

Characteristics of Unification Consciousness of
Korean-Japanese Students Viewed through Their
Writing: Focusing on the Works Awarded Prizes
in a Writing Contest

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the characteristics of Korean-Japanese students' understanding of unification through their written works that received prizes in a student writing contest, which has been conducted for more than forty years as part of ethnonational education of Korean students in Japan. In this study, middle and high school students' works (from 1978 to 2016) were selected as its subjects. Of the 1,485 works, 209 (14 percent) are related to unification issues, and these 209 works were in turn classified into seven categories according to the subject. By focusing on the trends and changes in the times that emerge from the students' understanding of unification, this study found that division and unification must be considered when students problematize their existence amid the continuing colonialist policies in Japan and the division structure. In addition, despite the strengthening of the framework for recognizing North and South Korea as separate nations within Japan's consciousness of the Korean Peninsula, the Korean students in Japan appear to have always looked forward to a unified Korea. This may be because the need for unification has been regarded as a matter of self-reliance by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan and within ethnonational education spaces, in which bodies have always engaged in and forwarded unification movements despite opposition from extremely conservative forces that seek to maintain the status quo.

Keywords: colonialist policy, division, Korean-Japanese students, unification consciousness, writing contest

Hyerim, I am really happy that you have been raised as a Korean person who loves our homeland and most sincerely desires unification, even leaving behind the comfort of your parents on this Japanese soil. I, your grandmother, am too old, but you can live in a new era of the unified homeland. And now I can live confidently wearing a traditional Korean dress. When I die, I should hold a news briefing for my compatriots in heaven; the US–North Korea talks were held!

– “How Far Has Unification Come?” (*Kkotsongi* 2019, 226)
by Ch’oe **, second grader in high school, Tokyo Korean Middle and High School.

Introduction

The first-generation Korean-Japanese woman in the above excerpt professes that she is most pleased that her granddaughter has been raised as a “Korean who wishes for unification from the bottom of her heart.” Meanwhile, her granddaughter, a third-generation Korean-Japanese student, writes, “To me, unification is at once close and distant.” However, she “learned about the history of the Korean people and of the Korean people in Japan as well as about the tragedy of a half century of colonization and another half century of division at school. At the same time, I realized that there was a future filled with hope called unification.”

This work is included in a collection of writing by Korean students in Japan, first published in South Korea under the title *Kkotsongi: uri-nūn chosōn hakkyo haksæng-imnida* [Blossoms: we are the students of Korean schools in Japan] in April 2019, commemorating the first anniversary of the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration.

By examining the Korean-Japanese students’ writing, this article seeks to illuminate the following: for more than seventy years since the inception of secondary education for Koreans in Japan, how have Korean schools in Japan sought unification in face of the division of the Korean Peninsula,

the political climate involving the United States, Japan, and Korea, and Japan's ethnic discrimination and oppression?

The term “Kkotsongi” [Blossoms] refers to a writing contest for students attending Korean schools in Japan, which has been conducted since 1978. Despite the generational shift among Korean students in Japan as well as changes in the number of students, the students at Korean-Japanese schools have been writing in Korean, not in Japanese, their native language, to express their emotions has remained constant for more than forty years.

This article seeks to examine the characteristics of Korean-Japanese students' unification consciousness in Japan through the selection of students' writings that received prizes in the Kkotsongi writing contest. Middle and high school students' works (from 1978 to 2016) in *Kkotsongi* were selected as the subjects of the study (works by elementary school students have been excluded). Of the 1,485 works, 209 (14 percent) are related to unification issues; these 209 works related to unification issues are divided into seven categories according to the subject. By loosely examining these works, the article concentrates on the trends and changes in the times that emerge from the students' understanding of unification.

About the Writing Contest “Kkotsongi” [Blossoms]

The first Kkotsongi writing contest was held in commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter, the Republic), under the auspices of the Chosun Shinbosa [Chosŏn Newspaper Press], with the support of the Federation of Young Korean-Japanese, Federation of Commerce and Industry, Union of Korean Teachers and Staff of Japan, Central Education Association, Korea Credit Union Association, Association of Korean Writers and Artists of Japan, and Hagusobang, the publisher of educational materials for the

General Association of Korean Residents in Japan.

