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Recording, Commemorating, and Remembering 1945: *China's Official Narrative and the Excluded Memories of Koreans in Manchuria*

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Abstract

This article critically examines the limitations of officially sanctioned histories and state-curated commemorative dates by foregrounding the lived experiences and memories of Koreans residing in Manchuria (*chaeman* Chosŏnin) surrounding Japan's defeat in August 1945. Commemorative dates marking Imperial Japan's defeat currently differ among the Korean peninsula, the People's Republic of China, and Taiwan. These divergences reflect each nation-state's construction of selective "histories" through processes of selective memorialization, undertaken to establish political legitimacy while forming "liberated" nation-states amid the emergence of the Cold War order following the collapse of the Japanese Empire. For Koreans in Yanji and other regions of Manchuria, liberation is remembered not as an event occurring on August 15, but as unfolding several days later with the entry of the Soviet Army and the actual surrender of the Kwantung Army. Yet the empire's defeat did not immediately bring peaceful liberation. In the ensuing turmoil of the Chinese Civil War, Koreans in Manchuria were exposed to renewed violence, shaped not only by ideological confrontation but also by accumulated interethnic tensions rooted in the colonial period. The enduring image of Koreans as "second-class citizens" or *erguizi* 二鬼子 (collaborators or lackeys) became a catalyst for ethnic conflict with Han Chinese communities and for acts of retributive violence after liberation, leaving deep and unresolved traumatic memories among Koreans in Manchuria. Accordingly, this article explores the contemporary meaning of "liberation" in relation to the healing of individual traumatic memories that have been excluded from official state narratives.

Keywords: Koreans in Manchuria (*chaeman* Chosŏnin), 1945, August 15, liberation, historical trauma

Introduction: Certain Memories, the Day of "Liberation"

> It was dawn on August 18, 1945. Knock, knock, knock. Along with the urgent knocking, we heard the joyful voice of a woman from the house across the street shouting, "Turn on the lights! The lights! The Japanese have been defeated. Liberation has come!" It was truly joyous news. Father immediately lit the oil lamp and the room was suddenly filled with light. Although Imperial Japan had already surrendered unconditionally, people in this area were unaware of it and continued to live under emergency conditions, strictly observing blackout regulations. With renewed spirits, we quickened our pace. As we entered downtown Yenchi, faces bloomed with smiles never seen before, and everyone openly displayed the joy of welcoming liberation. (Editorial Committee for the *Historical Footsteps of the Chinese Korean Ethnic Group Series* 1992, 4)

Yenchi, located across the Tumen River, had been under the rule of Manchukuo—a mere puppet state of the Japanese Empire—since its proclamation in 1932. Why, then, did the Koreans living there hear the news that "Japan had been defeated" and take to the streets on August 18 rather than August 15?

August 18, 1945, was the day after Emperor Puyi of Manchukuo read his abdication edict, announcing the dissolution of the state. It was also the day following Kwantung Army Commander Yamada Otozo's order to all units to cease resistance against the Soviet Union and disarm. As a result, Han Taek-su, a Korean resident of Yenchi, learned of liberation—of Japan having truly "been defeated"—only several days after August 15. Stepping into the streets with a heart full of joy, he encountered the Soviet army that had "liberated" them from Japanese imperialism.

> When we reached the area in front of what is now the Second Department Store, a Soviet tank came speeding by, kicking up clouds of dust. Without exception, everyone on

> the road raised both hands high and shouted at the top of their lungs, "Long live the Soviet Army!" My elder brother and I pushed our way through the crowd and shouted "Long live!" as well. . . . The moving tank stopped in front of us, and a Soviet Red Army soldier dismounted from the tank and shook hands with each of the people gathered, saying something we could not understand. He then drew the Taiwanese flag, the Taegeukgi flag, and the Japanese flag on the ground and gestured for me to point to one. I remembered seeing the Taegeukgi flag hidden in our home when I lived in Korea as a child, and with my heart pounding, I pointed to it. The soldier was delighted and said, "Khorosho! Koreiskii" [Good! Korean!], giving us a thumbs-up in encouragement. The crowd once again erupted in cheers, "Long live the Soviet Union!" and "Long live Korean independence!" (Editorial Committee for the *Historical Footsteps of the Chinese Korean Ethnic Group Series* 1992, 4)

At 0:00 hours on August 9, the Soviet Union launched military operations against Japan in accordance with agreements reached with the United States and Britain at the Yalta Conference. From that moment, fighting between Soviet and Japanese forces broke out across Manchuria and northern Korea. On August 15, the Japanese emperor announced unconditional acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, thereby confirming Japan's surrender. However, ceasefire orders were not immediately transmitted to Japanese forces engaged with the Allied powers in various locations, and the Kwantung Army fighting Soviet forces in several areas. Even after orders to cease combat were issued on August 17, resistance by the Kwantung Army persisted. Fighting gradually subsided beginning on August 19, following negotiations over surrender procedures, locations, timing, armistice arrangements, and disarmament (Yoon 2023, 193–194).

