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Donggil Kim ^a

^a History Department, Beijing University, Beijing, China

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Prelude to war? The repatriation of Koreans from the Chinese PLA, 1949–50

Donggil Kim

History Department, Beijing University, Beijing, China

In 1949 and 1950, three ethnic Korean divisions of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) returned to North Korea. While some historians have cited their return in terms of Chinese and Soviet encouragement for Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea, this article argues that this was simply an attempt to enhance North Korea's self-defence capabilities, rather than to invade South Korea. The rationales behind the Soviet and Chinese decisions are analysed here. The Soviet Union's viewpoint will be explained, taking into account the high degree of tension on the Peninsula in early 1949. The Chinese perspective will be examined vis-à-vis the close Sino-Korean relationship, China's domestic economic pressures, and requests by the Korean soldiers themselves. Furthermore, this paper argues that at no time did North Korea dispatch troops to Northeast China in order to help Chinese communists in the Chinese Civil War, showing the limits of both reciprocity and fraternal socialism in the Sino-North Korean relationship.

Introduction

A significant number of Koreans living in Manchuria joined the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the Chinese Civil War. By May 1949, the number of Koreans in the PLA had swollen to more than three divisions, and Mao Zedong

Donggil Kim is Associate Professor in Department of History, Peking University in Beijing, and co-author of *History of Sino-Soviet Relations (1931–1945)* (Beijing: CCP History Publishing House, 2009). He has published articles in *Cold War History*, *Lishi yanjiu* [Historical Research], *Dangde Wenxian* [Literature of Chinese Communist Party], *Dangdai Zhongguoshi Yanjiu* [Contemporary China History Studies] and *Kangri Zhanzheng Yanjiu* [The Journal of Studies of China's Resistance War against Japan] on Sino-Soviet Relations and Sino-North Korea relations, and is presently working on the Sino-Korea Cold War project.

Correspondence to: Email: dgkim@pku.edu.cn

promised that these units would be returned to North Korea.¹ Therefore, two ethnic Korean divisions of the PLA were dispatched to North Korea in July 1949.² In late January 1950, the remaining oversized division was reorganised into one division and one regiment and was introduced to North Korea in March and April 1950.³ Unquestionably, the return of the ethnic Korean divisions from the PLA to North Korea greatly enhanced the strength of the Korean People's Army (KPA), which previously had only three regular divisions, one infantry regiment, and two border security brigades.⁴ At the outset of the Korean War, North Korea had 21 regiments on the frontlines, of which 10 were composed of the repatriated former PLA Korean soldiers. Many top leaders of the KPA, including Chief of Staff General Gang Geon as well as two army corps commanders and the KPA's 6th Division commander, were veterans who had fought against the Guomindang (GMD) military forces in Manchuria. Their experience in the Chinese Civil War allowed these soldiers to play critical roles in the Korean War's early phase.

Because the Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950, almost immediately after the return of the 3rd Division, leading scholars draw a causal relationship between the return of the ethnic Korean divisions to the PLA and the war's outbreak, thus believing that China proactively supported the North Korean attack on South Korea.⁵ Bruce Cumings argues that China's role in the outbreak of the war was far greater than the Soviet Union's, noting how the war did not begin until June 1950 because crack troops still fighting in China had not yet returned to North Korea.⁶ According to Cumings' interpretation, in the period February 1948–March 1950, 75,000–100,000 ethnic Korean troops in the PLA transited to North Korea.⁷ Basing their assumptions on American intelligence (G-2) gathered by US forces in South Korea, some scholars also maintain that North Korea in April 1947 dispatched some 30,000 soldiers to Manchuria to help the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the Chinese Civil War.⁸

This article questions the validity of these arguments. It will first analyse PLA documents related to the founding of the Korean Volunteer Army and its integration into the PLA, paying attention to the relationship between ethnic Korean units in the PLA and so-called troops directly dispatched by North Korea. Newly uncovered Chinese PLA documents will show that ethnic Korean units in Manchuria were in fact indigenous to the region. Second, it investigates why the ethnic Korean units in the PLA returned to North Korea and what the positions were of China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea regarding this matter, and accordingly discusses the relationship between the repatriation of the ethnic Korean units in the PLA and the newly developed tension on the Korean Peninsula in early 1949. Third, by reviewing the size of North Korea's military forces at various points in this period, it will refute the argument that North Korea directly dispatched soldiers to China during the Chinese Civil War. Finally, through an examination of newly discovered PLA and Russian documents, it will shed light on the exact numbers and weaponry of the Korean units that returned to North Korea.

The founding and development of ethnic Korean units in the PLA

At the end of World War II, two Korean anti-Japanese military forces remained in China; the first was an ethnic Korean anti-Japanese military force in China, the *Hanguk Kwangbokgun* (Korean Independence Army), which was under the custody of the GMD government. This force had been subject to the Korean Provisional Government established in 1919 first in Shanghai and later in Chongqing. After the surrender of Japan, hundreds of Korean Independence Army soldiers returned to South Korea together with the Korean Provisional Government. Therefore, this group had no connection to any further discussion of ethnic Korean armies.⁹ The other military group was the *Chosun Uiyongjun* (Korean Volunteer Army, KVA), a force that was based near the Taihang Mountains in North China, and operated mainly in areas containing high concentrations of Koreans.¹⁰ Despite being nominally subordinate to the CCP, the KVA retained a high degree of independence, and it regarded a Chinese Communist victory over the Japanese as the best vehicle for the liberation of Korea.¹¹ Mu Jeong was the KVA commander-in-chief, while Park Hyeosam and Park Ilu served as deputy commanders. The KVA also set up the *Chosun gunjeong daehak* (Korean Military-Political Academy), a training school for its cadres in Yan'an.¹² According to a February 1942 Japanese intelligence report, KVA soldiers and their families numbered 300–400.¹³ By 1945, this number had increased to more than 1000.¹⁴

