

---

## Living as *Zainichi* in the Twenty-First Century: Identity and Citizenship in Japan's Ethnic Korean Community

---

*Matthew Heidenreich*

*University of British Columbia*

*While much of the existing academic scholarship on Japan-Korea relations has focused on the ongoing political and historical disputes related to World War II, this paper analyzes the experience of ethnic Koreans living in Japan on a microeconomic and sociological level. Zainichi Koreans and the ongoing structural societal and economic challenges they face in Japanese society are analyzed from a historical perspective throughout this paper. Through a comparative-historical analysis of the experience of Koreans from the point when Japan annexed the Korean Peninsula in 1910 until liberalizing reforms of the twenty-first century, this paper shows that the social rights, civil rights, and economic opportunities of Zainichi Koreans have remained fluid throughout much of the twentieth century. While the challenges faced by Japan's Korean population have marginally improved since liberalizing reforms in the 1990s, this paper demonstrates that ongoing scapegoating on the part of politicians and negative public perceptions of Zainichi Koreans continue to pose challenges to Japan's sizeable Korean minority population.*

### Introduction

Common perceptions of Japan in Western media often characterize Japan as a country of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. While there is some truth to this preconception, the reality is more complex. Even though ethnic diversity is not a term usually applied in the Japanese context, there are several non-Japanese ethnic groups living in Japan, many of which can be examined

and understood as scars of Japan's imperial project during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic Koreans make up one of the largest minority populations in Japan, with about 850,000 permanent residents identifying as ethnically Korean in 2014, according to Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.<sup>2</sup> In the Japanese context, these people are referred to in academic scholarship and media as "Zainichi" Koreans (*Zainichi Kankokujin*).<sup>3</sup> The term *Zainichi*, literally meaning "foreign citizen in Japan", carries the significant connotation that these individuals are temporary residents rather than permanent members of society.

Korea and Japan have a long and complicated political history with longstanding and unresolved animosities mainly stemming from Japan's colonial rule and cultural assimilation policies on the Korean Peninsula. The most notable of these ongoing hostilities is Japanese compensation to Korean victims of forced labor during the years preceding and during World War II, which the Japanese government has argued have been resolved by existing treaties. Nevertheless, compensation disputes remain highly politicized and a source of ongoing tension between both Koreas and Japan. These unresolved hostilities and resulting tensions continue to complicate the situation of ethnic Koreans living in Japan. Most ethnic Koreans permanently residing in Japan today are descendants of Koreans that arrived in the country before or during World War II, usually as physical laborers and often against their will.<sup>4</sup> These individuals remain largely marginalized in society, face workplace discrimination, lack employment opportunities, and are often prevented from holding passports due to their complicated citizenship status. The lack of opportunities for Koreans in Japan is not a new phenomenon. It is a fluid situation that has gradually shifted in both positive and negative ways since World War II. Ethnic Koreans were brought to Japan to work in many manual labor industries preceding World War II. However, many opportunities dried up in the decades following the war, as the Japanese economy shifted towards a growth-oriented nativist economic system in the mid-twentieth century. As the Japanese economy slowed down in the 1990s, following a series of

1 "Japan," CIA The World Factbook, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/japan/>.

2 "Foreigners by nationality and by visas (occupation)," Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, accessed on March 30, 2019.

3 All translations are author's own unless otherwise stated.

4 Sonia Ryang, "Space and Time: The Experience Of The 'Zainichi', The Ethnic Korean Population of Japan," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 43, no. 4 (2014), 520.

liberalizing reforms, many institutional barriers were eliminated, allowing ethnic Koreans to participate in a much more market-oriented economy more freely.

While the plight of Japan's Korean population has been studied extensively in English-language literature, many scholars have focused on the experience of these people during Japan's occupation of Korea and the war years.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, few critical studies have been conducted on the continued challenges facing the Korean diaspora in Japan in the twenty-first century. While the situation for Japan's Korean residents has greatly improved in many ways as Japan has blossomed into a vibrant liberal democracy and developed economy, these residents still face several daily challenges. Such challenges include racial job discrimination, housing discrimination and ghettoization, and limited access to public services compared with ethnically Japanese citizens.<sup>6</sup> This situation has been further complicated by the political division of the Korean Peninsula since the 1950s, which has resulted in Japan's refusal to recognize the existence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Japan, therefore, does not recognize North Korean citizenship as a legitimate nationality.

