Conversations on Korean Liberation and Zainichi Korean Identity: An Interview with Two Zainichi Koreans*

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* This interview was conducted online in two sessions, on March 27 and April 11, 2025, to mark the release of Haebangüi kiŏk: hanbando, chungguk, ilbon-eseo 8.15-rŭl majihan k'oriŏndŭl-ŭi sam [Memories of Liberation: The Lives of Koreans Who Experienced August 15 in Korea, China, and Japan] (2025). The book was authored by members of the Institute of Humanities for Unification at Konkuk University, in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of Korea's liberation.

Lee Hello, and thank you for joining this dialogue. To begin with, let's briefly introduce ourselves. My name is Lee Taejun, and I'm currently a doctoral student in Unification Humanities at Konkuk University. I was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1991 and am now in my mid-thirties. During my undergraduate years, I was involved in activism addressing the issue of Japan's military "comfort women," which inspired me to write my thesis on the lives and activism of surviving victims. My current research focuses on the historical traumas stemming from Korea's colonial period and subsequent division, with particular attention to postcolonial and feminist perspectives. I'd like to invite both of you to introduce yourselves as well.

Kim My name is Kim Rihwa. I study the musical history of Koreans in Japan—commonly referred to as Zainichi Koreans. I am currently conducting research as a special researcher at both Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Doshisha University, and I also teach part-time at several universities. I completed my doctoral dissertation in 2021, titled "Creating Decolonial National Music: The History of Zainichi Korean Musical Practices during the Liberation, Division, and Cold War Period." I attended Korean schools from kindergarten through high school and later graduated from a Japanese music university. During my university years, I took part in student activism led primarily by Zainichi Korean students, through which I grappled with notions of nationhood and critically reflected on the essentialist ideas I had internalized. That experience helped me reconnect with Zainichi Korean history and reexamine questions of identity.

Kim-Lee It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Kim-Lee Iseul. Like Rihwa, I attended Korean schools from kindergarten through high school in Kanagawa prefecture. While studying at a Japanese university, I also joined Zainichi Korean student movements. After graduating, I wanted to give back to the Korean community, so I began working at a law firm that represents plaintiffs in the lawsuits demanding tuition-free high school education for Korean schools in Japan. Currently, I work as a translator and interpreter between Korean and Japanese, and I'm active with the Association of Korean Human Rights

in Japan. I also participate in the Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee.

Lee It's truly a pleasure to speak with both of you. I'm particularly impressed by your involvement in Zainichi Korean student activism during your university years. Could you tell us more about the nature of such activism? Also, just out of curiosity—were you two in a senior-junior relationship within those circles?

Kim-Lee Yes, although we were born in the same year, in Japan school-age cohorts are determined by the April cut-off, so I'm technically junior to Rihwa. The student organization we were involved in has a long and significant history. It was originally formed by Korean students living in Japan during the colonial period. After 1955, it was taken over by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (abbreviated as Chongryon 總聯) and began advocating more actively for the rights of Zainichi Koreans. Key areas of activism include defending our schools and promoting the study of our history and language—through which many of us encountered and engaged with the concept of "nation."

Kim The official name of the organization is the Korean Students' League in Japan (abbreviated as Ryuhaktong 留学同). It's a student-led activist group composed primarily of Korean students attending Japanese universities or vocational schools. Its origins go back to the League of Korean Students in Japan (Chohaktong 朝学同), which was established on September 14, 1945, right after Korea's liberation from colonial rule. It holds the distinction of being the first ethnic organization created by and for Zainichi Koreans in the post-liberation period.

The Category of "Nation"

Lee I see—so both of you developed your ideas about the nation through Ryuhaktong activities. I'm especially impressed by Rihwa's reflection on the essentialist tendencies embedded

in the concept of "nation." In Korea, we rarely use that term in everyday life. Instead, we speak of "citizens," usually in reference to the Republic of Korea. When "nation" does come up, it's often in contexts involving both North and South Korea or special inter-Korean issues. Even then, awareness tends to stop short of including diaspora communities like Zainichi Koreans and Chinese Koreans.

I have to admit, I didn't begin thinking seriously about the concept of nation until my university years, when I was involved in student activism. At the time, when we said "our nation," we were thinking almost exclusively of North and South Korea—and among overseas communities, only Zainichi Koreans came to mind. It wasn't until after graduation, as I continued my studies, that I learned about Koreans displaced to countries like China or Russia during the colonial period, many of whom couldn't return after liberation. Learning about the poverty they experienced in colonial Korea and the discrimination they faced as ethnic minorities abroad challenged my previous assumptions. It pushed me to rethink what I thought I knew about the diaspora—and about the boundaries of nation. I'm curious to hear how both of you understand the boundaries of "nation."

Kim I also got involved in Ryuhaktong and began thinking about "nation" through the people I met there. Some of my friends had graduated from Korean schools, while others had only attended Japanese ones. Up until then, I assumed being part of the nation meant speaking Korean, having Korean names, and knowing Korean songs. Or I loosely connected it to nationality. But talking with friends, I realized that some of them couldn't speak Korean and others didn't have Korean names. Their diverse experiences made me realize my ideas of nation have been too essentialist.

As I began my research, these questions became more pressing. In academia, we often use terms like "national music" or "national culture." Each time, I found myself asking: "What is the nation?" Over time, I came to see it not as something fixed and enduring, but something that changes and is continually reconstructed depending on the context.

