

THE SHADOW OF JAPANESE POSTWAR NATIONALISM AND ZAINICHI DISENFRANCHISEMENT

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This paper analyses the various modes in which Zainichi, ethnic Koreans who have lived in Japan for generations, are disenfranchised in Japanese society. The use of distorted cultural narratives about a “pure Japanese society”, historical revisionism, and erasure of the Zainichi population all contribute to their current situation. Through denial of birthright citizenship and the difficulties in obtaining naturalization, the Zainichi are denied human rights and protections that all ethnic Japanese people are entitled to. Furthermore, populist politicians promote the erasure of Zainichi from popular consciousness because of their aims to amend the post-war constitution. In spite of growing effort to move towards multiculturalism, Zainichi remain outliers to these efforts because of their focus on newcomers to Japan rather than acceptance of diversity that already exists.

With the planning of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Olympic Committee stated its commitment to “Diversity and Inclusion” (as stated on the Tokyo 2020 website and in various marketing material). However, these goals can be seen as ironic and perhaps even insulting in the face of how Japan treats ethnically diverse people who live within Japan’s borders. Japanese people perceive themselves to be ethnically homogenous. While a majority of Japanese report to support diversity, the myth of Japanese ethnic homogeneity has been allowed to continue to benefit Japan’s right-wing Liberal Democratic Party; by erasing and ignoring the existence of ethnic minorities in Japan they can further their goals of more aggressive international policies. Japanese citizens are largely unaware of the positions and concerns of “foreign” residents in Japan. Japan’s Zainichi population, in particular, remain the largest target of xenophobic attacks and are unable to garner support to push for policy change to improve their situation. This disenfranchisement is perpetuated in several ways: first by making citizenship necessary to obtain human rights; second, by creating high barriers to naturalization; and finally, by erasing public awareness

of their position, and creating an education system that does not correct racist perceptions.

The Zainichi are ethnic Koreans who initially came to Japan when Korea was a colony of Imperial Japan between 1895 and 1945. All Koreans were considered Japanese subjects that had Japanese citizenship. However, at the end of the war, when Japan lost its colonies, these ethnic Koreans, many of whom were born in Japan and had never been to Korea, became effectively stateless as their citizenship was taken away. Those who did not leave Japan became classified as “Special Permanent Residents,” a category of foreigners that are in effect stateless. Foreign residents and Special Permanent Residents pay taxes and contribute to their community, the same as Japanese nationals. It is unclear how many Zainichi exist in Japan because census data does not include Zainichi in their questions, and they are grouped with all other foreign residents. Many average Japanese citizens are unaware that many Korean residents still do not have access to pension funds and some social benefits and that they have limited access in areas of employment, housing, and education, despite their long residence and history in Japan.¹

One of the biggest problems for the Special Permanent Resident Zainichi is that human rights are tied to citizenship. Foreigners and foreign residents’ human and social rights are seen as not being Japan’s responsibility to uphold and protect because they are just “visitors.” This lack of human rights for foreigners is reinforced at the through all levels of public office. For example, at the higher levels of public policy, the Prime Ministerial cabinet survey portrays human rights for foreigners as optional. On the prefectural level we see this perception reinforced with a comment made in 2011 by a prosecutor from Saga stating that prosecutors are taught that “foreigners have no human rights under police detention and interrogation”.² Even with Special Permanent Resident status Zainichi are treated in the same way as visitors, such as being regularly fingerprinted (like all foreign visitors to Japan), having to carry government identification at all times and being subject to police questioning at all times without probable cause.³ Despite having never lived outside of Japan for possibly generations, Zainichi have no right to vote, contribute to political campaigns, hold civil service administration jobs, or run for public office.⁴ The Japanese Supreme court has affirmed their statement that “human rights in Japan are not linked to being human; they are linked to holding Japanese citizenship.”⁵ On multiple occasions, and most recently in a 2008 decision by the Supreme Court, it was determined that “a lack of Japanese nationality is the

¹ Yoko Demelius, “Multiculturalism in a ‘Homogeneous’ Society from the Perspectives of an Intercultural Event in Japan.” *Asian Anthropology* 19, no. 3 (September 2020): 170.

² Debito Arudou, “‘Embedded Racism’ in Japanese Law: Towards a Japanese Critical Race Theory.” *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 161.

³ Ibid, 158.

⁴ Ibid, 158.

