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Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands

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**Introduction**

*Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney*

Why does the China-North Korean border matter, and why is such a wide-ranging book needed about it now? In the past few decades, this border region has undergone a transformation into a site of intensified cooperation, competition, and renewed international interest. Information has trickled, and then cascaded, out of the region (Baek 2016; Kretchun et. al. 2017) and then reduced again. Journalistic coverage of the region pools around topics like Chinese enforcement of United Nations sanctions on North Korea, the stories of refugees fleeing North Korea, the potential for more Sino-North Korean economic interactions, Kim Jong-un’s own idiosyncratic construction calendar, and, every so often, the shadows of the Korean War. In every narrative and every instance, the abundance of data as well as its absence has implied divergent things about how the region is changing and offered contradictory messages for conceptualizing the border.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Sino-North Korean border is less overtly hazardous than of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or the maritime Northern Limit Line between the two Koreas. It is not in a war zone, nor is it a zone of massive economic uplift. Since the aftermath of the North Korean famine of the late 1990s, the border has seen regular but small out-migration from the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; North Korea). While the commercial and human movements that take place along its length are surely consequential for the daily lives of those on either side, they cannot match the scale evident in border regions elsewhere.[[2]](#footnote-2) In comparison with the historical weight and palpable meaning of the inter-Korean boundary, the border and the regions around it between North Korea and China are of modest significance. The imposition of order in recent years has made information in some ways harder to obtain. Kim Jong-un’s emergence in particular has coincided with a crackdown along the frontier, and a measurable decrease in outward defections.[[3]](#footnote-3) The region is being more carefully controlled by both China and the DPRK. There are fewer complaints than there had once been about renegade soldiers crossing into China, and illegal activities in the Tumen Valley are hampered by a renewed sense of central control from Pyongyang or Beijing, which is just over 220 km away (Lankov 2014; 2015).

Amid the outright guesswork often found in scholarship on North Korea, the border region can play a concrete role in explaining the DPRK’s bilateral relations with China. For many, the Sino-North Korean border matters because it is the most measurable barometer of an otherwise opaque diplomatic relationship. China’s relationship with North Korea can be measured on some days simply by counting trucks crossing a bridge. Developments on both sides of the border in recent years are rooted in agreements made in Pyongyang and Beijing in 2009 and 2010 as part of Kim Jong-il’s solidification of Chinese support for the third-generation hereditary leadership (Reilly 2009). At the time, even as the North Korean state focused anew on the frontier for the sake of both its security and propaganda meanings, Chinese cross-border projects reached a crescendo. In addition to bombastic new infrastructure projects such as a giant cable-stayed bridge at Dandong, more North Koreans were permitted to cross the border legally than had ever been the case before, even to reside in China as guest workers or small entrepreneurs (Kim 2017). Cumulatively, this commercially and culturally driven trend reflected movement toward greater exchange of people and ideas.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, a violent purge in Pyongyang in 2013 put the halt on bilaterally managed economic development in the North Korean border regions near Dandong, and shocked Chinese business partners. Like the snap North Korean currency revaluation of November 2009, the purge of high-ranking party member Jang Song-taek – as discussed in Chapter 13 – indicated that the underlying structures in the border region are still too fragile to sustain ongoing treatment in a climate of mistrust.The dynamic changes that this border is capable of demonstrating, both in terms of North Korea’s own internal development and direction, and that of the Sino-North Korean bilateral relationship, are discussed at length in this book.

We editors have made several efforts to gain access to the North Korean side of the border and have seen both successes and failures in this endeavor. Christopher Green spent time in Sinuiju – a short journey, but a success by North Korea fieldwork standards. On the other hand, several different trips to Rason fell through following the North Korean government’s sudden withdrawal of its representative in Yanji during 2015 and, later, travel warnings from various national governments and sudden price spikes. All of us travelled to Pyongyang, but in spite of acquiring a handful of new publications, the capital of North Korea for foreign visitors is hardly a hub of information about the northern frontier, and we learned more about topics like our minders’ perspective on Otto Warmbier’s captivity than the (arguably much more important) long-term outlook on Chongjin. The most extensive engagement with data from the North Korean side of the boundary was undertaken by Christopher Green and Steven Denney, who interacted with more than 350 defectors from the borderland whilst in Seoul for an in-depth structured survey and interview project in 2016. Throughout the period of working on this book, access to the Chinese side of the frontier was a simpler and more direct logistical proposition, and Yanji in particular has been a touchstone for our visits. So the majority of our time on the ground, both separately and as a group, was on the PRC side of the border.

While the North Korean state is easily criticized for its limiting research environment, the Chinese state has also done a great deal of work to shape the way that both outsiders and its own citizens look at the border. The PRC has put forward multiple frameworks for the border with North Korea during the period of our research. Frontier studies (*bianjiang xue*) has grown exponentially since the turn of the century, proliferating research institutes, conferences and journals (Wang 2015, Li 2017). Much of the apparatus of this academic discourse drives toward a conclusion that reinforces Chinese territorial claims, and harnesses rhetoric of ethnic harmony and order within the boundaries of the contemporary People’s Republic of China. On the border with North Korea, much of the China-driven research is centred in Beijing and Shenyang. Locally driven initiative is a difficult thing to locate; few borderlands scholars from China do the bulk of their work in Dandong and one can often learn more by having meetings in Seoul than stalking around the streets, restaurants and coffee shops of Dandong. Economics and ideology converge with the ‘One Belt, One Road’ framework advanced by Xi Jinping, Chinese academics and provincial officials. This framework, however, has not been of much interest to North Korean comrades, meaning that China places a de facto emphasis on border security and hard power in the region. The generally slow rhythm of bilateral ties in Dandong does not always lead to the production of a type of ‘border studies’ as a scholarly undertaking, which a student of the inner-Irish border or the United States’ fractious border with Mexico would immediately recognize. Ultimately, because of its various idiosyncracies and frustrations, the disharmony we encountered between theory and practice along the Sino-North Korean border is one which we wish to share with other scholars as we shape the challenge of borderland studies or studying this particular border space.

We are obviously not the first scholars to claim an interest in the Sino-North Korea border region as an analytical space. We have learned much from colleagues and mentors who have contributed much to the collective understanding of contemporary cross-border interactions. Of the published attempts to synthesize a new outlook on the entire region and its relationship to the Korean peninsula, Hyun Ok Park’s *Capitalist Unconscious* is by far the most ambitious in scope. Park urges us to consider the transformative role that capital in the Post-Cold War regional order plays in (re)defining social and political relations between China and the Koreas, claiming that the movement of capital and people across the porous Sino-North Korean border has effectively united a divided peninsula (Park 2015). This develops her prior monograph’s argument (2005) about the transformative role that capital played in Manchuria in the late 19th and early 20th century, although her latest work is more focused on contemporary political, economic, and social issues relevant to the border region, including the almost unimaginable pressures put on ethnic Koreans in China under Maoist power. Conversations about her work were a touchstone among our research group as we conceived of and carried out this book project. Kang Ju Won (2016) has challenged and stirred our understanding of the functioning of North Korean labour in Dandong and outlying areas through one particularly noteworthy book, *The Amnok River Flows Differently*. Through firm-level surveys in the same city, Kim Byung-yeon (2015) has brought considerable insight to the economic impact of the migrant labourer population through the lens of small business owners and intermediaries. Ethnographic research in Dandong, PRC, has shown how North Korea engages the global economy via trade and economic exchange with Chinese and South Korean businesses in the border regions. (Kim and Kang 2015). Looking further back, we have found roots in work by historians and journalistically-minded academics like Owen Lattimore. Using their example, we have tried to go well beyond significant but dated analysis of the role of ethnic Koreans north of the Tumen River and also of the border in both the North Korean personality cult and in triggering China’s intervention in the Korean War. Ultimately, after acknowledging the security imperatives in the region, we seek in this book to blend the high politics of Chinese-North Korean relations with the meaning of the border space for business and Special Economic Zones.

Capturing the full breadth of interactions, potential, disconnection, and unresolved history in the border region is a high-order goal indeed, but recent scholarship on the DMZ as borderland does at least offer a pattern from which to work (Gelézeau et. al., 2013). Moreover, recent scholarship on Sino-North Korean relations in the border region as authored in Australia, South Korea, as well as England and North America has provided us with substantive questions about the borderland – and the temporal terms upon which any analysis of it deserves to be based. As editors, our goal is to use our own experiences and analytical capacities not just to bring together the disparate chapters in this volume, but to reflect and consolidate the wide spectrum of work being done on the region.

Several sets of questions bind together our essays and overall inquiry. First, has the post-Cold War regional configuration changed both the nature of social relations for peoples in the borderlands and the nature of Sino-DPRK interstate relations, as Hyun Ok Park’s work suggests? Or have things remained largely the same, including for North Koreans in the border region whose interaction with markets and other peoples may in fact be long-standing rather than novel?

Second, the refugee migrants making the flight from the DPRK through China constitute a new interstate political development and migratory pattern for peoples of North Korea, but are these developments sufficient to reshape the nature of Sino-DPRK social and political relations? Relatedly, how has the movement of people in and through the Chinese frontier region changed the social and national identification of ethnic Koreans living there?

Lastly, how have state and individual priorities altered over time, given the changing nature of Sino-North Korea and Sino-South Korea relations? To what extent are our interest and understanding of Sino-DPRK relations and peoples based on a nostalgic for an era of socialist solidarity that never actually existed, and how might we overcome this bias? The historical element provides our text with a novel and important means, we believe, of achieving something new.

Accordingly, this interdisciplinary volume pulls together data, theories, and perspectives from various sources on the region, drawing from multilingual sources, and fieldwork to decode the politics of the Sino-DPRK border region. Comprised of four parts, it emphasizes the link between theory, methodology and practice in the fields of Chinese and Korean Studies and brings Sinologist and Koreanist strands into rare dialogue. Part I focuses on geography and borderlands theory, the objective of which is to situate the reader and the Chinese-North Korean border region within the extant literature on borderlands. Three chapters are devoted to this task. Chapter 1, by Edward Boyle, reviews the relevant theories and concepts developed in the discipline of borderlands studies in order to understand border spaces in North America, Europe, and Asia. The chapter focuses on those contributions relevant to our understanding of the China-North Korea border region. In Chapter 2, Elizabeth Leake draws links between her areas of specialization in the South and Central Asian borderlands and new research on Northeast Asia, putting the China-North Korea borderland into a frame which will be useful for scholars of Asian borderlands more generally. Chapter 3, by Christopher Green, Adam Cathcart, and Steven Denney introduces the different border spaces along the Sino-North Korean border, providing a compact guide to subregions and cross-border urban pairings whose explorations will follow in treatments of greater detail throughout the rest of the book.

