History as Propaganda:  
Korean Minorities and the National Question in Chinese Communist Historiography


by
Jason J. Wu

Undergraduate Senior Honors Thesis, Department of History  
Advisor: Professor Karl Gerth  
March 23, 2018
Table of Contents

Abstract 3
Introduction 4
Section 1 Previous Scholarship 7
Section 2 The National Question and the Logic of Ethnic Uplift 12
Section 3 Koreans as Comrades: Nationalizing the Space of Resistance 21
Section 4 Koreans as Chinese: Creating a Socialist “Model Minority” 30
Section 5 Koreans as Potential Threat: Ethnic Violence and Censorship 35
Conclusion 41
Bibliography 47
Abstract

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, elite intellectuals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have had to construct a nationalistic historiography that serves to justify the new-born nation’s cultural and geopolitical hegemony over disputed frontiers and their indigenes. This task required the CCP intelligentsia to configure minority populations in an image that was coherent with both the Party’s socialist dogma and the PRC’s national myth of ethnic harmony. Existing scholarship among North American academics interprets the CCP’s narration of frontier history as a manifestation of “socialist imperialism”—that is, the view that the CCP had managed to reinstate the traditional Sino-centric political core and recolonize China’s premodern borderlands through programs of socialist construction. This essay extends that notion by arguing that the CCP’s historiographical orthodoxy legitimized the expansion of state power into ethnic frontiers by re-narrating the historical making of the PRC as a teleological process of ethnic assimilation under principles of ethnic “uplift” and political development. Focusing on how Chinese communist historiography since 1949 reconstructed the history of Korean minorities in the PRC, this study examines the elite’s ideological reasoning as well as political narratives of cultural censorship that established Han-centric dominance over regions of ethnic difference. In doing so, this research aims to accomplish two goals: (1) to delineate the state’s “top-down” logic of ideological control by analyzing its use of history as propaganda; (2) to depoliticize the study of frontier history from the hegemony of nationalism.¹

¹ I would like express my utmost gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Karl Gerth, for providing me meticulous guidance and academic resources into the development of this research project. Without his expertise on the theories of political economy and history of 20th century China, I could not have completed this project. Also, I want to thank Professor Todd Henry for his intellectual acumen and generosity. A preliminary draft of this paper entitled “Nationalizing a Dissonant Past: The Making of Korean Minority in post-1949 Chinese Historiography” was submitted as the final project for an independent study under the supervision of Professor Henry.
Introduction

Heavily monitored by the state’s orthodox historiography, the history of ethnic assimilation in modern China is a controversial subject which exposes the incongruities between theory and praxis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since 1949, elite intellectuals of the CCP have systematically sought to redefine what it means to be “Chinese” in ideological, geopolitical, and ethnocultural terms. The communists’ attempt to construct a unified “Chinese” national identity over a diverse demographic landscape has given birth to the nation’s conception of multi-ethnic sovereignty which granted limited political autonomy to ethnic minorities. Yet, parallel to the CCP’s political project of nation-building was the state’s cultural subjugation of the fifty-five ethnic minorities who live on the fringes of the Chinese socialist polity. Despite the promise of political equality from the Han-dominated party state, ethnic minorities were criminalized for their cultural and religious traditions because such practices contradicted with the historical materialist ideology of the CCP. Moreover, ethnic minorities were simultaneously configured by state propaganda as signifiers of ideological backwardness despite their crucial role in maintaining frontier stability, national security, and interethnic solidarity of the People’s Republic. Although ethnic minorities often appear in state propaganda as symbolic bearers of ethnic harmony and multiculturalism, the circulation of ideas like ideological dependency and regional underdevelopment reveals the state’s paradoxical treatment of minorities that granted political autonomy without cultural membership.

2 Thomas S. Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Introduction.
3 Article 1, section 3 of the Constitution of People’s Republic of China (1954) defines the PRC as a “unified, multiethnic nation” (统一的多民族国家). The PRC constitution states that ethnic minorities can keep their language and customs within the designated regions of “ethnic self-autonomy” (民族自治). The constitution maintains that all ethnic minorities are inalienable parts of the Chinese nation. For further analysis, see James Leibold, Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and its Indigenes Became Chinese (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
Seeking to deconstruct the PRC’s problematic national myth of ethnic harmony, this essay examines how the architects of the communist ideology managed to justify the construction of a highly centralized nation-state over a heterogeneous ethnocultural landscape without abandoning the universality of Marxist theory. I argue that the CCP’s master-narrative of “multiethnic unity” was accomplished through a systematic process of historical reconstruction that was contrived by members of the elite communist intelligentsia. This political strategy involved the party state’s constant sanitation, subjugation, and absorption of ethnic minority subjectivities into the nation’s teleological historiography of ethnic assimilation—a hegemonic power discourse which Walter Benjamin called the “empty, homogeneous time” of linear progress. In the context of political control, the practice of cultural censorship buttressed the central authority of CCP by rationalizing the state’s oppressive and assimilationist politics towards minorities as necessary means for development.

To understand how the idea of linear progress could easily convert into a control apparatus, this essay identifies ideology and geopolitics as two interrelated arenas of governmental power where history is harnessed by the state to police its sovereign boundaries. On an ideological level, the elite intellectuals of the CCP co-opted the Marxist theory of historical materialism to recast the historical process of ethnic marginalization as a history of dialectical, progressive ethnic inclusion based on class struggle and proletarian liberation. By obfuscating subjugation with redemption, these scholars justified the state’s domination over ethnic minorities and concealed Han-Chinese nationalism behind the façade.

---

4 By “empty, homogeneous time of linear progress,” I refer to Walter Benjamin’s argument that the idea of progress is rooted in illusory determinism, a vulgarized form of historical materialism that only sees the past from the position of redemption. This notion is co-opted by state power to justify systematic oppression by rationalizing it as a necessary part of progress or wiping it out of public memory. The critique of linear time inspired scholars of nationalism, including Benedict Anderson who argued that nation-states often derive cultural legitimacy through re-imagining the regime’s pre-history as a linear progress leading to the present. For further information, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Harry Zohn, trans. Hannah Arendt, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
of Party tradition. On a geopolitical level, the process of historical fabrication allowed state bureaucrats to justify Han-Chinese dominance over a contested terrain and populace that did not belong to the past jurisdiction of the Han people. Especially in places like Manchuria and Tibet where the Han Chinese did not claim historical ownership until the modern era, the censorship of ethnic minority histories allowed the CCP to consolidate power over this territory while maintaining the integrity of its multiethnic political fabric.

For the party intellectuals of the CCP, one of the most significant challenges of writing about China’s “multiethnic unity” was the problem of incorporating an immigrant population into national history. The primary example of this difficulty was the PRC’s narration of Korean ethnic inclusion in Manchuria, whose history of ethnic assimilation is heavily regulated because the displacement of Koreans to China was mainly a result of Japanese colonialism. From 1910 to 1945, Manchuria became one of the major destinations of Korean immigration due to its geographic proximity as well as the weakening presence of Chinese sovereign power in the Northeast.\(^5\) Although Korean famine refugees from the Chosón dynasty had already immigrated to the Yanbian region (modern day Jilin Province, China) by the 1870s, the majority of Korean populations in Manchuria today trace their original displacement to the post-1910 period when the newly-independent Korean nation (1897-1910) was colonized by the expanding Japanese Empire (1868-1945).\(^6\) Push factors for immigration included the expropriation of Korean land by the Japanese Empire, brutal policing, and diminished hopes for upward mobility due to institutional racism. However, under Japan’s renewed interests in “cultural rule” (J. *Bunka Seiji*) after 1919—a strategic shift from military governance (J. *Budan Seiji*) to colonial mobilization and assimilation—Japanese authorities harnessed the momentum of Korean immigration as a political

---


bargaining tool to undermine Chinese control over this region. Proclaimed by the Japanese Empire as targets of “protection,” Korean immigrants were granted extraterritorial rights as a reward for illegal farming activities in Chinese-controlled Manchuria. They appeared in Japanese propaganda as proxy imperial subjects and colonial pioneers who harbored Japanese sovereign power abroad. Moreover, since Koreans in Manchuria were constructed as one of the five major ethnicities of the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo (1931-1945), the question of their ambiguous nationality and role in Japanese colonialism remains a problematic entry for PRC historians. Thus, to rewrite the past of Korean assimilation in China according to the master narrative of “multietnic unity,” PRC historians had to downplay the history of Korean participation in Japanese colonialism. As a result, PRC historians overwhelmingly focused on the history of Korean-Chinese joint communist resistance in Manchuria in the 1930s as a strategy to glorify CCP leadership. Through this, Manchuria was reconstructed into the geographic locus of diasporic nationalism where Korean underground colonial resistance converged with Chinese communists through the binding force of socialist ideology.

Previous Scholarship

Academics in North America have long studied how the PRC regime justified its exercise of authoritarian power. Familiar to many, for example, would be the seminal works

---

9 Conceptualizing Korean laborers as pawns of the Japanese capitalist machinery during the 1920s and 1930s, Hyun Ok Park argues that colonial agents such as the Mantetsu (South Manchurian Railway Company) had tactfully mobilized Korean workers to Manchuria while utilizing the indefinite citizenship status of Koreans to bolster Japanese imperial influence in this region. This form of socioeconomic infiltration—that is, the use of capital and labor relationships to undermine the binary, oppositional logics Chinese national sovereignty—is characterized by Park as an imperial strategy she called the “triangular politics of osmosis.” For further details, see Hyun Ok Park, “Korean Manchuria: The Racial Politics of Territorial Osmosis.” The South Atlantic Quarterly 99:1 (2000): 193-215.
by Roderick MacFarquhar (1966), Albert Feuerwerker (1968), and Maurice Meisner (1986) that explicated the role of history in the ideological politics of the CCP.\textsuperscript{10} These scholars shared the similar view that the notion of teleological progression was deeply entrenched in the nation’s project of socialist construction. Feuerwerker, for instance, argued that Chinese communists reinterpreted the entirety of the nation’s history from a “class viewpoint” in order to perpetuate public support for the present regime.\textsuperscript{11} However, only recent inquiries have tried to add the spatial dimension—that is, the dispossession of ethnic minorities—to the discussion of how the state’s linear historiography was constructed in a way that favored those in power.