On 11 August 1945, 8th Army commander-in-chief Zhu De issued his sixth order to the KVA:

I order Commander Mu Jeong and vice commanders Park Hyeosam and Park Ilu, operating in Northern China, to march towards Northeast China together with the Eight Route Army and other Northeastern communist troops to defeat the Japanese and collaborating forces, and organise the Korean people there to liberate Korea.¹⁵

In order to cooperate with the Soviet Red Army in China and Korea and to liberate the Korean people, the CCP planned to dispatch the Korean Volunteer Army to Korea. In accordance with Zhu De's order, on 12, 15, and 18 August, the *Chosun Dongnip Dongmaeng* (Korean Independence Federation, KIF), the political arm of the KVA, promulgated propaganda leaflets. These leaflets called for Koreans serving in the Japanese and Manzhouguo armies to surrender to the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army, and encouraged them to join the Korean Volunteer Army to fight for a New Korean Republic.¹⁶ At the same time, under the command of General Mu Jeong, the faculty and students of the Korean Military-Political Academy at Yan'an, numbering around 300, marched to Northeast China, arriving in early November 1945.

Even before the arrival of the Yan'an groups, there were already ethnic Korean military forces in Shenyang, called the KVA Independent Detachment and the KVA Vanguard Detachment, organised by Han Cheong and Ju Yeon respectively. These groups were combined to create the *Seongyeonjongdae* (KVA Vanguard Column). Han Cheong assumed command and Ju Yeon became the political commissar. This newly formed unit comprised 12 companies and about 1500 men total.¹⁷ The KVA Vanguard Column took up positions in Korean villages around the suburbs of Shenyang, where

it waited for the KVA's command groups from Yan'an. While it was waiting, it was actively protecting ethnic Koreans and property from bandits and maintaining order in the ethnic Korean community in Northeast China.¹⁸

In early October 1945, the Soviet command in Shenyang suddenly notified the KVA Vanguard Column that it must leave the city for rural areas. Therefore, the KVA Vanguard Column leaders decided to enlarge their army in the Korean-rich areas of South Manchuria, such as Huanin, Tonghua, Ji'an, and Dandong. When they arrived at Dandong on 12 September 1945, the Soviet commander of the North Korean city of Sinuiju, situated across the Yalu River from Dandong, sent his envoy to the KVA Vanguard Column, asking it to enter North Korea. The next day, Han Cheong led the KVA Vanguard Column into a Korean middle school in Sinuiju. Immediately after its arrival, the commander of the Soviet army in Sinuiju requested the KVA Vanguard to disarm, saying that, 'based on the Potsdam Conference, only the Soviet army and American army can be located in North and South Korea, respectively, and that other armies have to disarm'. Han Cheong was stunned by and protested at this. Kim Il-Sung, who had just returned from the Soviet Union, also asked the KVA Vanguard Column to return to China. The column's leaders decided accordingly, arriving at Shenyang from Sinuiju by train on 5 November 1945 and joining the other KVA groups stationed there.¹⁹

Under these circumstances, the KVA, according to the instruction of the CCP Northeast Bureau, held a soldiers' meeting in Shenyang on 10 November.²⁰ In that meeting, Mu Jeong declared that the KVA would be reorganised into three detachments and these would be dispatched to North, South, and East Manchuria where there were the highest concentrations of Koreans. There, the majority of the KVA cadres would actively participate in the Chinese Civil War under the command of the PLA. Concurrently, the KIF leadership would return to North Korea.²¹ Therefore, early that December, under the command of Mu Jeong, about 70 KVA and KIF veterans returned to Pyongyang of the North Korea in a personal capacity. Among the 70 were KIF chairman Kim Dubong and deputy-chairmen Choe Changik and Han Bin.²²

In accordance with Mu Jeong's declaration, the 1st Detachment was established in south Manchuria, the 3rd in north Manchuria, and the 5th in east Manchuria. Several of the 5th Detachment's founding members diverted to Jilin and also established the 7th Detachment.²³ The 1st Detachment commanded by Wang Jain was renamed the Li Hong-Gwang Detachment in March 1946. Following its enlargement, it was reorganised as the 4th Independent Division in April 1948. When Northeast China was liberated in November that year, the 4th Division was renamed the 166th Division, and in July 1949 it entered North Korea.²⁴ The 3rd and 7th Detachments grew independently but in April 1948 were combined with several other ethnic Korean units to form the 11th Independent Division. The 11th Division was renamed the 164th Division in November 1948 and entered North Korea in July 1949.²⁵

The 5th Detachment commended by the commander Lee Ikseong and political commissar Park Ilu, respectively. On 8 December, Mun Jeongil, leading 30 founding

members of the 5th Detachment, arrived at Yanji in advance. Another 400 troops originally assigned to the 5th Detachment in Shenyang under the command of Lee Ikseong and Park Ilu, arrived at Yanji in early 1946. In March 1946, the 1st Security Brigade of Yanbian was founded on the basis of the 5th Detachment, with the addition of some Chinese cadres and four newly-established local security regiments. Expanded to 6000 soldiers, this brigade presided over the elimination of local bandits and the construction of a base in eastern Manchuria. In April, an ethnic Korean regiment from this brigade took part in the liberation of Changchun, and Park Nakgwon, the regimental commander and an ethnic Korean, sacrificed his life in the fighting. Later this brigade became an independent division in eastern Manchuria and was subsequently named the 10th Column of the Northeast PLA, established in the Yanbian and Dunhua areas.

