# Gambling in History: The Intergenerational Search for Zainichi Identity in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

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**ABSTRACT**

"History has failed us, but no matter"—the opening line of Min Jin Lee's 2017 novel, *Pachinko*, hints at the types of characters it centers on: not the movers and shakers of history but the ordinary people who find it difficult to steer their own course against history and survive its knock-on effects. *Pachinko* narrates a Dickensian story that spans generations of a family of Koreans in Japan—commonly referred to as Zainichi—from the Japanese colonization of Korea to Japan's bubble economy. The novel's title refers to a combined pinball-like arcade game where winning mainly rests on luck. This paper analyzes how pachinko becomes a central metaphor in the novel for the Zainichi's search for identity and quest for belonging, and shows how the work poses a "winning combination" that resolves these issues. The paper is divided into four parts. The first discusses the history of the Zainichi, who are part of the larger Korean diaspora. The second gives a brief history and description of Zainichi literature, and the last two sections summarize the novel and analyze the intergenerational search for Zainichi identity, focusing on the contrast between the work's gambling metaphor and the teleological thrust of its Biblical characters.

*Keywords: Identity, Pachinko, Min Jin Lee, pachinko, Korean diaspora, Zainichi, Zainichi literature*

## The Zainichi

This paper analyzes the novel, *Pachinko*, by Min Jin Lee to explore the responses of three generations of Zainichi Koreans in Japan[1] to the issues of identity and belonging in different historical conjunctures. The novel chronicles the lives of the Baek family—Korean migrants—through the Japanese colonization of Korea, World War II, post-war society, and Japan's bubble economy of the late 20th century.

For the Zainichi, being an ethnic minority in a country that projects itself as racially homogenous presents problems of historical exclusion, nationality, identity, and social belonging. The word "zainichi" literally means "foreign resident" in Japanese. Their existence arose from the colonialist-imperialist history of Japan and further complicated by its conflicted relationship with Korea after its independence from Japan. Neither Korean nor Japanese, the Zainichi occupies a unique position in Japanese society.

The Japanese colonization of Korea in 1910 led to the mass migration of Koreans to Japan. Repressive colonial measures, land confiscations, and the settlement of Japanese farmers in Korea forced Koreans—85 percent of whom worked the land—to migrate and seek livelihood in Japan, particularly in Osaka (Kashani 2006, 170). Koreans filled labor shortages in rapidly industrializing cities (172). They were paid poorly in industries that did not require special skills or education, such as "coal mining, steel and metal industries, and in railway and canal constructions" (173). These jobs often had appalling working environments.

By the 1920s, most Koreans resided in Osaka because of its burgeoning small-scale enterprises, which mostly required manual laborers, unlike in Tokyo's medium- to large-scale manufacturing industries, which demanded a "skilled" workforce and fluency in the Japanese language (175). The Zainichi's living conditions were far from idyllic. Discrimination existed; decent housing was scarce; and landlords were reluctant to rent to Koreans, forcing them to form ghettos (178).

In 1945, after Japan's defeat in World War II and Korea's subsequent independence from Japan, the Zainichi could, in principle, repatriate. However, only few chose to do so because they already had livelihoods in Japan (Shin 2018, 5). The post-war years only led to more chaos in Korea because of the partition of the peninsula and the subsequent war. After World War II, the Zainichi retained their imperial citizenship, which was later stripped off after the 1952 San Francisco Peace Treaty was enacted. The treaty restored Japan's political independence from the Allied Occupation under the Americans. Consequently, Koreans in Japan also "lost all the legal properties of national belonging" in the country, thereby becoming stateless or refugees (Ryang 2012, 164). In 1965, when the relationship between Japan and the Republic of Korea normalized, the Zainichi were offered South Korean passports and citizenship. Choosing to do so meant acquiring a special permanent residency status in Japan. In contrast, those who claimed North Korean citizenship were not given passports and were blacklisted by South Korea, whose own domestic policies prohibited any show of sympathy to the North. They were only given permanent residence (officially, *tokurei enjuken*) and re-entry permits to Japan in 1981 "when Japan ratified the International Covenants for Human Rights" after joining the UN Refugee Convention (175). To this day, Tokyo does not have any diplomatic relationship with Pyongyang.

The establishment of diasporic organizations such as Mindan in 1946 and Chongryun in 1955 maintained the Zainichi's foreign nationality in Japan; the former was affiliated with South Korea, the latter with North Korea. Reflecting the ideological partition of the Korean peninsula, these and other organizations "actively discouraged their members from naturalizing despite the obvious advantages of foreign citizenship status" (Chung 2010, 86). They advocated repatriation and the maintenance of Korean nationality. Both viewed naturalization as a betrayal of their country; lobbying for the rights of the Zainichi in Japanese society was perceived by some members of the organizations as either assimilationist or collaborationist. The two groups advocated differing identities rooted

in blood ties and nationality/homeland politics. In insisting this, both removed from the Japanese state the need to provide citizenship—and civil rights entailed—to the Zainichi.

> Mindan and Chongryun centered their political activities on opposing each other, not on contesting Japanese state policies and social discrimination. (Chung 2010, 87)

## Discourses on belonging in Japanese society

The Zainichi unsettled Japan's dominant identity discourse of *nihonjinron* (Befu, quoted in Rear 2017, 6)—a single-race nationhood based on blood, and an ideology of ethnic homogeneity that underpins citizenship. After the dissolution of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the legal position of the Zainichi in Japanese society grew precarious. They were exposed to deportation, had limited access to state welfare (Hester 2008, 141), and hence were encouraged to repatriate. Acquiring Japanese citizenship was difficult, but factors like homeland politics and possible banishment from the Korean community back home influenced their decision to naturalize. Becoming a Japanese citizen would stabilize their social position, but it was nevertheless seen as a betrayal of their Korean identity.

