North Korea's China Connection: Documenting Transnational Cadre Ties during the North Korean Revolution, 1945-1949

by Charles Kraus

The history of Chinese-North Korean relations has been dominated by the largest personalities. While it is easy to understand why Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong have loomed large over the historiography, this tendency to focus on "the giants of the old generation"—a trend perpetuated by both official party historians in the PRC and DPRK and acquiesced to by professionally-trained scholars elsewhere—obscures what is really a much richer fabric of bilateral relations. The diversity of personalities involved in Chinese-North Korean relations is particularly evident when we study the years straddling the creation of the respective People's Republics. A closer look is needed at the extraordinary cross-border connectivity between China and North Korea from 1945 and 1950, the era of the Chinese Civil War and the North Korean revolution.

Cemetary of Revolutionary Martyrs, Pyongyang | Via Japan Focus, July 2012

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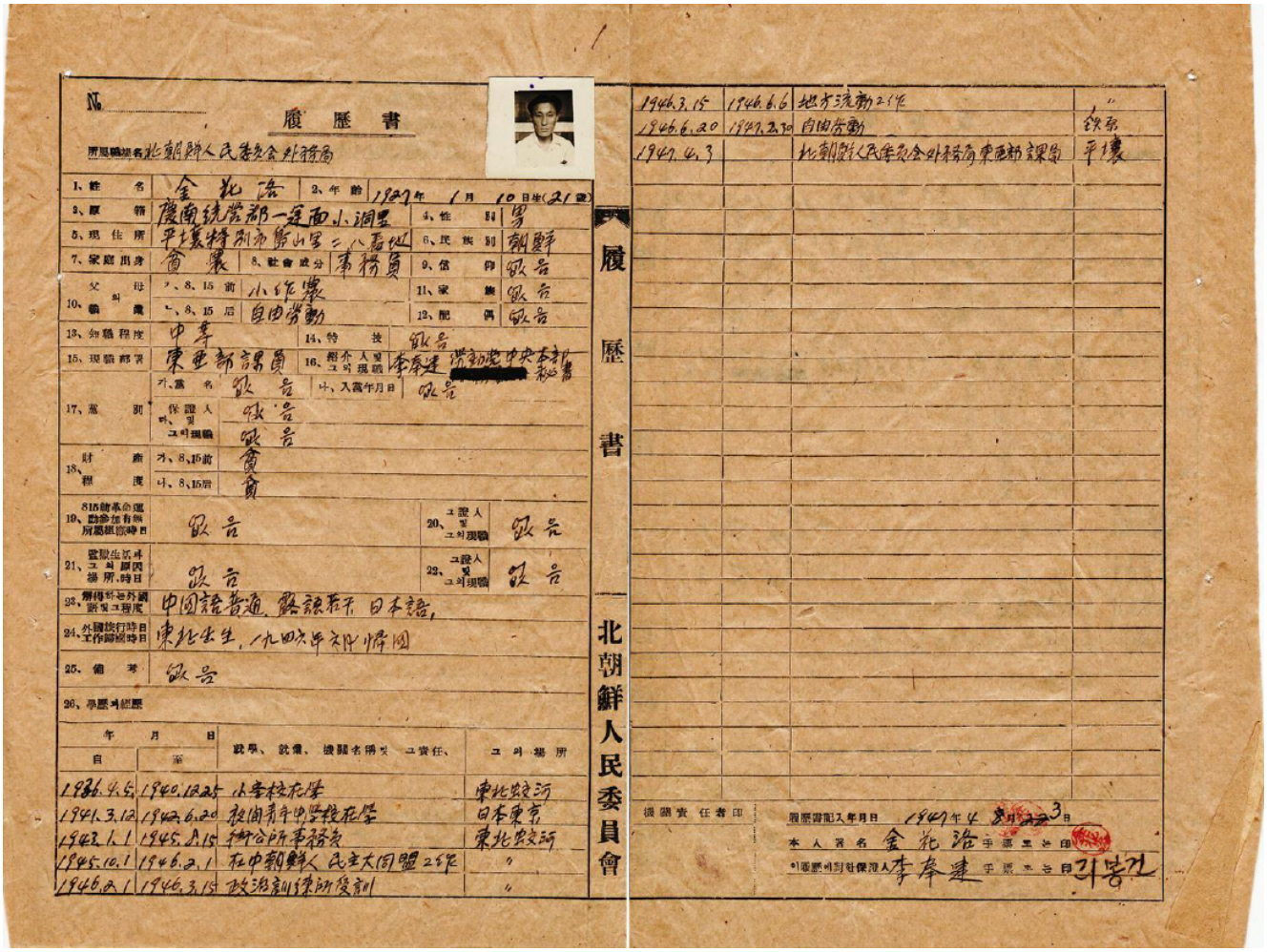
(North) Koreans Abroad | Even in the wake of Patrick McEachern's call for a more bureaucratic and less personality-driven view of the DPRK, North Korean institutions—and the individuals who occupy them—still tend to receive short shrift in the West. The North Korean Foreign Ministry is one such institution. In typical treatments of North