Returning to March 1946, when the majority of the 5th Detachment was renamed the 1st Security Brigade, a small part of the 5th Detachment was reorganised into the independent 3rd and 6th Regiments of the Yanbian military district. Later, these two were merged into the independent 6th Division of the Northeast PLA. In November 1948, the independent 6th Division was renamed the 6th Column of the Northeast PLA. Later, it was reorganised again as the 156th Division of the 43rd Army. This division, which was mostly composed of ethnic Koreans, was involved in the Beijing–Tianjin Campaign and crossed the Yangzi River.²⁶

As noted above, when the Chinese Civil War came to an end, the Korean units in the PLA were mainly reorganised into three divisions: the 156th, 164th, and 166th. No evidence has yet emerged showing that the Korean troops directly dispatched from North Korea joined these Korean units in the PLA. In addition, according to the PLA documents of that time, these Korean units were founded and developed in Manchuria under the guidance of the original members of the KVA.²⁷ Therefore, it can be concluded that these Korean units were all made up of ethnic Koreans who had been living in Manchuria. Many Koreans, including some from the Japanese and Manchukuo armies, joined the KVA after Japan's surrender, but the KVA expanded most as the Chinese Civil War intensified. As for their motivation, Koreans in Manchuria most likely chose to join the KVA and CCP troops because of GMD mistreatment of Koreans.²⁸

The return of the Korean units and the positions of the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea

By late December 1948, the Soviet Union had withdrawn its troops from North Korea, and American troops in the South moved southward, away from the 38th parallel, in January 1949. From the beginning of 1949, South Korean forces started routine provocations at the 38th parallel. In reports dating from late January and early February 1949, the Soviet ambassador to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), T.F. Shtykov, reported to V.M. Molotov that, 'during the past ten days (15–25 January), the incidence of South Korean troops and police crossing the 38th parallel

has increased'.²⁹ Shtykov also noted that, 'the situation around the 38th parallel is very unstable, and nearly every day South Korean troops and police crossed the 38th parallel and attacked North Korean police posts'.³⁰ While voicing some alarm over the clashes, Shtykov postulated that an all-out South Korean assault on Pyongyang was unlikely. 'It is of low possibility', he wrote, 'that the southern troops will launch a full attack at the present because both the national and international situations do not permit them to do that.' Shtykov added a caveat, however, stating that, 'it cannot be dismissed that they [the ROK government] have moved their troops to the 38th parallel and have concentrated them at the main corridors into Seoul . . . to block a Northern attack on Seoul, because they always expected an attack by the North'.³¹ Shtykov also reported that North Korea believed that, 'these military provocations were related to the UN committee's arrival in South Korea and aimed to create trouble around the 38th parallel in order to justify the presence of American troops in South Korea'.³²

In April, however, the Soviet Union suddenly changed its evaluation of the threat posed by South Korea. On 17 April, Stalin sent a telegram to Ambassador Shtykov, stating,

according to recent intelligence, American troops will withdraw from South Korea in May, and move into the islands around Japan in order to give freedom of action to the South Korean army. By that time, the UN Commission will also have left the Korean Peninsula. In April and May, South Korea will concentrate its troops around the 38th parallel. In June they will launch a surprise attack on the North with the aim of totally destroying the northern troops by August.³³

On 20 April, in a telegram to Stalin, Shtykov expressed deep concern about the KPA's combat capabilities, adding that, 'the combat preparedness of the KPA has considerable shortcomings'.³⁴ On the same day, in a telegram to Stalin, the General Commander of the Far Eastern Army Marshal A.M. Vasilevsky and his Chief of Staff S.M. Shtemenko observed that 'the South continues to concentrate its forces around the 38th parallel', and that they 'could not exclude the possibility that the "southerners" will conduct new provocations on a greater scale against the North'. They advised, therefore, that 'it is necessary to recommend to the North that they take appropriate measures to counter possible larger and new provocative attacks by the "Southerners"'.³⁵ Greatly alarmed, Stalin warned his ambassador in Pyongyang, saying 'in April–May the Southerners must concentrate their troops near the 38th parallel. In June the South will start a sudden attack on the North'.³⁶ Soviet intelligence seemed to clearly indicate that a South Korean attack was imminent. Based upon its new estimates of the tension on the Korean Peninsula, the Soviet Union decided to station a Soviet naval detachment temporarily in Ham Heung harbour.³⁷ On 21 April, Stalin appointed Shtykov as the chief military adviser to the KPA. Following consultation, North Korea decided to adopt a defensive strategy to fend off a large-scale South Korean attack, which included the use of returned ethnic Korean troops from China.³⁸

In accordance with the new defensive strategy, on 28 April North Korea sent Kim Il, a member of the KWP Politburo, to petition the CCP to transfer ethnic Korean troops to North Korea.³⁹ In response to North Korea's request, Mao Zedong immediately

replied, stating that 'there are three ethnic Korean divisions in the PLA. The two divisions stationed in Shenyang and Changchun could be sent to North Korea at any time, but the other division, which is operationally engaged in South China, would be sent to North Korea at the conclusion of operations.'⁴⁰ China and the North immediately entered into negotiations on the details of the troop transfer. At the same time, the Soviet Union and North Korea continued to plan a defensive strategy that utilised the anticipated ethnic Korean troops from China. On 22 June, Shtykov sent a report to Vyshinsky, pointing out that 'once South Korean troops begin an attack, the two divisions stationed in Shenyang and Changchun would immediately be deployed to North Korea'. Shtykov emphasised that, 'Their mission is to devote themselves to North Korean territory and carry out a defensive campaign once South Korean troops attack.'⁴¹ Shtykov's 13 July report again stressed that 'the southern troops will make a preemptive strike towards the northern army in July'. He continued, 'Kim Il-sung has decided to move the ethnic Korean troops in the PLA back to Korea: the Shenyang division will be deployed in Sinuiju and the Changchun division will be deployed in Nanam.'⁴² In accordance with Kim's decision, the Changchun Division (the 164th Division of the PLA), left Changchun on 20 July, arrived at Nanam via Hoeyeong, and regrouped as the 5th Division of the Korean People's Army (KPA). The Shenyang Division (the 166th Division of the PLA) departed from Shenyang the same month, arrived in Sinuiju on 25 July, and finally arrived in Anju (Hwanghae Province, near the 38th parallel), where it was rechristened the 6th Division of the KPA.⁴³

