

Trauma, Stigma, and Resilience: The Social and Psychological Realities of Zainichi Koreans

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Abstract

This paper examines the historically rooted and socially reproduced traumas experienced by Zainichi Koreans—ethnic Koreans residing in Japan whose presence largely originates from migration during Japan’s colonial rule of Korea (1910–1945). Drawing upon historical scholarship, contemporary academic literature, journalistic investigations, and mental-health research, the study argues that Zainichi trauma is embedded in colonial violence and sustained through postwar legal marginalization, structural discrimination, and contemporary hate speech. These traumatic experiences manifest socially and psychologically and are transmitted intergenerationally through narratives of loss, stigma, and survival. The paper analyzes major domains of trauma, including wartime forced labor and atomic bomb survivor exclusion, postwar juridical liminality, discrimination in education and employment, identity erasure, and political scapegoating. It further reviews empirical evidence linking discrimination to adverse mental-health outcomes and highlights community-based coping and resistance strategies. The paper concludes with policy recommendations emphasizing structural redress, historical acknowledgment, and culturally responsive mental-health interventions.

Keywords: Trauma, Stigma, Resilience, Zainichi Koreans

Introduction

The term *Zainichi*, meaning “resident in Japan,” commonly refers to ethnic Koreans who migrated to Japan during the colonial period and their descendants. Their historical trajectory is inseparable from Japan’s imperial expansion, wartime mobilization, Cold War geopolitics, and postwar nation-building. As a result, Zainichi Koreans have experienced prolonged and layered forms of trauma, including colonial displacement, wartime exploitation, postwar legal exclusion, and contemporary hate speech.

These experiences constitute a form of complex trauma that operates across psychological, social, political, and cultural dimensions. This paper examines the primary traumas encountered by Zainichi Koreans, the social structures that have produced and sustained them, and the documented consequences for mental health and community life. By synthesizing historical analysis with empirical mental-health research, the study demonstrates how trauma unfolds across individual life-spans and collective memory, producing intergenerational effects that remain insufficiently addressed.

Historical Background: Colonial Migration and Postwar Liminality

Between 1910 and 1945, millions of Koreans migrated to Japan, often under coercive or exploitative conditions, to meet labor demands generated by industrialization and wartime mobilization. By the end of World War II, a large Korean population remained in Japan, forming the foundation of contemporary Zainichi communities (“Koreans in Japan”).

The San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 marked a juridical rupture for these residents. Koreans in Japan lost Japanese nationality and were reclassified as foreign residents, despite long-term residence and social integration. This legal transformation institutionalized marginality, restricting access to political participation, welfare benefits, and stable employment (Moon). Immigration and registration regimes reinforced their status as permanent outsiders.

Cold War politics further fractured the Zainichi population along ideological lines, particularly between organizations aligned with South Korea (*Mindan*) and North Korea (*Chongryon*). These divisions complicated collective advocacy and frequently positioned Zainichi grievances within geopolitical frameworks rather than human-rights discourse.

Domains of Trauma

1. Colonial and Wartime Trauma

Under Japanese colonial rule, many Koreans were forcibly mobilized into labor in mines, factories, and military facilities. These conditions involved hazardous work environments, physical abuse, and systemic dehumanization. Such experiences constituted foundational traumatic exposure for the first generation of Zainichi Koreans.

A particularly severe legacy concerns Korean *hibakusha*, survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many were Korean laborers brought to Japan during the war. In the postwar period, they were often excluded from official recognition, medical assistance, and compensation provided to Japanese survivors. This bureaucratic erasure compounded the original trauma with decades of neglect, reinforcing both physical suffering and psychological injury.

2. Postwar Legal Marginalization and Surveillance

Postwar legal frameworks such as the Alien Registration Law and compulsory fingerprinting practices publicly marked Koreans as foreigners. These policies facilitated discrimination in employment and housing and produced chronic insecurity. Although some practices were later abolished, their social and psychological effects persisted across generations.

The contradiction of compulsory taxation and social obligations without corresponding political rights generated deep mistrust in state institutions. This form of structural exclusion created a durable foundation for intergenerational trauma.

3. Everyday Discrimination in Social Institutions

Zainichi Koreans have historically faced discrimination in education, employment, and housing. Exclusion from public-sector employment and discriminatory hiring practices in private industries forced many into self-employment and ethnic economies, which were themselves stigmatized (“Zainichi: The Korean Diaspora in Japan”).

These cumulative disadvantages disrupted life trajectories, undermined economic security, and produced chronic stress. Over time, such conditions created patterns of cumulative disadvantage transmitted across generations.

4. Identity Trauma and Cultural Erasure

In response to discrimination, many Zainichi Koreans adopted Japanese names or concealed their ethnic identity. While these strategies enabled social survival, they often resulted in internalized stigma, shame, and identity conflict. Scholars describe this phenomenon as “identity trauma,” characterized by fragmented belonging and disrupted cultural transmission (Moon). The pressure to assimilate while remaining socially excluded produced long-term psychological strain and complicated intergenerational communication within families.