Korean history, the North Korean Foreign Ministry surfaces only in 1953, when its head, Pak Heon-yeong was accused of treason, blamed by Kim Il Sung for the failings of the war, and eventually executed. As is revealed in a number of captured North Korean documents, the personnel who worked in the Foreign Ministry in the earliest years of the North Korean state can give us the ability to go beyond the factional intrigues in Cold War Pyongyang and zero in on North Korea's long-term connectivity to China and Northeast Asia more broadly.

Much of the staff working in the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the North Korean People's Committee (北朝鮮人民委員會外務局), the predecessor to the DPRK Foreign Ministry, had been educated in China and/or Manchuria. Many of these men, and a few women, remained abroad beyond the date of Japanese capitulation. As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) moved north and east (and often in retreat) into the areas traditionally inhabited by ethnic Koreas in 1945 and 1946, particularly the cluster of counties making up and surrounding what is now known as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, the future staff of North Korea's Foreign Affairs Bureau came into close proximity with Chinese communist forces.

One man in particular, Kim Hwa-rak (金花洛/김화락), exemplifies these ties.

Our information about Kim Hwa-rak and other staff of the Foreign Affairs Bureau comes to us via a handful of personnel dossiers from 1947. All employees of the Foreign Affairs Bureau, like most other agencies, organizations, and schools of the North Korean government, were required to submit personal history statements, containing information about one's family background, work experiences, time spent abroad, political affiliations, and socio-economic standing. Two dozen dossiers from the Foreign Affairs Bureau were later recovered by American forces as they pushed north of the 38th parallel in 1950 and 1951, and now occupy a sliver of the files available in Record Group 242 in College Park, Maryland.



履歷書

北朝鮮人民委員會

Kim Hwa-rak's personal dossier, as found in Record Group 242, Shipping Advice 2005, Item 8/15 at the National Archives in College Park, MD. Image courtesy of Charles Kraus.

The "Northeast" (*Tongbuk*) | Kim was fairly unique compared to his colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Bureau, especially so because, prior to 1946, Kim had never actually lived in Korea proper. In his dossier, Kim indicated that his ancestral homeland was in South Gyeongsang Province, the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, but his birthplace was in the "northeast" (東北 *tongbuk*), or, as it is more commonly known, Chinese Manchuria.

Kim's terminology is interesting in itself: born in 1927, the "northeast" of Kim's conscious childhood was very much in the hands of the Japanese, but staff in the Foreign Affairs Bureau rarely used the politically charged term "Manchukuo" (满洲国 *Manjuguk*) in their dossiers. Perhaps to avoid giving legitimacy to the Japanese colonial state, more often the returnees from China's northeast typically stated that they had worked or been educated in "Jilin Province" (吉林省), a tacit recognition of Chinese sovereignty over the region. But Kim Hwa-rak's "*tongbuk*" lacks any of this administrative specificity. At the risk of over-reading only a pair of words, the choice of

words seems to suggest not simply a desire to put the scars of Japanese rule in the past, but perhaps even a certain sentimentality for a seemingly borderless world; it is, no doubt, a reminder of the interconnected histories of China and Korea, and the centrality of Manchuria to Korean history.

