**The Crossings**

By Imamura Eiji

*Our hero in this novella, Shin Chong-chin, has fallen into a desperate situation in life—of that he himself is undoubtedly convinced. It would be fortunate if you, dear reader, could understand this when reading the story. Some may complain, “I just cannot comprehend it!” However, because our lead character is so committed to his predicament, he must, indeed, be at his wit’s end. Even I, the author, am in no position to hazard any explanation from my standpoint.*

“It might as well just happen already.”

At a Korean inn, Shin Chong-chin lay sprawled on a straw mat dressed in a Japanese kimono, arms crossed under his head, muttering in irritation.

It was the end of August. The “Manchurian Incident” was about to break out and, as the newspapers put it, relations between Japan and China were “growing tense by the minute.” The Nakamura and Wanbaoshan incidents had occurred one after another, and around Changchun, Japanese deterrent drills were staged on the streets day and night. People were often awakened by late night gunfire. Exclaiming things like, “War’s begun!” they’d prepare to evacuate in a panic. If two people ran into each other while out and about, their talk would inevitably turn to events between Japan and China. The faces of people running through the streets flashed with anticipation and unease.

Even the weather that morning happened to be gloomy and depressing. Not a drop of rain came, nor did the clouds clear. The stifling heat weighed heavily on people’s chests.

Shin Chong-chin sat up sharply to look out the window and then lay down again. “Might as well just happen already,” he muttered repeatedly, scratching his head. Shin’s restlessness was not due to his concern for the Chinese and Japanese problems but, rather, because his personal life had hit a dead end.

As if to prove that his irritations were not a result of the trouble between the two countries, Shin had not once contemplated the conflict until now. Take the murder of Captain Nakamura by a Chinese official, for example. Or the dozens of Korean ditch-diggers in Wanbaoshan who had suffered at the hands of the Chinese tenant farmers. And how many Chinese had been killed in Pyongyang afterwards? Shin had always remained aloof to these day-to-day incidents. Perhaps he would have given it more attention if he hadn’t been so hard-pressed. As such, his agitated “It might as well just start already” sounded the same as someone utterly discontent or dying of boredom muttering *“if only a fire would start nearby.”*

As if to add fuel to Shin Chong-chin’s irritation, the innkeeper sauntered in, holding a long pipe and large wooden ashtray. His wide Korean pants gleamed with a filthy sheen.

Whenever he saw this old man, Shin Chong-chin felt an inexplicable disgust. The man made him feel sick to the stomach. Notwithstanding the proprietor’s pretentious swagger, Shin did not get up from his mat. He merely glanced up without saying a word.

The innkeeper, however, stared straight at Shin and, as if to reproach him for his unseemly behavior, deliberately cleared his throat while stroking his long, half-white beard. He sat down cross-legged in the characteristic manner of elderly Koreans, then knocked the head of his pipe on the ashtray with a *thwack* and began to speak.

“Mr. Shin, I have found you a fellow traveler.”

“A fellow traveler?”

“Eh? So, what you said before…were you toying with me, an old man?”

Shin Chong-chin finally remembered. “No, I didn’t mean it as a joke at all. Are you saying that you found someone willing to travel with me?”

“That’s right. I heard that there’s a rather large Japanese-run farm in the exact place you’re headed. There’s a Japanese man who’s going back there alone. For some reason, he seems to be looking for a Korean to go with him.” He paused for a moment and then added, “Even though you’re Korean, you often pose as a Japanese—fitting, isn’t it?”

The innkeeper finished and, like a one-man mob, looked at Shin Chong-chin scornfully. He coughed again.

The old man’s remark made Shin Chong-chin feel as if he had been stabbed by a needle, pricking the essence of why Shin’s life hadfallen apart. The words echoed painfully in Shin’s chest, evoking a strong sense of indignation.

“Hmph!” With a muffled grunt, he made up his mind. Shin perked up and seated himself upright on the hard, straw mat.

It had been fifteen years since Shin Chong-chin’s eldest brother, along with his wife and children, had moved to the county of ××, about two days away by wagon. He would send a letter about once every two years, but Shin had never sent one back. *Should I go to my brother’s place or not?* Shin Chong-chin was very torn these days.

