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A Double Bomb, Prolonged Colonization, and Resistance: The Lives of Korean Atomic Bomb Survivors

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After the 1945 US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrendered, liberating Korea from colonial rule. This study explores the lives and changing perceptions of both first-generation Korean atomic bomb survivors (ABSs) who lived in Japan as colonial subjects and second-generation ABSs. We interviewed ten Korean ABSs—six first-generation and four second-generation. As non-Japanese nationals, Korean ABSs were denied appropriate medical care and excluded from compensation, described by some as a "double bomb" or "double discrimination." Although eighty years have passed since the end of both the war and Japanese colonization, the complex political situation in Korea and abroad has left Korean ABSs in an extended colonial condition. Their experiences reveal a unique tragedy and life narrative that are absent from Japanese ABS accounts.

Keywords atomic bomb survivors, Japanese colonial era, prolonged discrimination, pain, Hiroshima, Nagasaki

Introduction

Shortly after the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, Japan surrendered, ending World War II. The total number of known atomic bomb victims is estimated at approximately 740,000 (Korean Atomic Bombs Victims Association 2024), including 213,000 who died before the end of the year (The City of Hiroshima 2024; The City of Nagasaki 2024; Tomonaga 2019). Among the victims were approximately 100,000 Koreans, of whom about 50,000 died shortly after the bombings (Korean Atomic Bombs Victims Association 2024; Tong 1991). Of the surviving 50,000, 43,000 returned to Korea, while 7,000 remained in Japan (Korean Atomic Bombs Victims Association 2024). Aside from Japanese nationals, Koreans constituted the

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largest group of atomic bomb victims—a fact that is rooted in Korea's history of Japanese colonization. Due to colonial policies that dispossessed rural Korean communities and undermined their ability to sustain agricultural livelihoods, many Koreans migrated to Japan in search of work. Under wartime conditions, young Koreans were conscripted into military units and forced to work in munitions factories in Hiroshima through systems such as the "conscription system" and the "conscription decree" (Song, Kim, and Kim 1991; Ichiba 1999; Korea Church Women United and Lee 1984).

Although over 80% of Korean atomic bomb survivors (ABSs) eventually returned to their homeland (Korean Atomic Bombs Victims Association 2024; Song, Kim, and Kim 1991), they have been largely neglected by both the Japanese and Korean governments. In the aftermath of the bombings, the Japanese government launched a large-scale cohort study focused on residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time of the bombings to assess the effects of exposure to the bombs' radiation (Ozasa, Grant, and Kodama 2018). This cohort study served as a warning to other nations about the dangers of atomic bombs and heightened global awareness about the extent of Japanese atomic bomb victimization. Japan extended assistance to all ABSs residing in Japan, offering up to four free annual medical examinations, monthly allowances for eligible survivors, and funeral expenses (Vasileva, Izumi, and Kawano 2023). In certain regions, second-generation ABSs also receive medical examinations and medical expense assistance (Jung, Lee, Yun, et al. 2018).

In 1974, the Korean Women's Federation of Churches, with assistance from the Japanese Citizens' Association, initiated a survey of Korean ABSs (Korea Church Women United and Lee 1984). Despite this effort, no specific support policies were established. In the 1990s, the Korean government conducted a survey to determine the number of ABSs (Song, Kim, and Kim 1991), along with additional government-led surveys (Kim 2004; Jung, Lee, Cho, et al. 2018). These were one-time efforts, however, unlike the annual surveys in Japan. Yet, since the 2000s, research examining the lives of Korean ABSs highlights their suffering, their experiences of discrimination, and the intergenerational transmission of atomic bomb-related harm (Moon 2018; Yoo and Kim 2022; Lee 2017). Research has also explored the necessity for legal, institutional, and policy support as well as compensation for Korean victims by both the Korean and Japanese governments (Kang 2011; Yoo and Jeon 2022; Chung 2019). The repercussions of the atomic bombings continue to affect subsequent generations of survivors. The Korean ABS survey documented numerous cases of miscarriages and unexplained deaths among infants and young children (Jung, Lee, Cho, et al. 2018). In addition, 30% of first-generation ABSs expressed anxiety regarding childbirth and the health of their offspring (Song, Kim, and Kim 1991; Jung, Lee, Yun, et al. 2018). Some second-generation ABSs deliberately avoided marriage and childbirth due to concerns about the heritability of atomic bomb-related

damage (Jung, Lee, Cho, et al. 2018), and their overall health status was found to be poorer than that of the general population (Lee and Jung 2022; Kim 2004). Given their challenges, the plight of second- and third-generation Korean ABSs has not received the attention and support it deserves.

Research on Korean ABSs has primarily focused on exploring individuals' suffering and the factual details of their exposure. Missing, however, are studies examining how these survivors articulate their experiences, specifically in relation to who they hold responsible as the perpetrators and the Korean government, and how their perceptions have evolved. This study explores the experiences and changes in perception of the first- and second-generation Korean ABSs who, under the unique historical context of being Koreans residing in Japan during Japanese colonization, experienced radiation exposure and underwent distinct social realities following the bombings, during liberation, and after returning to Korea.

Methods

Participant Recruitment

Participants in this study included the first- and second-generation ABSs who either actively participated in the Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association or were recommended by its members. The researchers first explained the purpose of the study and subsequently selected six first-generation and four second-generation ABSs. Participant observations were also conducted with an additional eight second-generation ABSs residing in Hapcheon, who were introduced by Peace House officials. In-depth interviews were conducted March 11-16, 2021, following approval from the Institutional Review Board of the Hanyang University (approval no. HYUIRB-202007-014-5). Additional interviews and participatory observations were carried out between March 31 and April 1, 2023.

