

March 1 and May 4, 1919 in Korea, China & Japan: Toward an International History of East Asian Independence Movements

Nishi Masayuki

March 1 and May 4, 1919 in Korea, China and Japan: Toward an international History of East Asian Independence Movements

Nishi Masayuki

March 1 and May 4 are important dates in the calendars of South Korea and China as they respectively mark the anniversaries of popular uprisings in 1919 against Japanese imperialism.



In South Korea, the anniversary is observed with a commemorative ceremony in which the president delivers a speech.

This year, President Roh Moo-hyun remonstrated with Japan about its "mistaken glorification and justification of history" and demanded that it engage in sincere soul-searching on the issue. Last year, South Korea's Prime Minister Lee Hae Chan came under public criticism for skipping the ceremony to play golf and was forced to step down.

When anti-Japanese demonstrations raged in Shanghai and other cities across China in spring 2005, Japanese and Chinese government officials feared that May 4 could prove to be the powder keg for further rioting. The demonstrators carried placards that said, "Boycott Japanese products," which was also a slogan of China's May 4th movement of 1919.

While South Koreans and Chinese still recall what occurred in their countries in 1919, many Japanese seem to regard the events as part of the distant past. But the large popular movements in South Korea and China were triggered by a single incident that occurred in Tokyo in February the same year. On February 8th, the declaration of independence from Japan was read

at a gathering of Korean students at the Korean YMCA in Japan in Tokyo's Kanda district.

A 2-meter-high white stone monument stands on the right side of the main entrance of the YMCA, which has been relocated to Tokyo's Suidobashi district. The monument is engraved with the words: "Memorial dedicated to the Korean declaration of independence on February 8, 1919."

The following is an account of what happened on that day, according to records kept by the YMCA and other sources.

At 2 p.m., the YMCA auditorium was packed with some 600 Korean students who were studying in Japan. It was snowing. The participants gathered under the pretext of a general meeting of students to escape the attention of the police, who were standing guard at the entrance. Once the meeting opened, the organizers carried out their original plan and held a rally for Korean independence.

The declaration of independence was posted on the stage. When a student representative read it, the auditorium roared with applause and cries of joy. It marked the moment Koreans rose in revolt against Japanese imperialism.

The YMCA building was damaged in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, and many documents concerning the events of 1919 were lost. In addition to the white stone monument, an

embossed metal plaque that copied the declaration hangs in the hallway on the ninth floor of the present-day YMCA building. The document was drafted by Lee Kwang Su, who was a student at Tokyo's Waseda University and later became a writer.



Lee Kwang Su

"Compared with the text that was read (in Korea) in the 3.1 independence movement, the content is much more aggressive," said Kim Hong Myong, deputy director of the YMCA. The declaration ends with the following statement: "If our demands are turned down, we will fight an endless bloody war."

After Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910, the Korean people were forced to assimilate as Japanese. In schools, students were taught subjects with a special emphasis on the Japanese language.

Japanese rule that trampled on the dignity of the Korean people led some to start an underground movement for independence. For example, Yo Un Hyung (Lyuh Woon Hyung), an

independence activist who fled to Shanghai, formed the New Korea Youth Party and was trying to build a network of supporters that included Korean students residing in Tokyo.

When Emperor Gojong of Korea's Joseon Dynasty died in January 1919, rumors circulated that he had been poisoned by Japanese agents, triggering an angry backlash among Koreans. The principle of national self-determination--the idea that nations should not interfere in the affairs of other nations--added momentum to the trend.

The concept was proposed at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference to negotiate peace after World War I.

Emperor Gojong's funeral

Some Koreans were making plans to take action to promote the push for independence in time for Gojong's funeral slated for March 3. It was against this background that word of the student rally at the YMCA in Tokyo reached Korea. One of the participants traveled from Tokyo to Seoul, hiding a piece of cloth imprinted with a copy of the declaration under his hat. The words apparently had a profound effect on the March 1 Proclamation of Korean Independence. Other students who participated in the Tokyo rally also returned to Korea and made preparations for a full-fledged independence movement.

The 3.1 movement originated at Seoul's Tapgol

Park, formerly called Pagoda Park and now regarded as an oasis for senior citizens. Just beyond the gate, a huge stone monument engraved with the Proclamation of Korean Independence stands to the right. At the end of the proclamation appear the names of 33 people with the title "representatives of the people." In reality, however, it was a student who actually read the proclamation before citizens who gathered at the park.



Bronze bas-reliefs commemorate the March 1 reading of the proclamation in Tapgol Park

The 33 people whose names are listed on the monument had turned themselves in to police immediately after reading the proclamation at a nearby restaurant. There are various explanations about their surrender. Some people say they turned themselves in to demonstrate the principle of nonviolence they advocated in the proclamation.

A total of 1,542 demonstrations were held across Korea over a three-month period. An estimated 2 million people, or about 10 percent of the entire population at the time, are said to have taken part. Back then, Koreans had no freedom of assembly or association. Nor were there media to convey the will of the people.