Kim-Lee Taejun's story raises the key issue: who do we include within our "nation"? For me, all people living in North and South Korea, Chinese Koreans, and Koreans in America—everyone we call "diaspora"—are part of our nation. They're our compatriots.

History Beginning from Family

Lee Talking with you both, I've come to believe that we can only expand our concept of nation by reflecting on it—both in Korea and in Zainichi Korean society. Without that effort, we risk defining it narrowly—as only North and South Korea—or, worse, losing the concept entirely.

Family stories, in particular, offer powerful insights into history. No one in our family experienced colonial migration, but my grandmother once told me that during the Korean War, she retrieved her father's body after he was killed by the South Korean forces. It was a traumatic memory she had kept hidden from her children—my parents and their siblings—for decades. A few years ago, she finally shared the story with me, her granddaughter. Her experience showed me that the 38th parallel, which divides the peninsula, also runs through individual lives in intimate, painful ways.

Reading your manuscript, I learned how many Koreans left the peninsula during the colonial period and scattered across the globe—and how many couldn't return, even after the liberation. Have either of you heard similar stories of migration within your own families?

Kim-Lee Your grandmother's long silence is something I can relate to. I sometimes asked my family members about our roots, prompting them to share their stories.

My maternal grandmother was born in Gyeongsangnam-do in 1921 and came to Japan at 19 to find work. She settled in the Kansai area. Even while working at a factory, food was scarce, so she would split a single piece of sugar to share with her coworkers. My mother was born in Nara prefecture. She later settled in Kawasaki and spent her childhood there.

My paternal grandmother, from Jeju, was called to Japan by relatives living here. She sold ice cream at Yamashita Park in Yokohama and later worked at a factory where she suffered fatal burns and passed away. My father was only three years old at the time. My grandfather, also from Jeju, followed his older sister's family to Yamaguchi prefecture. He worked various jobs, and I've heard that "the ship he was on was shot at," which makes me suspect he might have been a military auxiliary during the war. Eventually, he settled in Yokohama.

Lee Could we also hear Rihwa's family story?

Kim My grandfather came from Gwangju, Jeollanam-do, to Japan around age 13 to study. He relied on relatives in Kawaguchi, Saitama prefecture, where there was a Korean settlement and a foundry they ran. My grandmother was born in Maizuru, Kyoto. Her parents, both from Gyeongsangbuk-do, had married in Korea before immigrating to Japan—they were first-generation immigrants. Her father was conscripted to work in Kyushu's coal mines shortly after marriage, but barely escaped and reunited with her mother in Kyoto, where they settled. If they hadn't reunited, neither my grandmother nor I would have been born. Later, my grandmother moved with her parents from Kyoto to Hirakata, Osaka. When the air raids intensified, they evacuated to Ina, Nagano prefecture, where they experienced Japan's surrender on August 15.

Because my grandfather was a first-generation Zainichi Korean, he called me third-generation and said my hometown was Gwangju. I accepted that, but as I got older, I realized my grandmother must have had her own parents and her own hometown, but we had never talked about that. When I joined a project collecting oral histories of Zainichi Korean women in Japan, I decided to focus on my grandmother. That gave me the chance to have long, in-depth conversations with her.

Lee While my family avoided speaking of certain histories out of fear, both of you actively sought out your family roots. I'm especially moved by your effort, Rihwa, to go beyond the patrilineal tradition and trace your grandmother's life and experiences. It made me think: if we follow your

grandmother's history, wouldn't that make you a fourth-generation Zainichi Korean, not third-generation? What led both of you to become so invested in family history?

Kim For me, it started with Ryuhaktong student activism. It prompted me to seek out my roots, which naturally led to family stories. I ended up writing about my grandmother's family history three years after graduating.

In Japan, Zainichi Koreans still face colonialist stereotypes and discrimination. In response, our community has tried to claim historical justice by sharing multilayered stories—from personal and family narratives to community-level histories, such as those of ethnic education and activism. For example, Zainichi Koreans suffered tremendous damage in the Tokyo air raids but the Japanese state rarely acknowledges this. Perspective matters in history, and we try to understand it through Zainichi Koreans' experiences.

Kim-Lee For me, it began at Korean school, where we were taught to see ourselves as "Korean people," not Japanese. Our curriculum focused on our heritage on the Korean peninsula. Exploring family history was central to understanding that identity. Now that I think of it, my younger brother didn't go to Korean school. There's a gendered aspect to this—some families believe Zainichi Korean boys should attend Japanese schools to better integrate and earn a living in Japanese society. My parents told me, "We sent only you to Korean school because you loved your Zainichi Korean friends so much."

Divergent Perceptions of March 1st and August 15th

Lee Our discussion on family history and gender hierarchies has been insightful. I also would like us to reflect on the intersections of gender and nation.

Interestingly, as I was preparing for this conversation and arranging our schedules, it was March 1, 2025. When I was a child, we would hang the Taegeukgi—South Korea's

national flag—on our front door or window every March 1st (Independence Movement Day) and August 15th (Liberation Day). I remember feeling solemn and grateful toward those who had fought for Korean independence. Back then, I only knew of figures like Yu Gwan-sun, An Jung-geun, and Kim Gu. As I grew older, I stopped putting up the flag. I've become more critical of nationalism and now believe there are various ways to honor those we're grateful to—ways that don't necessarily involve national symbols. One such alternative has been attending rallies commemorating the March 1st Movement. This year, I briefly visited Gwanghwamun Square.