⁵ Ibid, 161.

cause of discrimination, and that obtaining Japanese nationality is essential for basic human rights to be guaranteed in Japan.”⁶

The pursuit of Japanese citizenship, which would ensure Zainichi equal rights, is also a fraught issue. Some Zainichi do not pursue naturalization because of the concern that it would erase their multi-ethnic identity. Naturalization also has a historical association with the colonial legacy of assimilation.⁷ However, for those who pursue naturalization, the process is unduly difficult and influenced by racial bias regardless of how long or how well integrated someone has been in Japanese society. The vast majority of Zainichi have not obtained legal citizenship.⁸ Unlike Canada, Japanese citizenship is not conferred by being born in Japan, rather through Japanese blood. Article 2 of Japan’s Nationality Law requires at least one parent to be a Japanese national in order to qualify for citizenship regardless of the place of birth. This lack of birthright citizenship means that for Zainichi who have failed or chosen not to have Japanese citizenship, their child will not have citizenship at birth no matter how many generations of their family have lived in Japan. Naturalization is possible, but it is a difficult process. The Ministry of Justice claims that most candidates who apply for citizenship receive it, but this claim becomes dubious because of how many are rejected at the preliminary screening.⁹ Before potential candidates for naturalization can even process their application, they have an interview at the Ministry of Justice. Candidates are questioned about their commitments to Japan and then are told immediately whether they may collect the necessary documents. The questions can be intrusive and personal, including family and income. This subjective questioning also opens up applicants to harassment from officials. In some of the examples that Debito Arudou encountered in his interviews of past applicants to the naturalization process, two Filipina applicants were asked about their sexual history, and a second-generation Zainichi was rejected because he had parking tickets.¹⁰ If the applicant does make it through the questioning, then they have many official documents to retrieve at cost. Next, there are other requirements such as and having achieved adulthood (20 years old) with no criminal record, ability to support oneself without government assistance and a vague requirement of “upright conduct” and to “uphold and not advocate the overthrow of the Japanese Constitution or Government.”¹¹ These last two stipulations are especially strong barriers for applicants because their vague wording makes their interpretation up to the individual person reviewing the application. Any protest or collective action to try and improve the status of fellow

⁶ Arudou, 161.

⁷ Yuka Kitayama, “The Rise of the Far Right in Japan, and Challenges Posed for Education.” *London Review of Education* 16, no. 2 (July 2018): 252.

⁸ Demelius, 168.

⁹ Arudou, 159.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 159.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 158.

Zainichi could be interpreted as violating of these last two conditions. Furthermore, there is no right of review or appeal, only reapplication.

These issues that Zainichi face go largely unknown by the wider public because of the structural erasure. Japanese people still have difficulties conceptualizing the possibility of multi-ethnic individuals. We can see this in the rejection of dual citizenship and ideas that even those who are half-Japanese are assumed not to be Japanese enough to be included in conceptions of who Japanese people are, as shown in the backlash to half African-American half Japanese, Ariana Miyamoto being crowned Miss Universe Japan in 2015. Japan claimed to the UN in 1999 that ethnically diverse people are not Japanese.¹² Through this statement, they were trying to justify the unequal treatment of ethnic minorities while reinforcing the idea that Japanese people can only truly be Japanese by having purely Japanese blood. Furthermore, Japan's census only measures citizenship, not ethnicity or national origin. Data from the Ministry of Justice says that the foreign residents only account for less than 3% of the population, but this number does not count those who have obtained citizenship in the "non-Japanese" category, or the Ainu and Okinawans.¹³ The erasure of other cultural groups' existence in Japan makes it impossible to advocate for their rights because they must first prove to the larger society that they exist before you can even begin to argue for their protection. This is encompassed in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs comment in 2001 that "since there are no other races in Japan to have 'relations' with, *ergo* there can be no racism in Japan."¹⁴ This myth of homogeneity makes the larger ethnically Japanese society unaware of the discrimination that exists in their country. Any sort of education that could help reduce the discrimination Zainichi face, such as historical knowledge, is often censored in Japanese mainstream media, social platforms, and education.¹⁵

The suppression of rights for Zainichi people is critical for Liberal Democratic Party and right-wing nationalist grassroots organization goals. The main goal for the LDP for years was, and still is, constitutional reform with the aim to replace Japan's pacifist constitution that was created in the post-war years during the occupation by the United States. Right-wing supporters want a new constitution that promotes national pride, and includes the use of force as a sovereign right. Those who oppose constitutional revision fear it would increase Japanese involvement in international military conflict. It is no secret that populist politicians like Shinzo Abe, Junichiro Koizumi, and former governor of Tokyo, Shintaro Ishihara, harbour aggressive attitudes to China and Korea. They have all made

¹² Arudou, 161.

¹³ Demelius, 165.

¹⁴ Arudou, 162.

¹⁵ Demelius, 170.

remarks that justify pre-war colonization and invasion.¹⁶ Koizumi and Abe have also repeatedly visited Yasukuni Shrine, where Japanese war criminals are enshrined, and Abe furthered poked at China regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. By revising the constitution, it would be constitutionally permissible to attack their neighbours. The constitution also serves as a reminder to Japanese conservatives of an inconvenient and unpleasant past of colonialism and defeat they would rather forget, much like the Zainichi themselves. In conservative magazines, articles related to Koreans in Japan focused on four topics: 1) voting rights for foreigners and the right-wing establishment fear that it would pave the way for Koreans to be enemies from within, 2) Korean intellectuals would oppose right-wing revisionism, 3) attacks against the pro-North Korean community organization, the Chosen Soren (General Association of Koreans in Japan.)¹⁷ These concerns serve as a motivator to target the Zainichi as representatives of their enemies hiding in their midst.

