# Korean Perceptions of Liberation in Northeast China during the Era of Liberation

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## Abstract

This study explores how Korean communities in Northeast China perceived liberation in the aftermath of Japan's 1945 defeat, focusing on representations in Korean poetry from the period. Rather than viewing liberation solely as the end of colonial rule, the research frames it as a process of "finding one's place"—a complex experience involving both ethnic and economic restoration. The findings suggest that liberation for Koreans unfolded along two main axes: ethnic liberation, marked by the recovery of sovereignty from Japanese colonial rule, and economic liberation, marked by the Chinese Communist Party's land reform policies. Ethnic liberation evoked feelings of joy and relief, but it also brought fear and uncertainty. Though Koreans were freed from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, they now faced hostility from local Han Chinese, the threat of banditry, and the Kuomintang's expulsion policies—challenges that forced them into new struggles for survival amid the dilemma of repatriation and permanent resettlement. In contrast, economic liberation—enabled by Communist land redistribution—allowed many Koreans to move from tenant farming to land ownership. This transformation was not merely economic but also symbolic, catalyzing a shift in identity from "Korean diaspora" to "Chinese Koreans" and establishment of a new social status within China.



**Keywords:** liberation, Korean diaspora, repatriation, Chinese Koreans, land reform

# Introduction

On August 9, 1945, over one million Soviet troops swiftly occupied Northeast China, dramatically altering the wartime situation for Koreans living there. The Japanese Kwantung Army collapsed within a week, signaling a decisive shift against Japan. Yet, most Koreans did not anticipate that these developments would soon lead to liberation.

Both Chunwon Yi Kwang-su and Midang So Chong-ju later remarked that liberation had come suddenly. They recalled "believing that Japanese rule would persist for at least several more centuries." As such, although liberation marked a monumental moment in Korean national history, it often felt surreal, arriving abruptly and in an unprepared state. For overseas Koreans in particular, the sense of liberation was especially muted. The unexpected liberation represented a historical turning point for Koreans who had endured 35 years under Japanese imperial colonial rule. It required Koreans to reestablish themselves as independent political and cultural subjects. "*Kwangbok*" (literally, "restoration of light") was not merely the collapse of a colonial regime, but a process of recovering lost sovereignty and identity.

This transformation was accompanied by a series of sweeping social changes. Japanese institutions, including the Government-General of Korea, withdrew, the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere crumbled; and Manchukuo, which had promoted the harmony of five races, was dismantled. Many Koreans who had left their homeland and began seeking ways to return. Those who had remained abroad—whether as impoverished farmers, forced migrants, conscripted laborers, comfort women, or independence activists—started the journey back to Korea. For the first time, returning home became a real possibility. However, this repatriation was fraught with obstacles. For Koreans scattered across the globe, returning home often meant confronting a new form of struggle. Many wanted to return but were unable due to political or logistical constraints. Some, such as Koreans in Sakhalin, could not return due to international political circumstances. Others, such as forcibly conscripted laborers

in Japan, faced tragedies like the Ukishima-maru incident during repatriation. Even those who successfully returned often found themselves destitute, lacking the resources to rebuild their lives.

The present-day Chinese-Korean community consists largely of the descendants of those who remained in China after liberation. For them, the decision to return or stay was never straightforward. At the time, the Korean peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel, with the South under U.S. military occupation and the North under Soviet control. Deep ideological rifts plagued the country, and political turmoil surrounding the creation of a new state was escalating. China, too, was entering a period of extreme instability as civil war broke out between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party. Soviet forces in the Northeast, pursued their own interests and adopted a passive stance despite their agreements with the Kuomintang.

In the end, of the roughly two million Koreans residing in Northeast China at the time of liberation, about half returned to Korea, while the other half chose to remain. This choice was driven more by survival than by political ideology. Those who stayed built their lives on the land they had long cultivated (Yi 2003, 61).

Why, then, did as many as one million Koreans remain in their adopted homes rather than return to the Korean peninsula? If we understand *kwangbok* as "finding one's place," does their decision to stay represent a failure to do so—or could it be seen as an alternative way of realizing that aspiration?

## Sovereignty Recovery and the Struggle for Survival: The Dual Nature of Liberation

Liberation is often imagined as a moment of overwhelming emotion and joy. Indeed, August 15, 1945, marked a pivotal historical turning point—the end of 35 years of Japanese colonial rule and the restoration of the Korean nation's sovereignty and identity.

