

# From Liberation to the Great Leap Forward: Ethnic Koreans and Assimilation in Northeast China, 1945-1962

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## Introduction

In September 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will celebrate the seventieth anniversary of its establishment of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Separated from North Korea by the narrow Tumen River, the six counties of the Yanbian prefecture constitute the easternmost edge of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Jilin province. The Chinese Koreans who live in Yanbian are known as *Chosunjok* or *Chaioxianzu* (朝鲜族), and have been characterized as a “model minority” within the PRC (Gao, 2008; Schubert-Zhang, 2016). They are also one of the most transnational of groups, given their ties to ethnic Koreans in Russia, Central Asia, the two rival Koreas on the adjacent peninsula, and Japan. Recent research demonstrates how interlinked their population has become with South Korea and the global economy (Park, 2015), and historians of the Cold War have recognized the transnational movement of *Chosunjok* between China and North Korea as significant (Shen and Xia, 2014). Today, Chinese Koreans in Yanbian and beyond deserve our critical attention, particularly as the CCP continues to deepen and accelerate its assimilationist drive toward ethnic minority groups along its securitized peripheries (Ma 2018; Zhao and Xu, 2017). The construction of Chinese Korean identity, and the inclusion post-1945 of Koreans within a communist Chinese polity, were both difficult processes. In the immediate aftermath of Japanese imperial rule over both Korea and Manchuria/Northeast China, Koreans were faced with an array of confounding and often deadly choices about political loyalty, national identity, political allegiance, and cultural orientation. Ultimately, those who did not depart for the Korean peninsula in the late 1940s were considered among the most politically loyal and strategically significant of China's minority ethnicities, a perception that was consolidated by their important service to the CCP and the socialist bloc during the 1950-1953 Korean War. However, as work by Dong Jo Shin (2016; 2021) has demonstrated, the Maoist mass movements unleashed in the late 1950s would shake these bonds to the Party and call into question the CCP's own ability to endow a ‘minority nationality’ with genuine cultural and political autonomy. In the Great Leap Forward and the political turbulence that preceded and birthed it, the CCP began to single out the presence of what they called ‘local nationalism’ (地方民族主义 / *difang minzuzhuyi*) among ethnic Korean intellectuals and leaders, seeing it as a threat to Maoist political hegemony. With the cooling off of the Great Leap in 1962 and the arrival of Zhou Enlai in Yanbian that year, some of the worst excesses were rolled back, but hundreds of Korean Chinese targeted for cultural persecution were not ‘rehabilitated’ until 1979, and others did not survive the Cultural Revolution at all. As Kwon (2019, 77) describes it, the latter half of the twentieth century dug traumatic furrows in Yanbian and resulted in a bifurcated sense of identity: “Korean Chinese,” she writes, “have struggled with a duality mainly derived from their geopolitical and ethnic condition—as a group of migrant settlers from the Korean Peninsula *and* as a Chinese ethnic minority”. This chapter will look back at two distinct episodes—during the Chinese civil war and the years around the Great Leap Forward—in order to investigate the assimilation of the *Chosunjok* across periods of time which have received relatively little attention, doing so by focusing on political struggle and language.

## A Chaotic Liberation from Colonial Rule, 1945-1949

When Emperor Hirohito announced Japan's unconditional surrender on August 15, 1945, Koreans in Manchuria (the region known today as Northeast China) were in an ambiguous position. Korea as a nation had been formally annexed by Japan since 1910, and the 1930s had seen a massive acceleration of migration to Manchuria, largely from the peninsula's southern provinces (Kim, 2016, 64). By 1945 there were hundreds of thousands of Koreans who were relatively new migrants into northeast China, alongside others with roots back to the nineteenth century and earlier. In February 1932, with the delayed but vigorous backing from the Japanese state, the Japanese Kwantung Army set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Although the intercourse between Korea and the new Japanese puppet state was idealised as smooth and vital, in fact it was not always easy for Koreans to move between the two states, nor was their legal position in doing so particularly clear (Han, 2004; Han, 2005). An organized Japanese push was initiated to move more Koreans into Manchuria, and then accelerated in 1937 along with a drive to more effectively control undocumented or "stateless" Koreans in the region (Kim, 2014, 122; Kim, 2016, 64-65). In an idealised and propagandized harmony of the races, Koreans were supposed to have been elevated for their service to the Japanese empire. However, the reality was very different. Japanese language education continued for Koreans in Manchukuo, as in Korea itself, although in some villages girls were prevented by their families from attending language classes (Piao and Li, 2013, 185). Some Korean farmers in Manchuria were placed into "strategic hamlets" and isolated from both education and the metropole (Lee, 1967; Han, 1999, 225).

