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Contested Narratives: Reclaiming National Identity through Historical Reappropriation among Korean Minorities in China

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During the last two decades, the concept of nationalism has been repeatedly put under spotlight by both the media and academics. This heightened attention has produced a plethora of theories and applications of the concept. However, there is little agreement among scholars on what “nationalism” means and how it came about. Gellner and Hobsbawm regard it as a political principle that reflects cultural and voluntary commitment of individuals within a national political boundary, where as Anderson describes it as an imagined collective identity.¹ Breuilly offers yet a different definition by identifying nationalism with political movements seeking or exercising state power.² Recently, even the long-held consensus on the relatively recent historical origin of the concept has been challenged.³

In spite of such wide range of disagreements on various aspects of nationalism, however, most scholars agree on its dynamic and fluid nature. Nationalism is not a fixed ideology or identity, but

changes constantly through interactions among members within and outside of the nation. Yet, few studies explicate what the dynamism of nationalism entails. How is nationalism dynamic? Are the forces that shape nationalism endogenous or exogenous? What are the mechanisms of change? What is the locus of the dynamism? This paper attempts to address these questions by examining the contentious politics of symbolic boundary maintenance between the Chinese government and Korean minorities in China.

The dynamism of nationalism denotes that national identity is, in essence, fluid and changeable. Prasenjit Duara contends, “nationalism is rarely the nationalism of the nation, but rather represents the site where very different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.”⁴ Through the contestation and negotiations among various members of the group/nation, national identity constantly evolves. Therefore, no ethnic groups or nations have fixed identity

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*. 2nd ed. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983).

² John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

³ Philip S. Gorski. “The Mosaic Moment: An Early Modernist Critique of Modernist Theories of Nationalism,” *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 105, No. 5 (March, 2000): 1428-68.

⁴ Prasenjit Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 30, (July, 1993): 2.

or completely rigid membership boundaries. In fact, it is not uncommon for individuals and ethnic groups to change their membership or allegiance depending on their ever-fluctuating socio-political relations and surroundings. For instance, some minority nationalities in China have witnessed explosive population growth—the population of Manchus doubled between 1982 and 1990. While some of the cause can be attributed to the CCP's more relaxed child birth control policy in minority areas, the more significant reason is the switching of national identity by many who were formerly registered as "Han" Chinese. The nationality switching occurred partly because individuals made rational choices based on new institutional privileges given to minorities, but also because the meaning of being a Manchu changed dramatically during the reform era. The fluidity of national identity also makes possible for politically powerful groups to manipulate and exploit individuals.⁵ The question, then, is not whether national identities change, but how they are constructed and manipulated, and whether we can conceptualize the process.

This paper argues that the main channel through which national identity is actively contended and negotiated is through historical narratives. There are two main

reasons why historical narratives are emphasized in this study. First of all, as Anderson argued, if a nation is an imagined community, then the central force that maintains the imagination is shared memories embedded in historical narratives. Historical narratives not only sustain shared memories, but also make "a *social identity* explicit, not so much in the way it is 'given' or held as stable, as in the ways it is *differentiated* from a former period or another society," as Michel de Certeau argued.⁶ Secondly, empirical evidence from China indicates that there have been a number of attempts by both central government and minority groups to re-evaluate the history of the ethnic minority.

This paper will document how the process of contention and negotiation unfolded during the last 20 years since the reform began in China by taking the Chaoxianzu/Korean⁷ national minority group as the sample case.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary (1994) of the Yanbian⁸ Institute of Historical Research (*Yanbian Lishi Yanjiusuo/Yonbyon Yoksa Yon'guso*), Prof. Pak Munil, the president of Yanbian University, wrote a dedicatory article for this event.⁹ The article ardently calls for a complete renewal of historical research among Chaoxianzu¹⁰ historians in order to adapt to the rapidly

“ THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT THE MAIN CHANNEL THROUGH WHICH NATIONAL IDENTITY IS ACTIVELY CONTESTED AND NEGOTIATED IS THROUGH HISTORICAL NARRATIVES. ”

⁵ Stevan Harrell ed., "Introduction," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 10.

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 45.

⁷ "Chaoxianzu" is the official title for the Korean minorities living in China. In this paper, the term is used interchangeably with "Koreans in China," "Chinese Koreans," or simply "Koreans."

⁸ Yanbian is the officially designated autonomous prefecture for Korean minorities in China. It is located in southeast corner of Jilin province, one of the three northeastern provinces of China. To the south it faces North Korea, and to the east it conjoins the Russian border. It is a home of almost 1 million Koreans in China.

⁹ Pak Munil, "Concerning the Research Direction of Yanbian's Historical Scholarship in this New Historical Era [Sae Yoksa Sigi Yonbyon Sahakye ui Yon'gu Panghyang e Taehae]," in Pak Munil and others, *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, vol. 2, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 3-12.

¹⁰ "Chaoxianzu" is the official nationality title for Koreans in China. In this article, I will use the two terms (Koreans and Chaoxianzu) interchangeably.