That day, the square was filled with massive rallies—divided between supporters and opponents of President Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment. The pro-impeachment camp framed March 1st as a day of "independence" and resistance to "humiliating diplomacy," while the opposition accused them of "selling sovereignty to China and North Korea" and called for defending the "free Republic of Korea." That was March 1st, 2025, as I experienced it in Korea. I'm curious: how did you both spend March 1st in Japan or within Zainichi Korean communities?

Kim-Lee I studied abroad in Seoul for a year in 2011. That was the first time I learned that March 1st is not only a public holiday in Korea but also marked by large-scale state and civic commemorations. I had known it was a national holiday through my translation work, but I hadn't realized how significant the day was. In Zainichi Korean communities, the March 1st Movement is recognized as part of our ethnic and historical struggle, but it's not observed as a commemorative holiday like it is in Korea. I have a friend who was born on March 1st, and among us, it's common to say, "You were born on a good day"—but that's about the extent of it.

Lee That makes sense. March 1st isn't a public holiday in Japan. So, for both of you, it would have been a fairly ordinary day. In Korea, by contrast, March 1st is deeply embedded in the national consciousness as a symbol of resistance to Japanese colonial rule. It's seen as a shared historical memory between North and South Korea. The media often highlights what

messages the president delivers to North Korea and Japan on March 1st. From what you've said, it sounds like March 1st doesn't hold much significance in Zainichi Korean society. How about August 15th, which is also a central theme of our book? How is that day perceived within your community?

Kim-Lee August 15th is definitely different. As far as I know, representatives from the group Ryuhaktong used to participate in the Pan-National Rally on that day. But given recent shifts in North Korea's policy toward the South, I'm not sure what the future holds for such events.

Lee Ah yes—the Pan-National Rally! When I was at university, during the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments, inter-Korean relations were largely characterized by confrontation rather than dialogue, making it a period of heightened tension on the Korean peninsula. I recall that, despite the rarity of North, South, and overseas communities coming together in a single space, congratulatory messages from Zainichi Korean organizations were read aloud at August 15th rallies in South Korea. It's been quite some time since I last heard the term "Pan-National Rally." What are your thoughts on this, Rihwa?

Kim Within Zainichi Korean society. August 15th holds far greater significance than March 1st. As the date approaches, Japan television tends to broadcast programs and testimonies related to wartime suffering. However, these broadcasts often lack any serious reflection on Japan's colonial aggression. This absence of accountability has long been a source of deep concerns for many Zainichi Koreans. When we look at the historical reasons why we remain in Japan to this day, August 15th is central. The way Japan commemorates the end of the war—centering narratives of victimhood while ignoring its role as a colonial perpetrator—reflects a historical perspective that excludes Zainichi Koreans. This is one reason August 15th resonates so strongly with us—it symbolizes the continued absence of responsibility and historical reckoning within Japanese society.

August 15th and Encounters with Various Memories

Lee What you just said about Japan emphasizing its victimhood over its responsibilities as a colonial aggressor was also in the manuscript for this book, but hearing it directly from you gives it new immediacy. I've heard that Japanese textbooks often frame the end of the war through narratives of the U.S. atomic bomb damage, which seems to echo the revisionist discourse that obscures Japan's responsibility for colonial rule and war of aggression by emphasizing its own suffering. Even after the war, discrimination against Zainichi Koreans persisted in Japan. A key example is the Japanese government's shutdown of Korean ethnic schools established after liberation to teach the Korean language and culture. I'm curious—how does Zainichi Korean society interpret "August 15th" from your perspective?

Kim I grew up in the Chongryon community, where August 15th is closely associated with the movement for ethnic education rights. After Korea's liberation on August 15, 1945, Korean language schools were established throughout Zainichi Korean society, eventually leading to the creation of full-fledged Korean schools. Ethnic education through these schools provided Zainichi Koreans born and raised in Japan with an experience of becoming members of their ethnic group. So, August 15th became a powerful symbol representing the starting point of ethnic schools and connecting Zainichi Korean children to their ethnic identity.

When I read the manuscript and saw August 15th interpreted in terms of 1948—the founding of the Republic of Korea—it didn't leave a particularly strong impression. For me, August 15, 1948, evokes the deepening of national division and the onset of the political chaos that led to war.

Kim-Lee As we've discussed, Japan's self-image as a defeated nation and victim of war tends to weaken any collective sense of guilt or responsibility for its colonial past. This deeply influences Japan's historical consciousness and stance on human rights. Fortunately, the Korean school I attended

offered a curriculum grounded in anti-colonial critique, which helped me form a critical view of Japan's historical narratives. However, since fewer than 10 percent of Zainichi Koreans attend Korean schools, most don't have access to this perspective or experience.

Kim Still, I believe there is a widely shared sense among Zainichi Koreans that the Korean peninsula is our homeland, and that our very existence in Japan often feels out of place—almost at odds with Japanese society. Through my research, I've come to better understand the historical meaning of August 15th for Zainichi Koreans. After the liberation of 1945, Zainichi Koreans launched community-wide efforts to reclaim the ethnic culture that had been suppressed under colonial rule. Korean language schools began appearing rapidly across Japan for children who had grown up with little or no knowledge of Korean language or culture. There was an intense desire to reconnect with our heritage, and that took shape through communal gatherings—people would sing Korean songs, dance, drink, and weep together. Singing, more than writing poems or stories, was the most immediate and familiar way to express and share ethnic sentiment. We confirmed our connection with each other through the tones and national sentiments that resonate through the songs.

