

***A Place for “Us” to Be Weaved:
A Case Study of Zainichi Korean Kindergarten in Japan***

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Abstract

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, established by the United Nations, explicitly prohibits discrimination and provides protection against violence. However, as a consequence of political considerations, *Zainichi*¹ Korean schools in Japan are the only foreign schools that are not recognized by the Japanese government as 'schools prescribed by law'. Furthermore, they do not receive any financial support from the state. Previous studies have revealed the financial situation of *Zainichi* Korean schools and the history of their establishment and ongoing struggle for recognition. This study aims to elucidate the genesis and evolution of ethnic education in *Zainichi* Korean schools, with a particular emphasis on kindergartens, which represent the inaugural stage of ethnic education. To this end, an ethnographic research approach was employed, utilizing the long-term observation method in *Zainichi* Korean schools. The findings indicate that a range of activities, including summer festivals and the preparation of *Zainichi* Korean cuisine, are regularly undertaken in kindergartens in collaboration with primary, junior high, and senior high schools, as well as with the *Zainichi* Korean community in Japan. This study has demonstrated that the concept of "*Zainichi* Korean schools" extends beyond the boundaries of traditional educational institutions. It has been proposed that these schools serve as a focal point for the *Zainichi* Korean community and a setting where children enrolled in the *Zainichi* Korean school and *Zainichi* Koreans engage in mutual care and support. Moreover, the advancement of children's social development could also be clarified.

Keywords: Japan, *Zainichi* Korean School, Ethnic Education, Community Formation, Ethnographic Approach

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations in 1990 and subsequently entered into force. It is currently the most widely accepted human rights treaty in the world, with 196 countries and territories having signed it. The Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly prohibits discrimination (Article 2) and sets out the obligation to protect children from all forms of violence (Article 19). In accordance with the stipulations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are designated as "rights holders," while the "duty bearers" responsible for safeguarding their interests are the state and its adult citizens. In other words, it is incumbent upon each country to implement the rights of children as set forth in the Convention through the enactment of legislation and the formulation of policies. The present study focuses on Japan, which ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994. Three decades later, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Japanese law through the Basic Act on the Rights of the Child. This legislation stipulates that all children in Japan are entitled to the rights set forth in the Convention. The legislation is intended to guarantee that children are treated as individuals and are not subjected to discriminatory practices (Children and Families Agency, 2023).

It is, however, regrettable that this is merely nominal. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in the prevalence of chauvinistic sentiments and hate crimes directed towards *Zainichi* Koreans. Furthermore, *Zainichi* Korean schools² in Japan are the only foreign schools that are not legally recognized as such by the Japanese government, a status that is attributed for political reasons. Additionally, these schools do not receive any financial support from the state. This is a consequence of irresponsible and discriminatory statements and actions by the Japanese government and politicians that are devoid of any basis in reality. Examples of such statements include the assertion that "*Zainichi* Korean schools are suspected of being agents against Japan" and the characterisation of North Korea as "like a yakuza". It is evident that these public institutions and political stances of public figures have resulted in the promotion and legitimisation of hate speech and racism towards *Zainichi* Koreans and *Zainichi* Korean schools (Itagaki, 2016). For example, commentators who are regarded as 'experts in something' have repeatedly made the following statements on television and radio. For example, commentators who are regarded as experts have repeatedly made the following statements on television and radio: '*Zainichi* Korean schools are spy training institutions and should be monitored and inspected'; 'not supporting *Zainichi* Korean schools is not against the law'; '*Zainichi* Korean schools are poorly managed'; 'if you are dissatisfied with public support for *Zainichi* Korean schools, go to a public school'. Furthermore, these problematic statements have triggered serious hate crimes. *Zainichi* Korean schools are subjected to a daily barrage of threatening phone calls, and there have been numerous instances of children from these schools being physically assaulted on their way to school. Furthermore, one civil society group has even perpetrated an attack on a *Zainichi* Korean school in Kyoto. In response to these situations, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has repeatedly expressed concern about the unfair treatment of *Zainichi* Koreans and *Zainichi* Korean schools over the course of several years. Hate crimes, defined as criminal acts motivated by discriminatory attitudes towards individuals or groups based on attributes such as ethnicity or nationality, represent a significant social issue with global prevalence. These crimes not only inflict fear and suffering upon the victims but also perpetuate discriminatory attitudes and violence within society. However, as previously stated, the Japanese government has yet to implement a comprehensive system to combat hate crimes. Indeed, it could be argued that there is a lack

of political will to eradicate hate crimes and that the issues surrounding *Zainichi* Korean schools have not been adequately addressed (UN, 2018).