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changing social and historical milieu. Prof. Pak suggests that this renewal of historical research must begin by concentrating on social functions of history, instead of blindly fulfilling its political functions. Furthermore, he emphatically articulated that Chaoxianzu historians must invest their efforts in researching the national and regional history of Chaoxianzu nationality, because “strengthening the national and regional historical research has significant implications for developing national culture and home-consciousness (*Kohyang Kwannyom*)” and “for wholly revealing the real face/truth of history.”¹¹ His desire to make use of historical research to revitalize nationalistic spirit is unmistakably clear.

Chaoxianzu historians, in effect, have been rewriting their history prolifically ever since the inception of the Reform Era.¹² The majority of their works were not innocuous academic papers divulging some undiscovered aspects of the past, but rather a myth-making project recreating the image of the nation and re-establishing Chaoxianzu people’s roots and pride. In doing so, many Chaoxianzu historians had to directly or indirectly contend with the official historical discourse formulated and imposed upon by the central government in Beijing. There are ample evidences of how Chaoxianzu historical narratives try to construct new national image of Chaoxianzu by often undoing the official narratives constructed by

the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Thus, historical scholarship became the most virulent contending arena for national identity between Chaoxianzu historians and CCP in the Reform Era.

The Beginning of Contention

On June 4th, 1979, The Yanbian Historical Research Institute (*Yonbyon Yoksa Yon’guso*), which was forcibly closed down during the Cultural Revolution, reopened. The Institute has since been publishing assiduously. Beginning with the publication of *The General Situation of the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture [Yanbian Chaoxianzu Zizhizhou Jiekuang]* in 1984 and *A Study on the History of Yanbian [Yonbyon Yoksa Yon’gu]* (Vols. 1-5) in 1985, the Institute has published over 60 monographs and 90 miscellaneous historical research papers to date.¹³ In addition to their own publications, the researchers at the Institute have assisted in the publications of many CCP-sponsored minority studies and reference books. This refurbished zeal for historical research is one of the most significant stepping stones for the revival of Chaoxianzu nationalism. Through fervent writing and publishing of historical narratives, Chaoxianzu historians are recreating their own national identity on the one hand, and differentiating themselves from both the Han national identity and the official projected image of Chaoxianzu

¹¹ Pak, 10-11.

¹² Although Koreans in China are relatively small in terms of population (1.9 million according to 1990 census, 13th largest in China), they publish more literatures and studies in their own language than any other minority nationalities. Many of their literatures and other publications deal specifically with history and identity. Especially, since the beginning of improved relations between China and South Korea, academic symposiums on “Korean immigrant societies” sponsored by Korean government or Korean academic institutions gave them more opportunities to reflect on their own identity and publish the results. Notably, the Hanguk Chongsin Munhwa Yonguso (The Academy of Korean Studies) has been sponsoring yearly symposium on overseas Korean culture. The Center for Korean Studies at University of Hawaii also sponsored an International Conference on Koreans in China in 1988. These symposiums and conferences contributed significantly in understanding Chaoxianzu nationalism and culture. Seoul National University has also established sisterhood relationship with Yanbian University since 1992, and has been sponsoring publications of many Chaoxianzu historical and social studies by Yanbian University professors.

¹³ Chon Chunja, “The Development of the Yanbian Historical Research Institute and the Major Fruits of its Research [Yonbyon Yoksa Yon’guso ui Yonhyok mit Chuyo han Haksul Songgwa Sogae],” in Pak Munil and others, *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, vol. 2, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 357-364.

identity on the other hand.

Interestingly, the characteristics of this renewed effort of constructing new historical consciousness for Chaoxianzu share many similarities with the “colonial nationalism” of the early 20th century. Generally, “colonial nationalism” is taken to refer to the assertiveness of local autonomy and interest as well as the desire for self-rule and self-respect within a changing set of connections to the empire.¹⁴ In a likewise manner, Chaoxianzu historians are now re-excavating their historical roots in order to reappropriate their own history and to reassert their local autonomy within the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Having gone through what resembles a colonizing experience during the Cultural Revolution, Chaoxianzu historians attempt to de-colonize their cultural and intellectual realms and construct new national identity. They do so by reclaiming the right to articulate their own past and correcting some of the false images of their identity created by the Beijing government. Consequently, their historical narratives often display significant and sometimes even confrontational disparities from the official state narratives. This article will discuss how these contentions unravel in their interpretations on defining who the Chaoxianzu are and re-establishing Chaoxianzu’s place in the Chinese history, and argue that, during the last two decades, Chaoxianzu historical scholarship has been laying the foundation for building a strong and distinct historic culture-community among Chaoxianzu minority with deep sense of affinity with Koreans in the Korean peninsula.