According to the first collection of writing, this project was started to help Korean language education, which is a basic subject of ethnonational education, to foster the students' healthy mindset and literary talents, and to demonstrate the superiority of democratic ethnonational education of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. At that time, eligible applicants ranged from the second grade of elementary school to high school level in Korean-Japanese schools; in the first contest, there were 1,104 entries, among which 53 were selected for prizes. Serving as the first judges were the representative Korean-Japanese literary figures, including Ri Ŭnsik, Park Jongsang, Kim Tugwŏn, Chŏng Hwahŭm, and Chŏng Hwasu. According to the data, the judges, almost all of whom were first-generation Korean-Japanese, were so moved by the fact that children who grew up in Japan wrote in Korean, the language of their homeland, that they had immense difficulty making selections from the entries.

Thereafter, the Kkotsongi writing contest became established as an annual event of Korean-Japanese schools as part of a larger movement to teach Korean properly in schools. Nearly 1,000 works are submitted every year around October, and prizes are announced in early January of the New Year in the *Chosŏn shinbo* [Chosŏn Newspaper].

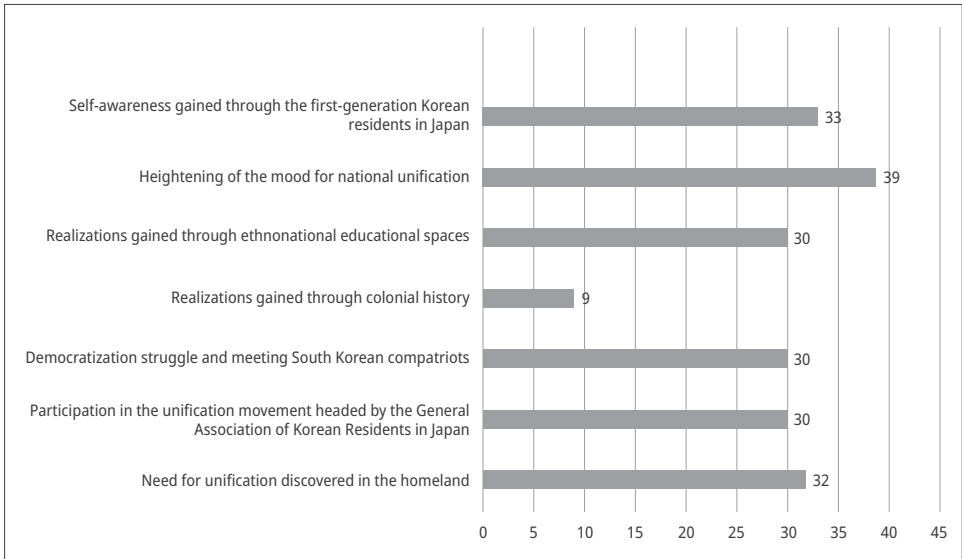
Currently, there are fifteen categories, including prose and poetry for third-grade, upper elementary, middle school, and high school levels. Prizes are awarded through three rounds of screening.

Subjects and Characteristics per Age

Starting with the first writing contest in 1978, works dealing with the issue of national unification have been awarded prizes every year, with the exception of six times (in 1997, 1998, 2000, 2010, and 2012). Twenty prizes were given immediately after the June 15 North–South Joint Declaration. The following figure shows a total of 209 unification-related