Interviews

Two researchers participated in both the interviews and data analysis for this study. Prior to the interviews, they deepened their understanding of the atomic bomb and relevant historical context through multiple meetings and also engaged in discussions on qualitative research methodology. Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging. Each interview lasted approximately fifty to ninety minutes and began with an open-ended question, such as "Do you remember the situation at the time of the atomic bombing?" or "What were your experiences when you returned to Korea?" Additional questions included: "Have you or your family experienced any diseases?"; "What kind of support do atomic bomb survivors need?"; and "As a survivor, how do

you view the governments of the United States, Japan, and Korea?" To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned an identifying code (e.g., ID 1, ID 2), which was used throughout the research process and in this article.

Analysis

This study employed a phenomenological approach as a qualitative methodology. Phenomenology aims to grasp the identity and essence of a phenomenon or event (Van Manen 2023). The phenomenological research method, meanwhile, explores the meaning and essence of a phenomenon or event through human experience and grasps the essence by excluding the researchers' prejudices and existing experiences (Knaack 1984). Data were analyzed using Giorgi's phenomenological method (Kim et al. 1999). This is a useful methodological approach for describing the essence of a phenomenon, as it identifies the structure of each participant's unique and subjective experience and reveals its meaning by using the participants' own language (ibid.). Rather than extracting commonly used words across participants (Allman et al. 2024), the Giorgi method prioritizes the unique meaning embedded in each individual's distinctive experience (Ro 2015).

The analysis followed Giorgi's procedural steps. First, the recorded interviews were repeatedly listened to and transcribed to capture a holistic understanding of the context. Second, meaning units were identified by segmenting the data at points where the narrative shifted in focus or meaning. Third, these meaning units were translated into academic terms, thereby transforming participants' expressions into research language that accurately reflected their experiences and thoughts. Fourth, the researchers structurally integrated the meaning units, classified core elements, and grouped them into essential themes representing the lived experience of Korean ABSs. Finally, sub-constituents were clustered based on shared attributes to derive constituents, clarifying the overall structure and meaning of the phenomenon (Ryu 2018). The participants' own words and the contextual meaning structures were preserved to accurately represent the significance of their individual experiences (Ro 2015). All data were analyzed using that qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA.

Results

A total of ten participants took part in in-depth interviews, comprising four men and two women from the first generation and three men and one woman from the second generation. The first-generation participants included two individuals in their seventies, two in their eighties, and two in their nineties. The second-generation participants included two individuals in their sixties and two in their seventies. The participants resided in various regions, including Hapcheon, Daegu, Gyeongsangbuk-do, Seoul, and Busan (Table 1). As a result,

Table 1. Korean ABS Interviewees

ID	Generation	Sex	Age	Region
1	1	Male	77	Busan
2	1	Male	77	Daegu and Gyeongsanbuk-do
3	1	Male	80	Hapcheon
4	1	Male	82	Seoul
5	1	Female	95	Hapcheon
6	1	Female	95	Hapcheon
7	2	Male	63	Busan
8	2	Female	64	Hapcheon
9	2	Male	70	Busan
10	2	Male	76	Seoul

Source: Authors.

three constituents, ten sub- constituents, and thirty meaning units were identified (Table 2). The three constituents were "Colonial Koreans became ABSs in Japan," "Irresponsible governments: the US, Japan, and the homeland, Korea," and "Resistant subjects."

Colonial Koreans became ABSs in Japan

Lives Stolen through Cross-Border Violence: During the Japanese colonial period, many Koreans migrated to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan either to escape economic hardship or as a result of Japan's forced labor policies. One participant's father was conscripted for forced labor in Japan after being selected through a village-administered lottery system implemented to fulfill labor recruitment quotas. Another participant's father, who was born in Japan because his own father had been imprisoned for participating in the independence movement, was conscripted to Nagasaki for forced labor and became a victim of the atomic bombing. As one participant explained when recalling the lottery system used for conscription, economic inequality often influenced these processes:

> The villagers had no choice but to gather and draw lots. Since no one wanted to go, if someone from a wealthy family was chosen, they wouldn't be sent to Japan. It was always someone from a poor family who ended up having to go. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

The first-generation Korean ABS participants in this study still vividly recalled the horrors of that day. They suffered burns, inhaled clouds of dust,

Table 2. Interviews with the First- and Second-Generation Korean ABSs

Constituent	Sub-constituent	Meaning Unit
Colonial Koreans became ABSs in Japan	Lives stolen through cross-border violence	Traveled to Japan for survival or as forced laborers
		Many Koreans died or were exposed to radiation due to the nuclear bombings
	Forced international migrants	Forced to return to Korea after liberation
		Struggling to live in South Korea
	Despair over illness and hereditary transmission	First generation: faced death and various diseases
		Second generation: suffered from rare illnesses or early death
		Third generation: continued to suffer from illnesses
		Felt guilty as a parent of a second-generation ABS
		Lived with uncertainty about the link between illness and the atomic bomb
	Indifference and discrimination in their own country	Lived in confusion, unaware of being a victim
		Living in a society unaware of the experiences of ABSs
	Silenced voices about a brutal and tragic life	Choosing not to speak
		Hiding out of shame
		Remaining in heavy silence
Irresponsible governments: the US, Japan, and the homeland, Korea	Resentment toward the US's and Japan's irresponsibility	The US atomic bombings were effectively a nuclear test on civilians
		Japan discriminates against Korean ABSs
	Disillusionment with their own country	Lack of national apology and consolation for failing to protect its citizens
		The Korean government's indifference, ignorance, and discrimination
		Absence of policy for Korean ABSs
Resistant subjects	Isolated struggle against both perpetrators and homeland	Demanding apology and compensation from Japan and the US
		Calling for government accountability and action
		Support first, investigation later
	The voices of the silenced	Sharing stories about ABSs
		A cry driven by the urgency of survival
		Voices of the hidden
		The study included only healthy participants

