Diversity of Zainichi Koreans and Their Ties to Japan and Korea

Soo im Lee
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Soo im Lee*

Introduction

Multiple generations of Koreans, numbering just under 600,000² and in diverse legal and residential categories, reside in Japan today. The majority of these resident Koreans, commonly termed zainichi (Japanese: “present in Japan”) Koreans, are descendants of colonial-era migrants from the southern Korean peninsula during the first half of the twentieth century. It is in fact not always obvious who belongs to the zainichi Korean collective. They appear indistinguishable from the Japanese, and their cultural literacy, use of Japanese pass names,³ and native fluency in Japanese allows “passing” as a way of life, making them an invisible postcolonial community.

Despite the community’s high degree of social and cultural assimilation to Japanese society, zainichi Koreans are legally marginalized and treated as foreign residents. Although over 80 percent of zainichi Koreans were born in Japan, and the current demographics include highly assimilated second, third and fourth generations, they are categorized as foreign residents unless they go through the strict process of naturalization. In this respect, Japan is currently the only advanced nation with a fourth-generation immigrant problem derived from exclusivist policies in dealing with foreign residents, particularly colonial subjects.

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² The total number of resident foreigners (the 2010 data from the Ministry of Justice) is 2,134,151. Zainichi Koreans were the largest group until 2007, when Chinese-nationality residents replaced them. The Korean community is shrinking rapidly because of the aging of the first and second generations, Japanese citizenship acquisition, and intermarriage with Japanese. The Ministry of Justice reported 565,989 residents in the category of Korea and Chōsen. Special permanent residents, permanent residents, and visa holders are all included in the category.

³ Japanese pass names are legally approved, and the government maintains that the use of Japanese names helps Koreans avoid discrimination. Two names are registered in the drivers’ license, and more than 90 percent of Koreans use their Japanese pass names at schools, at work and in their daily lives.
It is important to note, however, that Koreans were Japanese nationals under colonial rule, and it was not until 1952 that they were forcibly deprived of Japanese citizenship (Tanaka 1995). This was a violation of international law and a different path from that taken by Germany, which offered its former colonized citizens the choice of either remaining German citizens or recovering their original citizenship. This legal exclusion of former colonial subjects may not have been a concern for Korean migrants who repatriated to the Korean peninsula after World War II, but it had a significant impact on the lives of the one million Koreans who remained in Japan.

Different historical and social circumstances shaped zainichi Korean experiences across multiple generations. When Korea was colonized in 1910, first-generation Koreans who migrated to Japan experienced relentless discrimination due to their ethnic background and second-class status. The second generation, born in Japan, continued to be excluded from mainstream society, were affected by various forms of prejudice, and were barred from equal participation in society. The third generation, born during the era of the Japanese civil rights movement and internationalization, began voicing their concerns and demanding equal rights. The result was that ethnic identity formation differed greatly among these three generations. In addition, differences in citizenship (South Korean, those who have retained Joseon (old, undivided Korea, or naturalized Japanese of Korean descents), ideology (pledging allegiance to North Korea or not), educational factors (being educated in Japanese or Korean ethnic schools), and socioeconomic background heightened the diversity among Koreans living in Japan.

This paper focuses on zainichi Korean identity, ethnicity, and citizenship from a historical and contemporary perspective in relation to ties to their homelands—South and North Korea as well as Japan. This study also aims at illuminating the changing circumstances and shifting identities across different generations, and discusses the future prospects of Japan’s oldest, yet diminishing, postcolonial community.

1. Historical Background

In this section, the legal status of Koreans in Japan from 1910 to the present is traced chronologically.

