

"It Is Still Urgent to Have Correct Historical Understandings."

— Interview with Wooki Park-Kim

The first person we feature is Wooki Park-Kim who works at the Human Rights Association for Korean Residents in Japan. Korean Residents in Japan are those who migrated or were forcibly taken to Japan under Japanese colonial rule, and had no choice but remain in Japan for various reasons as well as their descendants. She is the third generation of Korean Residents in Japan.

She was born and raised and spent her childhood in Okayama where Korean schools have been located since immediately after the war-end¹.



(Photo: Wooki Park-Kim)

- What is the best and worst thing in your childhood as long as you can remember?

“The best thing was to go to Chōsen gakkō (Korean schools) since 1st grade of elementary school. At the entrance ceremony, I was kind of embarrassed as things were very new to me, for example my Korean name. Yet, I got to develop my identity as a Korean Resident in Japan without feeling uncomfortable within myself. The more I engage in various issues around Korean Residents in Japan, the more I feel it is important. This is because many of my friends and seniors of Korean Residents in Japan who were educated in Japanese schools say they had a very difficult time in the exclusionary atmosphere. I experienced challenges too, but I was fortunate enough not to feel excluded because of me being Korean Residents in Japan at all inside the school.”

- What about a bitter memory?

“At the same time, I felt excluded or isolated because of me going to Korean schools. For example, it was when I was in my 2nd or 3rd year of junior high school. I used to bike to school, wearing an ethnic traditional clothes, hanbok, as a school uniform. One day while waiting in the traffic lights, I strongly felt someone stare at me and wondered what it was. Then when I looked at it quickly, it was a Japanese woman in her 50s or 60s as I remember at the time. I felt so scared. Never before or since have I felt so much hatred in someone’s gaze.”

¹ For more information: <https://www.pref.okayama.jp/page/624881.html>.

- **What did you do after that?**

"I then told a teacher, and the teacher suggested that I write about what I experienced and felt and send it to a juvenile advocacy competition, which I did. While writing, I was questioning myself why I was stared at with such a scary gaze though I did not do anything; whether it was because I wore a hanbok; whether it meant that it happened because I am Korean. It was the first time I considered who I was and how other people perceived me."

- **Have you felt uncomfortable with being said to be "Korean Residents in Japan"?**

"It might not be a sense of discomfort, but I have thought about my identity several times. As I mentioned before, I got to develop my identity as a Korean Resident in Japan, so I accepted it easily at that time. So, it was the next step to think a little more broadly about the categories based on ethnicity, such as Korean Residents in Japan or Japanese. For instance, I remember that when I was discussing historical awareness with Japanese friends, we had a confrontation because they told me that they did not experience the war and therefore had nothing to do with Japan's responsibility for the war. And they went on that there are various perspectives on the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery (comfort women) and thus it is impossible to generalise, and they were more a global person than just a Japanese person. I myself think that it is important to be aware of our respective ethnic positionality and to face history on our initiatives."

- **What about being called a minority woman?**

"As, I think, is the case with Buraku women or Ainu women etc, I feel that there are various differences even among Korean Residents in Japan and those of women, such as where they live and which school they attend. There are a lot of things we can share with other minority women, or there are lots of differences. However, if we track the origin, we can see that Ainu, Okinawa women, and Korean Residents in Japan, were all affected by violence of Japanese imperialism and colonialism in terms of ethnicity and gender. In this sense, I am very happy when I see them and feel like I want to work together."

Currently, she teaches gender studies at Korea University in Japan.

- **What motivated you to study gender issues?**

"Academically speaking, it was Japanese military sexual slavery issues (Japanese military 'comfort women' issues). When I was in my third year of undergraduate, I was surprised at how differently my Japanese friends and I recognised history. I also realised how ignorant I was about the issue. Then, I went to graduate school to research this matter and learned the concept of gender, the essential component of my research. After I started working, I got to know what gender issues were in a true sense. Interacting with various people, I learned a lot at the same time, I questioned the attitudes or behaviours based on gender norms against young women. Not only me but also friends, juniors and seniors of women Korean Residents in Japan went through similar painful experiences. At that time, I called on my friends around me who were interested in gender issues and organised a study session on gender. That is how I come to understand gender issues empirically."