Table 2. (continued)

Constituent	Sub-constituent	Meaning Unit
	Hope for peace in solidarity with each other	Found comfort through connection with other ABSs
		Cared for other survivors with different but related experiences
		Individuals and groups who support ABSs
		Raising their voices and acting against war and nuclear weapons

Source: Authors.

witnessed corpses floating in the river, and saw people whose entire bodies had been burned. Several reported that they survived because they had just arrived at work, were still at home preparing to leave for school or work, or were resting in their dormitories after working night shifts. Some first-generation Korean ABSs were injured when their homes collapsed, sustained serious wounds to their backs and waists after being trapped under debris and forcibly pulled out, and lost consciousness and later awoke, or managed to escape to air-raid shelters. In the burning city where black rain fell from the sky, some Korean ABSs lost family members, desperately searched for missing relatives, or were mobilized to assist in rescue operations at the Mitsubishi factory. For those whose families survived, the relief was immense. As one participant recalled when describing her family's survival:

> My mother and brother were shocked, unsure if I was alive or a ghost because I was covered in blood. Then they realized, "Our daughter is alive," and we embraced, crying together. (Researchers' interview with ID 5, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

Forced International Migrants: Korean ABSs were forcibly repatriated to South Korea without adequate medical treatment. After Korea's liberation, Japanese citizens told Koreans—who were derogatorily called *Joseonjin* (Joseon people)—to return home, amid rumors that Koreans who stayed might be beaten to death. One participant recalled being forced to leave her job in Japan because her family feared that women would be in greater danger once American forces arrived. As another explained,

> Since Korea was liberated, the Japanese said Koreans shouldn't be here and that they had to go back to Korea. Because everyone was leaving, I went along with them, too. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

Yet, it was a perilous repatriation. Those who tried to return early on small

boats were caught in storms, and most did not survive. In contrast, those who left a month or two later on larger ships arranged by Japan or Korea mostly survived. Even after returning home, Korean ABSs faced great hardship. Although they returned to their hometowns, it was difficult to rebuild their lives, and the money they had brought from Japan, which was deposited in the Bank of Korea, was inaccessible. Those born in Japan struggled with the Korean language. They endured indescribable hardships just to survive. At the age of nine, one became the head of their household and farmed the land. The participant recalled that neighbors sometimes found their entire family collapsed from hunger. The Korean ABSs who lost their parents or children had no time to grieve—survival left no room for mourning. Although most people in Korea were struggling in the aftermath of the Korean War and amid widespread poverty, those who had returned from Japan faced even greater adversity as they had no foundation on which to rebuild their lives. Some of these hardships were described by participants in their interviews, as illustrated in the following quotations:

> When I came to Korea, I thought, "Oh no, the language just didn't work." I couldn't communicate properly, so I always felt like a fool. (Researchers' interview with ID 5, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> My mother said we could live there because it was our hometown, so we went. At first, everyone welcomed us since it had been a long time, but because things were so difficult, after a while, people stopped coming around. We were told to pay back the money we brought from Japan to Korea, so she deposited 4,500 won in Choheung Bank. But we never got that money back. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, 2021)

> People who came back from Japan had it even worse, right? We had nothing at all. It was so tough. Honestly, I wish I'd never left Japan. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

Despair over Illness and Hereditary Transmission: The interview data revealed that the participants experienced chronic physical illnesses such as skin disease and cancer, as well as long-term psychological suffering resulting from the bombings (Table 3). The first-generation Korean ABSs were directly affected both physically and psychologically by the bombing, and later experienced a range of illnesses, mental suffering, and death. They endured lifelong chronic skin diseases and skin cancer, with symptoms resembling those of Hansen's disease, yet they rarely received proper medical treatment. Some first-generation survivors, either the interviewees themselves or their parents, suffered lung damage from inhaling radioactive dust at the time of the bombing, lost sight in one eye, or lived their entire lives with only one kidney. A participant described some of the physical suffering they witnessed and experienced:

Table 3. Participants' Health Status and Family Information

No.	Generation	Sex	Age	Region	Health Status	Family Information
1	1	Male	77	Busan	Surgery for skin cancer in 2020	His father went to Japan due to economic hardship.
					Suffering from a chronic skin condition for over 10 years since his 30s	His father suffered from Parkinson's disease, and his mother suffered from a skin condition and liver cirrhosis.
2	1	Male	77	Daegu and Gyeongsanbuk-do	Suffering from unexplained skin disease since age 30	His father suffered from blindness in one eye, skin disease, and kidney disease
					Diagnosed with diabetes	The eldest sister was diagnosed with diabetes, and the younger sister was diagnosed with Takayasu arteritis
					Received twelve surgeries for colon polyps	
3	1	Male	80	Hapcheon	Has had a skin disease for ten years	His father went to Japan for forced conscription
					Suffering from hypertension and weakened knee joints	
					Difficulty writing due to severe hand tremor	
4	1	Male	82	Seoul	Sustained severe leg and back injuries from being rescued from rubble after the A-bomb.	His mother suffered from bone marrow cancer.
					Diagnosed with cardiovascular disease and diabetes	The eldest sister had liver cancer, and the younger sister had a mental illness
5	1	Female	95	Hapcheon	Severe leg swelling due to wounds sustained during the atomic bomb damage	Her son suffered from paralysis
					Wear compression socks every day	
6	1	Female	95	Hapcheon		Born in Japan in 1928 after her parents went there to make money

Table 3. (continued)