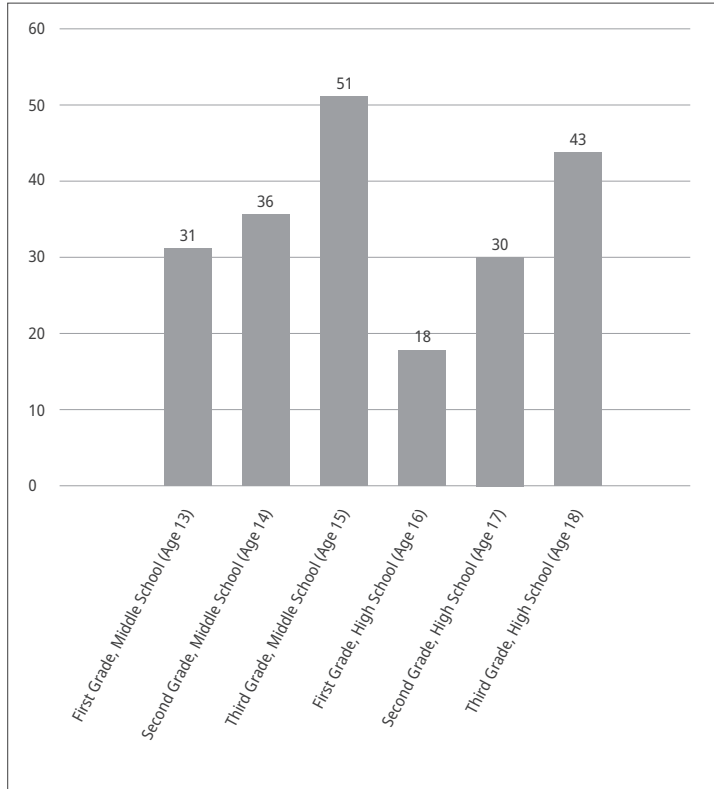
works classified according to the subject.

Figure 1. Categorization according to subject



The most popular subject among the students' works is related to the heightened mood for national unification, such as the World Youth Student Festival, Pan-National Convention for Korean diaspora, Korea Table Tennis Team of North and South, reunion of the families separated by the division of the Korean Peninsula, and repatriation of long-term political prisoners. Other subjects commonly found are the experiences and stories of first-generation Koreans that have led the student writers to think deeply about the unification of their homeland. Students wrote about the need for unification through their experiences of organizing their thoughts as they considered the problem of unification in school, participating in the unification movements of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, visiting their homeland, and encountering the news of the democratization struggle of their South Korean compatriots. Examining the corpus of works accrued for more than forty years showed that there was no tendency for the subject matter to be one-sided. By year, there were seventy-one works in the 1980s, sixty-three in the 1990s, forty in the 2000s, and ten in the 2010s (until 2016), with the highest number of works in the 1980s.

Figure 2. Number of awards per age group



An examination of the number of works that were awarded prizes in each school year and age group shows that the third-grade level (or the last years of middle and high schools, corresponding to fifteen and eighteen years old, respectively), which is closely linked to establishing future plans, had the greatest awareness of the problems of unification. In particular, students in the third year of middle school (the graduating class) tended to regard unification as their mission from listening to the painful stories and experiences of their predecessors, including the first-generation Korean-Japanese. Meanwhile, students in the third year of high school (graduating seniors) considered the mission of the Movement of Korean People in Japan in connection with the issue of unification, as they joined the Korean People's Restoration Movement held by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan as part of its summertime social activities.

In addition, high school seniors tended to experience the division directly through their visits to Korea, through which they felt palpably the need for unification.

Changes in the Unification Awareness of Korean Students in Japan

From the First Issue in 1978 to the 1980s

In each era, there are certain changes in the understanding of unification by Korean-Japanese students. Of the works that were selected from 1978, when the writing contest Kkotsongi began, to the 1980s, majority are concerned with unification, homeland, and South Korea, and 80 percent are poetry. The second most common subject addresses the self-awareness of unification garnered from the students' encounters with the first-generation Korean-Japanese, mostly written in prose.

The poems related to the homeland are set in 1978 and 1979, with the Republic's Pyongyang Student Youth Art Troupe performance in Japan and the Homeland Visitation Group of Korean Residents in Japan, which has barely been realized since 1979. For the Homeland Visitation Group of Korean Residents in Japan, a visit to the homeland was executed once in 1965, but the door was shut for fifteen years due to the interruption by Japanese authorities. Therefore, the Republic sent the large passenger ship *Samjiyeon* and provided convenience for Koreans living in Japan to visit their homeland.

