

ON THE IDENTITY PROBLEM OF KOREAN RESIDENTS IN JAPAN

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the identity problem of Korean residents in Japan (*Zainichi* Koreans). In pursuing the issue of the *Zainichi* Korean identity, I point first to the shift in the images that people draw on the *Zainichi* Koreans' identity—from a tragic one in the nineteen eighties to mundane and multiple ones in the nineteen nineties and thereafter. Then, I look into the reasons why the *Zainichi* Koreans don't feel at home in either Japan or Korea. The living conditions for the *Zainichi* Koreans improved as post-war Japan was recovering from the wounds of World War II to become one of the strongest players in the world economy and joining in the trend of globalization. But there still remain reasons why the *Zainichi* Koreans are made to feel alienated from both Japan and Korea. Finally, I discuss the importance of resolving the *Zainichi* Korean identity issue and make a concrete suggestion. The resolution of the issue is important because it is the single most significant step in defining Korea's relation to its historical expatriates and their descendents living abroad. Without such a definition, Korea will remain mired in its not-too-distant history, a history which it must come to terms with if it is going to advance to the rank of a developed nation. The one concrete suggestion that I make to alleviate, if not resolve, the issue is to propose granting the *Zainichi* Koreans rights to vote regionally in Japan and nationally in South Korea.

Keywords: Korean residents in Japan, identity problems, reasons for feeling alienated in Japan and in Korea, right to political participation, Korea's relation to its historical expatriates and their descendents abroad

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will examine the identity problem of Korean residents in Japan known as the *Zainichi* in Japanese.⁽¹⁾ Already so many things have been said and written on the topic. Why should anyone bother, one might ask, to write another paper on it? Upon a closer look, however, such a view turns out not quite true. The great coverage the topic enjoyed was mainly at the hands of the *Zainichi* Koreans themselves or foreign—mostly American and Japanese—scholars.⁽²⁾ At any rate, very few papers were written on this topic in South Korea apart from those written from the viewpoint of the state of South Korea.

In pursuing the case at hand, I'll take a viewpoint of a Korean residing in Korea. As such, I don't pretend to capture and speak for all shades of the ambivalent feelings of the *Zainichi* Koreans. But my viewpoint will surely be different from the ones held by the majority of Koreans, who are more often than not under the influence of the state of South Korea. Most South Koreans would love to see the *Zainichi* Koreans still loving Korea as their only country. For them, it would be an unwholesome development for the *Zainichi* Koreans to feel more at home in Japan than in Korea. My first-hand experience with the *Zainichi* Koreans, though limited, does not show that these wishes have been fulfilled. Neither does the literature that I have read on the topic.

What I will do in this paper is, first, to point to the shift in the images that people draw on the identity—or should I say “identities”?—of the *Zainichi* Koreans. Then, I would like to look into the reasons why they don't feel at home in either Japan or Korea. Finally, I will discuss the importance of resolving the identity issue and make a concrete suggestion. This suggestion, though not novel, is a very important one. If there is any merit to this paper, it will be found in the concluding section.

SHIFT IN THE IMAGES OF THE *ZAINICHI* KOREAN'S IDENTITY

Of the many things written on the issue of *Zainichi* Koreans' identity, the books by DeVos and Ryang stand out. They are American University-based scholars and observers of the *Zainichi* Koreans. The book by Devos, an anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley, was extremely influential in the American academia in the nineteen eighties and nineties. Books on the topic by Ryang, a scholar at Johns Hopkins University, seem most influential in this decade.

In 2005, I met a *Zainichi* Korean graduate student on the campus of Saitama University. When she told me that she was studying the identity problem of the *Zainichi* Koreans, I asked what she thought of the view that DeVos advanced in the book he co-authored with Changsoo Lee. I read the book during my study years in the United States and remember feeling very sympathetic with the views of Devos and Changsoo Lee. To my surprise, the response of the *Zainichi* Korean graduate student was very lukewarm, saying that DeVos does not capture the identity problem as she and other young *Zainichi* Koreans were experiencing. Then, she asked me if I knew Ryang, a scholar at Johns Hopkins University and herself a *Zainichi* Korean politically affiliated with North Korea. Saying that Ryang is a minority person in triple senses—a woman, a pro-North *Zainichi* Korean, now a scholar at a university in America which is not so friendly to North Korea—she seemed to suggest that Ryang's view is the one that she feels capture the problem of the *Zainichi* Korean identity as she and other young *Zainichi* Koreans were experiencing.