In Manchuria, communication networks had been severely damaged since 1944 due to U.S. air raids and other factors, and many command headquarters had lost operational capacity. As a result, numerous Kwantung Army units received armistice-related orders only after significant delays. Ultimately, gunfire did not fully cease across

Manchuria until the end of August. In this context, Yenchi was one of the places where confirmation of Japan's and Manchukuo's defeat arrived relatively early, even within the vast territory of Manchuria (Yoon 2012, 168; 2023, 176–177).

Another Korean resident, Choe Heon-sun from Helong in Jilin province, similarly recalls the moment of "restoration" (*kwangbok*) in conjunction with the arrival of Soviet forces:

> The Japanese forcibly conscripted many people for labor. My husband was also taken away to work at the Tongsŏng airfield. At that time, my mother-in-law was ill, so my husband said he could not go, but they told him he had no choice. . . . When we reached the Chaoyang Stream estuary, people were standing shoulder to shoulder on both sides of the road, saying that the Soviet army was coming. The Soviet troops marched down the middle. When we arrived in front of the police station, the policemen had laid all their guns and swords on the ground and stood there in silence. This was how we welcomed liberation. (Chinese Korean Youth Association 1992, 22)

Manchukuo functioned as a logistical base for the Japanese Empire's "Greater East Asia War," and its residents lived under constant wartime controls. Blackout regulations prohibited the use of lights at night in preparation for U.S. air raids, while during the day, people were forcibly mobilized for various forms of labor to support the war effort.

For these residents, Japan's defeat arrived simultaneously with the entry of Soviet forces that had overcome the Kwantung Army. Although the timing of liberation varied by locality, those who experienced the joy of Japan's defeat commonly remember it as "the day when Korea achieved independence and welcomed liberation from Japan through the Soviet entry into the war." After seizing control of Manchuria as a "liberation army," Soviet forces withdrew in May 1946, after "returning" the region to the Republic of China.

1945 Confined within Memorial Days: The State's Selective Memorialization

> On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, respectively. On August 8, the Soviet government declared war on Japan. The following day, the Soviet Red Army advanced into northeastern China and attacked the Japanese Kwantung Army. On August 9, Mao Zedong issued a statement entitled "The Last Round with the Japanese Invaders," calling on all anti-Japanese forces among the Chinese people to join a nationwide counteroffensive, which ultimately crushed the Japanese invaders. On August 15, 1945, the Japanese emperor had no choice but to announce Japan's unconditional surrender. On September 2, the Japanese government officially signed the instrument of surrender. China's War of Resistance against Japan endured fourteen years of hardship and countless twists and turns, culminating in final victory through eight years of bloody nationwide struggle. Taiwan also returned to the embrace of the motherland. The global anti-fascist war thus ended in victory. (Zhang and Xu 2019, 108–109)

This is how Japan's defeat is summarized in contemporary Chinese middle school history textbooks. Compared with the sequence of events familiar in Korea, there are no major discrepancies, aside from China-specific domestic contexts. However, unlike Korea—which experienced Japanese colonial rule and commemorates August 15, the day the emperor broadcast Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, as Liberation Day (Kwangbokchŏl), symbolizing "national restoration"—China does not commemorate August 15 as a distinct memorial day. On the mainland, September 3 is designated as the "Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression," yet it is not observed as a public holiday, unlike in Korea. In Taiwan, by contrast, October 25 was designated as "Taiwan Retrocession Memorial Day" (Taiwan Guangfu Jinianri) and observed as

a national holiday; however, from 2001 onward, liberation-related memorial days were abolished entirely. Why did these differences emerge?

In April 1946, shortly after the end of the War of Resistance against Japan, the Kuomintang (KMT) government designated September 3—the day following the formal signing of the Japanese instrument of surrender—as the "Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression." After winning the civil war, however, the People's Republic of China rescinded this designation in December 1949 and instead issued regulations establishing August 15 as Victory Day. This decision appears to have reflected the widespread perception of August 15 as the true day of victory, rather than the Kuomintang's criterion of defining victory by the completion of the formal surrender procedures to the Allies. Yet in August 1951, the Administrative Council of the Central People's Government once again changed Victory Day to September 3. This designation was retained when the State Council revised national memorial days and public holidays in 1999 and remains in effect today (Sin 2006, 305–306).

Taiwan's original designation of October 25 as "Retrocession Memorial Day" stemmed from the fact that Taiwan and the Penghu Islands had been formally ceded to Japan under the Treaty of Shimonoseki following the Qing dynasty's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895. Thereafter, the Japanese Government-General of Taiwan was established, and following Japan's defeat in 1945, governing authority over Taiwan passed to the Allied Powers, as it did on the Korean peninsula. A key difference, however, lay in how the Allied Powers interpreted sovereignty. In the case of Korea, they regarded sovereignty, territory, and citizenship as having been left unresolved following the 1910 Korea–Japan Annexation and did not recognize any government as possessing legitimate governing authority. Consequently, after liberation, the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel and placed under occupation by the U.S. Military Government in the South and the Soviet Military Administration in the North.

