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Fluid Borders: *The End of Empire and Korean Migration from Manchuria*

Jaehyung KIM

Abstract

The liberation of 1945 marked a transnational turning point, with far-reaching consequences that reshaped both individual lives and migration patterns across East Asia. For Koreans in Manchuria, the initial joy following Japan's defeat quickly gave way to uncertainty, as the collapse of empire and the outbreak of civil war in China triggered widespread displacement. This article examines the migration of Manchurian Koreans during the immediate post-liberation period (1945–1950), arguing that return to Korea was an active response to the political turmoil and revolutionary upheaval unfolding in Manchuria. Drawing on autobiographies, local newspapers, and US military interrogation records, this study explores the experiences of migrants and highlights their agency in navigating these disruptions through networks of kinship, friendship, and community. It contends that these migrant networks grew increasingly complex during this period of displacement, laying the foundation for persistent transnational migration between North Korea and Northeast China in the 1950s and 1960s. By tracing the trajectories of Korean migrants in Manchuria, this paper contributes to broader understandings of refugee experiences, migrant agency, and the role of migrant networks in shaping East Asia's postwar transformation.

Keywords: migration, migrant networks, refugees, postwar history, land reform, North Korea

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Jaehyung KIM is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a junior fellow at the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies, Seoul National University. E-mail: kimjaehy@hawaii.edu.

Introduction

"The bells of liberation resounded." This phrase, commonly found in the autobiographies of Koreans who returned from Manchuria to North Korea, captures the euphoria many felt at the end of Japanese rule. For Koreans in Manchuria, liberation stirred hopes of returning to a freed homeland and helping to rebuild it, but it also ushered in a period of upheaval, loss, and separation, as seen in the life of Chong-Sik Lee, who eventually became a respected Korean studies scholar and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Born in Liaoyang, Liaoning Province, Lee experienced liberation with his family in Manchuria, but their joy quickly faded. His father disappeared during the Chinese Civil War, and in 1948, Lee fled across the Amnok (Yalu) River to Pyongyang with his mother and siblings. Though he briefly rebuilt his life there with the help of relatives, his Christian faith and anticommunist beliefs led him to escape again—this time to South Korea, where he served as a translator for the US military during the Korean War (C. Lee 2020).

Lee's journey was but one thread in the larger tapestry of Korean migration. Many Koreans returned from Manchuria and eventually settled in either North or South Korea, with some rising to national prominence—such as South Korean President Park Chung-hee, who had served in the Manchukuo Army before returning home (Eckert 2016). Because of the returnees' lasting impact, scholars have examined the significance of Manchukuo as a model of modernization and development in East Asia (Duara 2003), and recent studies have explored how the region shaped the trajectories of future Korean elites (Han 2024; Siverson 2021). Yet the everyday experiences of returnees—especially ordinary migrants—remain underexplored (M. Kim 2010). While the repatriation of Japanese settlers and soldiers has been widely examined in recent studies (Watt 2009; Igarashi 2016), the return migration of Koreans has received far less attention. This is partly due to limited sources: many educated Koreans chose not to speak about their lives or hardships in the wake of Japan's surrender. As Takashi Fujitani notes, for those who had served as officials or soldiers in the Japanese Empire, the fear of being branded "collaborators" may have further

silenced their stories (Fujitani 2011, 4).

By contrast, the fate of Koreans who remained in Manchuria after 1945—caught in the currents of political upheaval and the Chinese Civil War—has drawn consistent scholarly interest (Ahn 2013; D. Kim 2022; Im 2019; C. Kim 2004; Li 2009; Shin 2018; Yeom 2010). After the war, ethnic Koreans were officially recognized as one of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s minority groups, the Joseonjok (Chaoxianzu in Chinese). Scholars have examined the incorporation of this community into the Chinese state, tracing how Nationalist and Communist forces governed Koreans in their respective zones. Existing scholarship shows that Koreans in Nationalist-controlled areas often faced displacement and insecurity, whereas those in Communist-held regions were organized through land reform and other campaigns that encouraged settlement.

Yet scholarship on Koreans in Manchuria has largely focused on those who remained; this represents only one side of the story. In the immediate postwar period, Manchuria shifted from a destination of migration to a site of departure. Many Koreans joined the broader refugee flows triggered by the collapse of empire and the birth of new nation-states. This reversal of migration patterns reflects what historians identify as the global refugee crises of the postwar era, shaped by three interlocking macro-contexts: World War II and its aftermath, the dismantling of colonial empires, and the geopolitical divisions of the Cold War (Jansen and Lässig 2020). In Asia, the redrawing of national borders after 1945 displaced millions, forcing them to move as refugees across hostile and unfamiliar terrain (Amrith 2011, 111–116).

This article revisits the history of Korean migration during this transitional moment, focusing on movements between Manchuria and Korea from 1945 to 1950. This study examines the informal mechanisms that facilitated Korean mobility and resettlement—particularly migrant networks, defined as "personal inter-connections that facilitate migration" (Manning and Trimmer 2020, 228). In the absence of institutional aid, Korean refugees drew on kinship and friendship networks to navigate uncertainty.[1] These networks served not only as immediate support for

1. One notable exception was China's transfer of Korean soldiers—who had fought in

migrants in crisis but also as enduring social structures that continued long-distance ties over time, as Adam McKeown has shown in his study of Chinese migration (McKeown 2001). Similarly, Koreans in Manchuria used such networks to move from town to town or, when possible, to return across the border to Korea. Those who remained in China and those who returned to North Korea eventually forged transnational networks that persisted across national boundaries.