In the immediate aftermath of liberation, Korea's literary circles responded with a surge of commemorative works. On the Korean peninsula, the Central Cultural Association published the *Haebang kinyŏm shijip* [Liberation commemorative poetry collection] in December 1945, representing the first poetic commemoration of liberation. This was followed by *Hwaetpul* [Torch], published in April 1946 by the Korean Proletarian Literary Alliance, with poets led by Pak Se-yŏng, and *Nalgae* [Wings], published in August by the Gyeongnam branch of the Korean Youth Writers Association. These collections played a crucial role in shaping and preserving the historical significance of liberation across ideological lines.

In March 1947, Korean writers in Northeast China published *T'aep'ung* [Typhoon], the first known poetic work commemorating liberation within Chinese–Korean community. Given the ongoing China civil war at the time, its publication was a relatively swift literary response. *Typhoon* holds particular significance as it marked the formal literary articulation of liberation consciousness among overseas Koreans. Most contributors to the collection had been active in the Manchurian literary scene. With leading figures such as Yom Sang-seop, Pak Palyang, and An Sugil returned to the Korean peninsula after liberation, many others remained in place, continuing their creative endeavors and expressing the emotional resonance of liberation through poetry.

Pak Kwi-song's poem "Ch'ŏnsa" [The Angel] symbolically captures the joy of liberation through the image of children running with *t'aegŭkki* (the Korean national flag). These children, born to Korean immigrants in Manchuria, hold "the first *t'aegŭkki* they've ever grasped in their lives" and cry out "the first manse ("hurrah") they've ever shouted."

These expressions do not merely end with children's actions. During the colonial rule, Koreans were compelled to shout slogans like "Long live His Majesty the Emperor," "Long live the Great Japanese Empire," and "Long live Manchukuo." In contrast, the *manse* of liberation was a voluntary, emotional outpouring—a reclaiming of voice and identity. It symbolized the collective emotional experience of liberation across the Korean nation.

Of course, the context in which these children lived remained precarious. They inhabited "muddy ground" and neighborhoods "among Chinese people," underscoring the instability of their lives. Yet, the emotional power of liberation ignited a renewed hope of returning to their ancestral homeland. This experience differed from that of Koreans on the peninsula—it was not only a moment of national celebration, but also a reaffirmation of ethnic pride and identity within the diaspora.

During this period, Sol In's poem "Hwanhosŏng" [Cheers] presents a diverse array of social classes shouting *manse* in response to liberation. The poem features an elderly man who lost a child in the war, a laboring father, and a returning youth—highlighting how liberation was not merely a political event but a deeply personal, emotional, and national experience. Through these figures, the poet portrays liberation as not just the attainment of independence, but also the recovery of ethnic dignity and consciousness.

Many poems from this period frequently employed national symbols such as the *t'aegŭkki* and *mugunghwa* (Rose of Sharon). Once banned under colonial rule, these symbols were reclaimed through liberation, serving as powerful emblems of restored national identity.

At the same time, some poems portrayed the Soviet forces as cooperators or as positive actors in the liberation process. This portrayal reflects the historical reality that the Soviet army played a direct role in expelling the Japanese forces. Indeed, from August 1945 to May 1946, Soviet forces were stationed in Manchuria under the terms of the Yalta Agreement. During this period, many poets expressed favorable views of the Soviet military—in both northern Korea and among Chinese–Korean communities in Northeast China.

However, these songs of liberation soon gave way to the harsh realities of post-liberation life. Immediately after liberation, the Soviet forces committed acts of violence and looting—initially against Japanese residents but later affecting Koreans and Chinese as well. Korean women, in particular, took various measures to protect themselves, such as cutting their hair, smearing soot on their faces, or sewing red cloth

patches on their left chests to signal allegiance to communist ideals (Chinese Korean Youth Association 1989, 119). Despite these efforts, the Soviet forces often failed to distinguish between Japanese and Koreans, leaving Korean civilians vulnerable to fear and violence.