Chinese Minority or Korean Émigrés? – The Origin and Cultural Boundary of Chaoxianzu

The Dictionary of the History of China’s Minorities (Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzushi Dacidian), published in 1995, introduces the history of Chaoxianzu nationality as the following:

They are one of China’s minority nationalities.... Their origin is closely related with the ancient kingdoms of Guchaoxian (Kochoson) and Gaojuli (Koguryo). Their ancestors originally resided in the Liaodong area and the northern part of Chaoxian (Choson) peninsula. After the fall of Gaoli (Koryo), many of those who were living in the Liaodong area either moved inward or remained in Liaodong, and gradually integrated (*ronghe*) into the Han nationality. Some of them went back to the Chaoxian (Choson) peninsula and joined (*jiehe*) the Xinluo (Silla) nationality to form a new Gaoli (Koryo) nationality, and renamed themselves as Chaoxian (Choson) around the beginning of Ming dynasty in China.¹⁵

There are two extremely significant points that the article posits. First, it argues that Manchuria (or Liaodong Area) is the birthplace of Chaoxianzu nation. According to the article, the ancient history of Chaoxianzu indicates that they are, in fact, descendents of the ancient kingdoms of Kochoson and Koguryo and are closely related to the ancient inhabitants in Manchuria, most of whom are now “integrated” into the Han nationality.

¹⁴ John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder eds., *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa first assert their nationalities, 1880-1914*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 7.

¹⁵ “Chaoxianzu,” in *Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzushi Dacidian [The Dictionary of the history of China’s Minorities]*, (Changchun: Jilin Jiaoyu Chupanshi, 1995), 2174-2175.

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Secondly, the article implies that there are several sub-national groups with different origins within the all-encompassing category “Korean” ethnic group, and the present Chaoxianzu nationality in China has closer and more ancient affinity to the original Kochoson and Koguryo nations of Liaodong area than the southern Silla nationality which it “joined” much later. By shrewd choice of words, the article attempts to link the Chaoxianzu nationality more closely to the “integrated (*ronghe*)” ancient nations and thus to the Han nationality than the southern nation of Silla which now stands as Korea. The intention of the article, which aims to locate the roots of Chaoxianzu national identity in China by manipulating its ancient history, is subtle but unmistakable.

Today, many Chaoxianzu historians vehemently reject this official version of historical narrative regarding Chaoxianzu’s origin.¹⁶ Rather, most of Chaoxianzu scholars

particularly stress that the history of Chaoxianzu properly began in the mid-19th century.¹⁷ They try to distance themselves from earlier Korean settlers in China as much as they can, and emphasize this aspect of recent historical immigration in order to endow Chaoxianzu with a unique

characteristic as migrant (Chonyip) or crossed-over (Wolkyong/Kwakyong) people. One of the reasons why they wish to dissociate with the ancient Korean inhabitants in Manchuria is clearly articulated by Prof. Han of Yanbian University in his article: “I do not deny the fact that there are descendents of Koguryo in the northeastern region of China. However, they have been already completely assimilated into Han or Manchurian nationalities, and have been converted into those nationalities.”¹⁸ What this statement purports is that Prof. Han’s understanding of Chaoxianzu national identity takes strong independent national and cultural distinctiveness as a prerequisite. In other

words, if an originally ethnic Korean is culturally assimilated, he/she is no longer a Korean or Chaoxianzu, regardless of his/her genealogical roots.¹⁹

In order to build their distinct national identity apart from that of Han

identity, Chaoxianzu historians have also had to clarify the boundary-line for their national membership. It was important to make sure that the Chaoxianzu identity was unequivocally defined, not left arbitrary, so that any Chaoxianzu individual could identify himself/herself as a member of the

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¹⁶ Most of the Chaoxianzu scholars who attended the Conference on the Migratory History of Chaoxianzu sponsored by the Chaoxianzu Historical Society of China in 1988 rejected the theory of aboriginality of Chaoxianzu in Manchuria.

¹⁷ Chon Susan, “Immigration of Koreans near the end of Qing dynasty [Ch’ongmal sigi Chosonjokui yiju],” in Kim Chongguk and others ed., *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 49-79; Han Chun’gwang, “Discussing ‘The history of Koreans in Beijing Area [’Bukkyong Jiyok Hangukin Yiminsa’ e Taehan Toron],” in *Korean Culture in the World: Life and Culture of Overseas Koreans [Saegyesokoi Hanguk Munhwa: Jaeeo Hanimui Saenghwalgwa Munhwa]*, Papers from the 1st Conference on Koreans in the World, (Seoul: The Academy of Korean Studies, 1991), 91-97.

¹⁸ Han Chun’gwang, 92.

¹⁹ This added emphasis on cultural distinctiveness is a quite recent development. Even until 1984, Korean historians did not completely reject the idea of the historical association between Chaoxianzu nationality and the ancient kingdoms of Kochoson and Koguryo. It was only in 1988 that the academic consensus has been completely turned around. Since the Conference on the Migratory History of Chaoxianzu sponsored by the Chaoxianzu Historical Society of China (*Zhongguo Chaoxian Minzu Shixuehui Qianrushi Xueshu Taolunhui*) in 1988, hardly any Chaoxianzu historian makes the connection between Chaoxianzu and ancient kingdoms of Kochoson and Koguryo.

nation without perplexity. Contrary to the efforts of CCP to blur the national distinctions,²⁰ Chaoxianzu leaders strove to ascertain Chaoxianzu membership boundaries. They understand ‘nation’ as a cultural and political community that retains common cultural characteristics and national consciousness.²¹ ‘National Consciousness’ is further defined as “realizing the dignity of one’s own nation and recognizing that the members have the supreme right to decide the destiny of their own nation; and thus it does not allow the members to succumb to oppression and humiliation caused by other nations and induces them to fight for the prosperity of their fatherland even to death.”²² It is apparent that their endeavor to define their cultural boundary carries a strong nationalistic agenda. This agenda is most clearly revealed in the so-called Pak clan controversy.