There is no doubt that the Soviet Union regarded the return of the ethnic Korean divisions as a counter-measure against an impending attack from South Korea. In the second half of 1949, however, Stalin began to worry that North Korea itself would launch an attack on South Korea.⁴⁴ On 3, 12, and 13 September, the North Koreans expressed the necessity of solving the Korean problem by force and asked for Stalin's permission to begin limited-range operations against the Ongjin and Kaesong area of South Korea.⁴⁵ On 24 September 1949, Stalin, in the name of the CPSU Politburo, relayed to Kim Il-Sung that, 'your proposal to begin a KPA attack on the South requires giving a precise evaluation of the military and political aspects of this question'. Specifically, Stalin stressed that 'this [proposed attack] can give the Americans cause for any kind of intervention in Korean affairs', and opposed Kim's proposal for an assault on South Korea.⁴⁶ On 30 October, Stalin harshly criticised Shtykov, saying that 'encouraging North Korea to launch a limited attack against South Korea will threaten our interests, and may lead the opponent to initiate a large-scale war. Your actions are totally irresponsible.'⁴⁷ Soviet diplomats in the DPRK, according to Stalin, needed to keep a tighter lid on Kim's southern ambitions.

Although Stalin stood against North Korea's plan to unify by force in 1949, the handover of the second group of ethnic Koreans in the PLA was still put on the agenda. On 25 December 1949, Lin Biao, the commander of the 4th Field Army, reported to the Military Commission of the CCP Central Committee that 'there are around 16,000 ethnic Koreans in the PLA' and 'after our army went South, however, there was rioting among some of the ethnic Koreans. They demanded to be sent home [North Korea]'.⁴⁸

Lin Biao supported the request of the disgruntled Koreans and added that, 'at present, the war is almost over. In the interests of the Korean people, we should send these trained cadres back to Korea, those wishing to stay may stay'. At the same time, Lin Biao also requested that the CCP discuss this issue with the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Nie Rongzhen, the interim general chief-of-staff, on 29 December 1949 relayed this telegram to Mao Zedong, who was in Moscow.⁴⁸ After Mao received this telegram, he relayed it to Stalin, stating that China would like to transfer the remaining ethnic Koreans in the PLA to North Korea and initiate negotiations through the PRC trade representative in Pyongyang.⁴⁹ It is clear that the direct impetus for the transfer of the remaining ethnic Korean troops was the demands of those soldiers to be repatriated.

Regarding China's request, North Korea decided to dispatch three political staff officers to China who were planned to reorganise the troops with the aim of transferring them to Korea in April, after changing into North Korean summer uniforms. They were also to choose 1000 soldiers to return to Korea in advance to study force mechanisation. On 11 January 1950, China agreed with the North Korean plan.⁵⁰ In addition to the question of ethnic Korean troops, North Korea also asked China to provide other necessary equipment and materials. On 22 January, Nie Rongzhen reported the new North Korean requests to the Central Committee.⁵¹ The same day, Liu Shaoqi relayed this to Mao Zedong who was still in Moscow. Three days later, Mao approved North Korea's request.⁵²

About 14,000 ethnic Korean soldiers – 8500 from the 43rd Army's 156th Division, 2500 from the 15th Army, 1000 from the 113th Division and 2000 from the 47th Army – assembled in Zhengzhou, Henan Province. In mid-March, these ethnic Korean troops were reorganised into three separate units: the independent 15th Division, an independent regiment, and one independent battalion. On 20 March, the 15th independent division left for North Korea arriving in Wonsan at the end of March, finally regrouping as the KPA 12th Division. The independent regiment left for Songnim, Hwanghae Province, in early March and upon its arrival, regrouped as the KPA 18th Regiment. The independent battalion left for Pyongyang and was incorporated into a KPA mechanised infantry battalion.⁵³

In the second half of 1949, Stalin still had a negative attitude towards the forceful reunification of the peninsula. In a message to Mao at the end of October, he revealed his opinion: 'at present, the Korean troops should not launch any assaults.'⁵⁴ This attitude was seen again on 16 December 1949 when Stalin agreed with Mao's opinion that 'China needs a period of three to five years of peace, which would be used to bring the economy back to pre-war levels and stabilise the country in general.'⁵⁵ With the help of recently declassified Russian documents, we can see that the first signs of Stalin's acquiescence with Kim's proposal to forcefully reunify the peninsula emerged at the end of January 1950.⁵⁶ Yet arrangements for the return of the Korean PLA troops had already been concluded almost a month before, at the beginning of January. Therefore, it can be concluded that the former was not the direct cause of the latter.

Regarding China's position on the matter of the ethnic Korean troop transfers, it is certain that fighting together in the anti-Japanese and Chinese Civil Wars, as well as following the same communist ideology cemented North Korea and Communist China together. Therefore, it would have been difficult for the CCP to reject North Korea's request to return ethnic Korean troops to Korea.⁵⁷ The CCP had its own internal reasons for meeting North Korea's request. For one thing, the Korean divisions were no longer needed. By early May 1949, the CCP had already essentially won the military contest. Therefore, the ethnic Korean troops were in charge of garrisoning Shenyang and Changchun and were no longer militarily meaningful.⁵⁸ Moreover, in autumn 1948 the PLA Army had begun to disarm and demobilise in the liberated regions.⁵⁹ It was at this moment that North Korea requested the ethnic Korean troops, to which the Chinese agreed without hesitation.