Shin Chong-chin was so accustomed to urban culture that it seemed absurd for him to set out for a remote area of Manchuria, where there was no other means of transportation besides wagons, to live a farmer’s life with his eldest brother. Moreover, in the ten years since he had left his hometown and gone to Dalian, he had not even spoken Korean. He had been working with Japanese people, having fun with Japanese people, and living with Japanese people, without a single friend from his hometown. Shin Chong-chin himself had become a bona fide Japanese person in every respect.

With his finances wearing thin, Shin had been going home more frequently in the past couple of months. Or, like now, he would come to Changchun to stay at a Korean inn for a few days. Although his mother tongue had more or less come back to him, he still did not speak Korean as fluently as Japanese. He did not hate the Korean language, but speaking it felt somehow unnatural—as if he was speaking in a foreign tongue. It gave him a sense of failure.

But Shin Chong-chin despised the customs of Korea.

Imagining the lives of farmers in the distant countryside put Shin ill at ease. Language aside, even the shadow of a Japanese person probably could not be found in those parts. When it came to lodging, the uncleanliness of the inn and the straw mat were already hard to bear. Out there, it might not be possible to lay a mat; he would have to sleep on scraps of straw or something. And the windows would probably just be small holes bored into the earthen walls.

If he went to live there, Shin Chong-chin would have to take up the plow and hoe, which he had never touched before. He was physically strong enough to do the rough work of farmers, but on second thought, he wasn’t sure he could endure such a primitive and barbaric life.

Now, he could not free himself from his predicament either mentally or practically. Under such a strain, Shin had the vague thought that if he leapt into that kind of place and endured it for a while, perhaps a different path would open up for him. He mentioned this to the innkeeper in passing and asked if he knew anyone who could accompany him. But after everything, he hadn’t made a concrete decision.

Upon hearing that the companion was Japanese, however, his unrelenting irritation disappeared, replaced by a kind of sorrow.

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Shin decided to leave on the next day’s delivery wagon, so he began to prepare that very night. There were the personal belongings he might need in the remote countryside, plus a modest gift for his brother, whom he had not seen in fifteen years. He wandered the streets alone, collecting items to the minimum extent, until he stopped for a drink and bade farewell to city life for the time being.

When he returned to the inn, he gave all his suits, kimonos, and other items he felt he could not use in the countryside to the inn’s porter. Then, he changed into a shabby Chinese outfit that he had bought on the stolen goods market.

“It’s perfect, it fits awfully well—exactly like a Chinese. You look much better in something like this than a Japanese kimono, Mr. Shin…your face and hands might be a little too clean, but you’ll get ‘em dirty when you get on the road,” the porter chatted while happily fiddling with the Japanese kimono and suit he had just received.

Shin Chong-chin responded in annoyance, “Cut the crap!”

Disgusted, he took off the Chinese clothes and went to bed. The thought of the two-day wagon-ride he was about to endure unsettled him. He had not experienced and, therefore, did not know real country life. This anxiety weighed heavier and heavier on him, especially the never-ending onslaught of ominous foreboding—he couldn’t bear it.

He had a sleepless night in the end.

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Early the next morning, when even tofu sellers were not yet out on the street, Shin Chong-chin had the porter lead him to the north side of the railway station where the carriages were parked.

The rain did not fall after all, and the sky began to clear. Patches of dusky blue exuded the breath of early autumn.

The sound of gunshots from the militia drills, which had been disturbing the city all night, had also stopped. By morning, it was as if the entire Sino-Japanese crisis had been forgotten. The whole boulevard was unusually calm.

Shin Chong-chin turned around at the end of the street and took one last look at the city. Yesterday’s sadness had unexpectedly disappeared without a trace. Although he had some fondness for the city, he didn’t feel overly emotional at leaving. Perhaps the nerves and gloom of the previous night had birthed in him the notion to give it up.

But as Shin walked, he looked down at his attire and was engulfed by an inexplicable disgust. These dirty—even patched—Chinese clothes! To others he must have looked like a coolie, if not a little better dressed than a street sweeper. Where was he going looking like this?

Although he had come into this world Korean, he disliked Korean customs and habits to the point that he had practically forgotten the language. In his heart of hearts, he wanted to become Japanese. Now here he was, unable to be accepted by either side. He’d had to break off relations with both and was now being banished to a culturally primitive backwater mountain town.

