

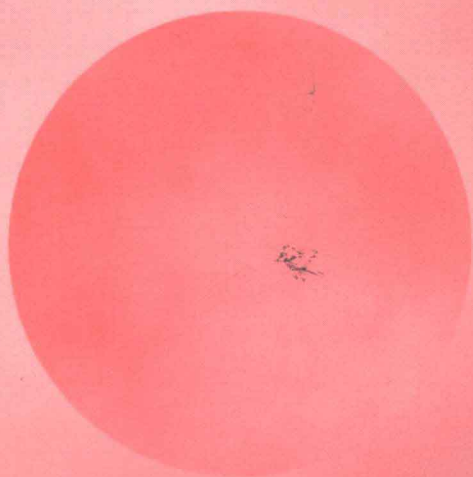


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# JAPAN'S HIDDEN APARTHEID

THE KOREAN MINORITY  
AND THE JAPANESE

George Hicks



# Japan's Hidden Apartheid

The Korean Minority and the Japanese

GEORGE HICKS



**Ashgate**

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# JAPAN'S HIDDEN APARTHEID

# Preface

*Japan's Hidden Apartheid: The Korean Minority and the Japanese* tells the story of Japan's Korean minority and its troubled relationship with Japanese state and society since World War II.

The story of Japan's largest minority casts important light on the nature of Japanese state and society in general and minority relations in particular. This includes the changing parameters of Japanese state policy toward Asian peoples, social tension and conflict, and approaches by minority groups to assimilation and cultural preservation.

Hundreds of thousands of Koreans were brought to Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, during Japan's colonial rule, many of them as semi-slave forced labor in mines and factories. They were the forebears of the 700,000 strong Korean minority in contemporary Japan, many of them in the second, third, or even fourth generation without Japanese citizenship and facing issues of discrimination and second class status.

A legacy of the Korean War has been the deep divisions within the Korean community in Japan, divided among groups aligned with North and South or independent of both. These divisions have shaped the responses of Koreans in Japan to issues of discrimination (such as the fingerprinting of aliens) and assimilation (Soren, the pro-North Korean group maintaining its own autonomous school system from nursery school to university).

In recent decades, as a result of the movements among Koreans, Japan's changing relationship to Asian nations, and her response to international human rights campaigns and other factors, the position of Koreans in Japan has undergone important changes: it became possible for many Koreans to become Japanese citizens; compulsory fingerprinting and other indignities have been eliminated; the Soren Korean community and its schools have entered a period of crisis with the death of Kim Il-Sung and with pressures from its members to acquire a Japanese education; Koreans in Japan spearheaded the movement to expose imperial Japan's sexual slavery of the comfort women.

This volume documents far reaching legal and social changes as well as the continued legacies of discrimination in such areas as employment, education, and welfare that face the Korean minority. Koreans, who had Japanese citizenship under colonial rule, were deprived of that citizenship and the most minimal welfare benefits following World War II regardless of individual wishes. Partial improvement in their situation began with the Japan-ROK Normalization Treaty of 1965 and continued with Japan's 1979 ratification of the International Covenant on Human Rights which led to access to public housing and some local public employment; ratification in 1981 of the Treaty on the Status of Refugees brought standard welfare benefits including the national pension; in 1984 ratification of the Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women allowed nationality to be acquired through either parent. A 1991 agreement with the ROK led to relaxed and uniform permanent residence for all resident aliens, the end of fingerprinting, and appointment to regular teaching and some local government posts. Particular attention is paid to the intensely personal and symbolic issue of the legal status and use of Korean names against a background of forced adoption of Japanese names.

Issues of discrimination and assimilation are further explored in relation to the study of marriage patterns where mixed marriages have been the majority since the 1970s. Against these patterns of gains for the Korean minority, however, stand periodic outbursts of violence against Koreans and continued legacies of discrimination.

Many of the issues are given a human face through the experience, observations, and research of Korean activists. One of these is Yumi Lee, whose lengthy memoir on her own and her community's experience constitutes one important foundation of the research for this book. Other contemporary Korean activists are also quoted.

Korean and Japanese names are as written in East Asia: the family names first followed by the given names. Yumi Lee however is an exception. Korean names are in principle romanised according to the McCune-Reischauer system but chaotic popular usage makes departures unavoidable.

