

An Ethnic Korean School Struggles to Survive in Japan: Caught in between rising tensions between Japan and North Korea

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Edagawa Chosen School students in a festival celebrating its 60th anniversary (November 2006)

A SCHOOL'S FIGHT TO SURVIVE

Tokyo, JAPAN—In autumn, when the leaves of the maple and ginkgo trees turn crimson and gold and clutter the city streets like confetti, schools throughout Japan hold annual festivals. At this time, late November, the Edagawa Chosen School, a primary school for ethnic Koreans, held a festival for its 60th anniversary at a culture center of Koto Ward. The hall, which resembles an upscale movie house with its plush red cushions, seated close to 200 people. Special attention was brought to the performances, costumes and singing on this night to honor the school's humble provenance located in the wretched days of post-war Tokyo. The good-natured feeling felt all the more poignant considering the school's uncertain future. The Tokyo government has filed a \$3.7 million lawsuit for use of the land since 1990—when the school's previous contract with the government ended. During negotiations in 2003, the government offered to sell the land for \$11.9 million, an offer the school, with a student enrollment of 65, had no means to even consider. The government does not recognize the school as a legitimate learning institution and has responded that the previous agreement the school had made in 1970 with then Tokyo governor, Ryoukichi Minobe, was not open-

ended.

The Edagawa Chosen School was started “to teach children language and history,” says the principal, Song Hyon Jin, through a translator. Song, a tall man with fatigued eyes, was born just two blocks from the main entrance of the school in a small house that still stands today. In the early years of the community, basic utilities like water and sewage were non-existent. Many crowded in windowless ramshackle houses made of flimsy materials. “Not many people wanted to live here,” recalls Song. Basic necessities, fresh produce and clean water could not be acquired because Japanese merchants refused to deliver to the area citing “the smell” as the main reason. After the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, many Koreans were used as forced laborers throughout the imperial empire while others moved willingly in search of better lives. For many Korean migrants, Japan was only a temporary home. “The first generation believed they would return to Korea,” Song says. When it was clear that they would not return to Korea anytime soon, his family believed “the next generation needed to be taught the history” of Korea and the injustice they faced by the hands of the Japanese. The first incarnation of the Edagawa Chosen School was a home made of wood that served as a Korean language school for the community. Later, it turned into a large two-



Old Edagawa buildings battle for sunlight with high-rise apartments rising up around them

story building.

Since the Edagawa Chosen School is not officially recognized by the Japanese government, students who graduate here face difficulties entering Japanese universities and finding jobs that require a high school diploma. "The school is recognized as equivalent to a beautician or car mechanic school," says Song. Many have criticized the government's stance, including 77 minority and human rights groups who wrote in 2006 to the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Doudou Diene, that Korean schools were "systematically discriminated against."

Today the school's building is in a state of disrepair. Parts of the walls are beginning to crumble. One portion, on the left side of the building, is held up by a jury-rigged assortment of metal pipes because the school does not have enough funds to repair it. Large uneven fissures in the fluoride-green first floor of the school, and disconcertingly on the second, are clearly visible. Two plastic buckets line the hallway to catch water from a leaky roof. In dire straits, the school has partitioned part of its exercise field to build a parking area to add income to its meager budget. Despite all this, the rooms are immaculately clean and the uniforms of the children are spotless.

According to officials associated with the case, the origins of the Korean community in Edagawa began in Japan's preparations for the 1940 Tokyo Olympics. During the 1930s, the government, in an effort to present Tokyo as a modern city before the Games, forcibly moved close

to a thousand Koreans, many who were families of poor fishermen, and others they deemed a poor representation of Japan. The site was uninhabited, barren and a portion of it once served as a landfill. The land was surrounded by water, and the bridges that served as the only way out of the area were heavily controlled. Sadly, the Olympics were canceled due to World War II and later held in Helsinki because of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

After WWII, ethnic Koreans, or Zainichi Koreans as they are called in Japan, found themselves destitute and politically voiceless. Koreans, once citizens of Imperial Japan, were now stripped of their Japanese nationality and all the rights and protections due to Japanese nationals. Two organizations were created to organize ethnic Koreans: Mindan, which associates with South Korea, and Chongryon, which associates with North Korea.

