



# Making of a North Korean Borderland: Northern Gangwon, 1945–1950

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## Abstract

*This paper examines North Korea's border politics along the inter-Korean border before the Korean War, focusing on the provincial division and the border revisions of Gangwon north of the 38th parallel. It traces how the division of Korea by foreign powers and the provincial boundary modification by the nascent North Korean state shaped northern Gangwon's distinct way of becoming a North Korean province. Rather than focusing on certain areas of Gangwon, the present study takes northern Gangwon as a whole, examining how the border revision affected the political relationship between the province's old and new administrative centers, Cheorwon and Wonsan, respectively, and North Korea's capital Pyongyang. This paper advances the notion of borderland, inspired by Etienne Balibar's rethinking of the concept of de/territorialization from the peripheral perspective, highlighting the power of bordering practices in maintaining the imposition of homogeneous symbolism upon heterogeneous realities. Through the lens of borderland, this research reveals the historical transformations of northern Gangwon from a remnant of an arbitrary division to a political arena of changing spatial relations and eventually to an abstracted territory not without uncontrollable elements within itself.*

**Keywords:** borderland, border politics, post-liberation North Korea, Gangwon, Cheorwon, Wonsan

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This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2017S1A6A3A01079581).

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## **Introduction**

Northern Gangwon<sup>1</sup> was a territorial consequence of the arbitrary division of Korea along the 38th parallel by the US and Soviet bilateral agreement at the conclusion of World War II (Fig. 1). Although its size was almost the same as southern Gangwon, northern Gangwon had only agricultural towns and none of the urban centers, commercial hubs, or industrial complexes of its southern counterpart. The Soviet occupation force's ambitious behind-the-scenes planning of post-liberation reconstruction of the province, as elsewhere in North Korea, was marked by its incompleteness. Despite successfully eliminating rival political groups in the province, the emergent North Korean central authority lacked the materials and resources to compensate for the loss of half of the territory in the borderland province. In the colonial period, northern Gangwon had based its modern development on its connections with the colonial capital city, Seoul; it now lost the southbound railway transportation due to the 38th parallel division. Nevertheless, northern Gangwon survived the loss of territory, reconnected to the new capital Pyongyang, and became a legitimate province of North Korea after another redrawing of its provincial boundary in September 1946.

Existing studies describe the specificities of northern Gangwon's incorporation into North Korea by drawing upon a particular county's evidence, such as Inje, Yangyang, and Sokcho. They explain that due to the long-standing communist influence, coastal towns in Gangwon, unlike the inland counties, tended to be supportive of the northern government's socialist policies (Lee 2019, 121). Further, they find that the residents of the northern Gangwon towns remade themselves as subjects of North Korea by attending its state formation, even though such assimilation did not eliminate people's occasional deviations from state domination (J. Kim 2006, 29). Moreover, these studies show that the local people in the borderland crossed the border when they were discontented with land confiscation,

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1. In both South and North Korea, the official name of the province is Gangwon-do (also Kangwon-do), or Gangwon province. Colloquially, Bukgangwon (northern Gangwon or North Gangwon) is used to refer that part of Gangwon province on the northern side.



**Figure 1.** Map showing Gangwon province at the time of liberation (1945)

Source: "Japan and Korea," compiled and drawn by the Cartographic Section, National Geographic Society (United States); James M. Darley, chief cartographer.

having trouble with party leaders, peddling small produce, or suffering economic hardship (Hahn 2017, 190).

However, previous studies overlook another factor in northern Gangwon's province-wide transformations in the post-liberation period: the redrawing of its boundary in September 1946. The 1945 Korean division that made northern Gangwon a province too big to be abandoned and too small to stand alone was the act of the foreign powers and hence an indication of Korea's lost sovereignty. In contrast, in the September 1946 boundary readjustment, the incipient North Korean government played the central part.<sup>2</sup> Although the border revision targeted a provincial boundary,

2. Despite the current absence of documentary evidence, one should not preclude the possibility that the Soviet occupation played a role in the decision regarding the Korean boundary adjustment in 1946. There was historical precedent. Since the mid-1920s, the Bolshevik leadership in the Soviet Union had been concerned with the areas along the country's borders where communism met its opponents. In the immediate aftermath of

not a national border, it was still the first time the Koreans exercised their right to self-determination on land after 36 years of Japanese colonial rule. Insofar as the border revision was an attempt to alter the spatial relations of the province, it also demonstrated an ideal type of land that the state desired to govern. In this light, the border politics of northern Gangwon were a process of not only incorporating the periphery into the center, but also the post-colonial projection of Korean sovereignty on the provincial territory.

It is equally important to note that the North Korean state's exercise of domestic territorial sovereignty shared the universal component of territorialization with modern states, namely, the imposition of abstract space on its regions. The North Korean boundary readjustment had the unique circumstances of no external interference, whether in the form of capital investment or territorial dispute, but the domestic purpose of enhancing the state's local dominance. At the same time, despite its circumstantial difference from other cases of modern border revisions, it acted on the similar assumption that "space is homogeneous" across its national territory and any province can be "compared and rendered equivalent to another" by the spatial standard the state establishes (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 388). The present paper's last section will show that northern Gangwon became smaller in area than other northern Korean provinces even after the boundary readjustment. However, this did not render such an administrative maneuver futile because, as Neil Brenner points out, the modern state's spatial administration is still fully operative only with a reflection of its goal, i.e., the homogenization of its territory (Brenner 1999, 50).

