

Liberation Narratives in Korean–Japanese Literature

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Abstract

This study reexamines the meaning of “liberation” as experienced by Koreans in Japan after independence from the diasporic perspective and analyzes the historical and cultural significance of self-narratives in Korean–Japanese literature. For Koreans in Japan, liberation marked not only a rupture from colonial rule but also the onset of a condition of being “abandoned people” (*kimin* 棄民), deprived of a nation to which they could belong. Subjected to institutionalized discrimination and assimilationist pressures within Japanese society, as well as to the structural constraints imposed by the division of the Korean peninsula, Koreans in Japan endured a triple fracture of nationality, language, and identity, existing as an “externality that must be internalized.” Focusing on works by Korean–Japanese writers such as Kim Saryang, Kim Sokpom, Lee Hoesung, Kim Sijong, and Yu Miri, this article demonstrates that post-liberation Korean–Japanese literature has articulated collective memory and historical experience beyond individual lives through autobiographical narratives and the “I-novel” (*shishōsetsu* 私小説) form. In particular, it shows that the disjunction between mother tongue and national language, the spatial condition of being *chaeil* 在日 (“in Japan”), and the lack of agency surrounding repatriation and settlement emerged as central dynamics of literary expression. In Korean–Japanese literature, liberation is thus represented not as the fulfillment of a singular ethnic belonging, but as an ongoing process of confronting the trauma of division while seeking possibilities for listening and coexistence. This perspective offers important humanistic insights in the present moment, as the 80th anniversary of liberation invites renewed reflection on complex post-division subjectivities beyond frameworks that define ethnicity and language in singular or essentialist terms.

Keywords: liberation, Koreans in Japan, Korean diaspora, Korean–Japanese literature, Korean–Japanese writers

Introduction

Korea's liberation in 1945 has commonly been understood as an event that conferred upon colonized Koreans the historical imperatives of "freedom" and "return" within the framework of the modern nation-state. For Koreans residing in Japan, however, liberation did not constitute a definitive historical resolution. Rather, it marked the beginning of a new condition in which uncertainty and the impossibility of choice became structurally embedded in everyday life. While liberation brought about the dissolution of colonial legal status, it simultaneously produced a vacuum of national belonging. This vacuum, in turn, functioned as the condition that positioned Koreans in Japan as an "externality that must be internalized" within Japanese society. In this sense, the liberation experience of Koreans in Japan exposes a form of diasporic existence that cannot be adequately subsumed under a linear narrative of "decolonization."

Diaspora should not be understood merely as the outcome of physical movement across borders, but rather as a liminal condition that emerges where the presumed unity of territory, ethnicity, and language underpinning the nation-state system begins to fracture. After liberation, Koreans in Japan were reclassified as foreigners within Japanese society; yet they were not foreigners affiliated with a victorious nation, but members of an ethnic group that had lost its national sovereignty through defeat. Japan governed Koreans in Japan through institutionalized discrimination and assimilationist policies, while the newly divided states of South and North Korea alternately sought to incorporate or exclude them in accordance with their respective ideological frameworks. Through these processes, Koreans in Japan were constituted as subjects located at the intersecting boundaries of nationality, ideology, and language, even as they remained excluded from the protective apparatus of nation-states.

This study revisits these issues through the conceptual lens of "diasporic subject formation after liberation." In particular, it foregrounds the role of literature as a medium that records aspects of the lives of Koreans in Japan that

have remained insufficiently articulated within political and institutional discourses. The representations of liberation found in Korean–Japanese literature offer important theoretical resources for critically rethinking these historical and conceptual premises. By examining works by Kim Saryang, Kim Sokpom, Lee Hoesung, Kim Sijong, Yu Miri, and others, this study explores how Korean–Japanese literature has narrated the experience of liberation, with the aim of expanding the humanistic horizons through which the lives of Koreans in Japan after national division can be understood.

The Liberation of Those Who Cannot Speak of “Home”

With liberation in 1945, Koreans in Japan became a diaspora. According to standard dictionary definitions, “diaspora” refers either to the voluntary or involuntary movement of a specific ethnic group from its homeland to another region, resulting in the formation of a collective, or to that collective itself.

