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Koreans in Japan: a struggle for acceptance.

Korea and Japan, by virtue of being neighboring countries, have had a long and connected history spanning over a millennia. The relationship is characterized by an exchange of culture, trade, war, idea, and ultimately people. My first exposure to this issue of zainichi Koreans was through a friend I met at an internship. He was ethnically Korean and grew up in Los Angeles. However, I noticed that his middle name was Izumi, which is Japanese. Slightly puzzled, I asked him if one of his parents was Japanese. He told me that his parents were both Korean, but that his grandparents had lived in Japan since the end of World War II and they had wanted to give him and his brother Japanese names. I was intrigued by the fact that his grandparents identified so much with the Japanese culture such that they decided to give their grandsons Japanese names.

The Japanese term zainichi means “staying in Japan.” Paired with the word Korean, the use of the phrase zainichi Koreans, or simply zainichi in Japan, reflects the supposed temporary nature of the Korean people. However, this term is a misnomer considering the fact that Korean families have stayed in Japan for multiple generations; most families’ stays have not been temporary but rather quite permanent. Despite their long stay, a large proportion of Koreans do not have Japanese citizenship. Japan is a *jus sanguinis* country, in which citizenship is determined by family lineage. This contrasts with a *jus solis* country, like the United States, which grants citizenship based on an individual’s place of birth. There are both top-down and bottom-up reasons to explain

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why Koreans have not obtained Japanese citizenship. From a top-down perspective, it was historically difficult to obtain Japanese citizenship because of strict requirements placed on applicants. Meanwhile, a bottom-up reason is that some zainichi Koreans find it difficult to reconcile wanting to maintain their Korean heritage while obtaining Japanese citizenship because becoming a citizen carries certain political and emotional significance that trumps the legal aspect. Obtaining citizenship is more equivalent to ethnically and culturally assimilating to the Japanese identity, which some ethnic Koreans may not wish to do.

A brief overview of Japanese and Korean relations is required to fully understand the plight of zainichi Koreans. One of the most significant events in the history of these two nations was the formal annexation of the Korean peninsula by Japan in 1910. While there were some Koreans living in Japan prior to 1910, the population was quite small. Some estimate that there were only four Koreans living in Japan in 1882, and 790 Koreans in 1909.¹ After the annexation, the Japanese government brought over Koreans as workers because of a shortage of labor. Koreans likewise sought to move to Japan to seek better educational and employment opportunities.² Most Koreans worked in the mining and construction industries, typically performing menial labor.³ Around the time of World War II, Japan brought over more Koreans to fill the demand for increasing laborers

¹ Tamura, T. (2003) “The Status and Role of Ethnic Koreans in Japanese Society,” in

² Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies. Fall 2010. *Koreans in Japan*, pages 1-3.
http://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Koreans_inJapan.pdf

³ *Koreans in Japan*, page 1.

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required for increased production of supplies used during the war.⁴ Voluntary migration turned into forced migration, with around 700,000 – 800,000 Koreans coming into Japan. It is estimated that Koreans made up about 32% of the industrial labor force in Japan in 1945.⁵ Furthermore, over 200,000 ethnic Koreans fought on behalf of the Japanese empire in World War II.⁶ It is also estimated that over 30,000 Koreans died in the atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima.⁷ By 1945, over two million Koreans lived in Japan.⁸ After the war ended, most Koreans returned back to the peninsula, but it is estimated that around 600,000 Koreans had remained in Japan in 1948.⁹

There were a myriad of reasons for Koreans to stay in Japan after the war. Some Koreans had obtained a privileged status in Japan by virtue of rising in the ranks of the military or achieving a successful business. In 1932 and 1937, 187 Koreans ran for public office with 53 being elected.¹⁰ One Korean even made it into the Diet, the Japanese parliament.¹¹ Other Koreans saw Korea as being a poor and undeveloped country, and staying in Japan offered them greater security. Looking back from the present, these individuals might have made the right call considering that the Korean War broke out just

⁴ *Koreans in Japan*, page 1.

⁵ Chung, E.A. (2010). *Immigration and citizenship in Japan*. Cambridge University Press, page 68.

⁶ *Koreans in Japan*, page 1.