The primary goal of this paper is to examine the experiences of Korean migrants through their own voices. Drawing on local newspapers, North Korean autobiographies, and US military interrogation records, it seeks to more closely examine the experiences of individuals.[2] While many scholars have studied Koreans in Manchuria, much of the existing analysis remains grounded in state policies or memoirs written long after the 1945–1950 period. This article relies primarily on sources produced during that period and seeks to delve into the experiences of individuals. Of course, each type of source has its limitations. For instance, autobiographies of returnees often omit negative accounts of life in Communist-controlled areas; interrogation records may emphasize the failures of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s policies; and the Korean edition of the *Jilin ribao* may obscure ethnic tensions or downplay individual criticism of CCP policies. Even so, combining these varied sources allows this paper to capture Korean

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the Chinese Civil War—to North Korea in 1949–1950, on the eve of the Korean War. Migration often operates through political and military institutions, as well as through migrant networks. As Manning and Trimmer remind us, "other migrants were impressed into military forces, expelled from their homeland, or taken into captivity by raiding parties" (Manning and Trimmer 2020, 8). This article, however, will focus on the migration of Koreans who moved through migrant networks.

2. Most North Korean autobiographies were handwritten between 1947 and 1949 and submitted for review to institutions such as universities, schools, and various party or state agencies. Suzy Kim (2013) and Kim Jae-ung (2020) are among scholars who have recognized their value and made active use of them as historical sources. On the Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS), the US military body that produced interrogation reports, see S. Lee (2018). In this article, *Jilin ribao* refers to its Korean-language edition, which, while functioning as a local CCP organ, also conveyed the voices of local Koreans. There was even criticism that coverage of news about Korea should be reduced (*Jilin ribao* 1947e).

migrants' lived experiences more vividly and comprehensively.

This article is organized into three sections. The first explores the choices Koreans faced in deciding whether to remain in or leave Manchuria, highlighting personal motivations and episodes of violence in the immediate post-liberation period. The second reexamines CCP-led land reform not merely as a benevolent project of settlement, but as a disruptive intervention whose unintended consequences included flows of out-migration. The third examines the processes of return and resettlement in North Korea, with particular attention to the migrant networks that enabled and shaped these homecomings. By tracing these migration trajectories, this paper identifies the early foundations of transnational mobility between North Korea and China. It focuses on Manchurian returnees to North Korea, arguing that the return migrations of the post-liberation period established enduring cross-border networks.

Chaotic Liberation: Migration for Survival

> *Myeong-hwan stepped outside, eager to share his joy with anyone he might encounter. He had imagined the streets overflowing with Manchurians celebrating their liberation from Japanese rule. But he couldn't see a single person—not in the alleyways, nor on the main street…It was still early in the afternoon, not yet two o'clock, but the city lay in an uncanny stillness. Myeong-hwan couldn't understand what was behind the silence.*
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> —Kim Man-seon, "Dual Citizenship" ('Ijung gukjeok'; quoted in Kim Man-seon [1948, 63])

While August 15 is commonly remembered as a joyous moment on the Korean Peninsula, liberation unfolded quite differently for residents of Manchuria. Kim Man-seon, a novelist who lived through liberation in Changchun, later rendered these experiences—as shown in the quotation

above—in his literary work.[3] There, even after news of Japan's defeat reached the city, his protagonist Myeong-hwan found no one on the streets rejoicing. Elder Park, his father, heard that some Koreans and Chinese are fleeing alongside Japanese refugees, trying to escape the Soviet invasion. But for Park's family, ethnic conflict arrived first. Myeong-hwan and Elder Park soon witnessed Chinese people attacking and looting both Japanese and Koreans. Elder Park initially believed his family would be safe—he had been naturalized and received Chinese citizenship after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931. However, to the local Chinese, Elder Park was still seen as a Korean—and nearly lost his life as a result. Like Elder Park's family, many Koreans in Manchuria became victims of violence and were ultimately forced to flee. This stood in stark contrast to liberation in Korea, famously captured in images of jubilant crowds smiling in the streets after learning of Japan's surrender.

Why did Koreans encounter violence and anxiety amidst the disorder of post-liberation Manchuria? Ethnic tensions between Koreans and Chinese in the region had deep historical roots. Hyun Ok Park's study shows how Japanese imperial expansion facilitated Korean migration into Manchuria, which in turn contributed to conflicts between Koreans and Chinese (H. O. Park 2005). After the founding of Manchukuo, local Manchurians—primarily Chinese—viewed Koreans as "second-tier citizens" (*ideung gongmin*), in part because some middle-class Koreans gained positions as officials or obtained professional jobs such as teachers and doctors. As Koreans in Manchuria were seen as beneficiaries of Japanese rule, retaliatory violence emerged as an act of revenge.[4] Ethnic violence was perhaps the most visible legacy of Japanese rule and Manchukuo's governance. Clashes among Manchuria's ethnic groups demonstrate that the "ethnic harmony" envisioned by Japanese colonialists was nothing more than an illusion (Yun 2013).