However, pursuing ethnic music was no easy task. Colonial policy had wiped out much of our cultural memory, so we had to start from scratch—on former colonial soil. People who had never touched Korean instruments began to search for what ethnic music is and how to recreate it. In that sense, for Zainichi Koreans, August 15th also marks the beginning of a very practical challenge: the need to create ethnic music before it could even be performed. It started with people coming together—gathering, creating songs and dances, and rebuilding from nothing. That's how our musical and cultural activities began.

Lee Zainichi Koreans' ethnic music activities after liberation that you described are incredibly compelling. What drew you personally to their ethnic music activities?

Kim I studied music at university, but I think the interest and pride I developed in ethnic music began much earlier—through what I learned at Korean school. That experience made me want to explore and document how our music emerged and how it has been passed down. Much like my own search for identity and roots, my interest in ethnic music and culture grew out of a desire to understand where I came from. And one thing became clear to me: there isn't a strict division between South Korean, North Korean, and Zainichi Korean music. They're all "our songs." In Korean, we simply say "our songs." So, our repertoire is naturally diverse. In Zainichi Korean society, songs from North Korea and South Korea—such as "Morning Dew"—are all embraced as "our songs." We choose them depending on the message and purpose of each performance.

Lee I also used to listen to songs from Korea's democratization movement while participating in student protests. These songs, known as *minjung kayo* (people's songs) were once part of my daily listening—almost like pop music. But I think I unconsciously categorized them as something separate from popular music, rather than embracing them as "our songs" as you described. While some *minjung kayo* are now accessible on music platforms, many continue to be passed down orally. Your framing of songs from South Korea, North Korea, and the Zainichi community as "our songs" is striking, and I am especially moved by your explanation that, in the context of Japan's suppression of the Korean language, "our language" becomes "our songs."

Reading this manuscript, I encountered scenes related to liberation that I had never considered before. It expanded my understanding of what liberation means. For instance, learning about the People's Committee elections held in Pyongyang helped me see liberation not simply as the "joy" of escaping Japanese colonial rule, but as a transformative process of "becoming masters of society"—voicing one's opinions and building a new social order. Conversely, as illustrated in Yi Taejun's novel *Haebang jeonhu* (Before and After Liberation), I also thought that liberation could come as "chaos" for some people. Liberation must have come as a

sudden and unfamiliar news to those who lived under Japan's wartime mobilization regime. When they faced the end of one era and the onset of new changes, it would have been accompanied by anxiety and fear.

Moreover, learning that Soviet troops—celebrated as liberators—also committed acts of sexual violence against Korean women made me confront the fact that liberation was not experienced equally by all. Sometimes, what is called "liberation" can resemble yet another form of plunder. This perspective is far removed from the celebratory image I had of August 15th—the joyful cheers filling the streets as Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's surrender. In short, I came to realize that for Koreans, August 15th was a complex, layered moment that cannot be reduced to a simple equation: "August 15th = Liberation = Joy."

Kim-Lee That idea—that liberation wasn't just a time of joy—also resonates with Zainichi Korean history. In Okinawa, there were even cases of Korean families being massacred after August 15th. So, the question, "Was liberation truly joyful for all Zainichi Koreans?" doesn't have a simple answer. Especially since discrimination against Zainichi Koreans persists in Japanese society today, it becomes even harder to frame liberation as unambiguously joyful. We continue to live as foreigners without full legal rights, and Japan's education system does not teach students about the country's colonial responsibilities. If Japan truly recognized the rights of Zainichi Koreans, it would have granted us citizenship, not merely imposed obligations. Instead, Japan has focused on managing us as a population. In that sense, August 15th is merely a passing point in history. Although I now hold South Korean nationality, before that, I was just a symbolic figure—a "Korean" without a recognized place.

At the same time, I've often felt a disconnect with Korea's mainstream narrative of independence movement. Personally, I really loved the Korean drama *Mr. Sunshine*. The depiction of the volunteer army moved me because it mirrored the photos I'd seen in Korean school textbooks. But I felt a sense of dissonance at the final scene when the Taegeukgi (national flag of South Korea) was waving. Of course, the Taegeukgi

was a powerful symbol during the independence movement, but in the context of the drama, it seemed to be presented as a symbol of the current Republic of Korea. Watching a story of resistance against colonialism conclude with the Taegeukgi left me feeling emotionally excluded. As a Zainichi Korean, I couldn't fully share in that narrative of national unity—it seemed to imply a deeper division.

Lee I also watched *Mr. Sunshine* when it aired and, like you, I was deeply moved by its depiction of Korean people's anti-colonial resistance. But I also felt uneasy at the scene with the waving Taegeukgi. For me, that discomfort came from a general rejection of nationalist narratives. But for you, the scene represented something more—a barrier, a narrative of liberation that only South Korea could fully claim. I now better understand your point: the common equation of "August 15th = Liberation" is not only insufficient, but also marks a continuation of colonial legacies and the beginning of national division.

Kim-Lee For us as well, August 15, 1945, marks the day of liberation—just as it does in South Korea, where Taejun lives. But I recently learned that in China, the same historical moment is commemorated on September 3 as the "Victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese." That revelation was striking. Both Zainichi Koreans and Chinese Koreans left the Korean peninsula during the colonial period, yet their post-liberation trajectories diverged significantly. Over time, their paths may have grown increasingly distant.