5. Intergenerational and Collective Trauma

Trauma among Zainichi Koreans is not confined to the first generation but transmitted across generations through family narratives, socialization practices emphasizing vigilance, and persistent structural inequalities. Collective memories of displacement, denied rights, and unresolved injustices function as shared wounds that shape political mobilization and community dynamics.

Attempts to address trauma solely through individual-level psychological interventions often fail to account for these historical and structural dimensions.

6. Contemporary Hate Speech and Political Scapegoating

In recent years, digital media platforms have amplified xenophobic rhetoric targeting Zainichi Koreans. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2022, misinformation circulating online falsely blamed a “Zainichi Korean,” triggering surges of hate speech and harassment. Such incidents demonstrate how rapidly online conspiracy narratives can translate into real-world hostility, reinforcing collective fear and insecurity.

Mental Health and Empirical Evidence

Empirical research consistently links experiences of discrimination and hate speech with adverse mental-health outcomes among Koreans in Japan. A recent peer-reviewed study published in a SAGE journal reports statistically significant associations between perceived discrimination, exposure to hate speech, and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (“Discrimination, Hate Speech, and Mental Health Outcomes”).

Qualitative studies further document persistent fear of exposure, familial silence regarding wartime experiences, and unresolved grief related to denied recognition. Zainichi adolescents, in particular, experience elevated stress due to bullying, identity confusion, and intergenerational tensions, highlighting the need for culturally responsive mental-health services.

Coping, Resistance, and Community Resilience

Despite enduring structural barriers, Zainichi communities have developed multiple strategies of resilience and resistance. Community organizations such as *Mindan* and *Chongryon* have provided mutual aid, cultural preservation, and political advocacy, even amid internal divisions. Legal activism and human-rights litigation have contributed to reforms, including the abolition of compulsory fingerprinting. Cultural production by Zainichi writers and filmmakers has articulated experiences of trauma and challenged public erasure. Grassroots mental-health initiatives and anti-bullying programs further address culturally specific needs.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing the multidimensional trauma experienced by Zainichi Koreans requires coordinated structural, legal, cultural, and public-health interventions. Given that Zainichi trauma is historically produced and socially reproduced, policy responses must move beyond individualized remediation toward systemic reform. The following recommendations outline key areas for intervention.

First, comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation is essential. Japan currently lacks a robust, enforceable legal framework addressing racial and ethnic discrimination across key social domains. Legislation should explicitly prohibit discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and education, while also extending regulatory oversight to digital platforms. Effective enforcement mechanisms, including penalties and accessible reporting systems, are necessary to ensure meaningful protection rather than symbolic compliance.

Second, historical recognition and redress must be institutionalized, particularly concerning Korean *hibakusha*. Official acknowledgment of colonial exploitation, forced labor, and postwar exclusion would constitute an essential step toward memory justice. Material compensation, medical support, and inclusion in national commemorative practices would address both symbolic and practical dimensions of historical harm,

countering decades of institutional erasure.

Third, the expansion of culturally competent mental-health services is crucial. Mental-health interventions should be community-based, linguistically accessible, and historically informed, recognizing the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Training mental-health professionals to understand Zainichi histories and social contexts would reduce misdiagnosis and improve therapeutic outcomes, especially among youth and elderly populations.

Fourth, educational reform should integrate Japan's colonial history and Zainichi experiences into national curricula. Such inclusion would challenge historical denial, foster critical historical consciousness, and reduce the reproduction of prejudice. Public education plays a vital role in reshaping collective memory and preventing the normalization of exclusionary narratives.

Fifth, platform accountability and hate-speech regulation must be strengthened. Digital platforms should be required to monitor, remove, and prevent the circulation of hate speech and misinformation targeting minority communities. Given the demonstrated mental-health impact of online harassment, hate speech should be treated not only as a civil rights issue but also as a public-health concern.

Finally, sustained support for civil society organizations is necessary to ensure long-term community resilience. Zainichi advocacy groups, cultural institutions, and social-service organizations provide essential support networks and serve as intermediaries between marginalized communities and state institutions. Stable public funding and institutional recognition would enhance their capacity to deliver services, preserve cultural heritage, and advocate for structural change.

Collectively, these policy measures emphasize that healing from Zainichi trauma requires structural justice, memory work, and social inclusion, rather than isolated or temporary interventions. Such an approach not only addresses past and present injustices but also contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and equitable Japanese society

Conclusion

The traumas experienced by Zainichi Koreans are simultaneously historical and contemporary, structural and interpersonal, individual and collective. Originating in colonial dispossession and wartime brutality, these traumas were entrenched through postwar legal exclusion and continue to be reproduced through discrimination and hate speech. Research across disciplines demonstrates that such conditions inflict measurable harm on mental health and perpetuate intergenerational trauma.

Healing requires more than clinical intervention; it demands structural reform, public acknowledgment of historical injustice, and sustained community empowerment. Addressing Zainichi trauma is both a moral imperative for Japanese society and a broader lesson for post-imperial societies seeking inclusive futures.

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