During the 1910s, confiscations of land and rice harvests carried out against Korean farmers under Japanese colonial rule led to a rural exodus of Korean farmers seeking work overseas (So 1987). Increasing numbers of displaced farmers in the southern regions who had lost their land migrated to Japan. By 1920, approximately 30,000 Koreans had migrated to Japan (Kawa 1997, 22). After Japan's rice riots in 1918, Japan reorganized the farm villages of its colonies to stabilize the rice supply. This led to an increase in migration, with 300,000 to
400,000 Korean farmers entering Japan by the year 1930 (Ibid, 22). Since Koreans were Japanese citizens under the colonial nationality clause, migration from the periphery of the empire to large Japanese cities was considered domestic migration, although migrants had to apply for permission to relocate (Ibid, 24). Korean language and culture was discouraged and eventually forbidden during the colonial period, and Japan's religion of Shintoism and system of Emperor worship were forced upon colonized subjects.

Since Korea had become a logistical base for Japan's invasion of China, the destruction of farm villages proceeded and farmers began suffering from starvation. Koreans were displaced in the Japanese industrial market by low-paid unskilled labourers (So 1987; Lee 2005). Since many Japanese were conscripted after the outbreak of the Pacific War, the war industry faced labour shortages. Under the National Mobilization Law, Koreans were forcibly recruited as low paid workers under the most severe working conditions, mainly in construction, coal mining and metal manufacturing (Lee 2009).

In 1945, Japan was defeated by the United States and the allied countries, and Korea was liberated. After Japan's defeat, about 2 million Koreans were given the choice to return to Korea or remain in Japan. Of this number, approximately 650,000 remained in Japan. There are no precise records of the demographic differences between those who left Japan and those who stayed, but it is safe to assume that the majority of those who remained had been living in Japan for many years, were largely settled with Japanese-born, Japanese-speaking children, and enjoyed a relatively privileged status compared to newer immigrants, especially those who came under forced migration policies after 1940 (Lee and Tanaka, 2007). Nevertheless, any hope of eventual return was shattered when their homeland was partitioned between the Soviet-occupied north and the US-occupied south, and the subsequent Korean War (1950-1953) consolidated the division.

Under the occupation of the Allied Forces, primarily the United States, the status of zainichi Koreans was uncertain. General Douglas Macarthur received instructions from Washington to designate zainichi Koreans as “liberated nationals” or “enemy nationals.” Clause 11 of the Alien Registration Law, promulgated on May 2, 1947 as Edict No. 207, stipulated that “Koreans designated by the Ministry of Justice, as well as Taiwanese, are to be considered foreigners for the time being” (Tanaka 1995, 2006). As a result, former colonized subjects with limited Japanese citizenship were registered as foreigners and obliged at all times to carry alien registration documents stating their nationality as Korean. However, this did not signify official nationality status, due to the precarious situation in their homeland.

In 1952, when the Treaty of San Francisco came into effect and Japan recovered its autonomy, the Japanese citizenship of Koreans living in Japan was revoked without advance
notice of any kind. In the meantime, Koreans in Japan began to change their nationality in their alien registration documents from Korean to South Korean.

After Japan-South Korea diplomatic relations were re-established in 1965, Koreans were granted the right to reside in Japan as permanent residents. However, since the reconciliation was made with only one of the Koreas, those who chose South Korea became South Korean nationals, while those who supported the North could not obtain the right to permanent residency and became stateless. In 1959, a major repatriation project was started when Il-sung Kim promised “a dream life after their return to the homeland” to celebrate the tenth anniversary of North Korea’s founding. A repatriation campaign by Chongryon (Japanese: Chōsen Sōren) succeeded in repatriating 89,011 Koreans by 1967 (Kim 2004).

According to the Japan-South Korea Foreign Exchange Memorandum of 1991, the right to permanent residency was recognized for descendants of all former colonial subjects living in Japan (Tanaka 1995). The right to permanent residency for both groups, those of South Korean nationality and pro-North Koreans, was assured as special permanent residents.

2. Struggle between Assimilation and Separation

Yun (1992) points out that the ethnicity shared among first-generation Korean immigrants served as a bulwark against the social injustice they faced in Japan. For the sake of their children, they were torn between assimilation and separation, and some achieved socioeconomic mobility despite being excluded from the mainstream. First-generation Korean immigrants were highly motivated to work as low-wage labourers under harsh conditions. Due to discrimination, the language barrier, and lack of education, the only available jobs for many Koreans were so-called “three D” (dangerous, demanding, and dirty) jobs. Koreans in Osaka often found employment in glass, fabric spinning, and rubber factories (Kawa 1996; Kashani 2006; Willis and Lee 2007; Nagano 2010). They also toiled in coal mines and on canal construction projects (Lee 2009).