Kim That reminds me of a seminar I attended during university. I gave a presentation on the nationality and identity of Zainichi Koreans, and a Chinese-Korean researcher asked why some of us choose not to acquire Japanese citizenship. I couldn't answer the question right away. That moment helped me realize how differently "nationality" can be understood depending on one's historical context and country of residence. Although both Zainichi Koreans and Chinese Koreans are part of the diaspora, their realities differ greatly. Recognizing those differences is essential if we are to foster

mutual understanding between the two communities.

Lee I agree. This book has also helped broaden my understanding of "liberation" and "nation." Just as Korean society tends to overlook the history of Zainichi Koreans, Zainichi Korean communities may also find it difficult to fully grasp the history of Chinese Koreans. For example, while Zainichi Koreans have endured discrimination in Japan, Chinese Koreans have lived as second-class citizens—situated ambiguously between perpetrator and victim. And yet, despite these different experiences, both communities remain outside their homeland while still relating to it. That shared condition may offer the possibility for mutual recognition. In that sense, I see Rihwa as encouraging us not to forget the importance of recognizing difference.

I've also come to feel the need to historicize the experiences of Zainichi Koreans beyond the narratives of discrimination and oppression from the Japanese state. Zainichi Koreans have engaged in various forms of negotiation and resistance to build their own culture and carve out lives amid tension with their host society. These stories may serve as valuable reference points for understanding how Chinese-Korean communities have also navigated their lives while maintaining a national identity. Rather than locating the problem in the diaspora itself, I now feel compelled to question why the Korean government continues to neglect those who were forced abroad under colonialism—even 80 years after its end.

Anti-Violence, Historical Awareness as Minorities, and the Japanese Military "Comfort Women" Issue

Lee If we understand liberation as a form of "chaos," rather than simply focusing on the systemic change that followed, we can see how it involved life transitions marked by anxiety and fear. Japanese people who remained on the Korean peninsula after liberation saw their status shift from rulers to potential targets of retaliation. In Manchuria, Koreans—

who had lived as second-class subjects—faced retribution from Chinese people. And even after the war's end, Koreans in Japan continued to experience discrimination. The end of colonialism and war did not necessarily bring peace; rather, it created new forms of violence.

Is it not problematic to frame the end of war simply as "victory" or "defeat," instead of viewing it as the conclusion of armed conflict? The colonial desire to assimilate others or use violence against those perceived as different stem from a logic rooted in uniformity and sameness.

Kim-Lee Zainichi Koreans live as minorities in Japanese society. Because Japanese public education does not adequately teach the history of Zainichi Koreans—despite our presence as part of the society—we are often asked, "Why do you claim rights in this country?" In order to resist such marginalization, many of us study our own history. Through this study, we not only learn about our status as minorities, but also cultivate a sense of pride and affirmation in our identity as Zainichi Koreans.

Colonialism didn't end with liberation, and so I don't believe we can equate August 15th with the complete end of violence or with true liberation. True liberation can only be realized when Japan fully acknowledges responsibility for its colonial rule over the Korean peninsula, offers sincere apologies and reparations to victims, and provides proper historical education. That is why I believe that unless we are all willing to examine social structure, recognize our own positions, and confront injustice with courage, the same forms of violence will persist.

Violence can never be justified. Of course, we cannot equate imperial violence with colonial violence, but resisting violence requires a clear understanding of one's own positionality and power. At Korean school, we were taught about gender issues, which led us to ask whether, even as we suffered from ethnic discrimination, we might also be complicit in gender discrimination, and whether, metaphorically, we were stepping on other minorities while one of our own feet was being stepped on. We came to understand that anyone can be both a victim and a perpetrator of discrimination. The term "discrimination" can even be replaced with "violence."

Without a strong human rights consciousness, violence is inevitable. That's how I came to understand the various forms of violence that persisted after August 15th.

Lee I completely agree with Iseul's point. Being a minority does not exempt one from reproducing discrimination. Zainichi Koreans may be a minority in Japanese society, but within our own communities, gender hierarchies and discrimination—against women and sexual minorities—can still exist. So, continuous self-reflection is essential. It seems your engagement with human rights and gender awareness deepened through your involvement with the Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee of the Association of Korean Human Rights in Japan.

Kim-Lee Yes, a senior from my Ryuhaktong days introduced me to the Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee. I vividly remember the first study session I attended, in 2013, where I learned in depth about the Japanese military sexual slavery system—which is also Taejun's research focus. The "comfort women" issue held particular significance in Zainichi Korean society, especially from the perspectives of gender and colonialism. I joined the committee after experiencing conflicts at home around domestic labor and traditional ancestral rites, particularly after I entered the workforce. As I became more conscious of gender issues, the education I received through the committee was deeply formative and empowering.

Lee I see. I was also involved in university movements to address the "comfort women" issue and studied the lives of survivors. That experience shaped my commitment to feminism, so I was particularly interested and pleased to learn about the feminist work being carried out within Zainichi Korean society through the Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee. I noticed you use two surnames—"Kim" and "Lee." If you don't mind me asking, could you share the meaning behind that?

Kim-Lee Certainly. As I began to study feminism through the committee, I grew uncomfortable with the idea that I had to

use only my father's surname. After changing jobs at the age of thirty, I started using my mother's surname in addition to my father's—not as a legal change, but more like a chosen name. Of course, my mother's surname is also her father's surname, so the act isn't free from contradiction. And the very practice of using surnames is embedded in patriarchal norms.