In 1982, approximately 350 members of Pak clan from Qinglong County in Hebei Province applied for change of their nationality registration from ‘Han’ to ‘Chaoxianzu.’ Following their example, more members of Pak clan who were previously registered as ‘Han’ applied for the change: 1,234 from Benjie county and 277 from Gai county in Liaoning Province, and 60 from Shunan County in Jilin Province. They all claimed that they are descendents of Korean immigrants from medieval period. Drawing on this claim to blood relations, these thoroughly assimilated members of Pak clan sought to re-convert to Chaoxian nationality. Although the applicants from

Benjie County were denied the change by the government due to the lack of substantial genealogical evidence, all the others succeeded in changing their nationality registration. This incident caused enormous controversy among Chaoxianzu scholars. The reason why it became an issue is because these members of Pak clan became a prototype of what the members of Chaoxianzu are most afraid of—ethnic assimilation.

According to Chaoxianzu historians, the ancestors of the Pak clans came to China at least 600 years ago during Koryo dynasty in Korea or even earlier. However, after several centuries of living within Chinese and Manchu communities, they had totally lost any Korean cultural traits. None of them are capable of speaking the Korean language, and there is no trace of traditional Korean customs in their lifestyle. The only sign of their Koreanness is that they have Korean last names and somehow remember themselves as descendents of Koreans. The Pak clan is a perfect example of an assimilated nationality, and according to the socialist ideals, this is where all the ethnic groups are supposed to be headed. The national “community” imagined by the Pak clan is wholly in line with the CCP minority policies. However, this is precisely what Korean intellectuals are striving to prevent at all costs. Consequently, many Korean scholars have become uneasy about the whole situation and thus began to strongly deny the validity of Pak clans’ claim to Chaoxianzu nationality. They not only

²⁰ CCP’s dexterous practice of blurring national distinctions have most effectively carried out in the southwest. Especially, their work of mashing several ethnic groups into one nationality called Zhuang for political purpose is a case in point. See Katherine E. Palmer, *Creating Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in the Peoples Republic of China*, Ph. D. Dissertation, (University of Virginia, 1997). Even among the officially recognized ethnic groups, the government often focuses on the most salient division that is drawn between Han and minorities instead of giving each ethnic group comparable weights and attention.

²¹ I Tuman, “National Consciousness of Chaoxianzu [Chungguk Chosonjok ui Minjok uisik],” in *Koreans in the World [Segaesok ui Hanminjok]*. Papers from the 2nd Conference on Koreans in the World, (Seoul: The Academy of Korean Studies, 1993): 431-442.

²² From *The Dictionary of Chaoxian Cultural Language [Chuson Munhwao Sajon]* as quoted in Kim Sung-ch’ol, 443.

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suspect the truth of their claim to Korean genealogical origin, but also reject their claim to membership in Chaoxianzu nationality even if their genealogical claim proved to be true.

An Bong, a Chaoxianzu historian, carefully argues that there is no guarantee that these Pak clans are really from the Korean peninsula. The mythological stories of Pak clan's origin²³ are not restricted to Korean peninsula. An Bong argues that similar stories can be found in China and Japan, so it is not academically plausible to limit Pak clan's origin to only Korean peninsula.²⁴ Furthermore, he contends that there were several clans with last name "Pak" in ancient China. Using Chinese historical sources, he proves that "Pak" was a rather common Chinese last name even before the Yuan dynasty.²⁵ Just the fact that they have the last name "Pak" does not guarantee that they are descendents of Koreans.

Another Chaoxianzu scholar, Han Chun'gwang, presents a different argument against allowing Pak clans to obtain Chaoxianzu nationality: in spite of their claim to blood relations, none of the Pak clan really has Korean blood in them. All of them have only one side of their parentage related to Korean ancestors, or some of them have none at all. Among the 45 households that applied for change in nationality registration from the Qinglong county in Hebei, 12 household heads had both parents who were either Han or Manchu, and 33 household heads had one parent who were either Han or Manchu.²⁶ Furthermore, those who applied

for change were rather small in number in their communities. In the same county in Hebei, only some 350 have applied for change while more than 1,500 others with the same last name decided to remain 'Han.'²⁷

Chaoxianzu scholars conclude that the only reason that some members of Pak clans changed their nationality registration is to benefit from the favorable nationality policies of the government toward minorities. As members of minority nationalities, they can have more than one child and gain a bit more political leverage. Even after the government approved their applications, none of them attempted to learn Korean language or culture, and still live in predominantly Han or Manchu communities.