Additionally, the CCP faced financial and economic difficulties, which Zhou Enlai's 15 November 1949 talk with Soviet Ambassador Nikolai Roshchin makes clear. He pointed out that

at present, there are 4.5 million soldiers in the PLA and nearly 1.5 million workers and staff members in the state-owned enterprises and government organisations that need to be supported by the government. With the incorporation of provincial and local units into the PLA and the continuing expansion of government organisations and national enterprises, there will be 8 million people that need to be supported by the national treasury, which is not a small burden.⁶⁰

In 1949, military expenditures accounted for 45% of government financial outlays,⁶¹ and thus demobilisation was unavoidable.⁶² It was under these conditions that some of the ethnic Korean soldiers in the 4th Field Army rioted in December 1949, demanding a return to North Korea. From the perspective of a Chinese government that was already undergoing significant reductions in its military expenditures, there was no reason to reject this petition. Therefore, it is incorrect to view the transfer of ethnic Korean troops as evidence of proactive Chinese support for North Korean military action towards the South.

Independent of the domestic situation in China, the Chinese government also repeatedly expressed its negative attitude toward reunifying the Korean Peninsula by force.⁶³ Mao's telegram of October 1949 to Stalin, presenting this view, has already been mentioned. On 16 December 1949, Mao again stressed to Stalin that the new Chinese government desperately needed a period of peace to reconstruct the shattered economy.⁶⁴ This point was emphasised to the North Koreans in March 1950, when Mao received DPRK ambassador to China, Lee Juyeoun. In a conversation regarding Kim's visit to China, Mao told Lee that, 'If there is a detailed plan to unify Korea, then Kim's visit should be in secret; if there is no such plan, then we will receive him officially.'⁶⁵ Zhou Enlai unequivocally clarified Mao's statement by adding that 'China hopes for an official visit',⁶⁶ thereby making evident China's opposition to North Korea's ambitions.

In marked contrast to the USSR and the PRC positions, the North Korean leadership consistently expressed its wish to solve the Korean Peninsula issue by force.

In a meeting with Stalin on 7 March 1949, Kim Il-sung broached the idea but met with Stalin's stern opposition.⁶⁷ In meetings with Shtykov on 12 and 14 August 1949, the North Korean leadership also raised the issue of attacking the South, claiming that

there is no choice but to solve the Korean issue through this method [by force] . . . the Korean people will not understand us, we will lose the people's trust and support, and will lose the historical chance of retaking the motherland. We are sure that comrade Stalin, who always supports the Korean people, will understand our feelings.⁶⁸

On 17 January 1950, Kim again requested that Stalin agree to a plan for unification by force.⁶⁹ By the end of 1949, Kim had asked Stalin more than 48 times to permit an attack on the South.⁷⁰ Naturally, Kim regarded the significant addition of the PLA ethnic Korean troops as a key moment in a larger bid for military preparation. On 30 January 1950, Stalin sent his first positive signals to Kim for a North Korean attack.⁷¹ Mao, however, who was in Moscow at the time, was not aware of Stalin's green light.⁷² The so-called 'three countries conspiracy' theory does not hold up in light of this fact.

The composition of the repatriated ethnic Korean troops and whether North Korea had dispatched troops to Manchuria

As mentioned earlier, Bruce Cumings maintains that 30–40,000 ethnic Korean soldiers returned to North Korea between July and October 1949 and 40–50,000 from February to March 1950, totalling somewhere between 75,000 and 100,000.⁷³ Newly discovered Chinese PLA and Russian documents refute his argument on several fronts. In terms of sheer numbers, the earlier argument is flawed. Chinese and Russian archives show that two divisions, the 164th and 166th, entered Korea in July 1949, and the 164th Division contained 10,821 troops while the 166th Division held 10,320.⁷⁴ Therefore, with the addition of about 14,000 in March–April of 1950, the total number of soldiers returning to Korea was slightly over 35,000, far less than estimates cited by Cumings. There has also been a misidentification of ethnic Korean units involved in the repatriation. Cumings argues that in February 1948, shortly after the establishment of the Korean People's Army, 10,000 soldiers of the Li Hong-Guang (LHG) detachment entered Korea.⁷⁵ Chinese documents show that the predecessor of the LHG detachment was the KVA 1st Detachment, which campaigned in South Manchuria during the Chinese Civil War and later regrouped as the 166th Division.⁷⁶ We also now know that this division entered Korea in July 1949, not February 1948.

Finally, within the military context of the time, it would not have made sense for the CCP to agree to repatriate Korean units in early 1948 as argued by Cumings. This is because only after December 1948, just after the end of the Liao-Shen campaign, did the CCP hold overwhelming military superiority over the GMD. At the time suggested by Cumings, the PLA was in desperate need of troops as it had begun a strategic counterattack since the second half of 1947. Moreover, on 23 October 1948, Kim, in his conversation with the Yanbian commissioner Lim Chunchu, stressed that, 'At the

present, not a few Korean comrades participating in the Northeast China campaign hope to return to their motherland [North Korea]. Of course, that is based upon their love for their motherland.' Continuing, Kim stated: 'But in view of the brotherly relationship between us and the Chinese comrades, it should not be permitted.'⁷⁷ It is obvious that until the end of 1948, the North Korean government did not request China to redeploy the ethnic Korean troops. Thus, those few soldiers and officers who returned to North Korea before 1949 should be considered as having done so on their own personal initiatives rather than through any large-scale PLA coordination effort.

US intelligence reports of the time argued that North Korea dispatched its troops to Northeast China to support the CCP war effort.⁷⁸ These reports stated that in autumn 1946, North Korean troops, trained under the supervision of Soviet army officers, started entering Northeast China, and as of 1 April 1947, numbered 20,000. Intelligence reports also stated that from 5 to 30 April 1947, North Korean General Kim Chaek, leading over 30,000 Korean soldiers, entered Northeast China. And an unknown number of Korean soldiers from Pyong'an Province near the Sino-Korean border moved into Northeast China by train or truck.⁷⁹ US intelligence also reported that there were at least 125,000 soldiers in North Korea in April 1947,⁸⁰ but one year later, it reported that there were only 47,607 soldiers, with 80,000 suddenly disappearing.⁸¹ It seems that this report wanted to show that Korea had dispatched these troops to Northeast China. In fact, whether Korea dispatched troops to Manchuria can be determined by re-examining the exact numbers of the North Korean military, as reported to Stalin during this time. In August 1946, North Korea established the *Boanganbuhullyeonso* (Peace Preservation Officers Training Academy), which was the predecessor of the North Korean regular army. This institution gradually expanded to become the KPA.