Criticizing nativist Chinese thinkers for their inability to think beyond the ethnocentric framework of nation-history, recent studies on Chinese historiographies have shifted their focus to the frontier as a liminal zone of ethnic and national subjectivities.\textsuperscript{12} Existing scholarship stemming from the New Qing History school often seek to problematize the “unbroken, monolithic lineage” of Chinese ethnocultural identities through questioning the Han-centric imaginations of alterity as well as scrutinizing the origin myths of non-Han ethnicities located China’s geographical peripheries. Arguing that the modern Chinese conceptions of ethnocultural boundaries were not as “clear-cut” in history as the current


\textsuperscript{12} By the term liminal zone, I refer to Victor Turner’s original argument about liminality. Turner conceptualizes the frontier as the ambiguous space and meeting point between self and other, viewing the borderland as a threshold that marks the cultural boundaries of difference. Although Turner’s work is more concerned with liminality as a rite of passage, Turner’s successors (including Owen Lattimore who wrote about China) expanded his argument to interpret the frontier as the site that marks the death of empires and the birth of the nation-state systems under international legal frameworks. James Leibold further expanded the notion to include language and domestic politics as central discourses of border politics that shaped the nation-state’s cultural boundaries and identities. For further details, see Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in \textit{The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure} (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969) 94-113,125-130; Owen Lattimore, \textit{Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928-1958} (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); Leibold, \textit{Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism}, 5.
regime has imagined, this new paradigm centers the borderland as the site where Chinese discourses of ethnic difference were produced.

While scholars of the New Qing History school often deem the PRC as a modern reincarnation of the Chinese Empire, this essay provides an alternative view of ethnic marginalization with regards to the PRC’s historiographical discourses on multiethnic unity, hegemony, and frontiers. Specifically, this essay shows that, although the modern state of PRC resembles a multiethnic empire in its treatment of ethnic minorities near the nation’s borders, its strategies of managing difference stemmed from the CCP’s nationalistic dialogues that sought to deal with populations across frontiers within the context of ethnic sovereignty and socialist modernity. The CCP’s experimentations with ideas of ethnic self-autonomy, political development, and class solidarity reveal that the CCP’s master narrative is deeply embedded in the epistemology of modernity—that is, the transition from a premodern, feudal empire to a modern socialist state. In other words, the PRC regime carefully crafted the story of ethnic assimilation because it displays both the successful modernization of China and the ideological superiority of the PRC as a socialist state. Because of this, PRC scholars had to approach the conundrum of “multiethnic unity” not only as a spatial question of managing ethnocultural diversity, but also as a temporal question of historicizing Chinese modernity, in which the frontier becomes central for PRC regime to define its limits and capacities for progress.

Apart from the central aim to depoliticize the study of ethnic and frontier history from the hegemony of nationalism, this research is also a genuine attempt to understand how Chinese communist scholars have adopted, co-opted, and re-invented the classical Marxist “National Question” in the context of nation-building and ethnic development. While the

---

13 By “National Question,” I refer to the classical dilemma in Marxism with regards to statehood and global revolution. I will explain its relation to Korean minorities in China in later sections.
bulk of this literature is devoted to the study of socialist movements in Europe and the Soviet Union, I contend that the CCP’s reconstructive project on Korean-Manchuria deserves equal attention. This is because, unlike the cases of Europe and USSR, socialism in the PRC evolved from an abstract theory of mobilization into a systematic ideological apparatus which was primarily concerned with the redistribution of power and the preservation of national sovereignty against foreign capital. This metamorphosis accrued momentum from China’s ethnocentric political culture that was inured to blaming foreign imperialism for internal state failure. According to political scientist Germaine Hoston, the significance of the “National Question” in China expanded beyond the narrow focus of “nationality” in European and Soviet Marxism—namely the attempt by ethnically distinct populations to construct their own national communities in the wake of rising transnational class consciousness—to include issues like development, modernization, statecraft, cultural identity, and human agency.14 Building on the same interpretation of the “National Question,” historian James Leibold extends this position by adding the “Frontier Question”—that is, the challenge of mapping, colonizing, and politically incorporating minority territories into a new Chinese frontline in the struggle to restore the nation’s territorial sovereignty—to the existing conundrum of how to cultivate a national identity.15 Thus, rather than merely being a political question of how to create a worker’s state in what Marx called “latecomer societies” of industrial development, the “National Question” in post-1949 PRC became a systematic power discourse which legitimized the absorption of culturally distinct minorities into China’s nascent multi-ethnic polity.16 Because of this, PRC historians saw the chance to incorporate Koreans into the

---

16 Neither Hoston nor Leibold has written about Korean minorities. Here, I am making a conjecture that both the “National Question” and “Frontier Question” in Marxist theory can be equally applied to the case of Korean assimilation because the question of their ambiguous political membership unveils a salient crisis with regards to the CCP’s conception of “unified, multiethnic” nationhood—a problem that the CCP intellectuals had to solve on a theoretical level.
Chinese national history as an opportunity to solve both the “Frontier Question” and the “National Question” at the same time—a project that could not be accomplished without rewriting the history of Korean assimilation and resistance against Japan.

In this regard, this essay dissents from the mainstream narrative in the North American academia, which used Korean assimilation as an example to show how the PRC was merely a “new Chinese empire garbed in the costume of a nation.”17 Cultural historian Peng Hai has recently written about the censorship of Korean minority histories in contemporary master-narratives of nationalism in China. He argues that under the contemporary context of cyberspace censorship, the CCP had exerted greater control over the subjectivities of Korean minorities because the modern regime of knowledge production imposes and mass-produces its nationalistic historiography in the public domain by infiltrating the internet.18 Moreover, Peng contends that this nationalistic historiography bolsters the current CCP leadership by sanitizing critical historical data that illustrate how the history of Korean-Chinese joint resistance in the 1930s was not harmonious. Though Peng’s argument is helpful in revealing the gaps between the emancipatory CCP rhetoric and the dissonant reality of ethnic marginalization, his research overlooks the political dynamics and key actors that were responsible for the construction of China’s historiographical orthodoxy. Because of this, Peng sees the CCP’s project of historical reconstruction as a simple case of ethnic oppression rooted in the binary antagonism between the Han-chauvinist CCP government and the marginalized Korean communities in Yanbian region. He falsely assumes that the CCP state and the ethnic Korean societies were two static and monolithic entities. Consequently, Peng is unable to detect its connection to the PRC’s broader attempt to garner ideological support through conflating the “National Question” with the search for modernity.

I depart from the work of my predecessors because the CCP’s project of Korean assimilation was not merely the result of its oppressive politics. The CCP’s rendering of both the “National Question” and the “Frontier Question” in Korean-Manchuria demonstrates that the history of Korean assimilation was harnessed by the state to advance power through its tactful interplay of ideology and geopolitics. In this process, the image of Koreans as docile and underdeveloped minorities was cemented into the nation’s master-narratives. The making of ethnic Koreans into what I will call a “socialist model minority” involves the following: (1) the antagonization of Japan; (2) the depiction of Korean assimilation as a teleological process; (3) the discrediting of non-communist visions of Korean self-rule, and; (4) the state’s censorship of dissonant histories that contradicted the master-narrative of ethnic harmony and Chinese-Korean communist class solidarity. Essentially, all of these could not be thoroughly understood without first explicating how the CCP’s elite intelligentsia circumscribed Marxism to justify ethnic marginalization, political intervention, and authoritarian state-building.

The National Question and the Logic of Ethnic Uplift

One of the most salient ideological challenges that Chinese communist intellectuals encountered was the contradiction between the theory and praxis of Marxist political theory. In *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx offered neither a viable solution for the national question, a precise definition of socialist nationhood, nor a general guideline for how followers of communism should seize state power from capitalist accumulation regimes.\(^\text{19}\) Even when Marx did talk about the political implications of ethnic dispossession in his canonical text *On the Jewish Question*, his answers were putative and inapplicable in geographies like East

Asia, where the question of class struggle overlapped with the simultaneity of racism, nation-building, the dissolution of Confucianism, as well as other symptoms of late modernization.\textsuperscript{20} Due to the impracticality of Marx and the dissonant realities of the Chinese revolution, elite intellectuals of the CCP faced the dual imperatives of state sovereignty and socialist internationalism. On the one hand, the architects of the Chinese communist revolution had to anchor their strategies in the internationalist ideology of Marxism that envisioned the ultimate destruction of the nation-state system through uniting workers across the globe. On the other hand, the bureaucrats of the CCP needed to safeguard the fruits of revolution through constructing an ethnic sovereign state that would appeal to local desires for national protection and self-determination by the Han Chinese people. Without resolving this paradox, the Chinese communists could not garner enough support from both the Comintern and the Han Chinese populace, who were crucial for the CCP’s simultaneous struggle against the Guomindang (GMD) regime and the Japanese Empire.

One solution that the Chinese communists devised was the principle of “national struggle” (Ch. \textit{Minzu Douzheng}), which was an attempt by Mao Zedong and his followers to circumscribe Marxism under the CCP’s objective to wrest control over the diverse ethnocultural landscape of China. The crux of Mao’s strategy was to convert Marxism into a workable theory that would help the CCP to engulf ethnic minorities through the binary logic of “self” and “other.” On the eve of communist victory, Mao identified the establishment of a “united front of all revolutionary classes and [ethnic] groups under the leadership of the [Communist] Party” as one of the “three principal weapons” that were crucial to the success of the communist revolution (the two other weapons were the military and the Party).\textsuperscript{21}

Arguing that the project of state-building under the leadership of the CCP required the

\textsuperscript{20} Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question (1844),” First Published in \textit{Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher} (Paris: German-French Annals), Marxist Internet Archive.