The Zainichi's problem of identity then is also a matter of social location. The dichotomy of self (ethnic Japanese) vs. other (Zainichi) results in stereotypes and stigmas that vilify the latter, who are denied individuality and equal opportunities. As a minority, they are excluded from official histories, and their social contributions are often overlooked.

In the 1970s, Kim Tong Myung in "Zainichi chōsenjin no daisan michi" (The Third Path for Koreans in Japan, 1979) proposed a new discourse on how to be Korean in Japan. It was called the "third way," which meant (1) not having to naturalize and (2) not gaining citizenship, though one could still maintain one's Korean identity (Chapman 2004, 36). The "third way" offered an alternative to repatriation and signaled

a generational power shift within the Korean community; in the 1950s, Japan-born Koreans comprised 49.9 percent of the Zainichi population; by the 1970s, it had grown to 74.6 percent (31). By then, the second- and third-generation Zainichi outnumbered the first, whose promotion of homeland allegiance and anti-Japanese nationalism were no longer suitable to the times. Among other reasons, ideas of repatriation became inconceivable as the Zainichi had been living in Japan (32). "Independent of homeland" politics and "first-generation control," the "third way" locates identity not in Korea but in Japan (35). However, despite opening new possibilities, it did exclude naturalization. For Kim Tong Myung, naturalizing will not eliminate prejudice and will simply force the Zainichi to "pass" as Japanese (40). At any rate, naturalization and repatriation are too rigidly essentialist; both disallow the formation of new identities—that of hybrid and hyphenated—which cannot be grasped by the Japanese and first-generation Zainichi.

Other discourses on Zainichi identity have been proposed, such as the "fourth way," which is

> Not repatriatism, not living as a foreign resident, not rejecting ethnic heritage through a naturalization involving complete absorption in a "monoethnic Japan," but an acquisition of full civic-political membership in the Japanese polity, while maintaining a pride in Korean heritage. (Hester 2008, 146)

The fourth way no longer meant using *tsūmei*—a Japanese name or "passing" as Japanese; it allowed the Zainichi to celebrate their ethnicity. The 1970s were a time teeming with identity discourses, not least *nihonjinron*, which defined and strengthened the uniqueness of the Japanese. Partly because of this atmosphere, most Zainichi held onto their ethnicity (Tai 2004). By the 1990s, another Zainichi discourse on identity came about: the concept of and identification with "Korean-Japanese." By then, Japan was welcoming more migrant workers to offset labor shortages. Unlike the Zainichi, these laborers were physically, culturally, and linguistically

different, and therefore could not simply "pass" as Japanese. This hyphenated identity offered yet again a new set of possibilities because it "displaces descent-based ethnic signification rooted in the term '*Nihonjin*/Japanese'" (Hester 2008, 146).

Around the same time, in 1998, Sakanaka Hidenori spoke of the "disappearance thesis" i.e., the disappearance of the Zainichi through naturalization and interethnic marriages (Tai 2004, 368). For Sakanaka, an immigration official who influenced public opinion, the solution to the identity crisis lies in the alignment of nationality and ethnicity. Since Japan-born Koreans are already culturally and linguistically Japanese, they must be granted a Japanese nationality. Despite promoting this "Korean-Japanese" identity, Sakanaka's definition thereof is no different from his previous views of assimilation and naturalization for the Zainichi, the process for which he wanted to streamline (357). Also, though the identity of "Korean-Japanese" conveys empowerment, it can lead to "minoritization" (370, quoting R. Radhakrishnan) and discourage the Zainichi from promoting it. A hyphenated identity has a lot of potential—it deviates from a fixed ethnic category—but it needs to be further examined. To empower themselves and overcome minoritization, the Korean Japanese must "focus on 'routes' to examine their diasporic history, i.e., the history of their lived experiences, instead of 'roots' in searching for a fixed ethnic origin…" (374–5).

Solving the Zainichi identity crisis has become intricately complex, as it is no longer about repatriating to the ancestral homeland. Nor does it now entail an "us (either North or South Korea affiliation) vs. them (Japan)" arrangement. Most have no desire to repatriate and know that they should have a place in Japanese society. What makes a solution more complicated to come by is the complex definition of "identity." In his essay, "The End of the Road?: The Post-Zainichi Generation," John Lie (2009) compares the views of Kang Sang-jung and Tei Taikin, two Zainichi intellectuals who have opposing views on the positionality of the Zainichi in Japanese society. By analyzing their lives and beliefs, Lie highlights the ambiguity of simplistically determinist identity discourses because they discount many

factors. Comparing the personal histories of Kang and Tei, Lie concludes that family and social backgrounds cannot define one's identity nor can its formation be limited to sociological generalizations either.

## Zainichi Literature

Zainichi literature depicts "the realities of the absurd conditions of human life brought about by imperialism and [it] has been dependent on the framework of national and ethnic narratives. It also brings forward the possibility of escaping such boundaries" (Shin 2018, 6). A form of postcolonial literature that emerged in the wake of Japanese imperialism in Korea (5), it tackles issues and themes across generations of colonial subjects, and gives voice to "post-colonial traumas" that both Korean and Japanese "literatures fail to register individually" (10). Likewise, post-war Zainichi literature focuses on "people negotiating an existence in Japan or as Japanized within Korea" (Wender 2015, 756). These writings contemplate the "lifelong struggles with ideas and ideologies inherited from or imposed on them by the native country and the newly settled country" (Shin and Kim 2015, 2). Shin (2018) and Shin and Kim (2015) discuss Zainichi literature in terms of generation, each of whom tackles similar issues and experiences differently.

