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Cover Page Footnote

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Hyomin Lee

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical construction of stigmatization toward Zainichi Koreans in Japan, as well as the consequences of such stigmatization. Zainichi Koreans are a minority group of ethnic Koreans living in Japan as special permanent residents, a unique identity formed as a result of the history of Japanese war imperialism and post-war nationalism. Zainichi Koreans have been residing in Japan for many generations now, and are no different from Japanese except for their ethnicity, or lack of Japanese blood. The homogeneity of Japan that boasts of pure Japanese blood is constantly conflicted by the long-term presence of Zainichi Koreans, which not only is one of many other ethnic minority groups that has been eroding that highly-sought-after homogeneity but is also a remnant of Japan's history as aggressive colonizers. This conflict results in the stigmatization of the Zainichi Koreans, which is defined as a historically constructed process through which a person or group of people are seen as threatening the status quo of the society. This stigmatization can be explained by the system justification theory as well as the status characteristic theory, and is present in two aspects, namely structural, as well as intergroup stigmatization. Both posing unique sets of challenges and negative consequences to the Zainichi Koreans

When an individual or a group of people is set apart from the mainstream and marked as flawed, tainted, and less human, they are said to be stigmatized.¹ Stigmatization can be based on a perceived threat, including deviance from a set of cherished norms that maintain the present state of dominant culture, group identity, and social order.² According to System Justification Theory (SJT), people are inclined to defend the status quo of their society because it provides a sense of safety from perceived threat.³ One way they do so is by endorsing group stereotypes, which are used to justify a multitude of discriminatory treatments toward stigmatized groups, reinforcing the idea that such treatment is warranted, and thus fair. In Status Characteristics Theory (SCT), how a person will behave and interact with others are conveyed through the attributes and

expectations of a person.⁴ Thus, the way a person is perceived and treated is in accordance with their social status and grouping. This division between groups indicates a hierarchical societal structure that awards certain groups higher positions on the social ladder and, in turn, greater power.

This paper employs SJT and SCT to examine the group hierarchy between Japanese people and Zainichi Koreans, as well as the stigmatization of the latter, all in the context of Japanese society. In this paper, I will argue that the ethnically Japanese majority stigmatize Zainichi Koreans because their very presence threatens a cherished notion of a homogenous Japan, disrupting the alleged "purity" of Japanese society and culture. In doing so, I will also explore how the social construction of a homogenous Japan relies on the displacement

of Zainichi Koreans through key stigma processes, including reinforcing social norms (e.g. “Japanese only” signs outside of businesses), defining Zainichi Koreans as deviant (e.g. enemies, aliens, foreigners, others), and constructing stereotypes about Zainichi Koreans (e.g. violent, filthy, criminals, cockroaches).⁵ The socio-historical roots of these three stigmatization processes have sowed the seeds for modern-day discrimination toward Zainichi Koreans in Japan.

History

From 1910 to 1945, Korea was colonized by Japan. During this time, the Japanese government enforced Japanese language and culture through the *kominka seisaku*, the policy of subordinating people to the Emperor of Japan, through banning the usage of Korean language and Korean names and forcing Koreans to learn in the Japanese education system.⁶ Many Koreans were also conscripted into the Japanese labor force for cheap manual work in coal mining, ship-building, and construction, among other things. They had to register as members of *Kyowakai* (a membership card created to identify and control Koreans in Japan during colonial rule) and wear badges, a form of visual identification that served as a tool to manage the Korean population in Japan.⁷ Despite the increasing number of Koreans in Japan, they were treated poorly; the state disregarded their basic needs and assigned them menial tasks, shunned by the Japanese majority because they were labor-intensive, low-paying, and had poor working conditions.⁸

