

Experiences of 'the Other' in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

The presence of strong centralized states in Northeast Asia from ancient times, as well as the geographical and political conditions of the present-day, has meant that the movement of people across boundaries in the region has been less marked, compared to other places in the world. Nevertheless, there are countless accounts documenting how individuals or groups came to find themselves across boundaries in unfamiliar environments, be it through their own agency or as a result of coercion. These experiences of 'the Other' in Northeast Asia can provide important insights into the issues that the region faced in the past and continues to face in the present.

In this issue of *News from Northeast Asia*, we examine four different groups of people and their unique experiences as 'the Other' in Northeast Asia.

In "Tan Jie-sheng: a success story of one transnational Cantonese merchant in Korea", Jin-A Kang of Hanyang University examines the experiences of Chinese merchants in colonial Korea through the lens of the Tongshuntai Firm. The migrations

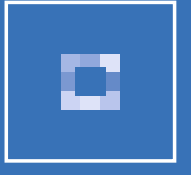
of the late 19th and early 20th century that marked the first stage in the formation of a large Korean diaspora in Russia are addressed by Vadim S. Akulenko of Far Eastern Federal University in "Vladivostok and the Migration of Korean people to the Russian Empire". "Korean Soldier Internees in Siberia and the Issue of (Un)Redressability", by Naoki Watanabe of Musashi University, presents an interesting study of Korean soldiers and their experiences as 'the Other' in numerous

settings. Finally, the experiences of Japanese women who accompanied their Zainichi Korean spouses are considered by Tomoomi Mori of Otani University in "Japanese Wives' in North Korea (DPR Korea)".

Ilhong Ko Research Fellow,
Seoul National University Asia Center;
Regional Editor of *News from
Northeast Asia* mahari95@snu.ac.kr

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Tan Jie-sheng: a success story of one transnational Cantonese merchant in Korea

Jin-A Kang

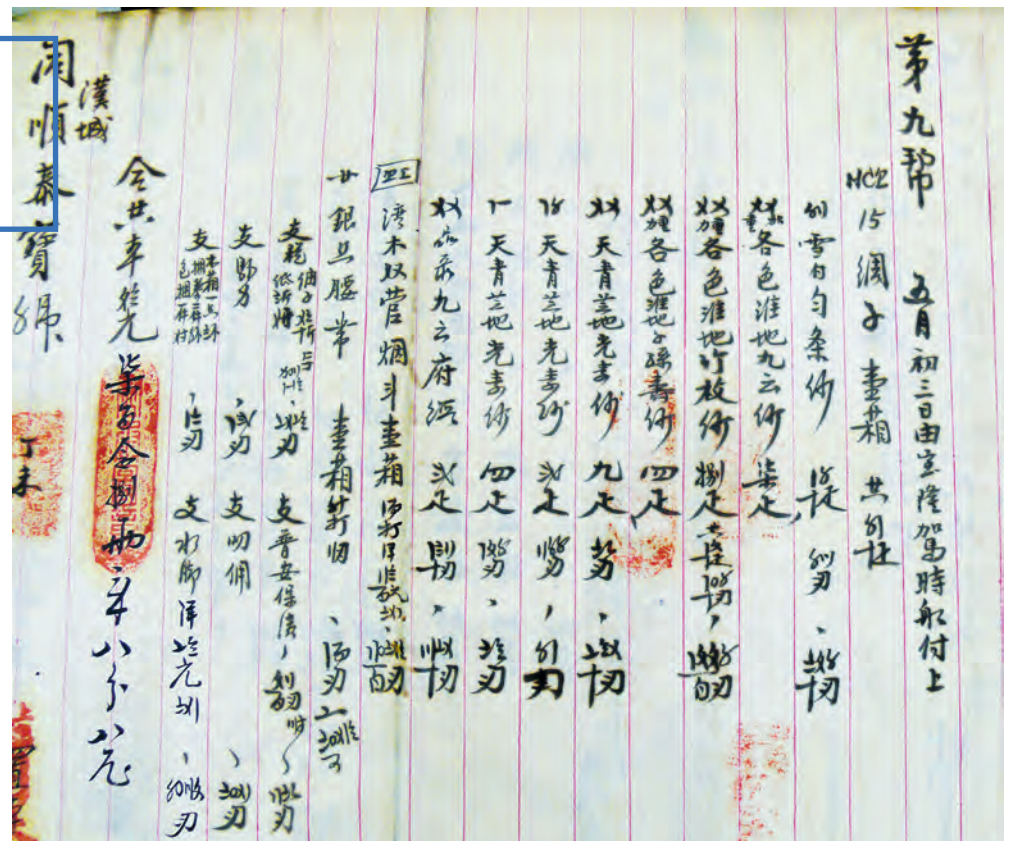
It would occur to very few people that a Chinese name would make it onto the 'Korean Rich List' during the Colonial Period of Korea. However, the top taxpayer in Seoul in 1923 was indeed a Chinese person, Tan Jie-sheng (譚傑生, 1953-1929). Tan Jie-sheng was the manager and later proprietor of the Tongshuntai Firm (同順泰號), one of the representative Chinese companies in modern Korea. The Kyujanggak (奎章閣) Archives and the Rare Books & Archival Collections (古文獻資料室) of Seoul National University Library preserve a large amount of the Tongshuntai Firm's invoices, receipts for transactions and business correspondences. Consisting of seven books (67 volumes in total), those Tongshuntai documents are nearly ready to be published by Guangdong People Publishing House of China.