According to newly accessible documents, North Korea had established one infantry brigade and two infantry divisions by the end of 1946,⁸² and an additional division between early 1947 and June 1949. Thus, up until June 1949, there were only three regular divisions, one infantry brigade, and two border security brigades in the North Korean army.⁸³ These numbers were reported to Stalin, and are therefore reliable. Thereafter, in July 1949, two ethnic Korean divisions in the PLA were repatriated to North Korea, and thus there were five divisions and one brigade in the KPA, with the total number of KPA troops reaching 57,000 soldiers.⁸⁴ From March to April 1950, there was another ethnic Korean division and one brigade, amounting to 14,000, that went to North Korea. If more than 30,000 Korean troops in April 1947 had been dispatched to Manchuria as reported by US intelligence then when did they return to North Korea? In view of the change in size of North Korea's military force, they must have returned after July 1949. And yet, as is confirmed in PLA documents, the ethnic Korean troops who returned to North Korea were not the troops dispatched from North Korea but had been established and developed indigenously in Manchuria.

In July 1949, when North and South Korea confronted each other and North Korea was hastily making defensive preparations for a South Korean attack, it would not have made sense for them to maintain a deployment of their troops in China, if they had

sent them in the first place. There has been no evidence to show that these supposed North Korean troops returned from China. I believe it is not that they did not return but, rather, that they had never been dispatched. Of course, this does not mean that no North Koreans joined the Chinese Civil War. Chinese sources state that, 'Although the number is relatively small, some young people living in northern North Korea did voluntarily join the KVA. Sometimes the 1st Detachment, which fought in South Manchuria where the ratio of Korean people is low, recruited new soldiers from northern North Korea.'⁸⁵ This proves that some of the Koreans in northern North Korea joined the KVA, but not that North Korea officially dispatched troops to China.

Why then did some US Intelligence reports show that North Korea dispatched troops to China? From the latter half of 1946, tens of thousands of CCP troops including the KVA retreated to North Korea to rest and regroup, and then returned to Manchuria. In addition, the northern part of North Korea offered the main corridor for transportation between North and South Manchuria. Thus, tens of thousands of CCP troops frequently passed through the northern part of North Korea.⁸⁶ All of these troops passing through could possibly have been misidentified by US intelligence agencies as North Korean troops being dispatched to China.

In summary, repatriated ethnic Korean troops performed to high standards during the early phases of the Korean War. Considering that until the end of 1949 both the Soviet Union and China had a negative attitude toward forceful reunification amid the unstable Korean situation, the principal reason behind the PLA's decision to return the ethnic Korean soldiers was to ensure North Korea's security against what it perceived as South Korea's threat to the North. China's financial difficulties as well as the desires of ethnic Korean soldiers themselves were additional reasons why the Chinese government agreed so easily to return the soldiers. Finally, Chinese documents verify that ethnic Korean units in the PLA were indigenous in Northeast China and that the North Korean regime never dispatched soldiers to Manchuria to assist Communist China during the Chinese Civil War.

Notes

- [1] There was no fixed name for the Koreans in China during the Anti-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War. The Koreans in China were variously called *Gaoliren*, *Hanguoren*, or *Chaioxianren*. On 3 September 1952, the ethnic Korean (*Chaioxianren*) became the formal name after the establishment of the Ethnic Korean's Autonomous Area in Yanbian. This article uses the term *ethnic Korean* (*Chaioxianren*) to refer to Chinese of Korean descent. See Go Youngil, *Jungguk hangil jeonjaeng gwa chosun minjeok*, 465–7; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 15 May 1949, Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, hereafter APRF), APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 9, Listy 54.
- [2] Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 76–7.
- [3] Kim Jung-Saeng, *Chosun uiyonggun milipbuk gwa yukio jinjaeng*, 151–2.
- [4] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 22 June 1949, APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 73.
- [5] A group of scholars has argued that the launch of the Korean War was planned in close cooperation between Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang, commonly known as the three states

conspiracy theory. In the Cold War period, this theory was accepted widely in the Western countries, based on the following speculations: (1) from December 1949 to February 1950, Mao Zedong visited Moscow and reached an agreement on the unification of the Korean Peninsula by force; (2) the return of the ethnic Korean divisions in the PLA to North Korea was designed to enhance the military capability of the KPA so as to unify the Korean Peninsula by force; (3) China and the Soviet Union agreed to divide the work between them, i.e., the Soviet Union provided the weapons while China sent troops; (4) in order to ensure North Korea's security and provide military aid to North Korea when necessary, China and North Korea signed a mutual defense treaty prior to the Korean War. See O'Balance, *Korea: 1950–1953*, 59–60; Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 90; Whiting, *China Crosses Yalu*, 44; Nagajima, 'The Sino-Soviet Confrontation'; So Jincheol, *Hanguk jeonjaeng ui giwon: gukje gongsanjuui ui eummo*; Donggil Kim, "'Sanguo tongmoulun" fenxi'.