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<b>Part One: Overview</b>	<b>1</b>
1 Japan's hidden minorities	3
2 What it means to be a Korean in Japan	13
3 Divisions in the Korean community: The Soren, the Mindan, the Mintoren	22
<b>Part Two: Legal issues</b>	<b>43</b>
4 The evolution of the Korean community's legal status	45
5 Names	66
6 Nationality and naturalization	86
7 Alien Registration and immigration control	91
8 The vote	98
<b>Part Three: Conflict between the two cultures</b>	<b>105</b>
9 Marriage	107
10 Accommodation	111
11 The Utoro mass eviction case	115
12 Work	120
13 Violence and the school system	127
<b>Part Four: Cultural issues</b>	<b>133</b>
14 Education	135

15	Religion	146
16	Apartheid in death: The Korean atomic bomb memorial	153
17	Korean writers in Japanese	156
18	Conclusion	164
<i>Select Annotated Bibliography</i>		167
<i>Glossary of Japanese and Korean terms</i>		171



# Part One

## OVERVIEW



# 1 Japan's hidden minorities

Japan proclaims itself a homogeneous society of a unique and distinctive character. To the world at large, it is widely perceived as such. The Japanese establishment regards homogeneity as an essential element in its national ethos and power structure. It is credited as the key to Japan's outstanding success in overall development among non-Western countries, ever since its opening to the world in the mid-nineteenth century. This claimed homogeneity is also said to explain Japan's avoidance of the revolutions and other major convulsions which have affected all other major powers during the last few centuries.

It is true that by the standards of most large countries, Japan is relatively homogeneous. Nevertheless, out of a total population of 125 million about six million or over 6 percent of the population are minorities. According to the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* there are 'about three million Burakumin a caste of "untouchables" known pejoratively as the Eta ['those full of filth'] living in about 6,000 communities.' Koreans, including those who have become naturalized (about 160,000), are close to 800,000 in number. Okinawans number a million plus. Foreign workers from Asian countries other than Korea make up another million or more.

Official Japan has, in the past, denied the existence of these minorities. As a signatory to the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Japan has to submit reports to the United Nations with respect to the Covenant's enforcement. The first report of 1980 stated flatly that 'minorities did not exist in Japan.' The Ainu, indigenous people of Hokkaido, and other minorities strongly protested the report. As a result, when Japan submitted its second report in 1987, it stated 'that although minorities did exist, there were no minority problems.'

Official Japan was forced to concede the existence of minorities when Prime Minister Nakasone in September 1986 claimed that Japan had a high intellectual level because it had no minorities. He drew a comparison with the United States: 'The level of knowledge in the United States is lower than in

Japan due to the considerable number of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans.' The Japanese press hardly bothered to report this statement, but when an uproar of protest arose from the United States, Nakasone subsequently clarified his remarks. He stated that he had been misquoted and had only meant to point out that America had many remarkable scientific achievements to its credit 'despite the existence of so many troublesome minorities.'

Given this perceived importance of homogeneity, the existence of alien elements which do not fit the prevailing pattern of the larger population are felt by the authorities to present an anomalous irritant. Significant minorities exist in Japan. With the enormous recent growth of the guest worker phenomenon the minority population is in fact rising rapidly.

George A. De Vos, the leading authority in the United States on Japan's minorities, feels that the Japanese strategy of coping with the existence of problems posed by the minorities 'is avoidance or *direct denial that any such group continues to exist*, or that there is any real problem' (italics in the original).

To be Japanese is almost a definition of racial purity. A Korean Japanese would be a contradiction in terms, since a person can be either one or the other, but not both. The unavoidable contacts that do occur between people involve tension, disdain, and discrimination. Effectively, Japan practices a type of apartheid, but unlike the former policies of South Africa, it is apartheid by default rather than plan. It is also almost invisible, not only to the outside world but also to most Japanese themselves.

Who are Japan's minorities? In order of historical origin, the first are the Burakumin or 'ghetto dwellers.' These people are traditionally associated with unclean occupations, mainly involved with animal products. Their existence is a residue of premodern feudalism, though any legal discrimination was abolished along with the sweeping abolition of feudal structures in the 1870s. Movements for their emancipation from social barriers have occurred, both from within the community and from progressive administrative agencies, but much remains to be done.

