

Fleeing from the Kantō Massacre and Its Psychological Aftermath

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Abstract

This paper examines the survivors' and bereaved families' experiences of the Kantō Massacre in September 1923 and seeks to draw a connection between said experiences and their movements after the tragedy, focusing on the fear planted in the ethnic Koreans as psychological damage caused by the massacre. This fear manifested itself in various physical behaviors such as fleeing, hiding, or pretending to be Japanese, which defined the lives of the traumatized ethnic Koreans long after the massacre. Although the facts of the massacre had been disseminated throughout the Korean community by students and workers, what was significant in the memory of the massacre was the repeated issue of rumors about and persecution of Koreans in Japan even after the Great Kantō Earthquake. The situation worsened after Japan's final defeat in the war and led to the rise of fears among the ethnic Koreans of being massacred, which led to the resurgence of ethnic Koreans fleeing as they had during and immediately following the Kantō Earthquake.

Keywords: Kantō Massacre, ethnic Koreans in Japan, flight, fear, trauma

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1. Introduction

The Kantō Massacre refers to the massacre of ethnic Koreans in Japan by the Japanese military, police, and vigilantes on September 1, 1923. As the term was employed by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, a popular alliance of Korean residents in Japan after Korean liberation from Japanese colonial rule, in this paper it is used as a term of power in accordance with the approach of reporting the movements of the victims.

The parameter of this paper is the movement of ethnic Koreans in Japan who lived in the aftermath of the Kantō Massacre. Accordingly, we must first discuss the methodological issues raised in approaching the relationship between violence and Korean residents in Japan.

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, modern Japanese history criticized the formation of the dichotomy between domination and resistance within Korean history as well as the history of ethnic Koreans in Japan. Rather, it focused on colonial modernity, which emphasizes mutually beneficial relationships and complicity, and advances social history and the history of mass movements, which in turn concentrate on the quotidian order of the masses who existed apart from the dichotomous framework of domination and resistance (Shin Ch'ang'u 2017).

Within such a trend, the Japanese historian Tonomura Masaru, who specializes in the history of Koreans in Japan, argues that approaching issues such as the Kantō Massacre from the perspective of event-based history cannot help to enlighten the everyday lives of the people involved. Tonomura also argues that Koreans in Japan around the time of the massacre had been easily incorporated into the governance system through discrimination and oppression that penetrated deeply into every facet of the lives of those concerned (Tonomura 2004). In this regard, Tonomura emphasizes the existence of Koreans in Japan who self-assimilated under a system of cooperation and complicity, but it must be noted that Tonomura confirms such existence *a priori* according to the conceptual boundaries of colonial

modernity. In contrast, this paper believes that there is a need to shed light on the behavior and its meaning of the Korean people in Japan who resisted violence and therefore were ultimately forced to live with insurmountable anguish. The analysis of structural relationship between violence and life is indispensable to considering the experience of the Kantō Massacre and subsequent movements of Korean residents in Japan.

Meanwhile, Cho Kyōngdal, who specializes in the history of Korean residents in Japan, has problematized Tonomura's work, arguing that ethnic Koreans in Japan could not be easily assimilated into the governance system precisely because they existed according the principles of living directly in opposition to the ideas forwarded by Tonomura (Cho Kyōngdal 2008). However, because both approaches are based on privileging the quotidian order, they ultimately examine colonial crimes discrete from the lives and the movements of the Korean people. The question then becomes—did the Koreans in Japan who survived the Massacre really amount to such a static existence?

This study sees that the research situation in which the history of the Kantō Massacre is not fully established within the history of the Korean people in Japan is fodder for certain problems in the methodology surrounding the people involved and the violence to which they were subjected. In response, this paper aims to highlight the fear of being massacred among the Koreans in Japan as an attempt to explain the relationship between said Koreans and the Kantō Massacre based on the critical reflection of modern Japanese history. Emphasized in particular is how the fear planted in the Korean people due to the psychological damage caused by the Kantō Massacre manifested in various problematic physical behaviors; such an approach is significantly informed by Frantz Fanon's clinical reports on the colonized. Fanon points out the emergence of reactive symptoms under the Algerian War of Independence manifested as muscular stiffness, hesitation, and rejection in the Algerians, who faced the climate of massacres and repression under a colonial power. By illustrating such reactive aspects, Fanon ultimately calls for re-consideration of the colonial war itself (Fanon 1996).