- [6] Cumings, *The Roaring of the Cataract*, 445–8, 619; Cumings, *Place in the Sun*, 243.
- [7] Cumings, *Place in the Sun*, 239–41.
- [8] US intelligence summary, 5–12 May 1947, stated that as of 21 April, the number of Soviet trained and equipped Koreans under the command of Kim Cha'ek moving to Jiamushi in northern China will reach 150,000, *ISNK*, no. 36 (1947.5.16) incl. no. 4, p. 8; *ISNK*, no. 39 (1947.6.30) incl. no. 1, p. 15: Baek Haksun, 'Jungguk naejeon sigi bukhan ui jungguk gongsandang e daehan gunsu wonjo', 274.
- [9] Shi Yuanhua, 'Lun guiguo qianhou de dahanminguo linshizhengfu ji zhuhua jigou'.
- [10] Choe Gang, *Chosun Uiyongjunsu*, 105–92.
- [11] Even after the *Chosun doknip dongmaeng*, the political arm of the KVA, moved into CCP headquarters at Yen'an, the main body of the KVA in the Taihang Mountains still maintained its independence from the CCP. See Mu Jeong, *Huabei Chaoxian Duli Tongmeng*, 354–6.
- [12] Shi Yuanhua, *Zhongguo gongchandang yuanzhu chaoxian duli yundong jishi*, 299.
- [13] Special Interview Group of Joong Ang Ilbo, *Birok*, vol. II, 140–41.
- [14] Choe Gang, *Chosun Uiyongjunsu*, 138–46.
- [15] Central Archives of China, *Zhonggong zhongyang wenjian xuanji*, vol. 15, 223.
- [16] Shi Yuanhua, *Zhongguo gongchandang yuanzhu chaoxian duli yundong jishi*, 389–90.
- [17] Choe Gang, *Chosun Uiyongjunsu*, 187.
- [18] In this period following the Japanese surrender, deep rifts emerged between the ethnic Koreans and Chinese in rural area of the Northeast China. Many Koreans fled from rural Chinese antagonism to big cities such as Shenyang, and many outlaws took advantage of the situation by forming bandit gangs and attacking ethnic Korean people and property. Zhu Dehai memoir's editing team, *Zhu Dehai yisheng*, 74.
- [19] Author recently obtained KVA Vanguard Column Leader Han Cheong's unpublished memoir, Han Cheong, *Han Cheng Hoegorok*, 1955–73.
- [20] On 24 October 1945, Mao Zedong sent a telegram to Peng Zhen of the CCP Northeast Bureau, saying that 'it is highly vital to establish our presence in the pivotal cities of Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, especially the former'. CCP Archive Study Office and Military Science Academy, *Mao Zedong Junshi wenji*, vol. 3, 45–60.
- [21] Shi Yuanhua, *Zhongguo gongchandang zhiyuan chaoxian duli yundong jishi*, 394; Special interview team of Joong Ang Ilbo, *Birok*, vol. I, 155.
- [22] Special interview team of Joong Ang Ilbo, *Birok*, vol. I, 155.
- [23] Zhudehai yisheng editing Team, *Zhudehai yisheng*, 74–5.
- [24] Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 76–7.
- [25] For more details about development of the 164 and 166th divisions, See, Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 76–7.

- [26] Wen Zhengyi and Chi Kuanrong, 'Kangri zhanzheng zhong de chaoxian yiyongjun', 20–25; Shi Yuanhua, *Zhongguo gongchandang yuanchu chaoxian duli yundong jishi*, 396–7; The Political Department of the 4th Field Army, *Chaoxian shi zhongguo qinmi de linbang gonghuannan de zhanyou*, 12–16.
- [27] Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 76–7; *Chaoxian shi zhongguo qinmi de linbang gonghuannan de zhanyou*, 12–16.
- [28] Cumings, *Place in the Sun*, 240; Cumings, *Roaring of the Cataract*, 357–64.
- [29] Telegram from Shtykov to Molotov, 27 January 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 3.
- [30] Telegram from Shtykov to Molotov, 3 February 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 6.
- [31] Telegram from Shtykov to Molotov, 27 January 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 3.
- [32] Telegram from Shtykov to Molotov, 3 February 1949, Cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, 'The Korean Conflict, 1950–1953'.
- [33] Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 17 April 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, List 25: Arkhiv Vneshney Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, hereafter AVPRF) AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 4, Papka 11, Listy 80.
- [34] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 20 April 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 839, Listy 13–14.
- [35] Memorandum of the USSR Ministers of Armed Forces and the Chief of the General Staff to the Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, 20 April 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 1, Delo 839, Listy 13–14.
- [36] Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 17 April 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 25; AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 4, Papka 11, Listy 80.
- [37] Decision of the CPSU Politburo on the Soviet Naval Detachment's temporary station in Korea, 18 March, 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 775, Listy 74–6.
- [38] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 22 June 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 73–5.
- [39] On 15 May 1949, Shtykov wrote a report to Vyshinsky saying, 'In the last meeting between Kim Il, Zhu De, and Zhou Enlai, Zhu De asked Kim Il whether the Soviet comrades knew about North Korea's request to send several divisions, and what their opinion was. Kim Il answered that he was entrusted by the KWP CC to do so and that the KWP CC had discussed about this issue with the Soviet Union.' See telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 15 May 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 9, List 54.
- [40] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 15 May 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 9, List 54; Telegram from Kovalev to Stalin, 18 May 1949, APRE, Fond 4, Opis 01, Delo 333, Listy 59–61.
- [41] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 22 June 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 73–5.
- [42] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 13 July 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 5, Listy 26–7.
- [43] Kim Jung-Saeng, *Chosun uiyonggun milipbuk gwa yukio jenjaeng*, 98; Wadaharuki, *Kim Il Sung gwa manju hangil jeonjaeng*, 38.
- [44] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 3 September 1949, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 4, Papka 11, Listy 136–38; Telegram from Tunkin to Vyshinsky (in reply to telegram of 11 September), 14 September 1949, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 46–53.
- [45] On 12 and 14 August of 1949, Kim Il-Sung and Pak Hen-yong raised the issue of attacking South Korea, asserting that there was no choice but to solve the Korean problem through this method [attacking the South], Record of conversation between Shtykov and Kim Il-Sung, 12 August 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 775, Listy 102–6; record of conversation between Shtykov and Park Heonyeong, 14 August 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 775, Listy 108–11; Torkunov, *The War in Korea*, 27–30.
- [46] Politburo decision to confirm the following directive to the Soviet ambassador in Korea, 24 September 1949, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 75–7.