By contrast, the Republic of China (ROC), as a member of the Allied Powers, was counted among the victorious nations.

This status enabled the Chinese government to immediately exercise governing authority in Taiwan. Accordingly, on October 24, 1945, ROC Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek dispatched Chen Yi, in his capacity as Chief Executive of Taiwan Province, to preside over the surrender ceremony of the Japanese Governor-General of Taiwan. The phrase commonly found in Chinese history textbooks—that Taiwan, after more than fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, "returned to the embrace of the motherland"—must be understood within this historical context.

The fundamental problem, however, was that after the end of the War of Resistance against Japan, the promise to "build a peaceful new China" was broken, and a new war erupted to determine who would become the rightful master of postwar China. Once Japan's defeat was assured, negotiations were held in Chongqing for forty-three days at Chiang Kai-shek's request, involving major Communist Party figures such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. These talks culminated on October 10 in the signing of the "Double Ten Agreement," which pledged to avoid civil war and to build "an independent, free, and prosperous new China," declaring that "there should be no more war." This reflected the fervent hopes of a population exhausted by years of conflict.

Continuing along this trajectory, the Political Consultative Conference convened in Chongqing on January 10, 1946, bringing together representatives not only from the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, but also from the Democratic League, the Youth Party, and other groups. The conference adopted the "Program for Peaceful National Reconstruction." Nevertheless, the Kuomintang later rejected the agreement at an internal plenary session, and in June of that year, the so-called Chinese Civil War erupted when Kuomintang forces launched sieges against under Communist-controlled "liberated areas."

Although the Kuomintang initially enjoyed overwhelming military superiority, it rapidly lost popular support as its wartime economic policies failed. The regime violently suppressed demonstrations opposing civil war and demanding famine relief, as well as labor strikes calling for wage increases. Amid soaring inflation and food shortages,

many officials and intellectuals grew disillusioned with the Kuomintang's continuation of authoritarian constitutional rule and its insistence on war, and increasingly threw their support behind the Communist side. In some cases, government-affiliated military units defected even before hostilities commenced. Ultimately, the civil war ended in Kuomintang defeat. On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was proclaimed on the mainland. Under the banner of anticommunism, the ROC government retreated to Taiwan and drew a sharp line of separation from the mainland, asserting that it alone preserved the legitimate lineage of the Republic of China founded in 1912 through the Xinhai Revolution.

What is puzzling, however, is that Chiang Kai-shek, as head of the ROC government and a member of the Allied Powers, chose October 25—the day Taiwan Island was "restored"—as the primary commemorative day for victory in the War of Resistance against Japan. In effect, while the new Communist government on the mainland sought to assert itself as "the legitimate heir of China" by shifting Victory Day from August 15 to September 3, the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan selected October 25 in an effort to manage and contain internal tensions on the island.

Taiwan's population consisted of indigenous peoples and Han Chinese known as *benxingren* 本省人 (literally, "people of this province"), whose ancestors had migrated from the mainland during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Following the conclusion of the civil war, a comparatively small number of Han Chinese known as *waixingren* 外省人 (literally, "people from outside the province") relocated to Taiwan, established the ROC government there, and came to dominate political power as well as the upper strata of society. From the perspective of long-term island residents, this development represented a dramatic reversal of host and guest.

Following "restoration," the Kuomintang's failed economic policies triggered runaway inflation in Taiwan, mirroring conditions on the mainland. At the same time, discriminatory and oppressive governance toward *benxingren* and indigenous peoples persisted. It was therefore unsurprising that resentment toward *waixingren* intensified among the

majority of island residents. These tensions culminated in the February 28 Incident of 1947, a large-scale confrontation between civilians and government authorities (Zhu 2006, 291–292). Occurring even before the ROC government had fully relocated to Taiwan, the incident was "resolved" through violent state suppression and thereafter remained a central issue affecting both social integration on the island and the stability of Kuomintang rule.

The Kuomintang appears to have emphasized October 25 as one strategy for suturing these fractures. With one hand, it wielded the banner of anticommunism to forge a unified national identity in Taiwan; with the other, it attempted to construct a narrative of "our Taiwan" liberated from Japanese colonial oppression. Yet this coerced reconciliation, enforced through state violence, was ultimately undone through the process of democratization.

Taiwan's "Retrocession Day" was abolished in 2001 following the inauguration of President Chen Shui-bian and the Democratic Progressive Party. At present, Taiwan has eliminated all memorial days—such as Retrocession Day and "Chiang Kai-shek's Birthday"—that were established during the Kuomintang era. Only the February 28 Peace Memorial Day and the October 10 National Day remain as political memorial holidays (Zhu 2006, 296).