Part II takes a somewhat more pragmatic tone and introduces various methods employed in the study of Sino-North Korean borderlands – methods which can be applied to the study of borderlands more generally. The contributing authors do not merely introduce methods; they also illustrate how these methods are put to practice in the study of the Sino-North Korean borderlands by drawing upon specific recent work. In Chapter 4, Steven Denney and Christopher Green introduce readers to the various survey methods available to researchers to study borderlands people, drawing on work by the authors surveying Chinese-Koreans in the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture and North Korean migrants in South Korea. Markus Bell and Rosita Armytage in Chapter 5 explore the advantages of employing ethnographic methods to research the people who live in the Sino-DPRK borderlands. In Chapter 6, Kent Boydston takes a look at the only semi-credible sources of economic data on North Korea currently available, and what it is feasible to do with them. Chapter 7 by Adam Cathcart shows how archival material is collected, destroyed, and corrupted in the Sino-North Korean border region when it comes to Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla history, using both new and neglected Chinese sources.

Part III continues into a longer history of the Sino-Korean border region. In Chapter 8 Yuanchong Wang takes readers back two and a half centuries when the Manchuria-based Fenghuang Gate was the marker between the Qing and Chosun dynasties. Wang highlights the symbolic and literal purposes of the gate, showing how it helped define borders and national identities, in addition to being a tool used by the Qing dynasty to consolidate political power in its periphery. The contribution by Dong Jo Shin, in Chapter 9, interrogates the Chinese Communist Party’s policy towards the country’s Korean ethnic minority, focusing specifically on the role of language politics during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the subsequent Great Leap Forward (1958-1962). These movements critically damaged ethnic Korean intellectuals and laid the groundwork for physical violence against Chinese Korean leaders during the Cultural Revolution. In Chapter 10, Warwick Morris and James Hoare conclude Part II by looking back upon their experiences in Yanbian during their years with the UK Foreign Office, an essay which is supplemented by journalism from the period. In addition to presenting a unique perspective on the history of Sino-North Korean relations in the early 1990s, the chapter is an opportunity to consider changes and continuities in Yanbian’s development today.

Part IV presents research on recent political and economic developments in the Sino-North Korean border region. The first three chapters look at the borderland implications of SEZ developments and marketization. In Chapter 11, Théo Clement draws from his own fieldwork in the Rason Special Economic Zone and interviews with North Korean officials to navigate a host of legal changes around that zone, interpreting Sino-North Korean developments and broader economic trends in North Korea via a more ‘local’ approach. Chapter 12 features Andray Abrahamian’s investigation of recent efforts by Pyongyang and regional administrative units to reinvigorate economies by designating special economic zones. The author’s extensive travels around the region and work with North Korean entrepreneurs give this chapter added interest. In Chapter 13, Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green show how China tacitly supported North Korea’s SEZ strategy on Hwanggeumpyeong and Wihwa Island in hopes of fostering economic engagement and investments in an otherwise moribund special economic zone. However, this strategy fell through with the death of Jang Song-taek in December 2013, and the zones have never been fully revived; the paper explores what the deeper meaning is behind these changes. Finally, Chapter 14 by Peter Ward and Christopher Green moves readers to recent to economic changes in North Korea since 1980, namely marketization, with a focus on the role played by China-North Korea trade as well as implications for bilateral relations.

The remaining four chapters in Part IV focus on migration and the political implications of people moving across borders. Nicholas Hamisevicz and Andrew Yeo draw upon multiple sources in Chapter 15, including testimonies of North Korean defectors, government reports, and interviews in their investigation of China’s policy towards this group of people and the implications of people crossing the China-North Korea border. Sarah Bregman then shows in Chapter 16 how these border crossers, once they have resettled in a South Korea that recognizes their right to stay, shape their own narratives about Sino-North Korean border crossing and the migration of North Koreans. Bregman draws upon her research on human rights NGOs in South Korea to investigate how women defectors, who constitute more than 70% of all resettled defectors in South Korea, are contributing to the discourse on North Korean human rights, but also experiencing challenges to their personal voices and autonomy. Hee Choi, a resettled female North Korean defector, draws upon her own experiences as a former migrant and border-crosser to explain in Chapter 17 what, specifically, South Korean and the international community are – and should be – doing about the migration of peoples from North Korea through the Sino-North Korean borderlands. Her discussion of the legal basis for China’s treatment of North Koreans provides a fascinating counterpoint to recent discourse from PRC think tanks that see ethnic Koreans and refugee North Koreans as victims of Christian ‘ideology infiltration’ in the border region (Zhao and Xu 2017). Ed Pulford concludes the section with Chapter 18, his exploration of former Soviet Koreans in the Sino-Korean border region (*Koryo saram*), making the case that the post-Soviet experiences of this group of ethnic Koreans is reflective of the region’s broader social, political, and economic changes. This meditation from one of the most talented scholars of the Sino-Korean border region, who has taken an embedded anthropological approach in the area where three nations and cultures meet, brings the narrative to a close.

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Part I

Geography and Borderlands Theory: Framing the Region

In 1927, a German scholar wrote a book entitled *Grenzen* (Borders). In this text, the Yalu and Tumen Rivers flicker into focus amid a matrix of comparative frontiers, including the US-Mexican border and the inner-Irish border. It was clear , then, to German audiences even prior to Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 that the border region between Korea and China then had become a site of competition and a test of strength between Japan’s burgeoning imperialism and China’s continental nationalism. Since the author of *Grenzen*, Karl Haushofer, was firmly on the side of the Japanese during World War II and killed himself whilst under investigation for war crimes in 1946, his comparative impulse has been forgotten when it comes to the frontier between Korea and northeast China.

The comparative impulse today brings us into dialogue with other frontiers and the historical context of the Cold War and post-Cold War. Looking at the Sino-Korean border region in a period during which it has been governed by communist states in Beijing and Pyongyang, reorients our vision. An East-West line opens up from Rason in the east to Changchun in the West. The three chapters that make up this section of the book try similarly to reorient our look at the Sino-Korean border region, moving away from the very contemporary vision of the place as a site primarily of sanctions evasions or enforcement, and put more logically in a comparative perspective in three ways.

First, within the broad context of border studies, Edward Boyle launches a provocative series of salvoes which begin with an extraterrestrial view of the border space, and arrive at the processes of bordering and state-making. Interpreting the border both as a site of anticolonial resistance and Cold War conflict, Elisabeth Leake then places the Sino-Korean frontier into a zone of Asian borderlands. While the India-Pakistan partition and border is one that is more often held up against the ironically-named ‘Demilitarized Zone’ that separates the two Koreas from one another since the Korean War, the South Asian parallels to the more sanguine Sino-Korean border are intriguing and may hold out hope for further comparative study.

The section concludes with another challenge to the orientation of Sino-Korean border studies, this one a blend of literature, travel and observations from the three editors. Our multiple strands of wandering, wondering, confusion, and occasional success over several years has led to a research haul that contains interviews, focus groups, shaky cellphone videos made on railway station platforms, conversations with colleagues along the way, as well as old North Korean books found gathering dust in the back of tiny Yanji bookshops. Here we bring some of it together in a kind of falsely coherent, yet hopefully cogent memoir that drags the reader from one end of the border to the next, poking into historical wells and occasionally getting pleasantly stuck.

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**1 Illuminating Edges**

Borders as Institutions, Process, Space

*Edward Boyle*

**Abstract**

This chapter highlights developments in border studies useful for analysing the Sino-North Korean boundary. The analytical instruments introduced here are drawn from a variety of work that is relevant to an interdisciplinary examination of borders, and they collectively provide a series of spotlights able to be directed at particular aspects of this northeast Asian boundary. The border picked out under these lights is an institution that mediates between two sovereign state spaces, one that emerges through a number of practices that reference the linear limits of state sovereignty in an ongoing process of boundary maintenance. The border is therefore dynamic, shaped by a series of distinct, and often contradictory, processes that work to reshape the space of the border itself.

**Keywords:** China, North Korea, cross-border exchange, border securitization, Asian borderlands

**Introduction**

The infrastructural development that draws attention to China’s inexorable economic rise blazes brightly at night. Photographs of the earth’s surface taken from orbit, like those by the International Space Station, show the dramatic expansion in domestic per capita power consumption the country has experienced, with China awash with artificial light (Molloy 2014). This nocturnal transformation of territory into neon spots and streaks shows the Chinese population proceeding on the long march towards economic parity with its regional competitors. These include the formerly heralded Asian Tiger economies, and the developmental granddaddy of them all, Japan, both China’s inspiration and competition, the shape of whose archipelago is also clearly recognizable from orbit. To Japan’s west lies the outline of one of the tigers, with South Korea’s coastline able to be picked out from space. There remains, however, a noticeable black hole at the centre of East Asia’s luminescence on the world’s nocturnal map, one that is situated between the bright lights of South Korea and China (NASA Earth Observatory 2014).[[5]](#footnote-5) Viewed in this way, North Korea appears as an absence rather than a presence in the region.

This is true not only along North Korea’s southern border, the overtly oxymoronic DMZ, where the high-powered electric lights that illuminate the southern, South Korean side of the border find no reflection to the north. This chasm in luminosity is fitting in many respects, for despite the warming of relations between the two Koreas in the past couple of years, there remains a deep divide between the two regimes. Yet a dramatic fluorescent distinction is also present along North Korea’s northern edge, where the bright lights of Chinese Dandong give out into sheer darkness on the North Korean side of the border. A view of the region at night emphasizes that North Korea’s own experiments with Special Economic Zones have failed to provide a much-needed spark to relieve the blackness of its economic situation. The borders of North Korea appear to keep the region’s economic efflorescence firmly at bay, with only a pale nimbus that surrounds the capital of Pyongyang breaking the monotonous blackness that characterizes the bird’s eye night view of the Democratic People’s Republic.

This contrast in the situation of North Korea and its outsized northern neighbour offers a floodlit vantage point from which to survey the insights to be gleaned from recent studies of borders and borderlands for the Sino-North Korean border.[[6]](#footnote-6) This chapter will trace out the development of the border as an object of study over the past two decades by focusing on the border’s emergence as an institution, influenced by a number of distinct, and often contradictory, processes. The significance of this for how we understand the Sino-North Korean border is the subject of the second section. The third section will think about how recent studies of borders have understood these processes as operating in distinct spaces, whether at the border or elsewhere, and how they come to reshape the space of the border itself. Together, the analytical instruments introduced here, drawn from a variety of work relevant to an interdisciplinary examination of borders, provide a number of beams able to be focused upon particular aspects of the divide that runs between these two Northeast Asian neighbours.

**Institutionalizing Borders and Their Study**

The description of this borderland as ‘Sino-North Korean’ emphasizes that the border marks where the sovereign jurisdictions of these two states meet. Strictly speaking, therefore, this border has existed since 9 September 1948, when the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was proclaimed in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. However, the northern border of the territory claimed by both the DPRK and its capitalist southern rival, the Republic of Korea, is largely, although not entirely, undisputed (Gomà 2006). This was because the northern limits to the territorial extent of the new state were inherited from the area administered by, successively, the Joseon dynasty and the Japanese Empire. Considered as the border between Korea and China, therefore, the ‘current Sino-Korean boundary – that formed by the Yalu and Tumen rivers – is arguably one of the oldest state borders in the world that is still effective’ (Song 2017).