### *First- and second-generation Zainichi writers*

First-generation Zainichi writers were born in Korea, experienced the start of Japanese colonization, and moved to Japan. Writing in Nihongo, they tackle the plight of the colony in their texts to inform a Japanese audience. They explore a colonial subject's problems with identity, especially the confusion and cognitive dissonance resulting from being forced to use two names during the Japanese occupation: a Korean name (*honmyō*) and their assumed Japanese name (*tsūmei*). This was a component of the colonial government's "cultural assimilation program" (Chung 2010, 84). As such, first-generation writers are sensitive to the problem of language.

The second-generation Zainichi writers were born in Japan and had to face the realities of a post-colonial Korea, post-WWII, and post-Korean War. They too often tackle identity crisis, violence, discrimination, and the unresolvable rift between the two Koreas, which made their lives more precarious. A common characteristic of second-generation literature is the trope of the violent father, who is blamed for the difficulty of the second generation in forming a diasporic identity (Shin 2018, 19).

> [Second-generation] Zainichi Korean writers frequently address the issues of the helplessness, rebellion, and resistance to the discriminatory life forced upon them. They often attribute their anger for their unstable identities to the violence they experienced from their fathers at home... The depiction of the violent father and the poor suffering mother by second-generation writers delves into the gender issues of diaspora and intensifies the identity crisis they endure. (23)

Gaeja Kim and Youngho Lee (2017) analyzed a landmark second-generation Zainichi text, *The Cloth-Fulling Woman*, by Lee Hoesung/Ri Kaisei. In 1971, it became the first Zainichi novella to win the Akutagawa Prize, a prestigious literary prize in Japan. It is centered around the life of a Korean mother and her remembrances, which serve to connect the narratives of the Zainichi across generations to the (then) present time. The novella "has been praised for constituting the very formation of the literary genre of Zainichi Korean writing" (Kim and Lee 2017, 252) because it depicts the merging of the relations of Korea and Japan, and its effects on the Zainichi. The spatial wanderings of the characters from Chosun represent the movements of Koreans driven away from their homeland, and how this is a direct effect of Japanese imperialist policies. The characters' migration also shows a lack of a sense of permanence.

*Third-generation Zainichi writers*

Third-generation writers depict the struggle to establish an identity that is neither Korean nor Japanese, but in the border between the two. Their characters are no longer preoccupied with nationality but in their personal problems. They illustrate how "the imagination in Zainichi Korean literature moves away from the trauma of imperialism towards the pursuit of happiness of individuals" (Shin 2018, 22) and prefer a hyphenated Korean-Japanese identity (24). Sonia Ryang (2002) analyzes another Akutagawa-prized winning novel, *Kage no sumika* (Where the Shadows Reside) published in 2000 by a third-generation Zainichi, Gen Getsu. Ryang compares it with the novels of other Zainichi writers who also received the same prize: Yu Miri, Yi Yang-ji, and Ri Kaisei. She argues that Getsu's novel differs from theirs because it is not autobiographical. Unlike the three authors whose protagonists represent their own generations, Getsu's main character is a first-generation Zainichi. Even so, this novel can still be read as a perennial reflection of the same identity issues that have preoccupied the Zainichi for decades. The protagonist has to settle with an identity tied to a local space: the ghetto where he lives; he cannot anchor himself to a national identity because Korea has become foreign to him, while obtaining Japanese nationality seemed inconceivable and unattainable. No matter how the circumstances have changed, the third generation are still ambivalent about their identity.

The Naoki prize-winning novel *GO* (2000) by Kazuki Kaneshiro offers an intriguing contrast to Getsu's work. As a third-generation work, *GO* appears to offer a more hopeful response to questions of identity: having the protagonist's father choose which Korea to side with, which frees his teenage son Sugihara from having to make that choice. "[Sugihara] tries to free himself from all ideologies of nation, society, or politics, which have so far served as tools for securing an identity in a foreign land" (Shin and Kim 2015, 4).

## *Pachinko*: Bridging Zainichi literature and Korean diaspora literature

For Min Jin Lee, the author of *Pachinko*, "[a]lthough the history of kings and rulers is unequivocally fascinating, I think we are also hungry for the narrative of ordinary people, who lack connections and material resources" (Lee 2017, 492), and who are often marginalized in many historical accounts. Like other Zainichi literature, *Pachinko* helps give a voice to the narratives of Koreans in Japan and serves an effective counternarrative to, among other things, a historiography that sidelines non-Japanese (traditionally defined at least). Also, like most of its genre, *Pachinko* posits its own resolution to the problems of the Zainichi. But unlike them, it encompasses the existential issues and predicaments of each generation, which is represented by, among others, the members of the Baek family. Zainichi writers tend to focus on their historically specific struggles, but by creating an intergenerational narrative, *Pachinko* offers a broader overview of the Zainichi experiences. Plus, with the novel written in English and published by an international press, not to mention its recent adaptation into a TV series by an online streaming platform, the plight of the Zainichi becomes more readily available for international readers. Also, unlike much Zainichi literature, *Pachinko* celebrates family matriarchs' struggles: women who are often portrayed as wives with abusive and violent husbands. Though patriarchal beliefs still appear in the novel, the men are not represented as abusive.

*Pachinko* arguably represents a microcosm of the history of Korean diaspora—in China, post-Soviet states, the US, and Japan—whose experiences resonate with the struggles of the Baek family across the decades: leaving their homeland and struggling to have a dignified life in another country. Zainichi literature (re)imagines the question of "homeland" and how Korean migrants carve a space for themselves in their adopted country. Part II of the novel is titled "Motherland," but it is set in Ikaino, the Korean ghetto in Osaka, not mainland Korea. "Motherland," in this sense, can have two meanings: the imaginary Korea existing in memories of the first generation or the ghetto itself. For the second and third generations, meanwhile, it

could also mean Japan, and not Korea. Ultimately, what is common across the Korean diasporic literature is the issue of identity and belonging.