“unification of the working class, the peasantry, the urban bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie,” Mao emphasized that the Party’s priority was to build a national coalition against the dual threats of capitalism and imperialism—leaving the question of class struggle to the future. Mao’s dichotomy identified the GMD government and the Japanese Empire as the two archenemies of the Chinese nation. In his political struggle to mobilize both the Han Chinese majority and ethnic minorities against the so-called reactionary GMD regime and the Japanese, Mao aimed to expand his support base by interpreting the communist revolution as both an emancipation for the allies of the working class and a binary national struggle between “us” and “them.” Serving as the theoretical underpinnings of the CCP, this dichotomous logic allowed the party state to construct a homogeneous polity over a heterogeneous ethnocultural landscape.

In theory, Mao’s “national struggle” strategy may have looked like a genuine liberation for ethnic minorities because it was political loyalty, rather than class or ethnic identity, that determined one’s political membership in the “us” group. In practice, however, the theory of “national struggle” was merely a justification for the CCP state to penetrate its ideological power into ethnic minority territories, in which the category of political (dis)loyalty became a convenient pretext for governmental intervention. One of the clearest statements that underscored the CCP’s reasoning for interventionist policies was delivered by Li Weihan, founder of the National Question Research Office (Ch. Minzu Wenti Yanjiushi) and the head of the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD) during the Chinese Civil War. Notice the three stereotypes that were ascribed to ethnic minorities in his narrative: (1) minorities as politically wavering due to the lack of collective ideological consciousness; (2) minorities as socially backward; and (3) minorities as economically primitive:

At the very present, we are uncertain about political loyalties of the Hui people…[because] the Hui ethnicity has not yet progressed into a modern ethnic

---

22 Ibid., 411-424.
group. Like most existing ethnic minorities in China, the Hui is one of the oppressed and weak Minzus [ethnic groups] living within the multi-ethnic boundaries of China. They are unable to fully modernize because the nature of their ownership and relations of production is still primitive. Thus, it is the responsibility of the modern the Han majority, as China’s ruling Minzu [ethnic group], to guide the Hui, Mongol, Tibetan, and other backward Minzus [ethnic groups] toward their collective emancipation…and to cultivate the correct conditions for them [ethnic minorities] to naturally assimilate and forge into an evolutionarily robust national [Chinese] people under the CCP.23

When Li suggested in his report that as the “modern Han majority” they should guide the other “weak and primitive” ethnic groups towards their collective liberation, he was basing this statement on the conception that ethnic minorities needed to be “uplifted” by the Han people due to their political instability, social backwardness, and primitive material conditions. This conception demands that ethnic minorities assimilate into the Han Chinese national polity to secure their own chances of survival. Despite Li’s frequent mentions about the “interconnected destiny of all Chinese ethnic groups” throughout his policy papers, his denial of minorities’ own capacities for modernity indicates how a common destiny did not imply political equality.24 For the Hui people, their backwardness attributes mostly from their cultural dependency on Islam. While for Korean minorities, their political disunity came from their ambiguous role in Japanese colonialism and loyalty to the Korean nation. Thus, in order to protect minorities from both the imperialists and themselves, Li reasoned that a centralized Party leadership is required for their assimilation because ethnic minorities are generally unlikely to voluntarily surrender their local autonomy for national benefit without external intervention. In the context of ideological politics, the rhetoric of ethnic “uplift” helped the CCP to rationalize its exercise of authoritarian power as necessary means for preserving the collective good of the nation. Here, Li’s rationale for the CCP’s interventionist

24 Ibid., 841-856.
politics provides a clear example of the sinister logic of state paternalism and ethnic marginalization underlying Mao’s unifying theory of “national struggle.”

The idea that Party intervention is required because ethnic minorities were unable to modernize themselves without the leadership of the Han Chinese allowed the CCP to dismantle the local institutions of ethnic minorities under the pretext of political development. This ideological construct derived legitimacy from the orthodox Marxist philosophy of historical materialism, which emphasizes that the material conditions and relations of production predispose the nature of political culture “at the top”—simply described as “base determines superstructure.” In the CCP’s Mongolian policy outline, for example, ethnic Mongolians’ Shamanistic religious institutions, itinerant lifestyle, and their “extremely complex and unequal” socioeconomic structure were listed as characteristics that determined their historical backwardness.

Similarly, the CCP guidelines on the Manchurian policy often circulated political stereotypes that Korean minorities suffered from “chronic factionalism” and “lacked ideological initiative” because of their “feudal” Confucian family structures. Consequently, the leaders and intellectuals of the CCP argued that these social relationships and local institutions needed to be annihilated in order to develop the material preconditions for socialist construction. The CCP’s justification for political intervention was that the state could not forge a national coalition unless the Party dispatches its Han Chinese cadres to ethnic minority terrains to transform their local institutions and “cultivate” class consciousness through socialist education and land reforms. As a subset of Mao’s “national struggle” stratagem, this philosophy of political development implied that ethnic minorities whose sociocultural way of living had not yet reached the conditions for proletarian revolution needed to be “modernized” by the CCP leadership.

---

Despite the CCP’s insistence that the rhetoric of ethnic “uplift” and political development sharply contradicted the Social Darwinist paradigms of its foreign imperialist enemies and the GMD regime, the core of the CCP’s ideological construct remained highly discriminatory. On the Thirtieth Session of the Central People’s Government Council in 1954, even Mao himself explicitly stated that the Han majority was at a higher stage of modernization because “primitive communal ownership, slave ownership, and feudal ownership” still exist in minority territories.26 The reason why the CCP reinforced Han-centrism despite its alleged disavowal of racism is because, as successor regimes of the multiethnic Qing Empire, both the GMD and the CCP needed to legitimize their control over ethnic minorities through rationalizing Han Chinese dominance. The only difference is that, while the GMD’s use Social Darwinism prescribed heterogeneity to innate racial hierarchies, the CCP’s “uplift” theory attributed perceived demographic differences to the innate cultural and ideological superiority of the Han Chinese vis-à-vis the inferiority of the “ethnic other.” Essentially, both regimes were trying to construct a unitary “Chinese” national identity to encapsulate the poly-ethnic boundaries of the Qing empire under the Han-dominated autocratic state. This task also required them to perpetuate support from the Han majority through appealing to the local demands for national sovereignty that had persisted in China since the dissolution of the Sino-centric tributary political system in the early 20th century. Thus, in order to hinge their ideological legitimacy on the emancipatory theory of Marxism, elite intellectuals of the CCP reinvented Marxism in the context of nation-building. The attempt by CCP intellectuals to circumscribe Marxist theory to the realities of governance gave birth to the CCP’s national myth of “multiethnic unity”—the historical fiction which prescribes that all ethnic groups in China have voluntarily forged into the same national community under the leadership of the

However, the idea of “multiethnic unity” was not purely a communist invention—historically, the systematic construction of China’s spatial and temporal “wholeness” actually started with the GMD’s attempt to justify their newborn nation-state (the Republic of China) as the legitimate inheritor of territories captured by the former Qing Empire. As early as the 1940s, the CCP had co-opted the same ideology to appeal to local nationalistic sentiments while clinging to the universalist ideals of Marxism. The leaders and intellectuals of the CCP actively selected and fused GMD ideas with the existing Marxist political paradigms to construct political legitimacy. However, in positioning themselves within a larger ideological struggle against foreign imperialism and their GMD rival, communist scholars had to distance from the Nationalist’s interpretation of “multiethnic unity” when they were essentially constructing the same myth of national “one-ness.” In a book titled *A Concise History of Chinese Ethnicities* (Ch. Zhongguo Minzu Jianshi) published in 1948, Lü Zhenyu, a Marxist historian and one of the architects of the CCP ideology, made the following argument regarding the ethnic composition of the Chinese “multiethnic family”:

Contrary to the Chauvinist and Fascist claims of the Nationalist Party, the “Chinese People” are not a fixed, monolithic racial category. The Han people are not the progenitor of the Chinese bloodline…other ethnicities such as the Hui (Muslims), Uighur, Manchu, Mongol, and Tibetans are not the racial subdivisions of the Han-Chinese people…In fact, the members of great Chinese family are bonded together by historical, cultural affinities as well as the common objective to fight for socialist class liberation. Because of this, only through Mao’s progressive vision of “National Struggle” can different ethnicities in China thrive in mutual harmony.27

Reacting against the so-called “fascist” GMD myth of consanguinity, the elite intellectuals of the CCP defined the ambiguous term “the Chinese people” (Ch. Zhonghua Minzu) as a non-racial category. As shown in this example, Chinese communist intellectuals like Lü proposed

an alternative strategy for the construction of China’s national unity through the emphasis on cultural affinity and ideology. By disavowing racialism as a categorical falsehood, this reinterpretation of the “Chinese people” allowed the Chinese communist intellectuals to reconcile the internationalist rhetoric of communism with the nationalistic core of Chinese “multiethnic unity.” Aligning with Lü’s conception of the “Cultural Chinese,” Jian Bozan, one of the key figures of Chinese Marxist scholarship in the early People’s Republic, also argued in his article “Regarding the Question of Ethnic Relations in Chinese History” that the “Chinese people are in fact a multiethnic cultural category.”

Jian’s characterization contrasts with both western stereotypes and GMD conceptions that perceived Chinese people as a racially homogeneous entity. With the direct authority of Mao behind them, both Jian Bozan and Lü Zhenyu condemned the GMD’s Social Darwinist terminology of the “Chinese race” but endorsed the idea that “the unity of the Chinese people is rooted in more than five thousand years of cultural melding.” Through locating the source of China’s cultural unity in a reconstructed past, both CCP scholars used the notion of “cultural affinity” to establish an essential historical linkage that bonded China’s ethnic minorities under single party leadership.