Although overseas Chinese merchants have always been a crucial agency in Asian trade prior to the 19th century, Joseon Korea was exceptionally isolated from this network unlike Japan and South East Asia. Along with the opening of the treaty ports, Joseon became incorporated into the regional trade system of Asia. Subsequently, Chinese merchants began to settle down around these ports on a large scale following the establishment of 'Regulations for Maritime and Overland Trade Between Chinese and Korean Subjects' (otherwise known as the China-Korea Treaty of 1882). While the predominant ratio of the Chinese population in modern Korea was represented by the natives of Shandong Province, the treaty ports at the very first stage of their opening, as well as Seoul at the time, witnessed a diverse composition of Chinese merchants. Those merchants came to Korea encouraged by the possibility of the Korean market and the strong political supports of the Qing government in Korea. Tan Jie-sheng was Cantonese – representing a typical case of a Southerner arriving Korea in this period – and became the richest Chinese merchant up until the 1930s.

The Tongshuntai Firm was founded first in Incheon around 1885 by the Tongtai Firm

(同泰號), a Cantonese firm in Shanghai. The owner of Tongtai Firm was Liang Lunqing (梁綸卿) who left the management of the new firm in Korea to the Tan brothers, whose sister married Liang. It was Tan Jie-sheng, who was Liang's third brother-in-law, that developed Tongshuntai's business and eventually became its actual owner. Liang Lunqing maintained close relations with the comprador-officers group from Xiangshan County, Guangdong, who had helped Li Hongzhang establish businesses as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement. In addition, there were quite a number of Cantonese returnees from the 'Chinese Educational Mission' (留美幼童) program working as Chinese staff of the newly opened Korean Maritime Customs Service or working for Yuan Shikai (袁世凱) as diplomatic officers. The native-place bondage of the Cantonese community both in Shanghai and Korea was an important resource for the Tongshuntai Firm and other Cantonese merchants, which enabled them to secure their initial success in Korea.