This incident re-awakened Chaoxianzu scholars to the reality of ethnic integration in Chaoxianzu communities. An Bong is particularly concerned about the status quo of Chaoxianzu culture and society. The population of Chaoxianzu is hardly growing, while the Han population in Yanbian is increasing rapidly. Moreover, young generation of Koreans in Yanbian feels no urgency to learn Korean language. In this socio-cultural environment of already degenerating national spirit, the presence of assimilated Pak clans among Chaoxianzu adds even more threat to Chaoxianzu national identity. The Chinese government, on the other hand, readily approved these applications. However, Chaoxianzu intellectuals even reject the validity of the government's approval. Consequently, they

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KOREAN IS NO KOREAN AT ALL.”

²³ Pak clans in Korea claim that their original ancestor was born out of an egg. He became the first king of Silla kingdom.

²⁴ An Bong, 39.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Han Chun'gwang, 95.

²⁷ Ibid., 95.

do not hesitate to express very strong feelings regarding this matter. For them, assimilated Korean is no Korean at all.

Henchman or Equal Partner?: Reclaiming the National History of Chaoxianzu

The official state narrative of Chaoxianzu history normally characterizes the Chaoxianzu as eager participants of CCP's glorious struggle against the four "anti-": anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, anti-Kuomintang and anti-America.²⁸ Instead of writing the stories of Chaoxianzu's own independent historic journey, the official account of Chaoxianzu history is always incorporated into the history of CCP revolution.²⁹ All the official accounts invariably stress that most of the armed resistance against Japanese was led by CCP.³⁰ Although Koreans were active participants of the anti-imperialist and anti-Japanese struggles, the ultimate victory was accomplished only through the guidance of the CCP.³¹ In order to justify their claim, CCP historians selectively chose historical events and narrated everything around the center represented by the party.³² They effectively eliminated any account of conflicts between Han Chinese and Koreans, and highlighted several instances when the two groups had worked together. Through these "model" narratives, they attempted to reconstruct Chaoxianzu history to fit within their own ideological and political framework. Such

manipulative historical practice is no longer acceptable to Chaoxianzu historians. The dissatisfaction with the official narrative is most conspicuously expressed in their re-evaluation of the works of the CCP's Manchurian Provincial Committee (1927.10-1936.6).

Because of Manchuria's undeniable strategic significance in the CCP's struggle against Japan and KMT during the first two decades of its history, the CCP called for the establishment of the Manchurian Provincial Committee (MPC - *Zhonggong Manzhousheng Weiyuanhui*) in 1927. In order to consolidate the position of the party in Manchuria and bring organization, the CCP sent one of its Central Committee members, Liu Shaoqi, as the first secretary of MPC in 1929; note that the work and role of the MPC were significant enough for the CCP to send the head of its Labor Department. The MPC's influence over Koreans in Manchuria was particularly significant, because Korean communists all joined the CCP in complying with the Comintern's directive calling for "one party for one country" in 1930, and thus came under the authority of the MPC. When the Manchurian incident broke out on Sept 18, 1931, the MPC played a critical role in organizing anti-Japanese guerilla armies.

In spite of the Committee's historical importance, Chinese historical scholarship is astonishingly silent on the subject. Most of the historical dictionaries do not even contain

²⁸ The National Publishing Committee on Minority Issues, *China's Minority Nationalities [Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu]*, (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1981), 43-56.

²⁹ Having examined many literatures on the official discourse of Chaoxianzu history, Heh-Rahn Park concludes that the state narratives characterize Chaoxianzu as the "liberated subjects" instead of common liberators. Park, 76.

³⁰ Chen Lian, *A History of the Development of Bases for Anti-Japanese Operations [Kangri Genjudi Fazhan Shilüe]*, (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshi, 1987), 539, 541, 543; Wen Zhengyi, "Chaoxianzu Righteous Army during Anti-Japanese Struggle [Kangri Zhanzheng zhongde Chaoxian Yiyongjun]," in *Ethnic Unity [Minzu Tuanjie]*, No. 290, (July, 1995), 20-24.

³¹ Chou Wanhong and others, *Records of Chinese Communist Party Led Anti-Japanese Warfare [Zhongguo Gongchandang Lingdao Kangri Zhanzheng Jishi]*, (Jilin: Jilin People's Press, 1995), 8-9.

³² Craig Calhoun contends that China has always engaged in a selective appropriation and reconstruction of China's past, and used those exemplary narratives in educational practices to foster loyalty and other values in the mind the Chinese public. Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 33-34.

³³ *Zhongguo Lishi Cidian*, (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshi, 1991); *Zhongguo Jindaishi Cidian*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshi, 1982); *Jindai Zhongguo Bainian shi Cidian* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshi, 1987); *Zhongguo Dabaike Quanshu* (Beijing: Zhongguo Dabaike Quanshu Chubanshi, 1978-1991).