Before liberation, many Koreans may have held optimistic fantasies that national liberation would usher in the disappearance of oppression and the arrival of a new world. However, the long-awaited liberation brought it with a "tiger" even more fearsome than the tyrannical "wolf" that had once wielded immense power. On the surface, the Soviet forces removed the shackles of being "subjects" and "second-class citizens" under Manchukuo, but in reality, Koreans now found themselves true "others" in a foreign land. This situation exemplifies the stark gap between expectations and the actual experience of liberation, revealing that the joy of national liberation did not translate into an unambiguously positive reality.

Therefore, the liberation experienced by Koreans in Northeast China cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of emotional triumph. Just because poets sang of euphoria does not mean they ignored fear. They shaped the experience of liberation by distilling it into a poetic present. Poetic time has a structure that compresses past and future into the present, distinguishing it from the linear temporality of novels. While novels tend to unfold liberation through a sequence of expectations, frustrations, encounters with reality, poetry captures the emotional core of liberation by rendering it immediate and refined.

In this sense, liberation was an opportunity to reclaim ethnic autonomy and identity. Even though subsequent historical conditions may have eroded that initial emotional high, poets endeavored to preserve in verse the essential meaning of liberation—the community's aspirations and its sense of dignity. Within this poetic language, traces of anxiety and fear, alongside euphoria, would have been expressed through metaphorical forms.

## Land Reform and Survival Strategy: Between Return and Settlement

In May 1946, Soviet forces began their withdrawl from Northeast China. This region, which had been under Japanese control through the puppet regime of "Manchukuo," was a strategic stronghold with developed heavy industry and the large stockpiles of weapons left by the Kwantung Army. As a result, it quickly became a central battlefield of the Chinese civil war between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party. In the midst of this conflict, ethnic Koreans in the region were exposed to direct threats, including looting, violence, and murder, often perpetrated by bandits and certain Chinese factions.

During the Manchukuo period, the Japanese government had purchased land from Han Chinese landlords at low prices and leased it to Koreans, which intensified ethnic tensions. Japan also positioned Koreans in a socially ambiguous status—below Japanese but above Chinese—exacerbating divisions through visible markers such as differently colored ration books. After Japan's defeat, this protective framework collapsed, and long-suppressed resentment toward Koreans erupted into violence. Bandits—comprised of Kuomintang deserters, disbanded soldiers, and criminals, numbering around 200,000—launched systematic attacks on Korean villages.

Historical records document entire Korean villages in mountainous areas being destroyed in these assaults. Systematic violence against Koreans was openly conducted like witch hunts, and Northeast China was thrown into extreme chaos immediately after liberation. Under constant threats, Koreans found it impossible to live in peace, even for a single day.

In this situation, the Kuomintang implemented forced repatriation policies, further undermining Koreans' position. According to the "friendship alliance" between the Soviet Union and the Kuomintang, Soviet forces transferred control of major cities and railway networks in Northeast China to the Kuomintang upon their withdrawal. This placed most urban

areas of former Manchukuo under Kuomintang's influence.

The Kuomintang viewed Koreans as collaborators with the Japanese regime and designated them for repatriation. Article 16 of the "Outline of the Northeast Restoration Plan" explicitly stated: "Koreans who migrated to Northeast China during Japanese occupation shall be ordered to return home, and their property shall be disposed of according to regulations." Consequently, Korean-owned farmland, homes, and other asses—developed during the colonial period—were treated as remnants of Japanese occupation and subject to confiscation and seizure.

Between April and September 1946, Koreans lost up to 70,900 hectares of land in the Northeast region occupied by the Kuomintang (Yun 2012, 188). For many, the loss of their livelihood made it difficult to remain in Northeast China. Though they set out to return to their homeland, even that choice was not easy. Having left with nothing, they returned with nothing. Many had no family or relatives to receive them, and for those who had lived in Manchuria for many years, it had already come to feel like a second home. Faced with these practical and emotional challenges, some Koreans chose instead to flee to areas controlled by the Communists, rather than go back to Korea (Yun 2023, 245).

In contrast to the Kuomintang, the Communist Party was eager to gain Korean support to solidify its dominance in Northeast China. Accordingly, it actively implemented various policies that recognized and respected Korean residents. After taking control of the Yanbian region in 1946, the Communist Party, which took control of the Yanbian region in 1946, conducted large-scale land reform targeting Koreans from July 1946 to April 1948. The Party recognized dual citizenship and provided favorable social positions for Koreans. It also distributed relief grain to poor farmers, supplied seeds and livestock, and enabled the cultivation of wasteland—creating a basis for sustainable farming (Pak 2019, 120).

