



Migrant Labor and Massacres: A Comparison of the 1923 Massacre of Koreans and Chinese during the Great Kanto Earthquake and the 1931 Anti-Chinese Riots and Massacre of Chinese in Colonial Korea

Byung Wook Jung, Korea University

Abstract

This article compares two historical massacres that resulted from ethnic antagonism during the Japanese colonial period: the massacre of Koreans and Chinese by the Japanese during the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and a series of anti-Chinese riots and the massacre of Chinese that erupted in colonial Korea in 1931. A similar trajectory led up to both massacres: most of the assailants and victims were lower-class male workers, and both incidents occurred during economic depressions when competition between indigenous workers and immigrants had intensified due to a massive influx of migrant labor. The fact that the majority of the assailants were from the lower class suggests that their own resentment, long condensed from years of experiencing discrimination in their home society, combined with nationalism and anti-foreignism to explode in the form of massacres. In addition, the reality that all assailants were male workers implies that their value system, their mode of life, and the consciousness of a patriarchal hierarchy, which dominated the everyday lives of the male workers of the lower class, were transformed into violence under exceptional circumstances. Lastly, the fact that the victims of the two massacres were migrant workers means that, from the outset, the trigger for the massacres can be understood from a transnational perspective on migrant labor and cannot be confined to the boundary of a single nation.

Keywords: Japanese empire, colonial Korea, massacres, riots, Great Kanto Earthquake, scaremongering, ethnic prejudice, migrant labor, masculinity, East Asian migration history

We very often tell ourselves that the doers of heinous wrongs are monsters, in no way like ourselves.... We have to confront the fact that we might become them. —Martha C.

Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*
(2004, 166–167)

Introduction: Korean Coolies

It will mark the third time if I go to Korea again for doing this job. I recruit Korean *yobos* for the manpower agencies on the mainland.... I supply Korean coolies to them. They will be a source of cheap labor.

—Yōm Sangsöp, *Mansejōn* (1924, 56–57)

The above excerpt from Yŏm Sangsŏp's novel *Mansejŏn* depicts a conversation among Japanese passengers on board a ship departing from Shimonoseki and heading to Busan in colonial Korea in 1918. A Japanese passenger is boasting that recruiting Korean workers will earn him a huge fortune. He goes on to say that he earned 2,000 yen on his previous trip, when he sent eight hundred workers to Hokkaido for mining. What was the fate of those migrant workers, who were displaced to a foreign territory to make money through this labor brokerage?

In this article, I compare two historical incidents that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century in Japan and colonial Korea, respectively. One is the massacre of Koreans and Chinese during the Great Kanto Earthquake that devastated Japan in 1923; the other is a series of anti-Chinese riots and the massacre of Chinese that occurred in colonial Korea in 1931.¹

Previous studies have identified similar motivations behind the two incidents. The following causes have frequently been cited for the 1923 massacre: (1) ethnic conflicts between migrant and indigenous workers; (2) suppression of the nationalist or socialist movements of the Japanese government; and (3) the contempt and anti-foreign perception toward Asian nations prevalent in modern Japan (Noh 2008, 2013; Ryang 2003). As for the 1931 anti-Chinese riots and the massacre of Chinese in colonial Korea, scholars who emphasize external factors tend to pinpoint a vicious scheme plotted by Japanese imperialists, whereas those looking to internal factors foreground the issue of nationalism. In addition, one should take into consideration the competition between Korean and Chinese workers in the labor market (Choe 2012; Jung 2015). To roughly encapsulate the previous scholarship, most of it tends to attribute responsibility for the massacres to either the Japanese government or to the Japanese (1923) and Korean (1931) people mobilized by the Japanese government. Ultimately, the research problematizes nationalism, colonialism, or the “violence” itself that has been inherently related to the formation of the modern nation-states or nationalism.

What is questionable about this line of discussion lies in the stereotyped depiction of passive people having been conveniently manipulated by the Japanese government or colonial authority. Also, the power structure surrounding the massacres tends to be oversimplified as an ethnic conflict between the two peoples.² Against this backdrop, recent research focuses on the active agency of the people and the multifaceted aspects of the power relation, while also recognizing what the previous scholarship has accomplished. In the case

of the 1923 massacre, for example, Fujino Yuko highlights the inner logic of the Japanese people, who were driven to slaughtering Korean civilians. According to her, there are other important aspects of the massacre process that cannot be explained by the “involvement of the government”; instead, what should be taken into consideration in examining the cause of the massacre is the value system and culture of the lower-class male workers who are believed to have played a leading role in the massacre (Fujino 2015, 271–300). As for the 1931 massacre, I have pointed out elsewhere that the incident can be seen as an “urban riot,” where “structured inter-class conflict among the lower-class workers” overlapped with “ethnic conflict,” by locating it within the context of the actual history and lives of the relevant people and region, both assailant and victims, through a case study of a suburb of Gyeongseong (京城) (Jung 2013). Nevertheless, paying attention to the active role of people and the complicated dimensions of power relations does not mean neglecting the culpability of the Japanese government and its responsibility for colonial rule, or ethnic issues. Rather, this can be seen as a down-to-earth attempt to understand the actual lives of the people involved and the massacre itself, building on the previous scholarship.

It is along these lines that I compare the two massacres in this article. Previous research on the two massacres has been confined within the boundaries of national history, and there has been no attempt to examine the two incidents from a comparative perspective. My purpose for adopting a comparative perspective is to challenge common conceptions regarding the two incidents, particularly when they are treated within a national framework. For example, it is noteworthy that Koreans, the major victims of the 1923 massacre, turned into the assailing party in the 1931 massacre. Thus, we can see that the roles of attacker and victim are not as fixed as they appear to be.