There is ample research on the historical and social background of zainichi Koreans, but not enough empirical research on the first generation’s identity and value system. The degree of transculturation among first-generation immigrants varies depending on their social and economic background, but their cultural norms were heavily influenced by Confucianism (Kawa 1997; Kashani 2006). Male dominance, loyalty towards ancestors, hard work, and frugality were key characteristics used to describe the culture of early Korean immigrants. But in many cases, their uprootedness led to unstable psychological states, trauma, and devastated lives.
Zainichi Korean Seok-il Yan’s novel *Blood and Bones* depicts the psychological makeup of first-generation Koreans during the colonial and post-colonial era. Set in 1930s Osaka and modeled on the life of the author’s father, the novel centers on Jun-pyong Kim, a man held in awe even by gangsters due to his physique and ferocity. It traces his success as a fish paste maker and high-interest loan shark, both typical businesses of Korean entrepreneurs. Violence inflicted on himself and his family is one of the central themes of this novel, which depicts his temperamental character. The novel ends with his inability to find a place in Japanese society and his return to his “roots” in North Korea, where he expects a better life than the one he had in Japan. But instead, he realizes that he belongs in neither place, and faces a solitary death. As seen in Kim’s life, the lives of those who returned to North Korea were far from ideal, and many died in concentration camps as political criminals (An and Ikeda 1997).

3. Struggle between Assimilation and Discrimination

Koreans who returned to North Korea in the 1950s and 1960s believed that life there would be heavenly compared to that in Japan. However, after arriving in North Korea and seeing the realities of life in the capital city, Pyongyang, some quickly realized that the North's propaganda was a lie. Zainichi Koreans were severely discriminated against in North Korea, categorized as secondary citizens, and often placed in worse situations than they had experienced in Japan. There was social stigma attached to being a zainichi Korean, because these individuals were culturally and linguistically Japanese in many ways. Ironically, the late ruler of North Korea, Jong-il Kim married a zainichi Korean from Osaka and her son, Jong-un Kim became the heir. When he was selected as the ruler of North Korea, North Korean government hid the fact that his mother’s background because it would have conveyed a second-class image to the public.

What is particularly unique about Koreans in Japan compared to other overseas Koreans is that postcolonial circumstances, the Cold War, and the division of their homeland in particular led to the formation of two distinct ethnic organizations within their community: the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Japanese: Chōsen Sōren; Korean: Chongryun) and the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Japanese: Mindan). These organizations have ties to the two Koreas, North and South, and have provided indispensable infrastructural support for ethnic Koreans living and working in Japan who lacked legal protection. They were especially important for first-generation Koreans who were not eligible to receive social welfare benefits from the Japanese government.

Although Japan's Ministry of Justice categorizes Koreans as a single group based on nationality, it still uses the terms zainichi Kankoku jin (Japan-resident South Korean) and zainichi Chōsen jin (Japan-resident North Korean). The former indicates those who have
South Korean nationality, while the latter indicates those without South Korean nationality, and who are therefore legally stateless. However, all Korean immigrants, including more recent immigrants, are placed in the same category. Such an approach is problematic. Colonial immigrants should be treated as “distinct” from more recent immigrants, because their historical background is so “distinct.”

Another problem with the government's description is that the term Chōsenjin conveys the impression that these individuals came from North Korea. It is important to note, however, that since more than 98 percent of first-generation zainichi Koreans came originally from the southern provinces, the vast majority of “North” Koreans in Japan trace their ancestors to South Korea despite ideological and political allegiance to the North. It is not uncommon for Chōsen Sōren Koreans to travel to South Korea to visit their ancestor’s graves. Therefore, the zainichi Korean “homeland” is not necessarily confined to one of the two Koreas. The truth is often complicated by sentiments shaped by state affiliation, family genealogy, and ethnic heritage.