At a cursory glance, the statements of Lü and Jian might have demonstrated the goodwill of the CCP for rejecting racism and Han-Chauvinism. When juxtaposed with the earlier statement delivered by Li Weihan, however, their strategic replacement of “race” with “culture” reveals that the CCP constructed this myth of cultural adhesion only to justify its more sinister governmental logic of ethnic “uplift.” Notice how the ambiguous neologism

---


29 Lü Zhenyu (吕振羽), A Concise General History of China (简明中国通史) (Hong Kong: Shenghuo Shudian, 1941); Jian Bozan (翦伯赞), An Outline of Chinese History, Volume 2. (中国史纲) (Beijing: Shanliang Shudian, 1943).
“the Chinese People” was repeatedly used in CCP policy papers, reports, and academic literature to emphasize the “interconnected fates of all Chinese ethnic groups” under the CCP leadership. Although the concept of an ontologically unified “Chinese” identity helped the CCP to construct a sense of national unity without any reference to the tarnished idea of “race,” the underlying assumption of CCP’s cultural adhesion myth was that ethnic minorities were backward and needed protection by the Han-dominated CCP due to their lack of access to modernity. This rhetoric provided the logical justification for why Mao’s national coalition was the only solution for China’s “National Question.” Moreover, it engendered a false sense of historical inevitability that deprived minorities of their agency. In essence, the notion that ethnic minorities were historically bonded with (and dependent on) the Han-Chinese majority generated a national myth that all ethnic groups within the boundaries of the former Qing dynasty ought to surrender their local autonomy to the CCP regime for their collective liberation in the future. Thus a circular logic appears to suggest the following: ethnic minorities are destined to assimilate into the Chinese socialist nation because of their historical, cultural linkage to the Han-Chinese, and the CCP is justified to accelerate this process through transforming their socioeconomic foundations and dismantling institutional barriers that obstruct their “reunification.”

In this section, I have outlined how the interrelated concepts of ethnic “uplift,” political development, and “national struggle” undergirded the CCP’s project of nation-building. As the leaders and elite intellectuals of the CCP managed to indigenize Marxism in the context of authoritarian power, they had simultaneously constructed a national myth of ethnic harmony through the invention of the unified “Chinese” cultural identity. As a result, ethnic minorities were reduced to symbols of backwardness that helped to legitimize the CCP’s interventionist politics in ethnic frontiers. This process of ideological configuration allowed the CCP regime to disrupt existing social relations and dismantle local institutions under the
By the end of the Mao era (1949-1976), historiographical traditions in the CCP had ceased to center Mao’s political stratagem of “national struggle” as the theoretical core of China’s “National Question.” Mao’s death in 1976 closed a chapter on China’s revolutionary politics as the elite intellectuals of the CCP were forced to construct an ideological alternative for the somewhat discredited Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. This paradigm shift was most notable in the changes of the CCP’s propaganda strategy, in which the state downplayed the rhetoric of class struggle in favor of nationalism and unity. Yet, despite tremendous ideological readjustments during the reform era, the Party leadership’s ideas about ethnic “uplift” and political development had remained static throughout the transformative years of the People’s Republic. The CCP’s historiographical orthodoxies today continue to reiterate the established stereotype of ethnic minority backwardness, since the current regime still depends on Marxism and the ethnic harmony myth as the two most significant pillars of political legitimacy. As I will show in this section on the contemporary discourses on Korean assimilation, the CCP’s description of ethnicity as a cultural category provided the theoretical justification for PRC scholars to subjugate Korean subjectivities. Through silencing the unwanted histories and demanding the subordination of Korean nationalism to a Han-centric adaptation of socialist internationalism, elite intellectuals of the CCP have tactfully used the notion of ideological assimilation to legitimize the CCP’s hegemony over ethnic Koreans.

To revitalize the nationalistic idea of “self” versus “other,” CCP intellectuals overwhelmingly focused on the history of Chinese-Korean joint resistance against Japanese colonialism in Manchuria during the 1930s. This is because, on the one hand, the imagination
of an inward-looking national community was predicated on the antagonization of an external national enemy, which functioned as the reminder of the hostile “other.” On the other hand, the regime’s construction of a unified memory of resistance helped reproduce the national boundaries of difference. Therefore, the history of resistance was a highly politicized terrain since the official stories of resistance were inevitably framed by the nationalized memories of collective trauma and the regime’s excessive glorification of interethnic class solidarity.

The historical construction of ethnic Koreans as part of the multiethnic Chinese “self” was often involved with the simultaneous “othering” of Japan. Oftentimes, the PRC historiography depicted Korean minorities as default, collective resistors of Japanese colonialism whose agendas automatically aligned with those of the Chinese communists. This dichotomy of the anticolonial “self” vis-à-vis the imperialist “other” allowed PRC historians to relegate the voices of Korean nationalism as sub-narratives of the greater Chinese anticolonial struggle to restore sovereignty in Manchuria, nationalizing a neutral space of resistance under Chinese hegemony. For instance, in a government-sponsored academic journal article titled “The Status and Contributions of Ethnic Korean Communists to the Anti-Japanese Struggle in Northeastern China,” the author Jin Chenggao, a CCP bureaucrat and the incumbent chair of social sciences at Yanbian University, argued that “Koreans were natural resistors of Japanese colonialism” because they were members of a “state-less, property-less, faction-less subaltern body” who were “collectively marginalized as the lowest strata of the Japanese colonial society.”

Observing Korean resistance only from a Marxist class standpoint, Jin viewed Koreans as state-less people whose a priori objective was to fight for the restoration of Korean sovereignty. Moreover, Jin’s emphasis on “natural resistors” shows that Jin rendered Koreans as default proletariats whose national

---

subjectivities automatically align with the anti-colonial agendas of the CCP. Citing
ingstruction letters from the Yan’an communist headquarters to the Manchurian branch of the
CCP on directions of Korean mobilization, Jin jumped to the conclusion that “Koreans were,
therefore, a vital revolutionary force since their rural backgrounds and history of colonial
abjection made them mutually incompatible enemies with the Japanese Empire.”31

This dichotomy—an oppressive Japanese empire vis-à-vis a revolutionary Korean
population, a capitalist regime of exploitation versus a proletarian victim of colonialism—
offered Jin a means to conceptualize Koreans as a homogeneous group that was collectively
victimized and consequently needed to be liberated by the Chinese Communist Party. In other
words, the binary portrayal of Japanese Empire as the antagonized “other” versus the
anticolonial Chinese and Korean “self” provided a pretext for Jin to conclude that the
assimilation of Korean communists into the CCP was the best possible option given the
material conditions of the 1930s, since Jin thought of the CCP as the more exuberant
anticolonial agent in Manchuria. As Jin continued to explain why Korean communists in
Manchuria formed an alliance with the CCP in the form of joint guerilla resistance, Jin made
the following statement: “Although Koreans had the most incentive to fight, Koreans
communists struggled to organize their resistance against Japan because their governments in
exile were weak…moreover, it was impossible for Koreans to achieve independence on
Chinese soil.”32 Consequently, Jin argued that “the Chinese Communist Party had the
obligation to lead and safeguard the Korean proletarian revolution.”33 Jin’s statement implied
that Korean efforts of resistance were futile because it disregards China’s sovereignty over

---
31 Jin draws his evidence from a CCP document titled “The Party Resolution on Work in Dongbiandao
Prefecture (1928.2.29)” (东边道工作决议案, 1928.2.29), in Compiled Documents on Revolutionary History in
Northeastern China, Volume 1 (东北地区革命历史文件汇集, 甲 1) (Beijing: CCP Central Archive): 357-360;
for further details, see Jin, “The Status and Contributions of Ethnic Korean Communists to the Anti-Japanese
Struggle in Northeastern China,” 15.
32 Ibid., 16.
33 Ibid., 16-17.
Manchuria. Here, Jin reasoned that the CCP’s hegemony over Korean communists was an altruistic effort to protect and rectify the self-preservationist course of Korean anticolonial resistance by converging Korean nationalism with the “larger” political ideal of proletarian liberation. The course of protecting Korean resistance, as Jin suggested, demanded that Koreans to “re-orient their revolutionary goals from self-preservation to the protection of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party.”\(^{34}\) In reinterpreting the history of Korean-Chinese joint resistance as a binary struggle of revolutionary “self” against the reactionary Japanese “other,” Jin marginalized Korean nationalism as a subordinate mission to the CCP’s agenda of socialist revolution, which was seen as a universalist political struggle.

Interestingly, despite Jin’s fervent denouncement of Japanese colonial rhetoric that subjugated Korean sovereignty through legitimizing the Japanese establishment of Korean protectorate, Jin was blind to his own hegemonic logic that paralleled that of the loathed Japanese imperialists. Similar to the Japanese colonial strategists and imperial historians who justified Japan’s annexation of Korea through “othering” the Chinese and the West as threats to Korean independence in the 1910s, Jin, like many PRC historians, justified the CCP hegemony over Korean communists by wedging conceptual binaries that separated the Japanese “other” from the Chinese and Korean “self.”\(^{35}\) The only difference between the two was that, while Japan framed their hegemony under Pan-Asianism, the CCP has embarked on the same project through socialist internationalism. This construction of dichotomies paved the theoretical groundwork for other PRC historians to argue that Koreans were smoothly incorporated into the CCP polity, which is often depicted in history as a paternalistic “savior”

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{35}\) In the chapter “Decentering the Middle Kingdom and Realigning the East,” Andre Schmid argues that the birth of Korean national identity was embedded in its political readjustment from identifying China as its tributary suzerain to engaging with the modern “civilization” of Japan. However, in this process of “decentering China,” the Japanese empire co-opted Korean nationalism to serve its own colonial agenda, justifying its establishment of the Korean protectorate as an act to protect Korea from “Chienese backwardness” and “western imperialism.” For further details, see Andre Schmid, Korea Between Empires 1895-1919 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 56-100.
of ethnic Koreans.

