

Echoes of 1945: Liberation Motifs
in North Korean Literature

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To commemorate the 80th anniversary of Korea's liberation, the editorial board of *S/N Korean Humanities* has curated a special feature for its March 2026 issue (Vol. 12, No. 1) titled "Echoes of 1945: Liberation Motifs in North Korean Literature." This feature focuses on how North Korean literary works have constructed and reimagined the memory of 1945. By examining the diverse and often contested narratives within this corpus, the collection explores liberation as a multifaceted process shaped by global, regional, and local dynamics. Through this specialized lens, *S/N Korean Humanities* seeks to move beyond singular interpretations and provide a critical forum for understanding how these North Korean "echoes" of liberation continue to influence the broader field of Korean studies today.

The first article by Li Xiang Yu (Ocean University of China) reexamines the dual nature of "liberation" for Koreans in Japan from a diasporic perspective. For this community, 1945 signified not only the end of colonial rule but also the beginning of a precarious existence as "abandoned people (*kimin*)," marginalized by both Japanese society and the structural realities of the divided Korean peninsula. Existing within a "triple fracture" of nationality, language, and identity, Koreans in Japan came to embody a unique existential condition—an "externality that must be internalized" within the post-war order. Focusing on the autobiographical narratives and the "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*) form employed by writers such as Kim Saryang, Kim Sokpom, and Yu Miri, the study explores how *Zainichi* literature articulates collective memory beyond individual experience. It identifies the disjunction between mother tongue and national language, the spatiality of being *Chaeil* ("in Japan"), and the lack of agency regarding repatriation as the primary drivers of this literary expression. Ultimately, the article argues that in *Zainichi* literature, liberation is represented not as a completed historical event, but as an ongoing process of confronting the trauma of division while seeking new possibilities for coexistence.

The second article entitled "Recording, Commemorating, and Remembering 1945: China's Official Narrative and the Excluded Memories of Koreans in Manchuria" by Solji Park

(Konkuk University) critiques state-sanctioned histories and official commemorative dates by centering the lived experiences of Koreans in Manchuria (*chaeman Chosŏnin*) following Japan's 1945 defeat. While modern nation-states in the Korean peninsula, China, and Taiwan have constructed divergent, selective "histories" of liberation to establish political legitimacy amid the burgeoning Cold War, these narratives often obscure local realities. For Koreans in Yanji and surrounding regions, liberation was not a singular event on August 15, but a delayed and chaotic process tied to the arrival of the Soviet Army and the actual surrender of the Kwantung Army. Furthermore, the collapse of the Japanese Empire did not bring immediate peace; instead, it triggered a violent transition marked by the Chinese Civil War and deep-seated interethnic tensions. Stereotyped as "second-class citizens" or *erguizi* (collaborators), Koreans faced retributive violence and conflict with Han Chinese communities, leaving behind profound traumas excluded from official national discourses. By foregrounding these marginalized memories, the article explores a contemporary meaning of "liberation" rooted in the healing of individual trauma rather than the reinforcement of state-curated historical narratives.

The feature articles are followed by Rhie Joung-hyun (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)' book review of Monica Kim's *Shimmunshil-ŭi han'guk chŏnjaeng* [The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War], originally published by Princeton University in 2019. This study re-centers the Korean War as a struggle over human subjectivity and self-determination, shifting the focus from territorial combat to the interrogation room. It explores how the issue of prisoner repatriation became a pivotal diplomatic crisis that delayed the armistice for eighteen months, creating a "battlefield of the interior." Within this space, prisoners were forced to navigate competing Cold War ideologies, where the American concept of "individual freedom" often functioned as a strategic tool to undermine the legitimacy of communist states. By examining rare materials such as interrogation records from the Kōje Island POW camp, the author reveals the interrogation room as a "laboratory of the Cold War" shaped by racial prejudice and colonial legacies. The narratives of North Korean,

Chinese, and American prisoners expose the deep ironies of the conflict, including the mistreatment of minority American soldiers and the use of Japanese Americans as interrogators. Ultimately, the book serves as a metaphor for modern Korean history, warning against the “crisis of political imagination” that arises when states impose rigid identities on individuals.

Lastly, Joh Kyeongil (Institute of Humanities for Unification, Konkuk University) conducted an interview with Kim Yeonu, and Kang Taeseong. This dialogue between young people from South and North Korea, moderated by Joh Kyeongil, reframes August 15 as an ongoing struggle for human rights and sovereignty rather than a settled historical event. The participants argue that liberation remains incomplete due to unresolved colonial legacies and the “special othering” of defectors within South Korean society. The conversation emphasizes that true change must be driven by North Koreans as active agents, rather than through an external imposition. Ultimately, they redefine unification as a process of restoring individual agency and dismantling the self-censorship—both legal and social—born of division, creating a space where all individuals can exist freely.

Established in 2009, the IHU has pioneered “Humanities for Unification,” a unique framework that treats unification as a dynamic process of communication and reconciliation across South Korea, North Korea, and the global diaspora. As the institute’s flagship English-language journal, *S/N Korean Humanities* plays a vital role in bridging *Han’gukhak* and *Chosŏnhak*, fostering the growth of “Integrated Korean Studies.”

Even as inter-Korean relations face ongoing challenges, the IHU remains committed to the belief that academic dialogue across these distinct traditions is fundamental to building mutual understanding. Moving forward, *S/N Korean Humanities* will continue to serve as a critical forum for scholarly debate, dedicated to advancing a humanities-based perspective on unification and expanding the horizons of Korean studies.

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