This paper will conduct a comparative study of the political, social, and economic challenges faced by Japan's ethnic Koreans. It will compare the period of colonial rule from 1910-1945 with the contemporary challenges faced by these individuals since the turn of the twenty-first century when Japan engaged in liberalizing economic reforms that removed many of the institutional barriers to Korean participation in society. As this paper will demonstrate, overt economic discrimination and systemic poverty among Koreans in Japan have drastically reduced as Japan has developed, resulting in a higher quality of life for both ethnic Japanese and Koreans. However, these economic improvements have not been uniform, as Korean communities have yet to see the same economic uplifting that the rest of the country has experienced. Ethnic Koreans continue to face systemic barriers preventing them from participating fully in Japanese society. In addition, this paper will highlight the social and political nuances faced by Japan's ethnic Koreans. It will demonstrate how a contested sense of ethnic identity has become a barrier to full integration into Japanese society and Japanese nationality. The tensions between ethnic

5 Japanese colonial rule of Korea lasted from the annexation of the peninsula in 1910 until Japan's surrender at the end of the Second World War in 1945.

6 Philip Brasor, "Japan's Resident Koreans Endure a Climate of Hate," *The Japan Times*, May 7, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/05/07/national/media-national/japans-resident-koreans-endure-climate-hate/>.

Koreans and their Japanese counterparts have continued to foster a sense of hostility. The situation is further inflamed by the political activism of North Korea-aligned political advocacy groups such as *Chongryon*, which continues to operate as a middleman between the North Korean government and North Korea-aligned *Zainichi* Koreans.<sup>7</sup> This paper will demonstrate that while Japan's economic and social situation has stabilized since the end of World War II, Korean residents' social rights, civil rights, and economic opportunities are still hindered by societal marginalization and racial discrimination. This issue can be attributed to continued hostility between Korean and Japanese residents and the unresolved political situation on the Korean Peninsula, which has left many Korean residents with precarious citizenship status.

This paper conducts a comparative-historical analysis of the challenges *Zainichi* Koreans face in Japan, beginning with the annexation of Korea in 1910 and concluding with contemporary trends since liberalizing reforms in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. This historical comparison demonstrates how the institutional barriers to Korean participation in Japanese society have changed over time, both negatively and positively, throughout the twentieth century. Social rights, civil rights, and economic opportunities are dependent variables in this analysis. Political and economic policies are demonstrated to significantly impact these rights and opportunities for the *Zainichi* Korean population. While institutional barriers should be considered a key obstacle to full participation in Japanese society, more nuanced societal barriers and anti-Korean discourses remain the greatest obstacles for *Zainichi* Koreans to enjoy equal social rights, civil rights, and economic opportunities as their ethnically Japanese counterparts.

### Historical Background

The premise of this paper depends on how one defines "Korean" or "Japanese", which themselves are contested concepts. Korea and Japan have experienced a long history of cultural and linguistic exchange. Historians generally accept that ancient Koreans were some of the first settlers of Japan.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, both Hirohito and Akihito, the most recent two Japanese Emperors, explicitly

7 · Ibid.

8 · Hyung Il Pai, *Constructing "Korean" Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State-Formation Theories* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 234.

acknowledged that the Imperial Family has Korean origins.<sup>9</sup> Despite sharing a close ethnic and political history, Japan and Korea continue to see themselves as fundamentally distinct from one another. In the years leading up to World War II, the line between Koreans and Japanese was further muddled due to Japan's imperial expansion. As Toshiyuki Tamura explains, "people in the colonial territories were deprived of their native nationalities and incorporated into the Japanese nation."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, there were legally no Koreans in the Japanese Empire, even though the whole of the Korean Peninsula was under Japanese rule. Due to the complex history of Korean nationality, this paper will use the term "Korean" to refer to any individual who came to Japan after the Japanese Empire was established in 1868 and their descendants.