By extension, this paper focuses on the various fleeing behaviors of Koreans facing the Kantō Massacre and examines the suffering of survivors and of bereaved families in the form of psychological injury based on their traumatizing experience. It also seeks to demonstrate that such physical and psychological trauma did not remain solely with the Koreans who directly experienced the massacre, but significantly influenced the ethnic Korean community in Japan before and after the Japan's ultimate defeat in the war.

2. Fleeing the Kantō Massacre

First, we need to examine the reactions of the Koreans to the Great Kantō Massacre, realized as various behaviors of fleeing, hiding, or pretending to be Japanese due to the fear of the massacre.

a. Fleeing or Hiding

① Hiding by Whatever Means Necessary

Yun Sōkki (a laborer born and raised in North Kyōngsang Province; birth date unknown) who worked in Yokohama, where the Japanese military led the massacre of ethnic Koreans, fled by hiding himself on a ship. According to his wife Mun Musōn (a laborer from South Kyōngsang Province; then twenty-one years old), “We had just survived the earthquake only to face the massacre, and though my husband was able to flee alongside the other Koreans at the time, only 20,000 could escape...My husband hid on a ship carrying coal and spent days there” (Mun Musōn 2002). Mun herself had survived the earthquake while working as a textile worker in Ōi-machi, Tōkyō, and was hidden away by her Japanese landlord. However, she testified that a person who had also come from her hometown was beheaded by a vigilante group for protesting against the Japanese and that she saw his decapitated head on a bamboo spear pass before her eyes.

② Imprisonment and Flight

The crackdown on ethnic Koreans began shortly after the Great Kantō Earthquake, and particularly after September 3, countless Koreans were arrested amid the general inspection to cull the so-called “Delinquent Koreans” from the “Good Koreans.”

Cho Insŭng (a male laborer born in South Kyōngsang Province, then twenty-two years old) testified to his experience at the Terashima Police Station in Tōkyō:

“At the Special Higher Police (‘Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu,’ for high policing, investigation, and control of political groups and ideologies deemed to threaten the public order of the Empire of Japan), I was forced to give my name, current address, and occupation...In the evening, the station was full of people. We stayed up all night in the police station yard. Before I knew it, so many people were gone...my fellow Koreans had fled in unison in fear of the Japanese coming back to kill them.”

Cho himself jumped into the moat of the police station because he believed that he needed to do something to avoid being killed. However, the vigilantes outside eventually found him.

Kang Tōksang, a researcher of the Kantō Massacre, argues that the inspected Koreans were interrogated by the Higher Special Police and that until their disposition was decided upon, they were left at the precipice of life and death: “There is no suffering equal to being forced into the anxiety of not knowing whether one is going to live or die. Many in fact fainted not from the physical exhaustion, but the mental suffering” (Kang Tōksang 2003).

Next, let us examine the case of Li Sōnggu, then a twenty-four-year-old male student from North Hamkyōng Province, who fled. While Li was being interrogated by the police, they found a copy of the daily *Tong’a Ilbo* in his possession, which led them to believe that he was part of the Korean resistance. Li was taken to the Ōtsuka police station in Tōkyō (*Tong’a Ilbo*, August 31, 1982; *Watari* 1983).