Numerous poems of that time express the yearning and idealism for the homeland, and at the same time, students expressed their sense of unification through determination to fight in Japan. Until the 1970s, the ethnonational educational spaces at once considered as their foremost goal the "cultivation of minds that will contribute to the socialist homeland" and clearly focused on continuation of life in Japan; based on the identity of overseas citizens of the Republic, students' writing demonstrates their desire to live

by contributing to unification despite living in a foreign land.

In “Fighting to Death for the Day of Unification,” written in 1982 by Park**, a third grade student in high school in Ibaraki Prefecture (*Kkotsongi* 1982, 290), during a trip to the nonroutine space called the Military Demarcation Line in a visit to the homeland, the student refers to the United States in terms with strong political overtones, such as “Yankees, who only wear the mask of human beings,” “barbarians of the contemporary era,” “mortal enemies who act as masters: American imperialism,” “mortal enemies of more than a century,” and “evil fascists.”

Meanwhile, students kept a close eye on the developments in South Korea and wrote poems that support the struggle of Kwangju citizens in the Kwangju Democratization Movement of May 18, 1980, voicing their anger against the military fascists. For example, in “The Voice of Anger Echoing” written in 1980 by a first-grade middle school student named Chwa**, a group of students protested the Chun Doo-hwan regime on the school playground well into the night: “One people with the same blood / the youth who should be enjoying the named warmth of the sun / how have they come to / be murdered by cars and guns?” (*Kkotsongi* 1980, 237). In such a way, the student author expressed the desire to join the South Korean youth in their resistance movement. The Korean-Japanese students at the time showed sensitivity to the oppression and alienation of young South Koreans because they had themselves experienced the marginalization due to Japan’s colonialist policies.

Next, in the process of listening to the first generation’s longing for their hometown and specific experiences, the students express their desire to take their grandfathers and grandmothers to their hometowns in South Korea. The first generation accurately recounts to their grandchildren the tales of forced migration and labor as well as severe hardships and discrimination they endured in Japan, stories of their hometowns, and the atrocities of the enemies who had infiltrated there. Such tales functioned as oral history that binds the family group and played a role in maintaining the students’ strong sense of the need to return to the Korean Peninsula. It is noteworthy that the principle remains clear—

that the homeland where the US military is stationed is not liberated in the true sense. Therefore, it demonstrates the students' innocent belief that they will drive out foreign powers as soon as possible and visit when their hometown is truly liberated. This is also related to the background that the South Korean government has interfered with the right of mobility and the right to return of the Korean residents in Japan, as they have cast the Korean-Japanese with Korean citizenship in the ideological confinement of "General Association of Korean Residents in Japan = Pro-North Korea." As Koreans in Japan have been victims of the North-South confrontation, it can be seen that unification of their homeland was a political and moral task related to their fate.

The next most important topic involves rallies, protests, and signature drives by the General Association of Korean Resident in Japan: Korea's self-directed peace and unification general march and signature drives aimed at the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, from June 25 to July 27, 1982; signature drives against Team Spirit, a joint military training exercise of United States Forces Korea and the Military of South Korea; and the movement to gather 5 million signatures by the Republic against the United States and its nuclear warfare provocation and in support of three-party talks suggested by the Republic.¹

In "My First Step to Unification of the Homeland," written in 1989 by Kim **, a second-grade high school student from Tokyo, the fundraiser to make the t-shirts for the realization of a large-scale cross-country march in the homeland and the 1 million signatures movement for the realization of the August 15 inter-Korean student talks are presented as the first step toward unification of the homeland. In fact, I could confirm on the television screen that the South Korean youth participating in their resistance movements are wearing t-shirts printed with the phrase "For the sake of unification, let's meet at Panmunjom." At that time, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan raised the idea that the plan for the establishment of the Koryō Democratic Federal Republic was its most honorable and important task at the twelfth general assembly of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan held in November