"When there was trouble, the South didn't help us with anything. The South Korean people threw away the Zainichi people," Song says. Ravaged by war and painful reminders of collaboration with the Japanese imperial government, South Koreans did little to support the ethnic Koreans in Japan. Chongryon, through funds from the North Koreans, built most of the ethnic primary and secondary schools in Japan, including the Edagawa Chosen School, and became the stronger group immediately after the post-war years.

Things began to change in Edagawa after the war when shell-shocked, and often destitute, Japanese soldiers returned and settled into the area. When they "came back and decided to live here, Koreans helped them," says Song. But as Japan's economy was rapidly turning

into a world powerhouse, land prices began to skyrocket, pushing Koreans out as many Japanese started to buy up the inexpensive property. Today, according to Song, 70% of the population in Edagawa is Japanese. The remnants of the Korean community are still apparent today in the many Korean barbecue restaurants that line the streets. But the school, the main symbol of the once thriving area, has become an odd visual anomaly. Today, the school, surrounded by massive and modern apartments that give permanent shade to the houses near it, occupies an apparent lucrative space.

DISCRIMINATION AND FEARS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST ETHNIC SCHOOL STUDENTS THROUGHOUT JAPAN

Many believe the harsh stance taken by the Tokyo Metropolitan government reflects a growing atmosphere of xenophobia and discrimination in Japan. “Because of the attention the lawsuit brought to the [Edagawa Chosen] School, students and teachers are safe. But in other cities there have been windows broken,” says Kim Jong Gyu, a father who attended the festival, referring to incidents at other ethnic Korean schools in Japan. “That kind of trouble is not on the news.”

The Korean community often cites the relentless negative stories in Japanese media on North Korea as a major factor in creating this hostile atmosphere. NHK, Japan's public broadcasting network, has been under scrutiny for its unprecedented coverage. According to the Christian Science Monitor, NHK “ran some 2,000 stories on North Korea. Of these, at least 700 have been on abductees—an average of almost three stories a day.” Human rights groups have sounded the alarm on the correlation between negative North Korean media coverage and the escalated reports of harassment of children who attend ethnic schools. In a 2006 report for the UN Commission on Human Rights, Special Rapporteur Doudou Diene writes, “unjustified treatment, such as harassment, verbal abuse, physical violence, or the ripping of the *chima chogori* (Korean ethnic dress) have taken place one after another after the North Korean side admitted the abduction of Japanese nationals in 2002.”

In fact, both verbal and physical abuse against ethnic Koreans, have been on a steep rise in Japan since the early 1990s. According to Song Hesuk, of The Association of Korean Human Rights in Japan, reported harassments first

spiked after the “the row over suspected nuclear reactor in 1993” and “the launch of a North Korean missile in 1998.” After North Korea admitted to abducting 13 Japanese nationals “more than 500 cases of harassment” were reported by Korean schools. In 2003, the media heavily covered an incident where “a female high school student was cut with a sharp device while on a train.” To protect students, the Chongryon organization ordered schools to change the school uniforms so students would be less identifiably Korean.

In recent months, after the North's missile launch and nuclear weapon test last October, relations between Japan and North Korea have deteriorated. The Asahi Shimbun, a national newspaper, wrote that many Koreans feared “their children coming under verbal and physical attack.” Adding that “each time Japan-North Korean relations hit a crisis point Korean communities in Japan find themselves caught in the crossfire.”

“The students are in a very dangerous situation because the media tries to connect the bomb and North Korea with the school,” says Principal Song, a week after the festival. In front of a ubiquitous Coke machine in the sandy exercise yard of the school, not far from the crumbling side of the main building, someone asks him about his future plans. For a brief moment, his tired eyes turned ebullient as he described his dreams of a new school and somehow reaching a settlement with the metropolitan government. Despite the ever-decreasing number of students, Song does not question the absolute validity and importance of ethnic school education. “If there isn't a Korean school in Japan,” he says, “who will remember the history?”