The two Korean political organizations in Japan were initially influential in discouraging their members from assimilating into Japanese society, specifically discouraging naturalization to preserve their national and cultural identities as Koreans (Chung 2006). This has also been important for institutional survival and to maintain solidarity among zainichi Koreans. However, as younger Koreans’ sentiments towards Japan and their homeland(s) began to shift, permanent settlement became the reality for most Koreans living in Japan. With repatriation no longer a motive, the purposes of the political organizations also began to change. Civic movements, especially those organized by Mindan, began to advocate zainichi Koreans as transnational citizens of Japan and demanded political participation at regional and local levels. On the other hand, Chōsen Sōren is requesting legitimate status for its ethnic schools to preserve Korean language and culture, but is not interested in acquiring voting rights or promoting integration into mainstream society (Minzoku sabetsu to kokuseki wo kangaeru Kyoto no kai 2002; Lee and Willis 2009).

4. Diversified Zainichi Korean Identities

Korean youths usually become conscious of their ethnic roots in a fully assimilated environment during the first phase of their identity formation. The childhood experience of discrimination awakens them and forces them to face the reality associated with being different from others. Compared to first-generation Koreans, who have stronger ties to the homeland, most second-generation Koreans were born and raised in Japan, educated in Japanese schools, and are unfamiliar with Korea and its culture. Nevertheless, most of them experience direct or indirect discrimination and prejudice at some point in their lives.
Fukuoka and Tsujiyama (1991) examine the different forms of *zainichi* Korean identity and argue that *zainichi* Koreans fall into one of four groups. **Pluralists** aim to “live with Japanese” and are classified as “oriented towards Japan.” **Nationalists** live as “overseas citizens” and are classified as “oriented towards ancestral lands.” **Individualists** do not think of their identity in terms of Korea or Japan, and are classified as “oriented towards the individual.” **Assimilationists** aim to “become Japanese” and are classified as “oriented towards assimilation.”

Pluralists take a symbiotic approach and emphasize the importance of living together with the Japanese without, however, denying their ethnic identities. Although still few, increasing numbers of Pluralists are beginning to maintain their own ethnic names even after being naturalized. Nationalists represent *Chongryun* Koreans and work to preserve Korean values, tradition, culture, and language. They regard naturalization as a betrayal of their ancestors and wish to protect their legal status as overseas Koreans. Individualists emphasize socioeconomic achievement and often devote their lives to financial success. They seem oblivious to their minority position and disinterested in *zainichi* Korean politics, concentrating instead on having a prosperous and satisfying life. Assimilationists take Japanese citizenship, use Japanese names, deny their ethnic roots, and live as Japanese.

Chung (2006, 128) explains that *zainichi* Korean identities are affected by six factors, following Suh’s interpretation (Suh 1997, 23): 1) the division of the Korean peninsula; 2) the separation of Koreans in Japan from the homeland; 3) forced assimilation and exclusion by Japanese society; 4) the respective economic situations of the homeland and Japan; 5) the state of democratization in the homeland; and 6) individual social-psychological factors. It is not appropriate to generalize about collective *zainichi* Korean identity, because *zainichi* Koreans are diverse depending on how they interact with Japanese society. Factors affecting *zainichi* Korean identities also include their upbringing, education, and whether or not they live in locations with high concentrations of *zainichi* Koreans. With increasing rates of naturalization and intermarriage with Japanese, however, the *zainichi* Korean community is expected to vanish over time. This is especially due to Japan’s rigid and continued policies against long-term foreign residents, as well as the lack of educational opportunities outside the ethnic community to learn about their history and the significance of their presence in Japanese society.