⁷ *Koreans in Japan*, page 2.

⁸ Chung, page 68.

⁹ *Koreans in Japan*, page 2.

¹⁰ Chung, page 68.

¹¹ Chung, page 69.

five years after the end of the World War II from 1950 to 1953. Some Koreans had married Japanese spouses and/or had Japanese born and speaking children.¹² Moving their entire families to a new country with a different language and an underlying recent history of annexation would have been extremely difficult. And for some Koreans, they simply could not afford the travel fare to reach a port city and get on a boat back to Korea.¹³

Historically, the pre-war Japanese empire was made up of various ethnic groups such as the Ainu, Okinawans, Koreans, and Taiwanese.^{14,15} Prior to the end of World War II, the Japanese government took the position that Koreans should be integrated into the broader imperial power in order to reinforce Japan's position as a strong and unified power in the East.¹⁶ This was achieved not only through granting citizenship, but also through preventing usage of the Korean language, requiring Koreans to adopt Japanese names, and requiring worshipping the Shinto belief.¹⁷ Koreans were given Japanese citizenship, which seemed logical considering that the peninsula was merely a political extension of Japan. However, the Japanese government took a completely different view of assimilating ethnic groups after its defeat in the war in order to distance itself from its

¹² *Koreans in Japan*, page 2.

¹³ *Koreans in Japan*, page 2.

¹⁴ Htun, T.T. (2012, February). *Social Identities of minority others in Japan: listening to the narratives of Ainu, Buraku, and Zainichi Koreans*. In *Japan Forum* (Vol. 24, No.1, pp. 77-97). Taylor & Francis Group.

¹⁵ Chung, page 63.

¹⁶ Htun, page 1.

¹⁷ Chung, page 63.

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imperialistic and militaristic practices it employed during the war.¹⁸ Japan formally no longer recognized Koreans as Japanese citizens pursuant to the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty.¹⁹ In 1945, the Election Law took away ethnic Koreans' voting rights.²⁰ The 1947 Alien Registration Law identified ethnic Koreans as belonging to the Chosun group and required them to carry alien registration cards at all times.²¹ In 1950, the Nationality Law proclaimed that only mixed-race Japanese Korean children who had Japanese fathers could obtain Japanese citizenship; those children born from Korean fathers but Japanese mothers would not qualify.²²

In 1991, the Japanese government created a special permanent residency system for individuals and their families born in former Japanese colonies. This system eased some requirements for such special permanent residents, such as not requiring fingerprinting and extending the length of stay requirement.²³ Considering that zainichi Koreans make up the largest minority population in Japan, it was a victory for ethnic Koreans and one step in the positive direction to obtain greater equality in the law.²⁴ While zainichi Koreans benefitted from this special status, it still deprives Koreans the

¹⁸ Chung, page 64.

¹⁹ Chung, page 64.

²⁰ *Koreans in Japan*, page 2.

²¹ Chung, page 108.

²² Chung, page 49.

²³ Tamura, page 87.

²⁴ Yamada, A. & Yusa, T. (2014). *Ethnic Microaggressions: The Experiences of Zainichi Korean Students in Japan*. Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies. (Vol. 10, No.2). <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8620q2sx>

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right to vote in elections and as well as not receive benefits of some pension and social welfare clauses

In lacking Japanese citizenship, zainichi Koreans are faced with numerous challenges, such as receiving social welfare benefits, obtaining employment, and encountering hate speech. The unemployment levels among zainichi Koreans is about double that of the Japanese national average in the same year.²⁵ Some believe that the unemployment rate is higher because ethnic Koreans switch jobs frequently, typically working in the service industry.²⁶

Excluding zainichi Koreans from the National Pension benefits – zainichi Koreans over the age of 60 as of April 1, 1986 and over the age of 20 with disabilities as of January 1, 1982 cannot receive benefits if they are not Japanese citizens.²⁷ The Japanese government maintains the argument that there is no nationality requirement or clause in the National Pension Law and is therefore not discriminatory against foreigners.²⁸ However, certain activist groups argue that non-retroactively eliminating the nationality requirement and adding the requirement that an individual must pay 25 years worth of contributions to the pension disparately affects ethnic Koreans who lost Japanese

²⁵ Tamura, page 91.