State-designated memorial days, much like school textbooks, function as mechanisms through which the state mobilizes shared historical experiences to inscribe selectively curated "memories" from an official perspective. Just as the Korean peninsula was divided into two nation-states through Cold War confrontation, China was similarly split into two political spaces—the mainland and Taiwan—each governed by a competing regime. These governments sought to assert their legitimacy as the rightful representative of the "nation."

As a result, the memories and aspirations of countless people who endured prolonged imperialist invasion and domination, and who believed they had brought that oppression to an end through war against Japan, were redistributed and reframed in accordance with the respective positions of competing nation-states. Today, we have grown accustomed to viewing both ourselves and others through the

constraining lenses of "August 15" or the symbolic abstraction of "Victory in the War of Resistance against Japan."'

China's 1945 within the Official Narrative of "The Termination of the War of Resistance against Japan"

When the Japanese Emperor announced Japan's intention to surrender, the vast Chinese landmass—despite containing regions occupied by Japanese forces and areas governed by collaborationist regimes—had not been completely stripped of governing authority. This situation differed markedly from that of the Korean peninsula, where the entirety of the territory remained under Japanese colonial rule.

Although Soviet forces were deployed to the puppet state of Manchukuo to terminate hostilities there, in regions outside the three northeastern provinces provinces—Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, which together constituted Manchukuo—Chinese forces encountered the war's end while still engaged in combat with Japanese troops. At the time of Japan's surrender, the government of the Republic of China was based in Chongqing. On September 9, 1945, He Yingqin, serving as the Allied representative and commander-in-chief of the Chinese Army, formally accepted Japan's surrender from Kobayashi Asaburō in Nanjing (Zhang and Xu 2019, 208). China was thus a victorious belligerent state that, as a member of the Allied Powers, had defeated Japan.

As a result, China's historical record of the period surrounding Japan's defeat both resembles and diverges from the historical narratives familiar to Koreans. Whereas Korean high school *Korean History* textbooks frame this period within the overarching thematic sequence of "V. Efforts toward Liberation – VI. Development of the Republic of Korea," structured around the idea of "August 15 Liberation and Efforts to Establish a Unified Government – Establishment of the Republic of Korea," China addresses this period within the framework of "The Chinese Nation's War of Resistance

against Japan and the People's War of Liberation." In this formulation, the War of Resistance against Japan refers to the struggle against Japanese imperialism, while the People's War of Liberation denotes the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party that followed the end of World War II.

Related content appears in the middle school (eighth-grade) history textbook *Shijie lishi, shang* [Chinese history, part I] (2017 edition) and the high school history textbook *Zhongwai lishi gangyao, shang* [Essentials of Chinese and world history, part I] (2019 edition), both of which are widely used in China. Although these textbooks differ in their specific organizational structures and narrative emphases, their overall historical progression is broadly similar.

In these textbooks, China's War of Resistance against Japan is described as beginning on September 18, 1931, with the Manchurian Incident instigated by Japan. The subsequent full-scale conflict is understood to have unfolded following the July 7 Incident triggered at the Marco Polo Bridge (Lugouqiao 盧溝橋) in Beijing on July 7, 1937, which marked the start of the eight-year "nationwide War of Resistance against Japan."

The character of the Sino-Japanese War shifted in 1941, when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, prompted the United States to enter the war on the Allied side, followed by China's formal inclusion among the Allied Powers. China became a theater within the "Asia-Pacific Theater" of World War II, and the war's conclusion was achieved through joint operations of the Allied Armies. Within this context, contemporary Chinese history textbooks summarize the significance of the War of Resistance against Japan as follows:

> The Chinese people's War of Resistance against Japan represents the national liberation struggle in which the Chinese people achieved their first complete victory against foreign invasion in the modern era. It promoted the awakening of the Chinese nation and laid an important foundation for the Chinese Communist Party to lead the Chinese people in achieving complete national independence and the people's liberation. China's battlefield constituted the major eastern theater of the global anti-

> fascist war, contributing greatly to the victory of the global anti-fascist war and the maintenance of world peace. Accordingly, China's international standing was elevated. (Qi 2024b, 109)

The textbooks emphasize that China was one of the principal theaters of World War II in which battles against global fascist forces were fought, thereby underscoring the world-historical significance of China's War of Resistance against Japan. This perspective is also reflected in world history textbooks. The middle school (ninth-grade) textbook *Shijie lishi, xia* [World history, part II] (2018 edition) addresses this period in "Unit 4: The Great Depression and World War II."