How did the independence movement spread throughout the country when the "representatives of the people" were in police custody? Shin Yong Ha, a distinguished professor at Ewha Womans University, said religious organizations and schools took the lead because they were the only entities that were allowed to hold rallies without notifying the authorities in advance. According to Shin, copies of the proclamation and Korea's Taegukgi flags had been distributed across the country beforehand by school teachers as well as followers of Chondoism, an ethnic religion in Korea, Christianity and Buddhism. All of the "representatives of the people" whose names appear on the proclamation were also religious leaders.

Shin, who specializes in the history of nationalist movements, said pre-organized networks and incidental associations produced a synergistic effect. "In rural towns, activists organized the movement on days when markets were held so as to involve as many citizens as possible," he said. Shin also noted that the 3.1 movement had a major impact on nationalist movements outside

the country, particularly in serving as an "external factor" to China's 5.4 movement. Indeed, Korea's independence movement sparked repercussions that reached China.

Korean independence activists who escaped Japanese oppression fled to Shanghai and established the provisional government of the Republic of Korea, the inspiration of the current South Korean government. Shanghai developed into one of the bases of the Korean independence movement. Yo Un Hyung and Lee Kwang Su, who drafted the declaration of independence that was read at the Korean YMCA in Japan on Feb. 8, 1919, were among those who helped to establish the provisional government. A key aspect of the Korean independence movement in Shanghai is that it served as a stimulus for Chinese intellectuals.

China's 5.4 movement, which grew into a nationwide patriotic movement involving workers and farmers across the country, started from Peking University. Korea's 3.1 movement caught the attention of Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, both Peking University professors who later founded the Chinese Communist Party, and Fu Sinian, a leader of the university's student body. They actively featured the Korean independence movement in magazines they edited.



A 1976 poster of the May Fourth Movement (Stefan Landsberger collection)

While Korea had no media of its own, magazines played a prominent role in advancing popular movements in China. At Peking University, teachers and students published many magazines. In one, Chen wrote: "Look at the Koreans. What are we doing?"

The Beijing Memorial Hall of the New Culture Movement is housed in the Honglou (Red Building), formerly owned by Peking University, on Wusidajie street, a main thoroughfare in central Beijing. While the hall displays exhibits of the 5.4 movement, none of them shows any links to Korea's 3.1 movement.

Song Chengyou, a Peking University professor who specializes in Northeast Asian history, said the university's archive does not include documents that suggest links between the two movements, either. "History is not seen from a broad perspective," he said. Song said it is a "problem" to view the 5.4 movement from the standpoint of Chinese history alone. He said

there is no doubt that the 3.1 and 5.4 movements are ideologically related. "The common enemy (for Korea and China) was Japan, but they were more than simple anti-Japanese movements," Song said. "We should regard them as patriotic and democratic movements by the people against imperialism."

'Taisho democracy'

At that time, popular movements were also emerging in Japan. In July 1918, a year before the 3.1 and 5.4 movements, women in Toyama Prefecture staged a protest against a steep rise in the price of rice. The disturbance, known as the "rice riots," spread across the nation, leading to uprisings in coal mines and armed clashes. Taking the blame for its failure to bring the situation under control, the Cabinet of Masatake Terauchi, who was also the first Japanese governor-general of Korea, resigned.

The movement for universal suffrage also became active around that time.

Named after the Taisho Era (1912-1926), this period came to be known as the age of "Taisho democracy" in Japanese history. While Japan advanced democracy at home, it was exerting imperialism abroad. Still, some Japanese intellectuals clearly empathized with the 3.1 and 5.4 movements.

Among them was prominent thinker and political scientist Yoshino Sakuzo, known as the

father of Taisho democracy. A professor at Tokyo Imperial University, now the University of Tokyo, Yoshino was a Christian and had contacts with Chinese and Korean students as director of the university's YMCA.

He even gave financial assistance to some students who could not afford tuition. Immediately after Korea's 3.1 movement, Yoshino wrote in the magazine Chuo Koron: "In no part of the (Japanese) people is there 'self-reflection.' Whenever a movement against the self occurs, the first step for fundamentally settling it must be self-reflection."

With reference to China's 5.4 movement, Yoshino wrote in the magazine Toho Jiron: "Those who boycott Japan are actually boycotting Japan as an aggressor." He also wrote, "We must recognize that Japan today has two faces, that of an aggressor and of a peaceful nation."

Li Dazhao, who a leader of the 5.4 movement, was Yoshino's student when he was a teacher at a vocational school in Tianjin, China. The two kept in touch and continued to send each other copies of the magazines they edited. In 1920, a year after the 5.4 movement, Yoshino invited a group of students from Peking University through Li, who was a professor at the university. In addition, Yoshino exchanged views with Yo Un Hyung, who led Korea's 3.1 movement, in Tokyo and touted him as a "man who commands respect."