To articulate their identity, members of a diaspora are necessarily positioned in relation to two or more nations: the country in which they reside and the country from which they trace their roots. Although they are all referred to simply as “Korean” in English, Koreans abroad are designated by different appellations in Korean, depending on their place of residence. In Japan they are *chaeil* (“residing in Japan”), in China *chaejung* (“residing in China”), and in Russia *chaerŏ* (“residing in Russia”). These terms are then followed by designations used by the homeland.

When Koreans crossed from the Korean peninsula to Japan, their nationality was recorded as “Chosŏn.” Originally, “Chosŏn” denoted the nationality of residents of the Korean peninsula during the Japanese colonial period. However, with the loss of sovereignty, this nationality was stripped of its legal and political substance. After the establishment of separate governments in North and South Korea in 1945, “Chosŏn” became a signifier without an actual state. The term “*chaeil* Chosŏnin” thus refers to “Chosŏn people in Japan.”

A wide range of terms have been used to describe Koreans in Japan: *chaeil tongp'o* (overseas compatriots in Japan), *chaeil kyop'o* (overseas Koreans in Japan), *chaeil Hanin* (ethnic Koreans in Japan), *chaeil Han'gugin* (South Korean nationals in Japan), *chaeil Chosŏnin* (Chosŏn people in Japan), *chaeil Han'guk-Chosŏnin* (South Korean and Chosŏn people in Japan), *chaeil K'orian* (Koreans in Japan), and *chaeil (zainichi* in Japanese), among others. This terminological confusion stemmed largely from the entanglement of nationality, ideology, and identity, as well as from generational differences shaped by divergent historical experience in Japan.

For overseas Koreans, terminology was not a mere linguistic issue; it was intimately connected to the roots of their lives. As the designation *chaeil* itself indicates, Japan was not the place of origin for Koreans in Japan. It was simply the country in which they resided. The place to which they would someday return, the place they were expected to return, the place they must not forget—this lay elsewhere.

What, then, was the existential reality behind the academically refined term “diaspora”? The inner lives of Koreans in Japan were marked by a desolation that defied expression. In Korean–Japanese literature, “liberation” does not appear as a celebratory climax. For Koreans living in Japan as colonial subjects in an enemy country, liberation was not a decisive rupture that ended colonial life and opened onto a new world. Rather, it functioned as a passage into another form of existence within a hostile environment. Even now, eight years after liberation, Koreans in Japan remain a diaspora—treated as strangers, as an “externality that must be internalized,” yet never fully integrated into the host society. How could language possibly capture what it meant to endure life in enemy territory eighty years ago?

Although some migration was voluntary, the suffering and grief experienced by those who left their homeland during a period when national sovereignty had been extinguished by Japan’s invasion—when even the existence of a nation was denied—must have been beyond articulation. For those in a diaspora, whose existence in the host country was necessarily that of a minority, the power structure of “majority versus minority” was inescapable. In the case of Koreans in Japan,

“Japan thoroughly treated Koreans in Japan as an ‘externality that must be internalized’ through institutionalized discrimination and assimilationist policies such as the ‘theory of the natural extinction of Koreans in Japan’” (Y. Kim 2009, 353–354).

For Koreans in Japan, the signifier *chaeil* signaled, above all, an irreversible misfortune. This marker was not limited to the generation that migrated from colonial Chosŏn to Japan. Rather, *chaeil* became a stigma transmitted across generations: the children of Koreans in Japan—despised within Japanese society—came to internalize a sense of sinfulness, shame, and negative self-worth.

In his Japanese-language novel *Hikari no naka ni* 光の中に [Into the light], which was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize, Kim Saryang (1914–1950) vividly depicts the atmosphere of surveillance and suspicion that surrounded Korean life in Japan:

Thinking back carefully, that child seemed to have been watching me with suspicious eyes for quite some time. Whenever my tongue got tied and I couldn’t speak properly, he would immediately imitate me and laugh excessively. He must have suspected from the beginning that I was from Chosŏn. (Saryang Kim 2021, 23)

One day, I finally became so angry that my face flushed bright red. I had gone down to the classroom and was playing with the children when Haruo deliberately tried to provoke me two or three times. Then, for no apparent reason, he suddenly became angry, pushed a small girl next to him in the chest, and beat her quite cruelly. The girl ran away crying. As he chased after her, he shouted “Chosenjing *jabare*, Chosenjing *jabare*!” *Jabare* is a Korean word meaning “catch,” commonly used by Japanese who had emigrated to Chosŏn. Of course, the girl was not Korean. The words were clearly meant for me. (Saryang Kim 2021, 24)

What did it mean for nationals of colonial Chosŏn to come to live in Japan? In a word, it meant loss. Survival often required concealing one’s identity, yet concealment itself entailed

enduring constant humiliation. Assimilation into Japanese society was enforced in every aspect of daily life, including language. Simply belonging to the ethnic category “Korean” entailed persistent exclusion and discrimination.