Still, for me, as an ethnic minority in Japan, surnames carry particular significance. Friends I met at Korean school often used their Korean names while in school, but after graduation or upon entering the workforce, some adopted Japanese names—because being openly Zainichi Korean can hinder employment opportunities. My given name, "Iseul," is a pure Korean word, but for others, unless they retain their Korean surname, their ethnicity may become invisible. So, I use both "Kim" and "Lee" as a way to express my identity. Ultimately, I hope for a world where we can simply live with our chosen names, free from the constraints of surnames altogether.

Kim I began thinking more deeply about the violence Taejun raised, after watching the documentary *Comfort* (2020), which centers on Japanese military sexual slavery survivor Kim Soon-ak. Even after liberation, her life was marked by repeated violence. Although she shared her experiences and joined the movement to resolve the issue, she never publicly spoke about her post-liberation work in red-light districts or her involvement in prostitution near military bases—choices made out of necessity for survival.

As you know, with historical denialism still rampant—claims such as "comfort women went voluntarily to make money"—Kim Soon-ak feared her post-liberation experiences would be used to undermine her testimony. Her life—marked by being unable to return home after enduring sexual exploitation and subsequently compelled to continue engaging in prostitution—shows that war not only inflicts immediate violence but can also deprive individuals of the possibility of living without violence afterward. In this way, it perpetuates cycles of violence, particularly for women.

Lee As a young person in Korea, I came to understand and engage

with the challenges of decolonization and feminism through the lives and activism of the surviving victims of the Japanese military's sexual slavery. Listening to both of you, I sense that Zainichi Korean society is also seriously grappling with these issues—decolonization and feminism—through the lens of the "comfort women" experience. I, too, have watched the documentary film *Comfort*, which portrays Kim Soon-ak's life, several times. I found it to be a powerful and thoughtful depiction of the lived realities of Japanese military "comfort women" survivors, and I was glad to see that it resonated within Zainichi Korean communities as well. Kim Soon-ak's testimony—explaining why she had to move from one brothel to another even after liberation, speaking of her "already ruined body" and her desire to "earn money to go home"—has stayed with me for a long time.

In the process of building a new nation-state after liberation, Korean society sought to purge remnants of Japanese colonial rule and emphasized a discourse of "pure blood." This ideology brought with it expectations of "purity" and "chastity" for women, continuing the "wise mother, good wife" narrative. As a result, the responsibility for wartime sexual violence committed by imperial forces was never properly addressed. In Korea, the concept of "sexual violence" only entered public discourse with the women's movement of the 1980s and was formally recognized in legislation in the 1990s. It was also during the 1990s that survivors of the comfort women system began to publicly share their testimonies. For nearly half a century, their victimization remained a social taboo, making it extremely difficult for them to return home. For those who did, many lived in fear that the truth of their forced mobilization would be discovered.

In a patriarchal society reinforced by a binary gender division of labor, women were burdened with the sole responsibility for domestic work and childbearing. Survivors of severe sexual violence often could not form families, and even those who did were subjected to further violence—whether due to complications with childbirth or the reaction of husbands upon learning of their past. Kim Soon-ak's decision to move between brothels and eventually become

a madam in base towns after liberation may reflect the absence of viable alternatives for survival in that society. The focus, then, should shift from judging Kim Soon-ak's individual choices to a broader critique of the Korean state, which established comfort stations and base towns for foreign military forces—an action not unlike Japan's operation of "comfort stations" during wartime. In this sense, I strongly resonate with Rihwa's point: rather than framing Kim Soon-ak simply as a victim or a perpetrator, we must recognize that the state never taught nonviolence to women mobilized as Japanese military "comfort women."

Kim-Lee In Japan, too, there have been active movements to address and resolve the issue of Japanese military sexual slavery. For the Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee, which I'm part of, serious engagement with this issue really began around the time of the 2015 Korea–Japan Comfort Women Agreement. Personally, I first learned about the issue in history class. I still remember some male students laughing about it, and how angry that made our teacher. Within Zainichi Korean society, there is a strong awareness of Japan's responsibility for the sexual slavery system. However, discussions of this issue from a women's rights perspective appear to remain limited. That said, as the "comfort women" issue itself illustrates how colonialism is inherently patriarchal, and how ethnic and gender discrimination are deeply intertwined. When Japan colonized the Korean peninsula, it reinforced existing patriarchy.

Korea–Japan Relations and the Whirlpool of the New Cold War

Lee Both of you have emphasized the Japanese government's responsibility for its colonial rule. While I share your anger and disappointment toward the Japanese government, I also feel a deep sense of frustration toward the Korean government for failing to adequately respond to that history.

Recently, South Korean president Yoon stated, “We can’t ask them to kneel for something that happened 100 years ago,” effectively giving the perpetrator country an excuse. This statement came from the government of the victimized nation, not the perpetrator, which makes me even more indignant. At times, I find myself more disillusioned with the Korean government than the Japanese government.

Kim Each time a new Korea administration takes office, I notice shifts in the tone of Japanese media. Some governments are welcomed, while others are clearly viewed with suspicion. When Yoon Suk-yeol became president, the media in Japan declared, “Korea is pro-Japanese again.” I always feel uneasy when Japanese media express hope for improved Korea–Japan relations. To me, that hope represents a kind of ideological alignment between Japanese conservatives and their Korean counterparts. When a government of a colonized country appears to align with the Japanese administration that refuses to acknowledge responsibility for its colonial rule, it feels like a continuation of colonialism, not reconciliation.