The image of the CCP as a “savior” of Korean nationalism was constructed as a narrative to underscore the ideological and institutional superiority of the CCP, which was depicted by PRC scholars as a progressive political body that was able to overcome national differences between Koreans and Chinese. In arguing that the Korean resistance in Manchuria would not have succeeded without the interference and leadership of the CCP, Chinese historians reconstructed the history of Korean resistance as one that was centered around the triumphant integration of Korean communists into the CCP. In an archival research report titled “Analysis of the Structure of Underground Communist Movements in Northeastern China, 1927-1933” published by the Central Research Institute of CCP, the author, Li Yuejun, argued that the CCP was successful in organizing anticolonial resistance on behalf of Koreans because the Party mobilized Korean class consciousness through education programs that transformed peasants into ideologically-motivated communists. In the report, Li stated that early Korean resistance in Manchuria lacked ideological coherence because most people joined the revolution out of desperation and survivalist instincts. In contrast to the “unruly organization of Korean resistance” in Manchuria prior to their incorporation into the CCP, Li argued that the joint Korean-Chinese resistance under CCP was more fruitful because it displayed “iron-like discipline, effective communication networks, and above all, a unifying and progressive ideology.” The undertone of Li’s statement, as reflected by Li’s Sino-centric analysis of 1930s resistance patterns, suggested that Korean anticolonial resistance

37 Li describes the early Korean communist movements in Manchuria as “hired revolution” (雇佣革命). Arguing that Korean peasants only joined communist resistance because of material incentives such as the desire for a better community and wages, Li discredits them as lacking in revolutionary idealism. As Li points out in his report, these problems regarding Korean communists affected the overall discipline of the CCP when they initially joined with Chinese communists. He identifies it as a major problem that inhibits the “professionalization of communists” (党员的职业化). Ibid., 60.
38 Ibid., 61.
was ineffective until their incorporation into the CCP polity. Li’s argument implied that the CCP was the savior of Korean revolution because the CCP equipped Korean anticolonial resisters with both ideology and institutional discipline, delivering Korean nationalists out of their unsuccessful struggle against Japan. Similar to Jin, Li’s rationalization of CCP hegemony was grounded on the antagonization of the Japanese “other,” which also reiterated the same protectionist logic that Li himself rejected as imperialistic. This narrative that highlighted CCP’s paternalistic role in Korean resistance was utilized by many other PRC historians to construct teleological histories of Korean inclusion.

Historicizing Korean resistance in Manchuria as the origin of Chinese-Korean class solidarity, party intellectuals of the PRC often narrated the experience of Korean-Chinese joint resistance in Manchuria as a progressive convergence of radical leftist ideologies in revolutionary strategy. In this regard, the Manchurian guerrilla experience was portrayed by PRC nationalistic historiographies as the inception of Korean integration into the Chinese socialist state. In an article titled “The Evolution of Social Ideals of Korean Ethnic Groups in China during the Democratic Revolution,” a Marxist historian and party branch secretary in Jilin Province, Zhao Gang, argued that the historical progress of Korean inclusion was part of the CCP’s experiment to apply the Maoist ideal of “new democracy” (Ch. Xinminzhu Zhuyi) on to the regulation of ethnic minorities. In his essay, Zhao identified three “evolutionary phases” of Korean social progressivism under the CCP, in which the CCP leadership has elevated Korean revolutionary objectives from “sheer survival” to “self-determination” to “socialist revolution.” According to Zhao, the history of Korean assimilation signified the CCP’s successful construction of an ethnically diverse and harmonious Chinese national community endemic to the particularities of Chinese society, while adhering to the

---

internationalist principles of Marxist-Leninism. Moreover, in positioning the Korean-Chinese joint communist resistance in the 1930s within the broader structural context of nation-building and Marxist historicism, Zhao contended that the historical process of Korean assimilation was, in fact, an undisturbed, teleological progress towards the complete convergence of Korean and Chinese subjectivities. In this teleology, the CCP’s takeover of Korean communists in Manchuria during the 1930s was reinterpreted as a decisive historical moment that marked the “smooth” assimilation of Koreans into the CCP polity. Not only did Zhao’s reinterpretation legitimize the CCP’s subjection of ethnic Koreans, but also recast the CCP as a “benevolent, progressive” patron of Korean nationalism whose leadership “bestowed” ethnic Koreans a place in the socialist Chinese national community.

Despite the consensus among PRC scholars with regards to the antagonization of Japan, not all PRC historians uniformly agreed that the experience of Korean-Chinese joint resistance in Manchuria constitute the definite origin of Korean assimilation. Likewise, these PRC intellectuals did not belong to a singular, monolithic category since the background and agendas of these scholars were also diverse. For example, Korean-Chinese (K. Chosŏnjok) scholars of Yanbian University often historicized Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910 as the historical origin of Korean anticolonial resistance in exile. In a journal article titled “China’s Korean Ethnic Group: A Historical Process of Its Merging into the Great Family of the Chinese Nation,” Sun Chunri and Shen Yingshu, both ethnic Korean Chinese scholars from the Yanbian academia, argued that the historical assimilation of Koreans into the Chinese nation began with Japan’s infringement of Korean sovereignty because the annexation forced dispossessed Korean nationalists to pursue anti-colonial resistance outside of the peninsula.

40 Ibid., 122-123.
Responding to the Han-centric conceptions of Korean assimilation which frequently configured Koreans as passive, hapless receptors of the CCP’s ideological grace, Sun and Shen conceptualized Korean residents in Manchuria as active resisters who utilized the discourse of citizenship and identity politics to counter Japanese hegemony in Manchuria. According to Sun and Shen, “about 20,000 Koreans out of the 300,000 Korean inhabitants in Jiandao voluntarily nationalized as Chinese citizens” to resist Japanese hegemony after the annexation in 1910. The collective act to renounce Japanese citizenship and “voluntarily” join the Chinese national community highlighted the symbolic agency that regular Korean peasants wielded in the face of Japanese imperial power, contrary to the CCP’s mainstream depictions of Korean passivity. Further, Sun and Shen argued that the 1910 annexation constitute an original merging point between Korean and Chinese nationalisms because “Korean nationalism after 1910 became homogeneously anti-imperialist and anti-feudal,” converging with CCP’s emancipatory goal of socialist revolution. What Sun and Shen tried to convey was that, instead of being passively “rescued” and consequently subsumed to the CCP’s statement of emancipatory revolution, Korean resisters in Manchuria had actively chosen to join the CCP because its anti-imperialist objective conveniently converged with that of the Korean resisters who had been dispossessed after 1910.

However, although Chosŏnjok Korean historians like Sun and Shen often wrote against the Han-centric notion of Korean passivity in the PRC’s narration of inter-ethnic class solidarity, they still homogenized ethnic Koreans as collective anti-colonial resisters through the “othering” of Japanese Empire. Moreover, by empowering the historical image of Koreans as active volunteers of the revolution, these Korean Chinese historians actually consolidated the legitimacy of the CCP’s “multiethnic unity” myth through re-narrating the

---

42 Ibid., 57-58.
43 Ibid., 58-59.
historical inclusion of ethnic Koreans into the CCP polity as an egalitarian, magnetic process of progressive convergence. Elsewhere in Sun and Shen’s writings, both scholars claimed that “compared to the maltreatment of ethnic Koreans by other multiethnic states like the Chinese Republic, Manchukuo, and the Japanese Empire, the CCP regime respected Korean minorities and genuinely incorporated them into the national community through egalitarian ethnic policies.”44 As Sun and Shen concluded in their paper, “it is utterly unsurprising that ethnic Koreans in China would become ideologically motivated to volunteer in the upcoming War of Liberation [Chinese Civil War] as well as the mobilization in the subsequent war ‘to resist U.S. aggression and aid North Korea’ [Korean War].”45 This notion of active volunteerism was also reflected in the writings of another contemporary Chosŏnjok scholar Piao Jinhai, who wrote in her article that “Koreans voluntarily joined the CCP’s revolution because they were a homogeneous ethnic group that was full of ‘anti-Japanese traditions.’”46 Both examples showed that, although contemporary Korean Chinese scholars often tried to criticize the Han-centric historiographies that marginalized Korean subjectivities, their works still embraced the notion that Koreans belonged to a homogeneous group that was collectively victimized by the Japanese Empire. Rather than relegating Koreans to a subordinate status who were passively “saved” by the CCP, their emphasis on the collective agency and volunteerism of Korean resisters constructed an image that the CCP’s vision of “multiethnic unity” was grounded on the active assimilation of Koreans who had joined the CCP in a historical process of natural, smooth, and mutual ideological convergence.

In sum, contemporary Chinese Marxist scholarship on Korean assimilation had reinterpreted the history of Korean-Chinese joint resistance in Manchuria as a successful

44 Ibid., 59.
convergence of the two nationalisms under the leadership of the CCP. Despite disagreements regarding the symbolic agency of Koreans in the process of assimilation, it was an established consensus within the PRC scholarship that Koreans needed to be represented as innate, collective resistors of Japanese colonialism because their imagined homogeneity helps the state to reconfigure this immigrant population as a historic “self” of the CCP’s progressive “multiethnic family.” Under this binary logic of nationalism, the “othering” of Japan served as a pretext for the CCP to recast its hegemony and marginalization Korean subjectivities as an act of protection.