Following the Japanese Empire's annexation of Korea in 1910, the Japanese government began to bring as many as 2.2 million Koreans from the Peninsula into the Japanese home islands by 1945, usually to work as forced laborers for the war effort.<sup>11</sup> While these Korean laborers were technically Japanese subjects, their rights were severely limited. These workers were often employed in the most dangerous jobs, such as factories or mines, and were paid significantly less than their Japanese counterparts.<sup>12</sup> By some accounts, the situation faced by wartime Korean laborers amounted to slave labor.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the poor working conditions faced by Korean residents of Japan, there was a history of racial segregation and discrimination. As far back as the Taishō Period (1912-1926), there are recorded events of lynching and public violence against Koreans. Immediately following the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake in Tokyo, mob violence immediately broke out, as rumors had spread that Koreans were plotting a coup. As a result, up to 10,000 ethnic Koreans were murdered by mobs in the weeks following the disaster.<sup>14</sup> While this level of violence was by no means the

9 · Toshiyuki Tamura, "The Status and Role of Ethnic Koreans in the Japanese Economy," in *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy*, ed. C. Fred Bergsten (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2003), 79.

10 · Ibid.

11 · Ibid., 81.

12 · Ibid., 82.

13 · Hyonhee Shin, "Thousand Koreans sue government over wartime labor at Japan firms," *Reuters*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-forcedlabour-southkorea-idUSKCN1OJ0F7>.

14 · Joshua Hammer, *Yokohama Burning: The Deadly 1923 Earthquake and Fire That Helped Forge the Path to World War II* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 167.

norm, it is important to consider the animosity and suspicion felt towards Koreans by many Japanese citizens at this time. While Japan and Korea had historically held strong diplomatic and trading ties, the early 1900s were a time of suspicion towards Koreans in Japan – especially as the budding Korean independence movement gained steam on the Korean Peninsula. Korean nationalists had engaged in civil disobedience and assassination attempts on Japanese officials on multiple occasions, contributing to Japanese suspicions of Korean citizens domestically.<sup>15</sup> Even though Korean residents of Japan were considered Japanese subjects and were politically equal, the reality was that they remained a significantly marginalized group.

With Japan's defeat and subsequent occupation at the end of World War II, the vast majority of Koreans were permitted to return to the Korean peninsula, which had only just been liberated from Japanese colonial rule.<sup>16</sup> The population of ethnic Koreans in Japan immediately dropped significantly, as between 1.1 million and 1.4 million Koreans were repatriated immediately following the war.<sup>17</sup> The political situation on the Korean Peninsula became more complicated with the division between the Soviet-backed North and American-backed South, and the nationality status of many remaining Koreans was brought into question. As part of the post-war reforms, Japan's Alien Registration Law of 1952 stripped Japanese citizenship from all ex-colonial descendants that remained in the country, including around 500,000 ethnic Koreans.<sup>18</sup> This caused that many ethnic Koreans were left effectively stateless unless they chose to pursue repatriation.

The partitioning of the peninsula into North and South meant that many Koreans in Japan had no real homeland to which they could return.<sup>19</sup> With anti-communist hysteria growing more prevalent in South Korea, many Koreans intending to repatriate to South Korea were barred from entry under suspicion of being Communist sympathizers, especially if they had engaged in left-wing politics or expressed leftist sentiments in Japan.<sup>20</sup>

15 Sharon Minichiello, *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy, 1900-1930* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 60.

16 · Tamura, *Role of Ethnic Koreans*, 83.

17 · Ibid.

18 · Ibid.

19 · Sonia Ryang and John Lie, *Diaspora without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 31.

20 · Ibid., 31.

As a result, the post-war period saw many ethnic Koreans placed in a stateless and marginalized position; they could not return to either Korean state on the newly divided peninsula and were largely unwelcome in Japan.