Li was released a week later, but whenever he asked anyone for the way back to his residence, people would yell, “There is a Korean!” Thus, he asked the maid at a shop selling soy sauce. After telling him the way, however, the maid yelled, “There goes a Korean!” causing vigilantes to chase after him. Knowing that if ever caught, he would be killed, he ran into a police station for help, but there, he was assaulted by vigilantes. When he tried to call the Ōtsuka Police Station after being assaulted at the police station, the police assaulted him. Being surrounded by the police as well as vigilantes, Li found it next to impossible to flee.

b. Pretending to Be Japanese

As can be seen in the experiences of Cho Insŭng and Li Sŏnggu, the places to which Koreans could flee were extremely limited, as they were constantly surrounded by the threats of vigilantes as well as the police. At the time, there were numerous Japanese people who had fled from the fire caused by the earthquake by jumping into lakes and rivers, but Koreans threw themselves into these bodies of water to escape being massacred. In Yokohama, for example, Japanese people threw rocks at the Koreans trying to flee and chased after them in boats to kill them. Moreover, even if they were able to flee from Kantō, rumors about and persecution of Koreans had already expanded throughout Japan. At such a juncture, some Koreans tried to avoid being killed by pretending to be Japanese.

One such example is Hwang Ŭiho, born in North Kyōngsang Province, then a twenty-one-year-old male laborer. Hwang lived without saying a single word so that no one could discover that he was Korean. According to his son, Hwang Punam, his father was working in civil engineering under the Japanese name Matsushita, a common name. Immediately following the Great Kantō Earthquake, his boss hid him under the floor of his house for a month, saying, “You are an honest, special Korean.” For the next year or so, Hwang Ŭiho pretended to be a mute (*Chōsen shinpō*, August 2, 2003). To hide one’s Korean identity, in other words, one had to prove that one was Japanese.

There is also evidence that the only person to have survived among approximately twenty Koreans in a place in Tsukishima, Tōkyō, was able to survive because he was extremely proficient at Japanese and pretended to be a Japanese by dressing like a vigilante (Li Chongūn's testimony, Choson Daigakkō, 1963). In addition, "a Korean woman who was wearing a school uniform skirt when the Great Kantō Earthquake occurred was said to have changed into a wafuku at her husband's behest to ensure that she would not be mistaken for a wife of a candy salesman or a laborer....The clothing saved her life (Ra Sangyun's testimony, *Watari*, 1983)." Although more laborers than students were massacred at that time, the wherewithal to speak the Japanese language proficiently and afford Japanese clothing were crucial factors that enabled escape from the massacre.

3. Emotional Trauma Following the Great Massacre

How did the survivors of the massacre continue their lives afterward? Li Sōnggu, who managed a narrow escape, finished his education in 1926 and worked at a school after returning to the Korean peninsula. Due to the trauma, Li is said to have always stiffened when he heard students running behind him (*Kazeyo* 1992).

It is expected that Koreans who witnessed the Kantō Massacre in person or fled with their lives hanging by a thread would have suffered, though the extent might be different, psychological aftereffects from the terrifying experience. However, the fact that aftereffects became long-term trauma, as could be seen much later after the Massacre, was due to the shock of the Massacre as well as the Japanese authorities' handling of the Massacre.

Some of these mishandlings can be categorized as follows: 1) the Japanese confirmation as reality the untruth of the Korean rioting; 2) refusal to take responsibility for the Massacre by the Japanese vigilantes; 3) suppression of the ethnic Korean's efforts to investigate the truth and

responsibility; and 4) machinations to obfuscate the Massacre vis-à-vis the assimilation policy of “Japan and Korea as One.” Due to this series of mishandlings, the imagined riots by Koreans and the existence of delinquent Koreans became remembered as factual in Japanese society. The society that ethnic Koreans in Japan encountered after the massacre was a milieu in which the Korean residents in Japan could not but worry about the recurrence of massacres due to the dissemination of rumors manufactured amidst Japanese government’s rash judgments and the Japanese people’s long-held bias against Koreans.

Let us now examine how the survivors lived in the aftermath through family testimonies.

a. Trauma of Survivors

① Mun Musŏn

Mun Musŏn could not ever forget her memory of the Great Kantō Earthquake after having seen the sunset the day before, which resembled a conflagration. According to Mun’s daughter, Yun Pongsŏl, Mun would tremble at the sight of the sun setting, saying, “When the sky turns red, there will be an earthquake somewhere tomorrow. That means that Koreans will die. We must be careful (Yun Pongsŏl 2008).”