This idea of the modern state's abstract space corresponds with Etienne Balibar's conception of borderland, by which this paper understands the making of northern Gangwon province in the late 1940s. Following the notion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari regarding de/territorialization, Balibar posits that a state establishing control over its territory is

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World War II, the Soviet Military Administration in Germany consolidated their influence in the "Soviet Zone," resulting in the formation of Saxony-Anhalt state in July 1945 (Edgar 2004, 217; Kulz 1951, 156–158).

simultaneously the forceful or voluntary exclusion of the elements that do not opt for assimilation. Balibar then claims that not being a linear course that solely results in a monolithic regime and a homogeneous society, de/territorialization creates a political space with social differences. Balibar calls this political space a “borderland,” where the clash of different values, cross-border movements, and conflicts between center and the periphery create historical dynamics possibly productive of new social relations (Balibar 2009, 191–192, 201–202, 210). His concept of borderland resembles Henri Lefebvre’s concept of abstract space in that it configures a contradictory location arranged for imposed homogeneity on the one hand and latent social differences on the other, as Japhy Wilson argues (Wilson 2013, 373).

This paper applies this idea of borderlands to provide an account of the first five-year history of northern Gangwon. It places a twofold focus on how the northern province became part of the emergent North Korean system while losing its existing political leaders and socio-spatial relations; and how the province, after the boundary modification, became a standalone province by accommodating the elements of its differentiation. The first section describes the contraction of northern Gangwon after the delimitation of the 38th parallel boundary and the Soviet administration’s ineffective management of the post-liberation reconstruction of the province. The following section narrates how the purge broke the northern province’s ties (specifically those of local self-government leaders in Cheorwon) with the southern capital of Seoul, to be replaced with ties to rising political groups in Pyongyang. The last section shows how the North Korean government was able to reify northern Gangwon as an ideal territory following the boundary revision of September 1946. It also argues that the new northern Gangwon was actually a heterogenous space that continued to harbor the ideological differences and practical contradictions it wished to exclude.

### **Stillborn Province**

Among the three Korean provinces divided by the 38th parallel in August

1945, Gangwon suffered the most territorial loss. The other two border provinces, Hwanghae and Gyeonggi, had most of their provincial territories on either the northern or southern side, respectively. In contrast, Gangwon's northern and southern parts had almost equal areas. The US commander General Hodge testified to the unbalanced provincial divisions: his proposal in January 1946 was to have the North incorporate the entire territory of Hwanghae and the South the entirety of Gyeonggi, while dividing the Gangwon administration equally, with ten *gun* (counties) on both the southern and the northern sides (USAFK 1988, 134).

Dividing Gangwon on the northern side was the responsibility of the Soviet Union, one party to the bilateral agreement on the delimitation of the 38th parallel. The Soviet 25th Army had finished erecting guard posts along the 38th divide by the end of August 1945 (Lee 2019, 112). The Soviets even crossed the border and demanded the transfer of the entire Gangwon police administration, which did not materialize due to their lack of jurisdiction (Kashiwagi 1946). Still, the Red Army came to occupy “half of Gangwon province,” about one-tenth of the of total northern Korean territory, and about half the size of the largest northern province, South Hamgyong (Kraskevich 1945).

Despite its substantial size, northern Gangwon lacked the population of other northern provinces. The province's pre-division population was 1.85 million, almost twice that of the least populated northern province, North Hamgyong. After the division, when northern Gangwon lost the most populous Gangwon towns, including Gangneung (142,000), Samcheok (147,000), Wonju (83,000), Chuncheon (116,000), and Pyongchang (88,000) (G. Yi et al. 2013, 436–437), its population (920,000) was no more than that of North Hamgyong (930,000) (Asia munhwa yeonguso 1994, 19, 26).<sup>3</sup> The truncated province could not feed even this small population. From March to September 1946 there was a shortfall of 5,000 tons of grain, even with the

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3. A North Korean census published in December 1947 shows that the population of northern Gangwon in 1946 was 1,222,555, including the newly added population of Wonsan (104,064), Muncheon (94,343), and Anbyeon (102,674). See Asia munhwa yeonguso (1994, 19, 26).

addition of extra fish and grain from landowners (Gangwon Prosecutor's Office 1948).

In addition, there was no industrial development in northern Gangwon. Only a spinning mill at Cheorwon was on a scale worth mentioning in a Soviet report on North Korean industry (NIKH 2020, 447). Although the colonial period left northern Gangwon with two hydropower plants, in Tongcheon and Hwacheon, with a capacity of 15,000 KW and 54,000 KW, respectively, the former was dilapidated and suffered from severe water leakage, while the latter's dam lacked a steel gate due to incomplete construction (NIKH 2020, 41). Even if these power plants were in regular operation, they would have supplied electricity to the large-scale chemical factory complex in South Hamgyong or the Samcheok industrial area in southern Gangwon, given northern Gangwon's lack of modern industrial establishments.

Northern Gangwon also lacked sufficient administrative resources. Chuncheon and Wonju, the modern and traditional Gangwon's provincial government seats, were in the southern half. No towns on the northern side had ever accommodated the provincial administration. Consequently, northern Gangwon administration suffered from the absence of "any statistics and a whole set of documents" in its ruling area (*Gangwon nodong sinmun* 1947b). Moreover, it was the only province in the north whose central towns did not have a direct railway connection to Pyongyang. A roundabout train service to the northern Korean capital from northern Gangwon via Wonsan took as long as three days (J. Kim 2008, 263).