The graduate student that I met at Saitama University was a third-generation *Zainichi* Korean and probably in her late twenties. She had graduated from a pro-North *Minjok* school⁽³⁾ and had obtained a college education in the United States. Now she was pursuing the problem of the *Zainichi* Korean identity as a field of her specialization. She had a

North Korean passport but had changed her nationality from North to South. She said she wanted to naturalize to Japan; that is why she changed her nationality. It is almost impossible for pro-North *Zainichi* Koreans to naturalize to Japan. There are so many barriers—psychological, cultural, legal, etc.—to the activities they wish to pursue, naturalization being just one of many barriers. So she changed to the South Korean nationality as a prior step to naturalizing to Japan.

I felt that this situation must be very confusing for her. So many things are involved with holding even one nationality. But by the time the graduate student fulfills her wish of naturalization, she will have experienced three different nationalities—North and South Korea, and Japan. When I questioned her about why she wanted to naturalize to Japan, she said a Japanese passport would be more convenient. She didn't say much about South Korea, from which I gathered that South occupied only a small corner of her mind. And she said that the pro-North *Minjok* schools definitely do good job in teaching *Zainichi* Korean youngsters the Korean language. This comment was certainly a token of her endorsement of at least some of the things that *Minjok* schools are doing. As such, it was also an expression of her attachment to North—or more precisely, to her background of having grown up in a pro-North family or environment. But now she attends events and gatherings organized by pro-South *Zainichi* Koreans. It was at her invitation that I attended a lecture given by the late Kim Kyong Duk (金敬得), the first *Zainichi* Korean to become a lawyer in the post-war Japan.⁽⁴⁾

When I asked her what she is, i.e. what kind of identity she has, the answer she gave seems to capture the view of majority of young *Zainichi* Koreans. "I want to keep my Korean name, live in Japan, and move freely including trips to countries I wish to visit abroad." She didn't seem to feel one hundred percent at home in Japan, but Japan is the country she feels most comfortable with. She didn't seem to dislike North Korea, but North Korea is not the country she will actively choose over others. South Korea is OK, but it does not capture her imagination. North and South Korea are just countries with which she is by chance associated. At the same time, however, they are not the countries in which she plans to spend her life. She said that she and her friends preferred to be called "*Zainichi* Korean"—not *Hangugin* (South Korean) or *Joseonin* (North Korean). She didn't feel that her lot having been born in Japan, rather than in Korea, was particularly tragic; but she did feel that life in Japan could—and should—be better and freer.

In my preparatory readings prior to writing this paper, most of the works that I read on the *Zainichi* Korean identity issue cited DeVos and Ryang as their sources of authority for supporting their views. DeVos drew a tragic picture of the *Zainichi* Koreans. In his book, they were depicted as suffering from discrimination by the Japanese in the matters most important in their life—marriage, jobs, education, laws, etc.—while strongly attached to Korea as their country or the country of their fathers and grandfathers. Ryang depicts a more mundane, matter-of-fact type of picture: the *Zainichi* Koreans live their lives just as any other person would. The *Zainichi* Koreans today have a multiplicity of identities.⁽⁵⁾ They feel the classes, genders, and the social

circumstances they find themselves in are factors more important than countries—North and South Korea, and Japan—in forming their own identities. As time passes, such a shift in the image of the *Zainichi* Korean identity—from tragic to mundane and multiple—may be a natural phenomenon.⁽⁶⁾

THE REASONS WHY THE *ZAINICHI* KOREANS FEEL ALIENATED

Reflected in the new image of the *Zainichi* Korean identity is an improvement of their living conditions and a more advanced degree of assimilation to Japan. Their living conditions have improved as the Japanese economy improved after World War II. Now Japan is one of the biggest and strongest economies in the world. More *Zainichi* Koreans entered the labor market force as Japan needed a work force to keep more of its factories and companies in operation. Undoubtedly, *Zainichi* Koreans' talents were more appreciated by the Japanese industry than in the old days when they were viewed only as laborers—and forced ones at that.