In major Manchurian cities—particularly Shenyang and Changchun—

3. In addition to "Dual Citizenship," Kim Man-seon (1948) depicted Korean returnees from Manchuria in his collection of literary works, *Amnokgang*.
4. However, other scholars, including Suk-jung Han, have noted that most Koreans were poor farmers living in the countryside. For Koreans' status in Manchukuo compared to other ethnic groups, see Han (2011).

Koreans appear to have been more exposed to violence. A crucial factor was the presence of Japanese residents. As Louise Young notes, in Manchukuo, "Urban Manchuria was not only being designed and built by Japanese, it was being populated by them as well" (Young 1998, 250). After liberation, this demographic composition fueled hostility against the Japanese and inflamed ethnic tensions. Korean sources from these cities frequently mention such violence. For example, Choe Song Sam, a Korean War POW, stated that many Koreans had lived in Shenyang, but after August 15, they began to leave due to various forms of abuse by the Chinese, including "race riots, stealing, burning of homes, murders." He added that "in Shenyang, the Chinese and Korean communities clearly did not maintain good relations" (ATIS No. 4447). These ethnic conflicts later evolved into attacks by so-called "Manchurian bandits."[5]

The Soviet invasion of Manchuria also played a key role in triggering mass migration. Moreover, the Soviet forces showed little interest in maintaining order—instead, they looted and confiscated local residents' property.[6] While North Korean and Chinese narratives typically portrayed the Soviet Army as a "liberator," exceptions emerged, particularly in cities like Shenyang. Reflecting on his experience, one North Korean returnee recalled that the "historic August 15 liberation … brought about no ideological shift or change in me at the time. [In Shenyang,] there was nothing but looting among ethnic groups … I came to harbor a deep resentment toward the Soviet Army."[7]

Similar experiences were recorded by Manchurian Japanese, who described suffering from violence and lawlessness following the Soviet

5. Ed Pulford (2021) shows that banditry in Manchuria had deep historical roots and involved all ethnic groups, not only the Chinese. In post-liberation Manchuria, however, Korean sources often portrayed bandits as non-Korean and stressed their ethnicity.
6. For example, Odd Arne Westad writes that "the brutal behavior of Soviet troops toward civilians during the initial period of the occupation of the Manchurian cities created a major problem for CCP propaganda efforts in the Northeast….The Chinese Communists found the rapes, murders, and robberies committed by Soviet soldiers politically inexplicable" (Westad 1993, 86–87).
7. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 147, Yang Hyeong-gwan.

invasion and the collapse of Manchukuo. While Japanese experiences provide a useful point of comparison, Koreans had more autonomy in returning.[8] Japanese civilians required institutional support to repatriate. Of course, their first reaction—much like that of Koreans—was to flee violence. Some even fled to southern Korea, as in the well-known case of the Japanese woman Fujiwara Tei, who managed to reach Busan and eventually secure repatriation (Fujiwara 1949). However, few Japanese could return to Japan without official assistance.[9] By contrast, Korean returnees could cross the Korean-Chinese border largely on their own. Most did so without state assistance—except for limited evacuations from Nationalist zones.[10]

After the August 15 liberation, the most common response among Koreans was to return immediately to Korea. Scholars generally agree that the immediate post-liberation period was the most intense phase of out-migration for Manchurian Koreans (Li 2009, 31–36; D. Kim 2022, 142–143). Return dates in North Korean autobiographies are also primarily recorded between August 1945 and early 1946. However, these journeys were rarely smooth. Many left in haste, abandoning property. Even a Yanbian Korean newspaper warned residents against hastily selling property without clear plans (*Yeonbyeon minbo*, November 17, 1945). Returning was fraught with danger. Kim Jin-won, a returnee from Liaoning, recalled that all of his property was robbed on the way to Korea; he and his family returned "with empty hands" to their "beloved homeland."[11]

Return conditions varied by region. In eastern Manchuria, most

8. As Li Haiyan has noted, "The most distinctive feature of the repatriation of Koreans is that they received no support from public institutions and had to repatriate almost entirely on their own" (Li 2009, 31).
9. While this example comes from southern Korea, Lori Watt notes that some Japanese returned home through unofficial channels, often hitching rides on Korean fishing boats—one account even describes a child tied to a small boat during a three-day journey from Busan to Hakata (Watt 2009, 65–66).
10. As Nationalist defeat loomed, Koreans in Manchuria were evacuated with US military assistance to North China, then transported from Tianjin to Incheon. Yeom In-ho analyzes this exodus in detail using Korean newspapers from Nationalist zones and interviews (Yeom 2010, 640–677).
11. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 145, Kim Jin-won.

Koreans could cross the border on foot. Yanbian—the most Korean-concentrated region in Manchuria—borders northern Korea along the Duman (Tumen) River. Given the river's shallowness and the difficulty of patrolling it, crossings were historically common and remain so today.[12] Heo Hyeon-suk, born and raised in Hunchun, recalled: "In the year of liberation, on August 15, we left Hunchun and moved to our new home in Ryongjeong [Chinese: Longjing]. Then, in May 1946, we left Ryongjeong; after crossing the waters of the Tumen River in the middle of the night, we found ourselves in Namyang [northern Korea]."[13]

