

## Intelligence in Public Media

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**“Kitachosen Kikan” o soshiseyo: Nihon ni sennyushita Kankoku Himitsu Kosakutai** [Stop the “Return to North Korea”: The ROK Covert Operative Teams that Infiltrated Japan]

Shirouchi Yasunobu (Shinchosha, 2013), 253 pp., map, photographs

**Reviewed by Stephen C. Mercado**

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Washington for decades has grappled with successive Korean regimes developing nuclear weapons in secret, carrying out abductions and other covert operations overseas, and torturing political opponents at home. As Donald Gregg, former US ambassador to the Republic of Korea (ROK), recalled in an interview published earlier this year in a major Japanese newspaper, Seoul in the 1970s was the Korean locus of such activities.<sup>a</sup> Journalist Shirouchi Yasunobu<sup>b</sup> of the Japanese daily *Tokyo Shimbun*<sup>c</sup> has written an intelligence history that reminds readers that Seoul has for decades conducted covert operations abroad. Shirouchi by now is an expert on Korean issues. Intrigued by Korea since learning as a child that his mother had been a Japanese repatriate following Japan’s loss of the colony in the Second World War,<sup>d</sup> Shirouchi has made the peninsula a focus of his writing. Between 1993 and 2011, he covered Korean events from Seoul as foreign correspondent, then bureau chief.

Shirouchi wrote several books related to Korean intelligence topics before the one under review here. For his first, *Shirumido* [*Silmido*] (Takarajimasha, 2004), he

interviewed former officers and soldiers involved in an aborted ROK project to assassinate Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Il-song.<sup>e</sup> Shirouchi next wrote *Fanso to yobareta otoko* [*A Man Called “Mad Bull”*] (Shinchosha, 2009), a biography of the Tokyo gangster Machii Hisayuki, an ethnic Korean also known as Chong Kon-yong, who worked with the KCIA as a fixer between the ROK and Japan.<sup>f</sup> Shirouchi also wrote *Showa nijugonen: Saigo no senshisha* [*1950: The Last KIA*] (Shogakukan, 2013), his story of a Japanese minesweeper’s crewman killed in a mine explosion off Wonsan in an operation conducted in secret with the US Navy.

The book reviewed here is the story of a failed covert ROK operation in Japan that President Yi Sung-man in Seoul had ordered to disrupt the “repatriation” arranged in 1959 by Tokyo and Pyongyang of tens of thousands of Korean residents from Japan to the DPRK.<sup>g</sup> While on his third Seoul assignment, Shirouchi tracked down and interviewed surviving veterans of the operation.<sup>h</sup> He also extracted information from Korean as well as Japanese written sources and translated from ROK materials the excerpts appearing in this book.

In June 1950, the Korean People’s Army of the DPRK had struck south in a bid to reunify the nation divided in

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a. “Intabyu-: Kitachosen no mokugekisha toshite” [Interview: North Korea Witness], *Asahi Shimbun*, 13 February 2016 (Edition 13), 15. Donald Gregg interview with Japanese correspondent Sakajiri Nobuyoshi. Time and place of interview not given.

b. Japanese and Korean names appear in this review in the conventional order, with the family name preceding the given one. Apart from “Seoul,” Korean names are transliterated in the standard McCune-Reischauer system, minus the diacritic marks.

c. The Tokyo newspaper of the Chunichi Shimbun Company, which hired Shirouchi in 1987 following his graduation from Waseda University.

d. Shirouchi, with fellow journalist Fujikawa Hiroki, contrasted in their book, *Chosen hanto de mukaeta haisen* [*On the Korean Peninsula when Japan Lost the War*] (Otsuki Shoten, 2015), the good fortune of Japanese—including the family of Shirouchi’s mother—who evacuated in orderly fashion the US occupation zone below the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel with the harrowing and in many cases fatal journey south through the peninsula of several hundred thousand Japanese fleeing Soviet-occupied Manchuria and northern Korea.

e. The operation is known to movie fans via the 2003 hit film *Silmido*, ROK director Kang U-sok’s sensational version of the story.

f. The American writer Robert Whiting included Machii in a story of postwar Japan, *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan* (Pantheon, 1999).

g. The author explains that Pyongyang and Tokyo termed the project as “repatriation” or “return,” while Seoul denounced it as sending Koreans to territory under communist control. The author also notes that nearly all the Koreans who went to the DPRK hailed from the southern part of the peninsula that later became the ROK or, if born in Japan, had their roots in the south.

h. Shirouchi also tapped his bureau’s resources, including a Korean staffer who sent additional information after Shirouchi’s return to Tokyo.

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1945 by Washington and Moscow into respective zones of occupation after Imperial Japan's surrender in the Second World War. The armistice in 1953 ended the overt military battles, but the war continued in the shadows. The movement begun in December 1959 of thousands of ethnic Koreans from Japan to the north outraged President Yi, who was furious that Tokyo was in effect aiding the enemy by sending over Koreans who would contribute to the DPRK's postwar recovery and hand Pyongyang a propaganda victory in their unsettled war.<sup>a</sup>

President Yi turned to the Home Affairs Ministry, whose police Shirouchi terms the "advance guard" of the regime's "politics of terror."<sup>b</sup> The scheme the ministry cooked up combined multiple covert activities. ROK agents were to be infiltrated into Japan, where they were to gather intelligence, blow up "repatriation" facilities, and abduct leaders of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (known in Japan as the *Chosen Soren*). Agents were also to attempt to sway Koreans in Japan against going to the DPRK.