It is a universal phenomenon that workers of a minority background anywhere in the world are the first to be let go when economy turns down. The post-war Japan had such a period in the eighties when it had a high-rising bubble economy suddenly burst. In this period, the *Zainichi* Koreans might have been expected to have had a more difficult time than the Japanese people, but by then they were firmly integrated into and widely scattered throughout the Japanese economy. So in fact, they fared about the same as the Japanese. Presumably, their difficulty was less severe than it would have been if the downturn had occurred immediately before and after the war.

This surely is an indicator that the living conditions for the *Zainichi* Koreans have improved since the end of the war. And during its period of economic recovery, Japan's democracy has taken a firm root. This development was another big boost to the improvement of the living conditions of the *Zainichi* Koreans. Along with this, the degree of their assimilation to Japan deepened too. Even the first-generation *Zainichi* Koreans had no big cultural problems in adjusting to life in Japan other than hunger, fatigue, loneliness, dire living conditions as the results of the discrimination orchestrated by the nation of Japan and the more zealous segments of its populace. To begin with, the Koreans share with the Japanese many similar, even identical cultural elements. Many of the main differences between the two peoples result from the fact that the nation of Korea was tardy in responding to the cultural and political encroachment of Western powers. But as time passed, the third and fourth generations, now the majority of the *Zainichi* Koreans, are culturally as Japanese as any typical Japanese person.

Why then would the *Zainichi* Koreans care so much, as it seems to me that they do, about their identity? They have several reasons for doing so. They still feel—and are in fact—excluded by the countries most important to them—Japan and Korea, both north and south.

As Concern Japan

The *Zainichi* Koreans still feel alienated from the Japanese society because there still remain many areas of discrimination against them (Hamamoto 2006). Of course, their lot in the post-war Japanese society has improved significantly. But the Japanese people tend to be ultraconservative. And statism and nationalism remain strong in Japan. Japanese politicians are adept at exploiting the ultraconservative, statist and nationalist sentiments of the people either for their own gain or to keep the country in the condition they see “fit.” People who don’t agree with them “completely” are seen as “others” to them. Never mind that the intermarriage rate between the *Zainichi* Koreans and Japanese spouses approaches 80%, and that most of third- and fourth-generation *Zainichi* Koreans are products—biologically as well as socially—of both the Koreans and the Japanese. And never mind that many of the patriotic Japanese who emphasize the Japaneseness of the Japanese may be of Korean lineage due to Japan’s long and far-reaching historical relationship with Korea.

Now that marriage and job issues, which according to DeVos were the two main difficulties that the *Zainichi* Koreans experienced, are to a certain extent relieved, if not resolved, it’s about the time to address their rights to political participation. No one can be a fully functioning member of a society unless he or she is given access to its political processes. This is because his or her life will be decisively affected by the decisions reached as the results of such processes. At the moment, the *Zainichi* Koreans—still holding a Korean passport—are excluded from elections except for very few and rare cases in which they are allowed to vote in municipal elections (French 2000). Granted, national elections in Japan are reserved for the Japanese citizens—the holders of Japanese nationality. But the *Zainichi* Koreans should be given a right to vote in regional-level elections because these elections will affect their lives immediately. Considering the historical reason why they are in Japan in the first place and their contributions to the Japanese society as culturally literate and tax-paying workers, and especially in light of Japan’s dwindling population and low-birth rate, it is only fair to give them a voice in matters immediately and decisively affecting their lives.

Naturalization is another thorny issue. While there is strong pressure on the *Zainichi* Koreans to behave and think just like the Japanese, which I think they do to a great extent, there are great many legal and psychological barriers to the naturalization process for the *Zainichi* Koreans who opt for that choice. This obstructionism is an obvious example of hypocrisy on the part of the nation and the society of Japan. Political and social persecutions of pro-North *Zainichi* Koreans are another problem that makes *Zainichi* Korean communities feel alienated in Japan. Misbehavior by North Korea should be dealt with on the national level, and undesirable cooperation by pro-North *Zainichi* Koreans should be kept in check. But that should be no reason to stigmatize the North-affiliated people as a whole (Williams 2007) and, by extension, the whole *Zainichi* Korean communities.

