show it. And, lastly as regards the abductees' life in captivity, his interviews with the male abductees yield far



more than those with the women. Why is that? Boynton does not comment on this imbalance, though it is an obvious feature of his text.

Reading Boynton's book, it is possible to lose sight of the several paradigm-shifting buffets to the Japanese psyche in the past quarter century—the Lost Decade of the 1990s, the Subway Sarin Incident of 1995, the tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster of 2011. Still, we are thankful to him for having called our attention to this lesser publicized blow, so quietly important to the Japanese also.

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