¹ This signature drive took place between March 1 and July 27, 1984

1980, and the young students appear to be clearly aware that they are to be at the forefront of this. In “My First Step to Unification of the Homeland,” Kim writes that the students were embodying the slogans “Let’s use our Korean language well to fight for South Korean youths” and “Let’s learn well with the heart of supporting the South Korean youths.” However, this was deemed to be not enough for South Korean young people: “I want to change my aching heart into a distinct form and send it to them” (*Kkotsongi* 1989, 137). These students’ sense of unification is the result of their proficiency in antidiscrimination movements based on the universal sense of rights that have been established in education and movements against discrimination for a long time.

The 1990s

In the first half of the 1990s, students were excited and impressed by the height of Korean ethnonational unity demonstrated by events such as the Thirteenth World Youth Festival (1989), the Pan-National Convention for Korean Diaspora (1990), the World Table Tennis Championships (1991), and the repatriation of the long-term political prisoner Ri Inmo.

According to “For the Unified Homeland,” which was written by Kim **, a high school senior from Tokyo, and was awarded First Prize in 1990, the Delegation of Korean Youth and Students in Japan said they would not stop fighting as young people of the generation of unification, drawing from the experience of the unification march from the top of Mt. Paektu with Im Sugyöng as well as the hunger strike at P’anmunjöm. In “For the Unified Homeland,” the student addresses a letter to Im Sugyöng, “I shared the same blood line, the same eyes, and the same meaning with you, so there is no reason that I cannot walk the path that you walk” (*Kkotsongi* 1990, 123), indicating that the student was determined to cross P’anmunjöm with Im Sugyöng. It is said that 3,043 people (O 2005) participated in the celebration, including the Korean Youth Student Delegation in Japan, the Women’s Alliance, and Youth Business League,

as well as groups of volunteers, reporters, and observers. In particular, the fist raised in solidarity by Im Sugyŏng to 150,000 people was a shocking incident that ruptured the daily routine for students at the time; in fact, twelve works were awarded prizes in the given year. Many of these works view Im Sugyŏng as a psychological symbol for unification, and the students projected themselves unto her, in so doing considering what they needed to do for unification.

Korean-Japanese students came to obtain a keen sense of ethnonational unity in the distinct culture of Korean-Japanese schools whereby numerous topics are related to unification of the homeland in Korean-Japanese schools, in songs, plays, and even poster-painting for athletic competitions. This unique culture of Korean-Japanese schools also means that the marginalized minority, largely ignored, can express itself and its existence in society. According to a written work by a student athlete, he/she is seeking his/her identity in the psychological “discreteness” of others as he/she participates in the international competition and dreams of becoming a player of the unification team in the future. As a result of the sublimation of students' identity, it can be seen that they desired to return to a unified Korea, which they considered a romantic space.

These students learned at school their history stained in the blood of their compatriots and participated in fieldwork. In the process, they realized that to demand to liquidate the past to the Japanese government is a necessary step toward unification. Written in 1990 by Park **, a third-grade middle school student, “When the Busy Lizzies Bloom” reads, “Our compatriots who died in someone else’s homeland during the Great Earthquake of Kanto / shouldn’t we at least take their souls back to our unified homeland?” (*Kkotsongi* 1990, 15) The work expresses the need for unification of the homeland in light of the Japanese government’s failure to investigate the massacre of the Korean people in Kanto and its rejection of responsibility. The student’s ready relating of the Kanto Massacre shows that the history of the Korean people in Japan was embodied as a collective memory. Most of all, it can be confirmed that the division was not only consistently seen in the Cold War structure of the East–West confrontation, but

also as a matter of overcoming colonialism.

Works in the 1990s are also characterized by the resentment and impatience, which continued to simmer in the families, of first-generation Korean-Japanese who devoted themselves to the patriotism project, but despite their old age, did not yet have opportunities to return to their hometowns. Most of the students were third- or fourth-generation by this point, so listening to the experiences of the first generation held a crucial meaning in considering their awareness of existence and of unification as a real problem. Therefore, students themselves considered the problem of spiritual succession in the process of participating in the national unification movement in the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan.