5. Naturalization and Acquisition of Japanese Citizenship

Japan is a *jus sanguinis* state as opposed to a *jus soli* state like the United States, Canada, and Australia, meaning that it assigns citizenship by blood but not place of birth. Until 1985, Japan’s Nationality Law was patrilineal. In 1985, the law was amended to incorporate the ambilineal principle, so that children born to *zainichi* Korean and Japanese parents are
automatically granted Japanese citizenship. Lineage remains the most important criterion for obtaining citizenship under the Nationality Law; foreigners remain foreigners regardless of how many generations their ancestors have continuously lived in Japan.

Since over 60 percent of applicants for naturalization in Japan are Korean nationals, Japanese naturalization policies are likely to have major implications for the future of both Japanese society and the Korean community in Japan. Yet, despite its importance, relatively little is known about how Japanese naturalization policy actually functions. Chung (2010) points out that the process of naturalization is highly contingent and almost always requires some form of assimilation, whether political or cultural. Japan is perhaps the only developed country which requires native-born applicants to go through a time-consuming procedure for naturalization.

In connection with foreign residents of Japan, a senior immigration official commented: “We, the Japanese government, have the absolute power and right to do whatever we want with foreigners” (Tanaka 1995). The stronger the degree of discrimination, the more ambivalent zainichi Koreans are toward naturalization. One zainichi Korean stated that he would never be interested in naturalizing because it means “selling my soul to the Japanese discriminatory authority” (Lee 2001). In a paper published by the Ministry of Justice, Hidenori Sakanaka, an immigration official, claims that a paradoxical relationship exists between the strict Japanese policy and zainichi Korean persistence in adhering to their ethnicity and their homeland(s), and posits that the more restrictive the immigration policy, the stronger such adherence becomes. He advocates an accommodating naturalization policy to promote assimilation to mainstream society (Sakanaka 1999).

The number of registered foreigners in Japan increases by around 1.9 percent per year. Every year, approximately 10,000 additional applicants apply for naturalization. In addition, the Nationality Law was amended in 1985, and the governing principle was changed from patrilineal to ambilineal. This implies that if one of the parents is Japanese, their children will be granted Japanese citizenship automatically. Also of note is the fact that 90 percent of young zainichi Koreans today intermarry with Japanese. Based on these trends, Hidenori Sakanaka predicts that the number of special permanent residents will become nil in the foreseeable future.

father’s case, through naturalization, he attempted to deny his Korean identity and started to “think and act Japanese.” In contrast, the daughter, who was culturally and linguistically completely “Japanese” to begin with, began to deepen her understanding of “being Korean” after acquiring citizenship.

Furthermore, in the study, “The Naturalization System for Foreigners in Japan,” Asakawa (2003) investigates Japan's naturalization system in detail based on 2,000 individuals, and analyzes 359 survey results. One question in the study deals with attitudes, subsequent to acquiring Japanese nationality, of those who nationalized. Informant answers are summarized below.

1) I hope Japanese society will be more tolerant to Koreans and other foreigners. Even after being naturalized, my Korean identity has not been changed because it still defines who I am.

2) I obtained Japanese citizenship but my identity has not changed. My ethnicity is Korean. We should have a more tolerant society where everyone can live without being discriminated against.

3) I do not think that becoming a Japanese citizen is a betrayal of my own people. Even after being naturalized, I want to be known as a zainichi Korean.

4) By obtaining Japanese citizenship, I felt a harmonious sentiment between Korea, my ethnic heritage, and Japan, my birthplace and home. I may be Japanese in legal terms, but mentally and emotionally, I regard myself as a person of two nationalities.