No.	Generation	Sex	Age	Region	Health Status	Family Information
7	2	Male	63	Busan	When he was in middle school, he suffered from frequent nosebleeds and collapsed due to anemia	His father was born in Japan and worked as a conscript worker for Mitsubishi in Nagasaki
					Diagnosed with stomach cancer at age 45	
8	2	Female	64	Hapcheon	Suffering from thigh pain since age 15	Her oldest brother died of an unknown disease
						The first and second sisters were diagnosed with cerebral infarction, and the third sister was diagnosed with anechoic necrosis of the femur
					Diagnosed with femoral avascular necrosis	Her son has never been able to sit up due to cerebral palsy
9	2	Male	70	Busan	Diagnosed with diabetes, hypertension, and hepatitis	His mother suffers from hypertension, diabetes, and skin diseases
					Skin disease since birth	His daughter also has a skin disease
10	2	Male	76	Seoul	Skin disease of unknown cause since his mid-20s	His father went to Japan for forced labor
						His father was weak and carried a cane since his thirties
						His younger brother was diagnosed with lung cancer
						His sister's child was born deformed

Source: Authors.

> (Some people) had their gums fall off, their eyes snap … (My leg) broke off the glass and blood just splashed like the sky over here. I'm wearing pressure socks like this right now. (Researchers' interview with ID 5, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

Another participant, witnessed the death of her daughter who had been exposed to the atomic bomb in utero. She hesitantly shared that the child, who kept nursing with all her strength until the end, wasted away to skin and bones and appeared frightening to her:

> When my daughter, an in-utero ABS, was born, she was a chubby, healthy girl. But then she suddenly wasted away and died—just skin and bones. She kept eating until there was no milk left, which was really unsettling. You'd expect someone who's dying to stop eating, but she fed until she couldn't breathe. I'd never seen anything like that. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

One relative of a participant who was also exposed in utero was born without one ear, and another had intellectual disabilities:

> My maternal aunt and my aunt were both pregnant at the time of the atomic bombing. My maternal aunt's child was born without one ear. And my aunt's child has significant intellectual disabilities. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

Second-generation Korean ABSs either died in infancy or suffered chronic skin conditions, cancer, and rare vascular diseases. They also witnessed their parents—who had been exposed to radiation—endure physical pain from cancer or skin diseases or die prematurely. One second-generation participant underwent over ten surgeries for an undiagnosed illness, bore the full cost of treatment, and struggled to care for a child born with a disability, making it difficult to live a normal life:

> In a situation where it's already challenging for me to cope with my own illness, having to take care of my son as well made each day feel like a living hell. It was just a hellish life every day, so painful and full of suffering. Eventually, it became a situation where I felt I could only be discarded in the end, and I couldn't fulfil any of my responsibilities as a mother. Thus, I ended up getting a divorce. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> As the president of the descendants' association, I saw that many of the children of ABSs had suffered from skin diseases. Not all of them, but some also had developmental delays and similar issues. (Researchers' interview with ID 9, Busan, March 12, 2021)

Among the third generation, there were also cases of children born with

illnesses, weak constitutions, or mental health issues. This second-generation participant, for example, shared their son's challenges:

> My eldest son has cerebral palsy and has been bedridden since birth. Even though he is forty-one years old, there is nothing he can do on his own right now. I must feed him. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

While the first generation suffered immediate physical injuries and trauma, the second and third generations experienced various organ damage, rare diseases, developmental disabilities, and mental health challenges. Across all three generations, participants frequently mentioned skin diseases as a common and chronic issue. Parents affected by the atomic bombs experienced a profound sense of guilt regarding the illnesses and suffering observed in their children. Throughout their lives, they harbored ongoing doubts about whether the health issues faced by themselves and their families were the result of their atomic bomb exposure:

> My mother believed that if she had not been an ABS, her children and grandchildren might not have suffered illness and could have lived more peacefully. In the end, she passed away without ever being able to unburden herself of that sorrow. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

Indifference and Discrimination in Their Own Country: Many Korean ABS participants in this study lived for a long time without even recognizing themselves as victims. For most of them, the term "atomic bomb survivors" only became familiar after the 1980s. The second-generation ABSs often learned that their parents were survivors not through direct disclosure, but rather indirectly or during the process of their family registering as atomic bomb victims:

> We didn't know anything because we were too busy just trying to survive. Then, in 1994, we received an official document telling us to attend a meeting. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, March 11, Hapcheon, 2021)

The participants perceived that Korean society was unfamiliar with, and indifferent to, those affected by the atomic bombs. Due to this lack of public awareness, they were often viewed as socially marginal or "othered." Even in Hapcheon, the region with the highest concentration of survivors, public interest in the atomic bombs or their survivors remained minimal. There were cases in which even government officials working in atomic bomb-related affairs were not well-informed about Korean ABSs. Participants described this lack of interest and awareness among the public and civil servants:

> Many people in Korea say, "Why are there any victims of the atomic bomb in Korea?"

> (Researchers' interview with ID 7, Busan, March 12, 2021)

> I worked with a city hall employee to draft the ordinance, but since then, the person in charge has changed three times. I told one of the civil servants, "You should learn about the ABS. You don't even know what it is or when it happened." (Researchers' interview with ID 1, Busan, March 12, 2021)

Silenced Voices about a Brutal and Tragic Life: Korean ABS participants reported experiencing shame and discrimination, making it difficult for them to openly identify themselves as ABSs. They did not openly disclose their experiences—not to those around them, and not even to their own families. Since disclosing their status as an ABS conferred no social benefits, they found little reason to speak about it. They were also cautious of the social stigma, particularly in relation to marriage, and expressed that being an ABS was neither a point of pride nor something they could reveal without fear—rather, it was a source of shame:

> I didn't disclose (that I was an ABS). If there had been any benefits, maybe I would have, but honestly, I felt ashamed to reveal it for no particular reason. (Researchers' interview with ID 2, Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do, March 11, 2021)