In the autumn of 1945, Japanese power collapsed, and Korean individuals and families in Northeast China faced an intimidating and often dangerous battery of choices (Ahn 2017). These choices—imperatives, really—ranged from surviving and finding food, to avoiding Soviet Red Army looting and rape, to mitigating the desires of the newly arriving Chinese Nationalists/Kuomintang to expropriate Korean-owned property. The CCP offered some hope of land ownership and citizenship in an as-yet-unborn communist republic, but Koreans in Manchuria also faced a core dilemma about repatriation (Kim, 2010). One Soviet document indicated that in the weeks following Japan's surrender, some 800,000 Koreans in Manchuria made a swift decision and repatriated to one of the two occupied halves of the Korean peninsula (Kim, 2014, 122).

There was no shortage of dangers for the Koreans who remained in Shenyang, the largest city in industrial and commercial Manchuria. In one survey by the Shanghai-based Korean Provisional Government, for the year from August 1945 to August 1946, in Shenyang 44 Koreans had been murdered, 63 wounded, 15,450 arrested, 215 Korean women raped, and 123,506 Koreans "subjected to indignities" in the city. Shenyang therefore represented the brunt of atrocities against Koreans in urban areas, although 58 Korean women were reported raped in Jilin city in the same document (Huang, 2013, 173; Kim, 2004, 94). Food rationing hierarchies connected to ethnic identity in Manchukuo (Kim, 2016, 66) became upended, and continued discrimination against Koreans as "secondary devils", a reference to collaboration with Japan (Kraus and Cathcart, 2014, 87). Nevertheless, these pressures did not result in wholesale repatriation of Koreans to the peninsula. The logistical hurdles to repatriation were immense, and not only due to the intensification of warfare in Northeast China. As Kim Chun-seon (2004, 102) explains, North Korea took a "firm position that [it] would not allow massive disorganized entry of Koreans from China" and the main border crossings were policed by Soviet forces into spring 1946.

In Yanbian, Koreans took advantage of the Japanese surrender to immediately set up new organizations, and to take up arms. In the immediate aftermath of Japanese rule, impromptu militias and participation in nascent Chinese Communist Party structures in Yanbian tended to be led by Koreans rather than Han Chinese. However, the Soviet Red Army was the preeminent military force in the area for several months, and itself was a source of

violence against some Koreans. One area where clashes occurred was Nanping, a small river village in Helong county known best today as a contentious border crossing point for North Korean refugees and occasionally hungry Korean People's Army soldiers (Perlez 2015). Soviet troops arrived in Nanping on September 9, 1945, seeking entry to a gathering to a school in which a group of youth were politically organizing. Denied entry by a local militia, the Soviets opened fire, immediately killing nine in the small town (Yanbian History Research Office, 1988, 26, 42). Two other locals who had been badly wounded by the Soviet gunfire in Nanping died shortly thereafter (Xu and Wang, 1992, 620). Friendship associations with the USSR nevertheless continued to grow that autumn, and Korean intellectuals used such affiliations in order to gain access to cultural materials left behind by the Japanese (Yanbian History Research Office, 1988, 55-56). In Hunchun and more rural Wangqing, the Soviets did not prevent representatives of the Nationalist Party/Kuomintang from setting up rival youth organizations like the Three People's Principles Youth League, so the CCP had to set up its own rival "Democratic League (民主同盟 / *minzhu tongmeng*)" for youth (Yanbian History Research Office, 1988, 35-38). While small institutions had to make a choice between Chinese regimes and also navigate the Soviet presence, schools in Yanbian nearly all transitioned away from the Japanese empire immediately, in a process which was, in some cases, accompanied by violence.