**Koreans as Chinese: Creating a Socialist “Model Minority”**

While the antagonization of Japan allowed Chinese Marxist historians to legitimize the state’s marginalization of Korean subjectivities, the scholars’ propagandistic narratives about Korean Chinese patriotism in the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War enabled them to occlude the ongoing process of Korean marginalization. This allowed the state propaganda to wipe out certain histories that did not fit into the Chinese national myths of Korean-Chinese class solidarity from public memory. Consider the example of the all-ethnic Korean 164th and the 166th divisions of the PRC’s People’s Liberation Army, which were often glorified by the CCP’s propaganda as the moral exemplars of volunteerism and socialist internationalism. According to military reports and telegram documents that have been leaked from USSR archives, CCP leaders like Mao and Nie Rongzhen organized Korean minority divisions with

---

47 Here, I borrow the term “model minority” from the field of Asian American Studies and insert it in the context of the PRC’s socialist construction. While the original term connotes an ambiguous “in-between” status of Asian Americans who are often required to downplay their “cultural baggage” to assimilate into the mainstream white culture of the American society, the logic of marginalization here is almost inverted—in a socialist multiethnic state that publically disavowed race as a category, the difference of Koreans is often over-highlighted to showcase the PRC’s ability to manage ethnocultural difference. In this way, my usage of “model minority” is similar to that of Takeshi Fujitani, who argued that US regime propagated the narrative of Neisei heroism in order “include” Japanese Americans as a strategic display of the ideological superiority of American liberal governmentality. For further details, see Takeshi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 206-236.
the intent to repatriate them back to North Korea (DPRK). Both the CCP and the DPRK regimes saw the repatriation of Korean-Chinese to the war-torn Korean peninsula as a political bargaining tool. Moreover, North Korean leaders actively lobbied the Chinese government to sponsor the recruitment of Koreans for their resettlement in the DPRK. To justify the mobilization and conscription of Korean minorities for ideological warfare, Chinese propaganda during the 1950s configured the Korean Chinese minority as token signifiers of transnational friendship between the two socialist regimes. However, the trauma of ethnic Korean veterans resulting from the difficulty of post-war incorporation, disrupted social relations, and inadequate compensation was generally absent in the CCP’s historical archives. One example of individual suffering was illustrated by an autobiographical excerpt of an unknown soldier published by a local ethnic Korean newspaper in Yanbian prefecture. Notice the emotions of betrayal, regret, uncertainty, and the diminish hopes for upward mobility that are illustrated by the following passage:

In 1950, I joined the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army at age thirteen to “resist America, aid Korea, protect our homes, and defend our country.” On my return from [North] Korea on May 25, 1955, I was assigned a menial job as a prison guard…I can’t help feeling pessimistic about my present circumstances. Many of my primary school classmates continued to pursue higher degrees after senior high schools; some of them are even studying in the Soviet Union to acquire postgraduate degrees…I regret my decision to volunteer for the war…I discontinued my education and risked my life in the war, but how come I am falling miserably behind now?

While the motivation behind its publication in 1957 remains unknown, it is evident in this excerpt that there was a clash of interests and opinions between the CCP’s central leadership

---


50 “What would be the best way to solve this problem?” Yonbyon Ch’ongnyon (1957): 8. For further details, see Jaeeun Kim, Contested Embrace: Transborder Membership Politics in Twentieth-Century Korea (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 137-146.
and the local inhabitants in Yanbian prefecture. Epitomized by the disillusionment of the protagonist in this narrative, members of the local Korean-Chinese communities voiced their criticism of the CCP’s postwar accommodation policies by pointing out the discrepancies between the sacrifices and gains of promised by the CCP regime. Overtime, these memories of collective trauma became sources of ethnic identity that helped the Korean Chinese minority to resist propaganda from Beijing and retain their local autonomy.

Responding to the dissonant narratives of postwar demobilization from Korean Chinese newspapers and communities, Chinese communist propaganda had reconstructed the history of Korean War to celebrate the natural incorporation of Korean minorities under CCP leadership. In re-writing the history of Korean ethnic assimilation into a linear teleology, PRC historians cast the Korean War as the historical “endpoint” that marked the “complete, successful assimilation” of the Korean minority. In a journal article titled “Research Review of the Korean Chinese National Identity,” a Chosŏnjok sociologist, Li Meihua, argued that the historical construction of Chosŏnjok national identity involves the “gradual and dialectical process of Korean ideological activism,” in which ethnic Koreans have “collectively chosen to join the Chinese national community because the CCP recognized the historical importance of ethnic Koreans in the liberation of Manchuria [from Japan and the GMD].”51 According to Li, the “reciprocal relationships” between CCP leadership and the vast Korean peasantry was the building block of Korean revolutionary activism. As a result, “about 6% of the total ethnic Korean population in China ‘volunteered’ to join the People’s Liberation Army from 1945 to 1949; during the Korean War, 98% of the martyrs in Yanbian region were ethnic Koreans.”52 This observation led Li to the conclusion that the Korean minority in China has completely assimilated into the Chinese socialist state by the end of

---

52 Ibid., 100.
Korean War in 1953 as a result of wartime mobilization under CCP leadership, sharply contrasting with the narratives circulated by local ethnic Korean newspapers from earlier periods.\(^{53}\)

Similar to the emphasis on Korean agency in the arguments of Chosŏnjok scholars in the previous section, Li’s temporalization of the “endpoint” of Korean assimilation was based on her uncritical observation of “Korean volunteerism” in the CCP’s national mobilization for the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Although her statistical research revealed a high-point of Korean wartime enlistment since the colonial period, Li was inattentive to the myriad of factors that drove the phenomenon of Korean hyper-identification—neglecting the possibilities of government coercion that contributed to the over-conscription of ethnic Koreans in the Chinese army. In offering a simple narrative of linear progress, Li strategically eschewed the sensitive topics of postwar demobilization and social marginalization of ethnic Koreans in Yanbian. Like most CCP scholars who write for a hegemonic political agenda, Li’s one-sided glorification of Korean participation depicted a natural and unproblematic patriotism for the Chinese national community. Their emphasis on the patriotic martyrdom of ethnic Koreans helped reproduce the orthodox narrative of “successful integration” which reconfigured the historical image of Koreans from the hapless targets of “ethnic uplift” into motivated defenders of the CCP’s national community. By interpreting the sealing of postwar borders in 1953 as the definite “endpoint” of Korean ethnic inclusion, CCP elite intellectuals cemented the master-narrative of Korean wartime patriotism into the national memory-scape of the PRC, reinforcing the historical myths of ethnic harmony and linear progress.

Apart from the excessive glorification of Korean patriotism, ethnic Koreans in China were also constructed into symbolic “model minorities” of socialist internationalism who played the vanguard roles in PRC’s wartime aid to North Korea (DPRK). Emphasizing the

---

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 100.
Chosŏnjok Korean population as the communicative nexus between the DPRK and PRC regimes, contemporary Chinese scholars reinterpreted their history of mobilization into a representation of the active consolidation of transnational class solidarity between the PRC and the DPRK regimes. According to Li Haiyan, a CCP member and political sociologist in Yanbian Party School, “approximately 20,000 Chosŏnjok Koreans from Yanbian region voluntarily enlisted in the Chinese army between 1950 and 1951. Due to their proficiency in Korean language and familiarity with the Korean geography, Chosŏnjok Koreans were naturally deployed as the vanguard of the Chinese army.”

Citing the heroism of Chosŏnjok Koreans in the all-Korean 164th division, Li argued that “such display of patriotism in the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent war in Korea had created a sense of unified class solidarity between Chinese and North Korean populations.” Moreover, Li asserted that “the patriotic deeds of Chosŏnjok Koreans in the war had also fostered national pride for Chosŏnjok Chinese citizens in Manchuria.” Here, Li characterized ethnic Koreans as the model minorities of the Chinese nation through highlighting their vanguard roles in leading the CCP’s anti-imperialist struggle against America and actively serving as the communicative nexus between North Korean and Chinese regimes. Compared with the earlier CCP scholarship that portrayed ethnic Koreans as passive receptors of Chinese communist leadership during the anti-Japanese resistance movements in the 1930s, contemporary discourses on the wartime mobilization of ethnic Koreans in the period between 1945 to 1953 delineate a neatly-crafted history of linear progress that the CCP wishes to display—that is, Koreans had “evolved” from their subaltern conditions to embrace the Chinese national community under CCP leadership.

55 Ibid., 252.
56 Ibid., 252.
In essence, the emphasis of the Korean War as the endpoint of Koreans’ teleological assimilation allowed Chinese scholars to argue that the CCP has “decolonized” ethnic Koreans from Japanese Imperialism. Through stressing the role that China played in Korea’s reestablishment of sovereignty over the colonized peninsula, the CCP was able to portray itself as the liberator of Koreans from the dual imperialism of Japan and America. For ethnic Koreans within the Chinese borders, this master narrative of liberation propagated a national myth that Japanese imperialism was a bygone era which was flipped over by the PRC as a past page of history. In this narrative of linear historicism, ethnic Koreans were reconstructed as a socialist model minority whose own memories of war and trauma were marginalized by the master-narratives of the PRC.

**Koreans as Potential Threat: Ethnic Violence and Censorship**

As much as the making of the ethnic Korean minority in the PRC “self” required the positive reconstruction of Koreans into assimilated socialist minorities and collective resisters of Japanese colonialism, this process could not have been accomplished without the flattening of certain cacophonous histories that did not fit into China’s neatly crafted master narratives of “multiethnic unity.” The targets of censorship included historical records of ethnic violence and interethnic suspicion between Korean and Chinese Communists in the CCP, which revealed the unattractive contradictions between theory and praxis of the CCP’s assimilationist ideology of ethnic uplift under the guise of socialist internationalism. In 1933, an instructional letter from Yan’an to the East Manchurian Committee of the CCP titled “An Open Letter to All Comrades and Cadres in Manchuria” stated that “the mission of the ethnic

---

57 The sources that I plan to re-examine in this section are from the CCP’s official archives. Although most of the contemporary Chinese scholarship has drawn their evidence from this archive, their analyses have been one-sided due to their nationalistic agendas or the restrictions of the CCP’s historiographical orthodoxy. Because of this, there is still empty room for me to insert alternative interpretations of the same archival sources they have cited.
self-liberation movement in Manchuria is both to protect the proletarian regime in China and
to defend the Soviet Union from capitalist imperialism…which is the reason why the
resistance movement in Manchuria is simultaneously nationalist and internationalist.”

