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“From Colonization to Zaitokukai: The Legacy of Racial Oppression in the Lives of Koreans in Japan” Article Review

“From Colonization to Zaitokukai: The Legacy of Racial Oppression in the Lives of Koreans in Japan” is a two year article that has two authors, Xavier Robillard-Martel and Christopher Laurent. Xavier is a Ph.D candidate for Anthropology at Cornell University after receiving his MA in Anthropology. Xavier has other publications with a focus on racial theories as well as other works about Zainichi Koreans. Christopher Laurent received his PhD in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Montreal. He actively does research on Japan with a heavy focus on anti-Korean discrimination and general nationalism. In this article, the authors explore the history behind the anti-Korean sentiment behind the Japanese people as well as how it’s still an ongoing issue.

The authors are disproving those that are saying that Zainichi Koreans are not victims of systematic racism within Japan. The observation of the Zaitokukai, a far-right extreme political group, has shown extreme resentment towards the Zainichi Koreans. The deeply seeded hatred towards this minority group is not one unknown to the Japanese citizens, “The rise of anti-Korean sentiment can therefore be seen as the conjunctural manifestation of an underlying structural reality – the ongoing oppression and marginalization of Koreans and other minority groups in Japanese society” (Martel and Laurent, 396). The Zainichi Korean are not easily discernible from a regular Japanese citizen, however have the tendency to keep their Korean

alias a secret as a way to avoid microaggression and discrimination. The two authors explain how the Zainichi are no strangers to being victims of racial exploitation which has been explained to continuously evolve how they view their own identities.

Martel and Laurent go into the history of how this minority group came to be in Japan. During WWII, Japan took hundreds of thousands of Koreans for cheap labor. During this time this group was used for hard labor for industrialization as well as compulsory prostitution. It was described as a, “gendered oppression supplemented class divisions and racial exploitation, leaving its trace in the traumatic experiences of Korean women” (Martel and Laurent, 396). After the war, the population that remained within Japan chose to associate themselves as Soren, those tied with the northern Korean regime, or the Mindan, those associated with the southern allegiance. Regardless of which side they choose, if any, the Japanese citizens discriminated against them equally. Despite being hard to discern from a Japanese person, they are still looked down upon. Residing in a nation that isn’t legally their own, the dysphoria felt behind identity would be tremendous.

There’s a term used in Japan that is the equivalent of a racial slur towards the Zainichi Koreans to exclude these groups from the rest of society. To remedy this, it was common for them to simply say and identify themselves as Japanese. This can be viewed as a way of assimilating, but opting to identify as Japanese did not mean they necessarily wanted to give up their Korean heritage. Furthermore, it was also challenging for those that were Mindan or Soren to stick with the North or South Korea depending on the relationship with Japan. It’s difficult for this minority group to really pick an identity. One group will see them as Koreans just trying to take on Japanese citizenship, and the other will say they aren’t real Koreans for not returning to their motherland. Joohwan Kim, a Zainichi Korean, voices his concerns that he had over the

troubles between the two, “The only way for the Zainichi to survive is for them to no longer exist; they must take on a role they were never born into, only scared into” (Kim, 444). He also shines a light on how during a heated discussion in Korea, he points out that Korea hasn’t had a completely innocent past either when thinking back to what happened in Vietnam. It’s a finger pointing game where there is no end. Nothing is achieved.

The Zainichi Koreans are among one of the numerous groups within Japan that is continually being marginalized. Japan is a country that prides and claims themselves to be homogenous while turning a blind eye to the oppressions happening to this day. Consistently turning a blind eye to the discrimination happening will not make it all go away. In fact, it fuels these groups to speak up more than what Japan is comfortable with. Not everyone can relinquish their background and heritage. These people don't exist as a historical reminder to the atrocities that were committed during the war. The Zainichi Koreans, like the other minority groups, are just fighting to stand on equal footing.

## Bibliography

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