The 2000s

The June 15 North–South Joint Declaration was announced in the early 2000s, and students’ consciousness of unification was also in flux. There were many works depicting the excitement of Korean compatriots looking forward to unification, expressing the excitement of unification in events wherein they directly participated, such as the soccer match of the Korea–Japan World Cup, Pusan Asian Games, Seoul–Jeonju performances, school festivals, sporting events, establishment commemoration events, and art competitions.

The most common works in the 2000s were the writings that shared the urgency of unification as the students witnessed the excitement and joy of the first generation who stepped on their homeland for the first time after the June 15 North–South Joint Declaration. Paragraph 4 of the joint press release stipulated that “North Korea and the remaining compatriots of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan form a visiting group to the homeland to cooperate, and appropriate measures must be taken in this regard.” Thus, the first General Association of Korean Residents of Japan trip to the homeland took place between September 22 and 27.

The hometown visit project must have had special significance as the Korean-Japanese people finally were able

to return to the hometowns that the first generation of the Korean-Japanese had for so long desired to visit. This must have been especially true after the hometown visitation policy, which was implemented to demonstrate the dominance of the South Korean government and the Republic of Korean Residents Union in Japan over the division of Korean-Japanese society and the competition over system with North Korea.

On the other hand, there were many works that commemorate grandparents who passed away without seeing the historic inter-Korean summits. Written in 2003 by Son**, a third-grade middle school student from Higashiosaka, “Passport Photo” depicts the author’s maternal grandfather who had treasured his new passport under his pillow and waited with bated breath for his chance to visit the homeland only to pass away two months before his visit. The poem expresses the student’s serious considerations of unification and dreams of visiting the homeland with the grandfather’s ashes in tow.

The image of the grandfather, who eagerly joined the activities of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, hoping for unification until the last moment of his life, demonstrates that he for his grandchild had become an ideal who did not hesitate to sacrifice himself and the foundation for his grandchild’s solemn determination.

In this period, there is a certain change in the unification consciousness. Amid the heightened atmosphere of inter-Korean exchanges, students began to romanticize unification, not just as a dream, but as an imminent, real possibility. In contrast to the sentiments in the 1980s, there is no great sense of resistance against the enemies in the unification movement, with dancing and fluttering of the unification flag becoming romantic symbols, and there is a feeling of optimism that meeting will lead to unification. As the blue color of the unification flag is just like the sky, a student writer professes, “I Love the Blue Sky” (*Kkotsongi* 2001, 141). Moreover, the dances held on the day of the school's founding are described as follows: “The first, second, and third generations may have their generational chasms, but they all achieved a great desire for unification” (*Kkotsongi* 2008, 198). As can be seen, unification became abstracted and conceptualized anew in

this context.

If the 1980s and 1990s were decades of clear awareness of the struggle as the main agent of the unification movement, the 2000s were times of the international stage, especially Japan, South Korea, and the Republic. It is the third generation of Korean-Japanese professional athletes who appear as protagonists of such works. According to the 2001 “As a Korean-Japanese” by Ku**, a high school senior from Kyoto, Hong Changsu, who revealed that he was ethnically Korean despite the discrimination, and fought proudly for the will to achieve national unification, showed the “need for me to clarify that I am ethnically Korean and that I should be proud to be a Korean.” Hong Changsu, who screamed “Korea is one” in the boxing ring, revealed his root in 2001 (*Kkotsongi* 2001, 239), and resisted, offering a symbolic hope for students under the harsh political conditions. Students argue that the meaning of “Korean Residents in Japan” should be interpreted as more than the meaning of “people living in Japan”; in fact, the term should denote Korean people. From such a perspective, the writings of Korean-Japanese students at that time can be seen as emphasizing the nature of homogenous identity in order to resist the strong oppression.