While PRC scholars today might uncritically read this document as a genuine display of the
CCP’s ability to reconcile the internationalist socialist rhetoric with indigenous sentiments of
Chinese anti-imperialist nationalism, the following statement from the same document
underscores an uncanny revelation about CCP’s treatment and suspicion of Korean
communists during the 1930s, undermining the national myth of interethnic class solidarity:

[However] Koreans belong to a group that needs special handling…On the one hand,
they have been utilized by Japanese imperialists to antagonize and sabotage the
Chinese revolution. On the other hand, some progressive Korean farmers and
laborers have worked with the Chinese proletariat to battle against Japanese
Imperialism…To manage them well, we give the following slogan for Koreans in
order to mobilize them for the revolution: Korean farmers, Japanese imperialists have
taken your land and banished you from your homes. Stop working for the oppressive
Korean bourgeoisie, rich peasants, and landlords and join us against Japanese
Imperialism.

This document reveals the class heterogeneity of Korean populations that was generally
overlooked by scholars who sought to homogenize Koreans as default collective resisters.
Moreover, as shown by Yan’an’s condescending tone towards Koreans, the CCP’s decision to
mobilize Koreans was not a result of the “smooth” teleological convergence that Chinese
Marxist historians have argued; rather, it was a nationalistic dialogue that was imbued with
inter-ethnic suspicions. For the CCP, Korean immigrants and communities in eastern
Manchuria manifested two dangers that alarmed the policymakers of the Chinese Communist
Party in 1933—the ambiguities of Korean loyalties as well as their possibility of betrayal.

---

58 “An Instructional Letter to All Comrades and Cadres in Manchuria from the Central Committee of the
Chinese Communist Party (1933.1.26).” (中共中央给满洲各级干部及全体成员的信, 1933.1.26) in The
Complied Documents on Ethnic Problems, 1921.7-1949.9 (民族问题汇编, 1921.7-1949.9) (Beijing: Central
59 Ibid., 194-195.
Because of the loss of Korea’s sovereignty to Japan, Koreans were simultaneously subjects of the Japanese Empire who could potentially sabotage Chinese nationalism, as well as makeshift members of the proletariat whose commitment to the revolution was only limited to survival and anti-colonialism. Since Koreans were both “corporal embodiments of Japanese power,” and “proletariat victims of Japanese colonialism,” their indefinite citizenship status made them vulnerable to both Japanese exploitation and Chinese marginalization. Thus, contrary to the historical myths of Korean-Chinese class solidarity, this example shows that the CCP has once considered the Korean minority a potential threat to national security and social stability due to their ambiguous citizenship status.

Subverting contemporary claims of Korean class homogeneity, this ideological figuration of the “Korean Problem” also exposes the “divide-and-rule” logic in which the CCP utilized to manage Korean class differences in the 1930s. As shown in Yan’an’s instructional letter, in order to resolve the ambiguous status of Koreans in Manchuria, the CCP had wedged Korean nationalist groups into two antagonistic categories: the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, epitomizing what the CCP deems as revolutionary and counter-revolutionary. Using this seemingly internationalist Marxist dichotomy of class antagonism, the CCP had in fact claimed authority over Korean communists as a part of its revolutionary “self” while excluding and discrediting non-communist visions of Korean nationalism as the reactionary “other.” For instance, in another report from the Jiandao branch of the CCP to the headquarters of the CCP’s East Manchurian Committee written in 1928, ethnic Korean farmers were described as “a valuable subject for communist mobilization because they have suffered the most under Japanese colonialism.”

---


included “Korean farmers (peasants) as the most adamant supporters of our revolution,” the CCP had antagonized right-leaning Korean nationalists, cultural nationalists, and other non-communist Korean organizations as reactionary spies or traitors who have worked against the entire Chinese nation.62 Within this binary logic, non-communist Koreans were immediately rendered by the CCP as Japanese collaborators, regardless of their actual class orientations or labor relations. Similar to the Yan’an letter, this document underscores the CCP’s unattractive strategy of “divide-and-rule”—a logic that turned the elimination of undesirable Korean voices into the elimination of anti-revolutionary elements. Because these historical documents often come into direct contradiction with the homogeneous image of Korean-Chinese class solidarity—a historiographical construct that was needed for the state’s legitimization of “multiethnic unity”—they are generally omitted in the contemporary discourses of Korean assimilation by CCP historians.

Further, the omitted history of ethnic violence and intra-communist purges during the 1930s undermines the CCP’s teleological narrative of smooth, harmonious ethnic inclusion. Often censored or utterly manipulated in contemporary CCP scholarship, the infamous Minsaengdan incident highlights the ugly flipsides of the CCP’s “multiethnic unity.” Framed as spies of the Minsaengdan (People’s Livelihood Corps), a pro-Japanese Korean self-rule organization in eastern Manchuria, between 1931 and 1936 hundreds of Korean communists in the CCP were interrogated and purged from the Manchurian committee, resulting in mass Korean defection from the CCP ranks.63 In the book The Korean Communist Movement 1918-1948, the author Suh Dae-sook argued that Minsaengdan was organized by the Korean bourgeoisie as a hostile reaction against the CCP’s land reform programs that involved the constant pilferage, harassment, and confiscation of property of the Korean landowners.64

62 Ibid., 478.
Despite the dissolution of Minsaengdan organization in October 1932, suspicions within the CCP that any Korean could be a spy or underground member of the Minsaengdan resulted in the indiscriminate killing and jailing of Korean communists from 1931 to 1936. According to Chong-sik Lee, who cited CCP insurgency documents from the military records of Manchukuo in his article “Witch Hunt among the Guerrillas: The Min-Sheng-T’uan Incident,” the raison-d’être of the Minsaengdan incident could be summarized in the following sentences from the perspective of the CCP leadership:

The Minsaengdan is a product of the burglary policy of Japanese imperialism. It has been established to use Koreans as the vanguard of Japanese imperialist occupation of Manchuria, to use Koreans to cultivate the wasteland, to destroy the Chinese-Korean Anti-Japanese Federation, and to provide a tool for armed aggression against the Soviet Union...After the Japanese Imperialists’ occupation of Manchuria, some of the Korean factional leaders on our side openly surrendered to the enemy; some other remained within our ranks. By utilizing comradely connections established during the period of common struggles, they established the Minsaengdan in our ranks. In order to promote their interests and positions, those factional leaders remaining within our ranks do not openly surrender to the enemy, but secretly participate in the Minsaengdan organization in alliance with the Japanese imperialists...Because of their low political understanding, the majority of the masses, the members of the Party, and the corps are not aware of the deceptive operations of the Minsaengdan. Therefore, it can easily operate among the revolutionary units.66

To sanitize the turbulent history of the Minsaengdan incident, contemporary Chinese Marxist historians in the CCP re-narrated the story of ethnic purges into a “top-down” effort to uproot reactionary elements and factionalism within Korean-Chinese joint communist organizations. Through this, the contemporary CCP scholarship legitimized the purges as attempts by the CCP to safeguard the “harmonious” class solidarity from inauthentic communists or saboteurs within. In a recent article titled “the Minsheng Group Event in North Manchuria,”

279.
the author Yu Wensheng argued that, “despite the Party’s unfortunate usage of excessive violence, the CCP had legitimate reasons to purge Korean communists of landlord, rich peasant, and bourgeoisie backgrounds because their inauthentic belief and wavering loyalties have plunged the Manchurian branch of the CCP to the brink of destruction.”\textsuperscript{67} Citing CCP archival sources that called this group of Koreans “unruly elements” (Ch. Bucheng Xianren; J. Futei Senjin), Yu argued that these Korean communists were attracted to Japan’s deceptive slogan of “Korean Self-Rule in Jiandao” due to their “ideological incoherence and selfish factionalistic thinking.”\textsuperscript{68} Here, Yu’s apologetic tone reiterated some of the arguments by the CCP elite intellectuals that I have mentioned in the previous section. Their frequent references to Korean factionalism and ideological incoherence emphasized the futility of Korean self-rule and self-liberation without the CCP leadership, very much like how Japanese imperialists often constructed the image of “Korean Dependency” (K. Sadae Juui) to justify the colonization of Korea.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, Yu’s unconscious recycling of derogatory terms like “unruly Koreans” from the discredited Japanese Empire drew parallels between the CCP’s hegemonic self-description of “multiethnic unity” and the imperial rhetoric of “Japan and Korea as One Body” (J. Naisen Ittai) from the defeated Japanese Empire. Although these ironic similarities were generally overlooked by the Chinese historians themselves, their selective amnesia revealed that the CCP had engaged in the very same project that the Japanese Empire began—that is, the regulation of Korean “difference” and the display their


\textsuperscript{68} The term “unruly Koreans” (不逞鲜人) was originally a derogatory term that Japanese Imperialists used to characterize the floating Korean “lumpen-proletariat” population. In CCP reports and documents, this term has been coopted to designate the opposite social strata of the Korean population—that is, the “bourgeoisie” Koreans within the CCP polity. In both cases, the term indicates the ambiguity of Korean loyalty (or consciousness), which was seen as a potentially subversive element by both Japan and China. See “The Investigative research on Unruly Korean organizations in Manchuria, 1926” (1926年满洲不逞鲜人团体分布调查表), in \textit{The Compiled Historical Documents on Korean Revolutionary Struggle in Northeastern China} (东北地区朝鲜人革命斗争资料汇编) (Shenyang: Liaoning Ethnic Press, 1992) (辽宁民族出版社), 435-443; Yu, “The Minsheng Group Event in North Manchuria.” 49, 51.

ideological capacities to accommodate, police, and overcome ethnocultural boundaries. To recast the Korean ethnic assimilation as a smooth, teleological process of inclusion under the paternalistic leadership of the CCP, contemporary CCP scholarship had sanitized and selectively obliterated these histories of Korean marginalization. This practice of historical reconstruction generated historical legitimacy for the CCP’s authoritarian rule over its ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

Writing more than a century ago, the historical sociologist Max Weber identified three fundamental sources of governmental legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and legal-institutional. Yet, Weber’s theory of regime legitimacy was inadequate to capture the nature of the CCP’s authoritarian rule over its ethnic minorities, which was neither based on a customary political culture of ethnic tolerance, a charismatic leadership, nor a representative legislature that bargains for minorities’ compliance. Attempting to fill this academic void, this essay has demonstrated how the CCP regime has constructed an ideological legitimacy by indigenizing Marxism to satisfy China’s reality of multiethnic governance. It also outlined how the bureaucrats and elite intellectuals of the CCP could reinvent the concept of political legitimacy through harnessing the power of history.