For the past few years, Yonetani Masafumi, an

associate professor at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, has been discussing Japan's relations with East Asia in modern and contemporary history. Some of his students come from Asia. Yonetani said many students say their perception of history changes if they look at it from the viewpoint of "interrelation and interaction." This is because they only studied historical events from the standpoint of their own countries.

For example, most Japanese students see Yoshino only as a leading figure of Taisho democracy and the universal suffrage movement, Yonetani said. "Students are surprised to learn that Yoshino was interested in the 3.1 and 5.4 movements and was standing face to face with Koreans and Chinese," said Yonetani, an expert in the history of Japanese social thought.

In Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing, which this writer visited to research this story, history was deeply engraved in monuments and memorials.



A monument dedicated to the 5.4 movement stands near a former building of Peking University in Beijing.

But how many Japanese today know that the catalyst for Korea's 3.1 movement was events that took place in Tokyo? Do Chinese know the existence of Koreans, who contributed to the country's 5.4 movement? Once the barriers that separate national histories are removed, important aspects of history, such as networks of people and thoughts that transcend national borders, can be seen.

Yoshino Sakuzo

Yoshino Sakuzo (1878-1933) was a leading figure in the age of "Taisho democracy" after he advocated Minpon Shugi, or politics of the people, while serving as a professor at Tokyo Imperial University, now the University of Tokyo. A native of Furukawa, now Osaki, Miyagi Prefecture, Yoshino graduated from the university and went to Tianjin, China, to work as a private tutor to the oldest son of Yuan Shikai. He later studied in Europe.



Sakuzo Yoshino

Yoshino devoted his final years to the study of Meiji Era (1868-1912) culture.

Li Dazhao

Li Dazhao (1889-1927) studied at Waseda University in Tokyo before helping to establish the Chinese Communist Party. As head of a new cultural movement, Li spent much of his time editing magazines.



Li Dazhao

During Li's tenure as chief librarian at Peking University, one of his assistants was Mao Zedong. Li was hanged in 1927 by military cliques, who cracked down on communists. His former home in Beijing was opened to the public as a memorial museum this year, 80 years after his death.

Yo Un Hyung

Yo Un Hyung (1886-1947), a Korean independence activist based in China, helped to establish the provisional government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai in 1919. After Japan's defeat in World War II, he led the move for the foundation of the Korean People's Republic but was assassinated in 1947.



Yo Un Hyung

In South Korea, Yo was long labeled as a leftist. But there have been moves to re-evaluate his achievements in recent years. In 2005, he was posthumously honored by the South Korean government under President Roh Moo-hyun's policy to re-examine the past.

Fact File: 5.4 movement

When World War I broke out in Europe in July 1914, Japan, as an ally of Britain, declared war against Germany, which had advanced into China. Japan captured Qingdao on the Shandong Peninsula, where German forces were based, and forced the Chinese government led by Yuan Shikai to accept a set of 21 demands in January 1915. The demands included the handover of German concessions in Shandong and the expansion of Japanese interests into southern Manchuria.

At the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, China demanded the return of the Shandong Peninsula and the abolition of the 21 demands, but its request was turned down. Upon learning of this, some 3,000 Chinese, including students

from Peking University, held a rally in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and staged demonstrations on May 4 to protest Japanese expansionism. More than 30 students were arrested for violent acts, which included torching the home of a pro-Japanese official who negotiated the 21 demands on behalf of the Chinese government.

The incident triggered more unrest and developed into patriotic movements in the form of a boycott of Japanese products and workers' strikes in Shanghai, Wuhan, Tianjin and elsewhere in China. As a result, the Chinese government dismissed three officials who were labeled pro-Japanese and ordered its delegation to the peace conference not to sign the peace treaty. What started as an anti-Japanese resistance movement developed into one with much broader aims. These included opposing feudalistic rule by military cliques and demands for freedom of thought.

Fact File: 3.1 independence movement

An anti-Japanese independence movement started on March 1, 1919, and spread across Korea, which was under Japanese colonial rule. The movement is also referred to as the Mansei Incident because demonstrators marched chanting "mansei" (independence) and carrying the Taegukgi flag.

The movement was orchestrated by religious leaders and flared in Seoul, Pyongyang and other major cities. In Seoul, demonstrators took to the

streets after the proclamation of independence was read before a crowd at Tapgol Park. The movement continued for about three months. It was nationwide in scope.

In April, Imperial Japanese Army soldiers killed about 30 residents of Jeam-ri, a farming village in Gyonggi-do province, after locking them up in a church and setting it on fire. A series of uprisings left 7,509 people dead and 15,961 injured, and an additional 46,948 people were imprisoned,

according to Park Eun Sik's history of the Korean independence movement.

The 3.1 independence movement also served as the starting point of labor, farmers' and women's movements across Korea.

This is a slightly abbreviated version of an article that appeared in the International Herald Tribune/ Asahi Shinbun on October 29, 2007. Posted at Japan Focus on October 31, 2007.