Shin Chong-chin thought about his attire, which seemed at once like a comical stage character and a tragic figure born out of the course of history. The porter walked ahead of him with an uninhibited and pompous stride. To Shin, he appeared to be laughing at him, a homeless failure.

“Hey.”

Shin Chong-chin had not intended to say anything. But he could no longer bear the deep loneliness and indescribable rage, so the word just came out.

The porter stopped and turned.

“What is it?”

But Shin Chong-chin walked on silently without responding.

The porter seemed to think that Shin, usually very elegant with his Japanese airs, deserved to go to the countryside as a peasant wearing Chinese work clothes in a horse-drawn wagon. It was as if he was making a display of Shin’s plight by squaring his shoulders under his stand-up collar and slapping his shoes against the pavement.

Shin Chong-chin finally couldn’t stand it any longer and called out again.

“Hey!”

“What is it? Go on, say it!”

“…forget it. Just…go back.”

“So, you’ll go alone?”

“Yes, I’ll go alone,” Shin replied angrily. He snatched his bag from the porter as if stealing it.

Then the porter retorted, “Hmph! I’ll go back then.” He cast a contemptuous glance at Shin Chong-chin and started walking back with big strides.

“Hey, wait a minute! Where’s the coach station?”

“Go about a hundred meters ahead and turn left. Even a blind man couldn’t miss it,” he called without looking back to face Shin as he left. From behind, Shin spat in his direction and walked on.

Three wagons, each loaded with five or six bags of salt, were parked beside the road and ready to go. Each wagon was tethered to four or five horses. All the horses were thin and bony, with crippled vision and boils all over their backsides. The idea of riding in such a cart for two days had Shin Chong-chin envisioning himself running across time to the Neolithic age. He took another look at his outfit and felt it matched perfectly.

He looked around to see if his Japanese companion had come or not but found no one who seemed an appropriate fit. He only spotted an old man in Korean dress sitting atop a mat spread out over the cargo in the middle cart. The man’s full black beard, growing on his cheeks and chin and below his nose, was completely incongruous with his Korean attire. His thick, straight eyebrows and shrewd, capable eyes also distinguished him from Koreans. Yet Shin Chong-chin did not suspect anything.

*There would be a Korean traveling with us, too?* Feeling somehow displeased by the thought, Shin Chong-chin wandered around the station. Just then, the old man spoke up.

“Is it *ni de*…?”

The man kept talking, but it was all in Chinese and Shin Chong-chin did not understand it. It had become clear, however, that this man was the Japanese companion in question.

The old man’s accent sparked something within him. Shin spat angrily, “What are you talking about? What’s this about ‘Is it *ni de*’?”

Wearing a Western suit or Japanese kimono could be risky. Yet, if he was going to disguise himself, he should have dressed up as Chinese on this stretch of the road. *Why was he wearing Korean clothes, of all things?*

He thought back to when the innkeeper had said, “For some reason he’s looking for a Korean to go with him.” It still didn’t make any sense to him. All he knew was that a characteristic despondency oozed off the shabby Korean clothing, and it was making him sick. He glowered at the man.

The old man lowered his head self-consciously. “Ah, sorry,” he smiled sheepishly. He felt not only surprised but also a little disturbed by the fact that this Korean—who had come from Korea and was now heading to the distant countryside to work as a farmer—spoke clear, authentic Japanese.

Shin, still grim-faced, paid the supervisor the fare he’d been informed of at the inn and got into the carriage without saying a word.

The driver came out after a short while. He whipped the horses, shouting something incomprehensible, and the wheels of the three carriages began to turn with a dull sound.

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Once they had passed through the residential areas, the wagons picked up speed and swayed more violently. The wheels rang in a kind of mourning. Clusters of peasants walked past the carriages, probably on their way to the city to sell the baskets of vegetables that they deftly carried on both ends of the poles balanced across their shoulders.

Eventually, they came to a vast plain where no other people could be seen. The bumpy road, overgrown on both sides, was surrounded by a field of soybeans. The green leaves had not yet withered; they emitted a fresh scent that swirled in the early morning air. The sun had quietly risen without anyone noticing. White clouds tinged with an eye-catching rosiness floated, transfixed as if leisurely strewn across the clear, blue sky.