In this essay, I have argued that the leaders and elite intellectuals of the CCP have retrospectively reconstructed the history of Korean assimilation into a teleological narrative of homogenization. This is because the practice of historical reconstruction was instrumental

71 Many scholars have tried to argue that the CCP’s source of legitimacy came from the charismatic leadership of Mao Zedong, epitomized by Mao’s cult of personality during the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s death in 1976, however, closed the chapter on China’s charismatic legitimacy. Yet, the political legitimacy of the CCP remained robust even in the contemporary world. For further details, see Elizabeth J. Perry, “Is the Chinese Communist Regime Legitimate?” Harvard Web Publishing, Cambridge: Harvard University, 31 Jan. 2018.
to the state’s self-description as a “unified, multiethnic” totality—a hegemonic conception of ethnic sovereignty which was buttressed by the state’s constant pacification, marginalization, and subjugation of minority subjectivities. Within the highly monitored spaces of the Chinese historiographical master-narrative, the alternative histories of Korean oppression were marginalized and subsequently assimilated into what Walter Benjamin calls the “empty, homogeneous time” of linear progress. Moreover, in the realms of geopolitics and ideology, the CCP’s teleological historiography has been translated into problematic ideas like underdevelopment and ethnic “uplift.” In this regard, this essay should be read not as a simple critique of the obviously nationalistic CCP scholarship, but as an attempt to unravel the ties between historiography and sovereign power, discourse and politics.

In advancing this argument, I departed in multiple ways from the existing literature on Korean minorities. Rather than focusing on the history of dispossession and local responses from below—as did Hyun Ok Park (2005), Peng Hai (2016), and Jaeun Kim (2016) who studied the interface between the state policies and identity politics of Korean minorities in Yanbian region—I examined the logic of ideological control “at the top.” This does not mean that I am uninterested in exploring the consequences of government micromanagement or probing the factors that either encouraged or discouraged collective action on the everyday level. On the contrary, my “top-down” perspective allowed me to better scrutinize the political origins of their present subaltern status. By addressing the question of how the elite communist intelligentsia configured Korean minorities in a way that reconciled the contradictions between socialist dogma and ethnocentrism embedded in PRC’s problematic conception of socialist nationhood, I explored the governmental logic that laid foundations for systematic ethnic marginalization. Thus, not only does this work depart from current analyses of Korean minorities in the PRC, it also offers new perspectives on the Chinese national myth, politics of history, communist ideology, and other central topics addressed in
the studies of Chinese socialist modernity. Essentially, all of these could not be thoroughly understood without deciphering the “minds” of the PRC regime.

In the first section, I analyzed the governmental logic of ethnic “uplift” and political development that the CCP leadership utilized to justify their penetration of state power into minority territories. In their attempts to resolve the “National Question” in China, CCP intellectuals merged Marxism with Mao’s unifying stratagem of “national struggle,” which enabled them to simultaneously claim allegiance to socialist internationalism and Han-Chinese nationalism. However, this idea of unity was predicated on the assumption that ethnic minorities inhabited in more “primitive” socioeconomic conditions compared to that of the “modernized” Han Chinese. By reducing minorities to symbols of cultural backwardness, CCP scholars claimed that the Han-majority had the obligation to “modernize” minorities and incorporate them into the Chinese national polity—ultimately allowing the CCP to dismantle the local institutions of ethnic minorities under the pretext of political development.

In the second section, I have demonstrated that the CCP scholarship reinterpreted the history of Korean-Chinese joint communist resistance in Manchuria during the 1930s as a “starting point” of Korean assimilation into the CCP’s socialist polity. Through the antagonization of Japan, the contemporary CCP scholarship reconstructed the chaotic history of anti-colonialism into neatly-crafted binaries of national inclusion and exclusion. Using this imaginary dichotomy as a figurative boundary of national difference, the CCP scholarship reimagined the ethnic Koreans as “self” while alienating Japan as the imperialist “other.”

In the third section, I reexamined the CCP’s orthodox historiographies which justified the brutal mobilization and incorporation of Koreans through the symbolic glorification of ethnic volunteers in the Korean War. This narrative of unwavering patriotism, transnational solidarity, and ideological triumphalism downplayed the actual sufferings of Korean minorities who were caught in a war that destroyed their ancestral homeland. While the
antagonization of Japan allowed Chinese Marxist historians to legitimize the state’s marginalization of Korean subjectivities, the scholars’ propagandistic narratives about Korean Chinese patriotism in the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War enabled them to occlude the ongoing Korean marginalization as well as the forgetting of other histories that did not fit into the Chinese national myths of Korean-Chinese class solidarity. Thus, in constructing the history of Korean ethnic assimilation into a linear teleology, PRC historians cast the Korean War as the historical “endpoint” that marks the “complete, successful assimilation” of Koreans.

Lastly, I have focused on how the contemporary CCP scholarship has sanitized certain unattractive histories that reveal the ethnic violence and subjugation of Koreans during the era of joint resistance. Moments of historical discord such as the Minsaengdan incident in 1932 and the subsequent anti-Minsaengdan struggle were censored from the CCP archives because they demonstrate how the CCP had failed to maintain ideological legitimacy on par with the national myth of ethnic harmony. Such signals of legitimacy loss underscore the inherent incongruities between theory and praxis of the CCP’s stratagem of ethnic management.

Beyond the dissection of various national myths, I have also drawn parallels between the treatment of Korean minorities by the Japanese Empire and the People’s Republic of China. The astonishing similarities between the two multiethnic regimes reveal how ideologies of both hegemonic entities shared the same oppressive logic of colonial paternalism—while the Japanese Empire claimed ownership over Korean subjectivities through the deliberate portrayal of Korean dependency, the PRC also perpetuated the notion that Korean nationalism needs to be saved by CCP leadership. Even Japanese colonial lexicons such as “Unruly Koreans” were unwittingly recycled in the CCP’s orthodox narratives. The fact that both regimes have marginalized Koreans on the basis of internationalist ideologies illustrates
that, although the PRC came to embody itself as the antithesis of Japanese imperialism, its emancipatory ideologies were still rooted in ethnocentric desires that sought to subsume the heterogeneity of empire to the homogeneity of the nation-state.

However, these parallels should not obscure the obvious fact that the PRC, unlike the Japanese Empire, was a nascent regime that inherited a diverse geo-body nearly identical to that of the pre-modern Qing Empire. Similar to its GMD predecessor in the early 20th century, the CCP had to wrest control over a heterogeneous political landscape while simultaneously constructing a homogeneous “Chinese” national identity that justifies its establishment of an authoritarian Han-Chinese state. At the same time, Chinese communist intellectuals needed to hinge their legitimacy on the alleged universality of Marxist ideology, which oftentimes sharply contradicted with their national project of state-building. As a result, Chinese communist intellectuals had to circumscribe Marxist ideology to the dissonant realities of governance in a multiethnic China. What this means is that the question of multi-ethnic sovereignty is highly pertinent to how the current CCP regime justifies the existence of Han-centric hegemony within the supposedly homogeneous framework of the modern nation-state—a question that still troubles CCP policymakers today with regards to “problems” of Uyghur autonomy, Tibetan independence, and Korean emigration.

While many have simply dodged the question of political legitimacy by claiming that the PRC is a “new Chinese empire garbed in the costume of a nation,” others have interpreted the CCP’s narration of frontier history as a manifestation of “socialist imperialism.” This essay answers that question by showing that the PRC scholars have tried to reconcile these contradictions within the PRC’s problematic conception of “multiethnic unity” through reconstructing the history of ethnic minorities into one that corroborates the master

---

historiographical construct of “national history.” As long as the current Chinese communist regime continues to command some vestige of historical legitimacy through professing its adherence to Marxism, elite intellectuals of the CCP will always be compelled to find alternative ways to rationalize the contradictions between the regime’s rhetoric and practices. What this essay is trying to offer is, thus, an attempt to analyze the government’s use of history as propaganda and to depoliticize the study of frontier history from the hegemony of nationalism.
Bibliography

Secondary Sources


Marx, Karl. “On the Jewish Question (1844),” First Published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (Paris: German-French Annals), Marxist Internet Archive.

Mullaney, Thomas S. *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.


**Primary Sources**


——. “Regarding the Question of Ethnic Relations in Chinese History (1950)” (关于处理中国历史上的民族关系问题), in *The Compiled Historical Papers of Jian Bozan* (翦伯赞


Lü Zhenyu (吕振羽), *A Concise General History of China* (简明中国通史) Hong Kong: Shenghuo Shudian, 1941.


Military Investigation Section, Department of Defense, Manchukuo (満州国軍政部軍事調査部). In *Study of Communist Insurgents in Manchuria, 1937* (滿洲共産匪の研究), 113.


“The Party Resolution on Work in Dongbiandao Prefecture (1928.2.29)” (东边道工作决议案, 1928.2.29), in *Compiled Documents on Revolutionary History in Northeastern China, Volume 1* (东北地区革命历史文件汇集, 甲1) (Beijing: CCP Central Archive): 357-360.


Yonbyon Ch’ongnyon. “What would be the best way to solve this problem?” *Yonbyon Ch’ongnyon* (1957): 8.