In this account, World War II is described as having begun "at dawn on September 1, 1939, when German forces launched a surprise attack on Poland," followed by declarations of war by Britain and France. The conflict that originated in Europe is depicted as gradually expanding across multiple fronts and theaters, driven by the "indiscriminate aggression by fascist states" and countered by "the alliance of global anti-fascist nations." The Joint Declaration by Allied Nations—officially titled the "Declaration by United Nations"—issued in Washington in January 1942 by representatives of twenty-six countries, including the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China, is presented as marking "the official formation of the global anti-fascist alliance." Following this declaration, the textbook explains, "nations mutually supported and cooperated toward common objectives, gradually transforming the war situation."

Within this historical narrative, China's War of Resistance against Japan is positioned simultaneously as a "national liberation struggle" and as "the major eastern theater of the global anti-fascist war." Accordingly, the contributions of the Chinese people to victory are evaluated as contributions to world peace. This interpretation is closely tied to narratives that emphasize the formation of the "Anti-Japanese National United Front" and highlight the Chinese Communist Party's pivotal role in leading the resistance. The overarching narrative in Chinese history textbooks—which stress both China's elevated status within the anti-Japanese struggle and

the Communist Party's leadership—reflects the contemporary reality of a divided China, separated into the mainland and Taiwan.

To properly understand these characteristics, however, it is necessary to examine China's historical context, which differs fundamentally from that of the Korean peninsula. The Qing dynasty, weakened by successive unequal treaties imposed by imperialist powers following its defeat in the Opium War, collapsed after the outbreak of the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 and the establishment of the Republic of China the following year. Yet the revolutionary forces that founded the Republic proved too weak to exert effective control over the country as a whole. As a result, regional warlords—including Yuan Shikai—seized power in their respective territories, and the vast Chinese landmass came to be governed in a highly fragmented manner.

In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party was founded, and in 1924 it entered into the First United Front with the Kuomintang. Together, they launched the "National Revolutionary Movement" aimed at overthrowing imperialist influence and eliminating warlord rule. Building on this momentum, the Kuomintang and Communist Party established the National Government in Guangzhou and conducted the Northern Expedition against warlords in north.

After Sun Yat-sen's death, however, Chiang Kai-shek, who commanded the Northern Expedition, carried out what was later characterized as a "counterrevolutionary coup" in 1927, dissolving the United Front and establishing the Nanjing National Government. From this point onward, the Communist Party pursued the creation of independent base areas and, in 1931, proclaimed the "Provisional Government of the Chinese Soviet Republic." That same year saw the Manchurian Incident, once again placing different areas of the Chinese mainland under separate regimes.

The Communist Party proved unable to withstand the repeated "encirclement and suppression" campaigns launched by Chiang Kai-shek's National Government against its base areas. As a result, it abandoned its base in Jiangxi province and undertook the Long March from 1934 to 1936. At the conclusion of the Long March, the Red Army established

itself in Yan'an, Shaanxi province. At that time in this region were Zhang Xueliang—who, after retreating from Manchuria following the Manchurian Incident, served as commander of the Northeastern Army under the National Government—and Yang Hucheng, commander of the Northwestern Army.

Despite the establishment of Manchukuo, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek continued to adhere to the policy of "first eliminate domestic enemies, then resist foreign invasion," prioritizing the suppression of the Red Army over resistance against Japan. From Zhang Xueliang's perspective—having lost his father to Japanese bombing and been forced to abandon his Manchurian power base—this policy was deeply unsatisfactory. Moreover, as anti-Japanese sentiment intensified in the northwest, both Zhang and Yang found it increasingly difficult to accept the Kuomintang's prioritization of attacks on Communist forces in Shaanxi over resistance to Japan.

In December 1936, Chiang Kai-shek traveled to Xi'an to oversee the suppression of the Red Army. Commanders of the Northeastern Army urged him to commit to resisting Japan, but he refused. After repeated persuasion failed, the Northeastern and Northwestern Armies jointly decided to detain the Generalissimo. Their core demand was that Chiang "immediately and comprehensively cease the civil war and adopt an armed anti-Japanese policy."

Essentials of Chinese and World History, Part I summarizes the outcome as follows: "With the peaceful resolution of the Xi'an Incident, the ten-year civil war was fundamentally brought to an end, and the basic conditions for forming a united national resistance were established." Chiang Kai-shek accepted these demands, and the following year, after Japan launched full-scale offensive following the July 7 Incident, the Second United Front was formed. China's "nationwide" and "comprehensive" resistance had at last begun.

One condition for the formation of the Second United Front was the Communist Party's acceptance of demands set forth by Chiang Kai-shek, including the disbandment of the Red Army and its incorporation into the unified national military as well as the dissolution of the "Soviet Republic." This information appears in student reading questions in

Essentials of Chinese and World History, Part I concerning the "Declaration of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Announcing the Kuomintang–Communist United Front" (July 15, 1937), drawn from the *Zhou Enlai wenji* [Writing collection of Zhou Enlai]. Through this decision, the Communist Party reorganized its forces into the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army under the National Revolutionary Army to participate in the War of Resistance against Japan.