In this article, I first examine similarities between the two massacres in terms of their development, while also paying attention to the different contexts in which the two incidents were located: that of the colonizer and of the colonized. Then, I discuss the circumstances and tensions surrounding both the victims and the assailants of the two massacres, particularly through the lens of class. In conclusion, I contend that social class, gender, and migrant labor should be all taken into consideration to understand the two incidents. The new perspective gained by doing so pays more attention to the actual lives and behaviors of attackers and victims of the two incidents and will diversify our understanding of them.

The Events Leading Up to the Massacres

On September 1, 1923, a severe earthquake with a magnitude of 7.9 struck the Kanto (關東) region of Japan. Strong aftershocks continued until the next day. The earthquake, accompanied by a strong gale and fires, swept Tokyo and its neighborhoods, resulting in a death toll of around 100,000 and burning down 281,000 households. During the turmoil, provoked by the rumor that Koreans had poisoned the wells, some vigilantes (自警團), police officers, and soldiers massacred thousands of innocent Koreans and hundreds of Chinese residents in Japan.

Eight years later, newspapers in colonial Korea reported that a Korean migrant farmer came into conflict with his Chinese neighbors over an irrigation issue, which eventually resulted in a large number of injuries on July 2, 1931, in Wanbaoshan (萬寶山) in Changchun, China. Instigated by the news, a wave of anti-Chinese violence swept over colonial Korea. During the riot, Koreans threw stones at and set fire to Chinese stores, and randomly assaulted the Chinese in Korea. The following year, based on the estimate presented by the Chinese government, the Commission of Inquiry of the League of Nations, which was initially formed to investigate the Manchurian Incident, reported that the casualties in the riot included 127 deaths and 393 injured, as well as massive property damage amounting to 2.5 million yen (Lytton Commission [1932] 1986, 138).

Simply put, the way in which the two incidents developed can be schematized as follows.

Figure 1. Development of the Incidents I

1923: Earthquake → Scaremongering → Massacre of Koreans and Chinese by the Japanese

1931: Wanbaoshan Incident → Scaremongering → Anti-Chinese Riots and Massacre by the Koreans

The causes behind the two incidents—the earthquake and the Wanbaoshan Incident—are completely different and cannot be compared on the same plane, in that the former was a natural disaster and the latter was a human conflict. In addition, in terms of the physical proximity of the incidents to the instigators, there is little resemblance: the former occurred right under the noses of the attackers, while the latter broke out outside of the national border. A similarity between the two incidents is that those involved remained helpless throughout; it seemed that there was nothing they could do about the situations. This may have generated groundless fear or indignation among them.

When a natural disaster occurs, migrant workers from colonies or foreigners are not, of course, necessarily killed. Likewise, if a fellow countryman is suffering beyond the border, retaliatory violence does not always occur in the home country in sympathy for the countryman's suppression. For these initial incidents to have developed into violence, a trigger was necessary; scaremongering played that role in both of these cases. In the 1923 incident, a false rumor that Koreans would instigate a riot began to circulate on the evening of September 1. In the case of the 1931 incident, a newspaper report began to spread in colonial Korea that a large number of Korean farmers had been injured in China. In the process of circulating, however, the initial news became exaggerated, to the extent that it turned into a rumor that "our fellow countrymen were massacred in Manchuria, and the death toll has reached two hundred" (Son 2009, 162).

Scaremongering refers to the act of creating groundless rumors. According to court records published by the Japanese Department of Jurisdiction, most of the "crimes" committed by Korean migrants during the earthquake turned out to have little supporting evidence. Although only fifteen theft and embezzlement cases had some credibility, the number of theft cases filed in the Tokyo District Court from September to November totaled more than four thousand. Some researchers have suggested that the false rumor that Koreans would instigate a riot was based on a misconception that lootings by Japanese right-wing organizations were crimes committed by Koreans (Yoshimi et al. 2007, 56). The reason for the rise in theft cases would have been destitution after the earthquake and devastating fires. Most Koreans also suffered deprivation. At that time, the director of the prosecution office of the Tokyo District Court stated, "Although some of the theft cases would have been committed by the Koreans, other crimes such as those mentioned in the rumors could not have been conducted by them" (Yamada 2008, 65–67). Indeed, the Wanbaoshan Incident in 1931 brought about few casualties to both parties involved, despite hostile conflict between Chinese and Koreans. The Chinese government claimed instead that it was Chinese farmers, not Koreans, who had been injured during the conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China [1932] 2009, 205).

For rumors to be credible and spread widely, two things need to happen. First, there must be an authoritative enunciator, and second, the receivers must be biased enough to readily accept the rumors as fact. In this regard, these two incidents share something in common. Although it is still debatable whether public authorities or civilians were behind the rumor in the 1923 incident, it is agreed that public authorities played a significant part in due

course for the rumor to circulate.³ The chief public security director of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the manager in charge of public order in Saitama Prefecture acknowledged the news of Korean riots as fact and therefore ordered tightened vigilance against them. The police said to civilians, “Be armed,” or “You may kill Koreans if they resist” (Yamada 2008, 102–112).

As for the incident in 1931, newspapers in Korea reported that an armed struggle had broken out in Wanbaoshan and was threatening the safety of Korean residents in the region. Not only Korean newspapers including *Chosŏn Daily* (Chosŏn I'lbo) but also official organs of the Government-General of Korea, such as *Maeil Newspaper* (Mae'il Shinbo) and *Keijo Daily* (Keijo I'lbo), jointly blew the case out of proportion. The police treated the rumor as if it were fact by aiding and abetting violence. One defendant at the criminal court who had been accused of murder testified that it was the police who confirmed that Koreans had been victimized during the Wanbaoshan Incident (Son 2009, 162). The head manager of police affairs of the Government-General of Chosŏn deliberately delayed a crackdown, thinking that, to some degree, “The Chinese would reap what they have sown in relation for how severely Koreans had been harassed in China” (Tanaka T. 2001, 203). There is no doubt that the supportive comments, acknowledgment, and connivance of the colonial Japanese authorities, particularly those in charge of preserving public order, would have endowed the attackers with vindication and even legitimacy.