Remaining discrimination against the *Zainichi* Koreans in marriage, job, political

participation and other fields are still formidable. The statist and nationalist tendencies of the Japanese are strong and exclusive in nature. These elements keep the *Zainichi* Koreans legally and psychologically alienated from the Japanese society. They are also hindrances to *Zainichi* Koreans' realizing their potential and fulfilling their dreams as human beings. The key to solving these problems of the *Zainichi* Koreans are in the hands of the nation and the people of Japan.

As Concern Korea

Korea is not free from the blame that attaches to Japan for alienating the *Zainichi* Koreans from the Japanese society. In fact, I hold the nation and the people of Korea equally, if not more, responsible for the plight of the *Zainichi* Koreans. Historically, the first-generation *Zainichi* Koreans were lower class people in Korea. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, many workers and peasants from Gyeongsang, Jeolla, and Jeju provinces were forced to go to Japan, where they ended up languishing as miners, factory workers, or other menial laborers. But some Koreans went to Japan either because they had no means to make a living in Korea or because they thought they could find better economic opportunities in Japan. About 3/4 of them returned to Korea after the country was liberated and gained independence from Japan. The remaining 1/4 formed the core of the first-generation *Zainichi* Koreans. The image of Korea that the second, third, and fourth generation *Zainichi* Koreans formed from the experiences told by their fathers and grandfathers cannot be a pleasant one—it is one of hardship, destitution and desperation.

Their life in the aftermath of the war was hard enough. But in addition, they felt abandoned and betrayed by the government of South Korea as it established the Normalization Treaty with Japan (Pressian 2004). Establishing the treaty with a Japan having no remorse—let alone repenting—about having colonized Korea and still maltreating the *Zainichi* Koreans was a slap to their face—especially when neither their conditions were considered nor their voices included at all in the treaty's negotiation process. They were just sacrificial lambs as Korea sought to collect—in the form of begging—some indemnity from its colonial master Japan. As people abandoned even by the government of their own country, they were exposed to harsh treatments by the nation and the society of Japan. For some Japanese, the treaty gave a green light from the government of Korea to do whatever they pleased to the *Zainichi* Koreans—“roasting, eating, and beating.”

Even now, all that the government of Korea gives the *Zainichi* Koreans are duties but no rights. Technically, the *Zainichi* Korean youngsters have to do their military service, although obviously the government of Korea has no way to enforce it. Meanwhile, the *Zainichi* Koreans have no right to vote in presidential elections in Korea. Granted, it would be a little bit out of the line if they voted in regional elections because the outcomes do not affect them directly—they do not live in the regions. But presidential elections are a different matter. Their outcomes affect their status and living conditions

in Japan. The fact that they are not entitled to participate in the political process in Korea means that they are not fully Korean. This is the message that the government of Korea has repeatedly sent to the *Zainichi* Koreans loud and clear. Here we see in Korea all the ills associated with the statism and nationalism of Japan. South Korea is a nation built indeed on the model of the modern Japanese nation.

There are many other reasons why the *Zainichi* Koreans feel alienated from Korea as well. In Korea, school, regional, and blood ties reign supreme in terms of importance in social life. Of the three, the *Zainichi* Koreans lack the first two. What they share with other Koreans is the blood tie. But the other Koreans don't care much about this because they themselves have it too. Despite the lip service it pays, Korea does not really value the talents of its own people.⁽⁷⁾ Even less so does it value the talents of the *Zainichi* Koreans. There is, therefore, virtually no place for the *Zainichi* Koreans in Korea.

The plight of the *Zainichi* Koreans does not enter into the consciousness of average Koreans. For them, the issue is as good as non-existent because it doesn't affect their own lives. These days, at any rate, Koreans are too busy catching up with "advanced nations" like Japan, being full of pride and enjoying a sense of achievement. The issue of overseas Koreans—ethnic Koreans in Japan, China and Russia with a possible exception of those in the U.S.—is just an uncomfortable reminder of the unpleasant past, not quite becoming for a country now basking in economic success and glory. The modern Koreans are a chic and cool lot. They pursue a sexy dream of living in an ultra-modern society armed with the spirit of neo-liberalism and super-capitalistic values. Anything or anybody that stands in their way should be neglected.