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Colonial Circuit | Kim may never have lived in Korea, but his class background was a distinct asset. He described his family as of "poor peasant" (贫农) stock, owning only a small piece of land prior to August 15, 1945. Despite his apparently low social position, Kim appears to have been reasonably well educated. He received his early education in Jiaohe (蛟河), a small town located at a critical bend in the road connecting Changchun and Yanbian, from 1936 through 1940. Kim, like many of his colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Bureau, subsequently travelled to Japan for middle school (probably transiting via Dalian, the "Hong Kong of the Northeast"), and he studied in Tokyo from March 1941 through June 1942. His whereabouts for the six-months following his studies are not entirely clear, though he did soon return home to Jiaohe.

With a reasonably extended and undeniably colonial education, Kim spoke fluent Korean and Japanese; his Chinese was described as proficient, and he also had command of basic Russian. An ideal candidate for employment, in January 1943, Kim reported that he had become a clerk in the Jiaohe Government (街公所). This experience was short-lived, however, and as soon as liberation day came on August 15, 1945, Kim was out of a job.

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The Language of Liberation | Kim's activities in the immediate post-liberation period are unclear. However, in October 1945, Kim reported that he joined the "The Great Democratic League of the Korean Peoples in China" (在中朝鲜人民主大同盟). To Chinese readers, this title may seem a bit unwieldy, as it is more often referred to in Mandarin as the "Great Democratic League of the Yanbian Peoples" (延边人民民主大同盟 *Yanbian renmin minzhu da tongmeng*).

As to the name: A seemingly trivial distinction, the difference in nomenclature may be rather important. The "Great Democratic League" was initially an autonomous organization run by Koreans in greater Yanbian, but it was eventually absorbed, repurposed, and disbanded by the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese Communist leaders praised the Democratic League for its ability to organize citizens, but derided it for lacking "unity" (团结 *tuanjie*), a reference to how the organization approached relations between ethnic Koreans and Han Chinese.

Although North Korean official histories tend to downplay the fact, Kim Il Sung's early career was highly preoccupied with the question of Korean-Han unity and fracture in Northeast China. In this task, Kim's intimate comrade and Chinese counterpart Zhou

Baozhong, himself an ethnic minority from the distant frontiers with Burma, also took on a critical capacity.

In his seminal report "On the Problem of the Korean Ethnicity in Yanbian" (延边朝鲜民族问题 *Yanbian Chaoxian minzu wenti*), Zhou Baozhong outlined a welter of problems that Korean leaders in Northeast China had failed to address, and had actually exacerbated, in their work regarding inter-ethnic tensions between Chinese and Koreans. According to Zhou, the Chinese Communists sought a multi-ethnic platform of governance which would aid in turning Koreans from "foreign nationals" (外国的侨民 *waiguo de qiaomin*) to a "minority living within Chinese territory" (中国境内的少数民族 *Zhongguo jingnei de shaoshu minzu*), and the CCP's title for the organization, on the other hand, reflects this desire. Kim Hwa-rak's nomenclature, "The Great Democratic League of the Korean Peoples in China," on the other hand, may reflect a singular concern for Koreans.

It is within this context over the status of Koreans in Yanbian that some tensions did begin to surface between leading Koreans and Chinese Communist officials in Yanbian. Gang Sin-tae (姜信泰), for example, initially ran the show in Yanbian; as he failed to live up to the ideals of the CCP's ethic platform, he was ousted as regional secretary in autumn 1945. Gang later departed for North Korea in June 1946, where he helped to establish the Korean People's Army.

Gang Sin-tae, Zhou Baozhong, and Kim Gwang-hyeop in Yanbian, 1946

The ambivalent national status of Koreans in the northeast, and certainly of North Koreans who entered China after 1948, was a recurrent issue in China's relations with their communist partner well before the wave of refugees hit the Yalu and Tumen rivers

during the holocaust of violence that erupted on the peninsula in 1950. Moreover, the status of Korean cadre with deep experience in China—either as colonial students or as anti-Japanese fighters and post-1945 administrators—was also anything but settled. In the Chinese-North Korean relationship, the "bonds of brotherhood" were always present, but they also constrained and were often struggled against.