One could see the smoke from breakfast cooking as it curled up over the city of Changchun, which was now far in the distance. The water tower appeared small, floating in the column of smoke. Not so much as a hill was seen in the vast expanse ahead.

After a long, distracted look back at the road he had come from and the distant view of the direction in which he was going, Shin Chong-chin suddenly came to his senses.

“Where the hell am I going?”

Despite how desperate his situation had become, he still sensed he was heading somewhere absurd. Shin Chong-chin once again looked back at the distant streets of Changchun and was assaulted by an indescribable loneliness.

Shin was facing a time when one could not survive without a strong, unfazed spirit—fearless of even the devil’s eyes or a wolf’s fangs. He did not want to be so emotional that he would suffer this much pain from such a separation.

Shin Chong-chin forced back tears. Even as he strengthened his resolve, inwardly he felt miserable all over again. Current affairs had unfolded such that he was entirely excluded by those people and things he had relied on, and this had pushed him into these unexpected circumstances. The uncertainty of his future created tides of worry that drowned him in unbearable suffering. In his heart grew a sense of dread.

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The military exercises began again. From the direction of Changchun came the faint sound of machine guns and rifles. *Pow, pow, pow—boom!* The Japanese man, who had been silently stealing occasional glances at Shin Chong-chin’s angry face, said, as if to himself, “The drills have started up again.”

In the time since their departure, the Korean had remained quiet and sulky. The Japanese man could not find an appropriate way to start a conversation and felt awkward. His original consideration had been the danger on the road. To cover for himself as a Japanese person, he had deliberately found a Korean to go with. But then, he had discovered that the companion was not a simple commoner. The Korean seemed to be more or less educated and, for some reason, unreceptive towards him. He could not help but feel somewhat afraid.

*If I had known, I’d have just found a Chinese companion, or simply gone alone instead.* Not knowing any details about Shin Chong-chin’s identity, the Japanese man deeply regretted his decision. But since they had already set out, he had to find a way to gain his convoy’s favor.

“I didn’t know anything about the outside world, you know. I’m a farmer who lives far away from the city—you wouldn’t believe my surprise when I came to Changchun! All this…between Japan and China…it’s gotten so complicated, don’t you think? Everyone says that war is about to break out.” He spoke as if trying to win Shin over.

Still, Shin Chong-chin did not engage and only responded with a simple, “Hmm.” He was more concerned about the Korean clothes on this man than affairs between China and Japan. The more he looked at them, the more they grated on his eyes. Finally, Shin could no longer hold in his discontent and spoke up:

“I heard that many Chinese people were killed by Koreans in Pyongyang and other places. How dare you wear Korean clothes! Of all times and of all places! Don’t you think it’s more dangerous?”

“I originally thought about wearing something Chinese, but I thought that you would wear Korean clothes, so…”

Even as his mouth formed the words, he could feel some of the uneasiness in his heart disappear. The man understood from Shin’s words that, although the Korean was angry, he did not bear any malintent. He felt relieved for the first time.

The man relaxed, knowing that his worries were unfounded, but said with some trepidation, “To be honest, as you probably know, the further you go into the countryside, the more lawless Koreans are. The Chinese in the countryside don’t know anything about what’s going on between Japan and China. Even if they heard about it through some channel, they think that war is fought between soldiers—they’d think it has nothing to do with them. So, any threat from Chinese people is surprisingly small. In this respect, they are actually very kind. Of course, bandits are a different story. To us, the Korean bandits are more dangerous than the Chinese ones. Not long ago, one of our farmers was attacked by them on his way back from Changchun.”

This was the first time Shin Chong-chin had heard of such a thing.

Until the mid-Taisho era, people from all over Korea would rise up, flock to the mountains late at night, set fires, and make a ruckus that the police struggled to control. For a time after that, there were also a number of so-called “unruly Koreans”[[1]](#footnote-1) running around. Shin vaguely remembered hearing as a child about people in the neighborhood who had been lynched or who had been left alone. These days, he also knew from reading the newspapers that one or two people would occasionally get arrested in major cities, such as Shanghai, Fengtian, Beijing, and Dalian. That was about as much as he knew. Shin had never even imagined that the further in the countryside he traveled, the more entrenched the vagrants would be.