Underneath the tension lie deep scars that extend to the annexation of the Korean peninsula by Japan in 1910. In the run up to WWII, many Koreans were forced into labor camps and scattered all over the Empire. Notoriously, “comfort women,”—women who worked as prostitutes in the military organized brothels—were trafficked mostly from the Korean peninsula. After the war and the nightmare of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where nearly 10,000 Koreans were also killed, ethnic Koreans were condemned by both the Koreans and Japanese. Ethnic Korean survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were “written off on racial grounds by Tokyo and given no help from a Seoul government ashamed of their existence,” writes Bruce Cumings, a professor of history at the University of Chicago and prominent academic in

East Asian history, in *Korea's Place in the Sun*. Cumings describes the atmosphere in Korea after the war as akin to "Vichy France in the early 1940s." Many Koreans who returned from Japan were suspected of being Imperial government collaborators. At the same time, many who were forced to work in labor camps throughout Asia, drafted into the military or other occupations, "were no longer the same people: they had suffered material and status losses, they had often come in contact with new ideologies, they had all seen a broader world beyond the villages," and decided to settle in Japan rather than go back to their provincial towns.

TORN BETWEEN TWO IDENTITIES

Many young Zainichi Koreans find it difficult to reconcile the Japanese and Korean aspects of their personality. Many interviewed said they had few if any Japanese friends and many felt ostracized by Japanese society. Some have endured years of emotional trauma and cling onto their Korean identity as a source of pride—though most have only visited Korea a handful of times. Parents and teachers often have a difficult time alleviating the alienation many children feel.

"They tried to protect us," recalls Kyong Il Chu, an ethnic Korean born in Japan and a former student of the Chiba Chosen School, another ethnic school run by Chongryon. On an early morning in 1993 in the coastal prefecture of Chiba, an area neighboring the east side of Tokyo, teachers and students of the Chiba Chosen School discovered the main wall of their school defaced with paint, racial epitaphs and crudely drawn pictures of the female anatomy. The wall, about four meters high and 20 meters wide, faces a public road that many residents in the area passed daily. The teachers of the school scrambled to paint over the graffiti before the main surge of students arrived. Remarkably, they managed to cover most of the obscene writing and pictures. During the morning announcements, homeroom teachers carefully explained to their students just what had occurred. Kyong was 13 at the time the incident occurred. North Korea had just threatened to pull out of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. After reports began to surface of a secret nuclear weapons program in the North, many in the ethnic Korean community complained of harassment, threats and taunts from the public at large. "People said to us, 'Get away Korean. Why are you



Edagawa Chosen School students

here? Move out," says Kyong, a native Japanese speaker. "Japanese people who talk like that aren't decreasing."

Kyong, now 23, recently graduated from Keio University and will attend law school next year. When asked about his experiences growing up as a Zainichi Korean, he recounted the everyday-small humiliations he endured throughout his childhood: racist taunts during soccer matches, unfair rebukes by bus drivers and the sense that his identity was under constant question. Many of the Japanese people he meets either unknowingly or openly deny the historical legacy of the Zainichi Koreans. "I work at Starbucks and I ask [my coworkers]: 'When you were in school, did you learn about Korean history—why Zainichi [Koreans are] here? Do you know?' Japanese friends don't know. They think I'm a newcomer," says Kyong.

The arduous process of reconciling these two opposed identities starts early. Kim Qwan-shee, who is 12-years old and attends the Edagawa Chosen School, wakes up every morning at 7:30 and eats a typical Japanese breakfast of fermented soy beans and rice, speaks only Korean at the school, comes home to watch Japanese cartoons and for dinner has *Bim Bim Bap*, a classic Korean dish consisting of rice, vegetables and red pepper paste. His parents were born in Japan and his grandparents also live in Tokyo. They speak mainly Japanese at home.

But when asked if he associated with Japanese people he responds, "I have no Japanese friends."

Any problems with Japanese kids?

"Once when I was walking home with my friends on the bridge a group of girls were yelling at us. They said, 'Stupid, idiot. Go to hell,'" he recalls in Korean.

And if someone were to ask you, where do you come from? Who are you? How do you respond?

"Nihonjin," he says. "I'm Japanese." 🗣️