The next group are the native inhabitants of the Ryukyu Islands, centered on Okinawa. The Ryukyans are essentially ethnic Japanese but are distinguished by their long history as a maritime state. Their dialect may be related to Japanese but is unintelligible to speakers of the Japanese homeland dialects. Physically they have some affinity with Malays or Taiwanese indigenes. The majority Japanese tend to regard them as alien, even to the extent that during the post-war Allied occupation the Japanese government was prepared to relinquish territorial claim to the Ryukyus permanently in exchange for an early peace treaty.

Next are the Ainu, indigenous people of Hokkaido, with some immigrants from Southern Sakhalin, from the time of Japanese colonialism there. Along with the Ryukyans, the Ainu were incorporated into the Japanese state during

its consolidation following the abolition of feudalism, when borders were defined against China in the south and imperial Russia in the north. The Ainu are ethnically quite distinct from the Japanese, marked physically by paler skin and Caucasoid build. Japanese commentators describe them as hairier than other East Asian races, though the Ainu resent this as a stereotype. Their language is equally distinct, though perhaps remotely linked to the same North Asian Altaic group as Japanese and Korean. Culturally they had not developed past the tribal stage before the intensive Japanese settlement of Hokkaido, though in recent times the Ainu Association of Hokkaido has become politically active, stimulated by the new eloquence of indigenous peoples throughout the world.

The Ainu have advocated revision of the 1899 Law on the Protection of Former Indigenes of Hokkaido and protested to the United Nations Human Rights Commission about Prime Minister Nakasone's 1986 statement that Japan 'had a uniformly high level of intelligence because it had no minorities.' This led to Japan's first admission, in its next report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that minorities existed in Japan, although any human rights problems were still denied. Despite this denial, both Ryukyuan and Ainu tend to be discriminated against as are Burakumin.

The Korean minority is a residue of Japan's colonization of Korea from the early twentieth century until 1945. The Koreans are the only substantial Japanese minority presenting an international dimension, since many of them retain ties or contacts with either of the two Korean states, and their treatment in Japan is often affected by the regional relations of Japan and the two Koreas.

The links between Koreans in Japan and the Korean states gives Koreans resident in Japan their place in the Japanese hierarchical world. Japanese mainstream political consciousness has always ranked all peoples along lines comparable with Japan's own social hierarchy. The Japanese insist on their own uniqueness and do not necessarily regard others as inferior, but judge them in terms of perceived achievement. Successful Western countries rate high, but Asian societies seen as less successful than Japan rate lower. Koreans are ranked rather low, both because of their former status as Japan's colonial subjects and, because of the current state of their homeland, divided between a Stalinist regime in the north and in the south, what was seen as a frequently turbulent, despised client of the United States. South Korea's improved economic clout since the 1960s has won only qualified recognition in Japan's hierarchy of nations.

There are many other smaller minorities in Japan. The number of foreign workers, both legal and illegal, is well in excess of a million men and women coming from most of the countries of east, south-east, and south Asia. Listed by type of employment, illegal women workers are mainly hostesses, factory workers, prostitutes, dishwashers, and waitresses. Illegal men workers are mainly construction and factory workers. Here is the making of a new sub-

caste, giving the Koreans and Burakumin a group below them on the social scale.

The small Chinese minority in Japan, about 80,000 settled residents, with 60,000 more temporary residents, mainly students, gives a total of around 140,000 in 1990, does not really fit into the hierarchy. Although they come mainly from Japan's former colonial territories in Taiwan and Manchuria, they tend to derive some degree of status by association with mainland China which, despite its material poverty, is ranked relatively highly because of its cultural legacy to Japan and its weight in international affairs. One index of their different status from Koreans is the more widespread use of Chinese names (83 percent), while most Koreans (91 percent) use Japanese aliases by way of 'passing' as Japanese in order to avoid discrimination.

Other foreign minorities in Japan as of 1990 were Filipinos 43,000, Americans 36,000 (including an unknown number of ethnic Japanese), Brazilian 34,000 (mostly ethnic Japanese), British 9,700, Thai 6,300 and all others 68,800.