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To Pyongyang! | Kim Hwa-rak, apparently still never having walked on the soil of the Korean peninsula, worked with the Democratic League in Jiaohe until February 1946. Though his specific portfolio is not made clear in his dossier, he likely was engaged in propaganda work, as the other activities of the Democratic League included staging military operations against bandits and repairing railroads, and Kim neither appears to have had a military nor an engineering background.

From February through March 1946, Kim received "political training," almost certainly from the Chinese Communist Party, which itself was experiencing a major crisis of expulsion from Northeastern cities and highly unclear limits to Soviet support. For the next three-months, Kim was working out in the field (地方流动工作) near Jiaohe. This may mean that Kim was completing agitation work on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party in and around Yanbian, but, again, the specifics of this experience are not made clear in his dossier. While North Korea would undergo "land reform" in summer of 1946, in the months prior to that experience, future DPRK cadre were watching the Chinese Communist strategy—which was sometimes melodious, and more often violent—play out in the countryside.

Like many other ethnic Koreans, Kim finally "returned" to Korea in June 1946, apparently first going south of the 38th Parallel to Cheorwon (铁原). The specific impetus of Kim's trip to Korea is not known, but it is reasonable to suspect that his reasons were much like Gang Sin-tae's: a learned disinterest in carving out a Korean enclave within the broader Chinese polity. Rather, Kim probably wanted Korean independence, not autonomy.

Kim Hwa-rak performed odd jobs for several months initially, and he wrote on his dossier that he was engaged in "free labor" (自由劳动) from June 1946 through February 1947. This floating existence hardly fits the contemporary Western characterization of the North Korean state as having sprung full-formed from the totalitarian womb, so it is worth noting: Why would a man with such wide education not be immediately employed by the expanding Korean Workers' Party, after all? Finally, having either been recruited or volunteered himself, Kim eventually made the move to Pyongyang, where he became a Staff Section Member of the East Asia Department of the Foreign Affairs Bureau. As a speaker of Chinese, it is extremely likely that Kim took up responsibilities for helping to manage relations with China and tracking Chinese affairs.

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Conclusion | Besides offering an interesting story of one man's experiences in a rapidly shifting regional environment, what does the experience of Kim Hwa-rak tell us about Chinese-North Korean relations in the late 1940s?

First, Kim is a reminder of just how broad the human wave of movement was between China and Korea after 1945. Clearly, there were more than just ethnic Korean soldiers who went to North Korea after participating in the Chinese Civil War; there were also many individuals who left China to become government workers and teachers in North Korea. Surely, Northeast China was embroiled in one of the bloodiest wars in all world history during his sojourn in the borderlands, and the Korean War was looming on the peninsula, but the non-military aspects of the relationship in this era nevertheless shine through in Kim's story.

Second, Kim and other ethnic Koreans who returned to North Korea from Jilin offer clues to serious divergences between Koreans and Chinese over how to best govern what in 1952 would be declared the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. While Kim offers no indication of this particular tension in his brief dossier, it seems fairly clear that there were indeed policy differences and even ethnic tensions between Chinese and Koreans in greater Yanbian which drove men like Kim Hwa-rak, and men with charisma and military chops equal to Kim Il Sung (i.e., Gang Sin-tae), back to Korea in 1946.

Gang Sin-tae would die in the initial months of the Korean War; he is celebrated and does have a small place in the pantheon of DPRK war heroes. Kim Hwa-rak's fate after 1950 is unknown. Did he survive the war and live to see the postwar evisceration of his Ministry by Kim Il Sung in the unceasing hunt for scapegoats after the armistice? Perhaps this information lies in a new body of dossiers to which we may never have access, buried in the North Korean archives.

One historiographical point is worth noting in more detail. The PRC and DPRK have heretofore set the agenda in studying the personalities involved in Chinese-North Korean relations. The most senior officials, namely Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung, have totalized the discourse, while someone like Zhou Baozhong, a mid-tier official by all means, only reinforces a positive narrative of bilateral relations. Historians ought to break this mold of studying the hand-me-downs of the official North Korean and Chinese historiographies, and concern themselves with uncovering the stories of individuals who go against the conventional narratives of Chinese-North Korean relations.

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