On the other hand, these writings also show strong resistance and hesitation to declaring that they are Korean in Japanese society. After the late 1990s, oppression and persecution of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan and Korean-Japanese schools transpired, and in 2002, the problem of abductions of the Japanese Citizens from Japan by North Korean agents surfaced; in fact, the influence of Japan's frenzied anti-Republic, anti-General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, and anti-Korean disturbances was at its zenith. Unlike those in other times, the writings of this period show that students were accompanied by a certain sense of fear when they had to have relationships outside of school. Therefore, in the 2010s, some works seem to be ameliorating their psychological alienation through exchanges with South Korean cultural figures, journalists, and Korean-Americans, which had never been subject material until this point.

Conclusion

Recently, as interest in Koreans in Japan has grown, the violent structure of marginalizing them by “speaking on behalf” of them has arisen everywhere. On the other hand, it is difficult for us insiders to discuss ourselves appropriately. In fact, we, who are in the multilayered structure of colonialism, divisional violence, and patriarchal violence, have not paid too much attention to the culture we ourselves have created.

I reflected on and regretted the fact that *Kkotsongi* has not been properly examined because it was published in South Korea first and because it contains writings by young students. I believe that we need to preserve it as part of our culture.

Also noteworthy is that *Kkotsongi* contains writings in Korean by students who are third- and fourth-generation Korean-Japanese. The Korean language is a key part of ethno-national education that ensures the psychological legitimacy of Korean-Japanese students. On the other hand, the normalized sense of crisis, which ironically works to protect the Korean ethnation within Japanese society, guarantees a strong awareness of the Korean people. As such, the works in the *Kkotsongi* writing contest represent greater political and collective awareness than writing in the Japanese language, the students’ mother tongue. I regret that the possibility of resistance lurking in the experiences of the student writers—their experiences in everyday life as well as their practice of the Korean language—has yet to gain momentum and strength as a unified voice, not having reached the mainstream media of Japan and the Korean Peninsula.

In completing this article, I would like to introduce a poem by a middle school student, which received a prize in 2017.

It truly is so ridiculous / I tell people about myself, about my life / methodically, clearly, thoroughly / I adore the beautiful landscape of Machida, where I live / I long for the egg-shaped Jeju Island where / there is an abundance of rocks, wind, and women / and where are no thieves, homeless, and front doors to homes, and / I keep in my heart Pyongyang,

*our capital that is making daily progress / I am a Korean!
/ Living in Machida / waiting for the unification train
between Jeju and Pyongyang / I am a student of a Korean-
Japanese school / I am a Korean! / How many times will I
have to declare myself? / I will say it again and again / until
the day when / people don't immediately ask me, "Who on
earth are you?"/ but extend their hands to me, warmly.*

– “Let’s Keep Telling the World” by Ko **, second grader,
Nishitokyo Middle School No. 2 (*Kkotsongi* 2019, 206–208)

In many first- and second-generation Koreans in Japan, their experiences of discrimination manifested not necessarily as inferiority complex, but as ethnonational awareness. However, the third-generation Korean-Japanese have assimilated more intimately into Japanese culture than their parents’ generation did, so they experience the inherent contradictions of embodying heterogeneous identities due to the Japanese values that they have internalized to a certain extent. Despite such difficulties, Korean-Japanese students would rather continue to declare their Korean-ness until the day when “the unification train runs between Jeju and Pyongyang.”

When students problematize their existence amid the continuing colonialist policies in Japan and the division structure, they cannot help but think deeply about division and unification. In addition, despite the strengthening of the framework for recognizing North and South Korea as separate in recognizing Japan’s understanding of the Korean Peninsula, the eyes of Korean students in Japan appear to have always been focused on a unified Korea. This may be because the need for unification has been regarded as a matter of self-reliance in the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan and national education spaces, which have always been engaged in unification movements amidst the forces that oppose meaningful, positive changes.

Lastly, I hope that *Kkotsongi*—born in Korean-Japanese schools conducting democratic ethnonational education in anticipation of the unification of the homeland and pushed to survival until today with great difficulty—will further shine

its value as an essential legacy of the Korean people.

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