When World War II ended in 1945 and Japan surrendered, approximately 2.4 million Koreans remained in Japan as a result of conscription. At that time, although they were differentiated from the native Japanese citizens as colonial subjects of a lowly status, they were still largely accepted by the Japanese society as Japanese nationals. However, this was not to last, for soon after, the imperial slogan of a multi-ethnic Japan collapsed and was replaced by the contrasting ideology of a monoethnic state. Koreans were henceforth rejected as Japanese nationals and were ordered by the Japanese government and the Supreme Commander of the Allied Power to leave Japan. Unfortunately, the post-war political instability and resulting economic and infrastructural ruins in Korea deterred Koreans from returning to their motherland, where they had lost virtually all of their assets. As such, many Koreans had no other choice but to remain in Japan and build a life for themselves and their families in spite of the state’s cold reception.⁹

In 1952, at the end of the Pacific War and the

drafting of the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty, Japan fully regained her sovereignty and officially renounced Zainichi Koreans as Japanese nationals. It mandated the confiscation of their Japanese citizenship by nullifying the official documents originally issued upon their conscription;¹⁰ this also applied to the Japanese-born children of the Korean workers. Consequently, Zainichi Koreans were marked as illegal aliens on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, meaning the “right of blood.” Under Nationality Law, there is a clause stating that ancestry, rather than birthplace, determines one’s citizenship. This clause also catalyzed restrictions on the naturalization of foreigners.¹¹

From then on, all Koreans in Japan were institutionally excluded from state welfare, denied voting rights, and were mandated to carry alien registration cards at all times.¹² This alien registration also required fingerprinting, which was symbolic of Japan’s degradation of the Koreans, as fingerprinting in Japan was previously reserved only for criminals. This systematic discrimination was not only a violation of human rights and dignity, but also an emblem of Japanese refusal to accept Zainichi people as nationals. Koreans were only endowed a special permanent resident status and given the name “Zainichi Koreans” after 1981.¹³ This may initially appear to be a concession on the part of the Japanese government to at last legally recognizing the Koreans in Japan; however, it was also a subtle reminder that Zainichi Koreans were outsiders, for the name Zainichi Koreans translates to “Koreans living in Japan.”¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, Zainichi Koreans continue to be denied voting rights, pensions, and social welfare, even with permanent resident status.

In the 1990s, when a new influx of immigrants settled in Japan, the government realigned the narrative of immigration control to that of incorporation and coexistence.¹⁵ The government also propagandized the naturalization of Zainichi Koreans as Japanese citizens and their assimilation into Japanese culture, reducing the actual figure of postcolonial foreigners in the national statistics. By doing so, Japanese aimed to reduce the magnitude of Japanese war crimes.¹⁶ These actions of the Japanese government temporarily buried the issue of discrimination against Zainichi Koreans, rendering them nearly invisible and catalysing the formation of a small minority group whose plights and needs are almost always ignored.

Today, there is no official available data on the Zainichi Korean population in Japan, although Zainichi Korean scholars estimate the population to be about 650,000.¹⁷ Current generations of Zainichi Koreans have largely lived exclusively in Japan. They dress,

walk, and have the same mannerisms as ethnically Japanese people, the result of having grown up in Japan. They speak fluent Japanese and their limited Korean is broken and inflected with a foreign accent. In short, Zainichi Koreans in Japan today are Japanese in all but name and ancestry, marked as “impure.” Due to this unchangeable fact, they are stigmatized and discriminated against in Japan.

Understanding Stigmatization toward Zainichi Koreans

Status Characteristic Theory and System Justification Theory are two ways to analyze Japanese discrimination and stigmatization of Zainichi Koreans. Japan is known as a country with limited immigration and a monocultural, monoracial population. Indeed, Japan places extensive emphasis on its homogenous makeup.¹⁸ For example, the Japanese government credits its postwar success to its community of citizens affiliated and bound by their ethno-national similarities. Japanese citizens also perceive that the homogeneity of their country was what allowed their rapid recovery from the war and their fast development into a leading player in the world’s political and economic spheres. *Nihonjinron*, or the theory of being Japanese, posits that Japan is homogeneous and culturally unique. Having Japanese “blood” is crucial to identifying with the Japanese identity and culture in Japan.¹⁹ As noted in the System Justification Theory, this is the system that the Japanese government is working hard to protect from change. By excluding foreigners who are deemed as unable to “be Japanese” and therefore can never truly become a part of Japan. The state is defining and protecting “Japaneseness”. The socio-cultural spheres of Japan are then defended by means of condemning interracial marriage and excluding foreigners from employment, especially in the domains of academic teaching and political leadership.²⁰

Following this trickle-down stigmatization process is the Status Characteristic Theory, where structural stigma influences group-level interactions. This means the system constructed and defended by the Japanese government leads to Zainichi Koreans being labelled informally as lower on social and competency hierarchies. These negative labels rear their heads in intergroup encounters, in what is known as intergroup stigmatization.