Contemporary textbooks present this history in considerable detail, emphasizing that the War of Resistance against Japan was a nationwide struggle and that the Chinese Communist Party played a central role in leading the Anti-Japanese National United Front while maintaining "independence and autonomy" and "united resistance." The subsequent narrative distinguishes between Kuomintang-led "resistance on the frontal battlefield" (*zhengmian zhanchang de kangzhan* 正面战场的抗战) and Communist Party-led "resistance on the enemy's rear battlefield" (*dihou zhanchang de kangzhan* 敌后战场的抗战). This framing appears to reflect the historical reality that, at the war's conclusion, the only internationally recognized government was the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek. At the end of World War II, China was represented by the Republic of China, a member of the Allied Powers, not yet by the People's Republic of China.

In this sense, narratives of the War of Resistance against Japan are situated within China's role as a member of the Allied Powers and a major theater of the global anti-fascist war, while emphasizing that the war constituted a "national liberation struggle" that cannot be explained solely through the actions of the state in power at the time. Within this framework, the Communist Party is highlighted as a key force that propelled this struggle forward—a crucial point in asserting the legitimacy of today's "new China" as the representative of the Chinese nation.

When comparing China's historical narratives with those of the Korean peninsula, it is important to recognize that fundamental differences exist in respective concepts of "nation" (*minjok*). Even before the modern era, the Chinese mainland was home to diverse ethnic groups and, during the

expansion of Japanese imperialism, became a destination for many Koreans, who were perceived as belonging to a different "nation."

The population now designated as the "Chinese nation" encompasses both the Han majority and fifty-five officially recognized minority nationalities that participated in the process of establishing the People's Republic of China. This designation thus reflects a collective reorganized around the constituents of the contemporary state, rather than a community defined by a shared premodern historical origin. Accordingly, references to "nationwide resistance" in current textbooks should be read as encompassing all of these groups.

Within this framework, *Chinese History, Part I* includes narratives stating that following the Manchurian Incident "the nation's various nationalities united" in resistance. It notes that "Manchus and Koreans (Chosŏnjok) in the Northeast actively participated in anti-Japanese organizations and anti-Japanese volunteer armies," and that "Mongolians and Han in the Northeast, North China, and other regions successively established forces such as the Mongol Border Cavalry, Mongol–Han Allied Army, Mongol–Han Anti-Japanese Guerrillas, thereby developing armed struggle against Japan."

Nevertheless, the overarching narratives of current middle and high school history textbooks do not address the specific historical conditions of the Northeast or the distinct historical experiences of the Korean nationality (Chosŏnjok). Accounts of this region—which served as the initial catalyst for the War of Resistance against Japan—are largely limited to brief references to clashes between the warlord Zhang Zuolin and the Kwantung Army, Zhang Xueliang's subsequent actions, the suffering of local populations under the rule of Manchukuo, and the existence of the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army.

Yet Manchuria had long been objectified as a site of imperialist competition, inhabited by multiple nationalities—including Koreans (Chosŏnjok)—whose lives were intertwined within complex, multilayered relationships. Japan's defeat in the region and the subsequent confrontation between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party over the construction of a new state activated long-accumulated and

deeply rooted tensions. At the very center of these dynamics were Koreans residing in Manchuria (*chaeman* Chosŏnin), who would later come to be recognized as today's Korean nationality (Chosŏnjok).

Traumatic Memories of Koreans in Manchuria Excluded from Memorial Days and Official Narratives

The jubilation associated with "liberation" erupted from collective joy and anticipation at the collapse of an oppressive empire. Yet the empire's defeat did not immediately translate into genuine "liberation" for the people themselves. Koreans living in Manchuria, swept into the turmoil of the Chinese Civil War, soon faced a new series of ordeals and conflicts. These struggles involved far more than a simple ideological choice, such as whether to support the Kuomintang or the Communist Party.

> On the night of May 27, 1946, . . . around 4 p.m., cannon fire resounded loudly from the direction of North Mountain, followed by Chiang Kai-shek's direct forces—the Kuomintang 88th Division, fully armed with American-made weapons—entering the city. . . . They led local lackeys (*chugu*) and went searching for Korean (Chosŏnjok) homes. "The Kaolipaotzu are all Communists and Eighth Route Army." There were plausible reasons why they barked like mad dogs and went searching for Korean homes seeking revenge. The primary reason was that immediately after liberation, the Korean people had sent their husbands and sons and daughters to the Liberation Army. . . . Thus the Koreans in Kirin city were entirely plundered, arrested, and trampled, suffering all manner of violations. (Editorial Committee for the *Historical Footsteps of the Chinese Korean Ethnic Group Series* 1992, 596)

As the Chinese Civil War intensified, the Kuomintang

advanced into the Northeast, a region that had served as a major Communist base, and launched a series of military campaigns. Unlike the Kuomintang, which uniformly classified Koreans—former subjects of Imperial Japan—as "enemy nationals," the Communist Party at the time maintained a relatively favorable stance toward Koreans in Manchuria. As a result, many Koreans who remained in the region participated on the Communist side in the "People's War of Liberation" (Yoon 2012, 192–194).