Both Japan and Korea were fertile soil for latent scaremongering. According to Yamada Shoji, the reason why the Japanese were easily manipulated by the rumors following the Kanto Earthquake lay in their deeply rooted prejudicial view of Koreans as a mob of rioters. Moreover, it was the press that promoted spreading such negative conceptions of Koreans. For example, newspapers in Japan reported the March 1, 1919 movement—the largest and most famous Korean independence movement in the Japanese colonial period—as “a riot by the mob” (Yamada 2014a 168–182). According to Edward Seidensticker, the police should have not provoked the mass: “A willingness, and indeed a wish, to believe the worst about Koreans has been a consistent theme in modern Japanese culture” (Seidensticker 1997, 20–21). In the case of the massacre of the Chinese, however, there seems to have been less scaremongering than in the Korean case. Even so, it hardly appears that the Chinese were killed because they had been mistaken for Koreans, as many suggested; the Japanese workers were directly targeting Chinese workers, having been instigated by the police and job brokers. Niki Fumiko pointed out that, behind the inflammatory Japanese mass, there was a perception

of contempt on the part of the Japanese against the neighboring nations in Asia that had emerged since the discourse of “leaving Asia and entering Europe” (脱亞入歐) (Fumiko 1993, 215–216).

In a similar fashion, some negative bias against the Chinese had become prevalent in colonial Korea. Since the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, weakest-to-the-wall kind of racial hierarchies and social Darwinism had begun to spread in Korea, along with feelings of contempt for China. This antipathy developed into hostility after the annexation of Korea by Japan and particularly after the massive influx of Chinese coolies in the 1920s. Right before the outburst of a series of riots in 1931, most newspapers, whether Korean or Japanese, had depicted the Chinese quarter in Korea as a “flash house” (魔窟) and published reports of a series of misdeeds by the Chinese (Oh 2013). The worst case was a report that appeared in *Maeil Shinbo* regarding the number of crimes committed by foreign residents living in Korea. It stated, “The reason why Chinese outnumbered other nationals in all crimes including opium, robbery, and violence is understandable given their ethnic characteristics on top of their large share of foreigners in Korea” (see *Maeil Shinbo* 1931).⁴

In this way, Korean and Chinese residents in Japan and Chinese residents in colonial Korea were killed by people because of false rumors. However, in each incident, the events leading up to the massacre varied. When the Great Kanto Earthquake broke out, there was no rioting. Right after the incident, on September 1, the army issued an emergency alert, and martial law followed the next day. It is somewhat surprising that the massacre of Koreans and Chinese occurred despite the prompt enactment of emergency services by the government. It is apparent that public officials and soldiers were directly involved in the massacre in some cases (Kang 2005, 147–189).

If the term *riot* can be defined as random, collective violence, the historical incident that occurred in Chosŏn in 1931 was a typical riot. Enraged at the rumor that Korean residents in China were victimized in Manchuria, a large number of Korean people from various cities, including Incheon, Seoul, and Pyeongyang, took to the streets to protest against the brutality of the Chinese. They threw stones, set fire to houses and shops owned by Chinese merchants, and randomly assaulted and even killed innocent Chinese civilians when they encountered them. While Koreans living in Japan in 1923 were too subjugated to defend themselves from attacks by the Japanese, Chinese residents in Korea in 1931 attempted to counterattack the offensive assaults directed at them, leading to a number of Korean casualties.⁵ This also reflects the fact that the difference in power dynamics between

Japanese citizens and Korean and Chinese migrants in Japan proper was even greater than that between native Koreans and Chinese migrants in colonial Korea.

The settlement of the two incidents is marked by an even starker contrast. Among those prosecuted for the 1923 massacre in Japan, the cases that involved slaughtering Koreans received lighter sentences than those that involved murdering Japanese or usurping the authority of police; Japanese assailants were released with either a suspension or shortening of their prison sentences. (Yamada 2008, 123–131). On the contrary, Koreans convicted in the 1931 riot, including those involved in slaughtering Chinese, received heavier sentences than those punished for the 1923 incidents or even those involved in ordinary criminal cases (Choe 2012, 317–321). Among the many reasons for these differences in sentencing, the most important is the different social positions of Koreans and Chinese within the imperial hierarchy. That is to say, while Koreans were undoubtedly treated as Japanese subjects, Chinese were still considered foreigners to the Japanese criminal authority, despite their extreme poverty. Confronted with international condemnation, the Japanese government had to punish Koreans more harshly, because they were involved in murdering foreigners. The different processes of the ex post facto casualty investigation of the two incidents provide another point of comparison. On one hand, the damages brought against the Chinese—including the personal information of those slaughtered, both in 1923 and 1931—were investigated by the Chinese government and civilians (Fumiko 1993, 104–117; 2008, 625–707).⁶ On the other hand, due to the hindrance of the Japanese government, a full investigation of the casualties of Koreans as colonial subjects in the 1923 massacre was not conducted. The 1923 investigation looked only at the approximate number of murders and where these were committed, without identifying who was actually murdered (Yamada 2008, 190–203).