During the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan in 1965, the South Korean government pursued a policy of “nationalizing” Koreans in Japan. Through a process known as “national registration,” passports were issued only to those who formally acquired South Korean nationality. This procedure enabled entry into Korea for purposes such as visiting relatives, tending graves, studying abroad, and conducting business. Conversely, those who retained Chosŏn nationality for any reason and refused registration as Han’guk nationals—that is, those who did not accept incorporation into the South Korean state—were denied both the right to travel to their homeland and the right to stable residence in Japan. (Suh 2011, 54–55)

Nevertheless, in a context where identity was imposed from outside, the absence of South Korean nationality was interpreted as signifying affiliation with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Although more than 80 percent of Koreans in Japan affiliated with the League of Koreans in Japan (Chae Ilbon Chosŏnin Yŏnmaeng; abbreviated as Choryon 朝連) originated from regions in South Korea, their designated fatherland became North Korea (Ha 2011, 109). In a situation where state and ethnicity failed to coincide, the disjunction between hometown and fatherland resulted in Koreans in Japan being defined not as “compatriots” but as “enemies.” Unless one actively demonstrated that one was not an enemy, one was presumed to be one. In this way, the division of the Korean peninsula translated directly into the division of Korean society in Japan.

The Self as Self-Narrative: Korean–Japanese Literature

In Korean–Japanese literature, “liberation” refers not only to the historical transition from Japanese colonial rule to the postwar era, but also to the reconstruction of identity amid the new conflicts faced by Koreans in Japan after 1945. For Koreans in Japan, liberation was a moment of joy and hope; at the same time, it was accompanied by confusion and conflict arising from the division of the homeland, persistent problems of identity, and unforeseen tragedies linked to the partition of the Korean peninsula.

Literary works that illuminate the lives of colonial and postcolonial Koreans include Kim Saryang’s *Into the light*, Kim Sokpom’s Korean-language novel *Hwasando* [Volcano island], and works by Lee Hoesung (1935–2025), Lee Yangji (1955–1992), and Yu Miri (1968–). As Korean–Japanese writers, they transformed the problematic consciousness of being *chaeil* into literary expression, though the historical and personal circumstances shaping their work differed significantly.

Kim Saryang was born March 3, 1914, in colonial Chosŏn. He was expelled from Pyongyang Pogo High School in his fifth year for participating in anti-Japanese demonstrations, illegally entered Japan, enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University, and wrote *Into the Light* in Japanese, becoming a candidate for the Akutagawa Prize. He continued to publish works that directly criticized Japanese colonial policy, including *Ch’ŏnma* [Heavenly horse] and *P’uri kipta* [The grass is deep], all written in Japanese.

Kim Sokpom, by contrast, was born in Osaka in 1925 and did not belong to the first generation that migrated from the Korean peninsula to Japan during the colonial period. Whereas Kim Saryang wrote in Japanese to expose discrimination against Koreans to a Japanese readership, Kim Sokpom explored the identity of Koreans in Japan primarily through works written in Korean. His life itself embodied the complex position of Koreans in Japan before and after liberation. Although born in Japan, he regarded Cheju Island as his fundamental homeland and is often classified as part of

the “generation of Koreans who spent their youth in colonial-era Japan.” He consistently sought to leave Japan, yet the geopolitical realities produced by the division of the Korean peninsula made this impossible. After leaving Cheju Island, he was compelled to return once again to Japan, a trajectory that forced him to experience the liberation of Korea while living in Tokyo (Takeda 2016, 111).

Yu Miri represents yet another contrast. Born in Japan and writing in Japanese as her mother tongue, she was born in 1968 in Yokohama, Kanagawa prefecture. She made her literary debut in 1988 with the play *Mizu no naka no tomo e* 水の中の友へ [To my friend in the water]. In 1992, she became the youngest recipient of the Kishida Drama Prize—Japan’s most prestigious award for drama—for *Uo no Matsuri* 魚の祭 [Festival for the fish]. She later won the 116th Akutagawa Prize in 1997 for *Kazoku shinema* 家族シネマ [Family cinema] (Woo 2005, 67).