However, whenever the Kuomintang gained the upper hand in the region, some Han Chinese denounced Koreans to Kuomintang authorities, claiming that all Koreans were Communists who had joined the "Liberation Army" and thus deserved "revenge." Why, then, was such "revenge" deemed necessary?

Gaoli bangzi 高麗棒子 (literally, "Goryeo stick") was one of the derogatory terms used by Chinese in Manchuria to refer to Koreans. Not everyone employed this term, nor did antagonism characterize all relationships. Yet at that historical moment, negative emotions that had accumulated among groups sharing the same space—now vacated by Japanese imperial power—began to erupt violently.

Japan viewed the Korean peninsula as a gateway for continental expansion and Manchuria as a strategic foothold for further advances. A region once sparsely inhabited by indigenous became, from the nineteenth century onward, a contested space in which the Qing dynasty, Russia, and Japan competed for control. From that point forward, "Manchuria" emerged as a multiethnic zone where diverse populations migrated and lived side by side.

In the late nineteenth century, during the final years of the Joseon dynasty, Koreans gradually migrated to the North Kando region. At the same time, Han Chinese peasants from Shandong and North China also moved into the area, forming either separate respective collective settlements or mixed communities. Following Japan's formal annexation of Korea and its full-scale advance into Manchuria, Japanese migration accelerated as well. Development projects unfolded across Manchuria—an "undeveloped" land rich in natural resources—not only to expand agricultural production but

also to establish a range of industries. These projects attracted large numbers of labor migrants, who came to live alongside imperial exploiters and the soldiers tasked with supervising and managing them (Kim, Yoon, Lee, and Yim 2004, 21).

Japan justified its rule through the "Theory of Ethnic Harmony," which portrayed Manchukuo as a place where Han Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Koreans (Chosŏnjok), and Yamato Japanese coexisted harmoniously. In reality, this ideology functioned as a divide-and-rule strategy that institutionalized ethnic hierarchies with Japan firmly at the apex.

> They spoke of Five Races Harmony and Japan–Manchukuo Harmony, but in reality there was ethnic discrimination—tremendous discrimination. The first-class ethnicity was the Japanese, the second-class ethnicity was Koreans, and the third-class ethnicity was the Han. When giving rations or distributing rations, they would give a bit less. (Kim 2009a, 26)

Although no official policy explicitly designated Koreans as "second-class citizens," most Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok) who experienced life in Manchukuo recall the presence of rigid ethnic fault lines. These hierarchies, long embedded in everyday life, resurfaced after Japan's defeat in the form of extreme violence among populations that continued to inhabit the same spaces.

> The *laogaoli* 老高丽 (a term used to refer to ethnic Koreans in Manchuria) killed Chinese—these bastards are *erguizi* 二鬼子 (lackeys). They were like this even during the Japanese period, so why are they still like this now? This is hopeless. So let's also beat these bastards, beat them to death. (Kim 2009b, 213)

Erguizi was a widely circulating term at the time and reflected deep-seated hostility toward Koreans perceived as having collaborated with Japan's invasion of China. Koreans in Manchuria generally possessed higher Japanese-language proficiency than Chinese day laborers, a disparity that translated into wage disparities under Manchukuo. Although

many Koreans lived in poverty comparable to that of their Chinese counterparts, their status as “imperial subjects” (*hwangguk shinmin*) afforded them extraterritorial privileges and protection from Japanese consulates and consular police. These conditions likely reinforced Chinese perceptions of Koreans as “second-class citizens” or *erguizi*.

Until the mid-1910s, relations between Chinese and Koreans in Manchuria had generally been amicable. Landless Koreans often lived alongside Chinese farmers and cultivated land together. Because rice—the Korean staple—was not central to Chinese agriculture, competition remained limited, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, a sense of solidarity rooted in shared anti-Japanese sentiment existed among populations resisting Japanese aggression. This relationship, however, began to change once Korea’s colonization became irreversible and Japan intensified its invasion of Manchuria.

Western “civilizing” discourses that legitimized Japan’s self-image as a modern Asian leader—contrasted with China’s perceived failure under imperialist pressure—were reproduced and disseminated throughout East Asia. Some Korean intellectuals adopted this logic early on, embracing an Orientalist hierarchy that positioned the West at the top, followed by Japan, and positioned Korea as superior to China. Over time, these ideas seeped into everyday interactions, reinforcing discriminatory practices as Japanese colonial governance increasingly penetrated daily life (Yoo and Cha 2014, 83–86).