As elsewhere in North Korea, the Soviet economic management was more extractive than supportive in post-liberation northern Gangwon. The Soviet occupation force did not receive supplies from the homeland but instead relied on on-the-spot procurement in North Korea (Y. Yi 2009, 111). Sometimes, the Soviet army used violent means such as looting. A Japanese resident in Cheorwon remembered that in early September 1945, Japanese who had failed to leave the colony north of the 38th parallel had their possessions seized by Soviet soldiers multiple times. About a thousand young Japanese between the ages of 20 and 40 from northern Gangwon towns went to Hamheung to disassemble factory facilities and send them to

the Soviet Union (Morida 1979, 3; Y. Yi 2009, 112).

Still worse, the Soviet Union did not export the raw materials it agreed to provide North Korea in exchange for the latter's supply of industrial goods (H. Jeon 1999, 104n92; Ignatiev 1947). Accordingly, North Korean industrial production did not recover its pre-liberation levels until after the Korean War. In the Cheorwon spinning mill in 1946 and 1947, for instance, the production rate was only 18.3 and 34.2 percent of its capacity, respectively, lower than its pre-liberation rate of 44.9 percent (NIKH 2020, 462).

True, north Gangwon's small size did not prevent its towns from organizing their self-governing bodies, commonly called People's Committees (PC), as elsewhere in post-liberation Korean provinces. In Yangyang and Sokcho on the east coast, those involved in socialist peasant unionism during the colonial period became PC leaders after liberation (Lee 2019, 115). In Inje, where no equivalent development of the social movement took place, PC and communist organizations still came into being as early as September 1 of the same year (Hahn 2017, 102). In Cheorwon, local leaders organized a "temporary committee" (*imsi wiwonhoe*) to maintain public order and to cooperate with the Soviet occupation force in policing Japanese repatriation (Morida 1979, 3–4). Lee Bong Ha, a former independence movement leader, initially headed the Cheorwon PC and was not reluctant to hire a former Japanese colonial township office clerk so he could continue working on tax collection (*Chosun ilbo* 1946; *Daegu maeil sinmun* 1951; Y. Kim 2013, 165).

The northern Gangwon leaders also organized a provincial-level PC, in the footsteps of the other provinces. As the Soviet army advanced south to the 38th parallel in late August 1945, it set the example of approving Korean local self-governments in South Hamgyong and South Pyongan (Kang 2020, 48; Armstrong 2003, 52–53). Subsequently, provincial PCs were organized in North Pyongan province on August 31, Hwanghae province on September 13, and North Hamgyong province in late September (IFES 1991, 180). Similarly, on September 15, in Cheorwon, local leaders of northern Gangwon elected 39 members of its first provincial-level PC (*Joongang sinmun* 1945). At this time, Ri Ki-yong, the former member of the Korean Proletarian Artist Federation (KAPF) during the colonial period and



later the central authority in North Korean literature, joined the cultural section of the northern Gangwon PC (Lebedev 1948). Ri's participation was indicative of the provincial self-government's membership covering a broad-range along the political spectrum.

Northern Gangwon's PC has a strong locational basis at Cheorwon. One of the largest agricultural establishments in Gangwon, Cheorwon began to grow in the 1920s with the introduction of modern irrigation (Chung 2019, 281). More importantly, Cheorwon housed a transit station of the Seoul-Wonsan line, the railroad built in the mid-1910s across central and east Korea, and the Kumgangsang Electric Railway commenced providing services to Gangwon's coastal towns from 1931. For this reason, in the local petitions of 1900, 1925, and 1933, Cheorwon appeared as the better place for the seat of the Gangwon government than Chuncheon, which did not have railway connections to Seoul until 1939 (Go 2018, 35, 46–47, 51). On the eve of liberation, Cheorwon's population ranked the fifth largest in Gangwon province, after Chuncheon, Samcheok, Gangneung, and Gimhwa. This census made Gimhwa the largest town in northern Gangwon after the provincial division, but besides better transport, Cheorwon also had more administrative recourses than Gimhwa, as it was the only seat of the municipal court in the vicinity, with Gimhwa under its jurisdiction (Go 2018, 30).

However, despite its standard shape, the Cheorwon-based northern Gangwon PC failed to get representation at the Joint Conference of People's Committees in the Five Provinces of North Korea (Bukjoseon 5-do inmin wiwonhoe yeonhap hoeui) of October 8–10, 1945. The conference's title reflected its failed participation: five provinces referred to North and South Pyongan, North and South Hamgyong, and Hwanghae. This omission was not because the central authorities were unaware of northern Gangwon as their area of jurisdiction. In his opening remarks at this conference, Ivan Chistyakov, commander of Soviet occupation forces in northern Korea, emphasized the need to have a centralized organization to oversee economic and cultural affairs in the "six provinces of North Korea." (H. Jeon 2016, 7). The Conference of Korean Communist Party Members and Enthusiasts in the Five Northwestern Provinces (Joseon gongsandang seobuk ododang

dangwon min yeolseongja yeonhap daehoe) was held right after the Joint Conference announcing the creation of a North Korean Bureau of the Korean Communist Party. This time, Pyongyang communist leaders recognized the northern Gangwon PC, yet only by making a nominal appointment of a non-Gangwon figure (Jung Jae-dal) for the party's Gangwon administration (Suh 2005, 72).