In sum, a foreigner in Japan will always be an outsider, never to be welcomed into a space reserved only for the Japanese. This is the fate of Zainichi Koreans, despite having lived in Japan for a long time—some even being third or fourth generation residents—and

having contributed greatly to the development of the country. They have been and continue to be perceived as threats that the Japanese system should defend itself against. The exclusion of Zainichi Koreans in Japanese society perpetuates and validates their ostracism, discrimination, and stigmatization in political, economic, and social domains.

Structural Stigma

As discussed above, structural stigma refers to institutional discrimination towards a group based on certain characteristics condemned in society. In Japan, structural stigma toward Zainichi Koreans manifests in the power of the Japanese government and its access to and control over social, economic, and political resources, forming powerful obstacles in the daily lives of Zainichi Koreans. Three of the biggest challenges Zainichi Koreans face are in education, employment, and basic welfare. These structural domains are avenues through which the Japanese maintain a monoethnic and homogenous society. Education is a form of power that allows one to access resources and achieve higher social status.²¹ High-quality and accessible education is used as a marker to assess quality of life or standard of living. However, for Zainichi Koreans in Japan, education is instead a tool the dominant group uses to exercise and reinforce its power. The “monolingual and monoracial state” ideology in 1910 banned Korean ethnic schools in Japan and forced Koreans to forgo their language and culture in place of Japan’s.²² At the end of 1946, the Japanese government made a small allowance for Korean schools to be set up. Doing so, however, was a long and tedious process with stringent terms and fraught with bureaucratic complications. For example, the 1947 School Education Law mandated that all Korean schools use Japanese textbooks, follow directions from the Japanese government, and only teach the Korean language as an auxiliary to the regular Japanese curriculum.²³ Any Korean schools would then have to seek official approval from the central government, bound by a rigid set of rules, for the official school opening. The schools that did not comply with the regulations were closed down and are now unrecognized.

Korean schools cannot offer good opportunities for their students given the way they are regarded in wider society.²⁴ Going to a school that is labeled as different from the mainstream academic system puts Zainichi Koreans at a disadvantage in achieving higher education.²⁵ Since Korean schools are not formally recognized, Zainichi Koreans lack school diplomas, which in turn excludes them from participating in the

national labor force.²⁶ Moreover, Korean schools are excluded from the High School Tuition Support Fund because they fail to satisfy the aforementioned laws and academic regulations. Without government funding, the number of Korean schools are decreasing, as is the number of Korean students attending such schools, inhibiting the right to education for ethnic Koreans.²⁷

As a result of Japan's neglect, Zainichi Koreans are pressured to assimilate into society and become more Japanese. They are forced to attend schools where learning about their ethnic identity, history, and language is not prioritized. Instead, Japanese language classes, cultural classes, multilingual advisory services, and publications are provided to minimize intercultural friction.²⁸ In this way, Zainichi Koreans are deprived of opportunities to learn about their ethnic identity, develop positive self-images, and engage in social support from similar others. These unique, chronic, and structural stressors expose Zainichi Koreans to psychological distress.²⁹ The Japanese government has a strong dismissive attitude towards any desire of Zainichi Koreans to learn about their ancestry. Indeed, the government supports coercive assimilation, rendering Zainichi roots, language, and culture less visible. This is certainly an effective way of defending cultural homogeneity, as Zainichi Koreans have only two choices: be stubborn and continue receiving a Korean education that is deemed inferior in the eyes of broader society or learn the ways of the Japanese and hope for a chance to attend schools with greater recognition. Either way, they are excluded.