> Korean ABSs are hiding because they are ashamed of everything. Isn't it hard for anyone to show that they are disabled? No one, no patient, is willing to show that they are sick. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

Korean ABSs endured such immense and profound suffering that they were unable to speak about their experiences, choosing instead to remain in deep and enduring silence. A second-generation ABS recalled that her mother never spoke about the bombing and avoided the topic entirely, even finding it painful to hear. After becoming a parent herself, she came to understand that her mother, having witnessed her children and grandchildren suffer from illness, disability, and even death, had no choice but to live in a silence shaped by unspeakable pain and an unbearably tragic life:

> My mother didn't really want to talk about the bombing. She avoided the topic and really didn't like hearing us, her children, wonder whether our illnesses were caused by radiation. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

Irresponsible Government: The US, Japan, and the Homeland, Korea

Resentment toward the US's and Japan's Irresponsibility: The US dropped the atomic bombs, and Korean ABSs were exposed to radiation while in Japan as colonial subjects. However, neither the US nor Japan have issued apologies or compensation to Korean ABSs. One participant argued that the US's atomic bombings were, in effect, nuclear experiments conducted on civilian populations:

> Many Koreans say they were liberated because of the atomic bomb, but I don't believe that. I think the US tested the bomb on civilians. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

Japan, meanwhile, provided no support and discriminated against overseas Korean ABSs who had effectively been forced to return to Korea. A second-generation ABS participant spoke to this discrimination by Japan:

> If my father had remained in Japan, he would have received the same healthcare allowances and medical benefits as Japanese citizens. (Researchers' interview with ID 7, Busan, March 12, 2021)

Disillusionment with Their Own Country: Korean ABSs felt that the South Korean government had not provided sufficient apology or consolation for the harm they suffered and the hardships they endured as a result of the state's failure to protect its citizens during the Japanese colonial period. As one participant expressed,

> Korea received 500 to 600 million dollars through diplomatic relations, but the government did not take care of us. Mental health issues need to be addressed, and an apology must come first. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

Some participants perceived the visits of government officials to the bomb survivor-related events in Korea as merely formal gestures lacking genuine sincerity. They pointed out that officials appeared to attend these events out of obligation and, even after witnessing the horrific realities firsthand, seemed to forget them shortly thereafter.

The Korean ABSs perceived the South Korean government as indifferent to them and felt that they were not treated as Korean citizens. Furthermore, compared to other historical victim groups, they experienced discrimination by the state. The Korean ABSs expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that no comprehensive survey has been conducted to date, that there are few relevant policies in place, and that the government has failed to fulfill its promises. Expressing significant disillusionment with the Korean government, participants stated,

> I no longer have any expectations from the Korean government. I only think about dying. Life has just been so weary and painful. (Researchers' interview with ID 5, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> We are citizens of South Korea, too. Please recognize us as victims and provide some support as citizens of South Korea. It's not like we are asking to become wealthy. We

> just want some support for medical expenses when we are sick or at least a bowl of rice to eat when we are hungry. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> The (Korean) government and society treat ABS with such coldness. That make me feel deeply hurt and truly disappointed. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

Resistant Subjects

Isolated Struggle against Both Perpetrators and the Homeland: The Korean ABSs did not remain mere victims. In place of the South Korean government, the Korean survivors themselves demanded apologies from the Japanese and US governments. A small number of Korean survivors, including one participant's father, won lawsuits against the Japanese government, opening a path for overseas Korean survivors to apply directly to the Japanese government for support:

> My father spent about seven years in a legal battle against the Japanese government, eventually won the case, and passed away a month after the victory. (Researchers' interview with ID 7, Busan, March 12, 2021)

Their activism was further fueled by the discovery that Korean ABSs had been excluded from the confidential 1965 Korea-Japan Treaty. In response, the Korean ABSs voiced strong anger and staged protests against the South Korean government.

The Korean ABSs clearly articulated the responsibilities and roles expected of their government. They played a significant role in the enactment of the Special Act for Supporting Korean Atomic Bomb Victims and the Gyeonggi Province ordinance, emphasizing the need for follow-up measures, such as government implementation. They also called for continuous policy development based on comprehensive surveys of the first, second, and third generations of Korean ABSs. The second-generation participants, in the midst of cold, hunger, and suffering, appealed to the government in desperation to survive. Until now, the Korean ABSs have shouldered the work and reflection that should have been the government's responsibility. As several participants explained,

> I believe ABSs' efforts to enact a special law have been remarkable. Now, it is the government's responsibility to take over. This was achieved through the persistent efforts of the Atomic Bomb Victims' Descendants Association. (Researchers' interview with ID 7, Busan, March 12, 2021)

> We realized that waiting for the Ministry of Health and Welfare wouldn't bring change. So, we approached Gyeonggi Province directly to discuss and create an ordinance benefiting the second and third generations. Over seven months, we held

> about eight meetings, organized public hearings, and in 2018, the ordinance was passed. (Researchers' interview with ID 10, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

In South Korea, the cohort study involving Korean ABSs is currently underway. However, the participants voiced criticism over being required to disclose their identities as survivors and to devote time and effort to register for the study, despite the absence of current support and the lack of any guarantee of future assistance. They suggested that if support were first provided to first- and second-generation survivors—and to third-generation survivors if possible—more individuals would be willing to participate in the research:

> They've allocated 500 million won per year for five years, right? If even a portion of that budget were used to provide support, people who truly need it would come forward. To make it possible for them to engage in the research, support must come first. But because it's always just about research and surveys, people end up avoiding it. (Researchers' interview with ID 7, Busan, March 12, 2021)