The reason that the thought of the earthquake and the fear of Koreans being massacred again can be traced back to traumatizing memory of the Kantō Massacre and the rumors and persecution following the Earthquake.

As mentioned above, the Mun Musŏn witnessed the decapitated head of someone from her hometown after a beheading by a vigilante group, but it was only in 1999 that she testified to such an experience during a hearing for her legal action to seek liability. Mun’s family members reported that though they had heard frequently of how the Japanese landlord saved her life, it was the first time they had heard of the decapitation of someone from her hometown.

Yun Pongsŏl believes that perhaps, though her mother tried to suppress the trauma of having experienced such unspeakable suffering at a young age, her recollection

resurfaced at a certain point. Yun said at the time, “I felt anew the shock my mother must have suffered then and how the trauma that followed had long been painful for her.”

The complexities of the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in psychiatry include memory suppression of traumatic memory (Herman 1999). However, the situation wherein the Japanese government was shirking its responsibility of the Kantō Massacre, which forced Mun, the victim, to pursue legal action, led to the resurfacing of her traumatic memory. This can be characterized as secondary and tertiary violence and damage caused by the unclaimed responsibility of the massacre.

② Cho Insŭng

Cho Insŭng, whose older brother was killed and himself stabbed in the left foot with a hook, was one among many who suffered from nightmares long after liberation from Japanese colonial rule. Pak Punsun, who lived with Cho, said, “He would wake up in the middle of the night and start raging or slap me really hard, and I just thought it was some sort of normal illness.” However, when such behavior continued for months, Pak told Cho of the happenings and recommended that he seek medical help. Cho responded, “I am not ill, but I am often shaken by nightmares of the tragedy I suffered at the time of the Great Kantō Earthquake (Kantōdaishinsai).” As the two had married in 1938, Pak’s accounts informs us that Cho suffered from such nightmares for approximately twenty years after the Kantō Massacre. Moreover, after Cho was stabbed with a hook, he had to support his body weight with only his right foot, which caused intense pain. The pain worsened, and sleepless nights ensued, at times causing them to call an ambulance. Every time they were transported to the hospital due to the foot pain, Cho would recall his memory of the Massacre (*Asahi shinbun*, June 13, 1984). It can thus be seen that the Massacre had left inordinate scars both psychologically and physically.

③ Hwang Ŭiho

According to Hwang Ŭiho's son, Hwang Punam, "My father spent his entire life trying to completely transform into a Japanese person, so all I have in my memory is the image of the wafuku. With such a family background, my mother's Japanese had no Korean inflection at all. Unless my parents actually said they were Korean, everyone thought they were Japanese. Whenever I thought about the time my father was buried in a wafuku, I had the urge to criticize him. However, now that I myself am an old man, I think it was perhaps some kind of wisdom of a Korean man trying to survive in Japan (*Chōsen shinpō*, August 2, 2003)."

Hwang Ŭiho went to Japan after living on the Korean peninsula for approximately thirty years, and though it can be conjectured that hiding his Korean identity must have been difficult, pretending to be Japanese that began as a result of the Massacre wielded significant influence on his life afterward. Hwang's son, Hwang Punam, testified that he had continued to hear, from his childhood onward, that of the five people from his father's hometown, four were murdered, and that he did not want to listen to the stories of the Massacre that were repeated at every annual ancestral rite (Hwang Punam's testimony as collected by the author, 2010). In addition, the younger Hwang was sent to a Japanese school by his parents who spent their entire lives pretending to be Japanese, and as such, was too afraid to say the word "Korea" or "Chosŏn" in the everyday context. As can be gleaned, for Koreans who pretended to be Japanese after the Massacre, the experience of the Massacre was the beginning of their traumatic lives that forced them to self-dissociate.

b. Suffering by the Bereaved Families

The emotional distress endured by the bereaved families is also unquestionable.