Even if a Zainichi Korean successfully crosses the education hurdle and attains the well-regarded academic credentials necessary for the job market, they still face barriers to favorable job prospects. This is because Zainichi Koreans are also heavily discriminated against within the job market, which leaves many of them to seek employment as truck drivers, day laborers, or rag-pickers.³⁰ Large corporations, such as Hitachi, reject Zainichi Korean applicants on the basis of their ethnicity, and the government denies them the right to hold public administrative positions.³¹ In fact, ethnic Koreans are disproportionately unemployed as compared to ethnic Japanese people.³² The national government exerts full power over the employment regulations of both private and public organizations, as well as municipal authorities. As a result, any policies implemented that are deemed too foreigner-friendly can be easily overruled. For instance, local public schools allow the employment of foreign nationals as educators; the Ministry of Education has allowed this practice since 1992. But, foreign nationals can only be hired

under the condition that they are not given positions of administrative authority nor allowed to participate in faculty meetings.³³ Extrapolating from this to other job domains, it is easy to see that Zainichi Koreans, regarded as foreign nationals, are restricted by the national government from potential career advancements and struggle to hold anything but low status positions. Here, again, we see the application of System Justification Theory: allowing Koreans to have job opportunities equal to the Japanese would mean undermining the strong barrier between "pure" ethnic Japanese people and foreigners—a barrier that the government has worked hard to build. There is a deliberate reluctance in sharing precious resources with these foreigners and a strong preference for reserving them only for the in-group (Japanese people).

Education and employment difficulties aside, another major aspect of life that Zainichi Koreans experience discrimination in is welfare. The Japanese government restricts the human rights of the ethnic Korean minority, taking measures to ensure a difficult life for Zainichi Koreans. They are not considered citizens, yet they are not completely foreigners. Thus, the policies toward Zainichi Koreans reflect either coerced assimilation or ostracization. Punitive social policies toward Zainichi Koreans maintain their stigmatized social status and subject them to oppression and subjugation. For instance, national pension is denied to Koreans on the basis that they lack citizenship. Elderly or disabled Zainichi Koreans are excluded from the National Pension benefits despite their duty to pay taxes to both the national and local governments like any other citizen.³⁴ Although Zainichi Koreans have filed lawsuits multiple times against the Japanese government for violation of the equality principle of Article 14 of the Constitution of Japan and Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Supreme Court of Japan has sided in favor of the government in all cases, noting that exclusion of certain foreign nationals from the national pension scheme was not a violation of the Constitution of Japan.³⁵ Likewise, they are excluded from other fundamental markers of well-being, such as national health insurance and unemployment benefits.³⁶ As with employment rates, Zainichi Koreans are denied the welfare benefits and safety nets that their Japanese counterparts are entitled to simply by virtue of their ethnicity. System Justification Theory speaks to the Japanese government's rejection of those who are not endowed with Japanese heritage, as the government is responsible for maintaining and cultivating "Japaneseness".

The desire of the Japanese government to defend

its system of monoethnic and monocultural society leads to numerous negative labels being attached to Zainichi Koreans, whether advertently or inadvertently. These labels and stereotypes are promulgated by the structural stigmatization of Zainichi Koreans, but they move beyond systemic barriers. They take root in society with a kind of assumed truth. STC states that differences in status labels contribute to differences in performance expectations and evaluation, which then reaffirm one's belief in the accuracy of the initial status label.³⁷ Japanese perceptions of Zainichi Koreans' characteristics rely largely on the prejudices, beliefs, and stereotypes about them, which often emerge in intergroup encounters.