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an article with the title “*Zhonggong Manzhousheng Weiyuanhui* (or *Manzhou Shengwei* as a short form),”³³ and the official history of CCP’s anti-Japanese struggle mostly ignores the MPC or simply makes perfunctory remarks. The silence is equally dominant among Chaoxianzu historical narratives at least until the 1980s, except for a few typical party-controlled propagandistic historical accounts that praise anything that the Communist Party did.³⁴ Only in the new historic era has renewed historical investigation of the MPC been initiated, and a few research reports published by both CCP and Chaoxianzu scholars.³⁵

A few available CCP accounts of the MPC’s works unanimously elevate the MPC for providing crucial leadership in Yanbian’s struggles against feudalism and Japanese imperialism. They do mention the role of Koreans occasionally, but the entire narrative is focused around the heroic works of CCP.³⁶ For instance, a study of the CCP’s anti-Japanese operations by the People’s Liberation Army highly acclaims the MPC’s leadership in guiding the independent anti-Japanese military operations and organizing party structures in Manchuria.³⁷ It stresses that the military operations in the northeast after the 9.18 (or Manchurian) incident was heroically led by

“**NEW HISTORICAL NARRATIVES BY CHAOXIANZU SCHOLARS PLACE KOREANS AT THE CENTER OF MANCHURIA’S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE JAPANESE IMPERIAL FORCES.**”

the MPC.³⁸ Another study on Liu Shaoqi’s works in the MPC also praises the its achievement: “Under extremely difficult conditions, MPC restored the organization of the party and allowed the workers’ movement, peasants’ movement, soldiers’ movement, and all the other mass patriotic anti-imperialist movements to rapidly develop under the leadership of the party.”³⁹

These superb achievements of the MPC, presented in party literatures, are not how most of the Chaoxianzu people remember the Committee. Despite the universal familiarity of the MPC and its historic significance, its story is often not talked about in Yanbian. The sensitivity of the subject is uncanny, a puzzle whose centerpiece resides in what is known as the *Minsaengdan* (or *Minshengtuan*) incident which resulted in the massacre of more than one thousand Korean Communists. Recently, Chaoxianzu scholars revisited the works of the MPC and the *Minsaengdan* incident with much caution.⁴⁰ In these studies, the MPC is no longer an object of encomium; its policies and works are analyzed with moderate objectivity, and some of its mistakes are brought out to the surface. Most importantly, the role of Koreans in the anti-Japanese struggles in Manchuria is radically re-evaluated, and their relationship with the

³⁴ A Chaoxianzu historian writes that there were hardly any study on the subject of MPC’s policies toward Koreans. Ch’on Ryo, “Concerning the basic policies of the MPC toward northeastern Chaoxianzu,” in Kim Chongguk and others ed., *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 3.

³⁵ Ch’on Ryo, 3-21; *Yanbian University Journal [Yanbian Daxue Xuebao]*, No. 2-3, (1987): 148-160; *The General Situation of the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture*; Institute of Party School and Party History of Liaoning Provincial Committee, *Biography of martyrs of the Manchurian Provincial Committee [Manzhou Shengwei Lieshi Chuan]*, (Shenyang: Liaoning Renmin Chupanshi, 1981); Liaoning Social Science Institute, *Comrade Shaoqi at the Manchurian Provincial Committee [Shaoqi Tongzhi Zai Manzhou Shengwei]*, (Shenyang: Liaoning Renmin Chubanshi, 1981).

³⁶ Chen Lian, *A History of the Development of Bases for Anti-Japanese Operations [Kangri Genjudi Fazhan Shiliie]*, (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chupanshi, 1987), 539-558; Chou Wanhong and others, *Records of Chinese Communist Party Led Anti-Japanese Warfare [Zhoungguo Gongchandang Lingdao Kangri Zhanzheng Jishi]*, (Jilin: Jilin People’s Press, 1995), 8-9.

³⁷ *Biography of martyrs of the Manchurian Provincial Committee [Manzhou Shengwei Lieshi Chuan]*, 1-2.

³⁸ Chen Lian, 539-558.

³⁹ *Comrade Shaoqi at the Manchurian Provincial Committee [Shaoqi Tongzhi Zai Manzhou Shengwei]*, 110-111.

⁴⁰ Ch’on Ryo, 3-21.

CCP is carefully re-examined.

New historical narratives by Chaoxianzu scholars place Koreans at the center of Manchuria's struggle against the Japanese imperial forces. They stress that most of the northeastern regions' CCP members were Koreans: in 1930, over 90% of all CCP members were Koreans; 93% of the Communist Youth Organization members were Koreans; and virtually all of the 10,000 organized peasant families were Korean families.⁴¹ Even as late as 1934, more than half of all CCP members in Manchuria were Korean, and over 95% of guerilla armies consisted of Koreans. Chaoxianzu historians note that even the MPC Chinese leaders recognized the fact that "Koreans constitute the basic revolutionary force in Manchuria" in its report to the central CCP leadership.⁴² Furthermore, it is evident from the remaining documents from MPC archives that there were hardly any Han Chinese Communists in Manchuria and that the MPC encouraged Koreans to convert their neighboring Han Chinese to Communism. It gave directives to Koreans to produce propagandistic literatures and posters in Chinese and go into Chinese communities to spread Communist ideology among Han nationalities in Manchuria. Despite such critical roles played by Koreans, the MPC gradually moved against Koreans, which reached its peak with the *Minsaengdan* incident.