The effectiveness of this boundary is functional, in continuing to divide the sovereign state spaces of China and (North) Korea from one another. The seeming stability of this meeting point between them is testament to the border’s institutionalization, which has allowed for its material and discursive presence to be successfully reproduced by a series of political regimes down to the present. Nevertheless, the claim advanced above for the longevity of the Sino-Korean border is controversial, as it contradicts a basic tenet of border studies as the field developed in the early twentieth century. This was, as Lord Curzon (1907, 48) brusquely noted in his 1907 Lectures, that the ‘idea of a demarcated frontier is essentially a modern conception, and finds little or no place in the ancient world’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A state’s ideal borders were, and often still are, thought to be those that are ‘natural’, irrespective of whether this accordance with nature is understood on rational, topographical, cultural, linguistic or ethnic grounds (Pounds 1951; Fall 2010). Yet in origin, the study of borders between states itself presupposed the emergence of a modern state able to accurately delimit the extent of its authority. In this interpretation, it was in Europe where the modern state emerged, literally shaped by linear borders that demarcated its territory and distinguished domestic from foreign (Gottman 1973; Agnew 1994; Elden 2013; Branch 2013). Although the emergence of geopolitical thought at the end of the nineteenth century, associated with Friedrich Ratzel in particular, focused on borders as the ‘peripheric organ’ of states, selectively permeable while responsible for its protection (Rankin and Schofield 2004, 5), the presence of such borders worked to structure relations between neighbouring states (Kratochwil 1986; Simmons 2005). While the modern state is understood as a ‘bordered power container’, its sovereign status is the outcome of a process of mutual recognition that occurs between those states held to make up international society (Giddens 1985, 120; Bartelson 1995; Murphy 1996). The border was thus treated as an institutional zone of contact between different state entities, rather than as mere lines of separation, and a large proportion of the negotiations, treaties and multilateral arrangements taken as evidence of international society are themselves concerned with questions of institutionalizing these borders (Gavrilis 2008). Curzonian imperialists and liberal internationalists alike laid emphasis on modern boundaries as the product of mutual demarcation and recognition, as the ‘protection afforded by a natural barrier is nothing compared to the security given by a mere mathematical line that is accepted in good faith by both neighbours’ (Broek 1941, 18).

This approach accentuated a general Cold War reification of the state, under which borders appeared to exist simultaneously as instruments of state policy, the expression and means of government power, and markers of national identity (Anderson 1996). At the same time, borders were accorded a significant functional role in state-building and for their perceived contributions to international stability. This resulted in the creation typologies with which to understand borders (Jones 1945; Martinez 1994), and encouraged models of unidirectional developmental change, with a good border being one that promoted close ties between states and reduced the barriers to persons and material crossing it (Kolossov 2005). The study of borders therefore frequently sought to examine the conditions under which borders could serve to improve relations between neighbouring states.

The Sino-North Korean boundary was one component of this stability that characterized the role of the border within a Cold War-era international political structure. Chinese military intervention in the Korean War effectively preserved the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) against MacArthur’s designs on a unified peninsula under American rule. China, together with the Soviet Union, supported the defence and development of a North Korean state able to resist its capitalist rival, from which it was separated by the militarized front lines that abutted the DMZ from both sides. The initial result was a dramatic contrast in the situation at the northern and southern boundaries of North Korea. As during the war, it was the porousness of North Korea’s northern border that enabled the DPRK’s military competition at its southern boundary, with China supplying the bulk of weapons until the 1980s (Jia and Zhuang 1992, 1142). The border functioned effectively as an institutional buffer between the two states during this period, with its actual location on the ground subject to negotiation, such as through the 1963 Agreement over islands in the Yalu and Tumen rivers (Gomà 2006, 873-874).

It was the 1990s which saw the Sino-North Korean border rocked by the vicissitudes that affected both borders and their study elsewhere in the world. Globally, the previous decade had already seen concerns voiced that increasing volumes of cross-border flows would result in the ‘retreat’ and ‘hollowing out’ of states in the face of vastly magnified global exchanges passing through, rather than running between, state spaces (Strange 1996; Sassen 2005). The end of the Cold War greatly exacerbated this trend, with prominent examples of ‘debordering’ (collapse of the Iron Curtain) and ‘rebordering’ (disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia into constituent states) making it impossible to blithely point to the role of borders in fostering international stability. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and a brief period of ‘unbound’ euphoria, thought to presage the disappearance of state borders everywhere, it became all too apparent that the various trends subsumed under the label of globalization ultimately produced boundary effects that could only be called uneven (Newman 2006b; O’Dowd 2002).

The Sino-North Korean border captures this unevenness perfectly. The ending of the Cold War accelerated both China’s incorporation into the global economy, and North Korea’s increasing isolation. The Sino-North Korean border came to be increasingly shaped by the divergence between the two socialist economies. As North Korea starved in the 1990s, it was a globalizing China which kept the state and economy of its ally coughing and spluttering along, through shipments of food and fuel. Today, the ‘Hermit Kingdom’ of North Korea remains utterly dependent upon flows of food, finance, and fuel coming across its northern border, even as ‘unprecedented economic growth’, predicated upon the opening of China’s borders to international capital flows, ‘contributed to a strengthening of these national states and this often translates into attempts to buttress national borders’ (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014, 3). Yet despite the total divergence in the experience of these two states under globalization, the border remains an institution defined by relations *between* them. Change in border institutions is not simply resulting in either greater openness or closure, as the logics of border processes defy such easy assumptions (Paasi 2009; Rumford 2006).

**Borders as Processes**

Viewing the border as an institution existing between, and connecting, contiguous states allows us to understand its role in structuring relations between them. At the same time, it encourages an understanding of individual borders as unitary institutions, which are then able to be defined and characterized using certain binary qualities; as open or closed, hard or soft, etc. It is such qualitative evaluations of particular borders that encouraged viewing them in terms of stages of development. In reality, patterns of institutional change at the border are rarely this simple, with the different aspects of inter-state relations institutionalized at the border moving in distinct, and frequently contradictory, directions. These processes change over time, and are concerned with flows and mobility, not the putative stability and fixity characteristic of the border’s linear representation on the map.

This section will focus on two processes that are visible at the Sino-North Korean border, as well as along many others. These are cross-border exchange and border securitization. Superficially, these two processes appear to be operating on diametrically opposed logics of openness and closure. Placing the emphasis on these distinct border processes, rather than borders as unitary institutions, allows us to appreciate the dynamism of the border’s role.

Cross-border exchange and cooperation between China and North Korea initially occurred due to the similarity of their political and socio-economic systems, which obligated China to support its communist little brother. However, the divergence of the two countries after 1990 resulted in both a growing asymmetry in their relationship, and a massive expansion in the volume of flows crossing the border. Since the Soviet collapse in 1991, China has been North Korea’s largest trade partner, providing vital support to the economy as well as directly supplying food during famines in the 1990s and 2000s. North Korea runs a massive trade deficit with China, partially concealed by much of China’s support being designated as ‘foreign aid’, over half of which flows across this border (Nanto 2011). Additionally, Chinese initiatives for the development of its deindustrializing northeastern provinces, such as the Greater Tumen Initiative of the 1990s and the more recent Changjitu zone, are seemingly predicated upon a wider cross-border economic zone. These regional development plans necessitate the Sino-North Korean border becoming ‘increasingly permeable’, in order to facilitate rapid and sustained cross-border exchanges of the kind which have developed in Europe and elsewhere (Newman 2006a, 181-182). Given the dominant role of China within the North Korean economy, it might be expected that Chinese economic flows would ultimately overwhelm the international boundary entirely.

The continuing inability of Chinese goods and capital to move freely across this border is the result of North Korean policies that restrict China’s desire for freer cross-border exchange. This does not necessarily stem from a hardline DPRK opposition to exchange itself. In addition to its dependency upon cross-border flows, North Korea’s interest in economic development has been clear in the establishment of a number of Special Economic Zones, starting with Rason in 1991. As with North Korea’s SEZ with South Korea at Kaesong, though, these cooperative ventures have remained at the mercy of other political considerations. Most notably, the early interest of Kim Jong Un’s regime in such cross-border arrangements ended abruptly with the execution of his uncle Jang Song-taek, in December 2013 (Cathcart 2017). Although both the perceived necessity of economic development and porousness of the Sino-North Korean border promote increases in Chinese capital and investment, this increases the level of Chinese exposure, and hence vulnerability. While the openness of the border reflects North Korean weakness, it also strengthens its ability to affect Chinese interests, and thus assert its sovereignty against China. Along the Sino-North Korean border, this assertion occurs through the DPRK regime’s efforts to control Chinese flows: China’s sporadic enforcement of sanctions since 2017 has conversely made North Korea more amenable to facilitating cross-border investment from elsewhere (Reuters 2018; Wang and He 2018).

The ‘asymmetry’ in this cross-border relationship, so visible at night, provides an obvious imperative for the assertion of North Korean sovereignty against China. Nevertheless, China’s encouragement of border permeability leads to its own efforts to ‘shore up’ sovereignty at the border. This is because the role of borders in providing ‘a clear distinction between the spheres of foreign and domestic politics’ necessary for ‘stability in the political structure’ collapses under the weight of cross-border flows (Kristoff, 1959). As a result of China’s dominant position within the North Korean economy, it is invested in propping up the DPRK in order to ensure China is not forced to cope with the collapse of the North Korean state. Human security on the Chinese side of the border has now becomes dependent on the maintenance of flows across it, and ‘the line between internal and external security has become blurred to the point of fusing the two realms’ (Bigo 2001). In its efforts to reassure its own citizens of their security and re-assert a distinction between inside and out, the Chinese side of the border is seeing its own ‘performative enactment of state’ in the form of border securitization (Reeves 2011, 906). In a dialectic also visible elsewhere, the focus on facilitating certain flows across a border institutionalized between two states has brought with it concerns over other cross-border movements, leading to demands that the border be sealed (Nevins 2002).

Studies conducted on this new round of wall and fence construction have now incorporated the Sino-North Korean boundary (Rosière and Jones 2012, 223; Hassner and Wittenberg 2015, 167; Carter and Poast 2017, 250). This is on the basis of China’s 2006 construction of twenty kilometres of fencing at the border near Dandong, North Korea’s primary outlet to the world. It was announced that such fortified boundaries had been extended and strengthened in 2011 (Foster 2011), and again in 2017 (Griffiths and Wang 2017). These fences are perceived as means of controlling and reducing the flow of impoverished North Koreans into China and have been accompanied by Chinese crackdowns on fleeing North Koreans as ‘economic migrants’ in recent years.[[8]](#footnote-8)

These ‘fortified boundaries’, ‘fences’, and ‘walls’ are not military fortifications, but are instead explicitly designed to prevent, or at least discourage, the movement of people over particular international boundaries. The primary motivation for most of these new fortifications is ‘economic security’. From this perspective, not only is China incorporated within a broader economic globalization, but its border with North Korea appears subject to a globalized imperative to fencing, in which ‘differences in state wealth and migration rates are the best predictors of barrier construction’ (Hassner and Wittenberg 2015, 159). The institutionalization of this particular border is distinct, though, because it is generally characteristic of such fortified barriers that they do not ‘come in pairs’ (Hassner and Wittenberg 2015, 162). Here, however, not only has Kim Jong Un’s government married its pre-2013 interest in cross-border development with a crackdown on both human migration and smuggling, but in 2017 was reported to be ‘electrifying’ the Sino-North Korean boundary in order to further constrain mobility across the border (Asia Unhedged 2017).