① Suicide

There were women who committed suicide after waiting

for their husbands who disappeared during the Massacre. During his literary activities and textbook compilation work for the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan after liberation, Li Ŭnjik kept a record of what happened in his hometown, Ogŭm Village of Chŏngu Township in Chŏngŭp County, North Chŏlla Province (Kim Chŏngmyŏng 1966).

The year after the Great Kantō Massacre, Li Ŭnjik enrolled in the third grade at Shint'aein Public Normal School. On the way to school, "There was a mansion of wealthy people with large persimmon trees, where a boy, two or three years younger than I, stood alone, listless. His father had gone to study in Tōkyō but was murdered in the Great Earthquake. The family prayed, believing that he would ultimately come back. However, in the spring of 1927, the mother fell ill. When the persimmons became ripened to taken on a bright orange hue, there was a great commotion around the village. The mother had hung herself from the persimmon tree." According to Li, who had run to that mansion, the grandfather holding the hand of his grandson, who was now left alone in the world in front of his mother's body in the coffin, wailed to his grandson, "Your father was murdered, and now your mother has died, so you are all alone. All Japanese are horrible, the Japanese who killed them are horrible. When you grow up, you must avenge their death!" Li reported that he himself felt that he was also on the precipice of losing his mind.

② Nightmares

Kim To'im, a family member of Pak Tōksu, who disappeared in the Massacre, said:

I have been in mental anguish due to the story of my uncle I heard repeatedly from my mother ever since I could talk. Every year, as time crawls nearer to September 1, I suffer from nightmares. A samurai with a Japanese sword tries to stab my neck. I scream at him to please spare my life, and then I wake up, drenched in cold sweat. I also have nightmares in which I am dragged, kicking and screaming, to a large temple with ghosts or to

unfamiliar, dark places. For about three months around September, I do not feel well. I despise the Massacre after the Great Kantō Earthquake that has made my beloved mother suffer in this way.” (*Kantōdaishinsai* 1994)

As seen in the previous case of Hwang Punam, the traumatized memory of the Kantō Massacre was passed down to generations in the family.

c. Collective Trauma

The effects of the Kantō Massacre wielded considerable impact on the movements of not only the Koreans who experienced it in person, but also the ethnic Korean community-at-large in Japan.

The memory of the Massacre was orally widely spread among the Korean residents in Japan, by Korean laborers and those who had gone to Japan to study. However, unwanted recollection of the Massacre and response to trauma including collective residence and return to the Korean peninsula are not simply the result of the transfer of the memory of the Massacre itself. At the time of the Massacre, the Korean experience of the fear of being killed had accumulated as the situation worsened due to rumors and persecution throughout Japan, which were repeated around disparate disasters in various segments of Japan. Due to such accumulation, the fear of being killed intensified after Japan’s final defeat. The transfer of the memory of the Massacre widely took place among the Korean residents in Japan.

① Kim Ilmyōn’s Recollection and Assimilation

Let us now examine the behavior of Kim Ilmyōn, who neither had direct experience of the massacre nor was a surviving family member (Kim Ilmyōn 1977):

As an abused colonial subject, I began to harbor a certain hope for the possibility of liberation after Pearl Harbor, when the tide of the war shifted. However, in February 1945, as Tōkyō was air-raided and tension of the mainland

warfare was raised, I could not stop entertaining the thought that we Koreans would be stabbed to death by the Japanese people. As a Korean, I naturally intuited such dangers; I predicted that the Kantō Massacre would be repeated as rumors of the Koreans being massacred at the hands of the Japanese who, immediately before their defeat, would begrudge Korean liberation.