In Helong county, the grounds of an elementary school were used as the stage for executions of pro-Japanese landlords. On September 2, 1945, landlord Ri Yong-ch'un was killed; he was a native of Onsŏng-gun, just across the river in northern Korea's Hamgyŏng province, and had been a Chinese citizen for some thirty years prior to his death (Yanbian Cultural History Committee, 1984, 169). The CCP encouraged the production of dramas and local operas to commemorate and guide struggle sessions against class enemies like Ri, focusing on heavily Korean areas on the Chinese side of the border in Tumen and Longjing (Yanbian History Research Office, 1988, 58, 63-64). The stakes for the loyalty encouraged by such productions were high. One writer likened life in Longjing in autumn 1945 to "sitting atop a volcano" amid a "proliferation of traitors, running dogs, police, and secret agents" (Ai, 1990, 39). The arts were an important means of shaping the evolving history of the civil war as it unfolded, as well as emphasizing Yanbian's pre-1945 past as a terrain of anti-Japanese resistance.

Amid the violent uprooting of the colonial past, the CCP was trying to shape emerging new norms for education in Yanbian. By the end of March 1946, thirty-five middle schools had been opened in the region, enrolling nearly 12,000 students, many of whom were seen by the Party as a pool of logistical support in the civil war. Far more numerous were the elementary schools, numbering 388 across the region with an estimated 106,000 students (Yanbian History Research Committee, 1988, 85, 102). Well before the renewed drive for Marxist education in the region, pushed by the ethnic Korean communist leader Chu Tŏkhae / Zhu Dehai, Korean militias were opening their own schools and pushing for education in the history of the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle (Yanbian History Research Committee, 1988, 74, 98). Some students demonstrated their fluency in the argot of resistance by testifying at accusation meetings (控诉会 / *kongsuhui*) against pro-Japanese members of the community. In a November 1946 public trial focusing on retribution for killings of the Hailan River Incident of 1931-1933, a fourteen-year-old boy surnamed Kim testified that, while he himself was still *in utero* at the time, his father's murder in the Hailan River Incident had left him with an agonizing childhood (Han and Yao, 1991, 458).

Changes to education were meant to bring personal transformation to the newly-conscious youth like Kim, linking individual fates to projects of deep yet imperilled political change. One individual involved in uprooting the Japanese educational norms was Kang Sint'ae. Kang had been in close cooperation with Kim Il-sŏng in the Soviet Far East; Kang was named First Secretary of the CCP in Yanji on October 20, 1945. After a busy month of fighting

“bandits” and Party-building, Kang sent out a wide-ranging directive seeking an intensification of political education in the region and the “elimination of slave education,” by which he meant remnants of the old Japanese system (Han and Yao, 1991, 427). Kang would be superseded by the arrival of Zhou Baozhong, an ethnic Bai from southwestern China and a firm representative of Mao Zedong and the politics of the CCP Central Committee. Kang left Yanji in June 1946, went to North Korea, joined the North Korean People’s Army and died in the Korean War, having left behind his legacy in the formation of communist power and education in Yanbian (Kraus and Cathcart 2014, 86).