Lee The Japanese media’s optimistic predictions about Korea–Japan relations rarely materialize. The more the Korean government neglects to address colonial issues and Japan reacts to this passivity, the more public opinion in Korea solidifies around the need to hold Japan accountable. A small minority also resorts to extreme and radical rhetoric, but they represent only a tiny fraction. What Japanese conservative media describe as “Korea–Japan friendship” is fundamentally different from the kind of friendship we envision. Their version is rooted in Cold War-style military alignment—through Korea–U.S.–Japan cooperation—whereas ours is grounded in commitment to human rights and peace. Our vision seeks to overcome the Cold War order by encouraging both Korean and Japanese citizens to confront colonial history honestly and responsibly.

I began thinking this way after I first participated in the Korea–Japan Youth Forum in 2022. Now in its third iteration as of 2024, the forum has become a space where Korean, Japanese, and Zainichi Korean youth explore possibilities of

solidarity, reconciliation, and peace through historical and cultural exchanges. In 2022, as part of the forum, we visited memorial sites in Japan to commemorate the centennial of the Great Kanto Earthquake and the massacre that followed. What surprised me most was that some Japanese citizens had taken it upon themselves to uncover the truth about the massacre—truths that even many Koreans had forgotten. Some had recorded testimonies of Japanese eyewitnesses, while others had searched for remains at presumed burial sites. One individual, who had run a small izakaya near the Arakawa River, even erected a memorial for Korean victims after closing their shop. Through the forum, I came to understand that we, too—even as citizens of the victimized nation—bear a responsibility not to forget. I realized that true historical justice is not achieved by forcing the perpetrator nation to kneel, but through sustained efforts that treat historical wounds as shared heritage.

Kim-Lee I share Taejun's view. Colonialism should not be regarded merely as a political issue—it is fundamentally a matter of human rights. Fortunately, some civil society organizations in Korea are actively addressing the challenges faced by Zainichi Koreans and supporting Korean schools. One such example is the South Korean NGO "Mongdang Pencil: People Working with Korean Schools." Yet, the Korean government still seems hesitant to hold Japan accountable for its colonial past. This hesitancy may explain why tensions have persisted between Zainichi Korean communities and the Korean government. Meanwhile, Japan is witnessing a rise in far-right voices. When I see Japanese citizens dressed in military uniforms visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, I find myself asking: "Are there still progressive forces in Japan?"

Kim Even within Japan's peace and democracy movements, there are many who stop short of acknowledging Japan's responsibility as a perpetrator. They say, "Let's not go to war again," because they recognize that Japanese society also suffered from war—but they often neglect the fact that Japan was the aggressor that invaded and discriminated against other Asian peoples. It's deeply disappointing that

even those advocating for peace do so from a place of self-victimization. This victim mentality cuts across both progressive and conservative circles in Japan. Of course, there are Japanese intellectuals and activists sincerely committed to acknowledging their country's colonial responsibility—but they remain a minority.

Lee Korean society, too, has its own forms of hatred rooted in nationalism. Anti-Japanese sentiment is one example, but under the framework of national division, red-baiting has also evolved into deep-seated anti–North Korean sentiment. Recently, anti-Chinese attitudes have been rising rapidly. The pattern of using external threats to consolidate domestic political support is ongoing—and is intensifying, particularly within the larger context of a new Cold War. What does this look like from the Japanese side?

Kim In Japan, there is undoubtedly a strong "North Korea-phobia." This hatred and fear of North Korea help legitimize discrimination and prejudice against Zainichi Koreans and Korean schools—based solely on their perceived links to North Korea. In fact, discrimination against Korean schools today may be even worse than what I experienced as a student.

Kim-Lee Absolutely. Since the 2000s, as Japan's self-perception as a victim seems to have further enabled the denial of both its colonial responsibility and the ongoing human rights issues faced by Zainichi Koreans. Every time North Korea launches satellites, anti-Zainichi Korean sentiment intensifies in Japanese society. Yet few acknowledge that such launches are often reactions to joint military exercises involving the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

Kim The 1965 normalization of Korea–Japan relations entrenched the Cold War structure in East Asia. At that time, the United States pressured Korea and Japan to sign a treaty to consolidate the capitalist bloc. This effectively downplayed Japan's colonial and wartime responsibilities, framed compensation as economic cooperation, and laid

the groundwork for trilateral military cooperation. It not only cemented the division of the Korean peninsula but also reinforced the regional Cold War structure. While the global Cold War may have ended in the 1990s, it never truly ended in Northeast Asia. Any discussion of today's Cold War atmosphere must account for the U.S.–Japan–Korea military exercises.

Lee The inter-Korean summit in April 2018 and the subsequent Pyongyang Joint Declaration that September included commitments to halt military exercises. Yet even under the Moon Jae-in government, defense spending exceeded 50 trillion won, the THAAD system was deployed, and joint military exercises continued. Under the Yoon Suk-yeol government, the policy of "peace through strength" became even more deeply entrenched. His close alignment with U.S. and Japanese security interests pushed the region further toward a renewed Cold War. Worse still, his administration used external tensions to stifle dissent—labeling critics of authoritarian governance as "anti-state forces." With diplomacy absent and dialogue suspended, military parades returned to Seoul, and Korean democracy entered a period of crisis. As we critique Japanese militarism, we must also reflect on our own.