The poet Kim Sijong crossed to Japan after liberation. Although he did not migrate during the colonial period, his move to Japan occurred as an extension of the postcolonial condition. As a result, his problematic consciousness aligns more closely with that of the first generation who crossed from the Korean peninsula to Japan during colonial rule.

Taken together, these works reveal the complex landscape of liberation as experienced by Koreans in Japan—colonial subjects living on Japanese soil. After liberation, Koreans in Japan sought to move away from the identity of *chaeil* and to be fully recognized as Koreans. In reality, however, they continued to be regarded solely as *chaeil*. The literary worlds constructed by Korean–Japanese writers such as Lee Hoesung and Lee Yangji ultimately accept this reality and arrived at a reflective awareness of how to live within it. For these two writers, dialogue with “multilayered selves” through the form of the I-novel, and the accompanying transformation of self-image, played a crucial role in achieving this awareness (Ayumi 2023, 186).

Korean–Japanese literature raises fundamental questions of language and space. Language is the sole medium of literary expression, yet the condition of being *chaeil* made it impossible for Koreans in Japan to fully accept their mother

tongue as a national language. At the same time, Korean–Japanese literature faced limitations in representing its historical moment in its entirety. Korean–Japanese writers experienced a profound split between mother tongue and national language, and between Korean (the Chosŏn language) and Japanese.

Suh Kyungsik observes that Koreans in Japan—born as a result of colonialism—can exist only within the split between Japanese and Korean, and that this condition is not fully understood either in Japan, where they live, or in Chosŏn, their political place of belonging (Huh 2023, 73).

Previously, I received the Japan Essayist Club Award for a work called *Kodomo no namida* 子どもの涙 [Tears of a boy]. The reason given for the award was my “excellent Japanese expression.” When I received notice of the award, my feelings were complex. That my “expressions in Japanese were excellent” means that Japanese, and a Japanese sensibility grounded in the language, had penetrated my very marrow. In my acceptance speech, I said the following: “Born in Japan, the former colonial metropole, I grew up already deprived of the language that should originally have been my mother tongue—Korean—and with the language of the former metropole as my mother tongue. I think everything in Japanese and express everything in Japanese. What, then, am I but a prisoner confined within the ‘prison of language’ that is Japanese? Confined in that prison, I longed to escape to a broader place, and I have spent my days in anguish, seeking to convey my heart to my compatriots who were once torn apart.” (Suh 2011, 60)

Why does the literary activity of Koreans in Japan—conducted under pressures of assimilation into Japan or affiliation with either North or South Korea—so often culminate in works that reaffirm the identity of being *chaeil*? In *Theories of the Symbol*, Tzvetan Todorov (1995) argues that language is a privileged means of expressing “the spirit of a people,” and emphasizes that the meaning of language and discourse is deeply tied to the historical and communal context in which it is spoken.

Suh describes the dissonance between national language

as a symbol of ethnic identity and the inseparable mother tongue acquired at birth as a “prison of language.” That “language” became both prison and yoke for Koreans in Japan can be attributed to the ease with which their lives were judged through appeals to linguistic purity, as well as to demands for assimilation that were as powerful and oppressive as Japanese discrimination.

Just as the split between mother tongue and national language weighed upon Korean–Japanese writers like a form of punishment or confinement, so too did questions of spatial belonging—whether in Japan or on the Korean peninsula—constitute a source of profound anguish. The poet Kim Sijong describes his place of settlement, Ikaino 猪飼野, as follows:

A neighborhood that exists though absent.
A neighborhood that disappeared
Just as it was.
Streetcars deliberately run at a distance.
A neighborhood where only the crematorium
Quickly settled down.
Everyone knows it,
But because it's not on the map,
It's not Japan.
And because it's not Japan,
It doesn't matter if it disappears.
And since it doesn't matter,
One feels at ease.
(Sijong Kim [1975] 2013)

Ikaino is the largest Korean residential district in Japan, located in Ikuno Ward, Osaka. It was formed when colonial Koreans were forcibly mobilized for flood-control work on the Hirano River in the early 1920s. Ikaino was removed from administrative maps on February 1, 1973. Although erased cartographically, it remains etched in memory as a symbol of Korean–Japanese village. From the inaugural issue of *Kikan sanzenri* 季刊三千里 [Quarterly Sanzenri] in February 1975 until May 1977, Kim Sijong serialized *Chōhen shi Ikaino shishū* 長篇詩 猪飼野詩集 [Long poem: Ikaino poetry collection] in ten installments, using poetry to articulate the foundational

meaning of Ikaino in life in Japan. Ikaino—where those born on the Korean peninsula migrated and remained—was absent from maps and therefore “not Japan,” a place that could disappear without consequence, a place that existed and yet did not exist (G. Kim 2023, 101–102).