²⁶ Tamura, page 92.

²⁷ Lawyers Association of Zainichi Koreans (LAZAK). *Discrimination Against Koreans in Japan: Japan's Violation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Presented at the 85th Session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Geneva, Austria. August 2014.

²⁸ LAZAK, page 8.

citizenship during the post-war era.²⁹ Despite having filed multiple lawsuits for such discriminatory practices, zainichi Koreans have yet to receive a favorable response from the courts.³⁰

Zainichi Koreans and other foreign nationals are also not allowed to hold government positions that exercise public power or decision-making on behalf of the public. For example, a Korean nurse holding special permanent residency that worked at a hospital run by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was denied from a managerial position because she lacked Japanese citizenship.³¹ Furthermore, ethnic Koreans without citizenship are unable to take on leadership positions or the position of principal in Japanese public schools because they are qualified as full time lecturers without term limits rather than teachers.³² A large number of local governments also require firefighters to be Japanese citizens. Other official positions related to civil rights and welfare volunteering are also limited to citizens.³³

The government and nationalistic groups take on the stance that individuals with the authority to influence the public and use revenue collected from the public should be the citizens. However, a counterargument is that perhaps citizenship should not be the end-all of defining who is or is not Japanese, or even who is a good candidate for the

²⁹ LAZAK, page 10.

³⁰ LAZAK, page 12.

³¹ LAZAK, page 14.

³² LAZAK, page 16.

³³ LAZAK, page 18.

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position in question. A lack of legal citizenship because of one's ethnicity does not completely justify preventing perhaps well-qualified individuals to take leadership positions, or even jobs that may not have a connection or relation to one's citizenship. Furthermore, special permanent residents also pay taxes to the government that supports these local governmental institutions. Zainichi Koreans had their nationality arbitrarily stripped from them after the war, and it has been a struggle to obtain Japanese citizenship without giving up their ethnic diversity and identity. Most were born in Japan, have lived in the country for their entire lives, pay taxes, speak Japanese, and understand Japanese culture.

Zainichi Koreans also are targets of hate speech from ultra-right wing, ultra-nationalistic Japanese groups such as the Zaitokukai and the Action Conservative Movement.³⁴ Of 203 zainichi Korean residents ranging in age from their teens to their 30s, over 80% reported having experienced or having been aware of hate speech.³⁵ These anti-Korean sentiment spreading groups protest in front of Korean schools and in certain areas of Koreatown in Osaka, where a large percentage of zainichi live.³⁶ These demonstrations are not just protesters picketing signs saying "go back to your country" or

³⁴ Brown, L. (2015). *Caught between two countries: Zainichi Koreans in Japan*. Virginia Review of Asian Studies. (Vol. 17, pp. 254-260).

³⁵ Osumi, M. *Counseling offered for Korean youths in Japan victimized by discrimination*. The Japan Times, July 22, 2014.

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/22/national/social-issues/counseling-offered-korean-youths-japan-victimized-discrimination/> - .Vx4EdKMrLdQ

³⁶ Brown, page 256.

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“leave Japan,” but filled with much vitriol. Some signs say “Roaches” or “Let’s Kill Koreans.”³⁷ While the protests are not violent and have not yet led to any serious physical injuries or altercations, the alarming sense of disgust and repulsion in the language that they use is quite shocking. The hate speech projected is not only on the streets and in the various Korean neighborhoods, but they also take place online. Another group called the Action Conservative Movement has mobilized individuals to take action and attract new members through streaming videos uploaded online. It is estimated as of 2012 that membership among the movement reached nearly 12,000 individuals.³⁸ Despite Japan’s lack of social activism, the fact that the movement is spreading is an indication that this idea is spreading. While he failed to achieve a seat in the Tokyo Metropolitan government, the leader of an extreme right-wing party candidate Suzuki Yoshiyuki was able to obtain more than 77,000 votes in July 2013.³⁹

Luckily, there have been some changes concerning issues around hate speech. In July 2014, the Osaka district’s high court ordered the Zaitokukai to pay around \$111,000 to a pro-North Korean elementary school in Kyoto for its language directed at the school and school children.⁴⁰ Some of the protestors shouted comments such as “[Koreans] raped Japanese women in the turmoil after the war and occupied this land” and “Children? Give

³⁷ Hayashi, Y. *Anit-Korean Voices Grow in Japan*. The Wall Street Journal, May 16, 2013. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324031404578482570250163826>

³⁸ Ito, K. (2014). *Anti-Korean Sentiment and Hate Speech in the Current Japan: A Report from the Street*. Procedia Environmental Sciences. (Vol. 20, pp. 434-443).