The Joint Conference was like a declaration that northern Gangwon was not a full member of northern Korea. As a seminal event in the early North Korean state, the meeting was the first public expression of the Soviet Civil Administration's Korean policy (Armstrong 2003, 53–57; H. Jeon 2016, 3). Since the meeting invited the representatives of only northern Korean provinces, not “the thirteen provinces of the whole of Korea,” it was regarded as the starting point of founding a separate government in the northern half (Cumings et al. 1983, 267). Moreover, the decisions of the Joint Conference, which aimed at the “unification” (*danilhwa*) of local self-government organizations, were to affect the entire northern Korean territory, including the area whose delegation did not attend (Chistyakov 1945). In this sense, in post-liberation North Korea, the Korean division not only halved Gangwon but also deprived it of its status as an established province.

### **De/territorialization by Political Purge**

There may be several reasons for Pyongyang not inviting the northern Gangwon PC to the Joint Conference. One could be the northern Gangwon PC's close connections with Seoul, especially with the Jangan-faction communists, a short-lived leftist group without a developed organization (Cumings 2002, 80). At this time, the Jangan faction was not faring well with the Reconstruction (*jaegeon*) faction led by Bak Heon-yeong over the leadership of the Korean communist groups. The Jangan faction adopted a new strategy of supporting provincial committee organizations and preparing for an armed struggle by running a military school to win popular support (Scalapino and Lee 1986, 326–328). Due to its proximity to the southern capital city, Cheorwon became a target location for the Jangan

faction's activities. Just two days after the establishment of the provincial PC in northern Gangwon, the Seoul communists dispatched a group of ten activists to Cheorwon to open a military political school (*gunsajjeongchihakgyo*) with a fund allocation of one million *won* (Kalashnikov ca. 1945).

In late September, with the Jangan faction losing influence with the communist groups despite their efforts, PC leaders in northern Gangwon attempted to establish a better relationship with the new North Korean center. They went to Pyongyang to receive a *new movement direction*, and on their return, they renounced their affiliation with the Seoul communists. After this Pyongyang visit, the political school in Cheorwon named Kim Il-sung as its principal and adopted the "Pyongyang directions" as its educational platform (S. Jung 1945). In addition, on October 18, 1945, the provincial PC of northern Gangwon replaced its chairperson, Lee Bong Ha, with the local communist Han Yeong and appointed a deputy chairperson Kim Byung Hwan, who had led peasant's union movements in Yangyang in the colonial period (Lee 2019, 127–128). The Gangwon PC also inducted ten more committee members, which corresponded with the Joint Conference's decision to expand provincial PC membership (*Joongang sinmun* 1945).

At this time, the Kim Il-sung group was involved in factional rivalries with other Korean communist groups in Seoul and Pyongyang. To win this power struggle, the Kim Il-sung group proposed expanding the Communist Party's mass support base by including the non-communist Democratic Youth League, an idea that met with opposition from other communist factions (Armstrong 2003, 64). Under the direction of the Soviet occupation authorities, the North Korean communists also established a central administration for northern Korea called the Ten Administrative Bureaus (*Haengjeong 10-guk*) of northern Korea. Because the decision to have a separate Northern administrative body was made just a day before the National PC Representative Conference led by the Seoul communists, it is regarded as a message by Pyongyang of its intent to be independent of the latter. Indeed, only the northern provinces that had strong connections with the southern political leaders, namely, Hwanghae, South Hamgyong, and northern Gangwon, sent representatives to the National PC Representative

Conference in Seoul (Suh 2005, 78–79).

Against this backdrop, the National PC Representative Conference in Seoul served Cheorwon and Pyongyang leaders differently. For Cheorwon PC representatives, on the one hand, it was another opportunity to express their intention to cooperate with Pyongyang. Thus, attending the National People's Committee Conference of November 22–24, 1945, the northern Gangwon representatives emphasized their educational institution that declared Kim Il-sung as their principal (N. Kim 1984, 50–51). Given the ascendancy of Kim Il-sung and the consolidation of North Korean communists around him, northern Gangwon embracing him was a clear indication of the province's desire to be included in Pyongyang politics.

On the other hand, the Kim Il-sung group in Pyongyang had already lost trust in the current Cheorwon PC leadership. During the northern Gangwon PC leaders' visit to the National PC Representative Conference in Seoul, the North Korean Bureau of the Korean Communist Party in Pyongyang sent a group of comrades, headed by Kim Dae Bong, to take over the administrations of the northern Gangwon PC and the political school (S. Jung 1945). Kim Dae Bong was originally from Yangyang, where he had led the Red Peasant Union Movement and then gone to Moscow to study during the colonial period. His selection could thus be interpreted as Pyongyang's intention to displace locally rooted self-government leaders (Lee 2019, 127–128). Quoting the Cheorwon Youth League, the Pyongyang-backed communists accused the Gangwon communists of affiliating with the anti-communist-party elements of the Jangan faction and embezzling school funds (S. Jung 1945). True or not, Kim and other Pyongyang communists were able to replace all the executive members of the Gangwon Provincial Committee, confiscate the school funds, and seize control of the political school. With this purge, Pyongyang leaders succeeded in removing from the leadership of the northern Gangwon PC those who had affiliations with the political group in Seoul.