As we see in most responses, a hybrid or transnational identity is formed after naturalization, and individuals begin to define themselves beyond the limited framework of nation states (Lee 2002). This is a point on which Sil Pak, Choja Yun, and Yang Cheon all agreed. They felt that after naturalization, racial identity was strengthened. In response to being forced to legally adopt Japanese names, they filed a lawsuit, “Judicial Appeal for the Recovery of Ethnic Names,” to regain their Korean names lost after naturalization. Even if the framework of so-called Japanese “nationality” is protected, discrimination toward Koreans is still strongly embedded in the process. This lawsuit signifies a challenge made by naturalized “Japanese” toward Japan’s ideology of homogeneity as well as toward the zainichi Korean ideology that one has to keep one’s Korean nationality to preserve one’s ethnic identity. In 1987 Pak legally recovered his ethnic name and confirmed his new Japanese-Korean identity (Lee and Tanaka 2007).
6. “Zainichi” as Transnational Identity

In 2002, Jong-il Kim admitted that North Korea had been responsible for abducting Japanese citizens. Public hostility accelerated toward Korean ethnic schools, mainly those affiliated with Chōsen Sōren, and even Korean parents and students began to feel skeptical toward the education being taught beneath classroom portraits of the two Great Leaders. A number of parents continued to voice their concern about the quality of this education and demanded changes in the curriculum.

Korean ethnic schools today are rapidly losing students. The zainichi Korean community is also suffering from Japan’s low birth rate and aging population, and as a result, the number of students in Korean ethnic schools is also decreasing. The situation is exacerbated by the discriminatory policies of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (MEXT). In March 2003, MEXT excluded students of Korean ethnic schools from a new policy allowing students attending international schools to sit for Japanese university entrance exams.

Moreover, Korean ethnic schools, which are defined as private “other category” (Japanese: kakushu) schools, are legally entitled to state and local government subsidies. In fact, while a number of local governments provide subsidies, albeit in small amounts, to Korean schools, the national government does not offer subsidies of any kind. As a result, the facilities of these schools are poor and school buildings are in great need of repair, with no proper safety measures for earthquakes. Furthermore, no health check or service is provided by local government for the children. If a communicable disease spreads, there are no measures or plans to deal with the situation.

In 2006, those who were dissatisfied with the pro-Pyongyang schools and did not want to follow the Japanese curriculum opened the Korea International School in Ibaraki City, Osaka Prefecture. The school's establishment remains rooted in the colonial and postwar struggle and is aimed at preserving Korean ethnic and cultural identity in response to discrimination by the host country. The school’s mission differs greatly from that of other Korea International Schools elsewhere in the world today (Lee and Willis, 2009).

This new school’s mission is to erase the invisible boundaries found within the Korean community in Japan by accepting Koreans with various nationalities, including students with Kankoku seki (South Korean nationality), Chōsen seki (North Korean supporters), Nihon seki (Japanese nationality), Koreans with dual citizenship, and, more recently, ethnic Koreans with Chinese nationality. The underlying message is that for the younger generation, it is no longer necessary to have an exclusive relationship to any particular Korean state. According to the school’s principle, a more globalized cultural perspective is now a reality for Koreans living in Japan.
The melting pot of culture and ancestry of Koreans living in Japan, as well as Koreans living scattered throughout the world, has created a situation which transcends the North-South dichotomy. Zainichi Koreans are now a living bridge connecting Japan and other regions of East Asia. Unlike traditional Korean ethnic schools or Mindan-supported schools, the Korea International School teaches the meaning of the East Asian perspective—historically, culturally and politically. The meanings of “host” and “homeland” thus become increasingly complex and dynamic. The school's goal is to nurture global citizens with transnational qualities. It welcomes prospective students in an admissions process not bound by the ideology of the nation state, but open to all. The youth should still possess their roots in local areas. In fact, because of the uncertainty of the future, being “transnational” and “transcultural” have replaced “being ethnic Koreans.”

7. Barriers to Zainichi Korean Social Integration

Even for those educated in Japanese schools who are socially and culturally assimilated, structural discrimination prevents zainichi Koreans from full social participation. The two cases outlined below suggest that such legal barriers can affect both zainichi Koreans who maintain their Korean nationalities and those who naturalize.