In addition, it is important to note that some Koreans were attempting a so-called shift in orientation in Chosŏn. Kwon Pyeong Geun and others who used to be members of a union in the Incheon area incited an attack on the Japanese settlers by claiming that it was Japanese imperialism rather than Chinese immigrants who were causing all these disturbances. For this, they were sentenced to three years of imprisonment (Keijō District Court 1931). Among the Japanese, however, no one, including socialists, was punished for criticizing the Japanese government or its colonialism in relation to the 1923 incident (Kang 2005, 366–377).

Attackers and Victims

So far, I have used the collective nouns “Japanese,” “Korean,” “Chinese,” and “mass” to refer to attackers and victims in my description of the two incidents. However, not every class of Japanese or Koreans took part in the massacres, nor was every class victimized. Who were the victims and assailants involved in these two violent confrontations, and to which class did they belong?

Let me first examine those who were victimized. Despite the impossibility of confirming the exact death toll of the massacred Koreans in the 1923 incident, there is no doubt that it amounted to many thousands. The biggest massacre of Koreans in Tokyo took place on the west bank of the flood-relief canal of the Arakawa (荒川) in Minami Katsushika District (南葛飾郡). According to Yamada Shoji, there are two reasons for this. First, many Korean workers had been mobilized to excavate the flood-relief canal. Second, this area was an evacuation route toward Chiba Prefecture (千葉県) for both Japanese and Koreans fleeing from the nearby industrial area, which had been devastated by fires (Yamada 2008, 210–211). As a result, most of the victims were Korean workers employed in civil construction and other labor works in the industrial area. Another of the largest massacres of Koreans occurred in Nakamura-cho (中村町) in Kanagawa Prefecture (神奈川県), an area filled with low-grade accommodations where many Korean workers were concentrated. According to the 1920 census of the region, ethnic Koreans outnumbered locals in several fields of work, including transportation and engineering construction. Most of them were either port laborers or civil construction workers (Yamada 2008, 78, 228).



Figure 2. Korean residents in Japan sheltered at Narashino refugee camp during the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. *Source:* Kang Dök-sang (2005, 303).

In the 1923 incident, about seven hundred Chinese people were confirmed dead, most of whom belonged to the working class. The biggest loss of life took place in Oshimamachi (大島町) in Minami Katsushika District, where the largest number of Chinese workers were accommodated. The difference between the two death tolls can be explained by the fact that Korean migrant workers in the Kanto area outnumbered Chinese workers. The ratio of victims to total number of workers of each ethnicity in the Kanto, however, indicated little difference between the two (Yamawaki 1994, 276).

Due to interruption and concealment by the Japanese government, accurate figures of casualties and the personal data for identifying each victim was not collected. Nevertheless, the surviving trial records for a limited number of cases in certain provinces enable us to verify the number of victims and their professions. As seen in the top of Table 1, in the case of Fujioka (藤岡) in Gunma Prefecture (群馬県), located in the outskirts of the Kanto region, seventeen Koreans, out of eighteen inmates held in custody in a police station, were murdered by the vigilance committee. Among those detained, thirteen were public laborers, which amounts to 72 percent of the detained. Among the rest, there were three taffy peddlers, which accounts for 17 percent of the total professions. Indeed, at that time, it was not unusual for construction laborers working at civil construction sites to turn to taffy peddling when they became unemployed after the construction was completed, because it required a relatively low capital investment. Yoon Geun-yeong, a Korean writer of children's songs who was studying in Tokyo at the time, testified that a Japanese apologized to him and his college friends for not being able to distinguish jade from stone when he was taken to the military base. In this case, "jade" stands for college students studying in Japan and "stone" means laborers. According to Yoon, "it was mostly laborers who were slaughtered" (Kantōdaishinsaiji ni gyakusatsusareta 1992, 193–194).

In many ways, the 1931 incident was analogous to the earlier massacre in Japan. The department of police affairs of the Government-General of Chosŏn estimated that more than half of the Chinese residents in Korea in the late 1920s were laborers. In 1928, among the estimated 58,544 Chinese residents in Korea, 30,106 (51.4 percent) were workers. By occupation, 32 percent did miscellaneous work, with 23 percent in agriculture, 13 percent in construction, and 11 percent in the manufacturing industry. Adding all of the construction occupations together, including earthwork, woodwork, plasterwork, and stonemasonry, would bring the total to 26 percent (Head manager of police affairs 1929). According to the occupation subclass distribution of Chinese residents in Korea in the 1930 census, the

majority of employees were clerks and salespeople, followed by those employed in earthwork and agriculture. Construction workers combining earthwork with woodwork accounted for the greatest majority. Besides, such employees as daily workers, porters, and cooks held a high rank. In Pyeongnam and Hwanghae Provinces, where the anti-Chinese riots were particularly intense, construction jobs ranked highest among all types of employment.

In addition to experiencing extensive property damage, the victimized Chinese merchants also suffered human casualties. According to Kim Dong In, a renowned Korean writer who witnessed the riots in Pyeongyang, casualties were relatively high in the suburbs, while they remained considerably lower inside the city. Even in parts of the city that wealthy merchants had already evacuated, it was mostly employees of a lower grade who suffered the most damage (Geūmdong 1934). According to the police report, there were significant casualties among lower-class workers, most of whom were working at construction sites or for coal mine companies on the outskirts of the city. For example, on the afternoon of July 6, 1931, hundreds of Korean rioters attacked Chinese workers at an irrigation association and at the nearby mines in Daedong-gun (大同郡), Pyōng'an Nam-do, during which fourteen people were killed (Police Affairs of the Government-General of Chosŏn 1931).