> The average age of first-generation survivors is around eighty-two to eighty-three. Even now, they are passing away month by month. I hope the academic community will act quickly—conduct research and provide support while there's still time. (Researchers' interview with ID 2, Daegu and Gyeongsanbuk-do, March 11, 2021)

The Voices of the Silenced: The participants felt that if it had not been for the atomic bombings, they would not have had to live such difficult lives. The participants shared that because their realities wer so painful and desperate they eventually began to cry out. They felt, however, like their voices were an echo that never returned: they shouted themselves hoarse in front of the US and Japanese embassies, demanding apologies for the Korean atomic bomb victims. Whenever there were opportunities, the survivors spoke out about the experiences of Korean ABSs:

> It's like grasping at straws—whenever someone comes, I wonder, "Will this person listen to us? Will that person finally hear us out?" All we want is for someone to truly pay attention (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> I had a press conference to meet the US Embassy, the Japanese Embassy, and the Korean foreign minister. (Researchers' interview with ID 10, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

In this study, the researchers encountered ABSs in the Hapcheon region who were even more hidden than others. The researchers bore witness to their voices that emerged from lives lived in concealment. These individuals belonged to an even further marginalized group of Korean ABSs and they had not been included in the ABS cohort studies. These survivors primarily lived in remote

areas of Hapcheon and faced significant physical and daily life challenges, which limited their ability to participate in atomic bomb-related investigations or health screenings. The researchers encountered them either by chance during interviews or through introductions from other participants. During interviews in Hapcheon, the researchers also met a second-generation ABS couple with Down syndrome, but communication was limited. In addition, the researchers visited two households at the far edge of Hapcheon, both consisting of second-generation ABS siblings. In the first household, the older brother suffered from visual impairment and expressed deep frustration about his condition. The younger brother, despite serious health issues such as male breast cancer, lung cancer surgery, and spinal stenosis, had difficulty even standing but still prepared meals and served as a caregiver for his older sibling. Their father had been forcibly conscripted to Japan and became a first-generation ABS. After returning to Korea, he suffered from illness for several years and eventually died without receiving any form of government support. In another sibling household, the younger brother had the cognitive abilities of a three-year-old child. Their mother, a first-generation ABS, had persistently inquired about the possibility of support for the second generation, but passed away without receiving a response. Lastly, the researchers attempted to visit a pair of second-generation sisters who had been institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital in Hapcheon. The visit, however, was unsuccessful due to the absence of a legal guardian. The sisters had developed psychiatric conditions in adulthood and were admitted to the hospital after their mother passed away. Many interview participants expressed concern that only those in relatively good health were participating in the ABS cohort studies. As one participant explained,

> I observed everyone who came in for health checkups and talked to them all. Only those who were somewhat able to function came; the ones who are really sick can't make it. Most of the people who were truly sick had already passed away. The important patients were already gone. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

Hope for Peace in Solidarity with Each Other: One participant shared that interacting with other ABSs had brought her emotional comfort and led her to support those in even greater pain. Through helping fellow survivors, her once despairing outlook on life began to change. She continued to lead a support group for second-generation ABSs and viewed promoting daily well-being through empathy and solidarity as her personal responsibility:

> Living in so much pain, I wanted to find something I could do while being with these people. (Researchers' interview with ID 8, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

The ABSs hoped that the issue of Korean atomic bomb victims would enter public discourse, and they spoke out to Korean society and the international community about their experiences. They emphasized that their suffering was not due to personal fault, but rather a historical tragedy rooted in the times. Thus, they believed people should now be able to speak openly about their pain, struggles, and family histories, and that society should listen without judgment. A first-generation survivor who was over ninety years old, for example, continued sharing her story, through various media and giving interviews. Another participant recalled how, after revealing he was an ABS, acquaintances were surprised at first but later showed interest by asking questions and sharing related articles. The Korean ABSs were also engaged in preserving their life stories through writing, art, and collaborations with scholars, filmmakers, and civic groups. One participant introduced researchers to the Hapcheon Atomic Bomb Museum, where he had collected survivor lists, Japanese records, academic articles, and news reports. Another participant, a teacher, joined exchange programs with Japan, organized atomic bomb photo exhibitions, and gathered anti-war signatures. Explaining why they believed it was important to document the lives of Korean ABSs, participants shared,

> Our life stories need to be written down, but what if I die before the writing is finished? The reason I talk about the atomic bomb wherever I go like this is... because historical records remain. (Researchers' interview with ID 6, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

> I should leave a note for each person (the ABS I meet). I should do it with the mindset of investigating. Then, this will be a reference in the future. (Researchers' interview with ID 4, Seoul, March 15, 2021)

As individuals who had experienced war and nuclear weapons, the participants emphasized anti-war and anti-nuclear messages. They also highlighted the need to establish a World Peace Park in Korea and stressed that awareness of these issues should be promoted through Korean school textbooks. What they hope for is a world free from such destruction, a life that does not harm others, and lasting peace:

> Nuclear war is so scary. Who are we fighting for? Isn't it simply greed? It's greed for finances and power. (Researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021)

> Do not fight. What's the point of fighting? Only human lives will be lost. We should not engage in fighting. (Researchers' interview with ID 6, Hapcheon, March 31, 2023)

Discussion

This study identified the problems of atomic bomb damage in the colonial context by examining the exposure of the first- and second-generation Korean ABSs, their experiences of liberation, and changes in their perceptions and experiences upon returning to Korean society.

