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Muted in country of birth, three women fight for voice and choice in Japan | The Japan Times

Joel Fitzpatrick

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Chung Woohee (left), Amy Tiffany Loo (center) and Yuka Hamanaka often have deep discussions about Japan, the country of their birth, in light of their varied ancestral backgrounds. | KYODO

As Japan's demographic sands shift, with its graying population, declining regional communities and doors inching further open to immigrant workers, three young female Tokyoites are envisioning a new way forward.

One is Korean, one is Chinese and the other is Japanese, but they all want to make the country they call “home” a more progressive, inclusive and representative place.

All three look like they could be any young professional walking the streets of the capital, but when they speak they demonstrate a thoughtfulness that makes it obvious they have different motivations than most.

“I think, even like a few decades ago, it would be impossible for us to be having discussions and dialogue about how we want the future of Japan to be,” says Amy Tiffany Loo, 23.

Loo, who is Chinese, says the difficult history of relations between her ancestral homeland and those of her friends — Korean Chung Woohee, 25, and Yuka Hamanaka, 23 — means any discussion about a collective future in Japan would have been out of the question not so long ago.

“Woohee is Zainichi Korean, my family has been through a lot of upheavals through the Sino-Japanese war, and Yuka, she is a Japanese national, so when we engage in conversation we always talk about how we can think and discuss issues in a way that encompasses all three sides of us,” said Loo.

“The way we view history, it is very different. Me, coming from a Chinese background whose grandparents fought Japanese forces, it is going to be a very sensitive issue.”

Their varying ancestral histories may bring them into contrast, and even conflict sometimes, but their current shared realities in the country of their birth also give them plenty in common.

Being foreign in their own country, the issue of representation is one that is particularly important to Chung and Loo, and it led them to evaluate the issue of voting rights for non-Japanese nationals ahead of the recent Upper House election.

“There is a tendency for others to simplify us or to force us into a corner,” said Loo, a graduate of University of California, Berkeley and now a consultant at a large multinational professional services company.

“But in our case, we have lived in Japan for over 15 to 20 years. ... And so, for us, we feel the same things that Japanese people feel. We care about gender inequality, we care about the right of disabled people, we care about children,” she said.

But as much as they care, they, like the rest of the more than 2.73 million foreign people living in Japan, have no way to voice their opinion by casting a vote for a candidate or party that represents their best interests.

“In the season of the election many people around me they always say ‘I voted’ or ‘let’s go vote,’ but my frustration was that I was unable to join that voice,” said Chung, an artist, activist and office worker.

Without a voice, and feeling a great sense of frustration regarding the current Japanese leadership's attitude toward some Korea-related issues, Chung came together with her friends to start the #VoteForMe social media campaign.

“This campaign started from my personal frustration, I guess. I felt this kind of frustration because I have no right to vote in Japan even though I was born in Japan and grew up in Japan,” Chung said.

“I wanted to make a kind of bridge between the voters and those who don't have the right to vote, so this #VoteForMe campaign is going to be the bridge between them.”

The women hoped the social media campaign would raise awareness about Japan's disenfranchised among those who have a vote, making them realize their vote is both valuable and has even more significance to those without a voice.

Ha Kyung Hee, an assistant professor at Meiji University who specializes in race, ethnicity and immigration, understands the motivations of the trio.

Herself a Zainichi Korean, Ha says many foreign residents feel alienated from Japanese political discourse “even though they are impacted by it.”

“Election season is a painful moment as it reminds me that we are still excluded from one of the most basic civil rights,” said Ha.

“My family has been in Japan for 90 years, my first language is Japanese, and I want to call Japan my home. And yet, I hesitate because we are not treated with equality and fairness as full members of society.”

Through the process of naturalization, Japan gives foreign-born residents a chance to take the same rights as a Japanese person. They have to have lived in the country for a prescribed amount of time, and must meet a number of other conditions, but it requires they give up any other nationality and their old passport.

But many foreign passport holders do not believe they should be required to forfeit their nationality to have a voice in the country.

Cognizant that a vote for “me” does not necessarily mean that vote will represent the views to which they prescribe, the three women want to make clear they are not trying to influence anyone to vote one way or another — they just want to open a dialogue about issues of importance.

“It gives us a chance to engage in a conversation. If I say ‘vote for me’ and then (someone) asks me what are your issues and they agree with it, then it is their choice,” said Loo.

“In engaging in a conversation, (someone) might change their mind, they might go the complete opposite way, but that's their choice.”