Who were the perpetrators, then? The 1923 incident is differentiated from the 1931 incident in that the police and army authorities were directly involved in the massacre from the outset. Civilians took part as well, mainly through organizing vigilante groups. In response to the continued atrocities by the vigilance corps, the police began making arrests from September 17 onward. According to occupation statistics of those prosecuted in the courts in various places, the majority were lower-class workers, mostly engaged as construction workers, coopers, coachmen, engineers, carpenters, can manufacturers, and day laborers (Kang 2005, 343–345, 416). Table 1 shows the occupations of the perpetrators at Fujioka in Gunma Prefecture. The number of factory workers and those with odd jobs is twenty-one out of the thirty-seven victims and constitutes the largest portion, or 57 percent. The second-largest group by profession was petty merchants, whose number amounted to six, or 16 percent. In another slaughter case in nearby Saitama Prefecture, factory workers and those with odd jobs also constituted the highest percentage.⁷ The percentage of lower-class workers among those massacred would probably have been even higher in areas with more developed manufacturing industries, including Tokyo.

Table 1. Professions of the Victims and Attackers of the 1923 Fujioka Case, Gunma Prefecture

	Profession	Number
Koreans massacred	Construction laborers 土工	13
	Taffy peddler 飴屋, 飴行商	3
	Unknown	2
	Total Koreans	17 (one escaped)
Japanese prosecuted for massacring	Profession	Number
	Tiler 瓦職工	10
	Soy sauce maker 醤油職工	3
	Bamboo worker 竹細工職	3
	Carpenter 建具職	1
	Blacksmith 鍛冶職	1
	Cooper 桶職	1
	Wagon driver 馬夫	2
	General merchant 雜貨商	2
	Taffy peddler 飴行商	1
	Bird seller 鳥商	1
	Silk thread seller 絲繭商	1
	Horse and cattle seller 牛馬商	1
	Peasant 農夫	5
	Others	5
	Total Japanese	37

Source: Yamada (2014b, 5–6, 29–48, 145, 196, 247).

Among the 984 convicted for the offense of violent rioting in 1931, the proportion of the various employees and jobless people amounted to 66.1 percent, which would have reached 83.9 percent if the small self-employed sections of agricultural workers and peddlers were included. The largest single profession was “agriculture,” which claimed 143 of those convicted. They probably would have been small farming-class workers, rather than

landowners, engaging in suburban agriculture near the city, given the locations where the incidents occurred and the residential distribution of the convicted. Next came 126 “manual laborers,” 103 “unemployed,” 75 belonging to varied employment groups (雇人), and 71 factory workers. Miners, construction workers, ironsmiths, peddlers, clerks, temporary employees (傭人), day laborers, and errand persons were also identified. To sum up, most of the convicted were non-regular employees of the lower class, had low-grade occupations, and mostly worked in the city. A considerable number of them were simply unemployed (Jung 2015, 326–329).

To conclude, the lower-class workers were both the attackers and the targets. Why did people in a similar situation resort to killing each other? Let me offer a reminiscence of Tozawa Nisaburo, a former manager of a union in Minami Katsushika District, where several massacres took place in 1923:

There already had been a huge contradiction between Japanese and Koreans before the earthquake. It was related to the lower-class workers.... The so-called global great recession had begun, particularly for 2–3 years with the end of the world war.... It was around this time when capitalists attempted to implement a “rationalization” process, so to speak.... The Korean migrant workers might appear to be more employable to the capitalists thanks to their physical superiority over Japanese workers. In addition, they were diligent at all times. On top of this, they were paid less with all their hard work. They were willing to cope with any abnormal circumstances. To the indigenous Japanese workers who had been despising the Korean migrant workers, their presence could have been a real threat in the competition of the job market. Although it may sound cheap and narrow-minded, it could have been a really serious matter to the lower-class workers. Out of those accumulated feelings toward the Korean workers (during the turmoil after the Great Kanto Earthquake), there had been anti-Korean sentiments among Japanese workers, if not ordinary people, which eventually generated a hostile atmosphere against Koreans. (Tozawa 1963, 32–34)

Tabata Kiyoshi, who had witnessed the slaughter of Koreans in Nakamura-cho, pointed out, “As the Korean workers provided cheap labor, the indigenous workers in Japan had been struggling to get a job, which made them indignant” (Yamada 2008, 81) According to Niki Fumiko, the masterminds behind the massacre of the Chinese workers were the police and labor brokers. At that time, in Oshima-machi in Minami Katsushika District, a mutual aid association of Chinese residents in Japan was established to protect the rights and interests of Chinese workers. Labor brokers massacred uncontrollable Chinese workers by mobilizing coolie masters or colleagues (Fumiko 1993, 208–214). A Japanese person was killed as well

for providing accommodation and brokering jobs for the Chinese workers (Tahara 1982, 48–49).

Two-thirds of the Japanese laborers near Tokyo, where the most killings had originally occurred, came from the provinces to do odd jobs mainly at small factories or in household industries before they became unemployed due to the depression after the war in 1920. Although unemployment became grave, the number of Korean and Chinese migrant workers drastically proliferated in the basic industries. These are the circumstances in which the earthquake and massacre took place. Way before the massacre, there had already been frequent conflicts between native Japanese and Korean and Chinese migrant workers that included fights, murders, and petitions against the employment of Korean and Chinese workers by Japanese workers. As if predicting the massacre, a newspaper printed in December 1922 reported that the issue of laborers among the three parties involved had “advanced into a more and more nervous state” (Yamawaki 1994, 275).