Ministry officers recruited several dozen men for the operation, drawing from two pools. One comprised men who had sat for a national police exam. Test-takers who received from visiting police officers a terse summons to go to an inn in Seoul for further instructions went hoping that they had passed. Once at the inn, intelligence officers coerced them into joining the operation. Obeying such orders was the prudent course in those days. The ministry also recruited from among several hundred Korean residents of Japan who had volunteered in the recent war to fight on Seoul's side, but who had not been permitted to return home to Japan after the armistice. Along with coercion, the recruiters dangled incentives. They promised to assign the men to the regular police after the operation (such stable, relatively good employment was much prized in the poverty-stricken ROK). The recruiters also assured them that

they would care for their families during the operation and, in the event of accident, afterwards.

Sixty-five recruits—24 test-takers and 41 former residents of Japan—from September 1959 underwent several weeks of training north of Seoul at a camp in Pukhansan. Their instructors taught them intelligence gathering, demolition, and abduction. The recruits also received training in Japanese culture and language, listening to radio broadcasts in Japanese and reading Japanese magazines.<sup>c</sup>

The men sailed in December with foreboding, leaving on various dates and from various sites. One veteran told the author how, seeing a trainer weeping at the dock, he feared that they were on a one-way mission. Indeed, the operation soon proved fatal for a dozen men on board one ship that sank en route in a storm. The operatives on another ship, spotted by the Japanese and kept under watch after reaching the port of Kobe, soon returned in failure to the port of Masan.

Those who infiltrated Japan endured months of inaction or engaged in ineffectual acts while awaiting funds and instructions. One man recalled an order to put a flower in his suit and hold a cigarette in his right hand to meet a contact outside Kawasaki city hall. He did so repeatedly; no one ever approached him. Almost immediately out of money, the operatives sought out family and friends for shelter and work. One man turned in Tokyo to an uncle, an important official in the *Chosen Soren*, who found him a job in a trading company that did business with the DPRK. Another went directly to the ROK mission in Tokyo<sup>d</sup> to request funds. An official turned him away but suggesting that he see the pro-Seoul Korean Residents Union in Japan (known as *Mindan*), which gave him a small handout.

Operational security was absent. Their superiors had instructed the men to disperse to their old home towns and blend into the background to await orders, without apparently providing them cover stories. One operative took eight members of his group to his old haunts in Osaka and there sought the help of a fellow Korean veteran of the Korean War, telling him cryptically that he had returned for "national work." The nine operatives then

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a. The DPRK circa 1960 had a more developed economy than its rival. Pyongyang's propaganda also compared favorably with Japanese media reporting on the troubled Yi regime, convincing many Koreans in Japan that their future lay in the DPRK.

b. Shirouchi points to military and police executions of an estimated 200,000 civilians at the onset of the Korean War as characteristic of the Yi regime. Successive ROK governments kept silent on the killings for half a century, until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 2005 began bringing to light many of the darkest episodes in the history that began with Korea's 1910 incorporation into the Japanese Empire and ended with the 1993 election of the ROK's first democratic government.

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c. The training was a refresher course. Even operatives born and raised in Korea would have received a Japanese education until August 1945.

d. Seoul and Tokyo only opened embassies following the tortuous establishment of diplomatic relations in 1965.

stayed together at the home of their compatriot for several weeks.

But even the greatest discretion on their part would have done little to undo the damage from at least one previous operation. The detection of other plotting earlier in the year, involving a thwarted plan to dynamite “repatriation” facilities, alerted the Japanese authorities. On 5 December, the Japanese press reported a warning of the National Police Agency concerning a ROK “special operations unit” in Japan with the intent to stop the “repatriation.”

While the operatives were in Japan, the ROK government failed to beat down growing political unrest. President Yi left the country days following the explosion of popular anger after police shot dead nearly 200 demonstrators and wounded thousands more on 19 April 1960. Maj. Gen. Pak Chong-hui the next year ended a brief democratic interlude with a military coup d'état.

Seoul disavowed two dozen operatives arrested in a surprise raid in Shimonoseki on the night of 3 May 1960. Neither the democratic government in power at the time of their arrest nor the military junta that followed showed immediate interest in their fate. The 24 operatives left Japan only in 1961. Grim officials of the Home Affairs Ministry met them at Pusan on their return, had them write out reports, handed them money for fare home, and told them to await further contact.

Only those few operatives who returned before President Yi lost power received their promised policeman's position. For the others, the Pak regime disavowed the Yi Interior Ministry's promised compensation and threatened those who insisted the government honor its commitment. The widows of the drowned operatives did not receive promised survivor benefits or even official word of what had happened. One operative's son recalled with bitterness in an interview with the author how his father ended his days in poverty as a farmer.

As to the DPRK “repatriation” effort, from the time the first “repatriation” ship sailed from Niigata to Wonsan in December 1959 to the program's ending in 1984, some 90,000 resident Koreans, many born and raised in Japan, along with a number of Japanese spouses, would leave Japan for the Korean “fatherland.”

Shirouchi has written with a sense of indignation the story of a failed operation from the perspective of those who suffered by their participation in it. The resulting book is a moving human drama. As is the rule in intelligence history, the details revealed whet our appetites for more. What records lie unexamined in archives—open or closed—in Seoul, Tokyo, or elsewhere? What do those who refused the writer's interview requests know? How accurate and complete is the testimony that survivors and relatives gave? Limitations of the genre aside, the author has written an intelligence history that sheds light on a dark area of relations between Seoul and Tokyo.