Koreans themselves are discriminatory and the Korean society exclusive in nature. This is evidenced by the plight of foreign workers—mostly Asian migrant workers and including a large number of Chinese-Koreans—in Korea. There are two more pieces of evidence pointing to the discriminatory and exclusive nature of the Korean society and its people with regard to the *Zainichi* Korean returnees and the "*Jaehan*" Japanese (Japanese residents in Korea). Many Korean laborers who returned to that part of the Korean peninsula now called South Korea brought their wives with them, and they found the society discriminatory. Many South Koreans pointed finger at the returnees for not being able to speak Korean well; they resented and despised the fact that these returnees were more Japanese than Korean. Take a look at the Japanese wives who are now living their life as good citizens of South Korea. Do their problems—now mainly poverty—and their checkered lives, caught as they are in the unhappy exchanges between Korea and Japan, have any effect on the consciousness of Korean scholars, let alone of average Koreans? If so, why isn't the topic pursued as vigorously as *Zainichi* Korean issues? These cases point to a general immaturity and callousness on the part of Koreans as a nation.

Many of returnees went back to Japan because they found the South Korean society discriminatory and hence unlivable. This time, therefore, their return back to Japan was for a permanent settlement. The *Zainichi* Koreans could not—and still cannot—find a

solace in Korea for the traumas that they, like their parents and grandparents, are experiencing—hence, the paradox that they feel more at home in Japan, which does not accept them as full-fledged members of the society, than they do in their ancestral homeland.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Japan is a democracy with an advanced economy. And Japan is looking for a leadership role in the world affairs. Despite all its shortcomings, South Korea is a democracy as well, and it is about to join the ranks of the advanced nations of the world. If Japan and Korea, two democratic and economically strong nations cannot do more to alleviate—if not completely resolve—the *Zainichi* problem, it will be not because they lack the resources or means, but because they lack the will. If that is the case, it is only fair to call both countries callous and unwise. The *Zainichi* Koreans are law-abiding and hardworking people. Any forward-thinking advanced nation, say as in Europe, would love to have such a talented minority population. The issue of the *Zainichi* Korean identity is a touchstone. It will reveal either integrity or hypocrisy on the part of Japan and Korea, and thereby test their pretensions to be the two most civilized countries in East Asia.

These days, we often hear about the plight of Chinese-Korean workers in Korea. And recently there was a visit to Korea by a group of Russian-Koreans, who were deported by Stalin to the Central Asia and only in the last few years returned to their ancestral home in the Maritime Province of Russia. Along with such events, the problem of the *Zainichi* Korean identity provides Koreans with valuable moments to reflect on the humbling side of their country's not-too-distant history and its many unresolved issues. Certainly, one such issue is what is and should be Korea's relation to its historical expatriates and their descendents living abroad. Japan and Korea should cooperate to help the *Zainichi* Koreans feel at home in both countries. As a first step, both countries should grant the *Zainichi* Koreans the rights to participate in the political processes that affect their lives: the rights to vote regionally in Japan and nationally in Korea.

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<Notes>

- (1) Unless otherwise noted, Korea in this paper refers to South Korea.
- (2) I have listed in the reference section the three books that I found most helpful for the understanding of the *Zainichi* Korean identity issue.
- (3) *Minjok* schools are ethnic Korean schools mostly run by *Chongryun*, the pro-North Korea organization in Japan.
- (4) I found Kim's book (2006) immensely helpful on the issues of *Zainichi* Korean education and identity.
- (5) For a classification of the types of the *Zainichi* Korean identities, see Fukuoka (1993).
- (6) So (2000) describes this phenomenon well from the perspective of a young *Zainichi* Korean.
- (7) Ironic as it may sound, this, I believe, is unfortunately true. For a discussion of this topic, see my paper "On the Problematic Nature of Higher Education Reform Movements in Korea" (2006).