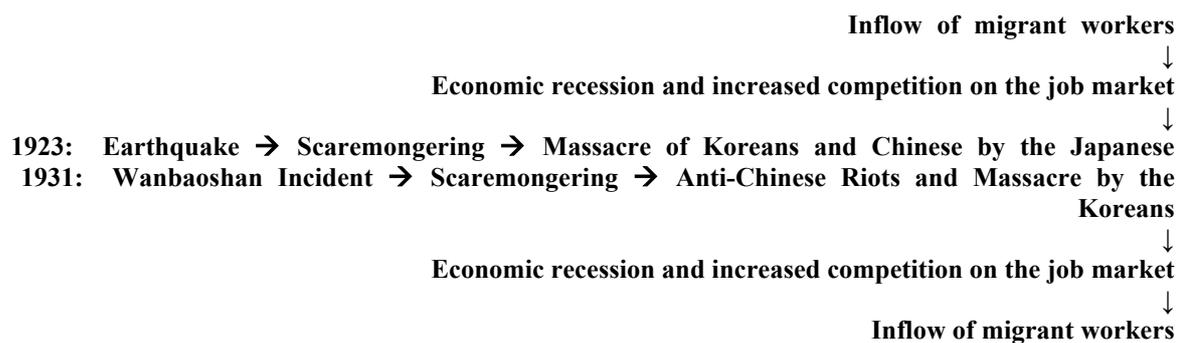
The 1931 anti-Chinese riots also occurred in the midst of a severe depression. The global recession continued to influence colonial Korea, as it had Japan in the 1920s. The rice price index had declined from 100 in 1919 to 38 in 1931. During this time, many Korean peasants headed for the cities, Manchuria, or Japan for survival. The proportion of the poor, destitute, and beggars increased from 11 percent of the population in 1926 to 28 percent in 1931. The unemployment rate of the whole population continued to rise after the 1920s, growing by a staggering 10 percent in three years in the early 1930s. The year 1931 marked the nadir of the economic recession. Despite the weak economy, cities and their suburbs were the best places for workers to search for jobs. In the 1920s, the population constantly grew in almost every city in Korea. From 1920 to 1930, the total population of fourteen largest cities reached 556,131 with an average growth of 88 percent; the increase due to relocation, excluding the natural increase due to births, exceeded 433,000. Most of the growth was a result of the inflow into urban areas from rural communities.

Chinese migrant workers emerged at a time of economic crisis. The number of Chinese residents in Korea increased from about 23,000 in 1920 to 67,000 in 1930, and their main field of occupation shifted during this period from merchant to laborer. More importantly, seasonal workers, who used to come in the spring and return in winter, also appeared. In the late 1920s, the number of these “swallows” coming into the port of Incheon every year reached over 10,000. They had their own desperation. The majority of them came from Shandong Province (山東省), where they had suffered destitution due to continual wars

and natural disasters (Yi 2008, 149–155). As they were hired for various construction sites in Korea, their presence became a threat to the livelihood of the urban underclass. A newspaper published in Korea on April 4, 1925, insisted that these Chinese migrant workers should be excluded on the grounds of “preserving our right to live, not out of national consciousness” (*Chosŏn Daily* 1925). Starting in the late 1920s, it became more common for Chinese workers to replace Korean workers, particularly at the time of the strike in Chosŏn (Horiuchi 2003, 7–8). Employers or capitalists in Chosŏn preferred Chinese workers, as they were considered harder working, cheaper, and more docile and thus easier to supervise when compared to Korean workers. As we have seen previously, Japanese capitalists preferred Korean and Chinese migrant workers to Japanese native workers for exactly the same reasons.

Having examined the various motivations behind the conflicts between attacker and victim, figure 1 can be revised as follows:

Figure 3. Development of the Incidents II



Scholars who emphasize economic factors have been criticized for exaggerating interclass conflicts among workers on the grounds that the total number of migrant workers was not that substantial given the economic scale or demography of the time (Ryang 2003, 737). Even if small in total numbers, jobs taken by those migrant workers must have posed a threat to native workers competing for the same job. According to Yasui Sankichi, a Japanese researcher on overseas Chinese, “as long as they [the Chinese migrant workers] were evenly distributed all over Japan, this would not have been too much of a problem.” However, in reality, they were congregated in specific areas in Tokyo, which caused “conflicts with the lower-class or odd job workers of the city” (Yasui 2013, 221). Apart from this, one must take into consideration the actual perception of the attackers vis-à-vis the increased influx of migrant workers. Whether or not migrant workers were a real threat, there is no doubt that the attackers’ perception that the migrant workers could be intimidating was a prominent motive that drove them to violence.

Conclusion: Social Class, Gender, and Migrant Labor as New Perspectives on the Massacres

As I have established, the victims of the 1923 and 1931 incidents were migrant workers incorporated into the low-grade working class of their host societies. The assailants in the two incidents were typically members of the native working class, who had inevitably become sensitive to the influx of migrant workers. With this in mind, I will now return to the question raised in the introduction regarding the value of developing a new perspective on the two incidents by paying attention to those who were actually involved in these incidents.

First of all, the fact that it was mostly lower-class workers who carried out the violence suggests that there are other dimensions to these events that cannot be reduced to nationalism or anti-foreignism. As Kang Dōk-sang points out, the offending party of the 1923 massacre “tried to relieve their own resentment resulting from discrimination by turning the blade of a sword toward those more vulnerable than themselves” (Kang 2005, 343–344). Likewise, Cho Kyōng-dal defines the 1931 massacre as stray violence committed by young workers of the lower class who “became hopeless about the future under the deadlocked condition of colonialism” (Cho 2008, 123–128). When combined with nationalism and anti-foreignism, the workers’ resentment about discrimination in their home society accumulated, condensed, and finally exploded in the form of massacres. It turns out that the root of the violence was even deeper than we previously thought, as well as being multifaceted. Further close examination of the case studies is required in order to explain how they ended up as such violent massacres.