With the conclusion of World War II and the continued political instability on the Korean Peninsula, a large population of *Zainichi* Koreans remained in Japan. In line with its history of oppression and marginalization in Japanese society, this population continued facing significant barriers to full participation in society. Japan embarked on a rapid reconstruction and economic boom during the 1950s and 1960s; the mainstream of Japanese society was lifted out of poverty, and homeownership became the norm. The same was not true, however, for the ethnic Korean population. Just as before the war, Koreans were generally forced to live in ethnically segregated communities along riverbanks. These sites were often superstitiously believed to be “roads to the afterlife” and were undesirable locations to live.<sup>21</sup>

*Zainichi* Koreans were largely exempted from vast increases in wealth that Japan saw throughout the post-war period, as many institutional barriers to employment and movement remained. While racism was not institutionalized as part of policies, the relative statelessness of *Zainichi* Koreans prevented them from attaining the same social and economic rights as their Japanese counterparts, which served to institutionalize a sort of passive racial discrimination.<sup>22</sup> Just as the post-war reforms had stripped Koreans of their Japanese nationality, the Nationality Act banned Japanese employers from hiring noncitizens as permanent employees. The Act thus effectively barred Koreans from seeking stable employment.<sup>23</sup> To survive, many Korean families were forced to operate small businesses, such as Korean food restaurants, within their segregated communities. Therefore, the Nationality Act created a situation in which the economy largely marginalized Korean-owned businesses and the families that depended on them. By cutting off access to mainstream commerce and the more mainstream Japanese economy, this system stilted the success of Korean businesses and left Korean families institutionally disadvantaged as a result. *Zainichi* Koreans were some of the last members of society to see improvements in their living conditions during the post-war period. This

21 · Ryang, “Space and Time,” 544-545.

22 · Tamura, *Role of Ethnic Koreans*, 83.

23 · *Ibid.*, 84.

had much to do with their inability to participate in the workforce fully.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ethnic and National Identities**

An important question that arises from this discussion is the issue of citizenship. Despite being stripped of their Japanese nationality after the war, *Zainichi* Koreans were not technically barred from pursuing Japanese nationality in the same way that any other immigrant arrivals in the country could. Although Japan's naturalization process has always been notoriously complicated and strict, the pursuit of Japanese nationality was not impossible, even in the years following the war. Despite this, the number of *Zainichi* Koreans that pursued Japanese nationality following the war remained surprisingly low, especially given the economic opportunities it would bring. The reality is difficult to explain fully, as all individual cases are different. However, some critical trends in the conceptualizations of national identity among Koreans and Japanese may differ from the typical Western conceptualization of national belonging. Japan's post-war order was primarily rooted in the idea that the country would only succeed as an economic and political power if it relied on its "ethnically and culturally homogenous nature", which was deeply entrenched in its social and political discourses.<sup>25</sup> This idea was also a guiding principle of the new governments in North and South Korea, especially to contrast these societies with their former colonizer. "Koreanness" and "Japaneseness" became mutually exclusive ideas, and social room for an identity in-between these two "essences" did not exist.<sup>26</sup> The Japanese government often expressed their belief in a "monoethnic ideology" through the bureaucratic system, which operated in a way that underscored the importance of "blood purity" when applying for citizenship.<sup>27</sup> For many Koreans, the pursuit of Japanese citizenship meant the abandonment of their Korean identity, and the vast majority of these individuals were categorically against naturalization.<sup>28</sup> For many *Zainichi* Koreans, the prospect of losing their identity as a people was too grave a risk to take, even if it meant passing up on the potential economic and social benefits of doing so.

24 · Ibid.

25 · John Lie, *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 84.

26 · Ibid., 84-85.

27 · Ibid., 85.

28 · Ibid.