Following the purge, northern Gangwon was stably incorporated into Pyongyang-led social and political projects. On February 7–8, 1946, Gangwon PC leaders, including Han Yeong, Choi Bong-su, Hwang Chang-hap, and Ri Ki-yong, were invited to the Pyongyang Conference for the

foundation of the North Korean Provisional People's Committee (Suh 2005, 149, 155). Given that this *de facto* central government was the principal agent in carrying out the most important social reforms in early North Korea, including land confiscation and redistribution, Gangwon PC's attendance meant full acceptance as an administrative unit of the emerging state (Armstrong 2003, 69). Moreover, Gangwon political leaders cooperated with the merger of the North Korean Communist Party and New People's Party (Joseon sinmindang) into the Korean Workers' Party (Bukjoseon nodongdang; KWP) of North Korea in August 1946, the political project that Pyongyang communist leaders urgently pursued to absorb the latter's middle class and intellectual members (Gong and Kee 2016, 77–78; Skutsky 1946a). As the culmination of the steady subsumption of northern Gangwon by the North Korean state, in Cheorwon, on the first anniversary of national liberation, a ceremonial parade of 50,000 people holding the portraits of the two symbolic figures of socialist centralization, Kim Il-sung and Stalin, was held without disturbance (Military Commander of Cheorwon 1946).

Nevertheless, by the standards of the northern Korean government, northern Gangwon was still too small to be a full-fledged province. The Provisional PC addressed this problem by redrawing the boundary of northern Gangwon province, announced on September 5, 1946, in Decision No. 70 (Fig. 2). This decision declared that due to the small area and population and insufficient resources, the existing Gangwon province north of the 38th parallel had little prospect for development and progress unless it incorporated the most advanced region in its vicinity, Wonsan city (NIKH 1987a, 24). This administrative decision entailed two revisions to the existing provincial government structure. First, the provincial affiliation of Wonsan was to be changed from South Hamgyong to Gangwon, and second, the seat of the Gangwon provincial government was to be relocated from Cheorwon to Wonsan.

The real gain of the boundary modification was not territorial or economic but political. Above all, it helped place Kim Il-sung and his allies in a better position vis-à-vis their rival communists in South Hamgyong, the “present communist stronghold in North Korea,” according to an intelligence report of the US occupation force (Armstrong 2003, 58). South

*Decision to Incorporate Muncheon County, Anbyeon County, and Wonsan City into Gangwon Province*

*Provisional People's Committee of North Korea Decision No. 70*

*North Korea's Gangwon province is the smallest of the six provinces, has a very sparse population, and hosts most of the mountainous highlands; thus, transport conditions are poor, and natural resources are scarce. In this way, compared to other provinces in the past, Gangwon always had a marked difference in administrative as well as economic, and cultural aspects, which not only severely hinders the province's development, but also delays the development of North Korea as a whole. Further, there is no suitable city for the seat of the Provincial People's Committee in Gangwon, and the future development of Cheorwon city is impossible to predict.*

*The condition of transportation, by which one must go through Wonsan for communication between Pyongyang and Cheorwon, makes the relationship between Wonsan and Gangwon extremely close. Such a condition creates a strong need to incorporate Wonsan city into Gangwon province. However, as Wonsan has an organic relationship with the industrial transportation facilities (smelting, steel mills, cement plants, Muncheon coal mine, northern port facilities, etc.) in Muncheon county, Muncheon and Wonsan cannot be separated. Further, Gangwon cannot achieve epoch-making development without having such industrial facilities.*

*It is acknowledged from a general viewpoint that such measures are also of great help to Wonsan while there is no undue hindrance to Hamgyong province. In light of the above points, the 2nd Provisional People's Committee of Korea decides as follows.*

- 1. The former administrative district of Muncheon county, Anbyeon county, and Wonsan city should be incorporated into Gangwon province;*
- 2. The Gangwon Provincial Court of the Gangwon Provincial People's Committee and the Prosecutor's Office shall be relocated from Cheorwon city to Wonsan city;*
- 3. Cheorwon city shall be incorporated into Cheorwon county;*
- 4. The chairperson of each People's Committee of South Hamgyong province and Gangwon province shall complete the relocation by September 20;*
- 5. The chairperson of each People's Committee in Muncheon county and Anbyeon county shall complete the relocation by September 10.*

*September 5, 1946*

*North Korea Provisional People's Committee*

*Chairman Kim Il-sung*

*Secretary Kang Yang-Rip*

**Figure 2.** Decision No. 70, redrawing the boundary of northern Gangwon province, announced on September 5, 1946

Source: National Institute of Korean History (1987a, 24). Translated from the Korean by Myung Ho Hyun.

Hamgyong communists included O Ki-seop, who argued for the need for labor unions under the socialist regime, and Ri Ju-ha, who organized the Wonsan PC following liberation. These communists enjoyed a solid mass base in this region, where they had long been involved in local labor movements (Romanenko 1946). Lacking such local grounds, the Kim Il-sung group continued to hold the Hamgyong communists in check. For instance, in December 1945, Kim Il-sung had criticized O Ki-seop, contending that his worker-first approach would conflict with the supremacy of the labor party's leadership. In May of that year, Kim dismissed the North Korean leadership of the National Council of Labor Unions (Joseon nodong johap jeonguk pyeonguihoe) that supported O (Ahn 2013, 123, 130). Another locally based communist, Ko Young-chan, was also labelled "factionalist" and expelled from the Gangwon Workers' Party due to his connection to the Hamgyong leadership (J. Kim 2020, 230).