Double Bomb or Double Discrimination

The Korean ABS participants found it difficult to speak about their experiences of the bombing within Korean society. They described feeling ashamed that they or their family members were victims of the atomic bomb, stating that they were "living in hiding" in Korea. Even when they mustered the courage to disclose their status as an ABS, they said that Korean society did not listen to their voices. This is partly because, in the Korean historical, social, and structural context, the atomic bombs of 1945 have been perceived as largely positive, having been dropped on Japanese soil—that is, the soil of the occupier—and considered as a crucial factor in Korea's liberation (Ryu, Cho, and Chi 2020; Kim 2009; Takahashi 2023). One interview participant testified, "Not only people who are not victims, but many ABSs themselves say that Korea was liberated because of the atomic bomb" (researchers' interview with ID 3, Hapcheon, March 11, 2021). Such historical perceptions and social attitudes have formed the basis for the political and social oppression and discrimination of Korean ABSs and have also provided the Korean government with a rationale for failing to provide an apology and policy support. This stands in stark contrast to the position Japanese survivors secured internationally, socially, and culturally, as Japan actively promoted its identity to the world as a victim of the atomic bomb rather than as a perpetrator of war (Zwigenberg 2015; Dower 2000).

While the atomic bombing of Japanese nationals was a consequence of war, the bombing of Koreans—what survivors have referred to as an "unjust bombing"—was the result of colonial rule, through which forced mobilization or economic hardship led to Koreans residing in Japan. Immediately after the bombing, Korean survivors endured far more dire circumstances than Japanese survivors. They were forcibly mobilized for relief and reconstruction work, which further exposed them to continued indirect radiation. Emergency medical facilities prioritized treatment for Japanese victims (Tong 1991), and the mortality rate among Koreans was 57.1%, far higher than the overall average mortality rate of 33.7% (Kim 2012). This demonstrates that the damage caused by the atomic bombings was more severe for Koreans than for Japanese. Koreans, who were compelled to return to Korea, were excluded from Japanese compensation and did not receive adequate post-bombing medical care. Study participants also testified that ABSs would have received various forms of support had they

remained in Japan.

Japanese survivors also suffered from illnesses caused by the bombings, fears about the potential genetic effects, and the social discrimination related to illness and heredity (Chappell 2020; Knowles 2009; Sawada, Chaitin, and Bar-On 2004; Tomoike 2007; Kamite 2017). Some hid their children or deliberately avoided registering as *hibakusha* (Japanese ABS) to evade the social discrimination associated with the atomic bombings that could, for example, jeopardize their children's marriage prospects (Chappell 2020; Tatara 1998). However, while Korea only enacted the Special Act on the Support for Korean Atomic Bomb Victims in 2017 (Republic of Korea 2016), Japan established the ABS Medical Care Law in 1957, officially defining the category of ABS and providing government-supported medical benefits (Naono 2019). Korea only began the Korean ABS Cohort study in 2020, whereas Japan had actively surveyed the number of Japanese victims immediately after the bombing, conducted status assessments, carried out health research, and even provided medical support to some second-generation survivors in certain areas (Jung, Lee, Yun, et al. 2018). Through registration of survivors, Japan has been conducting cohort studies of first- and second-generation survivors since the 1950s, publishing results and building a comprehensive national support system. Japan's Life Span Study has produced extensive research on mortality, cancer incidence, and related topics (Ozasa, Grant, and Kodama 2018; Preston et al. 2003; Ozasa et al. 2012; Shimizu et al. 1999; Shimizu, Schull, and Kato 1990; Cologne and Preston 2000). The Hiroshima University ABS cohort has focused on a broader population, including those who were not directly bombed but entered the city afterward, publishing findings on their radiation exposure and health conditions (Matsuura et al. 1997; Matsuba et al. 2016; Hara et al. 2016). A study has found that most second-generation Japanese survivors who grew up in the affected areas did not experience discrimination or prejudice (Kamite 2017). In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the large number of survivors and widespread public awareness of atomic bomb damage fostered an environment of recognition for Japanese survivors. In contrast, Korean survivors lived among those who never experienced the bombing, in a country and society that offer no apologies, comfort, research, policy, or support—indeed, no meaningful effort to address the issue. As a result, Korean ABSs faced deep discrimination. They endured not only the physical harm of radiation but also social discrimination and exclusion, living in Korea like silent people under the weight of a "double bomb" and "double discrimination."

Extended Colonial Period

The Japanese government did not admit responsibility for the suffering of Korean ABSs, and Japan emphasized to the world that it was a country affected by the atomic bomb without acknowledging or apologizing for the damage. According to the 1965 Korea-Japan Claims Agreement—in which Korea and Japan

committed to normalizing diplomatic relations, settling compensation, and building economic cooperation—Japan paid Korea $300 million free of charge (grants) and $200 million in loans and Korea agreed to formally end its claims against Japan (Kim 2012). The Korean government spent the funds on a national infrastructure project, excluding the ABSs. The "double discrimination" described by Korean ABSs refers to the injustice of Korean ABSs not receiving the same protection and compensation as the Japanese victims, living instead as if they were still citizens of the colony. At the same time, they never felt as though they were true citizens of Korea. During the Japanese colonial period, the Korean state lacked the power to protect its people, yet Korean ABSs have remained without the protection or concern of the state through to the present day. Thus, the concept of a "double bomb" presented in this study is not limited to the physical harm caused by radiation exposure—rather, it is a metaphor that highlights the severity of the secondary harm of social discrimination and exclusion experienced by Korean ABSs. It is distinct from the commonly used term "double burden," which typically refers to additional economic responsibilities, and instead highlights the survivors' unique historical realities. In other words, Korean ABSs have had to live not only with the aftereffects of the atomic bombings, but also with another figurative bomb—structural discrimination from both Japanese and Korean societies.