Among second-generation zainichi Koreans educated in Japanese schools, few individuals dream of directly participating in Japanese society at a national level. Naturalized politician Shokei Arai (Korean name: Kyonje Park), born January 12, 1948, is an example of someone who did. Arai was a highly assimilated zainichi Korean who became an elite bureaucrat and was expected to become one of Japan’s promising politicians. At the peak of his career, Arai was implicated in securities law violations, with allegations that he accommodated demands from Nikko Securities. As a result, on February 19, 1998, he committed suicide in a Tokyo hotel just before the House of Representatives was set to vote on his arrest. His suicide occurred before the truth of the allegations was disclosed. The day before he killed himself, he held a press conference inviting only foreign journalists. He claimed that he had become a scapegoat of conservative politicians and that the allegations against him stemmed from racial discrimination against Koreans. Arai’s case demonstrates that there are hidden forces at insitutional levels, especially in government, that exclude ethnic others, including naturalized citizens, from gaining access to the inner political circle. As a result, Arai’s efforts toward social integration became a losing battle.

Another second-generation Korean, Kyon-dok Kim, passed the National Bar Examination but soon discovered that he could not join the Legal Research and Training Institute due to his Korean nationality. Angered by the legal requirement that one must be a citizen to practice law in Japan, Kim challenged the law and appealed to the Supreme Court, claiming that “the nationality clause” should be removed. After his sixth appeal to the Supreme Court, he
became Japan's first foreign legal apprentice, and in 1979, he became the first non-Japanese national licensed to practice as a lawyer in Japan. Kim returned to Korea in 1981 and stayed for two years to regain his “Koreanness.” He returned to Japan in 1985 with his Korean wife and opened a law office named Uri Law Office (Our Law Office). He worked on a series of lawsuits until he died at the young age of 56. He played a leading role in lawsuits to protect the rights of foreign residents, including the anti-fingerprinting movement and the wartime comfort women issue. He believed that the Korean language was vital to preserve Korean identity, and sent his three children to Korean ethnic schools (Kim 2006).

Conclusion

Although zainichi Koreans are required to pay taxes, they are not granted the right to participate in civil society and vote in the most important elections. Even though 25 percent of the residents of Ikuno Ward in Osaka are of Korean origin, they have no political voice. Influenced by the European Union as a supranational idea, the debate in Japanese society that foreigners should be granted local suffrage has only begun recently. There are gradual efforts seen in local governments to recognize residential voting rights for those holding foreign nationality.

In contrast to Japan, the Moo-Hyun Roh administration passed “The Bill for Foreign Permanent Residents Obtaining Local Suffrage” in 2005. Even while Japanese politicians appeared indifferent to Korea’s sudden change in treatment of foreign residents, the argument remained that instead of granting local suffrage to foreigners, naturalization standards should be relaxed to encourage zainichi Koreans to apply for citizenship. In January 2008, the project team related to the Liberal Democratic Party Committee on the Amendment of Nationality Law (chairman: Tarō Kōno) held a 24-day meeting with the agenda of submitting special legislation on a policy for easing the procedures of naturalization for Koreans holding special permanent residency. However, even in 2012, relaxation of naturalization standards has not been realized.

What does it mean to be a zainichi Korean today? It is difficult to define. Fourth-generation Koreans, who are currently in their twenties, feel frustrated about their insecure legal status. On the other hand, steady but positive changes are also taking place. The number of zainichi Korean lawyers exceeded a hundred after Kyon-dok Kim’s death. His son became a lawyer and is ready to take his father’s place in stabilizing the status of zainichi Koreans and fighting for equal rights. Japan’s version of the civil rights movement will be further developed by the young Korean generation with the help of Japanese civil rights activists. This is one example of social integration; such collaborative efforts between Koreans and Japanese youth were not seen in the past. Increased rates of naturalization no longer mean yielding to
discrimination. Applicants wish to participate in society more directly through Japanese citizenship.

Currently, there is only one politician of Korean descent who publicly uses his Korea ethnic name, Shin-kun Hak, and it is expected that the number of politicians with non-Japanese backgrounds will increase. Japanese society, however, appears to be a step behind in recognizing these changes. Through acknowledging and incorporating zainichi Koreans and other minority communities, Japanese society must find a way to change so that it can come to terms with its past and the postcolonial legacies that continue to shape it.
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