Intergroup Stigma

Intergroup factors refer to the perception of stigma in the interactions of ethnic groups. Structural factors (e.g. barriers to decent education, employment, and welfare benefits for Zainichi Koreans) contextualize the perceptions of ingroup (Japanese) versus outgroup (non-Japanese) members in interactions. Beyond these structural arrangements of power, the connotation of "Zainichi Korean" itself creates a sense that this social group is provisional. It implicates them as foreign and aliens, only temporarily residing in Japan.³⁸ This "foreignness" or "alien-ness" is met with rejection and disdain from the Japanese. For example, Zainichi Koreans often face refusal from real estate agents.³⁹ Landlords do not want Zainichi Koreans to reside with Japanese people, as having their Japanese clients live in close quarters with "aliens" is likened to contamination of the "pure" with the "impure." This is especially prominent in upscale housing districts.

Japanese people protested against implementing the special permanent residency status for Zainichi Koreans, which eliminated the requirements of fingerprinting or having to extend the length of their "stay." They perceived this change as granting undeserved privileges.⁴⁰ After implementation, resentment towards Zainichi Koreans further intensified, such that they suffer from hate speech, including being told to "get the hell out of Japan." Zainichi Koreans are also dehumanized as "cockroaches."⁴¹ To take their protest further, some Japanese people formed an anti-Zainichi Korean group called *Zaitokukai*, which translates to "citizens against the privilege of Zainichi Koreans in Japan."⁴² Their rallies involve protest signs filled with vitriolic language, such as "go back to your country," "leave Japan," "let's kill Koreans," and "would-be criminals."⁴³ Zainichi Koreans today continue to face subtle and indirect discrimination, including minor insults, insensi-

tivity, and disregard. According to Osumi, young Zainichi Koreans reported experience or awareness of hate speech towards them.⁴⁴ This hate-speech is also active on the internet in the form of comments, websites, and videos.⁴⁵ As a result, when initially forming relationships with people, Zainichi Koreans feel the need to be cautious, suspicious, or even withdraw completely.⁴⁶

Even those who have managed to obtain Japanese citizenship are not recognized as Japanese in the family registration system (the *Koseki*). In Japan, marriage is not solely between two individuals, but between two families. In this system, lineage is highly important and ethnic deviance denotes marginality, lack of worth, and unreliability. Zainichi Koreans' marriage proposals are often refused simply because their ethnicity prevents their partners from carrying on a Japanese lineage.⁴⁷ In several interviews of Zainichi Koreans conducted by Fukuoka, interviewees revealed that marriage prospects are a huge concern for them, given the widespread disapproval of Japanese people.⁴⁸ One Zainichi Korean who holds Japanese citizenship through naturalization was told by the prospective in-laws that she and her partner could not get married because of their different nationalities. As stated in status characteristics theory, those stigmatized are evaluated as incompetent due to their incapability of carrying on a "pure" Japanese bloodline.

Consequences of Stigmatization

While most instances of stigmatization and discrimination of Zainichi Koreans are intentional, unintentional incidents are also significant. For example, regarding the prospective marriage between a Zainichi Korean and a Japanese person, it is not uncommon for the Japanese partner to advise their Zainichi Korean counterpart to refrain from revealing their ethnic background.⁴⁹ This can lead to feelings of shame and guilt, the stress of which may mark the end of an intimate relationship.

According to Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams, the experience of social rejection and exclusion activates patterns in the brain that are similar to those triggered in the face of physical pain.⁵⁰ Research has found correlations between the stress of social isolation and negative health consequences, such as higher levels of depressive symptoms, poorer quality of life, and even death. Monroe and Simons replicated a study supporting the theory that stress levels are positively associated with higher chances of depression.⁵¹ Similarly, Berkman and Syme reported that, age-adjusted, the mortality rate of those feeling isolated is significantly higher than that of those with social support.⁵² As sup-

ported by House, Landis, and Umberson, people who are socially integrated are more likely to live longer and survive epidemics and infectious disease, and are less likely to report being depressed.⁵³