In 1931, the central CCP leadership guaranteed the full right of self-determination to Koreans, Mongols, Hui, Tibetans, Miao and Li in the *Constitution of the Chinese Soviet Republic*, a right which also included the right of secession. While the MPC recognized the authority of the CCP

Central Committee's decision, it interpreted the concept of "self-determination" differently. MPC intentionally ignored the clause in the Constitution stipulating the right of secession, and argued that "self-determination" only promises "equal political power."⁴³ The committee ceaselessly emphasized "unity," and harshly condemned the "leftist tendency of mechanically applying the principles of nationality relations in Lenin's writings."⁴⁴ Therefore the MPC allowed Koreans to participate in the People's Revolutionary Government with only limited political power. Although Ch'on Ryo, the author of the study, does not make any interpretative statements in this issue, his resentment is clearly expressed by his cursory comment that the MPC did not fully follow the directives from the center.

According to Ch'on, the Committee was heavily influenced by the leftist ideology of the Sixth Comintern Conference, and labeled Korean anti-Japanese nationalist groups as "dogs of Chinese bourgeois and Japanese imperialists; and thus purely anti-revolutionary fascist groups." Such radical leftist ideology seriously impaired the process of bringing together all the Korean anti-Japanese forces in unity. The gravest mistake the Committee made, however, was concerning the thousands of original Choson Communist Party members who joined the MPC in 1930. Initially, the MPC welcomed the Choson Communist Party members as potential catalysts of advancing revolutionary movement of the Committee. They were interviewed and examined carefully before they were admitted to the party. However, soon after, the Committee came under the influence of Wang Ming's

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

⁴² "A report by MPC organization department (1930)," as quoted in Ch'on Ryo, 12.

⁴³ "Announcement of the MPC to the People (Sept 20, 1931)," as quoted in Ch'on Ryo, 13.

⁴⁴ Ch'on Ryo, 13.

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ultra-leftist line, and began to call the original Choson Communist Party members as “elements causing factional strife” and persecuted them. Many of these Korean party members had participated in the *Minsaengdan* (the People’s Livelihood Organization) activities from October 1931 to July 1932. According to a Japanese consulate report, *Minsaengdan* was organized by some Koreans for the purpose of relieving economic hardships of Koreans in *Kando*, but the organization did not last long because it failed to obtain general support from the public.⁴⁵ However, because of the alleged pro-Japanese stance of the organization, Korean Communists who joined the organization came under direct attack from their Han comrades in the MPC. The situation quickly deteriorated, and eventually caused the execution of more than one thousand Korean Communist members during the next three years. The incident permanently marred the relationship between Koreans and Hans, and brought calamities on the anti-Japanese campaign in northeastern China.

Although all the wrongfully accused *Minsaengdan* members were re-declared innocent and posthumously rehabilitated in 1981 by the government of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, no one dared to get to the bottom of the issue. Why did the MPC so viciously attack Korean revolutionaries? Ch’on Ryo’s study does not directly answer this question either, but a subtle implication can be detected in his presentation. When the CCP first established its MPC in northeast

China, its size and influence was minimal. Between 1927-1929, there were only 100-200 CCP members in Manchuria, all in the city. Even as late as April 1930, it had only 208 members. Consequently, when the Korean Communists joined the MPC in 1930, its membership suddenly rose to over 2,000, and Koreans dominated the Committee. Koreans played an extremely important role in establishing the party’s base in Manchuria. Yet, in spite of Koreans’ central role in its development, the MPC encouraged Koreans to allow Chinese members to take leadership.⁴⁶ Their reasoning behind the suggestion was to attract more Han Chinese to join the party, but the desired eventual consequence was pushing Koreans out of leadership positions. As Park suggests, the Han Chinese leaders were threatened by the sudden influx of many Korean party members, so the Han Chinese leaders eliminated the Korean Communist leaders and senior revolutionaries in order to have complete control over the Korean population.⁴⁷

The research in this area is still in its infancy. However, it has come a long way from merely parroting the official discourse that indiscriminately praises the achievements of the MPC and hides all its mistakes. Chaoxianzu historians have broken new grounds and dared to venture into the “forbidden zone.”⁴⁸ They proudly stress that *Koreans* led the anti-Japanese struggles in Manchuria, and that most of the leaders of rebellion in Yanbian were Koreans.⁴⁹ They even unhesitatingly state that anti-Japanese

⁴⁵ Park, 35.

⁴⁶ “A Letter from the central MPC to southern MPC branch,” as quoted in Ch’on, 12.

⁴⁷ Park, 32, 36.

⁴⁸ Kwon Rib, “On the Function of Historical Studies and the Reformation of Chaoxianzu Historical Scholarship [Sahak ui Kongnung kwa Chosonjok Sahak ui Kaehyok e Taehayo],” in Pak Munil and others, *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, vol. 2, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 14.

⁴⁹ Unlike most of the CCP publications that stress the leadership of the party, Ch’on emphasize the leadership of Koreans in their anti-Japanese struggles. Ch’on, 16.

struggles by Koreans had no direct link with the resistance movements of other nationalities in Manchuria, but more closely related to the independence movement in Korea.⁵⁰ Such new developments in historical interpretation rose out of an effort to carefully balance the official party-centered worldview with a new Chaoxianzu-centered worldview. Without using hostile and exclusive language, Chaoxianzu scholars have constructed a nationalistic account of their past which, to a certain degree, counter-balances the official narrative. This fresh way of history-writing reflects Chaoxianzu historians' effort to link an interpretive practice to a social and cultural praxis. For Chaoxianzu historians in the new historic era, history is not just about recounting the past. Rather, history functions as a way of reconstructing distorted national identity and evoking national spirit to unite its members. They fully understand that the driving force of nationalism lies in its historical embeddedness. By reclaiming their own history, they want to refuel the Chaoxianzu collective imagination and rebuild the culture-historic community of Chaoxianzu.