How did you become aware of human rights?

- What made you decide to join a human rights organisation?

“There are two main triggers. First is volunteering at the UN Human Rights Council, which I did as a student. I got to speak about the issues of Korean residents in Japan at its sessions. After that, NGOs staff from all over the world gave me great support responding to my statement and activities. I remember how happy I was. I also remember that during the same session I got to meet government officials for the first time and that I was very angry at how irrational their statements were. Second is hate speech and hate crimes² occurred at Korean primary schools in Kyoto in December 2009. A year before the incident, in 2008, I experienced a similar attack as a student at the Korean University in Tokyo. It was very scary. My heart was racing, thinking what if these people really came in. Despite being in my 20s, I thought like that. But, when I thought of what six- or seven-year-old or even kindergartners went through the same thing, I felt helpless. I really felt helpless. I felt helpless that I had put the younger students of Korean schools through the same experience. At that time (in 2009), there was not much that I could do. Among other things, I spread the word to my friends and professors of graduate school to sign the petition, which made me embarrassed and frustrated. These experiences led me to want to work for the Association for the Human Rights of Korean Residents in Japan, which has been working on human rights issues for Korean Residents in Japan in order to actively contribute to improving their human rights situations.

There are various issues around Korean Residents in Japan. On 15 December 2023, it marked the 500th of the Friday Action that was held at 4pm to 5pm on every Friday in protest against the exclusion of Korean schools from the free high school tuition scheme. Nevertheless, the government remains to take the stance that ‘standards are not met’³.

- What are some of the issues related to Korean Residents in Japan that Japanese and people all over the world should know?

“The most important thing is to make people aware of the existence of Korean Residents in Japan. The Korean Peninsula is said to be the world’s only remaining divided state. In that sense, they are a very unique existence who are subject to various influences including politics and economy from their home country. In the case of Korean schools, it is hugely impacted by the state of North-South division. Such influences, coupled with discriminatory policies against Korean Residents in Japan and Korean schools, resulted in a situation where their children’s rights to education is not guaranteed or they are subjected to ethnic discrimination. I strongly feel that we need to inform people about the current circumstances where their basic human rights are not guaranteed, such as the fact that despite being born and raised in Japan, they still need permission from the Japanese government to re-enter Japan. On a positive note, although the number of Korean schools is decreasing, we preserve our language and culture by ourselves without any support from the government for about 80 years despite discriminatory policies of the Japanese government. I strongly felt it at the UN Minority Forum where I got to interact with people of ethnic minorities from other

² Members of the ‘citizens’ association for no-Zainichi privileges (*Zaitokukai*) gathered in front of Kyoto Korean Primary School (Minami Ward, Kyoto). They shouted abuse, such as “Get the Korean out of Japan” for about 50 minutes using a loudspeaker.

³ <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASRDH63TYRDHUTIL00L.html>

countries in similar situations. I think it is so significant that it could be a model for other minorities all over the world, especially in terms of educational practices.”

- **What about the issues especially of women Korean Residents in Japan?**

“Community of Korean Residents in Japan is not the one and the same. When I came across the concept of intersectionality, I reaffirmed that there are difficulties in life and the purposes of life that cannot be described within the framework of the same ‘Korean’ or the same ‘women’ with regard to women Korean Residents in Japan. There is still a strong male-centred order in the communities of Korean Residents in Japan around me. In this context, I believe that informing various experiences of women Korean Residents in Japan will definitely contribute to the development of the community, and I would like to do my best for that.”

- **What does it take for those considered to be the majority to work with those considered to be the minority?**

“In the context of Japan, it is important to be well aware of the history of perpetration. Whatever slight discrepancies in its interpretation, I find it difficult to work together with those who do not value the attitude of learning about history and learning from history. Conversely, I can tackle the same issues together with those who are sincere about Japan’s history of perpetration or their own privilege despite different positions. Many so-called majority people I work with on the issue of Korean schools see it as a problem for the Japanese people and Japanese society. They are the people I admire and respect, who reminded me that I must be aware of my own privilege too. It is still urgent to have correct historical understandings with little teaching of the history of Japan’s perpetration in modern times in the Japanese school system and the prevalence of discourses that deny such history.”