With the separation of Wonsan from South Hamgyong, the Kim Il-sung group was able to not only split the Wonsan PC and South Hamgyong PC but also launch separate attacks against them. Han Il-mu and Kim Ryol, Korean-Russian allies of Kim, were particularly active in this regard. Han and Kim joined the KWP branches of Wonsan and South Hamgyong around the time the party committee began to exert no less influence than the PC Committee following the unification of the Communist Party and the New People's Party into the KWP of North Korea in August 1946 (Lee 2021, 266; Suh 2005, 183–184). Denouncing Wonsan as a "den of factionalism" and South Hamgyong as the "real base of factionalism," the Kim Il-sung group communists expanded their foothold by excluding those close to Ri Ju-ha (Suh 2005, 213). When the North Korean PC was founded, Han and Kim established themselves as the chairpersons of the Gangwon and South Hamgyong PCs (Suh 2005, 939–940). In brief, the political purges were effective means for Pyongyang to emerge victorious in the power struggle with other communist factions and to make Gangwon its territory.

## **Abstracting Province with Contradictory Reality**

North Korea's attempt to enlarge Gangwon province through border revision resulted in dubious gains, in at least four senses. First, the stated quantitative gain in Decision No. 70 was an exaggeration. Although the addition of Wonsan, Muncheon, and Anbyeon increased northern Gangwon's population by about 30 percent, the province's level of population was still only 60–70 percent that of the other four populous northern provinces (I. Choi 1995, 7, 9).<sup>4</sup> Another piece of evidence is the 1948 draft national budget of the North Korea People's Committee, the first North Korean central government whose authority was confirmed by locally elected representatives in February 1947. It shows that northern Gangwon's contribution to the national budget was only about 70 percent that of North Pyongan province, the largest provincial contributor to the national revenues for the year. Compared to North Hamgyong, the least populated mountainous northern province, northern Gangwon's overall budget was slightly higher, while its city budget was lower (G-2 Section 1948, 93–94).

In addition, as a solution, the provincial aggrandizement was somewhat irrelevant to the more fundamental logistics problem, and the general material shortage felt more severe in this remote province. For instance, propaganda films from the Soviet Union were shown only in the larger towns of northern Gangwon and did not reach inland counties due to the unrestored transport network (Y. Choi 1946). As late as July 1946, three months later than the targeted completion date of the land reform, the shortage in paper supply was hampering the issue of cadastral documents (Skutsky 1946c). In August 1946, explaining why the unification between the Communist and New People's Parties was lingering, the Soviet military commander of Gangwon complained that "almost all counties are unavailable for telephone communications." Schools finished hiring 90 percent of the needed instructors but suffered from a shortage of textbooks

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4. These were North Pyongan province (1,991,739), South Pyongan province including Pyongyang (1,811,258), Hwanghae province (1,711,695), and South Hamgyong province (1,622,483) (*Asia munhwa yeonguso* 1994, 19, 26).



(Skutsky 1946b). The boundary revision contributed little to the improvement of this logistical underdevelopment of the province. In early 1948, the youths of Inje still complained that they were only given outdated newspapers for their reading group meetings, a project that the North Korean state promoted for inculcating communist propaganda in the borderland residents (T. Kim 2006, 113).

Moreover, by transferring the provincial government from Cheorwon to Wonsan, the Pyongyang authority risked weakening the bureaucracy at both locations. Decision No. 70 stipulated that the court and prosecutor's office be relocated from Cheorwon to Wonsan. One former Cheorwon resident testified that this involved a large-scale movement of entire institution, including court workers and prosecutors and their families, large enough to attract the entire local community's attention and to remain in the witness' memory for decades (Y. Kim 2013, 167). A memoir of a cell meeting of the Gangwon Prosecutor's Office after the transfer of the provincial government also indicates that these judicial institutions could not function well in the early days because the workers were "unfamiliar" with the new environments. This evidence indicates that those who ran these governmental services in Wonsan were from Cheorwon; while the Wonsan PC was staffed by strangers to the city, Cheorwon lost experienced public workers (I. Yi 1947).

Finally, incorporating Wonsan made northern Gangwon's political landscape heterogeneous and uncontrollable. On the one hand, northern Gangwon residents' deviation from the state policy took the form of taking advantage of their status as borderland residents, such as by smuggling cattle to the south where the livestock prices were higher or defecting to a seemingly freer world (J. Kim 2007, 128, 130, 132). Conversely, Wonsan residents' resistance appeared as a quintessential protest of the city and its urban delinquency. In early 1946, a poetry anthology written and published by Wonsan-based authors and titled *Eunghyang*, became subject to censorship by Pyongyang literary authorities. Although no poems in the publication were openly critical of the North Korean regime, they did not use communist slogans or the language of class struggle and were stigmatized as "escapist" and "decadent" by the writers of Pyongyang (Gu

1975, 401–414). Moreover, in 1947, a member of the Wonsan City Party (Wonsansidang), above the rank-and-file level, used his party ID card to obtain a drink at a local department store. This case of delinquency, however trivial, disclosed the different degree of meaning that each component placed on their party's mission and also highlighted the urban landscape of the misbehavior, a scenery that the rest of northern Gangwon lacked. Further, in February 1948, 200 Wonsan Technical College students welcomed, through handbills, the UN Temporary Committee on Korea (UNTCOK). Given that the North Korean government was publicly polemical of the UN's support for a general election for one Korean government and denied UNTCOK's entry to the northern territory, the Wonsan students' demonstration represented a felony. Hence, 130 of them were arrested (NIKH 1987a).