> "What does it mean to be a Korean in the contemporary international world of global village?" This question has been raised for several purposes: first, to narrate the stories about the experience and destiny common to Korean people; second, to identify certain moral and aesthetic values of Korean culture; and third and last, to grapple with the demand of newly forming Korean identity across cultures. (Hong 2006)

*Pachinko* also bridges Zainichi literature and that of the broader Korean diaspora, with the former arguably the representative of the latter. This is partly because the author of the novel, Min Jin Lee, is herself a Korean immigrant to the United States. She was born in Seoul, South Korea, but her family immigrated to the US in 1976 and settled in New York (Lee n.d.). In 1989, as an undergraduate pursuing history at Yale University, Lee "attended a lecture" by an American missionary who "worked with ethnic Koreans in Japan." He talked about the history of Zainichis and relayed the "story of a… 13-year-old boy" who was "bullied" (Lee 2017, 481) and eventually committed suicide. This resonated with Lee and inspired her to write. Conducting extensive interviews, research, and fieldwork in Japan, she often encountered stories about the first-generation Zainichi women who made a lot of sacrifices for their families (495), a fact that influenced her writing.

Elsewhere, she shares that "journalism is a really important part of fiction writing for me. All of my fictional work depends on a great deal of fieldwork where I actually go to the place and talk to people as well as conduct extensive interviews and spend time with people who are like my characters" (Krull 2019). According to her, having a history degree was disadvantageous in writing the novel because it made her focus on document-based analysis, making it difficult for her to select which information to retain and discard. She wanted the novel to be inclusive of histories and perspectives often disregarded in grand narratives (Dilworth and Morefoot 2017).[2] Because of this, Lee took too long a time to write the novel.

*Summary of the Novel*

The narrative of *Pachinko* spans almost eight decades and is divided into three periods: *Gohyang*/Hometown (1910–1933), Motherland (1939–1962), and Pachinko (1962–1989). The first part of the novel, *Gohyang*/Hometown (1910–1933) follows Sunja, who is born into poverty during the Japanese colonization of Korea. It chronicles her childhood in Yeongdo, Busan; her departure for Osaka, where she lives in the Korean ghetto of Ikaino to start a family; and in Yokohama, where she settles in her old age with her son and grandson. In Part I, Sunja gets smitten by a fish broker twice her age, Koh Hansu, and gets pregnant by him. But he is unable to marry Sunja, for he already has a wife and three daughters in Osaka, Japan. Meanwhile, Baek Isak, a sickly Christian minister from Pyongyang, has fallen ill on his passage to Osaka and is recovering in Sunja's parents' boarding house when he hears of Sunja's dilemma. He proposes to marry her so her child can have a surname and a father. Sunja marries Isak and accompanies him to Osaka, where they live with Isak's brother Yoseb, and his wife Kyunghee. Life in the Korean ghetto, which is described as filled with animal stench and filth, seemed more deplorable than in Korea. Part I ends with Sunja giving birth to Noa Baek.

Things become more difficult for the family in Part II: Motherland (1939–1962). Sunja is forced to start peddling kimchi and taffy to provide for her family. She encounters Koh Hansu, the fish broker, anew. By this time, Isak, who was imprisoned after refusing to bow down to an image of the emperor, has been dead for three years. Hansu tells Sunja to flee to the countryside because Japan is losing the war, and the Americans will soon bomb Japanese cities. Part II narrates the family's survival through the war and the post-war years. Sunja's two children also have come of age. Noa enters Waseda University in Tokyo. Mozasu, the younger son, quits high school and starts working in a pachinko parlor.

Part III: Pachinko (1962–1989) begins with Noa banishing himself after learning that Koh Hansu is his father. He settles in Nagano under new a Japanese name and starts working for a pachinko parlor, an ethnic

industry he thought he could escape from. But Noa finds wealth and success. When his mother and Hansu discover his whereabouts, he commits suicide. Set during the bubble economy period of Japan, Part III also sees the birth of Mozasu's son, Solomon, who, despite being educated and wealthy, still suffers from being Zainichi. It ends with Solomon taking over his father's pachinko business.

## An Intergenerational Search for Identity

This section analyzes and compares each generation of the Baek family's responses to the problem of Zainichi identity across different historical circumstances. For the first-generation in *Pachinko*, the idea of "homeland" is not tied to either of the two Koreas. But it is complicated by political affiliations (Lee 2014, 25). Yoseb, Isak Baek's brother, sides neither with the North nor the South. He is hopeful that Korea will not be divided forever, a sentiment shared by Koh Hansu. Both men do not express a desire to permanently stay in Japan; they wish to return to Korea (*Chosun*), but only when it has reconciled. Refusing to align themselves with a North-South political ideology, they deem their families' survival and safety more valuable. For Yoseb, it is vital to

> Save your family. Feed your belly. Pay attention, and be skeptical of the people in charge. If the Korean nationalists couldn't get their country back, then let your kids learn Japanese and try to get ahead. Adapt... there were ten thousand compatriots on the ground and elsewhere who were just trying to eat. In the end, your belly was your emperor. (Lee 2017, 174)

In the novel, only Kim Changho, a first-generation Zainichi, expressed his political beliefs on the homeland. Though he is originally from Daegu, South Korea, he sides with the North. He eventually leaves for the North and is never heard from again. Likewise, first-generation women do not affiliate themselves with a North-South politics. And when they dream of Korea, it is the image of their hometowns that they conjure. Throughout

the novel, Sunja, Kyunghee, and Yangjin express the wish to clean the graves of their parents and in-laws, and perform the *jesa*, a tribute to one's ancestors, though Sunja and Kyunghee—as Christians—are forbidden to do so. Homeland for them is tied to tradition and culture. Thus, when these women learn that Phoebe, Solomon's Korean-American girlfriend, does not often eat Korean food nor does she know how to cook it, they are shocked and remarked how "American" she is, and only Korean by ethnicity. For them, identifying yourself as Korean also means practicing the culture and connecting to the homeland. The first generation do not have any problems with their identity as they grew up in Korea and speak the language. In their own way, they likewise have a clear idea of what homeland is and never conflate it with either the North or the South.