- [47] Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 30 October 1949, cited in Bajanov and Bajanova, 'The Korean Conflict, 1950–1953'.
- [48] Telegram from Nie Rongzhen to Mao Zedong regarding the question of sending home ethnic Korean officers and soldiers stationed in the Huazhong [Central China] military district China, 29 December 1949, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 334, Listy 8–9.
- [49] Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 8 January 1950, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 346, List 110.
- [50] CCP Archive Study Office, *Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao*, 319–20.
- [51] Nie Rongzhen, *Nie Rongzhen huiyiyi*, 748.
- [52] CCP Archive Study Office, *Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao*, vol. 1, 319–21; Telegram of Liu Shaoqi to Mao Zedong, 22 January 1950, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 334, Listy 22.
- [53] Kim Jung-Saeng, *Chosun uiyonggun milipbuk gwa yukio jenjaeng*, 151–2.
- [54] Telegram from Stalin to Mao Zedong, 26 October 1949, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 332, Listy 47–8.
- [55] Record of Conversation between Stalin and Mao Zedong, 16 December 1949, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 329, Listy 9–17.
- [56] Telegram from to Stykov, 30 January 1950, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 92.
- [57] Political department of the 4th Field Army, *Chaoxian shi zhongguo qinmide linbang gonghuanman de zhanyou*, 20–24.
- [58] Mao Zedong had commented that the two divisions were not regular divisions and were poorly trained. Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 15 May 1949, APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 9, Listy 52–54.
- [59] CCP Archive Study Office, *Chen Yun wenji*, 638–49.
- [60] Memorandum between Roshchin and Zhou Enlai on China's politics and economy, 15 November 1949, AVPRF, Fond 0100, Opis 42, Delo 19, Papka 288, Listy 81–95.
- [61] Chinese Academy of Social Science and Central Archives of China, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dangan xuanbian*, 202.
- [62] In May 1950, the Central Committee of the CCP decided to organise the demobilisation committee that would be headed by Zhou Enlai, and decided that the total number of the PLA numbers would be cut down from 5.4 to 4 million. CCP Archive Study Office, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, 390–6.
- [63] About the Chinese policy towards the Korean Peninsula before the outbreak of the Korean War, see Donggil Kim, "'Sanguo tongmoulun" fenxi', 112–21.
- [64] Record of conversation between Stalin and Mao Zedong, 16 December 1949, APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 329, Listy 9–10.
- [65] Telegram from Soviet representative Aleksei Ignatiev to Vyshinsky, 10 April 1950, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 98–9.
- [66] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 12 May 1950, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 100–103.
- [67] APRF, Fond 45, Opis 1, Delo 346, Listy 13–23, 46; Bajanov, *Aktual'nye Problemy*, vol. 3, 37; Weathersby, "'Should We Fear This'", 3–4.
- [68] Record of conversation between Shtykov and Kim Il-Sung, 12 August 1949, APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 775, Listy 102–6; record of conversation between Shtykov and Park Hen-Yong, 14 August 1949, APRF, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 775, Listy 108–11; Torkunov, *The War in Korea*, 27–30.
- [69] In a report to Stalin, Shtykov said, 'Kim Il Sung stressed again that he hoped to listen to comrade Stalin's viewpoint on the question of South Korea, because he always wanted to start an attack on the South'. Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 19 January 1950, AVPRF, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, Listy 87–91.
- [70] Weathersby, 'New Findings on the Korean War', 14.

- [71] Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 30 January 1950, AVPRE, Fond 59a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, List 92.
- [72] Heinzig, 'Stalin, Mao, Kim and War Origins, 1950', 240.
- [73] Cumings, *Place in the Sun*, 241.
- [74] Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 76–7.
- [75] Cumings, *Place in the Sun*, 241.
- [76] Headquarters of the Northeast Military District Command, PLA, *Dongbei sannian jiefang zhanzheng junshi ziliao*, 77.
- [77] Kim Il Sung, 'Jungguk inmin ui hyeong myeong eul jeokgeuk dow Juneun geosi uriui gukjejuujeok immuida', 386–7.
- [78] Headquarters, U.S. Military Forces in Korea, *Intelligence Summary of Northern Korea (ISNK)*, no. 36 (1947.5.16) Incl. no. 4, pp. 2–3.
- [79] *ISNK*, no. 36 (1947.5.16) Incl. no. 4, p. 8; *ISNK*, no. 39 (1947.6.30) Incl. no. 1, p. 15.
- [80] *ISNK*, no. 35, p. 15; *ISNK*, no. 45, p. 13; Headquarters, U.S. Military Forces in Korea, *G-2 Weekly Summary (W/S)*, no. 125, p. 17.
- [81] *W/S*, no. 142, p. 22.
- [82] Orlov and Gavrilov, *Tayny Koreyskoy Voyny*, 26.
- [83] Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 22 June 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 3, Listy 68.
- [84] Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 15 September 1949, APRE, Fond 3, Opis 65, Delo 776, Listy 13.
- [85] Wu Qun, *Li Hongguang zhidui*, 203.
- [86] In June 1946, the Northeast Bureau of the CCP decided to establish a logistical base for the struggle in southern Manchuria in northern North Korea. Therefore, the Northeast bureau of the CCP delegated a representative to Pyongyang. That is the beginning of the first official contact between the CCP and the KWP. See, Ding Xuesong et al., 'Huiyi dongbei jiefang zhanzheng qijian dongbei zhu chaoxian banshichu', vol.1.

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