Nonetheless, the nascent North Korean state advertised the border readjustment of north Gangwon as a success. On the first anniversary of the provincial reform, the organ of the Gangwon Worker's Party, the *Gangwon nodong sinmun* (Gangwon Labor News), celebrated that the administrative reform had transformed the "old agricultural Gangwon" into a new "industrial Gangwon" with "130 million residents," "one city and fourteen counties," and constituted "an organic coordination between agriculture and industry" (*Gangwon nodong sinmun* 1947b).

Inferred from these celebratory remarks were the ideas of spatial equality and balanced regional development, which a socialist state takes as its primary urban planning principles (Hwang and Nam 2018, 131; Jo and Adler 2002, 206). By adding the populous city of Wonsan to the sparsely populated Gangwon, the northern Korean government aimed to create a new Gangwon province equal in size to other northern provinces. Further, given that the administrative merger intended to incorporate a city of considerable industrial and commercial development (Wonsan) into the underdeveloped agricultural province, the new Gangwon province was expected to be an autarkic zone of self-sufficiency. The point was not so much the actual achievement of quantitative growth, as the socialist state's gesture of conformity to the abstract ideal.

Hence, adding industrial Wonsan to agricultural Gangwon was the first

step to attaining the ideal North Korean Gangwon. In this regard, Wonsan was perfect material. The Pyongyang-Wonsan Line and the Seoul-Wonsan Line provided daily rail connections between Wonsan and the northern and southern capitals. Wonsan not only had railway connections (the Hamgyong Line and Donghae Line) to and from the main urban centers on the east coast, such as Hamhung, Chungjin, and Najin in Hamgyong province and Yangyang and Sokcho in Gangwon province, but also ferry services. The city accommodated a large-scale petroleum refinery built with up-to-date American technology, the only one of its kind in Korea at the time, whose full recovery and regular operation were the concern of the top North Korean leader and Soviet commander (Shtykov 1948). Its shipyard and railcar repair shop were also among the largest in North Korea, with a capacity to build twelve 150-ton steel schooners with diesel engines, and hiring 1,250 workers fixing 60 train cars annually, respectively (NIKH 2020). Home to about 110,000 residents, Wonsan had a good supply of consumer goods, facilitated by its two public markets, leather factory, rubber shoe workshop, and well-developed fisheries (NIKH 2020). Being the seat of a city government for more than three decades, Wonsan had many functioning modern public office and school buildings, a municipal courthouse, and a garrison (Army Map Service, United States 1945). There had already been a campaign to move the Gangwon provincial government from Chuncheon to Wonsan in the 1920s, indicating the latter's exceptional development in an underdeveloped region (Lee 2021, 253; Go 2018, 43; *Maeil sinbo* 1923; *Dong-A ilbo* 1923).

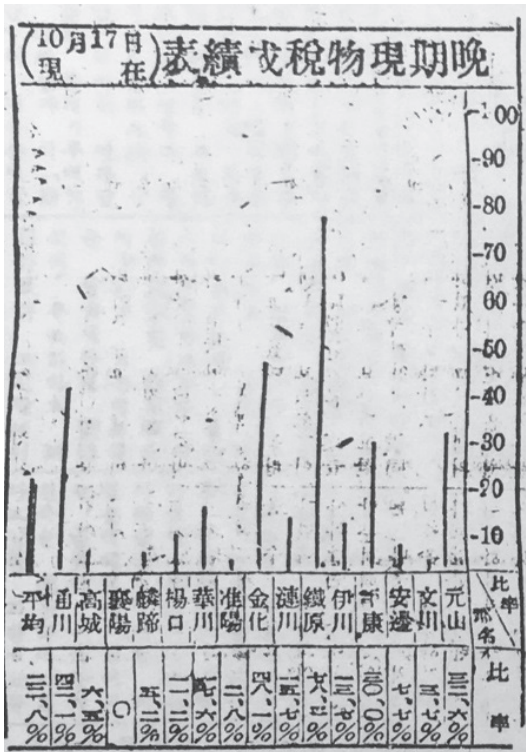
Furthermore, the North Korean state's decision to retain the province's name begs consideration. Other than the beginning phrase of Decision No. 70, "North Korea's Gangwon Province" (Bukjoseon Gangwondo), North Korea hardly attached the adjective northern to any of its official bureaus in Gangwon Province: hence, Gangwan PC and not Northern Gangwon PC, or Gangwon Labor Daily and not Northern Gangwon Labor Daily. In addition, when Decision No. 70 described the province's lack of developmental potential, it referred to the naturalness of its economically poor conditions, not the history of its post-liberation division, thus implying that northern Gangwon was not an outcome of the bilateral occupation of

Korea by foreign powers but an heir of the original Gangwon province. The North Korean state also demonstrated its power to define the meaning of Gangwon when its army briefly occupied southern Gangwon during the Korean War and assumed its administration by publishing a newspaper under the name *South Gangwon Daily*. This nomenclatural maneuver not only implied the North's possession of the authentic Gangwon province, but also subordinated the southern half as its lesser territory (*Gangwon nodong sinmun* 1950).