Awareness of the negative social sentiments toward Zainichi Koreans results in many choosing to pass as Japanese. They opt for identity concealment, which means hiding their true identity and blending in with the dominant group.⁵⁴ The fear of exposure mentally taxes the stigmatized individuals leading to negative health outcomes such as poor cognitive performance,⁵⁵ social withdrawal,⁵⁶ and psychological distress.⁵⁷ Despite their passing as Japanese, if their “Koreanness” is eventually revealed through their legal name or documents (such as *Koseki*), Zainichi Koreans face discrimination once more.⁵⁸ Altogether, these difficulties form daily stressors for Zainichi Koreans and produce lower social confidence, higher anxiety and depression, and lower self-esteem.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Both the Zainichi Korean identity and its stigmatization are historical—they are products of a series of choices made during the war. Despite shifting narratives surrounding Japan’s national identity from past to present, the concept of a multiethnic nation remains nonexistent. Rather, the status quo has been a homogeneous, monoethnic society. To be accepted, one has to be Japanese and to be Japanese, one must be descended from a lineage consisting only of Japanese people. As this paper has shown, Japanese heritage is taken as superior. From the perspective of the Japanese government and society, social cohesion is said to be the contributing factor of Japan’s success in overcoming postwar devastation and rebuilding the nation’s economy to become second only to the United States. Social homogeneity has been fervently promoted as providing social accord, safety, and sentimental meaning, with the presence of Zainichi Koreans as a roadblock. To the Japanese, Zainichi Koreans have always defied the very meaning of their monoethnic society. Early generations of Zainichi Koreans were foreign, not understanding Japanese language or culture. However, modern Zainichi Koreans—having been born and raised in Japan for several generations—are completely immersed in Japanese language and culture but are still regarded as aliens to society. On top of these perceived differences, Zainichi Koreans also symbolize Japan’s wartime atrocities and defeat, something the government has been very keen on concealing. Consequently, as noted in SJT, the government has a strong psychological motivation to defend and maintain the structural stigma towards

Zainichi Koreans and keep them down. Furthermore, the structural disadvantages perpetuate into interpersonal realms and affects their social status. Thus, the image of Zainichi Koreans as inferior and lowly continues to cling to them and shapes the interactions between Zainichi Koreans and Japanese fostering prejudice and discrimination as suggested in SCT.

Taken together, these jarring qualities that the Zainichi Koreans represent urge the Japanese to defend and justify the status quo, resulting in the stigmatization and discrimination of Zainichi Koreans. In fact, official government records on the Zainichi Korean population are hard to come across, attesting to the extent to which this small minority ethnic group has been oppressed. Indeed, the life and plight of Zainichi Koreans—of which current generations are Japanese in all but ancestry—has been captured wholly and heartbreakingly in Min Jin Lee’s award-winning novel “Pachinko,” which has garnered significant public attention worldwide. Perhaps the difficult situation that the Zainichi Koreans are in will now come to light beyond the borders of academia and see the prospects of improvement increase.

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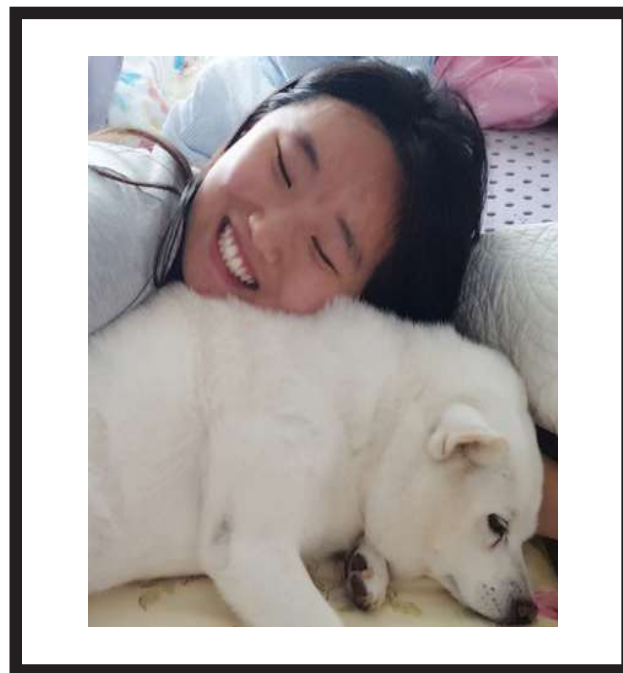
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