> In any case, there was discrimination then. We were students, so among us there was no ethnic discrimination, but in the education we received during the imperial period, the term “savage” (*yamanin*) was used extensively for Southeast Asians or people from other regions. The Japanese claimed the Yamato race was most superior, and people in the south were called savages. It was deeply ethnic. Ultimately, we were taught about differences between “advanced” peoples and ethnically inferior peoples, savages. (Kim 2009a, 269)

Within the Korean community in Manchuria, an additional

division emerged between "malcontent Koreans" (*pullyŏng sŏnin*) and "good Koreans" (*sŏllyang sŏnin*). Independence activists and socialists who actively engaged in anti-Japanese struggle and sought to dismantle Manchukuo's governing structure were labeled "malcontent Koreans" and subjected to suppression. In contrast, "good Koreans" who cooperated with Japanese colonial policies were positioned as "second-class subjects," subordinate to Japanese but superior to Chinese (Yoo and Cha 2014, 48, 50–51).

Following the establishment of Manchukuo, Korean elites who received preferential treatment over other ethnic groups and functioned as "lackeys of Japanese imperialism" played a significant role in intensifying anti-Korean sentiment. The conspicuous arrogance of pro-Japanese collaborators—who assisted Japan's domination of Manchuria while enriching themselves and oppressing Chinese populations—left a lasting imprint. Similar patterns appeared in Japanese-occupied inland cities such as Tianjin, Wuhan, and Guangzhou, where Koreans also participated in facilitating Japanese aggression. Although these individuals by no means represented all Koreans living in China, their actions contributed to the gradual formation of stereotyped images of "Koreans" in popular memory and emotional consciousness (Yoo and Cha 2014, 68–73).

Additionally, Korean violence and massacre against Chinese overseas residents (*huaqiao*) that occurred in Pyongyang in 1931 was transmitted, in reverse, into the Manchurian context, creating another node of tension between Koreans and Chinese residing there. Even prior to the establishment of Manchukuo, Japan repeatedly fomented disputes between Chinese and Korean peasants—who had previously maintained cooperative relations—under the pretext of protecting Koreans in the Kando region, while simultaneously confiscating Chinese land and relocating Korean settlers to those areas.

The *Chosun Ilbo* reported one such incident in Wanpaoshan as "hundreds of Koreans killed by Chinese," a portrayal that starkly contradicted the facts. This false report triggered violent reprisals by Koreans in Pyongyang, who attacked and killed overseas Chinese wherever they

could be found. The imperial logic of ethnic hierarchy thus became emotionally inscribed between Koreans and Chinese, transforming Koreans into perpetrators of mass violence under the justification of retaliation.

In this way, all the rifts and accumulated conflicts between Koreans and Chinese erupted into violence that transcended empirical reality in the space left behind by Imperial Japan, which had long ruled Manchuria by exploiting such divisions. At the same time, the antagonistic structure of the Chinese Civil War—sharpened by ideological struggles over postwar nation-state construction—operated concurrently within this volatile environment.

> Reactionary elements lurking in Changchun city created "ethnic strife." These individuals slandered and vilified Koreans, even fabricating rumors that they had been Japanese lackeys and had now attached themselves to the Eighth Route Army. Their actions not only sowed discord but attempted to incite riots. Social hooligans exploited this situation, taking up clubs to expel Koreans and plunder their property. (Editorial Committee for the *Historical Footsteps of the Chinese Korean Ethnic Group Series* 1992, 599)

Conclusion: Invoking "Liberation" as Healing of Traumatic Memory

In the "liberated" space of 1945, newly forming boundary lines—appearing where the empire's divisions had vanished—continued to engage emotional structures that could not be neatly organized by any single criterion such as nationality, ethnicity, or ideology. The tragedies produced in this process persist as unhealed traumatic memories, unacknowledged both in the celebratory narratives of August 15 and in the commemorations of September 3, the Victory in the War of Resistance against Japan.

If one thread connecting past and present is constituted by memory, another is history as an archived and recorded artifact. The nodal point of an era shaped by imperialism

and colonial domination in East Asia was Japan's defeat in 1945. In its aftermath, as the empire dissolved, movements to establish "liberated" nation-states unfolded alongside efforts to reorganize colonial systems of domination within the emerging Cold War order. The new boundary lines formed through this further period of turmoil—the boundaries of nation-states—selectively appropriated memories associated with 1945, arranging them into specific semantic sequences. In doing so, they produced histories and records that constructed a collective identity of "us" in the present. Through this process, history and archival records codified the meaning of "liberation" without leaving traumatic memories unaddressed.

Our present effort to invoke memories of "liberation," across the long river of time, must not reactivate traumas confined to that historical moment, nor provoke renewed ethnic or racial divisions and antagonisms. Healing past trauma becomes possible not through the exclusion or suppression of memory, but through the creation of a present and future that do not reproduce the tragedies of the past. This alone is the reason we must invoke "liberation" anew.

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