³⁹ Ito, page 437.

⁴⁰ Ito, page 438.

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me a break. They are children of criminals.”⁴¹ While the Zaitokukai appealed, the Supreme Court of Japan ultimately upheld the ruling against the group.⁴² There has also been pressure from the international community and from domestic leaders for the government to adopt or reform hate speech laws in light of the 2020 Summer Olympics taking place in Tokyo. In 2014, the United Nations’ Human Rights Committee stated that Japan add hate speech to legislation directed at combating racial discrimination.⁴³

While this type of hate speech affects zainichi Koreans, their encounters of such protests would typically be sporadic events. Meanwhile, most zainichi Koreans face subtle and indirect microaggression discrimination on a more frequent basis. Microaggressions are generalized and damaging insults based on stereotypes, attitudes, or actions. Rather than the direct high-level institutional racism that occurs on a higher level, microaggressions are the subtle insults, phrases of insensitivity or disregard that marginalized populations face on an everyday basis from childhood all the way up to adulthood.⁴⁴ Because discrimination in Japan is based on ethnicity rather than race, it is phenotypically very difficult to distinguish Japanese from Koreans. In order to minimize dealing with microaggressions, zainichi typically take on Japanese names as their assumed

⁴¹ Ito, page 438.

⁴² Boyd, J. *Hate speech in Japan: To ban or not ban?* Al Jazeera, March 19, 2015.
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/03/hate-speech-japan-ban-ban-150310102402970.html>

⁴³ *Spin and Substance*. The Economist, September 27, 2014.
<http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21620252-troubling-rise-xenophobic-vitriol-spin-and-substance>

⁴⁴ Yamada & Yusa, page 14.

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names in school or at work.⁴⁵ While immigrants often change their first names to assimilate and accommodate the majority population in the United States, rarely do you see immigrants changing their surnames. It would be as if I changed my name Young-Min Cho to Madison Smith; this almost never happens in immigrant families in my experience as an immigrant to the United States. Surprisingly, this is quite common in Japan. Surveys show that only 14.2% of primary students and 9% of older students use a Korean name.⁴⁶ The fact that zainichi Koreans change the first and last names shows the extent to which they go to conceal their Korean heritage in order to be more accepted and less conspicuous.

There has been progress in obtaining greater rights for zainichi Koreans in the past few decades primarily beginning in the 1970s. One of the most famous cases involving discrimination against Koreans is commonly referred to as the Hitachi case. Park Chon Sok sat for a placement test for the Hitachi Corporation, a large manufacturer of electronic goods, using his Japanese name.⁴⁷ He successfully passed the test. However, when Hitachi found out that Park was not a Japanese citizen, it revoked its offer of employment.⁴⁸ The court found in his favor, stating that it was reasonable for Park to use his Japanese name

⁴⁵ Yamada & Yusa, page 14.

⁴⁶ Yamada & Yusa, page 14.

⁴⁷ Maher, J.C. (1995). *Diversity in Japanese Culture and Language*. Routledge, page 130.

⁴⁸ Maher, page 139.

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given the social and historical tensions between Japan and Korea, and that Hitachi illegally dismissed Park.⁴⁹

Another case involves Kim Kyung Deok, the first non-Japanese citizen to pass the bar and become a qualified lawyer practicing in Japan.⁵⁰ Born in to Korean parents brought over because of WWII, Kim Kyeong Deok was a resident of Japan but not a citizen.⁵¹ He successfully passed the bar examination, which was viewed as notoriously difficult in the past, and applied enter the two-year legal training required by all individuals before becoming lawyers.⁵² However, the Supreme Court rejected his application stating that he must first apply to become a citizen in order to proceed.⁵³ He successfully argued to allow non-citizens to not be forced to go through naturalization as a prerequisite to practicing law. His fight led 27 other legal trainees to be accepted into the program and become attorneys by the year 1990.⁵⁴ His son, Kim Chang Ho, is also a Japanese lawyer currently working on refugee and minority rights issues.