Like the Duman case, the Amnok River had its own distinct historical dynamic, characterized by rampant smuggling, as Joseph Seeley (2024) notes. After the end of empire, however, Soviet authorities on the North Korean side tightly controlled the Amnok River bridge, reserving trains for military use. As discussed in the introduction, Chong-sik Lee, who was in Liaoyang in 1947, recounted how he and his family had to smuggle themselves across the border by boat (C. Lee 2020). For those in northern cities such as Harbin, returning immediately proved even more difficult. Jeong Pan-ryong, a well-known Korean intellectual in today's Yanbian region, recalled his dilemma while living in Hedong, Heilongjiang Province:

> Although Japan had been defeated, we Koreans in China were left uncertain about what to do next. Returning to Korea seemed impossible since traveling from this far-off northern Manchurian region to Korea required at least a few hundred won, money we simply didn't have.… Consequently, those in Hedong who had some money began heading to Yanbian to return to Korea. However, the majority of [Hedong's residents] wanted to return to Korea but lacked the means to do so. (Jungguk joseonjok cheongnyeon hakhoe 1992, 261)

Thus, not all Koreans in Manchuria chose or were able to return. Faced

12. Nianshen Song notes these historical continuities in the epilogue of his work (Song 2018, 270–271).
13. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 147, Heo Hyeon-suk.

with uncertain prospects, many fled to nearby cities and villages with large Korean populations. Lee Nam Yong, a Korean War POW raised in Hunchun, recalled that Korean refugees arrived in Hunchun in large numbers, increasing the city's Korean population to 50 percent. According to his account, many fled due to "race riots" in their original towns (ATIS No. 4426).

The civil war, which erupted following the Soviet withdrawal in early 1946, further intensified migration. Seo Il-won, a teacher in Harbin, returned to Korea in May 1946 as the war escalated. He recalled: "As the situation in China changed with the Nationalist reactionary army's recapture of Changchun and their move toward Harbin, the number of colleagues returning to Korea rapidly increased day by day."[14] Propaganda against the opposing side fueled fear and led many to consider migration. *Jilin ribao* (Korean edition) reported on Korean suffering in Nationalist-controlled areas, describing a wave of refugees moving eastward. One elder said: "It was impossible for Koreans to live in the Nationalist zones. Had we known how favorable [the Communist Party's] liberated zones were, we would have relocated here much sooner" (*Jilin ribao* 1947a).

How many Koreans left Manchuria for Korea after liberation? Scholars have attempted to estimate the number of returnees using archival documents from the US and Soviet occupation forces in Korea. However, it remains difficult to determine an exact figure because Korean return migration was largely self-reliant, informal, and beyond official channels. Accurately calculating the number would require a separate, dedicated study. But, if we follow Park Keong-suk's estimate that the Korean population in Manchuria approached two million in 1945, at the time of liberation, and compare it with Chinese census data—the CCP Northeast Bureau's June 1949 report recording 1,109,492 ethnic Koreans in the Northeast—we can infer that roughly 900,000 Koreans returned, either to North or South Korea, in the immediate post-liberation period (K. Park 2009).[15]

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14. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 147, Seo Il-won.
15. "Dongbei de shaoshu minzu gongzuo" 東北的少數民族工作 (Work on Ethnic Minorities in the Northeast), 1949 June, in Dongbei jiefangqu caizheng jingji shi bianxie zu (1988,

Escaping Revolution

Revisiting Land Reform

Despite the chaos and uncertainty that followed the collapse of the Japanese Empire, many Koreans remained in Northeast China—a sharp contrast to the near-total repatriation of Japanese settlers, apart from small numbers of professionals, technicians (King 2016), and orphans (Tamanoi 2008, 84–114). Through the dislocation and violence of civil war, Manchurian Koreans came to be recognized as an ethnic minority within the People's Republic of China, a process explored in a substantial body of scholarship (Ahn 2013; Cathcart 2010; Im 2019; C. Kim 2004; D. Kim 2022; W. Lee 2015; Li 2009; Shin 2018; Yeom 2010).

Why, then, did so many Koreans—about one million—decide to stay? Still, the official narrative in China provides a compelling explanation: Korean peasants remained because they were the primary beneficiaries of the CCP's land reform (Zhongguo kexueyuan minzu yanjiusuo and Jilin shaoshu minzu shehui lishi diaochazu 1964, 134–147). Positive evaluations of the land reform were also evident in sources produced outside China. For instance, Kwon Chae Ung, a Korean War POW, who was in Shancheng Town (now part of Tonghua City) during land reform, stated that he "felt that the land reform was to his advantage and to the advantage of all the farmers in the village. The farmers did not have to face as many hardships as they did during the Japanese occupation" (ATIS No. 4435).

While the CCP's land reform undoubtedly helped many Koreans settle in Northeast China, another dimension of the revolution—its radical nature—also produced exiles and returnees, fueling migration flows back to Korea. It was accompanied by violence and upheaval, prompting many Koreans to leave.[16] Rather than examining CCP policies toward Koreans

425–427). According to the 1953 national census, the total Korean population in China was 1,120,405 (Jin 1993, 2–3).

16. Suzanne Pepper has noted, "The sensational reports of struggle meetings, liquidations, beatings, and executions were too numerous and too widespread to be dismissed as the work of a few overzealous or misguided local cadres" (Pepper 1999, 208). This contrasts

as a whole, this section focuses on how land reform specifically shaped Korean migration patterns, particularly in Yanbian, a region with a high concentration of Koreans.