***Zainichi* in a Globalizing Japan**

Japan, like much of the world, has been transformed in the age of globalization. In 2000, Japan was recovering from one of the most prolonged recessions in its history. When the Bubble Economy popped in the 1990s, it left Japan's economy in tatters, with low economic growth and uncertainty about its future. The first decade of the twenty-first century brought American-style economic and political reforms to Japan with the election of Junichiro Koizumi's conservative, reformist-minded government.<sup>29</sup> Reforms to the sprawling bureaucracy became the centerpiece of government, bringing new conceptualizations of citizenship and nationality as Japan sought to reinvent itself as a "normal" participant in the world order. These reforms, including the deregulation of the financial markets and liberalization of currency practices on American-style market lines, primarily began with the slowing of the Japanese economy in the 1990s. This new political age brought sweeping changes, especially to the *Zainichi* Korean population. As the government deemphasized the "monoethnic nation-state" narrative and expanded the employment rights of noncitizens, Japan's population of Koreans saw expanded opportunities to participate in the workforce without the need to give up their identity. As Japan's economy liberalized, foreign investment and an influx of foreign workers diversified the face of the labor force, creating an atmosphere in which non-Japanese, in this case, Koreans, became more common through increased exposure to the markets. As institutional barriers to participation fell, however, the existential threat to the continued existence of the *Zainichi* identity was even further clarified. In addition, these reforms have encouraged more *Zainichi* Koreans to pursue naturalization.

While the government does not publish official statistics, estimates place the number of *Zainichi* Koreans that pursued naturalization after 2000 to be in the tens of thousands.<sup>30</sup> This number sharply contrasts similar research performed in the 1950s, which saw about 232 ethnic Koreans naturalize in Japan. This increase in the willingness of Koreans to naturalize is fundamentally challenging to explain simply. However, the decline in the monoethnic public discourse is most certainly a critical component in driving this trend. If the pursuit of Japanese nationality does not demand that Koreans completely give up their identity, they may be more willing to naturalize.

29 · Ikuo Kabashima and Gill Steel, "The Koizumi Revolution," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40, no. 1 (2007): 79.

30 · Tamura, *Role of Ethnic Koreans*, 84.

Despite this evidence, it is still important to consider that *Zainichi* Koreans are not guaranteed citizenship should they choose to pursue naturalization. Japan remains one of the most difficult states to naturalize in, as explained by Anna Boucher in her analysis of Japanese immigration policy: “naturalization is regarded as arduous, arbitrary, and unfacilitated; while 30,000 permanent resident visas are issued each year, the country processes only 1,000 annual naturalizations.”<sup>31</sup> The barriers to citizenship still exist across all minority groups, especially since Japan does not guarantee birthright citizenship. While many *Zainichi* Koreans are third or even fourth-generation Japan-born Koreans, many still struggle to obtain Japanese nationality.

While ethnic Koreans no longer faced institutional barriers to economic well-being, threats to their linguistic and cultural identity intensified. Racialized discourses became more extreme, with several large-scale demonstrations by Japanese citizens against what many viewed as “preferential treatment” of *Zainichi* Koreans by the government.<sup>32</sup> The improving livelihoods of *Zainichi* Koreans effectively brought many of these individuals into mainstream society, which potentially catalyzed public backlash. This backlash has been expressed in the establishment of several anti-Korean organizations such as *Zainichi Tokken o Yurusanai Shimin no Kai*, or the Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the *Zainichi*. They often organize large street protests calling for an end to state welfare and alleged “privileges” afforded to *Zainichi* Koreans.<sup>33</sup> As this paper discussed previously, anti-Korean sentiment has a long history in Japan. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a corresponding increase in anti-*Zainichi* sentiment has accompanied the increase in economic opportunity for *Zainichi* Koreans.

### **Korean Politics and *Zainichi* Identity**

As this paper has already discussed, the complex political situation on the Korean Peninsula has repeatedly complicated the *Zainichi* identity and quest

31 · Anna K Boucher and Justin Gest, “Naturalization,” in *Crossroads: Comparative Immigration Regimes in a World of Demographic Change*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 118.

32 · Apichai W. Shipper, “Nationalisms of and Against *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan,” *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 1 (January 2010): 55.