As the CCP consolidated political power and went through land reform in Yanbian, Korean language education was improved. In March 1947, Longjing Medical University, which would become Yanbian University, started teaching courses in Korean history, Korean geography, and Korean culture (Han and Yao, 1991, 362). An array of new institutions was set up in 1948 and 1949, including Korean-language newspapers like the *Yonbyŏn Ilbo*, or *Yanbian Ribao*. In June 1949, the Party organized five days of debates over Korean language instruction at the elementary and middle school levels (Yanbian Archives, 1990, 136). Yanbian University, the regional centre for research and cultural study of Korean, was formally established in March 1949. Yanbian’s ethnic composition at the end of the 1940s was 76% Korean, with an internal estimate from July 1949 showing 563,080 Koreans out of a total population for the region of 744,620 (Chinese Communist Party Yanbian Committee, 1949, 70). At Yanbian University and elsewhere, the environment was suffused with Maoist argot and the curriculum was unquestionably that approved by the CCP, but it also allowed for multiple routes of connection to, and even modelling on, North Korea (Cathcart, 2010, 38-39, 43-44). During the Korean War, Yanbian sent to North Korea 1,773 laborers with the Chinese army, 2,157 interpreters, and 898 nurses, all ethnic Koreans. Of the 6,981 deaths of individuals from the Yanbian region denoted as having been occurred in North Korea during the Korean War, 98% were ethnic Koreans (Li, 2012, 41). However, in spite of the sacrifices from the region in the Korean War and the legal deepening of autonomous status in 1954 (Schubert-Zhang, 2016, 24), Korean language usage and development would be threatened in Yanbian. Ultimately, in one acrid assessment, “the period from the late 1950s to the late 1970s [would be] culturally sterile and politically brutal for Korean Chinese” (Kwon, 2019, 79).

### **Korean Culture in Yanbian amid Socialist Upsurge, 1957-1962**

The Chinese state would seek to accelerate the drive toward socialism from the mid-1950s, all the while codifying and reshaping its policy toward ethnic minorities around the country, ultimately settling on a recognition of 56 official ethnic groups (Mullaney, 2010). Those years would also see tensions running high with some border regions of the PRC, as the pressures of collectivization and national mobilization for mass campaigns clashed with the norms and expectations of minority nationality groups. The CCP’s drive to collectivize and settle Tibetans in Kham/western Sichuan, as well as in Amdo/Qinghai province were two such arenas where tensions over the speed and character of democratic reforms boiled over into revolt and violence (Li, 2016; Weiner, 2012). The late 1950s also saw migration of Han Chinese growing into areas like Inner Mongolia, creating new assimilationist realities (Schwartz, 1963). In Xinjiang, the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 revealed a wide gulf of trust between Uighurs, Kazakhs, and the Han Chinese bureaucratic class, amid accusations of “local nationalism” (Jacobs, 2016, 192-193), and the subsequent famine stimulated the movement of over two million Han Chinese “hunger refugees” to the region (Joniak-Lüthi, 2013, 160).

In this context, the transnational potential of the Chosun’jok and their ties in particular to North Korea brought suspicion due to their “double” identity. Following on from the pioneering work by Shin (2016 and 2021), looking at impacts of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward through a more transnational lens can add to our broader

understanding of this campaign and how labels such as “revisionist”, “capitalist” were more or less randomly applied to people of non-Chinese identity in order to condemn their non-homogeneity with the Han Chinese. Accusations of “local nationalism” were vague yet powerful, in that they were difficult to refute but also pointed to ethnic difference and transnational potential as a point of weakness in individual and collective striving toward socialism in Yanbian.

The Great Leap Forward did not summon a wave of overt physical violence in Yanbian, but it did result in significant steps back for Korean language education and intellectual life. Accusations of “local nationalism” abounded, particularly levelled at ethnic Korean intellectuals in Yanbian whose efforts to maintain and expand Korean language education were seen as hindering the advancement toward socialism (Shin, 2021, 195-198). While Shin correlates the “anti-local nationalism movement” precisely to the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, Li (2012, 66) shows the campaign’s justification as having roots in a 15 October 1957 Central Committee directive rectifying socialist education in ethnic minority regions. A local Party history (Cui, 1993) dates the movement from spring 1958. Top leaders of the prefecture could refute the more outlandish accusations of localism (Park, 2015, 163) but for Korean intellectuals in Yanbian, they had to bear their burden stoically (Shin, 2021, 195-96). Cultural circles were tarred with labels such as “revisionist”, “right wing capitalist”, “local nationalists”, and “reactionary writers” (Li, 2012, 134). Accordingly the labelling of rightists as targets for political struggle had a sharp impact upon cultural institutions like the Yanbian Daily (Jin, 1988, 50-51). Among reasons for self-criticisms generated within Yanbian Daily and at Yanbian University in spring 1958 were “reluctance to take Chinese nationality, refusal to learn Chinese, discontent over the size and administrative status of self-rule areas, and disapproval of the appointment of Han Chinese officials to administrative positions in self-rule areas”. Nevertheless, in 1958 Yanbian University published a collection of highly critical wall posters from that spring, including essays that compared “the act of making Koreans into Chinese” as no different from Japan’s colonial assimilation policy (Park, 2015, 156-158).