*Landlords and "*hangan*" on the Run*

Landlords and rich peasants were among the primary targets of the CCP's land reform. Although the scale and intensity of the reforms varied over time, depending on directives from the CCP Central Committee (Pepper 1999), those groups were consistently subjected to class struggles. Struggle meetings, often marked by violence and public humiliation, resulted in landlords losing their property, suffering beatings, and in some cases, being killed. Many sought to escape by fleeing to other villages or towns. Matthew Noellert's study of Shuangcheng County near Harbin shows that while it carried risks, "escape was a real and relatively safe option" for targets of land reform (Noellert 2020, 160). North Korea witnessed a similar pattern, with many landlords fleeing southward (S. Kim 2013, 84).

In Korean communities in Manchuria, many landlords initially fled to nearby towns. One example from Yanbian tells of a landlord who attempted to escape following criticism at a struggle meeting. Though he owned land elsewhere, he was eventually captured while trying to flee again with his father and brother (*Jilin ribao* 1947f). Recognizing these escape attempts, CCP cadres implemented countermeasures. In May 1946, the Yanji County formed local militias and self-defense groups to apprehend fleeing landlords. As a result, "many bad elements who attempted to flee due to fear of the struggle meetings were captured" (*Jilin ribao* 1947c). In Yanji, "some landlords tried to avoid struggle meetings by posing as poor and hiding among refugees or staying at relatives' homes" (*Jilin ribao* 1947i).

The CCP worked to restrict the mobility of landlords through measures such as requiring travel permits. For example, in one Dunhua village, the peasant association implemented a rule stating that landlords needed a guarantor and official approval to travel (*Jilin ribao* 1947b). Despite such

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with the relatively smooth process in North Korea (Cumings 1981, 416).

restrictions, some landlords managed to evade capture. In Yanji, a rich peasant helped his relative obtain a permit to flee to Tumen (*Jilin ribao* 1948b). Bribery was also common; some cadres were criticized for issuing passes to landlords in exchange for favors (*Jilin ribao* 1947j).

Former Manchukuo officials and professionals were also targeted. After liberation, these individuals became targets of mass retaliation. One example is Lee Hyong Ch'ol, a Korean War POW born in Yanji. His father, who had served as a police official under the Japanese name "Matsusira Arishige," was executed in September 1945, shortly after Japan's surrender. The following month, Lee fled to Korea with his mother and sisters (ATIS No. 4369). Koreans who had worked for the Manchukuo regime were often labeled *hangan* (*hanjian* in Chinese)—a term denoting "traitors" allied with the Japanese empire—and became targets of reprisal. Under Communist rule, they were subjected to struggle meetings. In Mudanjiang, Heilongjiang Province, Yu Hui Jae, a Korean War POW, described a "People's Trial" of Kim Tong Yol, the Korean vice mayor of the city. According to the report, in December 1947, Kim was nearly beaten to death during the trial (ATIS No. 4352).

In these circumstances, for Korean *feudal elements*, escape to Korea became a means of survival, relying on migrant networks. Paek Chong Hwan, another Korean War POW, was born in Yanji and began teaching in 1946. By the end of that year, however, his family's land was confiscated, and he was dismissed from his post for allegedly promoting capitalist ideas. Facing political pressure, he fled to Buryeong, North Korea, in January 1948 and found refuge at his sister's home (ATIS No. 4336). There is no evidence that North Korea monitored or repatriated such individuals. For the CCP, simply removing members of the rural elite may have been sufficient. As Pepper observes, "The primary component of the land revolution in this regard was the overthrow of the existing rural elite" (Pepper 1999, 329).

Ethnic Conflict and Class Struggle

Ethnic tensions continued to trouble the CCP. Internal records show that at a July 16, 1946 meeting, the Jilin Committee prioritized "the problem of ethnic relations and unity." At the meeting, Committee Secretary Chen Zhengren

cautioned that unresolved ethnic issues could jeopardize the CCP's ability to consolidate its revolutionary base.[17] To address this, CCP authorities framed land reform in terms of class struggle, aiming to supersede ethnic identity. A March 1947 *Jilin ribao* article cited the Yanji Work Team's conclusions:

> This issue cannot be resolved solely by educating a few cadres.…We must mobilize Chinese and Korean masses for class struggle, enhancing their resolve for their class and strengthening their class unity. In this way, we can achieve ethnic unity. (*Jilin ribao* 1947d)

Despite this ideological emphasis, unity was elusive. In a Helong County meeting, local cadres admitted that "The Koreans and Chinese failed to embrace the conviction that 'the poor are one family'" (*Jilin ribao* 1947h). In reality, Korean and Chinese peasants tended to live in separate communities with limited interaction. As a Korean POW Ch'oe Hong Sik, a Yanji native, observed: "the Koreans and Chinese lived and confined their social activities to within their respective communities" (ATIS No. 4325). Rather than fostering solidarity, land reform may have heightened ethnic tensions. In one telling example, a Chinese landlord remarked, "If people are going to confiscate my stuff, I hope the Chinese peasants will take all of it. Anyway, I hope Koreans don't touch my stuff" (*Jilin ribao* 1947i).