In contrast to elsewhere, the Sino-North Korean border is being sporadically fortified from both directions. Yet this fortification is not leading to a reduction in cross-border flows, merely their reshaping and rechannelling. Rather than considering borders as merely a stable site of modern state ‘performance’, therefore, borders should be generally understood as dynamic elements in politics. Functionally speaking, there appears little justification for an absolute distinction between the sporadic and only partially successful efforts of the Qing and Joseon Courts to halt Korean migration and ginseng smuggling over the Yalu and Tumen rivers four centuries ago and their contemporary equivalents (Kim 2017). Rather than temporal distinctions between different forms of border institution, we have an ongoing process of transformation, as material and discursive manifestations of border fixity and cross-border flows reshape and respond to one another. Through such processes, borders do not only exist at the edges of political formations but find themselves brought to the heart of contemporary political concerns.

**Border Spaces**

The border is an institution which functions in different registers at different times, allowing us to capture ‘the multiple and changing meanings of borders in different historical and spatial circumstances’ (Popescu 2011*,* 24). Borders are constituted and reproduced through a variety of processes, frequently operating at cross cutting logics, which come together in order to bring them into existence between states. This creates institutions characterized by temporal dynamism, but also ones that are spatially, as well as functionally, complex.

The two processes of cross border exchange and securitization are revealing of such spatial complexity. The actual material construction of the fence may provide a ‘hyperbolic token’ of the state, a material barrier which exists to symbolically shore up both state sovereignty and security (Brown 2010, 25). Yet along the Sino-North Korean boundary, the hyperbolic nature of this claim stands unveiled by that fact that those fenced stretches of the border separate the most populated parts of it, while much of the remainder of the border exists as ‘mile after mile of nothing, guarded by no-one’ (Sagolj 2018). Interpreted in this light, the fence comes to be understood as a largely symbolic performance designed to shore up a state’s sovereign authority with its own population. Such a border process is largely detached from the institutional role of the border as mediating contact between states, yet allows for the state to ‘write’ itself into existence at the border (Walker 2010).

While this type of analysis appears ever more pertinent in the light of recent political events, it is worth resituating such border processes within their broader institutional context. Doing so shows that an understanding regarding the seeming porousness of the border up close may also be misleading. Along this Sino-North Korean boundary, as at many others, the actual fencing is supplemented by a ‘technical landscape of control and surveillance that extends both within and beyond the border itself (Paasi 2009, 224). These include the standard security paraphernalia of cameras, satellites, and patrols, which come together to create a fortified border zone extending far beyond the international boundary. It then extends beyond this to incorporate the North Korean agents active in Dandong and elsewhere in the northeast, seeking to render defectors back across the borderline. It would also include the screening undertaken in North Korea of those despatched by the regime to work and remit foreign currency to the regime, as well as the surveillance they experience when across the border.

Conceptualized through the notion of a ‘networked border’, these factors remind us that ‘bordering takes place in far more sites than geographic borderlines and their linked institutions, such as consulates and airport immigration controls’ (Sassen 2005, 523). Neither, however, is it present ‘everywhere’ (Balibar 2002), for ‘state boundaries are not universal phenomena [and their] everyday life meanings…differ crucially in border areas and elsewhere in states’ (Newman and Paasi 1998, 197). To this we may add that they differ at different places along the border, and on its different sides. The fencing and cross-border exchanges taking place along the Sino-North Korean boundary are processes whose effects are not solely internal to their states. To interpret them in such a fashion stems from the ‘misconception that flows across the border without affecting them or being affected by them’ (van Schendel 2005, 43), yet borders are ‘where the … reconfiguration of fixed territories, through a system of ordering, takes place at one and the same time as the dynamics of cross-border flows and networks’ that reshapes not only relations between states, but the space of the border itself (Newman 2010, 777).

Perceiving this only in terms of inefficiency or illegality indicates how borders come to be defined by what the state ‘sees’ (Scott 1998). Indeed, ‘for the state, the borderland is an area where, by definition, criminality is rife and sovereignty under constant threat’ (van Schendel and Abraham 2005, 25). It is important, however, to resist the temptation to reduce all interactions at the border to those which undermine or transgress its sovereign authority. The concerns of those fleeing across the border, or engaging in smuggling the cigarettes, phones, seafood, and mushrooms (*matsutake*) that make up the illicit borderland economy, are generally with daily existence rather than resistance. The presence of illicit activities at the edge of the state is evidence for people manipulating the border for their own ends, rather than consciously attempting to subvert the state order (Dean 2012, 227). It is because of the state’s ‘partially obscured view of borderland activities’ that there exists a ‘gap between people’s understanding of what they are doing versus the state’s [understanding]’ (van Schendel and Abraham 2005, 25).

In order to overcome this gap, scholars of borders in Asia have frequently drawn upon this notion of a ‘borderland’. It is possible to understand a borderland as a spatial, and thus social, formation existing prior to that shaped by the modern border (Adelman and Aron 1999), but it is more usual for borderland characteristics to be ascribed to modern borders, and particularly loosely administered terrestrial ones in Asia (Horstmann, and Wadley 2006; Cons and Sanyal 2013; Gellner 2013). Researchers have drawn upon the notion of the borderland as a means to spatially blur the two sides of the border together. As this chapter has shown, though, by focusing on the border as an institution concerned with the governance and channelling of mobility and flows, constituted by processes originating and taking place in a variety of places, we can in any case extend the notion of border out beyond its linear representation on the map.

The real value of the borderlands approach lies in how the rich ethnographic studies conducted under its label shift our gaze away from the border as a state institution, and towards the people themselves, and how they come into contact and navigate the border. This also allows us to think about not only how the border is made real throughout the state, but how the space of the border is experienced by those residents in or passing through it. The borderlands approach emphasizes the unevenness of the border’s effects, affecting people differently at different times, in different places. It therefore focuses on how the institution of the border actually functions within borderland society, rather than how the sovereignty claims of the state maintain that it does or should function. A more recent conceptualization that draws further attention to the space of the border is that of ‘borderscape’, a term that invokes a ‘border landscape’ while also drawing upon Arjun Appadurai’s ‘-scapes’ suffix to illustrate the flows and discordances associated with contemporary capitalism (Appadurai 1996, 33; Brambilla 2015; dell’Agnese 2015). Both notions emphasize that the border needs to be understood as mutable rather than a fixed construct, one that is rife with contradictions and situated within a larger ‘landscape of competing meanings’ (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007, xv).

The aesthetic qualities associated with landscape allow us to conclude our brief discussion of borders and their studies with a mention of tourism. A fixed perspective on the border is available to Chinese tourists in the city of Hunchun, near the triborder point with Russia and North Korea. There, it is possible to gaze out over China’s border with both states, viewing borders from this raised vantage point as lines of separation existing between different states (Sudworth and Wang 2018). However, a different form of tourism is also emerging at the border. While North Korea’s contribution to the ethnic tourism that takes place in Yanbian and elsewhere is not new, active Chinese consumption of the border itself, particularly along the Yalu at Dandong, is a more recent development (Wen 2018). There, as tourist boats and marrying couples snap photos with the decaying factories of Sinijiu in the background, the border has become a space where modern, affluent Chinese are able to gaze upon their own past, literally a foreign country.

**Illuminating the Sino-North Korean Border**

In 2004, the first Chinese taikonaut to orbit the earth was forced to confirm that, contrary to what generations of schoolchildren had been taught, the Great Wall remained invisible from space (Fall 2010). Yet while this material legacy of a monumental example of border securitization was unable to be seen, the contemporary Sino-North Korean border is clearly discernible, an institution revealed through the discrepancy in artificial light on either side of the boundary. Although the result of a divergence in economic policy, this difference is not solely the result of grand central planning, as ‘Linjiang and some other towns seem to compete for who has the most brilliant or outlandish decoration. It’s as if they want to make a point, to show people on the other side what China has achieved as it emerged from its dark ages’ (Sagolj 2018). While not planned by either government, this neon border is the outcome of a series of processes institutionalized in the border existing between these two sovereign states.

Studies of borders now take pains to argue that ‘state borders are complex and dynamic *multiscalar* entities that have different symbolic and material forms’ (Laine 2016, 466). The border is made visible at a variety of scales, from orbit to standing on a boat in the Yalu River. It is reproduced in various spaces, whether in conference rooms during sanctions negotiations at the United Nations, or through the local amelioration of those same sanctions at the border itself.[[9]](#footnote-9) This is possible through its institutionalization between sovereign states, where they both separate and mediate between them. Whether we stand in the artificial glare on one side of the border, or the consummate darkness of the other, borderlands work to ‘illuminate rather than negate sovereignty’ (Miles 2014, 4).

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**2 On Asian Borders**

The Value of Comparative Studies

*Elisabeth Leake*

**Abstract**

This chapter will draw from the author’s research project on ‘The Defiant Border’ region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, drawing links between the South and Central Asian borderlands research and that in Northeast Asia, specifically the China-North Korea borderland. The purpose will be to show the comparative relevance of borderland studies with two case studies worthy of analysis, as well as discussing some of the issues surrounding violence – both state-controlled and local – in borderland studies generally.

**Keywords:** borderland studies, India-Pakistan border, Sino-Korean border, border crossing, politics and borders, comparative Asian studies

**Introduction**

The ‘border’ has been one of the most critical concepts in twentieth- and twenty-first-century international politics. In an era dominated by the nation-state and an international states system, the fact that the study of borders and borderlands has exploded is hardly surprising. Borders and borderlands share universal importance as critical spaces for local, state, and international interactions. Thus, while a field initially focused on study of the US-Mexico borderlands, it has expanded globally. Thinking about borders in Asia, Willem van Schendel, a pre-eminent borderlands scholar, and Erik de Maaker point out their ‘particular importance in the exceptionally multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic social landscapes that characterize much of Asia’ (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014, 3). This is true not only of the Sino-North Korean border region, but across East, Southeast, and South Asia.

This chapter will provide brief reflection on some of the common issues confronted by states and their populations in border regions, thus giving a broader context for developments in the Sino-North Korean borderlands. What should become clear is that the Sino-North Korean borderlands are not unique. They share many characteristics with those across Asia (and beyond). Borders – the lines demarcating states’ political (and thereby territorial) boundaries – and borderlands – regions on either side of a border – frequently complicate relationships between states, as well as between a state and its citizens. What has become increasingly clear in studying borderlands is that these relationships frequently interact and affect each other. This chapter first will outline some key state-led, top-down approaches to borderlands, then will turn to borderland inhabitants, themselves, and the lived realities of these regions.