Also, it is notable that most of the offenders, particularly those who actually committed the slaughtering, were male workers, although some of the victims were women and children. This implies that examination of the role of gender is important for understanding these massacres. As Fujino pointed out, the masculinity of lower-class male workers, who were mostly responsible for the urban riots and the murder of Koreans, was the cultural bottom line of this violence. In other words, masculinity and the dissipated life-culture of the lower-class male workers that had gradually formed in their everyday lives against the backdrop of social exclusion, alienation, and a strong desire for upward mobility exploded in the form of a massacre under exceptional conditions (Fujino 2015, 166–202). According to Kim Puja, in 1923, a false rumor that Korean males had attempted to rape Japanese women was gradually established as a “rapist myth.” This became one of the major motivations that brought about the massacre of Koreans, which was provoked by the national

and patriarchal consciousness of Japanese males collectively (Kim 2014, 19).

I believe gender is an equally relevant conceptual lens for understanding the 1931 massacre; in colonial Korea, those who were most responsible for the massacre were lower-class male workers. As in the 1923 case, there was constant media coverage about the raping, kidnapping, and prostitution by Chinese residents in Korea, which eventually provoked a patriarchal consciousness among Korean males. In addition, it should be noted that previous research employing a gender-oriented perspective has been confined to male offenders. As previously mentioned, however, the victims were also mostly lower-class male workers. How can the masculinity of these male victims be distinguished from that of the offending males? This requires further examination in relation to patriarchy and colonialism.

The fact that the victims of the two massacres were mostly migrant workers also implies that the trigger for the massacres, from the outset, can only be understood within the framework of a transnational perspective on migrant labor and cannot be confined to the boundary of a single nation. Seeing these incidents from the perspective of migrant labor or transnational history allows us to cast a new light on these two incidents. First, what actually brought both assailant and victim into violent confrontation can be detected. What is prominent is the role of labor brokers, who supplied workers to employers who had no previous connection with them. As seen in the epigraph excerpted from Yöm Sangsöp's novel, the brokers could benefit from importing Korean and Chinese laborers to Japan proper. Even in colonial Korea, it was the labor brokers who brought in Chinese workers. Those early settlers who immigrated ahead of the workers were among the brokers who capitalized on their knowledge of both countries. Moreover, the majority of the workers who came in later and were mobilized in this way belonged to a special labor organization run by their early compatriot settlers. The Chinese workers in colonial Korea also belonged to "bang" (幫) run by their Chinese predecessors. Likewise, many Korean workers arriving in Japan proper collectively resided at a bunkhouse (Ham'ba 飯場), and they were managed and supervised by their compatriot Korean foremen (Jung 2013, 161–164; Tonomura 2010, 42–43, 104, 218).⁸

Broadly speaking, the influx of migrant workers and their employment has much to do with the labor contract system. In particular, the majority of the victims of the massacres in 1923 and 1931 were construction workers hired through this labor contract system, and they were regulated and supervised by the special labor organization.⁹ In addition, the ultimate benefits of this method of labor management based on labor brokerage and the labor

contract system fell exclusively to employers. As seen in Tozawa Nisaburo's testimony above, Japanese capitalists intended to overcome the depression by hiring cheap but well-disciplined Korean workers. For the same reason, capitalists in colonial Korea preferred Chinese workers. Moreover, the presence of those migrant workers could effectively function to repress any requests for a wage increase by native workers and to prevent any resistance by them. Korean native workers were often threatened with being replaced by migrant workers. To sum up, it was employers, labor brokers, and labor supervisors who benefited from the influx of migrant workers that drove these ethnic minority workers into violent conflict. Structurally speaking, the cause of these conflicts lies in the labor contract system that sustained East Asian capitalism at the time.

Second, paying attention to the way in which migrant workers were mobilized, as well as their residential and labor patterns, leads us to examine another cause of the violence. Since the migrant workers recruited by means of labor brokerage rarely spoke the language of the host country, and because they were regulated and managed by the special labor organization, they were forced to remain quite segregated, without much contact with the mainstream society of the host country. Indeed, the majority of the migrant workers resided in collective camps. All of these factors must have aroused a sense of anxiety among members of the local community (Yoshimi et al. 2007, 59).

In this regard, what Tonomura Masaru suggests is interesting. Despite a decrease in recruitment of Korean workers in the 1920s, which had been prolific in the previous decade, the number of these workers continued to grow in Japan; most of these migrations were made possible by a form of chain migration that relied on the brokerage of the preceding settlers from the home country. A shift in the mode of immigration as such eventually resulted in another change in the mode of residency. For example, Korean workers who used to live in a bunkhouse provided by the employer began to move into friends' houses or into collective housing complexes on the riverside. This facilitated greater exposure of Korean migrant workers to the native Japanese population, particularly in the cities. Nevertheless, those migrant workers might still have been considered as a group "incapable of communicating, out of control, and unknown," which would have struck fear into the heart of the indigenous community (Tonomura 2004, 24). Given that some Koreans were saved from being slaughtered, thanks to the help of Japanese civilians, and most of those were in casual contact with the Japanese, we should also examine what constrained or stimulated the mutual contact between the two ethnic groups.