Another explanation is that by retaining the province's name, the North Korean government could render the meaning of Gangwon space at the forefront of Cold War competition. Originally, the name Gangwon derived from the first letters of Gangneung and Wonju, a traditional toponymic naming convention in Korea by which a province's name came from the first syllables of the province's two main towns. Not having Gangneung or Wonju within its territorial boundary, northern Gangwon did not have to retain its old name, according to this convention. However, just as the addition of Jagang and Ryanggang provinces in 1949 and 1954, respectively, showed the importance to North Korea of legitimizing its regime by having an equal number and size of provinces as South Korea (Hwang and Nam 2018, 122, 128, 130), so keeping the province's traditional name was meant to affect remembrance of the province's history and the north's discursive confrontation *vis-à-vis* its southern counterpart. In sum, like the enigmatic designation of Seoul as North Korea's capital city in its first constitution of 1948, Pyongyang continued the ideological battle by not changing Gangwon's name (IFES 1991, 209).

Lastly, the border revision gave Gangwon full membership to participate in the new country's post-colonial reconstruction in two ways. First, with its enlarged territory and greater population, Gangwon was now ready for the nationwide election of representatives for local People's Committees two months later. It was perhaps not a coincidence that North Korea's decisions regarding the boundary redrawing and the election were announced on the same day (H. Jeon 2014, 175). By incorporating Wonsan, Gangwon gained an urban center comparable with other provinces' major urban centers and did not have to break the aforementioned principle that

the city and the country equally constitute and represent a North Korean province. Second, the province also became a full unit of the 1947 People's Economic Plan (Inmin gyehoek gyeongje), the first implementation of North Korea's command economy. Lacking capital and raw materials for investment, the first North Korean central economic policy aimed primarily at increasing labor efficiency and in-kind tax collection by setting up and encouraging patriotic competition between production units. Labor and production divisions were thus the keys to success. Reconstructed as a standard province with industry and agriculture, Gangwon served this purpose. For instance, as the representative of Gangwon, the Wonsan train repair shop *challenged* its counterparts in Pyongyang (South Pyongan) and Hamheung (South Hamgyong) for productivity improvement (*Gangwon*



**Figure 3.** Published record of tax payments by towns of northern Gangwon province

Source: *Gangwon nodong sinmun*, October 17, 1947.

*nodong sinmun* 1947a). Gangwon also served as an abstract category for intra-provincial competition for in-kind tax payment. The organ of the Gangwon Worker's Party, *Gangwon nodong sinmun* (Gangwon Labor News), regularly published graphs showing each town's tax payment record, often accompanied by such provocative wording as, "chugyeok" (chase) and "wannap" (payment completed) (*Gangwon nodong sinmun* 1947c) (Fig. 3).

In brief, the boundary revision of September 1946 remade Gangwon as an administrative category containing diverse social realities, including undesirable ones, from the central government's perspective. By incorporating the city of Wonsan, the province aggrandized its size and industry and helped the political purge of locally rooted communists, but not without accommodating rebellious ideas and reckless practices. Northern Gangwon thus did not mean the literal achievement of the unadulterated ideal province as described by the North Korean. It was the achievement of an abstraction that had to live with and through its concrete social differences.

## Conclusion

Only one Korean province figures on the administrative area lists of both North and South Korea: Gangwon. Among the three inter-Korean borderland provinces divided by the 38th parallel in the post-liberation period, Gangwon was, and still is, the only province that came to have two separate administrations of almost equal scale. Despite its similar size, northern Gangwon lacked its southern counterpart's administrative and industrial resources inherited from the colonial period. Its Soviet administration stopped short of implementing the same degree of economic reconstruction as the United States did in southern Gangwon. Traditionally, it had closer connections and exchanges with Seoul than with Pyongyang, and its forced incorporation into North Korea was a testament of how the peripheral province's relationships with the southern and northern capitals changed and how that change was the result of the purge of local leaders and the influx of external elements.

Northern Gangwon was also the first Korean province in post-liberation Korea that relocated the seat of its provincial government and redrew the administrative area to include a region that had been formally belonged to another province, in this case, South Hamgyong. The border revision revealed not just a similar story of the uprooting of local activists by Kim Il Sung and his group, but also how the new North Korean central authority envisioned their new country as a collection of provinces in uniform shapes and sizes and with localities that mutually competed for the same goal of national reconstruction but not for their own independent historical progress. Although the boundary modification led to a substantial degree of provincial incorporation into the emergent North Korean system, it also left a kind of counter-public sphere that accommodated dissidents, smugglers, border-crossers, and draft evaders.

This paper's discussion does not extend to the topic of the making of new subjectivity in and of northern Gangwon. Insofar as the main effect of border politics is the identification of the residents within the bounded territory, its study can naturally lead to the question of the characteristics of the people that are to be made in boundary drawing and redrawing. Although it seems unlikely that there was any promotion of a unified political identity for northern Gangwon province as a whole because of early North Korea's opposition to articulating a regional identity, it is still necessary to examine whether that was indeed the case. Significantly, historical research is lacking on northern Gangwon's post-Korean War history that would investigate any continuity of its prewar legacies.

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