As part of the second generation, Noa and Mozasu in their youth heard—from the first generation—of the possibility of returning to Korea, and were optimistic about the matter; they imagined life there would be better. Noa believes that "he would be normal" (Lee 2017, 211) in Korea, and will no longer be a perpetual outsider. But after Mozasu's visit to the country, he realizes that

> Koreans like me can't leave. Where we gonna go? But the Koreans back home aren't changing, either. In Seoul, people like me get called Japanese bastards, and in Japan, I'm just another dirty Korean no matter how much money I make or how nice I am. (Lee 2017, 377)

Mozasu's identity crisis is reinforced after facing the ambiguity of being neither Korean nor Japanese. By contrast, Noa feels indifferent after his own travels to his putative homeland; the only thing he has to say about it is "my *supposed* motherland" (Lee 2017, 384; emphasis mine). These are similar to the experiences of second- and third-generation Zainichi who had visited Korea.

> South Koreans in the "homeland" treated many Koreans from Japan as foreigners or criticized their lack of proficiency in Korean language and culture... those who expected to become more "Korean"... returned to Japan with the realization that they were neither Korean nor Japanese, but they were *zainichi*. (Chung 2006, 94)

In fact, the Zainichi have more in common with the Japanese than the Koreans in the peninsula (134). In the novel, as we have seen, the second generation do not speak of the political orientations that divide the homeland nor do they believe them; they are more preoccupied with dealing with existential and identity problems. The novel implies, however, that Mozasu and his son Solomon have South Korean passports, which enable them to travel abroad and for Solomon to study overseas. But this does not mean that they support Seoul; obtaining a South Korean citizenship is simply strategic and convenient, not least for their residency status in Japan. The Japan-ROK (Republic of Korea) Normalization Treaty in 1965 helped stabilize the legal status of Zainichi who chose to be affiliated with Seoul. This "treaty-based permanent residency afforded those who qualified with expanded freedom of foreign travel and fewer grounds for deportation than other foreign residents" (89). In this respect, Noa and Mozasu's stances resonate with the "third way" discourse on Korean identity. Neither of them wants to repatriate or to be politically aligned with Mindan or Chongryun. Both simply want to enjoy their rights and live without discrimination.

### *Identity Formation*

As we have seen, the first-generation Zainichi are not confused with their identity. Nor do they think of permanently settling in Japan; and the common reason to go or stay there is to look for work and have a better life. Accepting the prejudices that come with being Korean in the country, they simply adapt to the harsh living and economic conditions. What is evident, however, are the significant changes in gender roles among first-generation Zainichi and in the traditional family life upon moving to Japan (Kashani

2006, 172). Zainichi women had to work and were no longer confined to domestic roles, just as Sunja peddles food to provide for her family. This change affects men because it challenges their gender-defined role as the sole provider for the family. For example, Yoseb, who had deep patriarchal beliefs, feels humiliated and offended when Sunja and his own wife started working.

In contrast, the second-generation Zainichi, born and raised in Japan, develop identity problems, to which they respond differently. Noa is eager to conform, mimicking the Japanese and hiding his Korean ethnicity. Even at a young age, Noa wanted to be Japanese.

> At school, he went by his Japanese name, Nobuo Boku, rather than Noa Baek; and though everyone in his class knew he was Korean because of his Japanized surname, if he met anyone who didn't know this fact, Noa wasn't forthcoming about this detail. He spoke and wrote better Japanese than most native children... Above all the other secrets Noa could not speak of, the boy wanted to be Japanese; it was his dream to leave Ikaino and never to return. (Lee 2017, 176)

While studying at Waseda University, Noa successfully passes as Japanese. He, however, struggles to fashion an identity beyond ethnicity. "Noa didn't care about being Korean with [Akiko, his girlfriend] in fact he didn't care about being Korean or Japanese with anyone. He wanted to be, to be just himself, whatever that meant" (308). Since childhood, he has always wanted to be considered Japanese, but Noa experiences an existential crisis instead. After Akiko confronts him about his biological father, Hansu, and accuses him of hiding his ties to a yakuza boss, he realizes that he just wants her to see his humanity without any labels of nationality or ethnicity: to be seen as human and be treated like one (308). Like Sugihara in the novel *GO*, Noa seeks to rid himself of nationalist beliefs to carve his identity.

Noa's response to his identity crisis is painful because he believes that if he becomes an ideal student and son, he "would help the Korean people by his excellence of character and workmanship, and that no one would be

able to look down on him" (309). But now he considers himself irredeemable; if his birth father, Hansu, is a yakuza, it means that he comes from a bad seed, something that he cannot change.

> I will never be able to wash this dirt from my name... How can you make something clean from something so dirty?... All my life, I have had Japanese telling me that my blood is Korean—that Koreans are angry, violent, cunning, and deceitful criminals. All my life I had to endure this. I tried to be as honest and humble as Baek Isak was; I never raised my voice. But this blood, my blood is Korean, and now I learn that my blood is yakuza blood. I can never change this, no matter what I do. (311)

The second-generation Zainichi in other Zainichi literature are portrayed as having identity crises and resentful of their fathers, blaming the latter for their problems. Noa initially believes that he can be redeemed as long as he follows his stepfather Isak's advice. But upon learning his biological father is a yakuza, he blames Hansu for putting all his efforts to naught; he can no longer be fully accepted in Japanese society since the yakuza are part of the criminal underbelly, shunned and feared. Noa's desire to define an identity for himself is abandoned. He banishes himself to Nagano, where he resigns himself to being a Zainichi passing as Japanese.