33 · Justin McCurry, “Police in Japan place anti-Korean extremist group Zaitokukai on watchlist,” *The Guardian*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/04/police-japan-rightwing-anti-korean-extremist-group-zaitokukai-watchlist>.

for nationality, as the majority of *Zainichi* Koreans arrived in Japan before the partition of the peninsula. While many *Zainichi* Koreans self-identify with liberal-democratic South Korea, there is a sizable minority that has chosen to identify themselves with totalitarian North Korea. This has historically been a significant roadblock to repatriation; the Japanese government has never recognized the North Korean government as legitimate and therefore does not allow *Zainichi* Koreans to claim North Korean nationality.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the fierce political divide between the North and South in Korea is mirrored by *Zainichi* Koreans aligning themselves with different sides of the conflict. This divide has led to the establishment and rise of two separate political organizations: *Mindan*, which operates on behalf of South Korea-aligned *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan, and *Chongryon*, which operates on behalf of those who align themselves with North Korea. Notably, *Chongryon* also serves as a *de facto* embassy of North Korea in Japan, as the two countries do not have official diplomatic ties.<sup>35</sup> Both *Mindan* and *Chongryon* operate as middlemen between *Zainichi* Koreans and their respective Korean governments. They provide financial support and lobbying, especially in the case of *Chongryon*.

These organizations have also established a vast network of “Korean Schools” throughout Japan, which have become a point of serious controversy, especially with the renewed anti-Korean sentiment since the early 2000s. These schools operate similarly to private schools but offer education in Korean and provide students with a curriculum comparable to those of North or South Korea. Thus, North Korea-aligned schools have allowed *Zainichi* Korean students as young as preschoolers to be exposed to the propaganda and indoctrination promoted by the regime in North Korea.<sup>36</sup> Accompanied by an increasingly belligerent and nuclear-capable North Korea under Kim Jong Un, this has encouraged a fierce backlash by anti-Korean activists, who see the activities of *Chongryon* and North Korean schools as a threat to national security.<sup>37</sup> Directly following North Korea’s missile tests over Hokkaido in 2017, members of anti-Korean groups engaged in coordinated protests at Korean schools and Korean institutions around the country, further fueling the anti-

34 · Erik Ropers, *Voices of the Korean Minority in Postwar Japan*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2018), 97.

35 · Tamura, *Role of Ethnic Koreans*, 99.

36 · Misa Ryu, “Issues Concerning Immersion Education in Korean Schools in Japan,” *Japan Social Innovation Journal* 3, no. 1 (2013), 62.

37 · McCurry, “Zaitokukai on watchlist.”

Korean sentiment and pushing many *Zainichi* Koreans to fear for their lives.<sup>38</sup>

### Continued Challenges

The activities discussed above have continued to serve as a barrier for complete *Zainichi* integration into society, as these individuals continue to face discrimination. In addition to protests and threats made by fringe organizations and right-wing groups, significant social barriers to integration remain. While the laws have been generally reformed since the post-war years, *Zainichi* Koreans still experience workplace discrimination and lower salaries than their Japanese counterparts.<sup>39</sup> These individuals have also been subject to what Bumsoo Kim calls “practices of everyday exclusion.”<sup>40</sup> These practices include the inability of *Zainichi* Koreans holding permanent residency to return to Japan from abroad without attaining a re-entry permit, as well a public ban on employed *Zainichi* Koreans in managerial posts that have the potential to “shape the public will.”<sup>41</sup> While not overtly discriminatory compared to past policies, these policies reflect a deep-seated distrust of *Zainichi* Koreans by the Japanese political elite and members of society. Antidiscrimination has been enshrined in liberal democracies around the world, including in Japan through its adherence to the International Covenants on Human Rights. Despite this, *Zainichi* Koreans are still subjected to policies and practices that place them in a permanent sub-citizen status. Even outside the realm of official policies, Koreans in Japan experience widespread harassment, especially when the threat of North Korea is in the media. Following the most recent missile tests over Hokkaido, police received several reports from Korean residents who had experienced physical or verbal abuse, such as having their bags sliced open and other types of physical assaults.<sup>42</sup> While it should be noted that these types of violence are the exception rather than the norm, it cannot be doubted that *Zainichi* Koreans continue to suffer discrimination and abuse in contemporary Japanese society.