Victim but Also the Object of Resistance

In Japan, Japanese ABSs received state support (Nemoto 2021). Rather than resisting the US, hibakusha came to be recognized as individuals who, through personal reflection and introspection, voiced anti-nuclear and anti-war sentiments on their own terms (Jin 2021). With the support and attention of the Japanese government, they were able to overcome trauma and anxiety, gain insight into the meaning of life, testify about their exposure experiences, sublimate their suffering, and ultimately become central figures in the anti-nuclear movement (Knowles 2009, 2011; Nemoto 2015; Matsuo 2010; Yoshida 2022). The experiences of Japanese ABSs were actively utilized as national and global narratives in alignment with Japan's political purposes (Zwigenberg 2015; Okuda 2011). In contrast, Korean ABSs, having received no support from either state or society, became agents of resistance in their own lives. The Korean ABSs, who felt abandoned by both the state and society, initially hid themselves out of shame. Yet, as life became unbearably painful, they began to speak out, again and again. They reached out and provided comfort to fellow survivors, stood together in solidarity, and refused to live solely as victims. Korean survivors took it upon themselves to collect historical materials related to the atomic bombings, share their experiences through oral histories and testimonies, engage with Japanese students and teachers, contribute to the construction of the exhibition hall and Peace Park in Hapcheon, establish organizations in various regions, and raise

their voices within Korean society. The enactment of the Special Act on the Support for Korean Atomic Bomb Victims and the establishment of related ordinances were direct outcomes of these survivors' tireless efforts (Palmer 2008; Oh 2013). The Korean ABSs were angered by the irresponsibility of the US, who dropped the atomic bomb, and of Japan, who initiated the war. They regarded both Japan and the US as perpetrators of the atomic bombings and stood in front of their embassies demanding apologies and compensation. The Korean ABSs also felt disillusionment with the Korean government's indifference, ignorance, and discrimination, and therefore held the Korean government accountable for its responsibilities to its citizens.

In 2024, the Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the Council of Atomic Bomb Victims' Organizations, a civil society group that has led grassroots movements on behalf of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors (The Nobel Prize 2024). The Committee recognized the group's efforts to build a world without nuclear weapons and to prevent the future use of such arms through their testimony and activism. However, it is essential to remember that the pain and devastation caused by the atomic bombs were not limited to Japanese citizens. Recognition of the suffering and the calls for peace that arose from overcoming that pain must also include those of the Korean victims who lived under Japanese colonial rule.

Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations regarding the timing of the interviews. In 2021, after analyzing the interviews with six ABSs, it was determined that additional interviews were necessary. In 2023, two researchers conducted interviews with four ABSs in Hapcheon. Although the interviews were conducted at different points in time, the additional data collection enabled more in-depth questioning. Through the follow-up interviews, it was possible to reach Korean ABSs whose stories had previously remained hidden. This highlighted the need to reflect their unheard voices in future research and policymaking and to develop more inclusive support measures. Furthermore, among the ten ABSs, male participants tended to be more actively involved in the atomic bomb victim's association; they were more likely to recall their experiences in greater detail and to communicate and engage with other survivors.

Future Research and Policy Recommendations

In the future, a government-led survey encompassing first-, second-, and third-generation Korean ABSs is urgently needed. Between 1993 and 2017, a total of 4,255 first-generation Korean ABSs were registered with the Korean Red Cross. By 2017, 1,911 had passed away and 2,344 were still alive (Korean Red Cross 2024; Jung, Lee, Cho, et al. 2018). By 2023, the average age of surviving ABSs had reached 83.3 years. As the mortality rate of first-generation survivors continues

to rise rapidly (Korean Red Cross 2024), limited time remains to accurately assess the total number and conditions of Korean ABSs across three generations.

In this study, most participants reported that they or many members of their families suffered from skin diseases. They had either been diagnosed at hospitals with rare conditions, had not received an accurate diagnosis, or relied on folk remedies. According to a study by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, the prevalence of atopic dermatitis among second-generation Korean ABSs was about five times higher for men and about seven times higher for women compared to the general population (Lee and Jung 2022). There is a need for hospitals and institutions where the diagnosis, treatment, and research of diseases affecting ABSs can be conducted.

As there are many unregistered Korean ABSs and participation in research is likely more difficult for those in poor health, measures such as providing prior support should be implemented to increase registration and research participation. If the Korean government were to establish a formal support program for first-, second-, and third-generation survivors that includes regular health screenings, psychological counseling services, and genetic monitoring, it could help address the health problems and alleviate the anxieties of Korean ABSs and their descendants.

Significance of the Study

In this study, two researchers conducted and analyzed interviews to minimize potential bias. This research explores the long-term experiences of ABSs, covering the historical trajectory from Japanese colonization, through the atomic bombings, to their eventual return to Korea. It examines the lives of first- and second-generation Korean ABSs in a comprehensive and integrated manner. While many previous studies have amplified the voices of ABSs, this study is distinctive in its exclusive focus on Korean ABSs—a group that has been largely excluded from international discourse. By highlighting the lived experiences of both first- and second-generation survivors, from the colonial period to the present day, this study contributes a significant perspective that has long been overlooked in both historical and academic narratives. In doing so, it addresses critical gaps in the literature about marginalized populations affected by the atomic bombs.

Conclusion

Colonial Koreans who endured the atomic bombings faced prolonged double discrimination in the aftermath of the war and colonialism. They navigated life as both survivors and resistors, experiencing more challenging conditions compared to Japanese ABSs. Their unique experiences and perspectives underscore the

existence of a distinct tragedy and life narrative, beyond what Japanese ABSs convey. As most first-generation ABSs have passed away and the monumental tragedy of the atomic bomb is gradually fading from collective memory, listening to the voices of not only the first generation but also the second and third generations is crucial. At a time when global political tensions are on the rise once again, this endeavor remains vital for the survival and future of humanity. On the eightieth anniversary of the atomic bombings, the above findings contribute to the necessary broadening of discussions related to this critical event in world history and its implications for future warfare.

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