Finally, this chapter will make one brief intervention in the study of Asian borderlands. Scholars have largely recognized the critical role played by decolonization in the establishment of borders, and border conflicts, in twentieth-century Asia. But the end of empires certainly was not the only global phenomenon to shape Asian borders: perhaps more than in any other region in the world, great power politics and international diplomacy – the global Cold War – have shaped the trajectory of Asia’s borderlands. Foreign intervention has played a critical role in the creation of artificial borders that do not match lived realities or local politics, as well as in exacerbating border tensions between neighbouring states.

**Borderlands and the State**

State borders typically have not occurred naturally. Even in those areas where geography seems to indicate a ‘natural’, Braudelian boundary – a mountain range or a river – demarcating borders has proved difficult. Rivers may change course, revealing or submerging islands, and the alpine provenance of watersheds can be disputed.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, for example, while the Himalaya would seem a natural boundary between China and Nepal or India, in fact this has been a widely disputed region where the logic of geography has been increasingly rejected (Garner 2014; Raghavan 2006). Instead, state leaders frequently look to borders explicitly demarcated (both on maps and on the ground) to determine the limits of their power.

In much of the non-Western world, state borders are a relic of European colonialism, as are border disputes. Imperial rulers, in some places, chose to delineate the perimeters of their governance; in others, they opted for vague frontiers, where they exercised some rights but not others. Imperial border-creation is clear across Africa and perhaps most famously, or infamously, with the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, which demarcated British and French spheres of influence in the Middle East during the First World War and established a series of still contentious borders. In South and Southeast Asia, border building was frequently more fluid. In some areas of Southeast Asia, pillars and boundary posts were erected to indicate the extent of colonial influence (and often in blatant disregard of the configuration of local villages or kingdoms); in other areas, such as northwest and northeast India, borders were less formal and treated ambiguously (Wain 2012; Simpson 2015; Saha 2016). For example, colonial India’s famous northwest frontier (now the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands) was treated as a region ostensibly overseen by British rule, though the colonial presence on the ground always remained limited to a handful of political agents and intermittent military garrisons; to the northeast, the boundary between India and Burma fluctuated and remained undemarcated until late in the twentieth century.

With the advent of decolonization, colonial frontiers crystalized into postcolonial borders. Borders served two critical purposes for new state leaders. First, in an era when postcolonial leaders were intent on asserting their political legitimacy and the rights and existence of their states, confirmed borders were critical: they indicated the territorial limits of the new regimes and circumscribed their sovereignty. As such, border regions were an important space for the performance of state sovereignty – for both local and foreign audiences. Guomindang leaders, for example, pursued state-building projects in China’s borderlands from 1937-45, through which ‘frontier service’ encouraged border regions’ assimilation (Rodriguez 2011). Similarly, both newly independent Pakistani and Indian leaders pursued development projects, such as roads, schools, or hospitals, in their respective northwestern and northeastern border regions, as well as in disputed Kashmir, to assert governance over area subjects (Leake 2017; Guyot-Réchard 2013; Leake and Haines 2017). As such, borderlands provided arenas in which state leaders could exert sovereignty – the writ of law, the ability to fund and pursue building projects – over their own citizens, as well as in the eyes of their neighbours.

Second, border regions provided a setting in which states could determine who belonged, who did not, and the legalities of population mobility. The official establishment of border posts created settings for the state to monitor traffic flows and to police who entered and exited, or decide who was or was not allowed. As such borders were indelibly linked to the national project and the question of citizenship. This is as true today as it was historically. Borders are critical zones where citizenship can be performed and questioned. Borders confirm the bureaucratic reach of a state: the border checkpoint cannot be separated from the passport, the physical manifestation of national belonging. Similarly, ‘border control’ has become synonymous with the issue of immigration and state decisions about who can or cannot cross (Bashford 2014). As such, borders were, and are, indelibly tied to the issue of citizenship and belonging and indicate a specific space where these issues receive particular scrutiny.

Those borders about which state leaders are least confident are those that frequently are subsequently militarized and thus become an importance space for armed force. Uncertain borders tend to see large military bodies. The Line of Control that divides Kashmir between Indian and Pakistani influence is perhaps one of the most (in)famously militarized zones in the world, and this reflects the claims to all of Kashmir made, at various points, by both sides (Leake and Haines 2017). The border between North and South Korea remains similarly militarized, historically due to Cold War tensions and more recently to prevent North Koreans from fleeing the state and ensure the regime’s security. The border between India and Pakistan also beholds large military presences, and to this day, the nightly ceremonial closing of the Wagah border post between Indian Punjab and Pakistani Punjab, involving Indian and Pakistani soldiers, colourfully demonstrates the perceived importance of clearly delineating India from Pakistan. Militarized borders are thus intended to circumscribe and limit citizens’ movement, at the same time that they reveal states’ concerns about their borders’ security (Andreas 2003).

The militarization of borders highlights a key issue regarding borders and borderlands: while state leaders have sought reaffirmation of state boundaries subsequent to decolonization, this has frequently led to conflict. Disputed borders have been as much a result of the end of empire as those that have been accepted. Leaders in neighbouring countries frequently have presented conflicting demarcations, often thanks to vague colonial frontiers or resented colonial-era demarcations. Examples can be seen (at various points throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) with the borders between India and China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar/Burma; Pakistan and Afghanistan; Cambodia and Thailand and Laos; Vietnam and Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand; and North Korea and China (Raghavan 2006; Maxwell 1999; Leake 2017; Amer 1995).

State representatives have wielded various border logics to argue for or against certain borders. Some advocate continued acceptance of the colonial precedent and borders drawn by the withdrawn imperial powers (this can be seen in arguments made by Pakistan against Afghanistan; India against China; and Cambodia against Vietnam). Others reject this logic and argue that borders should mirror precolonial realities (China against India and Vietnam; Afghanistan against Pakistan; North Korea against China). These arguments frequently involve issues of both geography and ethnicity. For example, the Afghan state in the 1950s pointed to the Jhelum river in Pakistan’s Punjab as its precolonial riverine border, as well as affiliating itself with ethnic Pashtuns dwelling in Pakistan; Chinese leaders rejected the colonial-era McMahon Line separating northeast India from the PRC citing precolonial ethnic, linguistic, and economic ties between northeast India (now Arunachal Pradesh) and China (Ministry of External Affairs 1959). Similarly, ongoing border tensions between Laos and Cambodia have revolved around the location and belonging of borderlands ethnic Khmer and Lao communities (Baird 2010).

Border disputes consequently have been responsible for the militarization of some borders and the introduction of violence into some borderlands. Border skirmishes between national armed forces have not been uncommon in these various cases, and have even sparked larger conflicts. The 1962 Sino-Indian war, resulting from the disputed border, was one of the most significant conflicts confronting India in the twentieth century. And competition and confrontation between national bodies is not the only form of violence that haunts borderlands. State leaders have been prepared to take violent action against their own citizens in cases where border disputes threaten state sovereignty. The Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan provides one of the clearest examples of this: colonial-era practices of aerial bombardment and military occupation have continued through the twenty-first century any time local Pashtun populations have resisted state interference in the ongoing Afghan-Pakistan border dispute (Leake 2017). Similarly, when threatened by autonomy movements near the border with Burma/Myanmar, Indian officials ‘grouped’ local Naga and Mizo communities into camps where they were overseen by state officials (Sundar 2011). In both cases, violence against locals has been justified in the name of state cohesion. More systemic violence can also be seen in borderlanders’ daily lives: frequently their mobility is fenced in or policed, and strict limits are placed on locals’ movements and activities.

Thus, a paradox emerges. On one hand, borders present spaces where states readily demonstrate the extent of their sovereignty and the ability to exert law and order. On the other, borderlands are also spaces of potential exception where actions – especially violence – that might not otherwise be tolerated are accepted. As such, what becomes clear is that borderlands frequently have an uncomfortable relationship with a state’s centres of power. And while border disputes often take the form of diplomatic maneuvering, or the occasional skirmish, between neighbouring countries, their effects on borderlands communities are far more reaching.

**Borderlands and the Everyday**

While borders, themselves, frequently dominate state-led rhetoric – whether it is developing up to a border, or settling a border dispute – complex realities exist in borderlands and often link communities and territories on either side of a border. Border regions may be areas where state leaders are particularly concerned with exerting their governance, but they also frequently support populations who disregard, undermine, or exploit the border in their daily lives.

Unsurprisingly, colonial-era borders reflected imperial strategic calculations, not local circumstances. Given how attached many postcolonial states have remained to colonial borders, tensions thus have persisted in borderlands where borders do not match lived realities. Many local populations continue to move across borders in pursuit of longer-standing social, economic, and political relations. Communities on either side of a border are frequently linked by language, culture, and ethnicity. These ties can sit (uncomfortably) alongside national identities, or they can be considered paramount.

In this regard, several opportunities are available to locals. Local populations can decide to engage with state actors and become ‘nationalized’ and linked to the centre. This can mean activities such as joining the army or police forces, engaging with local development initiatives, and generally assimilating with the nation (as defined by the state). Alternatively, communities and individuals can choose to engage with the state while also pursuing transborder ties. An example of this involves Pashtuns living on either side of the disputed Durand Line separating Afghanistan and Pakistan; drawn in 1893, the line divided the Wazir Pashtun community between Afghanistan and colonial India, ignoring familial, social, economic, political, or ethnic ties that continued to link Wazir Pashtuns even after the border’s creation. On one hand, Wazir Pashtuns have engaged with the Afghan and Pakistani states in limited ways, for example accepting financial subsidies from the colonial Indian, then Pakistani state, in return for allegiance. On the other, local relationships have persisted despite a border, and the fact that the border has only been policed intermittently means there is little to stop Wazir Pashtuns from crossing the line. Thus while ‘officially’ the border exists, in reality, its impacts have been limited – including in the twenty-first century, when drone attacks have persisted in disrupting any sort of official border (Omrani 2009; Ahmad 2014; Jones 2009).

Locals also can reject limits placed on their mobility by state-imposed borders and (try to) continue their daily practices. This frequently means crossing the border, despite potential danger, to continue traditional familial, social, or economic practices. For example, despite the presence of fences along half of the India-Bangladesh border, locals continue to traverse the border to visit family or conduct business. Reece Jones recounts the story of a servant in a Bangladeshi household who paid a broker to escort her across the heavily guarded border into India to visit her son: ‘She never saw any border guards, or even the new border fence, but it was certainly there […] The only difference from previous trips […] was the extra cost of paying the brokers’ (Jones 2012, 1-2). As such, what becomes clear is that even when state officials try to assert the presence of a border, locals can, and frequently do, ignore the border for their own needs.

Borders also can create new opportunities and new economies in borderlands: they can be exploited to serve local interests. Michiel Baud and van Schendel note how smuggling epitomizes a specifically borderlands economy that takes advantage of a border’s presence and smugglers’ ability to cross the border to deliver goods back and forth (Baud and van Schendel 1997, 229-231). They take advantage of state-led activities, such as border controls, to create new opportunities, financial or otherwise. Even in heavily militarized or policed border regions, such as the Sino-North Korean border, locals have taken part in black market activities to create a ‘second economy’, actively seeking ways to cross the border and take advantage of transborder connections to import goods. As Andrei Lankov and Kim Seok-hyang point out, these transborder traders not only are ‘making good money out of it’, but they have the potential to encourage wider change, as ‘they present a vital and attractive alternative to the officially promoted life strategy’ in North Korea (Lankov and Kim 2008, 71). Even if participants become involved in smuggling for personal gain, they represent the potential for broader subversion of state control, whether through introducing material goods or novel political and social ideas.