Even after liberation, Koreans in Japan were uncertain whether to return to their homeland. The northern part of the peninsula, where some had been born, and the southern part, where others had grown up, were divided by an insurmountable barrier. It was only through Japan, where they resided, that they could cross the 38th parallel dividing the Korean peninsula. When *Chōhen shishū niigata* 長篇詩集 新潟 [Long poem collection: Niigata] was translated and published in Korea, Kim Sijong wrote the following in “The Poet’s Words”:

If the dividing line of the 38th parallel that tears apart North and South Chosŏn is extended eastward, it passes through the northern part of Niigata City in Japan. Above all, there was the idea of crossing in Japan the 38th parallel that could not be crossed in the homeland. (G. Kim 2023, 98)

Although the boundary dividing the Korean peninsula was later renamed from the “38th parallel” to the “armistice line,” it has remained intact for nearly eighty years after liberation. Any imagination of crossing or traversing the peninsula continues to be prohibited. Korean–Japanese literature powerfully reveals how this enduring division has generated further fractures within Korean–Japanese society itself.

Even on barren ground, human beings create. Rather than merely coexisting with nature, people produce material and spiritual works through deliberate action—this is culture. Unprotected by any state and cut off from their original homeland, Koreans in Japan nevertheless took root in desolate terrain. For them, literature became a means of affirming identity, preserving lived experience, and writing history itself. Liberation, in this context, did not signify alignment with one political side or another; rather, it entailed confronting the trauma of division through a posture of listening, reflection, and endurance.

As Ernest Renan (2002) observed, people assign political significance to language because they regard it as a marker of ethnicity. He also cautioned that becoming captive to narrow conceptions of language risks confining oneself within a limited culture equated with ethnicity itself. As we approach the 80th anniversary of liberation in 2025, we are compelled to reflect on whether we continue to impose ethnicity upon ourselves and to enclose our lives within a circumscribed culture presumed to be ethnic in nature.

Conclusion

This article reexamined the experience of liberation among Koreans in Japan from the perspective of diasporic subject formation and analyzed the significance of self-narratives articulated within Korean–Japanese literature. For Koreans in Japan, liberation marked a rupture from colonial rule, but it was simultaneously the moment in which an “impossibility of choice” became structurally entrenched amid the absence of national belonging and the emergence of the division system. Institutionalized discrimination and pressures toward assimilation in Japanese society, together with the exclusive nation-state order that solidified after the division of the Korean peninsula, shaped Koreans in Japan as liminal subjects unable to fully belong anywhere. Under these conditions, their lives remained in a state of continual deferral even after liberation.

The Korean–Japanese literature examined in this article constitutes an expansive field that meticulously records these conditions of life. In works by Kim Saryang, Kim Sokpom, Lee Hoesung, Kim Sijong, Yu Miri, and others, liberation is depicted not as a singular historical achievement but as an everyday reality in which division, statelessness, and linguistic fragmentation overlap. In particular, autobiographical narratives and I-novel forms function beyond the realm of personal confession, serving instead as modes of witnessing the structures of diasporic life that states and institutions failed to recognize. In Korean–Japanese literature, “individual

life” was inseparable from collective history, and literature became the sole linguistic space capable of recording that inevitability.

Moreover, this article illuminated the limitations of modern ethnic nationalism through the language problem foregrounded in Korean–Japanese literature. For Koreans in Japan, the division between mother tongue and national language was not merely a matter of linguistic choice but a political condition that shaped identity and belonging. Writing in Japanese risked being read as evidence of assimilation, while returning to Korean exposed a disjunction from the language of everyday life. By navigating this tension, Korean–Japanese literature challenged assumptions of linguistic purity and ethnic coherence, demonstrating—through boundary-crossing linguistic practices—the possibility of complex, multifaceted forms of subjectivity.

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