North Korean sources also acknowledge these tensions. Around this time, Rim Chun-chu—a close associate of Kim Il-sung—was sent to Yanbian (Rim 2011, 20–36). According to official narratives, Rim was sent to mitigate ethnic conflict and encourage ethnic Koreans to contribute to the Communist victory in China. These sources claim that certain "ultra-left" elements of the CCP pursued a radical "poor peasant line," leading to the confiscation of Korean property and purging of Korean cadres (Rim 2011, 20–22). As a result, some Korean soldiers reportedly began voicing frustration, saying, "having shed so much blood and endured such sacrifice,

17. "Chen Zhengren tongzhi zai shengwei kuodahui shang dui xingshi yu jinhou fangzhen de fayan" 陳正人同志在省委擴大會上對形勢與今後方針的發言 (July 16, 1946) (Jilin Provincial Archives 1984, 20–26).

it was now time to return to our homeland" (Gil and Ri 2008, 217). Such accounts show how ethnic conflict during land reform shaped Korean decisions to return.[18]

Migration as Policy

Although the CCP presented land reform as a strategy to uplift the peasantry, some Koreans encountered it as a period marked by shortage and state-led resettlement. During the civil war, Korean refugees migrated toward more secure areas, particularly Korean-majority regions like Yanbian. In Wangqing County, this influx led to serious food shortages: "New immigrants arrived—numbering as many as 400 households—causing a sudden and severe shortage of food" (*Jilin ribao* 1947g).

To relieve such pressure, local officials encouraged migration to less populated areas.[19] In one Yanji village, a Korean peasant urged relocation, arguing: "in our village, there is too little land and too many people … let us all move to Emu County, where there is more land and fewer people." According to the article, 41 households—34 Korean and 7 Chinese—joined the relocation effort (*Jilin ribao* 1947k). Despite the CCP's efforts, discontent persisted. A November 1948 policy Q&A from the Jilin government noted the return of migrants from Emu to Yanji: "Q: There are many migrants in Emu returning to Yanji who are requesting land distribution or permission to cultivate new land. How should this be handled?" (Zhonggong Jilin shengwei dangshi yanjiushi and Jilin Provincial Archives 2013, 416).

18. Yeom In-ho skillfully analyzes how Koreans were ousted and lost their influence in Yanbian during the CCP's land reform campaign (Yeom 2010, 127–174). Kim Dong-gil, drawing on Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean sources, also notes that Koreans in Manchuria suffered discrimination, which contributed to their return to Korea (D. Kim 2022, 154–156). Interestingly, North Korean sources tend to dissociate these developments from Beijing's policies, instead attributing them to the actions of so-called local "leftist opportunists." For North Korean materials discussing ethnic conflicts involving Koreans in Manchuria, see Rim (2011, 20–36) and Gil and Ri (2008, 216–217).

19. On the migration policy, see "Jidong zhuanshu guanyu yimin gongzuo de jueding" 吉東專署關於移民工作的決定 (Decision of the Jidong Administrative Office on Migration) (December 25, 1947) (Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture Archives 1985, 375–379).

Moreover, fear and uncertainty were common among migrants. In Dunhua, one Korean migrant group said: "We heard in Yanbian that if we came here, we would have to live in 'Magyajeu [sic]' houses [馬架子, mud huts], which don't even have doors" (*Jilin ribao* 1948a). Some Koreans chose to leave China. The same Jilin document recorded this question: "Q: Some Koreans currently returning to Korea are requesting to sell their land. Should this be permitted?" (Zhonggong Jilin shengwei dangshi yanjiushi and Jilin Provincial Archives 2013, 416).

While land reform helped settle many Koreans in Manchuria, it also triggered significant instability and out-migration. For landlords, rich peasants, and former Manchukuo officials, return migration offered a way to escape political persecution. For ordinary peasants, ethnic tension, land scarcity, and dissatisfaction with resettlement policies made returning to Korea a viable option.

Returnees to North Korea

Homecomings were remembered most for the joy of reunion with loved ones. Jang Seong-jin, who studied in Japan before being drafted into the Japanese military in Mudanjiang, reflected on the liberation of August 15: "After liberation, when I returned home, my parents' joy was indescribable.… Relatives and friends, whom I hadn't seen for years, were also genuinely happy to see me. At that moment, I realized once again how precious my homeland truly is."[20] Like Jang, most Korean returnees went to their hometowns, where their families, relatives, and friends lived.

Family often played a critical role in the decision to migrate. Hwang Ok-gyun was originally from Hamgyongbuk-do but had spent most of his life in Northeast China. Hwang attended a Japanese middle school and enrolled at Meiji University. To avoid conscription, he returned to Manchuria in November 1943 and witnessed the August 15 liberation there.[21] While

20. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 149, Jang Seong-jin.

21. Fleeing was a common response by Koreans to Japan's wartime mobilization during

studying at Longjing Medical College, he left school and moved to North Korea in December 1946. His return was prompted by his father, who had gone back earlier in July of that year to join the North Korean Communist Party. That December, Hwang followed with his grandmother and seven other relatives, returning to what he called his "longed-for homeland." Although he had not lived in Korea since migrating as a toddler, his father's earlier decision appears to have significantly influenced his own.[22]

Even young Koreans born and raised in Manchuria joined the return journey to Korea. Rim In-sun, in her autobiography, recalled the discrimination she experienced as a student in Manchuria before liberation, noting that Korean students were few in number and treated as the lowest-ranking group in class. After liberation, her circumstances improved when her family moved to Yanji, where she attended a school composed entirely of Korean students—an environment that gave her a newfound sense of belonging. Nevertheless, despite these positive developments, her family ultimately decided to leave for Korea: "But in China, as rumors spread that Chiang Kai-shek's Central Army was approaching, I had to leave my hometown [Yanbian], which I did not want to leave. However, the joy of arriving in my fatherland, which I had never seen before, is beyond words." After crossing the border, she resumed her studies at Chongjin University of Education in North Korea.[23]