In this context, previous studies on *Zainichi* Korean schools exhibit considerable diversity. For example, there are studies that have provided a detailed account of the financial situation and curricula of *Zainichi* Korean schools based on fieldwork (Song, 2012), studies that have elucidated the history of the struggle and creation of *Zainichi* Korean schools (Oh, 2019), and so on. Other studies have examined the causes of anti-*Zainichi* Korean school sentiment (Wolfs, 2022), while others have sought to elucidate the meaning of the Learning at *Zainichi* Korean school (Yamamoto, 2014). However, previous studies have primarily focused on this topic from the perspectives of sociology and migration studies.

In light of the aforementioned studies, this study aims to elucidate the genesis and evolution of ethnic education in *Zainichi* Korean schools as a whole, with a particular focus on the initial stages of ethnic education, namely the *Zainichi* Korean kindergarten, which has not been the subject of previous research. The study then examines how kindergarten teachers and *Zainichi* Koreans attempt to comprehend the educational practices observed in kindergartens.

Methodology

To this end, the study employs an ethnographic approach, utilizing a longitudinal observational methodology to examine the participation of children in *Zainichi* Korean kindergartens over a period exceeding one year. In this study, the ethnographic approach is defined as a methodology for understanding the sites where people live. Consequently, in this study, the author, a Japanese national who is not a *Zainichi* Korean resident in Japan, gained access to the *Zainichi* Korean kindergarten with the intention of understanding it from the inside. This involved conducting observations while becoming a member of the kindergarten.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set forth by the Ethical Review Committee of the university to which the researcher belongs. Furthermore, prior to the commencement of this study, a verbal explanation was provided and written consent was obtained in accordance with the principles of research ethics. Additionally, the data obtained in this study were anonymised and analysed in a manner that ensured the protection of the information.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented herein.

1. Campus and Cross-Age Education

The *Zainichi* Korean kindergarten included in this study are situated on the same campus as primary, middle, and high schools. The total number of children enrolled in the kindergarten is approximately 20, with four teachers providing instruction. Due to the relatively small number of children in each age group, education is typically provided at different ages.



Picture 1: View of the School Campus

2. Practice Playing Korean Instruments

Japan has a bank holiday, designated as Respect for the Aged Day, which is observed in order to honour the elderly. Photograph 2 depicts a child engaged in the practice of the *janggu* (also known as a "hourglass drum"), a traditional Korean musical instrument, in preparation for a performance on Respect for the Aged Day. The children are instructed by their homeroom teacher in the 20 minutes or so preceding their departure. They listen attentively to the teacher's directives. As they have numerous occasions to handle Korean instruments on a regular basis, both the teacher and the children are well-acquainted with them as they practice.



Picture 2: Kindergarten Children Practice a Traditional Korean Musical Instrument

3. Experiencing the Food Culture of the Korean People

Photographs 3 and 4 illustrate the educational activities employed to introduce participants to the culinary traditions of the Korean people. This activity spanned approximately 60 minutes. The children collaborated in the preparation of dishes, primarily vegetables that are commonly utilized by the Korean ethnic group, while receiving guidance from the instructor. Subsequent to the completion of the dishes, the children engaged in musical activities associated with Korean cuisine.



Picture 3: Kindergarten Children Cooking Korean Food



Picture 4: Kindergarten Teachers Address Children on Cooking

4. Interaction With High School Students

The scene depicts a mini sports day, organised and conducted jointly by high school students and kindergarten children. Photograph 5 depicts the high school students engaged in conversation and interaction with the kindergarten children. The positive rapport evident between the two groups is likely attributable to the high school students' daily interactions with the kindergarten children. This observation will be further elucidated in Section 7.



Picture 5: High School Students Chatting With Kindergarten Children

Photograph 6 portrays a review meeting convened following the mini-sports day. In addition to high school students and high school teachers, the meeting also included representatives from the kindergarten teachers.



Picture 6: Kindergarten Teacher and High School Students Reflecting

Photographs 7 and 8 depict a collaborative endeavour between high school students and kindergarten children, engaged in the preparation of kimchi. Each group comprises two or three high school students and two or three kindergarten children. Kimchi is a customary food in the Korea. The participants appeared to derive pleasure from the process of making kimchi together. At the conclusion of the activity, the kindergarten children consumed the kimchi they had prepared, exclaiming "Delicious!" and "Spicy!" in the company of their peers. This activity has become an annual tradition.



Picture 7: High School Students Model Cooking to Kindergarten Children



Picture 8: Kindergarten Children Making Kimchi

5. Interaction With Primary School Children

Photographs 9 and 10 illustrate a joint initiative between primary school and kindergarten children, namely the organisation and management of a summer festival. During the period when the kindergarten children assume the role of shopkeepers, the primary schoolchildren act as customers. Conversely, when the primary schoolchildren are in charge of the shop, the kindergarten children visit the shop as customers.



