

Eightieth Anniversary of Korean Liberation

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Editor-in-Chief

In commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of Korea's liberation, the editorial board of *S/N Korean Humanities* has organized a special feature for the September 2025 issue (Vol. 11, No. 2). This feature brings together contributions that revisit the multiple—and often contested—experiences of liberation, both within Korea and across diasporic communities. By examining these histories in all their diversity, complexity, and ambiguity, the feature seeks to move beyond singular narratives and instead highlight liberation as a multifaceted process shaped by global, regional, and local dynamics. In doing so, *S/N Korean Humanities* reaffirms its commitment to providing a forum for critical scholarship that deepens understanding of the enduring legacies of 1945 for Korean Studies today.

The first article, by Jeon Eunju (Yanbian University), 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.

The second article entitled “Traitors or Patriots? Left–Right

Polarization within the Korean Community in Postwar Japan” by Lydia Doh (University of North Korean Studies) explores the Cold War that soon developed among ethnic Koreans in Japan following liberation. The League of Koreans in Japan (Chae Ilbon Chosŏnin Yŏnmaeng; abbreviated as Choryon 朝連) was officially established on October 15, 1945. In its early days, ideological divisions between left- and right-leaning factions were not yet overt. However, internal struggles for leadership eventually pushed the organization toward alignment with communist forces, leading to its support for the North Korean regime. Although Choryon’s founding congress nominally promoted unity across ideological lines, figures such as Kim Chon-hae—known for his anti-Japanese resistance—found it impossible to reconcile with individuals linked to pro-Japanese collaboration. Within a year of Korea’s liberation, the community of Koreans residents in Japan had become so deeply polarized that even joint commemoration of the March First Independence Movement became unfeasible. This division only deepened during the Cold War, especially after the establishment of separate governments in North and South Korea. Each faction within the community of Korean residents effectively became a conduit for advancing the unification policies of the respective authoritarian regime it supported.

The feature articles are followed by Shin Ki-chul (Geumjeonggul Human Rights and Peace Foundation)’s book review of *Shigan-ŭl kŏtta: modŏn sŏul* [Walking through Time: Modern Seoul], edited by the Institute of the Humanities for Unification at Konkuk University and published in 2024. This book is an attempt to connect Seoul’s urban spaces with significant events in modern and contemporary Korean history. This book is the product of collaborative work by sixteen researchers, each of whom conducted on-site investigations at a minimum of three locations—and in some cases, as many as eleven. Collectively, they explore nearly one hundred sites. Each chapter offers foundational insights that could only come from a deep engagement with primary sources, while also reflecting the distinctive investigative processes of the contributors. The researchers articulate their interpretations with notable candor, even addressing topics that have long remained unspoken.

Park Min Cheol (Konkuk University) provided a review of *Mirae-rül yŏnnŭn yŏksa* [History Opening the Future] published by Hankyoreh Publishing in 2005. Park reexamines “August 15” not as a liberation event limited to the Korean peninsula, but as a historical juncture where the different historical experiences of the three East Asian nations intersect. The contrasting memories of Korea’s “liberation,” Japan’s “defeat,” and China’s “victory” do not allow for a single meaning of “August 15,” stemming from differences in how each country experienced colonialism, war, and the Cold War. Here, this essay analyzes attempts to form common historical consciousness in East Asia, focusing on *Opening the Future: History* (2005), emphasizing that this textbook aimed not at simple settlement of past issues but at joint historical narrative based on universal values of peace, human rights, and democracy. In particular, “August 15” is understood as a historical turning point when imperialism and colonial rule ended while simultaneously marking the beginning of the Cold War and division, arguing that understanding this event in an East Asian context can become a key starting point for future regional reconciliation and peace-building.

Lastly, Lee Tae-jun (Institute of *Humanities for Unification*, Konkuk University) conducted an interview with two ethnic Koreans from Japan (Zainichi Korean) to explore understandings of Korean liberation and the factors that influenced the formation of historical perception and identity among young ethnic Koreans. Born in 1990, Kim Rihwa specializes in research on the musical history of Koreans in Japan as a special researcher at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Doshisha University. Kim-Lee Iseul specializes in Korean-Japanese translation and interpretation and affiliated with the “Association of Korean Human Rights in Japan,” while active in the “Gender Discrimination Elimination Committee.”

Since its establishment in 2009, the IHU has advanced the concept of “*humanities for unification*” as a distinctive framework for understanding unification as a process of communication, reconciliation, and integration encompassing South Korea, North Korea, and the global Korean diaspora. Within this vision, *S/N Korean Humanities*, the IHU’s English-language journal, has assumed a central role in fostering

dialogue between Han'gukhak and Chosŏnhak, thereby contributing to the development of "Integrated Korean Studies."

Although inter-Korean relations remain at an impasse, the IHU maintains that sustained scholarly engagement across these academic traditions represents an essential foundation for cultivating mutual understanding. In pursuit of this mission, *S/N Korean Humanities* will continue to position itself as a forum for rigorous debate and critical reflection, dedicated to advancing a humanities-centered approach to unification and to the field of Korean studies more broadly.

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