At first, Tongshuntai Firm's growth was based on trade, selling imported British cotton, Chinese silk, and other general merchandise in Joseon and exporting Joseon goods, such as Red Ginseng, gold, and cow hides. Trade mainly took place between Incheon and Shanghai, but expanded to Japan and Hong Kong as well, through Shanghai. Additionally, the close relation with the official group of the Self-Strengthening Movement and their status as the largest Chinese company let the Tongshuntai Firm play a considerable political role in Korea. For example, under the circumstances in which a banking system between Qing China and Joseon was lacking, Tongshuntai was not only responsible for the transfer of government funds between Shanghai and Seoul, but also assumed the role of an official treasury on behalf of the Chinese legation in Seoul. Exploiting this special status, the Tongshuntai Firm could utilize official funds for their cash flow. The money-lending business to Chinese officials and upper class Koreans, including merchants, officials and the royal family, was highly lucrative. One of its debtors



Tongshuntai Baohaoji of 1907, the collection of import invoices of the Tongshuntai Firm. Image used with the permission of Seoul National University Library.

was Heungseon Daewongun, father of King Gojong.

When the Qing government provided the Joseon government with a loan of 200 thousand *liang* in 1892, Tongshuntai was written down as the lender, due to the anti-Qing sentiment prevalent in Joseon at the time. In return for lending its name, Tongshuntai was granted monopoly of navigation rights along the Han River and the operation of a regular route between Incheon and Mapo. Tongshuntai also issued a note, known as 'Tongshuntai-piao' (同順泰票), which was widely circulated in the treaty ports and Seoul as currencies until 1904. During the First Sino-Japanese War, and particularly after the battlefield was shifted into Chinese territory, Tan Jie-sheng monopolized the profit of the wartime boom in Korea and built a big fortune, taking advantage of the temporary setback of the Shandong merchants.

It is worthy to note that Chinese merchants continued to grow in Korea, both in number and in economic power, without the political support of Qing government after the defeat of the First Sino-Japanese War. The trade value with China increased tenfold from 1893 up to

1910 (when the forced Korea-Japan Annexation took place) and grew sevenfold again until 1927. However, as the direct route between Shanghai and Incheon was shutdown following the political withdrawal of Qing, the advantage of the Cantonese merchants, whose strong international trade networks had been based in Shanghai, disappeared; conditions became more favorable for traders from Shandong Province, which was geographically closer. Many Cantonese merchants withdrew as Joseon lost its charm but Tan Jie-sheng chose another path, reducing its dependence on Shanghai by cutting back its trade operations and adopting a localization strategy, which involved branching out into various businesses, such as the sales of Chinese lottery, real-estate development, and managing a taxi service. During this process, the capital of the Shanghai merchants was withdrawn and Tan Jie-sheng became the de facto owner of Tongshuntai.

Real-estate and house leasing business became Tongshuntai's main means of increasing its wealth during the colonial period. Real-estate investment by Chinese merchants began during the real estate crush caused by the Imo mutiny of 1882 and the Gapsin

Japanese Wives in North Korea

Tomoomi Mori

Japanese women who migrated to North Korea (DPR Korea) with their Korean husbands during the exodus of *Zainichi* Koreans from Japan are known as 'Japanese wives'. They are now quite aged, around seventy to eighty years old, and wish to travel to their motherland Japan, in order to meet brothers, sisters and other relatives, or to visit the graves of their ancestors before they die themselves. The existence of these Japanese wives in North Korea is not well known, but their experiences as 'the Other' in North Korea is a greatly interesting topic.

Zainichi Koreans are those who came to Japan during Korea's period of Japanese occupation as a result of forced labor, or reluctantly in order to earn a living. Also included in the category of *Zainichi* Koreans are their descendants. The majority of *Zainichi* Koreans suffered discrimination by the Japanese people and faced hardships due to unemployment and poverty. The exodus of *Zainichi* Koreans from Japan to North Korea began in 1959; by 1984, about 93,339 people had moved to North Korea. Included in this number are at least 6,679 Japanese nationals, some of whom were women, who had *Zainichi* Korean spouses. The number of women – the so-called Japanese wives – was 1871. Such a large-scale movement of people from a capitalist country (Japan) to a socialist country (North Korea) in the Cold War Period was a very rare case indeed.