Picture 9: Primary School Teacher Teaching Kindergarten Children How to Sell



Picture 10: Kindergarten and Primary School Children Playing at the Summer Festival

Photographs 11, 12 and 13 were taken subsequent to the summer festival. They depict primary school and kindergarten children consuming shaved ice prepared by kindergarten teachers within the kindergarten's school premises. As evidenced in Photograph 12, the primary school teacher was observed engaged in close collaboration with the kindergarten

children. In this instance, the primary school teacher is feeding shaved ice to the kindergarten children.



Picture 11: Kindergarten Teachers Serve Shaved Ice to Primary School Children



Picture 12: Primary School Teacher Giving Shaved Ice to a Kindergarten Child



Picture 13: Primary School Children Eating Shaved Ice on Kindergarten Grounds

6. Events by *Zainichi* Koreans

Regular exchange events are held by *Zainichi* Koreans at *Zainichi* Korean schools. The events are attended not only by *Zainichi* Koreans but also by Japanese individuals who express support for the *Zainichi* Korean school. At these events, fathers' and mothers' associations proactively establish stalls and serve a variety of Korean dishes. As can be observed in photographs 14 and 15, the event is characterised by a celebratory ambience. Children enrolled at the *Zainichi* Korean school, alumni, teaching staff, parents, local residents and a diverse array of individuals engage in conversation and dance together. This evinces a sense of collective belonging and shared identity.



Picture 14: Fathers' and Mothers' Associations Have Food Stalls



Picture 15: Students, Parents and *Zainichi* Koreans Began Holding Hands and Dancing

Photographs 16 and 17 illustrate this notion, depicting the spontaneous formation of a 'unity train' at the conclusion of the event, traversing the school grounds.



Picture 16: Most Event Participants Making the Unity Train



Picture 17: Primary and High School Students Are Also Making a Unity Train

7. Everyday Scene

Photographs 18 and 19 illustrate the intergenerational interaction between primary school students and kindergarten children during both the lunch break and in the evening. Photograph 20 depicts three junior high school students engaging in play with kindergarten children during the lunch break. All children in kindergarten, primary and secondary school settings interact with each other in a friendly manner. Additionally, students in elementary

and junior high school do not disparage the play of kindergarten children. Rather, they demonstrate respect for the play of their younger counterparts and engage with them in a manner that aligns with their developmental stage.



Picture 18: Primary School and Kindergarten Children Playing Together



Picture 19: Primary School and Kindergarten Children Playing Together (Outdoors)



Picture 20: Junior High School Students Voluntarily Come to Play in Kindergarten

Conclusions and Recommendations

The objective of this study was to elucidate the processes through which ethnic education is initiated and formed within the context of *Zainichi* Korean schools, employing an ethnographic approach. The study commenced with an investigation of ethnic education in *Zainichi* Korean kindergartens. The findings of this study demonstrate that kindergartens frequently engage in a range of activities in collaboration with primary, middle, and high schools, as well as with the *Zainichi* Korean community in Japan. These activities include summer festivals and the preparation of traditional Korean cuisine. Additionally, the study

revealed that kindergarten children have numerous opportunities to interact with individuals from elementary, junior high, and high schools, as well as with *Zainichi* Koreans on a daily basis. Based on these observations, we propose two key points for consideration in this study.

Firstly, it can be argued that *Zainichi* Korean schools are not merely educational establishments. It can be argued that *Zainichi* Korean schools serve a dual function, acting not only as educational institutions but also as a focal point for the entire *Zainichi* Korean community. In other words, it was proposed that the children attending *Zainichi* Korean schools and *Zainichi* Koreans serve as a conduit through which they can provide care for one another. In this context, the children at the kindergarten appeared to feel at ease within the *Zainichi* Korean community in a multitude of situations. This sense of comfort and belonging can be linked to the fostering of pride in being *Zainichi* Korean in Japan. Among *Zainichi* Koreans, *Zainichi* Korean schools are not referred to as 'schools'. Instead, they are always called 'our school'. For children in kindergarten, the very foundations of the concept of 'we' are beginning to form, a concept that will be developed and maintained as they progress through school.

Secondly, there is a notable degree of socialisation. The daily interaction of kindergarten children with a diverse range of individuals facilitates the development of social skills. This encompasses greeting individuals, respecting others, and behaving appropriately in group settings. Consequently, there are fewer issues when children transition to primary or even secondary school. This is because kindergarten children are continuously exposed to a diverse range of individuals, which makes what initially seems like a novel environment feel familiar. The capacity of kindergarten children to assimilate knowledge in such an environment is another notable benefit of *Zainichi* Korean schools.

Notes

1. The term *Zainichi* is used to describe foreign nationals residing in Japan.
2. There are *Zainichi* Korean schools in Japan: 41 kindergartens, 51 primary schools, 32 junior high schools, 10 high schools and 1 university.

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