In fact, many Koreans fled to the Korean peninsula amidst mixed hopes for Korean liberation and the fear of yet another massacre at the end of the war. Kim Ilmyōn also tried many different ways to escape; he attempted to escape to China due to difficulties of returning to the Korean peninsula, which had essentially become a military base, and fled to a village in a mountain away from places where he would easily become target of a massacre, such as areas where Koreans lived together. Later, Kim decided to assimilate by pretending to collaborate in the war efforts and participate in the construction of the underground airfield at the Koma Shrine. In the end, Kim met the liberation of Korea on August 15 in Tohoku, “...freeing himself that night from the fear of death, bizarre fantasies that had accumulated, and the burden of these delusions—that is, the liberation of the Korean people and freedom from the fear of death dissipated the delusions that had been germinating and fermenting in my heart over a year in the wake of that night.”

② Liberation: A Mixture of Joy and Fear

Kim To'im, who had no idea where her uncle Pak Tōksu was since the Massacre, met Korean liberation with her parents in a Japanese village near the Doshi River in Yamanashi Prefecture, where there were no Koreans around. At the time, Kim was shocked to hear what the adults were whispering about at night: “Rumors have it that Japanese soldiers who have been withdrawn from the Korean peninsula are killing Korean returnees at the Shimonoseki Port. Before returning to the peninsula, it might be safe to go where the Koreans are concentrated.” Kim's family then decided to go to Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture

(Kim's testimony collected by the author, 2014). Instead of immediately returning to the Korean peninsula, the family had decided to escape the rumored massacre of the Korean people by the returning Japanese soldiers by first moving to an area with a large concentration of ethnic Koreans. This was a more pressing issue for them as they were the bereaved family of the Kantō Massacre. In reality, on November 11, 1945, six people in a Korean family were murdered in Kyoto by a demobilized Japanese soldier (*Chōsenjin seikatsuken yōgo inkai nyūsu*, April 5, 1947).

As can be seen, trauma was not experienced just by those who experienced the Massacre: Koreans as a group recalled their memory of the Massacre and collectively returned to the Korean peninsula or congregated in groups.

The Massacre that had been perpetuated twenty-some years prior had precipitated a mass escape of Koreans from Kantō, causing the Korean population of Tōkyō to drop by half within two months of the Great Kantō Earthquake (*Jiji shinpō*, August 23, 1924). In Shimonoseki, Koreans who had fled the hostility of the Japanese in Kansai congregated (*Tong'a Ilbo*, September 14, 1923). In such a way, returning to the Korean peninsula as a means of escape emerged shortly after the Great Kantō Earthquake and became even more pronounced as a collective movement after liberation. The report on the situation by the Third Congress of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan describes the Koreans “running to Shimonoseki with their hearts fluttering with a mixture of joy, fear, and hope of seeing their beloved, now liberated, homeland again (Pak Kyōng-sik 1990).”

4. Conclusion

This paper focused on the relationship between the experience of the Kantō Massacre by the survivors and bereaved families and their movements following the Massacre. The fear as psychological damage caused by the Massacre manifested in various physical behaviors such as fleeing, and the traumatic experience made its imprint as

psychological injury on the survivors, the bereaved families, and the Korean community-at-large in Japan. In other words, the violence of colonialism not only caused physical but also psychological damage.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to capture the domination-resistance dichotomy in modern Japanese history from the point of view of violence and psychological damage suffered by the victims. There are two conceptual possibilities that can be gleaned from the narratives of the Korean residents in Japan: first, understanding the massacre of the Korean people from the perspective of the history of the “below,” or of the masses—that is, a re-examination of the colonial experience of the ethnic Koreans in Japan vis-à-vis their experience of the Kantō Massacre; and second, the sense of objectives regarding their lives by the subjects was liaised with the movement toward ethnic-national solidarity, endowing the potential to draw a connection between the lives of the Korean residents in Japan and their ethnic-nationalist movement. The former necessitates gathering testimonies and investigating the victims, and the latter gains its meaning through the direct connection to movement toward organization and toward seeking to place responsibility on the appropriate parties for the Massacre after Korean liberation from Japanese colonial rule.

Ultimately, it is the hope the author that this paper will move beyond the narrow parameter of defining the experience of the Kantō Massacre for the Korean residents in Japan to become a historiographical attempt to establish the Massacre firmly within the larger history of Korean residents in Japan.

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