Hearing this for the first time, Shin wondered what foolishness the Koreans were plotting in Manchuria’s countryside. And he thought about the fact that there were Japanese people running farms in such places at the risk of their lives. Of course, he wasn’t uninterested in these topics. The first thing that came to Shin’s mind, however, was his own precarious position—caught between the troublesome Koreans and the Japanese.

He could not say anything. His face and ears burned hot, and he hung his head in shame.

Shin Chong-chin carried blood branded with the Korean ethnicity that could not be erased, even in death. Yet he had long transformed himself into a fully Japanese person in mind and character. Shin Chong-chin stood in the middle of the two. He faced indignity on every side.

“You asked why I wore Korean clothes…” the Japanese man began after taking a longish look at Shin’s face to gauge his mood. “Now you get it, right? Our village is heavily guarded. Once we get there, we’ll be safe. But the road is dangerous. I beg of you, if we meet them on the way, can you help me out? Please, I beg you with my life.”

He then gently bowed his head and, like a Korean person, fumbled for the cloth wallet pinned to his waist. He pulled out a few bills, and as he put them on Shin Chong-chin’s knee, said, “If we run into them, I won’t say anything; I’ll only make gestures. You can say that I’m your poor mute brother or uncle and help me get through it.”

Shin Chong-chin made up his mind and nodded his head in agreement but looked at the bills on his knee in surprise.

“What are you doing with this money?”

“It’s just a little something for your help in keeping me safe—”

Shin Chong-chin lost his temper. The man had greatly insulted Shin, an honorable person. He furiously flung the bills back at the man while exclaiming in a loud voice:

“I don’t need your money. I will protect you! But who told you that I want money? You shouldn’t think that we’re all the same.” He glared at his companion.

The Japanese man stopped talking after Shin’s angry rebuke. Meanwhile, Shin grumbled to himself over money, ethnicity, and those “unruly Koreans”...

The men fell silent and let the wagon rock until long past the noon sun.

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They approached a hillock. The drivers shouted and whipped the horses with a loud *crack!* The horses sweated and grunted in pain as they climbed the slope. A short distance beyond the hill lay a forest with dozens of willow trees. Just as they reached the hilltop and began a more relaxed descent, the Japanese man suddenly nudged Shin’s knee.

“You aren’t…?” he asked.

Shin Chong-chin, who had been looking down and thinking about his problems, raised his head in surprise only to find the man’s face somehow strained. His unremitting eyes housed a million suspicions.

Baffled, Shin asked, “Huh? I’m not what? What do you mean?”

Instead, the other man pointed toward the woods and declared, “See, look there! Those are definitely the Korean bandits!”

Shin Chong-chin, startled out of his stupor, cast his gaze ahead. At some point, perhaps from where they had been hiding among the trees, four or five young men wearing long white, black, and gray tunics had blocked the middle of the road. One or two others then came out from behind the trees on each side. Eight people in total.

Shin Chong-chin wondered if they were Chinese, but the tunic-clad youths were clearly shouting in Korean, ready for the arrival of the cargo wagon. Shin started to get wary but managed to keep his voice down.

“It’s okay. You can’t show alarm at a time like this. Don’t panic. Just keep your head down and stay quiet. They won’t recognize you.”

*If it’s true that what you see is what you get, then wasn’t this practice of theirs called highway robbery?* That being the case, it might be easy to bluff their way through. The “unruly Koreans” were actually just highway robbers who went out raiding in Chinese clothes. Shin Chong-chin stayed calm while calculating the amount of money in his pocket.

His companion could not compose himself; instead, he became more and more agitated. Trembling, he cried, “We’re finished! This is no small matter. There shouldn’t be so many people waiting here blocking the road. Those men must have known that I was coming!”

Upon hearing this, Shin Chong-chin sat dumbfounded. His mind instantly recalled the time he had spent at the Korean inn before he left. The first thing he remembered was the young man with whom he had shared a room for those few days. He had rarely spoken unless he had had specific business to address. And he’d always stared at him with intimidating eyes. Although he could speak Japanese fluently, he had always replied sarcastically with a peculiar manner of speaking Korean whenever Shin had greeted him in Japanese. He thought back to the innkeeper and his words—*You’re Korean, yet you often pose as Japanese—fitting to have a Japanese companion, isn’t it?* Even when they learned that Shin was going to the country, they never said a word about Korean bandits. Were they the eyes and ears of the gang? Or were they in fact the “unruly Koreans” themselves?