Kim I agree. The situation in Northeast Asia is worsening. As long as the Korean peninsula remains divided, peace will remain elusive. The armistice is just a fragile pause; war could resume at any time. Joint military exercises between Korea and the U.S. held on this deeply conflicted land only heighten the risk. To truly move beyond the Cold War order in Northeast Asia, we must begin by dismantling the division structure itself.

"Liberation" Again and the World We'll Meet Again

Lee That's a good point. The legacy of national division and the Cold War order continues to exert significant influence on politics in Korea. There were suspicions that the infiltration

of unmanned aircraft into Pyongyang was used as a pretext by the Yoon Suk-yeol government to declare martial law. The division structure itself carries the threat of war—living in a suspended ceasefire means dangerous things can always happen. Those in power have repeatedly exploited and can exploit this divided structure and Cold War framework to consolidate authority. I'm curious—how did the news of the Korean president's martial law declaration and impeachment resonate within Zainichi Korean communities?

Kim I watched the impeachment ruling live. When the verdict came—"dismissed," I felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

Kim-Lee As I followed the unfolding martial law situation, I was reminded of studying the May 18 Gwangju Uprising. I thought, "Yoon Suk-yeol had committed a grave injustice," and felt confident he would be removed. That confidence stemmed largely from my trust in the Korean people. I could feel the strength of citizens rising up against the corrupt government.

Lee Did you hear about the president's declaration of martial law on the night it was announced?

Kim-Lee I found out about it through Twitter. I never imagined I'd live to see martial law declared in Korea. From the moment it was declared until it was rescinded by the National Assembly, I couldn't sleep.

Kim I heard the news the next morning—it was truly shocking.

Lee I quickly informed friends that same night and submitted a report to the media. Since then, I've focused on documenting the political dynamics in the public squares over the 123 days between the martial law declaration and the president's dismissal. Although I became increasingly concerned about the rise of fascism—especially after the far-right riot near the Western District Court in Seoul—I also grew deeply moved by the public's yearning for democracy. Feminists and minority activists in particular expressed a compelling vision of a world free from discrimination and hatred.

Kim-Lee I remember watching National Assembly members—including some elderly lawmakers—heading to the Assembly in response to the emergency. I also came across an article about a middle-aged woman standing alone outside the Assembly that day. I couldn't help but think that her act of protest was informed by past struggles like the May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising. It was so moving to see feminists and young people gather spontaneously, singing K-POP songs, including Girls' Generation's "Into the New World," in the square. That kind of public youth activism is rare in Japan.

Kim I'd also like to note that Girls' Generation's "Into the New World" has become an anthem of protest among Korean youth. People even brought light sticks to the National Assembly protests, adapting elements of K-POP culture as tools of resistance. I remember one citizen interviewed on MBC News saying, "The powerful say candlelight goes out in the wind, so we hold light sticks that don't." That statement was powerful—so was the symbolism of people expressing political beliefs through personal objects. Iseul and I often sing "Into the New World" at karaoke as well.

Lee "Into the New World"—now the de facto theme song of the square—is also a song queer and feminist groups in Korea sing at the end of pride parades. Both of you singing it at karaoke makes it all the more resonant. But beyond its symbolic weight, what stood out to me most was how people in the square were trying to enact, in real time, the very democracy and egalitarian world they envisioned. They even established community agreements at every protest, under the name "Everyone's Promise for Equal Rallies," to address discrimination and hate speech within ourselves. To close our conversation, I'd like to ask you both: In this 80th anniversary year of liberation, what does "liberation" mean to you?

Kim-Lee For me, it was an opportunity to voice the perspective of Zainichi Koreans—especially graduates of Korean schools—regarding August 15th. We shared the belief that colonialism has not truly ended. I'm grateful we could highlight how current issues like gender discrimination are rooted in colonial

legacies. I believe that overcoming the division of the Korean peninsula would lead to true liberation. While individual actions may seem small, listening to one another and working persistently in our own spheres will one day lead us to that liberation.

Kim Liberation, in a literal sense, means dismantling the various forms of violence—particularly systemic and structural—that constrain people's lives. For Zainichi Koreans, true liberation would require Japan's official apology and reparations for its colonial rule and the ongoing discrimination we face, as well as restoration of our dignity. Of course, historical injustices are rarely ever "fully resolved." But I believe that if we gather the lived experiences and commitments of those striving for genuine liberation, we can achieve a form of liberation in the present.

This is the first time I've spoken publicly about "liberation," and I wonder how many chances there will be to do so. I'm deeply grateful for this opportunity. I believe that the meaning of August 15th varies depending on one's location and positionality. I don't mean that some meanings are better than others, but rather that what matters most is how each of us continues to remember and reinterpret August 15th in ways that hold contemporary significance.

Lee Through this conversation with both of you, I was able to reconnect with a sense of affection for my "nation" that I had long tried to ignore. I also found meaning in sharing the pain etched into our history of colonialism and division, as well as a deep gratitude for those who endured those times. For me, feminism is an ongoing practice of asking how to amplify the voices of the marginalized. Those who engaged in feminist work include women, sexual minorities, people with disabilities, migrant workers, and members of marginalized ethnic communities—such as, in your case, our own people living outside the Korean nation-state. Perhaps that's why this conversation felt like a feminist practice in itself. I believe the "nation" we'll meet again in the future will be an egalitarian world, built through the steady, persistent efforts of feminist practice—beyond simply overcoming colonial violence and

national division. Just imagining that future brings me joy. I wish you both good health, and thank you sincerely for being part of this conversation.