Noa, in a way, has imbibed ideas of identity based on blood—*nihonjinron*—and he believes that good deeds can matter more than biology. But the discourse of *nihonjinron* is unforgiving, keen as it is on rendering invisible those who are not Japanese by blood. Despite being a fluent speaker of the Japanese language and knowledgeable of Japanese culture, Noa cannot *be* Japanese. For the Zainichi, "passing as Japanese" is the "most expedient and historically tested tool" to avoid discrimination (Chung 2006, 89). By looks alone, one cannot identify a Zainichi; they are often indistinguishable from the Japanese, and are so immersed and knowledgeable in the language and culture that they can "pass" as Japanese (Lee 2014, 20). Noa naturalizes as a Japanese and starts a family

without them knowing his true origins. For the rest of his life, he refuses to acknowledge his Korean ethnicity. After his parents find him, he commits suicide, confirming his belief that he cannot hide his true self. As John Lie observed, "*zainichi* meant life; its denial meant death" (Lie 2009, 172).[3]

Mozasu, on the contrary, does not have the same goals as Noa. Mozasu does not hide his ethnicity and will not let anyone treat him poorly just because of it. He behaves well, but is quick to defend himself when his peers bully him. Mozasu does not strive to be a model Korean. He is not good in academics and often gets in trouble in school. Regarding Noa's disappearance, Mozasu thinks that "he just got tired of trying to be a good Korean and quit. I was never a good Korean" (Lee 2017, 377). Mozasu knows that whether he is a good Korean or not, society will never change the way he is treated. He will still be a foreigner in Japan. Mozasu has accepted the absurdity of his nationality and identity; while he was born in Japan, speaks Japanese well, knows Japanese culture, and appears Japanese, he is not a citizen of the country. Neither is he accepted, nor does he identify with either of the two Koreas' political orientations.

Solomon, Sunja's grandson and Mozasu's son, is the third-generation member of the Baek family. Like his father, he still needs to submit his fingerprints to acquire an alien registration card, which is renewed every three years as a result of the Alien Registration Act of 1952. Before 1971, all foreign residents used the "rotating" finger-printing method, as if they were criminals (Chung 2006, 107). A form of governmental control to "identify and monitor Koreans," the fingerprinting does not aim to "officially assign nationality to residents of Korean descent" (Lee 2014, 23). The process is considered degrading by many Zainichi (Chung 2006, 107). When Solomon acquires his alien registration card, Mozasu confides to his partner, Etsuko, that "it is hopeless. I cannot change his fate. He is Korean. He has to get those papers, and he has to follow all the steps of the law perfectly.... Solomon must understand. We can be deported. We have no motherland" (Lee 2017, 395).

Solomon experiences discrimination at work because of his Korean identity; his colleagues think that his father is part of the yakuza because

of his pachinko parlors. In the end, he gets blackmailed and fired. Because of this, his Japanese friend, Hana, advises him to take over his father's pachinko business. "Japan will never change. It will never ever integrate *gaijin*, and my darling, here you will always be a *gaijin* and never Japanese. *Nee*? The zainichi can't leave, *nee*?" (Lee 2017, 467). Hana persuades him, saying that though pachinko has a stigma around it, good people work there. Similarly, while big companies may be esteemed, it does not mean that every employee it has is good. Mozasu doubts that Solomon will work in a pachinko, but Solomon assures him that others' opinions do not matter (474).

As a third-generation Zainichi, and with his father choosing to acquire South Korean passports for them, Solomon no longer has to decide which Korea to side with. Like Mozasu, he does not discriminate against people, nor is he prejudiced based on their ethnicities. He disagrees on this matter with Phoebe, his US-born Korean girlfriend, who generalizes that all Japanese are evil because of their involvement in World War II. Solomon argues against that saying that the Japanese also suffered (435).

Phoebe's exercise of identity and nationality offers a contrast to that of the Zainichi. Born in the United States, she has no problems with citizenship. Living in a multicultural society, she recognizes her ethnicity, and is encouraged to practice and celebrate her hybrid identity as a Korean-American. For Solomon, a Zainichi's citizenship is problematic, and they often hide their ethnicity. When Phoebe proposes to marry him, so that he can become an American citizen and work in the US, Solomon refuses because he prefers to live in Japan. He knows it makes sense to become a naturalized Japanese, but he is still undecided.

> Was it better to be an American than a Japanese? He knew Koreans who had become naturalized Japanese, and it made sense to do so, but he didn't want to do that now, either. Maybe one day. She [Phoebe] was right; it was weird that he was born in Japan and had a South Korean passport. He couldn't rule out getting naturalized. (Lee 2017, 471)

One sees Solomon's ambivalence here, but by the end, he acknowledges that he is both Korean and Japanese. "In a way, Solomon was Japanese too, even if the Japanese didn't think so.... There was more to being something than just blood" (471). His realization solves the problem of identity-formation that his uncle Noa encountered, which had left the latter at a dead end. Solomon's decision to work in the pachinko industry acknowledges and celebrates his ethnicity, an acceptance that a part of him is Japanese. His father, Mozasu, already had the same realization, but this entails more of recognizing the ambiguity of his identity as Zainichi: neither Japanese nor Korean. Solomon's identity is more encompassing and accommodating toward being Korean and Japanese. For Solomon and Sugihara, the protagonists of the novel *GO* by Kaneshiro, identity has become a personal choice, since their fathers have solved the political allegiance problem—a traditionally significant factor in Zainichi identity formation—by deciding that their sons will have South Korean passports.