The Great Leap Forward formally arrived in the region in June 1958, when the prefectural Party committee resolved to unleash the movement across the five counties of Yanbian. In July and August, the push for expansion of communes unfolded, including growth in communal kitchens (Li, 2012, 68-69). Yanbian cadre looking for a model for massive collectives were pointed toward Henan, Mao’s home province and a site that would prove to become, in Yang Jisheng’s sprawling assessment, “the epicenter of the disaster” (2008, 23-86). Mao’s personal guidance for communes was haphazard and improvisatory, and advice for how to balance unique needs of nominally autonomous ethnic areas of the PRC with the new agricultural push was undeveloped and scant. In a significant early collection of Mao Zedong’s commentaries on the emerging shape and character of the collectives, entitled *Socialist Upsurge in the Chinese Countryside* (中国农村的社会主义高潮 / *Zhongguo nongcun de shehuizhuyi gaochao*), questions of the role that ethnic difference might play in the campaign only elicited the barest of thought (Mao, 1957a; 1957b). While Yanbian did not have the same tensions between ethnographic and political overlap as, say, Tibetan border areas of majority-Han provinces like Sichuan, the push for Han-led assimilation or cultural imperatives still caused problems.

Mao’s remarks at Beidaihe hit a high water-mark for utopianism, and were loaded with directives and momentum. Over a number of days in late August 1958 at Beidaihe, Mao endorsed deep ploughing (“it creates a big reservoir for water and a big cistern for manure”), mused about controlling the countryside (“combining Marx and Qin Shihuang” and banning “people walking around uncontrolled”), previewed the Cultural Revolution in the academy (“a fierce kind of struggle [which] may take a few years [is needed] to sort out the bourgeois monopoly in science”), and compared the new campaign to military mobilization (“at least all

this kills fewer people than fighting wars”) (Mao, 1958). Whatever conflicting rhetoric he put forth about combining decentralization and local initiative, Mao was also deadly serious about pushing for hitting his new targets (*ibid*). Local energies in Yanbian were quickly thereafter turned toward steel production, flowing out of a September 4, 1958 Party meeting in Yanji. The prefectural party committee pledged 56,000 tonnes of steel and by late October 1958 it was expected to have some 100,000 people engaged in manual mass labour throughout the night (Li, 2012, 90-91). Like the reopening of Japanese-era mines for coal to feed low-quality steel furnaces, deep planting methods wasted thousands of days of cumulative labour. 1959’s harvest for all of Yanbian was smaller than the previous year’s by about 4.6 tonnes of grain, and livestock numbers were down significantly, down 5.3% from the 1952 figure (Cao, 2000, 31, 34; Li, 2012, 91, 95). By summer 1960, hunger was widespread in Yanbian (Li, 2012, 97-98). That year, in rural Wangqing county, residents were forced to generate meat substitutes and the local Party attempted to guide the public in their often-hazardous search for edible herbs in the mountains (Cui and Jin, 2000, 45-50; Wang, 2000).