As such, borderlands communities are particularly well placed to subvert or call into question state controls. Not only are they frequently located far from major centres of political power, but their ties with their transborder neighbours – whether created for political gain or historical in nature – create ambiguities of identity and belonging. Thus, unsurprisingly, borderlands have frequently been the site of separatist or autonomy movements, where local communities have advocated greater autonomy within the existing state, their potential merger with the neighbouring state, or the establishment of their own, independent nation. This can be seen in Balochistan, in western Pakistan, where an insurgency has been ongoing since the 1970s among Baloch populations demanding autonomy or independence (Harrison 1981; Titus and Swidler 2002). Similarly, conflict persists between the state of Myanmar and its ethnic Karen population, which lives along the border with Thailand and some of whom have fought for an independent state since Burmese independence (South 2007).

But, as indicated in the previous section, the potentialities of borderlands come at a cost. Given the importance placed on borderlands by state administrations, determined that their countries’ international borders will not change, borderlands communities have faced violent repression. States remain determined to quash autonomy movements and ensure borderlands’ integration, though ironically, the policies pursued by states – bombing, camps, a prolonged embedded army presence, travel passes – are not designed to endear the state to borderlanders. Moreover, the irony of many borders is that their porous nature allows locals to escape across the border during periods of punitive action and return after their completion. Thus, in recent years, the story of many borderlands has involved state pursuit of walls or fences to prevent flows of people and goods (Jones 2012). Whether this will lessen violence, or truly circumscribe longer-standing mobilities, remains to be seen. But as van Schendel and Michiel Baud point out, undoubtedly this reveals that ‘The meanings and consequences of borders change over time’ (Baud and van Schendel 1997, 223). Reflecting on borders and borderlands in light of twentieth- and twenty-first-century international politics particularly indicates the changing nature of borders.

**Borderlands and International Politics**

This chapter has already alluded to the importance of local and regional politics when considering the history of borderlands, and it has pointed to colonialism and decolonization as a key global aspect of borderlands history. But briefly, it is worth emphasizing how far borders serve as points of international, as well as regional and local, politics. Particularly in the context of the Sino-North Korean border, great power diplomacy has played a critical role in either exacerbating tensions along certain borders – or it has been responsible for the creation of new borders that have little rooting in local circumstances.

In the twentieth century, the global Cold War and the rise of international institutions, alongside decolonization, shaped borders and borderlands. The United Nations emerged as a key arena for disputing, demarcating, and policing borders in the post-World War II era. This was especially so as its membership ballooned with the entry of postcolonial states. UN peacekeeping and security operations thus frequently arose in the context of contested borders. For example, the UN was responsible for the establishment of the Line of Control as a de facto border between Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir (as well as ‘border’ separating Israel and Palestine). Similarly, the UN became responsible both for establishing and reaffirming new borders. In the former case, UN forces famously intervened in the Congo crisis in 1960 to prevent the creation of a new Katangan state; in the latter, the UN was behind the 1953 establishment of the demilitarized zone that effectively created the border separating the two states of North and South Korea (Amrith and Sluga, 2008). As such, borders became key sites of involvement by supranational organizations alongside state and local actors.

The Cold War similarly brought some borders into question, affirmed others, and at times, led to the creation of new boundaries (Westad 2011). Interstate border disputes often became imbued with broader ideological and political significance due to the broad spheres of influence of the communist and capitalist camps. The 1962 border war between India and China brought new US support and funding to India in its perceived struggle against a communist power, thus shoring up Indian claims to the disputed border region. The conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Durand Line came to represent a clash between the United States and Soviet Union (and capitalism versus communism), especially following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; in this context, the Durand Line was seen as a crucial barrier against further Soviet expansion, and its surrounding borderlands were key grounds for the anti-communist insurgency.

Further east, Cold War conflicts were significant in creating new, if not permanent, borders and borderlands. ‘Partition’ is a term frequently associated with the creation of new borders in South Asia, but it equally applies in the contexts of Vietnam and Korea. Both of these states were bisected by new orders during times of war, and indeed, the global Cold War was the key cause for these divisions. In both of these cases, as with those in South Asia, local conflicts became conflated with the bipolar conflict between the communist and capitalist worlds, and for this reason, artificial borders were created that in no way matched historical realities of either colonial or precolonial eras. As Jong-Han Yoon says of the border between North and South Korea, during the Cold War it marked ‘the fault line between two ideological camps’ (Yoon 2011, 255).

The border between North and South Korea thus is a product of international and supranational intervention in the name of ideology and a politico-military strategy of containment. During the Vietnam wars, the 17th parallel similarly served as a de facto border between north and south Vietnam, and as a frontline in a conflict between north and south and US and USSR (and PRC). In both cases, borders were implemented via top-down negotiations and international agreements. They were created during international conferences for strategic reasons that benefited foreign participants, rather than reflecting local circumstances, and were established without local input.

Thus, considering international intervention provides a critical addendum for understanding Asia’s borderlands. The divisions between north and south Vietnam and North and South Korea, much like that dividing Kashmir, highlight the role of supranational entities in establishing and monitoring borders since the mid-twentieth century. In both cases, the United Nations played a critical role as a forum for discussion of the conflicts and the newly drawn borders. Moreover, the interests of the superpowers and their supported regime dictated the creation of new borders. And the durability of these borders depended on Cold War developments as much as local shifts. As such, these two examples highlight how borders become the focus of not only state and regional, but also international interests.

These two case studies also reveal how borders come to embody different meanings, not only at different points of time, as indicated by Baud and van Schendel, but also by different agents. These two borders had ideological and strategic significance for foreign actors, especially the two superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union. More locally, they represented a question about national sovereignty for state leaders in either region: They could serve to circumscribe governance, societies, and politics, as in the Korean case. Alternatively, they could be rejected, undermined and broken down for resumption of a single sovereign national space, as in the Vietnamese case. Their impact on local populations was more ambiguous and changed over time: in the Vietnamese case, the border was transgressed by locals during the war, and has decreased in relevance since 1975 (into official non-existence). In contrast, in Korea, the border between North and South has been increasingly policed and regulated, and thus has served to increasingly differentiate between the two states (Gelézeau 2010; Kerkvliet 2001). This demonstrates that internationally dictated borders have the potential to become embedded into state and local community practices, but equally, given the right circumstances, they can decline and lapse. But in both cases, they demonstrate that externally imposed borders can have huge local, national, regional, and international impacts.

**Conclusion**

The Sino-North Korean border thus shares many of the same characteristics as other Asian borderlands. On one hand, it is a border that has been informed and reinforced by state interests, those of North Korea and the People’s Republic of China. The border’s importance stems from its role demarcating two national spaces, and it is a space where both states can regulate and oversee their citizens’ mobility and monitor who comes and goes. Nevertheless, because the border between these states remains partly disputed, this also means that the border persists as a potential source of tension within the region, and different border logics persist. While some in both North and South Korea still lay claim to ethnic Koreans in the neighbouring Chinese province of Yanbian, Chinese representatives continue to refer to a border originally delimited in 1712 (Gomà 2006). This aligns with the argument that no single border logic exists, and instead, different actors employ different justifications to either uphold or undermine a border region.

Moreover, despite close observance of this border by either state, it continues to shape, and be shaped by, non-state actors. It has provided opportunities for new local economies based on black-market goods illicitly smuggled over the border. Moreover, people continue to cross the border as part of their daily lives and maintain connections with crossborder parties, such as ethnic Koreans living in China. As such, the border is an important part of borderlanders’ daily lives, but it is not the only aspect.

Reflecting on the international attention paid to this borderland is perhaps a suitable way of ending this chapter. While the Sino-North Korean border has both local and regional significance, it has been increasingly imbued with international significance as well. Escalated tensions between the United States and North Korea means that Western observers are paying renewed attention to these borderlands – and trying to place new pressure on China to regulate this space. The border thus increasingly takes the form that the North-South Korea previously did – that of a stark ideological and political divide within international relations. As such, international attention on this region emphasizes how borders represent local, national, and international spaces where different interests converge. It also exacerbates the potential for violence, whether interstate or intrastate, in these borderlands.

Nevertheless, what remains equally clear is that the Sino-North Korean border, like those across Asia and the globe, will continue as one that is engaged with or manipulated in in numerous ways. It continues to mean different things for different actors – a matter of state sovereignty for state actors, a line linking two borderlands regions for locals – and the question remains how high-level diplomacy will affect matters on the ground. In borderlands, time and space are both important, as the nature of a border and its impact on neighbouring borderlands continues to fluctuate in various ways for different participants. Regardless of top-down actions taken regarding the border, itself, the borderlands are likely to remain fluid, contested, and complex.

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**3 Regions within the Yalu-Tumen Border Space[[11]](#footnote-11)+**

From Dandong to the Tumen and Beyond

*Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney*

**Abstract**

Using insights and observations from fieldwork in the border region, and complimented by secondary sources, this chapter moves in a northeastern direction up the China-North Korea border region, contrasting the commercial effervescence of the Dandong and Yalu estuary with the isolated area around Hyesan/Changbai and the ethnic Korean enclave of Yanbian. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the border region is not in fact uniform, but a series of sub-regions each with its own form of cross-border interactions, social dynamics, and commercial and security concerns.

**Keywords:** Yalu River, Tumen River, Jilin province, Liaoning province, North Korean border region

**Introduction**

The Sino-North Korean borderland may not be an intuitive vantage point from which to assess the state of Northeast Asia, but it is in a sense fitting. Many fates intersect there. For China, the region is a once-proud model of economic and social development that, in spite of its relative decline, remains advantageous for the leverage that it provides over North Korea. For South Korea, China’s border region with North Korea becomes an area where interfacing with the rival Korean republic can occur outside of the DMZ, and outside of the public disjuncture of the Kaesong Industrial Complex – closed since February 2016, in spite of the best efforts of the incumbent administration of President Moon Jae-in. For Japan, the area is the locus of two old failed colonial projects, and a site of potential increased economic interactions with the polyglot continent. It is in the Sino-Korean border region that the intelligence services of China, North and South Korea carefully watch each other, and are watched in turn. It is there that local elites and ethnic Korean communities consciously and unconsciously subvert central-state attempts to bring national frontiers under control. Smuggling and other border-crossing activities take place partly because local people do not see the border as a hard frontier.