Solomon acknowledging his being both Zainichi and Japanese raises the possibility of having a hyphenated identity, which proudly recognizes the legitimacy of one's ethnic heritage, without having to hide it. He is an example of the increasing complexity of the Zainichi: educated, a white-collar worker, and wealthy—far from the circumstances of his grandparents. He has lived in a multicultural and diverse society like the US. Aware of Japan's colonial history, he is not quick to condemn the country for its actions, even sympathizing with the Japanese who also suffered in the war. Solomon embodies the "Korean Japanese" identity that Eika Tai (2004), among others, speaks of. His refusal of Phoebe's proposal to marry for citizenship and become American, and his ambivalence toward naturalizing despite the practicality of both, resist confinement to a fixed or singular identity. Indeed, being Korean-Japanese directly challenges the descent-based notion of *nihonjinron*.

In sum, the first two parts of the novel express how the Zainichi struggle and try to live dignified lives amidst racism in Japan. Part III proposes that ideas of nationalism conveniently compartmentalize a society and create a sense of community, a "horizontal comradeship"[4]—which the Zainichi unsettle.

### *Faith, Gambling, and Finding the Winning Combination*

As a game, pachinko is combined pinball and slot machine. Pachinko parlors are an escape not only for players looking to entertain themselves and earn some money, but also for its Korean employees who cannot find employment elsewhere because of their ethnicity. Like the Zainichi, pachinkos exist in a gray area; gambling is illegal in Japan, but pachinkos are allowed to operate because of loopholes in the law. Precluded from joining other professions, the Zainichi have had to resort to self-employment or start their own businesses, such as pachinko parlors (like Goro, Mozasu's boss) and *yakinikuya*, Korean barbecue restaurants (Hansu). According to Prof. Toshio Miyatsuka, an estimated three-quarters of pachinko parlors are operated by the Zainichi (Plotz n.d.).

Pachinko is a game of chance and luck, and though parlor owners tinker with the machines, customers keep returning and playing because of the thrill and possibility of winning. Mozasu, as a pachinko parlor owner himself, muses on the nature of the game.

> His Presbyterian minister father had believed in a divine design, and Mozasu believed that life was like this game where the player could adjust the dials yet also expect the uncertainty of factors he couldn't control. He understood why his customers wanted to play something that looked fixed but which also left room for randomness and hope. (Lee 2017, 292–93)

> Every morning, Mozasu and his men tinkered with the machines to fix outcomes—there could only be a few winners and a lot of losers. And yet we played on, because we had hope that we might be the lucky ones. How could you get angry at the ones who wanted to be in the game?... to believe in the perhaps-absurd possibility that they might win. Pachinko was a foolish game, but life was not. (Lee 2017, 406)

The novel opens with "[h]istory has failed us, but no matter," which tells readers that it is not about the powerful people history; it's about ordinary people who get swept by history, feel like pawns in a game, and have more reason to believe in luck. The pachinko symbolizes how its characters' lives are moved by historical forces beyond their control and seem to depend on chance. The players have no real power because of the unpredictability of the outcome, and because the game itself is rigged, as it were. Much the same goes in the novel, where the characters are subject to the impact of history, not least colonization. The ubiquity of pachinko parlors in Japan[5] becomes a symbol of the Zainichi who are otherwise invisible and can "pass" as Japanese; likewise, pachinko parlors are considered as an inherent part of Japanese gaming and gambling culture; tourist websites include them as a "must-see" destination.[6]

However, there is another side to gambling, even a paradox. Even if gambling entails chance, lack of control, determinism, and uncertainty, it also demonstrates a degree of free will and individual agency, to say nothing of hope and confidence in a certain outcome. No matter the randomness and the force of history, the players have faith and keep on playing, believing that things will eventually lead—somehow—to a favorable outcome. Similarly, just as the pachinko encourages a belief in chance (to win), so does history compel each Zainichi generation to exercise some agency and explore the several possibilities on how to live in a society that denies their existence. This is especially illustrated through Noa and Mozasu's life stories, and Solomon's ambiguity to his. The shifting perspectives of the novel—its form—gives a sense of complexity to the lives of the characters, and to the solutions and experiences they attempt. There is no single way and experience of being a Zainichi; their lives are made complicated by larger, all-encompassing historical and political forces. And although there is no neat correspondence between playing pachinko and finding one's identity under difficult circumstances, the characters in the novel—or even the novel itself—resemble pachinko players who keep playing and trying different "combinations" to win, that is to say, to resolve issues of identity and belonging, and to carve a better life in Japan under various historical circumstances.

It is interesting to juxtapose the pachinko metaphor with the Biblical references in the novel because the two allusions are actually at odds: the randomness of the game contrasts with the certain, teleological thrust of salvation history from Isak Baek (named after Isaac, son of Abraham) to Yoseb (Joseph) to Noa (Noah) and Mosazu (Moses) and on to Solomon (Solomon). In this sense, the narrative of the Baek family, which culminates in Solomon, mirrors somewhat the search for salvation and return from exile of the Jewish people. Just as the first-generation Zainichi were "exiled" from Korea, so do their descendants try to (re)define their identity and the meaning of home in Japan (or elsewhere).

For instance, Yoseb, Isak Baek's brother, is named after the biblical Joseph, also a first-born son. In the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament for Christians), Joseph's wisdom in interpreting dreams earn him the trust of the pharaoh, and he becomes his adviser. Under Joseph's guidance, Egypt averts famine. Similarly, Yoseb in the novel is also responsible in ensuring his family has food and other necessities. Also, Yoseb's brother and Noa's adoptive father, Isak, embodies faith and trust in God, no matter the circumstances. Isak tends to be selfless and to sacrifice himself (Lee, 2017, 96), even if in the Bible, he almost dies by Abraham's hand. Isak gives up a lot by marrying Sunja to save her from disgrace, and becomes a martyr for his Christian religion when he refuses to bow to the Japanese emperor.