The velocity of change and the fissile political culture of the Great Leap Forward led Yanbian toward Sinicization from 1958-1961, in both the demographic and the linguistic sense. Amid the zeal to create ever larger units of labour in the Great Leap, the CCP enlarged Yanbian’s territory by incorporating Dunhua as a sixth county in November 1958. Dunhua itself consisted of only slightly above 10% ethnic Koreans, meaning that its inclusion made the overall Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture suddenly and substantially more Han Chinese. Shin (2021, 193) describes the decision as having been made by the Jilin Provincial Government, but Li says the decision was made by the State Council in Beijing. In either case, the motivation for the move was linked to the collectivist fever that autumn of 1958, and in the context of the campaign it resulted in an increase in the number of communes within Yanbian’s borders (Li, 2012, 69). Exodus figures for population in the period of the Great Leap Forward are also unclear. Some estimates exist of about 150,000 ethnic Koreans resettling in North Korea during the famine (Schubert-Zhang, 2016, 25-26). Alongside (or perhaps included in) these numbers are estimates of the movement of some 52,000 Chinese citizens for resettlement into North Korea as part of the means of making up for labour shortages in the DPRK after the punishing Korean War (Kim, 2016, 140). Such resettlement would certainly have been in line with North Korea’s broader push in the late 1950s to attract skilled Korean migrants from Japan.

The population movements are hard to pin down, but the questions about language learning and education in Yanbian are more solid. As Li (2012, 150) described, there was an increase in hours of Korean language education for youth in Yanbian. However, the number of Chinese language hours also went up, exceeding those of Korean. These numbers certainly inflected daily life in the classrooms of Yanbian, but the political campaigns impacts were more chilling, in effect, as the Great Leap Forward took hold over the region. In late October 1958, the Yanbian University’s most powerful official, the Party Secretary, was singled out by a Jilin-based Party discipline organisation for four days of criticism, after which he was judged guilty of crimes of cultural miseducation, and stripped of his Party membership (Li, 2012, 65). The meeting officially labelled 1,006 rightists across the prefecture. The reasons given were worrying, ranging from jokes made whilst drinking alcohol, for having spoken out in 1957 when the Party had asked for criticism, for having listened to and “worshipping foreign radio broadcasts”, a reference to North Korean radio (*ibid*). Nearly two years later in September 1960, 77 of these people were rehabilitated. The arrival of Zhou Enlai in the prefecture in 1962 brought with it a moderation of the line, and an explicit endorsement of North Korean broadcasting quality by the Premier (Li, 2012, 147), immediately exonerating some of the alleged rightists. Some 747 of the rightists were rehabilitated shortly thereafter, a trend seen again after the Cultural Revolution, as Tsurushima (1979) noted after a field visit to the region in the late 1970s.

## Conclusion

As the CCP marks seventy years of formalized autonomy for ethnic Koreans in China, the traumas of the post-liberation and Great Leap Forward eras, respectively, seem more distant than ever (Denney and Green, 2018). The 1990s and the early 2000s were years of relative prosperity (Morris and Hoare, 2021; Park, Easthope and Chang, 2020). Today, the future beckons in Yanbian, with burgeoning economic metrics, enhanced living standards, efficient transport networks, and growing PRC national power. Xi Jinping, in his summer 2015 visit to the region, took in some light ethnic entertainment, eyed the three-dimensional “ethnic unity” in the part of the prefectural history museum meant for leadership photo-ops, and sagely noted the need for “more urban infrastructure in rural area” (Fang, 2015). Whether or not the ‘Belt and Road’ ever connects to the Korean peninsula, the Yanbian region is better integrated than ever to the urban trunk of the Northeast, and to Beijing beyond.

But the ability of ethnic Korean students to study in their native language in Yanbian appears to be eroding further. In January 2021, a decision by Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee effectively said that Korean language instruction in Yanbian was in violation of the PRC Constitution (Wei, 2021). Even as Chosunjak transnational linkages to and cultural orientation toward South Korea appear to be strong, linguistic assimilation in Yanbian continues (Zhou, 2012; Chaguan, 2021). And to read the overall emphasis of Liu Hui, the chairwoman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, after a trip to the Northeast, the years of high Maoism are, stylistically speaking, all not that far off: “The most crucial thing is that General Secretary Xi Jinping is supported by the whole Party, loved by the people, and unreservedly accepted as the core of the Party, as the military marshal, and as the people’s leader who is the helmsman of the ship” (PRC Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2018).

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