Third, if considered from the perspective of migrant labor history, these two incidents can be situated in the broader context of East Asian or world-historical contingencies. The fact is that the migration of Chinese and Korean subjects within the empire was regulated differently depending on the region. Around 1931, Korean migrant workers in Japan rushed back to Korea upon the implementation of even more severe regulations on Koreans migrating to Japan due to the economic recession in Japan. This would have catalyzed the conflict between Korean and Chinese workers in Korea. In addition, it was around this time that the management plan on the flow of migrant labor was conceived on an empire-wide level.¹⁰

On the other hand, it is not difficult to detect a certain complicity in world-historical involvement from the debate surrounding the Japanese migration policies. For example, in order for the Japanese government to forbid Chinese migrant labor by denying mixed residence in mainland Japan (except for open ports) in 1899, it referenced the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States. In the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake, however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan was opposed to regulating Chinese migration on the grounds that Japanese attempts to oppose the Immigration Act prepared in the United States with the aim of preventing Japanese immigration would fail if Japan kept insisting on discriminatory regulation (Yamawaki 1994). As such, the massacre and riots discussed herein can be seen as events in the context of migration history in East Asia. In this regard, the two incidents should be highlighted in the context of migration history without neglecting their East Asian and world-historical connections.

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Notes

- 1 Scholars conventionally call the 1931 incident a “riot,” but it can be also called a “massacre,” because more than one hundred Chinese were slaughtered during the conflict (Yu and Cha 2013, 4–5).
- 2 Tonomaru Masaru pointed out that Yamada Shoji, the foremost scholar on massacres, neglected the “autonomy” (自律性) and “flexibility” (流動性) of people (Tonomaru 2004, 24–25). Fujino Yuko also critiques the consciousness of people presented by Yamada as “simple” and suggests comprehending it in a more “holistic” way,

recognizing the power structure of the Japanese society to which the offenders belonged (Fujino 2015, 272–273). Another respected scholar in the study of the 1923 massacre, Kang Dök-sang, sees the incident overall as an ethnic conflict between colonizers and colonized and as a war targeting the Korean nation committed at the level of the state, although he also briefly mentions the power relations and resentment within Japanese society (Kang 2005, 343–344; Kang et al. 2013, 19–42). Although both Yamada and Kang pointed out that those directly involved with the massacring of Koreans were mostly low-class workers, their perceptions of people remain more or less consistent with the commonly accepted idea that people are easily manipulated by nationalism and anti-foreignism, without attempting any meaningful reading of their class background (Yamada 2008, 78–81; Kang 2005, 341–345). Among others who have been inspired by nationalism, patriotism, or a sense of communality (Yamada 2011, 146–151), why it was the workers from the lower class who ended up slaughtering the Koreans needs to be explained. As for the 1931 incident, on the other hand, see Jung’s article in which he discusses and critiques the research tendencies depicting the cause of the 1931 massacre as the downsides of nationalism (Jung 2013, 148–150).

- 3 While Kang Dök-sang suggests that the rumor originated from the public authorities (官憲内發説), Matsuo Takayoshi supports the latter idea that the root of the rumor could be traced back to civilians (民間自然發生説) (see Noh 2008, 129).
- 4 One thing to consider is that such negative perceptions of others is not a phenomenon confined to modern times. Miyachi Tadahiko states that the Japanese newspapers at that time not only negatively portrayed Chosŏn people. He argues that they also published articles emphasizing the common roots of the Chosŏn and Japanese people, provoking what Freud called a “narcissism of small differences”—a hatred of those similar to oneself—among Japanese readers (Miyachi 2012, 122–123). Groups that have similar appearances or religious backgrounds still compare themselves, find small differences, and construct hostility toward one another based on such differences (Allport 1993, 131). This type of hatred between similar groups can be observed in the relations between Korea and Japan under the Sinocentrism that existed before modern times and between Korea, Japan, and China in the Eurocentric modern era.
- 5 According to the Government-General of Chosŏn, three Koreans were killed and thirty-three civilians were wounded (Police Affairs of the Government-General of Chosŏn 1931, 1).
- 6 The Chinese governmental report on the 1931 massacre in colonial Korea may be accessed at the Archives of Institute of Modern History (近代史研究所 檔案館) in Academia Sinica (中央研究院), Taiwan, as “Qiáowù” (僑務) material.
- 7 According to Yamada, among those prosecuted for murdering Koreans at Kumagaya (熊谷) and Honjō (本庄) in Saitama Prefecture, the biggest professional category was those who worked in factories and at odd jobs, including wagoneers and construction laborers, who constituted 51 percent (eighteen out of thirty-five) and 65 percent (twenty-two of thirty-four), respectively, and the majority of the rest were petty merchants (Yamada 2011, 136–137).
- 8 Eventually, interethnic conflicts and clashes among workers, administrators, and employers followed. In the words of Kim Tae Yōp, who was involved with the labor movement in Japan: “I considered as my enemy not only Japanese capitalists but also those Koreans including labor supervisors, pro-Japanese organizations consisting of

- collaborators, and the owners of Ham'ba who exploited fellow Koreans" (1981, 87). Likewise, there were similar interethnic conflicts between Chinese labor supervisors and laborers in colonial Korea (see *Chungue Ilbo* 1927).
- 9 This kind of brokerage group consisting of middle managers was called *kumi* (組) in Japan, *bang* (幫) in China, and *sipjang* (什長) in Korea.
- 10 "More than half of the Chinese residents in Korea belong to the working class and have been threatening native Korean workers in the limited labor market. Due to the stagnant economy in mainland Japan, unemployment of the working class in Japan proper became grave. As a result, Korean workers' migration to mainland Japan has been discouraged. However, as the labor market is declining as well in Korea, it is extremely hard for the workers discouraged from going to Japan to be able to find a proper job there. In this situation, if we keep fostering the growth of the Chinese workers in Korea as before and impeding native Korean workers' employment, it is certain that this would pose an important problem for social and security reasons" (South Manchurian Railway Company 1933, 33–34). See also Amrith (2011, 5–6). According to Amrith, it was in the 1930s that the previous patterns of migration, which had been greatly prolific and vibrant, began to transform due to global depression, warfare, and the emergence of newly liberated nations.

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