The exodus of the *Zainichi* Koreans began when the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung declared that North Korea would welcome the *Zainichi* Koreans in North Korea. The North Korean government may have

intended to improve the country's image within international society by accepting the *Zainichi* Koreans. However, the Japanese government and the Red Cross Society of Japan had their own reasons for wanting this group of people to move. Japanese society at the time was going through a period of

Coup of 1884, which occurred successively soon after their arrival in Joseon. Because of the massive evacuation of residents from Seoul, the population of Seoul was almost halved and house prices collapsed to 1/4 of their previous value. Taking advantage of this housing market crash, Chinese merchants bought numerous shops and houses located along the main streets of Seoul at an extremely low price. The urban development that subsequently took place during the period of Japanese occupation resulted in the soaring of real-estate prices, which led to the manifold increase in the wealth of the Chinese merchants. Of the Chinese merchants based in Korea, Tan Jie-sheng owned the greatest amount of real-estate; it is said that at one time, Tan Jie-sheng rented out approximately 700 houses in Seoul. The most famous of his properties is where the building housing the Korean National Commission for UNESCO now stands in Myeong-dong.

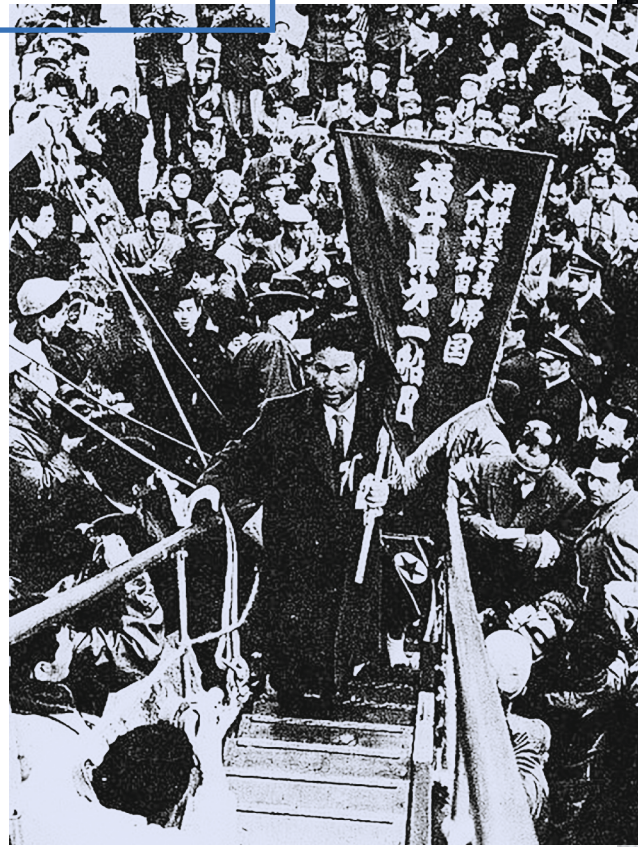
One reaction to this prosperity of the Chinese merchants was collective anti-Chinese sentiment; criticism of Chinese

economic power in Joseon was loudly voiced by both the Japanese authorities and the Korean population. In the 1920s, protective tariffs on Chinese imports increased significantly, while anti-Chinese articles began to frequently appear in Korean newspapers, arguing that Chinese merchants and Chinese laborers were taking wealth and jobs away from the Koreans. The main target of these attacks was Tan Jie-sheng, the richest Chinese person in Korea. Tan Jie-sheng died in 1929. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, many of the Chinese in colonial Korea, who had now become 'enemy aliens', returned to China. The Tan family of the Tongshuntai Firm also eventually withdrew from Korea and returned to China in September of 1937. This marked not only the end to Tan Jie-sheng's history of success in Korea, but was also the closing episode to the age of transnational business.

Jin-A Kang Professor, Department of History, Hanyang University
cantan@hanyang.ac.kr



Note amounting to 1,000 liang of bronze coins, issued by the Tongshuntai Firm. Source: Kang, Jin-A., 2011, *Tongshuntai-ho*, Daegu: Kyungpook National University Press



Above and right: Repatriation of *Zainichi* Koreans from Japan. Source: Public Domain images from Wikipedia.



post-war restoration; the policy towards the *Zainichi* Koreans was a great worry, liability, and burden to the Japanese government. One solution for this 'problem' was to make *Zainichi* Koreans move to North Korea.