These policies significantly improved the social and political standing of Koreans. Over 90 percent of Koreans in Northeast China—most of whom were poor or tenant farmers—gained ownership of land for the first time through Communist land reform (Kim 2024, 353). In this situation,

many Koreans who had not yet decided to return to Korea shifted from celebrating liberation to praising Communist land reform and policy benefits.

This transformation in sentiment was reflected in poetry of the time. For example, Kim Rye-sam's poem "Konongsari riryŏnggam ch'umch'wŏttao" [The poor farmer Ri Ryŏng-gam danced] is a work that captures the emotions of Koreans who, for the first time, came to own their own land thanks to Communist land reform. The poem's narrator, having escaped the hardship of tenant farming, expresses a profound sense of liberation, dancing freely on their own land. This joy transcends personal relief, connecting with the broader historical narrative of Koreans' forced migration and colonial subjugation.

Unlike Koreans forcibly conscripted to work for imperial Japan, many Koreans in Northeast China had migrated as family units and established village communities. As such, repatriation was not merely a personal choice but a communal decision. In reality, their former homes in Korea offered no viable prospects, while their long-time settlement area in Northeast China provided housing and farmland. Therefore, for many, staying represented not just survival but a path toward stability.

Under these conditions, the Communist Party's land policies presented a very realistic alternative to Koreans. While politically motivated, they provided Koreans with their first genuine opportunity to become landowners. Accordingly, many Koreans began to support the Communist Party and even to participate in its armed struggles. Park Kun-shik's poem "Uri-ŭi samyŏng" [Our mission] reflects this fighting spirit, emphasizing resistance against the Kuomintang, solidarity with the Communist Party, and a vision of Koreans as subjects bearing their own ethnic destiny.

At the time, approximately five percent of Koreans in Communist-controlled areas joined the Communist Party. This reflected not only a survival strategy but also an active commitment to the political cause. The Communist Party distributed land to Koreans and elevated them to political subjects within the socialist system. Koreans participated in the liberation war to defend the land they had developed

from the Kuomintang and to repay the Communist Party's favor. Many lost their lives in the struggle, and their sacrifices were nationally recognized after liberation.

Ultimately, the Communist Party offered Koreans more than just economic relief; it facilitated their ethnic liberation. This became a foundation for forming a new collective identity and subjectivity beyond mere survival strategy. No longer simply a diaspora, Koreans in Northeast China transformed into a distinct ethnic group, "Chinese Koreans," after liberation. This marked a profound historical shift—from oppression to liberation and from colonial subjects to autonomous citizens.

## Conclusion

For Koreans in Northeast China, the "liberation" of August 15, 1945, held a dual meaning.

First, it marked an ethnic liberation: the recovery of sovereignty from Japanese colonial rule. Koreans living in Northeast China, like those on the Korean peninsula, were released from 35 years of colonial rule, regaining their ethnic sovereignty and identity. Yet, this liberation was not solely an emotional or euphoric moment. It was a complex historical experience in which fear and anxiety coexisted with joy and excitement. While Koreans overcame Japanese oppression, they now had to seek survival within new power structures. Bandit violence, Kuomintang-led repatriation policies, and general political instability meant that liberation was not a simple blessing but a prelude to another struggle.

Second, through the Communist-led land reform, Koreans experienced a form of economic liberation. Transitioning from tenant farmers to landowners, they went beyond merely acquiring the means of production. This transformation offered a chance to break free from the quasi-serfdom they had endured since their time on the Korean peninsula and forge a new identity as independent producers. Communist land reform policies brought unprecedented sense of empowerment and hope, prompting many Koreans to

actively engage in reshaping their social status. Many Koreans voluntarily joined China's liberation war to defend their newly acquired land, accepting considerable sacrifice in the process.

Consequently, Koreans in Northeast China established themselves as new historical subjects through struggle and sacrifice. No longer simply diasporic beings, they forged a distinct identity and social standing as "Chinese Koreans." This was the "new place" they reached after liberation—a transformation both substantial and structural—brought about through the convergence of national liberation and socioeconomic empowerment.

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