Even now, getting deeper into the 21st century, the border is one of very few places where one can get closer to answering the ‘North Korea question’. It is now commonplace for Western journalists to travel to Dandong or Yanji, treating those cities as means of peering into the North. Borderland communities hold the promise – though not always the reality – of discussions with businesspersons or labourers from North Korea and China embroiled in work, cross-border trade, or cultural exchange. The present book is a start toward wedding this mode of gaining access with a more rigorous and multifaceted academic approach.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In this chapter, then, we aim to lay out the differences between variegated China-North Korea border regions, as the non-uniformity and incompatibility among them is more interesting than their likenesses. This borderland was never really ‘understood as a coherent space and a source of belonging’ (Giersch 2016). It is a space of obvious differences, not just between the states on either side of the rivers, but between the Yalu and Tumen river basins themselves. The former divides Korean and non-Korean communities, whereas the latter separates Korean from Korean. It is a non-trivial distinction.

Unlike the narrow waist of the Korean peninsula (190km coast-to-coast at its slimmest), Korea’s border with China is, at least by local standards, immense. Two rivers mark the line which divides China from North Korea, and North Korea – formally known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – hangs, like a gnarled appendage (though Koreans tend understandably to prefer the metaphor of a rabbit), from the Chinese northeast. The Yalu and Tumen rivers that form the border trickle down out of the volcanic Mount Baekdu, carve their way through rock cliffs, wooded pine forests and gentle alluvial hills, and grow in size and strength before billowing their sediment out into the Yellow Sea to the west and the Sea of Japan to the east, respectively.

Much of the 880 miles (about 1300 kilometres) of the vast frontier feels wild; here, fauna leap, swim or fly with relative ease from bank to bank without regard to borders or political systems. As for other things that penetrate the border with no regard for politics, well, that is another matter. On 25 May 2009, people as well as animals on the Chinese side of the border well understood – because they could physically feel – the power of North Korea’s underground nuclear test (McCurry et al. 2009).

Integration of transport on the two sides of the border is also another matter. High-speed rail has further mixed up the population of most of *Dongbei* (‘Northeast’), as this area is known.[[13]](#footnote-13) These trains connect Beijing with Shenyang, the old ‘Gateway to Manchuria’ and home to a US Consulate-General and a Korean War memorial, in addition to eight million people. From there the mainline stretches northward to Changchun, the former capital of the Japanese colonial state, Manchukuo, before terminating in the Russified city of Harbin.

Other lines hang like droplets from this arterial route, creating north-south linkages to the border but without connecting borderland termini together. A high-speed branch line connects Shenyang with Dandong and Dalian, and a spur of the mainline links Beijing with Jilin, Yanji, and Hunchun. Consequently, it now takes just 90 minutes to get from Shenyang to Dandong, and a mere nine hours from the Chinese capital to the most easterly point of the China-North Korea border. All the more jarring, then, that at the time of writing there is no border-skirting high-speed link between Dandong and Hunchun, which means that that traversing the borderland from end to end is still a journey of 21 hours, just as it has been for decades.

The geographic distance and relative disconnectedness exacerbate pre-existing inequalities between borderland communities. None of the border provinces here is wealthy, but the disadvantages of being in Jilin Province, with the exception of Changchun itself, are particularly obvious, especially when one compares it with the only major city right on the border: Dandong.

**A Site of Human Exchanges: Dandong**

Most border journeys start at Dandong in Liaoning Province. The city is also the first Chinese settlement that one meets on almost any journey by land out of North Korea, as the large city of Sinuiju, with its population of 300,000 lies just across the border (Cathcart and Kraus 2008). This is by far the most popular area of the immediate border region, which may be why, per South Korean scholar Kang Ju-won, Dandong is the primary zone of China-North Korean human exchange. Kang’s second book, *The Amnok River Flows Differently* (2016) is a rich anthropological depiction of North Korean livelihoods in the city, where 20,000 workers from North Korea quietly labour in the face of a December 2019 deadline, set by the UN Security Council, for the return of all North Korean overseas labourers (Associated Press 2017b).

It is the prevalence of firms employing these workers that draws the attention of economists Kim Byung-yeon and Jung Seung-ho, who use the municipality to partially quantify the basis of Chinese trade and investment with North Korea (Kim and Jung 2015). Though they do not openly admit it for security reasons, the authors of *Person to Person* seem also to have conducted their research in the city. In this case, the respondents were North Koreans in Dandong on legal visit visas, another common category of those who pass through here (Kang and Pak 2015).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Today’s visitor to Dandong, meanwhile, can scarcely avoid getting a sense of unrealized potential. It takes an extreme form of relational dysfunction for two modern nation-states – one a vast trading nation with global ambitions – sharing a 1400 km frontier to still be conducting 80 per cent of their legal cross-border trade across one, single-lane, early 20th century road and rail bridge. Yet that is what happens here. Absurdly, it is possible, albeit inaccurately and without accounting for what has at times been a very considerable trade in natural resources, to judge the state of cross-border economic relations by sitting on the riverside with a coffee, counting trucks in and out of the DPRK.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Seven kilometres downstream in Dandong’s impressive New City there is a second, much bigger cable-span bridge connecting Dandong with Sinuiju (Cathcart and Green 2017). Except that it does not. Instead, it connects Dandong with a field some 5km west of International Road No. 1, North Korea’s (ludicrously, unpaved) road link between Pyongyang and the border. When construction of the bridge was agreed upon in October 2009 – when then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao went to Pyongyang to deliver China’s economic vote of confidence in the succession of Kim Jong-un, as the chapter by Cathcart and Green later in this volume recalls – it looked for all the world as if North Korea was considering a serious economic policy shift (Cathcart 2012). Now, as if the neon lights of the Dandong skyline were not always jarring enough for North Pyongan Province locals, the new bridge now hangs on the horizon, pregnant with possibility and yet both literally and metaphorically unreachable. Everyone knows that, for now at least, on the North Korean side its multiple lanes end ignominiously in a field. Sinuiju is a city on the brink of something, but nobody seems sure quite what. It is still several kilometres shy of its destination, and with alternating currents of neglect and heavy central management, it is difficult to discern the future there.

Travel away from the border into the interior of North Korea and one finds that alongside International Road No. 1 there is another road built with the energy aroused by Wen’s 2009 trip (Ruwitch 2013). It is a simple, two-lane affair, but it is paved, which of course makes it a great improvement upon National Road No.1, the unpaved, axle-crushing dirt track. Unfortunately for driver and passenger alike, then, the new road, which begins east of South Sinuiju and culminates at the (also paved) Pyongyang-Huichon Highway north of Anju, is, like the aforementioned bridge, unconnected to the road network and lies unused, except by local cyclists. Today it functions only as the widest, longest, and arguably most expensive cycle path in East Asia.

To the southwest of Dandong is its port of Donggang, lying across the Yalu from what is ostensibly a North Korean special economic zone in Sindo County called Hwangumpyeong. In spite of these grand ambitions, most of which sank with the untimely death of Jang Song-taek in December 2013, this remains mostly an area of fishermen, more hardscrabble than Dandong. It is an area where North Korea is as often seen as an adversary and competitor on the seas than a comradely cousin, as a 2012 piracy case amply demonstrated (Ramstad and Woo 2012). A ferry runs a few times a week from China’s Donggang port to Incheon in South Korea; it runs around the sparse island edges of North Korea’s Hwanghae coastline and acts as a reminder both of how close Dandong is to South Korea, and how, at least economically, North Korea is receding from view.

Heading northeast of Dandong, one reaches the hilly forests and smaller villages and cities of Fengchuan/Manchu counties on the Chinese side. They are fronted by Uiju on the Korean side. This used to be the main juncture point before the arrival of Japanese-Russian rivalry in northeast China and Korea. Today, Uiju cannot be seen from the Chinese side of the border and has become ever more marginalized.

**Ground Zero in the History War: Ji’an and Manpo**

Continue northeast up the Amnok (known in Chinese as Yalu) River for several hundred kilometres and things begin to change at the town of Ji’an and its North Korean opposite number, Manpo. For one thing, an unassuming new bridge across the Yalu here is open and operational as, indeed, is a third one to the east near Hunchun (Im 2016) with another one at Namyang close to completion by the Chinese state-run railway corporation (Zwirko 2019). In most cases, tourists constitute the main cross-border economic activity. During the researchers’ stay in Ji’an, Xinhua announced the opening of a train route from the city to Pyongyang (Xinhua 2014). The article about the opening went on to cite one Liu Jun, deputy manager of Ji’an International Travel Agency, as noting with no lack of optimism that the train from Ji’an will put tourists within reach of Pyongyang, Kaesong, and even that most tantalizing of borderland spaces, the truce village at Panmunjom. ‘Holders of Chinese ID cards and passports can apply for the 2,980 yuan, or $480, visit in Ji’an’, it elaborated. ‘The trip is organized every four days.’

The optimism of the Chinese media is all very well and good, of course, but our own journeys to the border reinforced how tenuous the transportation connections still are in this neighbourhood; Ji’an is a bit of a cul-de-sac. It is supposed that linking Ji’an to North Korea might allow for something larger to develop. In the Xinhua piece, Zang Wanghong, named as di­rector of the Ji’an Tourist Board, indicated the pos­sibility of this, saying that day trips to Manpo would open on May 1, as by the June of 2015 they certainly had (China Daily 2015).

The chance to host tours would more than explain the dedica­tion of the North Korean authorities to the aesthetic revival of Manpo, as seen from across the river in Ji’an. New buildings here, new roofing on old buildings there: the city has been spruced up considerably since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2011. But then, the redevelopment of Manpo has also become a plank in the legitimating narrative of Kim Jong-un’s rule, so perhaps we ought not to be surprised (Macdonald 2018). An extended section of a KCTV documentary broadcast on 17 December 2014 in commemoration of the 3rd anniversary of the death of Kim Jong-il reflected this, expounding at length on the revival of the city.

Ji’an attained brief infamy at the turn of the 21st century as a key site in the bilateral struggle for ownership of Goguryeo heritage, after China rather brazenly integrated the ancient kingdom into its national history, triggering a bilateral spat with Seoul whose intensity still waxes and wanes in inverse proportion to the two capitals’ mutual enmity toward Japan (Chung 2009). The town now plays host to the Goguryeo Museum, one of the least user-friendly museums one is likely to ever encounter. Presumably antagonized by the ever-present risk of South Koreans taking umbrage at the revisionist content and, worse, uploading evidence of it to the internet, in 2014 not only was it impossible to take photos in the museum; one had to leave all cameras and phones in another building some 50m away. An AFP reporter, one of the only foreign corre­spondents to visit in 2013, was escorted out of town for apparently violating the rules of the museum (Korea Herald 2013). Our visits were, thankfully, less confrontational.

Ji’an’s generic elements emerge foremost in the linguistic realm: Ji’an has no hangul signs, no centre of ethnic Korean culture, no visible signs of the ‘Korean Wave’. When asked about Korean cultural impact, ethnic Koreans living in the area either refused to answer or deflected our questions. In a trio of local bookstores, a Korean dictionary could scarcely be found amid the latest Harry Potter translations and associated knock-offs. On the lip of ‘Goguryeo Park’ downtown across from the Cuiyuan Hotel, we walked into a small bookstore and asked two clerks for a map of North Korea, a request that brought looks of incredulity.