## **The Burakumin**

Within Japan, the study of minority issues throws light on the peculiarities of Japanese society as a whole. Among the other minorities, the status and activities of the Burakumin have the most direct bearing on those of the Korean community. The two causes have sometimes shared facilities, for example, when the Buraku Emancipation League in Kyoto helped in the Korean community's efforts on behalf of compensation for 'comfort women'—Korean women procured for sexual service to the wartime Japanese armed forces. See my study, *The Comfort Women*, for more details on this topic.

In 1974, when I was living in Kyoto, I read the classic study of the Burakumin, *Japan's Invisible Race* by De Vos and Wagatsuma, and then used the book as guide to visit several of the nineteen Buraku communities in Kyoto. On my first visit to one of these areas I became lost, and on asking directions, I was informed that the Burakumin had been legislated out of existence at the beginning of the Meiji era, so that my visit was almost a century too late. In fact, I was already within a hundred yards of a Burakumin community which I found was exactly as described in De Vos. Very prominent were the butcher shops which sold fried tripe as well as other organ meats. These shops are a distinctive feature of Buraku communities. Japanese consider a taste for this fried tripe, or any other organ meats, to be repugnant and a generally abhorred Buraku characteristic.

The origins of a class of untouchables or outcasts in Japan lie shrouded in the past, before the beginning of written records. It is probable that concepts of pollution in indigenous Shinto beliefs were reinforced by Buddhist concepts relating to impurities attending the killing of animals and the eating of meat.

Taboos against eating meat were established in Japan by the eighth century and certain occupations involved in killing animals and preparing and preparing animal products were thought to be contaminating. These occupations were carried out by defiled, hereditary specialists. By the early eighth century there were already codes which prohibited marriage between freemen and slaves of specified occupations. Although slavery was later abolished, the contaminating nature of certain occupations, combined with marital proscriptions, continued down the centuries.

Among the outcast communities, some were more equal than others. The higher in status of the two classes of despised citizens were the *hinin* or non-people. They were a mixed bunch of beggars, prostitutes, entertainers, and fugitives from justice who, one way or another, had dropped out of the four class feudal ranking of warriors, farmers, artisans, and merchants. For *hinin* there was still hope: if they settled down in normal communities they could revert to human status.

Beneath the *hinin* were a truly wretched class of hereditary outcasts known as *eta* or 'much filth.' *Eta* status was inherited through birth, just as Burakumin status continues to be handed down today. Traditionally the *eta* performed tasks that were considered to be ritually polluting such as animal slaughter and the disposal of the dead. But no change of occupation could save the *eta* who were thought to be genetically subhuman.

For many centuries ordinary Japanese were not only prohibited from marrying *eta* but also had to avoid physical contact with them. They were the true untouchables. In the early 1870s, the new Meiji government abolished the terms *eta* and *hinin* and replaced them with a new euphemism, which in turn was replaced with the more neutral Burakumin, or 'citizens of special communities.' The so-called emancipation of the Burakumin harmed rather than helped them. They continued to be relegated to 'unclean' work such as garbage collection and street sweeping while at the same time they lost their monopoly over the more lucrative leather crafts industry.

Although the law towards the Burakumin has changed for the better, Burakumin remain subject to discrimination as illustrated by the following examples spanning the last century and a half. In a famous case in 1859, an *eta* youth tried to enter a Shinto shrine in Edo (Tokyo) and was beaten to death by the residents of the district. Instead of bringing the guilty to justice, the magistrate responded, 'The life of an *eta* is worth about one-seventh of the life of a townsman. Unless seven *eta* have been killed, we cannot punish a single townsman.' This sort of legal decision has been inconceivable since the early 1870s, but that public attitudes have not in fact changed is suggested by the following three incidents that occurred around 1900, 1960, and 1989.

The historian Hane Mikiso points out that in the minds of the majority of Japanese, the *eta* have long been considered 'lowly, despicable people who deserved to be oppressed. They were seen as dirty, vulgar, smelly, untrust-

worthy, dangerous, treacherous, subhuman creatures. In a typical interaction, around the turn of the century, an *eta* was taunted by his fellow students and his teacher. "Isn't it true that you *eta* have no testicles and that you are short of one rib?" They then caught hold of him and stripped his clothes off to examine him.'

