

Japanese Discrimination Against Korean and other Ethnic Schools

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by Eriko Arita

For half a century, Japan has permitted ethnic minorities, notably Koreans, to run their own schools while refusing to recognize these schools graduates by denying their students the right to sit for entrance examinations at national universities. The controversy has centered above all on the rights of graduates of pro-North Korean schools. The issues came to a boil recently when the Ministry of Education extended this right to three international schools while continuing to require that graduates of ethnic schools take a preliminary examination to determine eligibility to sit for the regular examination. The issue has long been central to the movement for the rights of ethnic minorities in Japan. Eriko Arita is a staff writer for The Japan Times. This article appeared in The Japan Times on April 12, 2003.

The recent uproar over whether students at schools for Asian ethnic minorities should be granted equal access to national universities has highlighted the extent to which such institutions have been set apart within the nation's education system.

Amid protests from the Asian schools, the education ministry decided March 28 to reconsider its plan to allow graduates of international schools accredited by three Western education organizations to take national university entrance exams without having to take a separate qualifying test, called the "daiken."

Officials at the Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology Ministry said they will go back to the drawing board and consider extending the exemption to other ethnic schools.

A teacher and a student at Tokyo Korean Junior and Senior High School, together with mothers of students of the school and staff of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryun), submitted a petition to the ministry March 28 signed by 4,086 people who denounced the daiken waiver just for Western international schools.

Lee Ok Rim, a third-year high school student, explained that some of her friends want to enter national universities, even though more than half of private and municipal universities allow students of any school for foreigners to take their entrance exams without the daiken prerequisite.

"Because our school is not accredited, my friends who want to go to these universities also have to study for the qualifying test," she said, explaining that it is a burden to have to study for both the daiken and the actual entrance exam.

Kwon Dal In, a teacher at the school, said about 40 percent of its graduates go on to study at Japanese universities or vocational schools, with some enrolling at national universities after passing the daiken.

Critics have slammed the daiken requirement as one example of the government's discriminatory policies against ethnic schools, especially pro-Pyongyang Korean schools. Asian schools have meanwhile been campaigning to abolish the regulation for years.

Ministry officials deny the measure is discriminatory, claiming students of international and ethnic schools need to take the daiken because there is no other way to demonstrate they have obtained the minimum standard of education required in Japanese schools.

But Kwon argues that although his students study the language, geography and history of the Korean Peninsula, lesson content and class hours for such subjects as mathematics, science and English are basically the same as those at Japanese schools.

"Our students study Japanese, too, using such material as Japanese literature," he said. "There should be no problem in our school's curriculum."

According to the education ministry, some 21,000 students attend the roughly 120 educational institutions for foreigners in Japan that are classified as "miscellaneous schools," with about 11,000 of them going to pro-Pyongyang Korean schools.

Skeptics speculate that the ministry's initial daiken-waver decision came in response to the public outcry over North

Korea's admission in September that it had abducted Japanese nationals, but ministry officials denied any link between the two issues.

Kyoto University professor Naoki Mizuno, one of 1,436 national university educators and employees who submitted an appeal protesting the ministry's original plan, alleged that the ministry tried to maintain its discriminatory policy against Korean schools by taking advantage of the abductee issue.

Mizuno, an expert in modern Korean history, said the government has suppressed Korean schools since they were established after World War II.

"The government has a negative view of what is taught at ethnic Korean schools, believing the education they provide is anti-Japanese," Mizuno maintained.

According to Mizuno, the ministry issued notices to prefectural governors in 1965 in which it said the pro-Pyongyang schools should not be classified even as miscellaneous schools -- a classification applied to such institutions as cooking and driving schools -- after Japan and South Korea signed a normalization treaty that year.

But by the early 1970s, prefectural governments went against the ministry's policy and recognized all Korean schools as miscellaneous schools in response to calls from the public, according to Mizuno.

Until 1998, however, students of ethnic Korean high schools were not allowed to take the daiken, which are for university applicants who left high schools without completing the course, and had to attend part-time Japanese high schools while studying at Korean schools to take the preadmission test, he said.

A majority of the public seems supportive of the idea of granting ethnic schools equal access to institutions of higher education. The ministry accepted public comment on

its initial deregulation plan, but 12,779 people opposed it, saying Asian ethnic schools should also be accredited, while only 390 expressed support.

But observers say some people oppose extending the daiken waiver, especially to the pro-Pyongyang schools, citing such reasons as the institutions' close ties to Chongryun, which some allege to have been party to the abductions.

Others argue that these schools should follow the ministry's curriculum if they want to be exempt from the daiken.

However, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Japan has ratified, states that children belonging to a minority group shall not be denied the right to their own culture and language. Since 1998, various United Nations committees have mentioned their concerns on the inequity of access to institutions of higher education affecting Korean children in Japan.

Kwon of Tokyo Korean Junior and Senior High School said he wants the ministry to check the curriculum of his school and evaluate whether it could qualify for a daiken exemption.

"I asked ministry officials to visit our school and examine the curriculum," he said. Yasuko Ikenobo, parliamentary secretary for education, has promised to do so sometime next month.

Lin Tong Chun, chairman of the Association of Foreign Schools in Hyogo Prefecture and a former chairman of the board of directors of Kobe Chinese School, said that political issues should be discussed between governments, and not be a factor affecting children's education.

"If the Japanese government does not grant the (daiken waiver) right for ethnic schools, the international community would see Japan as discriminating against (other parts of) Asia," Lin said. "It would be a great demerit for the Japanese people."