Many, but not all, of the *Zainichi* Koreans were actually from the southern regions of the Korean Peninsula, but the decision to immigrate to North Korea was based on political grounds or in the hope of a better future; they were determined to 'return' to a country that they had never been to before. For these *Zainichi* Koreans, North Korea was their motherland and South Korea merely their hometown. Of the *Zainichi* Koreans who moved to North Korea, some were accompanied by their Japanese spouses, and the majority of these cases consisted of a Korean husband and a Japanese wife. These Japanese wives saw North Korean people for the first time when their ship, which had departed from Niigata port in Japan, arrived at Chongjin port in North Korea; most were shocked to see the North Korean people who had come to the port to welcome them because they looked poor.

The Japanese wives and their families settled down in the areas designated by the North Korea government and living standards differed from person to person. Some lived in urban environments, such as the capital Pyongyang or other regional cities, whereas other families were provided with houses in the countryside. Those who lived in the countryside faced significant hardships. Some of the Japanese wives passed away early on already as they could not adapt to the food scarcity and the social environment of North Korea. Of course, there were also those who enjoyed a happy life, to some extent, with their families. Although the situations of the Japanese wives may have differed among people, they shared a common desire – to visit their hometowns in Japan.

The hometown visits of these Japanese wives were carried out on three occasions – November 1997, January 1998, September 2000 – but they have not taken place since then, due to political problems between Japan and North Korea. In May 2012, *Kyodo News* (a Japanese wire service) reported on Ms. Mitsuko Minagawa in Pyongyang, a Japanese wife. The reporter asked Ms. Minagawa, "Do you hope to go to Japan?" and her answer was "Of course I hope, because my hometown is there. I hope I can travel back and forth between North Korea and Japan. For that I hope both countries will normalize diplomatic relations as soon as possible." In recent years, there have been some Japanese journalists who have energetically reported on the issue of these Japanese wives, for example

Takashi Ito and Noriko Hayashi. Takashi Ito has reported on the existence of a 'circle' of Japanese wives – the 'Hamhung Rainbow Association' – based in Hamhung, the largest city on the east coast of North Korea. The circle provides a mutual exchange and fellowship between Japanese wives. In the absence of diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea, it is difficult to travel freely between Japan and North Korea. The short trip made by Japanese wives in September 2000 was the last to take place. In order for such trips to take place, special humanitarian measures must be taken through the Red Cross Society of Japan and North Korea. However, such procedures are heavily influenced by international relations between Japan and North Korea and so the possibility of such measures being realized are, at present, uncertain.

The Japanese wives issue was dealt with in Japan-North Korea diplomatic negotiations. On 17 September 2002, the 'Japan-North Korea Pyongyang Declaration' marked a turning point in relations between Japan and North Korea. The Japanese wives issue was also addressed in the 'Japan-North Korea Stockholm Agreement' of May 2014. The subsequent deterioration of Japan-North Korea relations, however, has meant that additional trips by Japanese wives have yet to take place. The Japanese government has set the resolution of the 'North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens' as a top priority in negotiations with North Korea, and comparatively the issue of the Japanese wives is of a lower priority. However, the Japanese wives are already quite old and time is running out. For them, this is an issue that must be dealt with as soon as possible.

Tomoomi Mori Assistant Professor,
Faculty of Letters, Otani University
tt-mori@res.otani.ac.jp

Notes

- 1 These 'Japanese wives' should be distinguished from other female 'Japanese residents of the Korean Peninsula' who continued to live in North Korea even after the defeat of Japan in 1945 as they were not able to return to Japan due to certain circumstances. The concept of 'Japanese residents of the Korean Peninsula' first appeared on 7 April 2018, on TV Asahi's 2018 TV documentary 'Family ties connecting Japan and North Korea', reported by Takashi Ito.
- 2 Morris-Suzuki, T. 2007. *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.