Noa admires Isak and wishes to be like him and keep his faith, despite the tribulations. To follow God's commands, the biblical Noah builds an ark amidst mockery and disbelief, even when there are no signs of the flood yet. In the same way, Noa believes that despite the negative stereotypes and discriminations against the Zainichi, he must have faith and remain good, since someday he can prove the Japanese wrong. Unlike his Biblical counterpart, however, Noa meets a tragic ending.

Mozasu's success in the pachinko industry lifts his family from poverty, just as his biblical namesake, Moses, leads his people out of servitude in Egypt. Historically, the 1960s and 1970s marked the improvement of the Zainichi's socioeconomic position due to Japan's development,

which demanded a larger workforce (Kim 2011, 237). Their educational attainment also rose during this time (237), allowing them to work in jobs not considered dirty, demanding, and demeaning. In the 1980s and 1990s, the growth of Koreans' "biggest ethnic industry," the pachinko, exceeded that of the domestic automobile industry by 30 trillion yen. The *yakinikuya*, which Koreans developed in Japan—also made progress during this time (238).

The biblical Solomon is often regarded as the wisest man that has ever lived. Because of his wisdom, he is always sought as an arbitrator and considered a model for rulers. The novel ends ambiguously with Solomon's final decision regarding his identity, but his namesake hints that he has the wisdom that previous generations lack—to judge and change—the situation. Ultimately, the novel ends positively. The third-generation Zainichi, who have better living conditions, education, and opportunities, can now freely and wisely decide on their identities and destinies without being tied down by, say, North-South politics or being seen as traitors. Returning to the pachinko metaphor, one can see that Solomon arguably represents the "winning combination." He acknowledges that there is "more to being something than just blood" (Lee 2017, 471). He is wiser than his father because he acknowledges that he is Japanese too, whereas Mozasu only saw himself as an outsider in both countries. This again is similar to the fate of Mozasu's namesake: he never saw the "promised land" or a land where the Zainichi can live with full rights without sacrificing their heritage and history.

Despite the seemingly unresolved issue of identity by the novel's end, Solomon realizes that it is something he can decide for himself. Historical circumstances have led to this opportunity. The third and next generations are too far away from the pain of colonization, war, and postwar recovery. Because of the sacrifices of their ancestors, the present generation now have better chances in life, and can afford to treat identity as a personal choice.

## The Winning Combination: Concluding Remarks

The novel's use of gambling as a metaphor exposes a push-and-pull: pachinkos may operate under a grand design, but the uncertainty of its outcome leaves some room for agency. The novel ends with Solomon, who represents the third, and perhaps, future generations of Zainichi, wiser than their elders to know that identity is a personal choice and should not be dictated by politics and ethnicity—the usual bases for social belonging. It is Solomon who possesses the "winning combination" to make this happen: he is educated, wealthy, and did not experience the historical pain of the Zainichi. Additionally, unlike his grandmother, Sunja, or his grandaunt, Kyunghee, he does not see himself as fully Korean. Solomon accepts that a part of him is Japanese. Having visited South Korea several times, he feels that "it was no homecoming" (Lee 2017, 436). Unlike his father Mozasu and uncle Noa, he does not consider himself an outsider in Japanese society, and also unlike his Korean-American girlfriend, Phoebe, he does not harbor any hatred for the Japanese who committed atrocities during the war and have discriminated the Zainichi. He has the wisdom to see beyond one's ethnicity—"even if there were a hundred bad Japanese, if there was a good one, he refused to make a blanket statement" (471)—and historical circumstances, as "there was no need to keep rehashing the past" (438).

This paper has analyzed the novel *Pachinko* in light of Zainichi literature and as a bridge between that body of work and the writings of the Korean diaspora. It has identified the entire novel—a chronicle of several generations of Zainichi—as a narrative of attempts to find the winning combination in pachinko, i.e., a satisfactory resolution of Zainichi identity issues beyond questions of homeland, repatriation, and nationalism. The paper has also pointed out an intriguing contrast in the novel between the chance and randomness embodied in a game of pachinko on the one hand, and the Biblical, teleological thrust of the work on the other. That *Pachinko* stakes its position on hybrid identities in the end—embodied by Solomon—challenges narrow and essentialist notions of identity, but also reflects the author's positionality and location: that of a Korean-American living in the

United States, where similar notions of identity abound. At this point, it is interesting to see a juxtaposition of *Pachinko* with contemporaneous Zainichi literary texts to find a different solution or a winning combination. After all, there are many ways of being a Zainichi.

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## Endnotes

[1] Hereafter referred to as Zainichi. From the literature reviewed for this study, there is an inconsistency with how the term for Korean residents in Japan is stylized: zainichi Koreans or Zainichi Koreans. For this study, the latter is preferred to acknowledge their unique history and to not merely reduce "zainichi" as an adjective.

[2] To quote Lee in her interview with *Boulevard* (Krull 2019), "I need to write almost 60 years of history, which is a lot of wars in Asia, a lot of political calamity—and I needed to understand it. Because I had been trained in history in college, and because I was a lawyer. I approached all this with a very strong sense of sobriety, like I can't mess this up."

[3] This was Lie's (2009) insight when Japanese intellectual Kang Sang-jung shared in his autobiography a story of a fellow Zainichi and Waseda University student who had naturalized, and therefore could not join the university's Center for Korean Culture as

it was only for Koreans. Kang said that the student later committed suicide because he was neither accepted by the Japanese nor Koreans.

[4] Part III starts with an epigraph of a quotation from Benedict Anderson's treatise on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*.

[5] Though the number of pachinko parlors has been in decline in the last decade, as of 2019 there are still nearly 10,000 pachinko parlors operating and nearly 2.6 million pachinko machines in Japan (Nippon 2020).

[6] See websites like the *Japan Guide* (https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2065.html) and *Japan Visitor* (https://www.japanvisitor.com/japanese-culture/culture-pachinko).

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