What’s more, Shin Chong-chin was concerned about what his companion had inadvertently let slip, so he demanded, “You asked me whether or not I was something…What were you going to say?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, the man grabbed Shin Chong-chin by the throat.

“You bastard! Do I look like I was born yesterday?” With that, he abruptly pulled out the pistol he had secretly been carrying and shouted, “You bastard, of course you’re with those jerks! You conspired with them before we left!” The fury from being betrayed made his whole body twitch and shake, even his long beard. His eyes were full of murderous rage.

In shock, Shin Chong-chin’s face first turned red and then went pale. He felt dizzy. His vision filled with flashes of yellow, and after that, purple.

In the next instant, Shin wrenched away the other man’s grip. Then, with both hands, he clutched the wrist holding the gun and screamed, “Why do you suspect me? Why don’t you believe me?”

Shin Chong-chin had already forgotten about the Korean gang. He’d even lost sight of the threat in front of him. In this moment, he could only feel, once again, the categorical rift between peoples, nations. He shut his eyes in despair.

He was being regarded, standing there between the bandits and the Japanese man, as one of the very Koreans that he too hated. He was forced to re-examine himself body and mind.

Long ago, when Shin Chong-chin’s memories had just begun to form, his father had held his youngest son on his knee and taught: “We are all Japanese now. Do not speak ill of them. When Korea and Japan became one, we became Japanese.” Just then, Shin Chong-chin’s nearly grown brother, retorted, “Dad’s lying. Hey, Chong-chin, we’re not united, alright? Japan is a powerful country, and it annexed us. Now, we need to restore it to its original state.” Father’s face turned scary. “Idiot! Who taught you that? Get lost!”

*Times are changing, it’s a sign of the times*, Dad would say to himself. To young Shin Chong-chin, he’d say, “Before you came to this earth, you were destined to be born under the imperial grace of the Son of Heaven who dwells in the country of Japan. You must become a fine Japanese gentleman. You must learn Japanese from now on as well.” Dad had taught him Japanese whenever he’d had the time. When he got older and started going to school, Shin Chong-chin listened more earnestly than anyone else when their Japanese principal read the Emperor’s edict on holidays. He studied subjects such as Japanese History and Moral Ideology with enthusiasm. He had always been proud to grow up a Japanese national.

When Shin had become an adult and entered society, however, he encountered an ethnic or national divide. There was somehow a divide behind him as well, he had realized. It was the chasm that had formed between the 3,000 years of Korean tradition and what could only be called the self-deception of a fallen society. Shin Chong-chin’s character had long been transformed, making it impossible for him to cross this rift and return to the past. And he didn’t want to. By the time Shin finally realized that he would have to live in the cleft of endless loneliness, poverty, and suspicion, his bizarre identity had already sealed his fate.

Whenever he had been confronted with an issue involving his nationality until now, Shin Chong-chin told himself to take the high road. As a result, was always running into a wall. He could not outrun destiny, he realized. He accepted this knowledge as a part of his fate but could not make peace with it either. The hurt lingered.

But now, standing between the two sides, simply enduring more pain and struggle was not enough to reach a solution. For this one moment at least, he had to cross the chasm and land on solid ground.

Shin Chong-chin tightened his grip on the Japanese man’s wrist and shook it repeatedly while shouting, “Why do you suspect me!”

But he immediately switched tones: “Hmph, you have every right to suspect me. But give this to me first—don’t you move!” he said.

Unspeakable anger gradually incensed his heart. Shin Chong-chin wrestled his companion with all his strength, finally seizing the gun from his hand. Holding the Japanese man down as he desperately fought back, Shin shouted, “Don’t move or I’ll shoot you first!”

The carriage approached close enough that he could clearly distinguish the faces of the eight men.

With his fist, Shin Chong-chin beat away the tears that surged forth. Gripping the pistol, he fixed his eyes on the eight men as they came closer.

Magpies jabbered in the branches of the willow trees.

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1. Unruly Korean, *Futei Senjin* in Japanese, is a discriminative term that the Japanese used against Korean subjects opposed to Japanese rule during the colonial period (1910-1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)