Even without immediate family in Korea, returnees often relied on extended relatives for support in resettlement. Heo Won-seok was also effectively a native of Manchuria. Although born in 1919 in Hoeryeong, Hamgyongbuk-do, he moved there with his family during childhood. He wrote that he "didn't even know Korea was my homeland," and regarded Yilan, a town in Yanji, as his true home. In February 1948, he crossed the border into North Korea. Although he did not specify the reason for his

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World War II. Brandon Palmer notes that, in colonial Korea, many young men sought to evade conscription by "hiding with relatives, moving to another city without notifying authorities, or fleeing to Manchuria," describing these acts as "methods of resistance" (Palmer 2013, 87).

22. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 151, Hwang Ok-gyun.
23. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 147, Rim In-sun.

return, he wrote: "Coming back to Hoeryeong, the place where I was born, I thought about the hardships my parents must have endured here, and I consider it an honor to be working as a teacher at Hoeryeong Girls' Senior Middle School." While his parents and brothers remained in Northeast China, Heo likely received support from relatives in Hoeryeong to resettle.[24]

Some returnees relied more on friends and personal connections than on family. Park Song-hak was born in 1908 in Gilju, Hamgyongbuk-do. After his father died, he moved to Mokpo to live with maternal uncles who were active in the anti-Japanese movement. Their influence shaped his own political stance. After his return to Hamgyongbuk-do, he joined rural enlightenment campaigns, organized anti-Japanese activities, and built networks with other activists. These activities led to his arrest and an eight-month imprisonment in Chongjin—but also laid the foundation for future relationships. After enduring further arrests and financial hardship, Park moved to Manchuria in 1934 with help from a friend and began teaching physics and mathematics. After Japan's surrender, he remained in Manchuria and taught at Longjing Medical College. In June 1946, with the support of acquaintances—likely friends from his earlier activism—he returned to Korea with his wife and seven children, ending a 13-year stay abroad.[25]

Some were able to resettle through broader migrant networks that extended beyond family and friends. Hong Wan-myeong, originally from Hamgyongnam-do but raised in Hunchun, returned to Korea in late 1947 without stating a clear reason. He obtained a teaching position in Chongjin—outside his hometown—through a recommendation from a colleague he had known during his student days in Hunchun.[26] Similarly, Ahn Byeong-in, a high school teacher in Sariwon, was born and raised in Jilin Province and had never been to Korea before. In May 1946, at his brother's suggestion, he moved to North Korea to avoid the advancing Nationalist forces. Although he initially struggled to find employment in Sariwon, he later secured a teaching position through a recommendation

24. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 145, Heo Won-seok.
25. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 151, Park Song-hak.
26. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 149. Hong Wan-myeong.

from his brother's friend.[27]

Many returnees left behind family, neighbors, and colleagues, suggesting the emergence of transnational migrant networks linking China and North Korea. As mentioned, Hong Wan-myeong lived in Korea with his wife and children, but his father remained in Helong, his brother served in the CCP military in Shenyang, and other relatives stayed in Hunchun. Only one brother had settled in North Korea as a Workers' Party member.[28] Ahn Byeong-in also noted that his family remained in Manchuria: one brother was a CCP member and chief editor at the Yanbian Education Press, two others worked in a trading company, and his mother, who initially crossed with him, later returned to Manchuria.[29] Similarly, Heo Won-seok settled in Hoeryeong in early 1948, but his résumé indicates that his parents and brothers continued to live and work across Longjing, Yanji, and Changchun. He likely maintained contact with them after his return.[30]

Beyond family, some returnees left behind colleagues and professional ties. Ryeo Chang-beom, born in Yanji County, lost contact with his father, a communist who fled to the Soviet Union. Raised by his uncle, Ryeo graduated from Harbin Medical University and worked as a physician in northern Manchuria. After the Soviet declaration of war on Japan in August 1945, he fled to Longjing and began teaching at the newly established Longjing Medical College. In June 1946, his wife's family moved to Chongjin and urged him to follow. Though hesitant—especially as his students pleaded with him to stay—he continued teaching until December, then relocated to Korea. In January 1947, he joined the founding faculty of Chongjin Medical College. His case reflects a broader pattern of Koreans returning while leaving behind professional networks in China.[31]

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge the agency of these migrants. Although wartime chaos and the Chinese Civil War shaped the context of return, external pressures alone do not explain the range of personal

27. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 150, Ahn Byeong-in.
28. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 149, Hong Wan-myeong.
29. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 150, Ahn Byeong-in.
30. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 145, Heo Won-seok.
31. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 147, Ryeo Chang-beom.

motivations. Many sought to reunite with family, support a liberated homeland, or care for aging parents. Among these motives, the pursuit of education stands out. Some returnees noted they came to North Korea specifically to continue their studies. While this may reflect the institutional bias of autobiographical sources—often drawn from North Korean schools—it also reflects the reality that no Korean university existed until Yanbian University opened in March 1949. For young Koreans, North Korea offered an accessible path to higher education.