38 · The Japan Times, “Former Zaitokukai member pressed with libel charges for hate speech against Korean school in Kyoto,” *The Japan Times*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/04/24/national/crime-legal/former-zaitokukai-member-pressed-libel-charges-hate-speech-korean-school-kyoto/>

39 · Brasor, “Climate of Hate.”

40 · Bumsoo Kim, “Blatant Discrimination Disappears, But...: The Politics of Everyday Exclusion in Contemporary Japan,” *Asian Perspective* 35, no. 2 (2011), 288.

41 · Kim, “Blatant Discrimination,” 294.

42 · *Ibid.*, 297.

However, what is likely to be more damaging to the lives of *Zainichi* Koreans is the blatantly inflammatory language utilized by some public figures in Japanese politics. There have been several examples since the 2000s of right-wing, even centrist, politicians joining in on the anti-Korean public discourse. One significant example of this was in April 2000, when Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara stated that, “atrocious crimes have been committed again and again by *sangokujin*.”<sup>43</sup> in a televised speech. The term *sangokujin* means “third country” and is commonly used in a derogatory manner to refer to Koreans. This language not only serves to intimidate and exclude *Zainichi* Koreans from feeling accepted in Japanese society but also further inflames the already problematic anti-Korean sentiment. While this type of discourse is not unique to the twenty-first century, such discourses are important to consider in reference to the liberalizing reforms that have eliminated many institutional barriers to Korean participation in the labor force.

### Conclusion

Although Korea and Japan share more than two thousand years of political and cultural history, animosity between these two countries still exists. Japan’s imperial ambitions during World War II, in which Korea was absorbed into the Japanese Empire, have inflicted lasting scars on both Japanese and Korean societies. In Japan, the continued presence of *Zainichi* Koreans, who exist in a semi-stateless position, has complicated both countries’ efforts to move forward with reconciliation. Despite the narrow lens through which Japan is depicted in Western media, it is not an ethnically homogenous nation. The rights of minorities like *Zainichi* Koreans have routinely been threatened, and their challenges understudied.

While the number of Koreans in Japan today is far less than during the war years, the *Zainichi* population still represents a formidable cultural community. The rights of these ethnic Koreans living in Japan have been disrespected and oppressed since the early years of the Japanese Empire. However, they have improved marginally due to globalization and democratization. Rather than being forced to live in slums, *Zainichi* Koreans have been able to climb out of poverty and engage more meaningfully with Japanese society since the Koizumi era beginning in 2000. Despite this progress, however, Japanese ethnic Koreans continue to face systemic, often subtle, discrimination and exploitation in Japanese society. While,

economically speaking, *Zainichi* Koreans have progressed significantly, the continued challenges of these individuals in their daily interactions cannot be ignored. From outright abuse to subtle discrimination and inequality, Japan's Korean minority continues to suffer from social prejudice and institutional barriers to sufficient equity and equality in Japanese society.

This paper has demonstrated that the plight facing *Zainichi* Koreans has improved, but there is much work to be done in pursuit of equality. While economic development showed that progress could be made in bringing these individuals into mainstream society, public discourses have signaled a backslide. *Zainichi* Koreans living and working in Japan do not have access to the same opportunities as ethnic Japanese and are therefore excluded from full participation in society. While discrimination against these Koreans is not as overt as it once was, this paper has demonstrated that issues of prejudice and harassment are very much alive in contemporary Japanese society. As the political situation on the Korean Peninsula continues to worsen, *Zainichi* Koreans will require recognition as an at-risk group if they are to be adequately protected from further institutionalized discrimination. The first step to resolving these issues of identity is recognition. If Japan is to participate fully in the liberal-democratic order, it must acknowledge the continued social challenges facing its largest minority population, *Zainichi* Koreans.