Another very famous case concerning discrimination against Koreans is commonly referred to as the ‘Case on National Pension.’ Kim Hyonjo was persuaded by a city

⁴⁹ Maher, page 139.

⁵⁰ Koshiro, Y. (1999). *Trans-Pacific racisms and the U.S. occupation of Japan*. Columbia University Press, page 216.

⁵¹ Maher, page 140.

⁵² Maher, page 140.

⁵³ Maher, page 140.

⁵⁴ Maher, page 140.

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worker to contribute to the National Pension Program in 1960 when he was 50 years old.⁵⁵ Assured by the public official that non-citizens could also contribute and receive benefits, he faithfully put money into the program for twelve years.⁵⁶ When he turned 65, however, he was unable to receive his pension because he was not a Japanese citizen. The office reimbursed him for his 12-year contribution, but Kim instead decided to bring a lawsuit against the government regarding the program.⁵⁷ He was successfully able to obtain his pension for himself and 80 other elderly *zainichi* Koreans who had also opted into the program.⁵⁸

The situation seems to be improving for *zainichi* Koreans, but there is still a long road ahead in order to fully be equal in the eyes of Japanese law. The Japanese government and society need to embrace a more multicultural and diverse population for such discrimination to end. While it would be great to open public perception of minority peoples and foreigners as a way to be more inclusive, we cannot take such a simple naïve view. Perhaps a more convincing argument that incentivizes greater acceptance of different peoples is that having more foreigners or immigrants will help maintain Japan's status as one of the largest economies in the world. Currently, Japan faces a rapidly aging population and a shrinking younger population. It is predicted that by 2060 that over 50%

⁵⁵ Maher, page 140.

⁵⁶ Maher, page 141.

⁵⁷ Maher, page 141.

⁵⁸ Maher, page 141.

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of the population will be over the age of 65 years old.⁵⁹ This upside-down demographic pyramid presents major challenges for the government in seeking to provide welfare benefits for the growing population of elderly peoples, maintain industrial production, and continue to grow its economy. While only 37% of the public responded as being receptive to the idea of foreign workers entering Japan to secure its labor force, if the government enacted more laws and promoted a greater sense of acceptance the public's perspective would change.⁶⁰ And that should begin by promoting greater equality amongst the foreign residents living in Japan. While Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is currently pushing an agenda to increase female participation in the workforce to perhaps offset the alternative, and perhaps less nationalistic, option of bringing workers into Japan, his policy has been met with great skepticism. In speaking with leaders in the Japanese women's rights movement, they seem to suggest that more works needs to be done both institutionally and culturally to break down the barriers such that women are not forced to choose between work and family. In similar fashion, the Japanese government should take both a top-down and bottom-up approach to adopting a greater sense of tolerance towards minorities. Institutionally, the government should ease the requirements in becoming a citizen and promote laws and regulations that strengthen minority rights. However, institutional changes will not occur unless the public perception also changes. Perhaps it would be a

⁵⁹ Schubach, A. *The case for a more multicultural Japan*. Al Jazeera America, November 12, 2014.

<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/11/multiculturalismjapanantikoreanprotests.html>

⁶⁰ Schubach.

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good idea to promote a campaign for better understanding about minorities' histories and rights among the public to grow tolerance and acceptance. These suggestions may seem naïve and idealistic, especially considering the firm nationalistic stance of Prime Minister Abe, but they are in theory the only ways to promote a more equal treatment of zainichi Koreans and other marginalized groups. With the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo drawing closer, we can hope that greater scrutiny and pressure from the international community as we start to focus on Japan and learn more about the country will lead to some change. We cannot hope that the development of minority rights will encounter a dramatic change one day, considering the long and complex history and the ever tension-filled diplomatic relations regarding historical issues between Korea and Japan. However, we must not give up hope and continue to fight for change even one small step at a time.