One such example is Park So-hee, an exceptional woman. Born in 1928 in Jiaohe, Jilin Province, Park came from a poor family, and her father had no plans to support her education. Her first trip to Korea was unplanned: a distant relative, recently hired as a teacher in Yeongbyeon, Pyonganbuk-do, encouraged her to study there, noting that tuition was affordable. Thanks to this support, Park enrolled in a girls' school on April 3, 1943, and quickly discovered a passion for learning. She studied in Yeongbyeon until March 1945, when health problems forced her to return to China—where she witnessed the August 15 liberation. In March 1946, determined to continue her education, she moved with her mother to Jeongju County in Pyonganbuk-do and enrolled in a girls' middle school. After losing contact with her father, her mother returned to China in early 1947, leaving Park to pursue her studies alone. Relying on help from her older sister, she later lived with her in Kwaksan, also in Pyonganbuk-do, and remained deeply committed to her education. As she wrote, "I always had the hope of continuing my studies tucked away in a corner of my heart—it never disappeared." On April 5, 1948, she was admitted to the Chemistry Department at Sinuiju Education University. Later, she reconnected with her family in China and received a letter from her father:

> Since last winter [1948], I have received news from my parents in Northeast China. In his letter, my father told me not to worry about my parents or younger siblings and urged me to devote myself fully to my studies so that I could serve the people under the flag of the Republic. When I received that letter, my heart was filled with sorrow.

Although Park So-hee was born and raised in Northeast China and became separated from her parents after liberation, she concluded her autobiography with a strong resolve to study hard and dedicate herself to the nation.[32]

Conclusion: Korean Networks Across Borders

In the aftermath of liberation, Koreans in Manchuria found themselves on the margins of new political orders they neither designed nor fully understood. Stranded between collapsing empires and emerging nation-states, they faced the pressing need to move—but without the benefit of institutional guidance or state-sponsored repatriation. Whether under the Nationalists or Communists, Koreans in Manchuria endured deep uncertainty. Migration, in this context, was not a choice made under stable conditions but an improvised tactic of survival.

This post-liberation period—short and chaotic—offered little room for deliberate planning. The five years between 1945 and 1950 was a narrow window of transition compared to the centuries-long history of Korean migration to Manchuria, dating back to the era of Joseon Korea and Qing China. For many Koreans living through the upheaval of the post-imperial period, ending up as citizens of a particular country was less about making a clear choice and more about where they happened to be and who they had around them. In most cases, it was family connections and chance—rather than any formal decision—that shaped where they stayed and what national identity they came to hold. Migration destinations were frequently determined by immediate practical concerns—closeness to family, access to shelter, or existing community ties. Some returned to Korea and eventually became citizens of either North or South Korea, while others remained in China as part of the newly recognized ethnic minority, their national affiliations shaped more by circumstance than intention.

In moments of political collapse, people turned to what they had always relied on: family, friends, and community. As Laura Madokoro observes in

32. NARA, RG 242, SA 2005, Entry 299-C, Box 148, Park So-hee.

her study of Chinese refugees to Hong Kong, decisions to flee were often not the product of deliberate calculation but were instead shaped by existing migrant networks: "many people simply followed family and neighbors, with the support of clan and village associations, to safety" (Madokoro 2016, 6). Similarly, many Chinese refugees arrived in Taiwan as family members of Nationalist officials or soldiers, expecting their stay to be temporary—a sentiment later described as the "sojourner mentality" (Yang 2020, 88). Much like its effects on Chinese society (Lary 2015, 208–212), the Chinese Civil War brought about extensive family separations and social dislocation among Korean communities in Manchuria.

Yet from a broader social perspective, these displacements ultimately contributed to the formation and expansion of transnational Korean networks connecting Northeast China with North Korea. Cross-border population movements between the two states continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Some eventually became North Korean citizens by participating in the Korean War and resettling there. Others moved to North Korea later in response to social turmoil in China, such as the Great Leap Forward, which severely disrupted ethnic Korean communities (Yun 2017). This movement was not unidirectional. During and after the Korean War, North Korean refugees and orphans also crossed into Northeast China (Moon 2022). In more recent decades, ethnic Korean communities in the region have continued to serve as key destinations for North Korean refugees.

To be sure, the state was present—and assertive. Political authorities in Pyongyang and Beijing negotiated movements, dispatched soldiers, and mobilized labor. Scholars utilizing materials from the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs archive—recently declassified but now restricted again—have demonstrated that the movement of ethnic Koreans, including the deployment of Korean soldiers and workers from China during the Korean War, was largely driven by negotiations between North Korean and Chinese leaders (Cathcart and Kraus 2011; Shen and Xia 2020).

Nevertheless, these migrations were not entirely top-down processes. I believe that Korean migrants were also able to cross borders, motivated in part by transnational migrant networks and the hope of reuniting with

family members and friends across national boundaries. Even in state-led migration, individuals may have carved out small spaces of choice—much like workers negotiating the routines of everyday life in postwar North Korea (C. H. Kim 2018)—with migrant networks serving as informal pathways that made such choices possible. These networks provided essential resources—guidance, shelter, and means of mobility—during a time of revolution and war. Even the mobilization of overseas Koreans by North Korea during the 1950s and 1960s was likely enabled by the grassroots strength of these transnational networks (Jaeeun Kim 2020). Therefore, the migrations of Koreans serve as a revealing thread through which to trace the distinctive relationship between North Korea and China—two societies where restricted mobility is often considered a defining characteristic (Schmid 2018).

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