And this was the situation for Hamanaka, who, of course, does have a vote.

She was initially conflicted about being involved as she felt it may have been viewed as inauthentic.

“I wanted to support them, I wanted to do something with them, but I didn’t know how I can,” said Hamanaka, who is from Tokyo and works alongside Loo at the professional services company.

Even more frustrating for the women is that Japanese people are increasingly taking their ability to vote for granted, as demonstrated by the poor turnout for the Upper House poll in July.

For that election, in which Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s conservative Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partner secured a healthy share of the vote, turnout for races in single-seat constituencies fell to 48.80 percent, the second-lowest on record after 44.52 percent in 1995.

In the proportional representation section, turnout was slightly lower at 48.79 percent, according to the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry.

For Hamanaka, the indifference of her compatriots is annoying, but understandable.

“I didn’t go vote (in the past) because I wanted to prioritize what I wanted to do at that time over going to vote, so I understand it,” she said.

“But not going to vote means they support the current system, so I want more people to think about the consequences.”

Meiji University’s Ha says there is no reason why foreign nationals shouldn’t be allowed to vote, as they are able to in a number of countries, including South Korea and several in Europe. And at about 2 percent of the population, the impact of giving suffrage to the foreign community would be limited, Ha says.

“I absolutely think it’s realistic, particularly for local elections, because we already have many examples from other countries.”

“I think it requires discussions as to whether or not foreign residents should have a right to participate in national elections, but currently there is no such discussion because in Japan political rights are thought to be strongly connected with one’s nationality.”

Similarly, Loo sees the likelihood of getting to vote as being a long way off, but says there is a good reason for prefectures and municipalities to hear from all their constituents, Japanese and non-Japanese alike.

Tokyo’s Shinjuku Ward is a perfect example of a place where foreign residents need a voice.

According to the Shinjuku Ward Office, the bustling shopping and entertainment district's 43,065 foreign residents as of Aug. 1 accounted for 12.3 percent of its population — by far the highest ratio of any municipality in the country.

Therefore its government, says Loo, should reflect that relatively diverse demographic.

“Let's say it is going to be 20 percent in the future, as the Japanese population shrinks, that means a kind of big chunk of people living in Shinjuku, for example, don't have a say in how they want their community to be, how they want their living area to be.

“So, something has to happen to change that system,” Loo says.

There was a time when Japan gave serious thought to giving suffrage to permanent residents.

In 2010, former Prime Minister Naoto Kan of the now-defunct centrist Democratic Party of Japan upheld a Supreme Court ruling that acknowledged the constitutionality of granting local voting rights to non-Japanese nationals, but when he and then his party were ousted from power by the LDP, the push foundered.

Some municipalities do allow permanent residents to vote in local referendums, such as in Maibara, Shiga Prefecture, which became the first city to do it in 2002.

Since then, a number of others have given permanent residents a say in referendums on some matters, but to a limited extent.

Ha says much of the current thinking on the subject posits that there are only intangible reasons for major change to be more than a pipe dream.

“I see it as a symbolic refusal to treat foreign residents as equal partners in our society,” she said, pointing to the many countries that do give their foreign residents a say.

“People in Japan really must start asking themselves what is so wrong about allowing foreign residents to vote instead of giving up on critical thinking and automatically equating voting rights with nationality,” Ha said.

With universal suffrage realistically out of reach, at least for the foreseeable future, the #VoteForMe three have plans to make an impact elsewhere.

They plan to prepare a bigger and better campaign for the general election that has to be held by October 2021 and to expand their activities to encompass more activism.

Their next goal is to establish a program to use performance art to highlight targets of discrimination hiding in plain sight, such as Japan's *burakumin* (hamlet people) minority.

Hamanaka says using performance to highlight discrimination will illuminate the reality faced by those suffering from prejudice in an accessible way.

The meat-packing industry is particularly problematic, she says. The burakumin, an outcast group traditionally rooted to the bottom of the social strata and restricted to jobs widely — and without any basis — considered “dirty,” such as meat-processing, undertaking or hide-tanning, are in a plight that should be more widely understood, she says.

“In our daily lives it is very invisible, that process, but they are people who work in it and they are discriminated against in Japanese society, historically,” Hamanaka said.

“We are trying to make performance art in the place, and organizing a study tour to make the discrimination visible in a creative way.”

With impressive young women like Chung, Loo and Hamanaka trying to make their voices heard in Japan, the country has the potential to move in a positive direction.

However, it remains to be seen whether Japan’s leaders or wider population have an interest in listening.