George De Vos (1993) tells an illuminating story (from around 1960) about a cobbler, still a Burakumin trade. Once, when the cobbler's son 'delivered shoes to a customer, the money was given to him tied on the end of a bamboo pole—an ancient way of avoiding being "unclean" on the part of those needing the services of outcasts in Kyoto.'

In a recent example, the Buraku Liberation Research Institute gives an account of a message that was circulated by electronic mail to about 30,000 personal computer users on 15 July 1989. 'If you believe nuclear power plants are dangerous, build them in Buraku areas. Or build them in Korea and have them transmit electricity by cable.' Buraku people have been called *eta* and *hinin* and denied treatment as human beings. 'They are not human beings and they don't deserve human rights. They deserve to be killed. Nuclear power plants are not really threatening enough for them. Nuclear testing sites would be more appropriate. Kill them. Yotsu, [four-legged, is a derogatory term for Burakumin], *Eta*, *Hinin*, *Chonko* [derogatory for Koreans]. You are all shit.'

The Burakumin's political tactics have provided models for Korean community action. Their pre-war National Levelers Association (*Suiheisha*) adopted the strategy of public denunciation of cases of discrimination and demands for apology. In 1935, an officially sanctioned Reconciliation Council attempted to improve their condition, in the course of which 5,365 ghetto localities were identified throughout Japan. This list was, however, later misused to provide blacklists to screen out prospective employees and marriage partners. During the 1970s, the League forced apologies from companies found to be using such blacklists, but the practice does not seem to have stopped. The League has been successful in pressuring publishers into deleting any mention of their community from publications of any kind, even when not unfavorable. In 1969, a Special Integration Measures Law resulted in considerable spending by local authorities on housing, schools, community centers, and antidiscriminatory education. However, reflecting the conservative establishment's aversion to social engineering, no antidiscrimination legislation has eventuated and the community continues to be marked by poor school performance, delinquency, involvement with the *Yakuza* criminal underworld, prostitution, and welfare dependency.

## The Koreans

The case of the Korean community poses a wide range of issues. Whereas other minorities have Japanese nationality and at least formal legal equality,



including the vote, freedom from deportation, and full social welfare, the 700,000 non-naturalized Koreans have few of these rights. Moreover, since naturalization procedures demand a very high degree of cultural assimilation, many have preferred to preserve elements of their cultural heritage and identity, despite the humiliation that this sometimes entails.

A Korean Professor, resident in Japan and quoted by Korean rights activist Yumi Lee, has written:

Koreans live all over the world and are especially concentrated in the former USSR, China, and Japan, as a consequence of Japan's colonization policies. The phenomenon of Korean immigrants in the United States is a relatively recent thing . . . . Those who live in China and the former USSR have high ethnic consciousness, and have their own newspapers, TV, and radio stations. Koreans in the USA are equally conscious of their ethnicity and unlike the Koreans in Japan have no sense of inferiority. Those who freely emigrated to America would obtain American nationality with gratitude. The treatment of Koreans in Japan has been different. The historical background is completely different. For thirty-six years [under colonialism] Koreans were deprived of their nationality. [That is, Korean nationality ceased to exist.] Although forced to migrate to Japan, Japanese nationality was then unilaterally stripped away [following the Japan-US Peace Treaty]. . . . To survive and live in Japan, some obtained Japanese nationality; they went through an inhuman procedure [discussed below] and are known as 'new Japanese.'

Although some of those who are naturalized in Japan assimilate fully and lose all identity as ethnic Koreans, many of them and even their children find it impossible to reconcile themselves to this. Thus, while other minorities such as Burakumin, Ainu, and Okinawans, represent subcultures within Japanese culture, the Korean case involves the clash of two historically rich and long-established cultures. It is a curiously complex picture.

The Japanese colonization of Korea is sometimes contrasted with that of Western colonial empires, in that it involved a colony that was close by and of related culture, whereas the latter involved remote regions of totally different and often technologically less developed cultures. The great exception in the Western case is, of course, Ireland—and the parallels with the Korean case are striking. In both cases the subject people were deprived of much of their land, driving them to emigrate in large numbers both to the conquering country and elsewhere. Culturally, the native Irish language was largely eliminated, while in Korea the modern education system introduced under colonialism was based on Japanese. The use of the Korean language in education was virtually phased out by World War II. The Koreans sometimes speak of being 'robbed