The main tool that the Right employs to ensure the erasure of Zainichi issues is revisionist history in schools. Since 1997 the main talking-point for conservatives has been the subject of history. Its importance was bolstered in magazines that were published by the same companies that make revisionist history textbooks, such as the Sankei Shimbun Co.¹⁸ Current Japanese textbooks stress the positive aspect of colonialism and either downplay or do not mention wartime atrocities¹⁹. In Japanese schools, teachers are required to instruct apolitically, i.e., “to refrain from political education or other political activities for or against any specific party.”²⁰ That means teachers have to teach with the very politically influenced textbooks without being able to counter the extremism it can instill.

The prevailing idea of how to help the situation of ethnic minorities in Japan is to increase multicultural initiatives. However, these multiculturalism initiatives are ineffective in their aim of making Japanese society recognize the different cultures that live in Japan, and at worse, they serve to erase the problems of the Zainichi further. In 2006 Japan introduced a national program to establish services for new foreign residents by coordinating with local governments.²¹ Foreign residents who are not “newcomers” found no use for these initiatives as they focused on immediate concerns of new foreign residents in Japan, such as language services, help finding housing, education, medical services, labour protection, and

¹⁶ Naoto Higuchi, "The 'Pro-Establishment' Radical Right: Japan's Nativist Movement Reconsidered." In *Civil Society and the State in Democratic East Asia: Between Entanglement and Contention in Post High Growth*, 122.

¹⁷ Higuchi, 131.

¹⁸ Ibid, 123-4.

¹⁹ Kitayama, 254.

²⁰ Ibid, 257.

²¹ Demelius, 165.

evacuation procedures during natural disasters.²² Zainichi have no need for language support and already know how to live in their local communities along with the Japanese codes of conduct, so either Zainichi's needs are not being considered at all, or, by positioning Zainichi along with new foreign residents in diversity initiatives it erases their history and particular situation and needs. This makes it clear to Zainichi that they are not included in Japan's "multiculturalism." The 2006 initiative was introduced under the perspective of increasing globalization and internationalization, leading to *new* diverse people coming to live in Japan, *not* the appreciation and tolerance of diverse cultures that already exists in Japan. This motive for multiculturalism is also reflected in textbooks, as Kitayama states, "Non-Japanese citizens in contemporary society are often portrayed by school textbooks solely as unproblematic 'visitors' who represent Japan's 'internationalization.'"²³ Multiculturalism in this way is not an integration of different cultures into Japanese society, instead it emphasizes boundaries between Japanese and non-Japanese. The 2006 plan is also too vague to be effective because it has an "absence of a clear goal, direction, and policy guidelines without specifying what living on equal terms with Japanese should mean and accomplish."²⁴ Demelius' participation in the organization of the yearly Akahashi city intercultural event shows that these local events trying to foster multiculturalism can turn to the commoditization of these cultures for Japanese people to consume rather than accept and integrate into a multicultural society. Moreover, any politicization of minority issues at the aforementioned event was discouraged by the city administration, saying that they should make the event apolitical out of concern for offending anyone.²⁵ So any historical information about minority people in Japan had to be left out.

Zainichi still do not have the same human rights as ethnic Japanese, and are excluded from pension funds, medical care, and suffrage.²⁶ However, simply undergoing naturalization to gain those rights is difficult and opens them up to harassment and discrimination because of the subjective screening process. The Japanese who are able to participate in the political community by occupying administrative roles in municipal office and education are kept largely unaware of the situation of the Zainichi with the misconception that Japan is a homogenous country, and textbooks reinforce this way of thinking along with fostering aggression to their East Asian neighbours. Public policy goals and revisions of laws remain toothless and shallow such as the Hate Speech Elimination Law of 2016 that neither prohibits nor punishes hate speech. Multicultural initiatives, by focusing on the 'newcomers,' allow the government to have the perception of trying

²² Ibid, 167.

²³ Kitayama, 253.

²⁴ Demelius, 167.

²⁵ Ibid, 172.

²⁶ Ibid, 167.

to improve tolerance and coexistence without having to reckon with or provide reparations for their past abuses.

It remains unclear if, going forward, Japan will change its stance on Zainichi. With the resignation of LDP leader Shinzo Abe and the Japanese government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, there are some questions about how these factors will affect the support of the LDP. Covid-19 has shown a resurgence of xenophobia; storefronts broadly putting up signs that say "Japanese only"; Japanese television programs fueling the hatred to China and Korea by skewing testing results to show them as having a much higher rate of infection than Japan; pundits and variety show hosts reigniting the idea of Japanese exceptionalism by saying how to clean Japanese are. However, during this time, we have also seen Black Lives Matter protests in Japan. While some argue that this is yet another way for Japanese people to distance themselves from racism by placing it as a "foreign" issue, the protests in Shibuya were largely centred around an incident involving the police's physical violence against a Kurdish man on May 22nd of this year. Whether or not this fervour will extend to protesting the unfair treatment of ethnic Chinese and Koreans remains unknown, but with the internet, it could be more and more probable that Zainichi and others can tell their story and make Japanese people more aware of the challenges they face when Japanese mainstream media refuses to do so.

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