The experiences of Chaoxianzu illustrate that nationalism is not a fixed ideology or identity, but a dynamic field of shared memories. It constantly changes through interactions among various actors inside and outside of the nation. The present "nationalism" of Chaoxianzu is still being

actively negotiated between Chaoxianzu intellectuals and the central government. The national identity of Chaoxianzu that came out of the negotiation is markedly different from the ones that these two parties once dreamed of creating. The CCP's revolutionary vision of creating a true socialist society into which the Chaoxianzu is supposed to be gradually integrated, has been heavily compromised by its own mistakes as well as by the counter-narratives created by Chaoxianzu leaders. The newly emerging picture of Chaoxianzu national identity seems to favor neither of these two efforts of construction, thus providing all the more reason for continued fervency in ethnic negotiation.

It is not possible to accurately predict the final outcome of the negotiations, because there are various complex networks of domestic and international relationships that affect Chaoxianzu national identity.

Furthermore, it seems that there is another powerful influence that affects the outcome: the process of globalization and the post-modern wave of cultural pluralism and liberalization. Nevertheless, there is apparently a growing longing for historical consciousness and a search for roots among members of Chaoxianzu nationality. As a Chaoxianzu professor at Liaoning University (predominantly Chinese University) confesses:

The relationship between motherland and its people abroad is like the

“...NATIONALISM IS NOT A
FIXED IDEOLOGY OR IDENTITY,
BUT A DYNAMIC FIELD OF
SHARED MEMORIES.”

⁵⁰ Piao Changyu in *Koreans in China*, 58. Unlike the official historical discourse that characterize the anti-Japanese movements of Koreans as struggles for "liberation of China," Chaoxianzu historians often link them with the broader Korean national independence movement. For example, one of the earliest anti-Japanese demonstrations in Yanbian, the March 13th Movement, is retold by Chaoxianzu historians as a Manchurian extension of the March 1st Independence Movement that began in Korea. An Hwach'un, "Concerning the special characteristic of 3.13 anti-Japanese Movement [3.13 Panil Undong ui T'ukjom e Taehayo]," in Kim Chongguk and others eds., *A Study on the History of Chinese Koreans [Chungguk Chosonjok Yongu]*, vol. 1, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1993), 202-213. The fundamental aim of the Korean anti-Japanese resistance movement is also re-articulated as it was originally expressed in *Declaration of the Korean Fatherland Liberation Society in Manchuria [Jaeman Hanin Choguk Kwangbokhoe Sonon]* which was published in June 10, 1936: "Let us fight for the true autonomy of the Koreans in Manchuria and the liberation and independence of Korea."

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relationship between roots of a tree and the branches; therefore when the roots are healthy, the branches will naturally be fecund. By the same token, in order for the roots to reach deeper, it needs to receive nutrients from branches and leaves. The leaves are bound to return to the roots (*Luo Ye Gui Gen*). Consequently, if Koreans abroad forget their language and history, even if they would succeed in foreign soil their success is limited by their banana identity.⁵¹ True success can only be

obtained by ardently cherishing the roots.⁵²

Chaoxianzu nationalism has divested itself of the political and territorial connotations that are often associated with nationalism of the modern era. At the same time, it has taken up stronger cultural and ethnic national identity as an historic culture-community that shares its deepest roots with Koreans in the Korean peninsula. With the cultural and conceptual roads paved, their pilgrimage of searching for national identity continues. A Chaoxianzu singer, Cui Jian, sings:

*I have heard it, but never saw the 25,000 li.⁵³
 Much to say, but nothing to do, it is really difficult to know.
 Burying heads, walking forward, we are all seeking self.
 Coming and going, there is still no place to finally settle.
 I ask the heaven and the earth, "how much more must I travel?"
 I beseech the wind and the rain, "please, go far away from me!"
 Many mountains and many rivers, I can't even distinguish east from west.
 Many people and many mouths, no one clearly speaks the truth.
 How should I say and how should I act to truly become myself?
 How should I sing and how should I chant to finally feel satisfaction?*

- Rock and Roll on the New Road to Long March
 - Cui Jian

⁵¹ "Banana" is a nickname for Koreans who are completely assimilated to western (white) culture in terms of their inner sentiments, worldview, cultural inclination and philosophy; the only remaining feature of their "Koreanness" is the yellow skin color.

⁵² Ch'oe Chongsok, "The Reality and Task of Chaoxianzu Education in China," in *Koreans in the World [Segaesok ui Hanminjok]*. Papers from the 2nd Conference on Koreans in the World. (Seoul: The Academy of Korean Studies, 1993), 253-254.

⁵³ "li" is a Chinese measurement of distance. 1 li is equivalent to approximately 400m.