This all seems to sum up a great deal about the Sino-North Korean relationship: for Chinese, the multiple and overlapping sensitivities, as well as the changing attitudes toward North Korea, make it better under most circumstances to just claim ignorance or ignore questions altogether. There are North Korean restaurants which are common and rather unremarkable establishments scattered across the Sino-North Korea border region. The proportion of workers to patrons (always more of the former) and the sheer number of establishments one observes in the border region certainly exceeds market fit. But since workers’ wages are effectively garnished by a predatory state, perhaps this mismatch is of little concern.

Unlike South Korean tourists, visitors from the DPRK seem to present no impediment to the Chinese government’s creative reinterpretation of local history. At the nearby General’s Tomb, said to be the last resting place of the late-4th century monarch King Kwanggaet’o, we asked our guide, amidst all the squabbling over 1000-year-old relics, whether she has ever met a North Korean researcher from across the mountainous frontier. ‘One did come out here from Pyongyang once’, she recalled with a chuckle. ‘But all he was interested in was proving that Pyongyang has always been the capital of Korea’.

Which is not to say that North Korean scholars won’t take the fight to the Chinese at all. Kim Hyeonsuk (2012) notes how the North Korean academy produced ‘counterpart studies’ in the years after 2004 featuring arguments that were the same or similar to those published by South Korean scholars since the end of 2003. In 2007, the peak year for North Korean involvement in this particular history war and also the year China officially ended its Northeast Asia Project, a handful of papers appeared in the North Korean journal *Ryeoksagwahak* [‘Historical Science’] that sought to rebut Chinese claims on the region. The most prominent and extensive of these was by the deputy dean of Kim Il-sung University, Ri Gwang Hui (2007). The North Korean state-produced historical studies are critical of the Chinese claims to the region and strive to highlight what South Korean researchers also regard as the distortions embedded in the Chinese version of regional history. The difference is in their style. The North Korean studies, whilst rebutting the Chinese claims, do not do so as forcefully or directly as their South Korean equivalents. They are muted, referring frequently to ‘some foreign scholars’, instead of naming China as the object of criticism (Kim 2012, 315).

This relative North Korean passivity may come as a relief for some in South Korea. Kim (2012) points witheringly to differences of perspective between North and South Korean works, which she attributes to North Korea’s ‘rearrangement of [Goguryeo] history based on the Juche view of history’ (meaning in sum that North Korean state historians see, according to Song (2010, 49), the ‘Korean people as the all-subsuming value’.) Outcomes of this approach include the false periodization of Goguryeo, which North Korea backdates to 277BC, compared with 37BC in South Korea (Nahm 1993, 29). According to Kim (2012), as well as Song (2010), North Korea historical claims relating to the period are made without sufficient historical evidence to support them in an ‘unacademic’, ‘unscientific’, and ‘arbitrary’ manner. Kim (2012) fears that this could hinder the formation of a united Korean front and undermine the task of rebutting Chinese revisionism in Northeast Asia.

In any event, the dynamic of relations between the DPRK and China requires a different kind of diplomatic management to that between China and the Republic of Korea. The DPRK is relatively dependent on Chinese assistance and trade flows for its post-famine economic recovery and growth. Facing what is often described as an existential threat in the present, it is no surprise that the North Korean response to Chinese revisionism of the past might be constrained.

Up the river, far from the battles over history, Linjiang sits at the apex of a turn of that river along the border, functioning as the gateway to an Eastern spur of the Yalu, which drives down from Mount Baekdu to the East. Unlike Ji’an, Linjiang has no real external reputation; Chinese in the big cities of the Northeast go about their daily lives as wholly ignorant of Linjiang as do the readers of the Western press, for both Chinese and Western correspondents have not deemed the city worthy of much attention. It was, nevertheless, the end of the Chinese landmass, the beginning of the road to Mount Baekdu. This town’s version of Grand Central Station was, basically, a back alley a few blocks from the City Hall. Visions of China’s immense power on the frontier would have to be held in check in this little backwater. Unlike bigger towns like Shenyang, here in Linjiang few cabbies stood around to accost the newly arrived; there were no desperately unemployed or laid off industrial workers.

**Wellspring of Kim Regime Propaganda: Mt. Baekdu**

Out of town toward the towering Mt. Baekdu, the river gets progressively narrower. At 9000ft, Mt. Baekdu casts a long shadow across the borderland, and not merely as the mythical wellspring of North Korean ‘Kimism’. It is also a volcanic risk factor for the entire region. It has been a thousand years since the last volcanic eruption, but it was serious when it happened, creating the 7km-wide crater at the summit that is known today as the picturesque Heaven Lake.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the lee of the mountain lies the city of Hyesan and its counterpart Chinese town, Changbai. Hyesan is isolated from the North Korean interior; a remote corner of an underpopulated province, accessible by dilapidated public transport that takes forever. When time counts for anything, it is unwise to attempt such a journey; it is invariably quicker to fly to a regional Chinese city, travel by train, then cross the border once again. Visitors to Hyesan from within North Korea say that the ponderous train exacerbates the sense of a disruptive frontier settlement; the kind of place that pays only selective attention to *diktats* from the centre.[[16]](#footnote-16) The capital of Ryanggang province, Hyesan is a source of many smuggled goods and a common departure point for many defecting from the country (Choe 2018).[[17]](#footnote-17) This is not only because it is auspiciously located on the border. There is also a disruptive mind-set among the people – they do what needs to be done for themselves and are, by virtue of being along the border, less rooted to the nation-state than those in the interior. Although their acts of rebellion are rarely overt or concerted, they are quintessential borderlanders.

Hyesan, even when unseen, acts as a magnet. The frontier with China is often more flecked with humanity than properly populated, but Hyesan pulls all manner of humanity toward it. This magnetic principle is surely true from within the North Korean interior – the city is a key node for illegal traffic in drugs, flesh, and information. It also holds true from the Chinese side: even at this remote expanse, morally-compromised observers of North Korea seek an uncorrupted view of the DPRK’s urban northern face. In addition to being the largest city in Ryanggang province and the provincial capital, it is also a major site for Pyongyang’s regime propaganda narratives (Kim 1968). All of this means that its place on any national psychological map of the DPRK is larger than might otherwise be warranted.

Highway 303 is the road along the Chinese side of the border that stretches toward Hyesan. To drive east on it (and out of Erdaobaihe) is to be propelled yet further from Jilin’s warm provincial centres and toward Changbai, the small Chinese city which is an unattractively crucial outpost for Hyesan observation (Cathcart 2018). Leaving towns behind and travelling east, the road becomes more dramatic, even vertiginous. It twists around the edges of the river, occasionally becoming nearly swallowed by the DPRK on the other side. At times, one is surrounded by North Korea, its hillsides rocky and usually denuded, without being physically in it.

Leaving the river momentarily behind, the road climbs upward to a kind of plateau, alienated from the riverine frontier, as if Jilin province is all there ever was. But then just before the road slopes downward again and swiftly, three powerlines appear on the Chinese, side, dipping downwards toward, and then over, a small Chinese village. They then vault over into North Korea directly, where a small metal structure receives them, infusing the calcified veins of the socialist state with needed juice. Then there it is: Hyesan.

This visually fragile yet tangible infrastructural link between the two countries on either side of the frontier was a reminder of the hollowness of North Korea’s statements of self-reliance and of an earlier era in which Hyesan had pretentions of model modernity. Here, as in Hoeryong, the cult of Kim and revolutionary history created at least some small tangible benefits for citizens. Public improvements in Hyesan were more rapid than in other frontier cities, even though the main streets were still dirt (Lee 2009). And Hyesan was a unique city along the river (Lee 2015, 11-12; Cathcart 2018, 423-424; Gleason 2014). It was the only city in the northern border of the DPRK to have been occupied by ROK/UN troops during the Korean War. On 21 November 1950, American ROK troops marched into the city which was estimated to have been ‘85 percent destroyed’ by a bombing the week prior and the invasion itself (Appleman 1992, 732-736). Little is known about US and South Korean governance in the city, perhaps because it did not last for long. When China intervened in force in the conflict, the invading forces were quickly pushed into retreat.

During the short period of their ouster, the North Korean governors and military personnel responsible for Hyesan did not flee east to the forests around Mt. Baekdu, nor did they decamp down the Yalu River for Sinuiju, which was being bombed even more fiercely than Pyongyang. Instead, they were absorbed into Changbai on the PRC side, in an act of communist solidarity that was probably done more out of necessity and reciprocity than love. The war cross-border dynamics in a certain sense were maintained through the late 1950s, but with the pushing out of Chinese influence, the need to occasionally feed or repatriate hungry border-crossers from the Chinese side, and the closing or repurposing of Prisoner of War camps along the Yalu, there were simply fewer reasons to interact (Shen and Xia 2014).

History sometimes acts as a tremendous trigger in North Korea, as a sword hanging over the sky, but other times is it simply left to gather dust. The occupation of Hyesan may be one such latter instance, but it should not be forgotten. It is the one time that the effective frontiers of Southern governance and anti-communism butted up against Chinese territory, and the Chinese response was to absorb the North Koreans and recoil militarily into Korean territory. In place of this history, the absence of sovereign control, the DPRK has filled the void with Kimism. The recoil today seems more developmental than anything else. Today, the ROK frontier is 300 km to the south, and the glories and tragedies of North Korean socialism are instead on full display across the river. The final approach to Hyesan-Changbai on Highway 303 reveals Hyesan’s sprawl, its dusty mass which feels large after the sheer barrenness of what came before.

**Yanbian**

Stretching out from the north-eastern face of Mt. Baekdu is Yanbian, China’s Korean autonomous prefecture and home to approximately a million ethnically Korean citizens of the People’s Republic of China, most of whose ancestors settled here in the mid-19th century. A decreasing percentage of young residents of the prefecture speak functional Korean, especially in Antu and the northern city of Dunhua, and since the early 1990s there has been a constant net outflow of ethnic Koreans to South Korea.[[18]](#footnote-18) Nevertheless, Yanbian retains its distinct flavour in the Northeast, and is the easiest place for illegal migrant North Koreans to get around unimpeded. The local Korean dialect resembles that of North Korea’s Hamgyong Province, the rebellious frontier land to the south, and there is a (albeit slowly dwindling) reserve of sympathy for those who flee.[[19]](#footnote-19) Blending in is quite feasible, and thousands (primarily women) do.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In the 1990s, South Korean civil servants came here to get a handle on the scale of starvation across the border. What they found was a quintessential case of ‘borderland not bordered land’: people who recognized the border but didn’t particularly respect it as a division.[[21]](#footnote-21) This has changed markedly in the intervening years, with both China and North Korea investing in fences, cameras, upgraded customs houses and other accoutrements of state control to try and bring the unruly border into line (Denkowski 2014; Cathcart 2018). But this has long been, and in the privacy of older minds still is, an intimately connected frontier zone where Korean meets Korean across a river that divides territory, but not ethnic bonds. State power can impede this shared history, but not completely eradicate it. However, much like the history wars playing out silently in the sleepy city of Ji’an, there is a battle for hearts and minds involving the same three principal actors: China, North Korea, and the ROK.

During the earlier years of the Cold War, North Korea spent a considerable amount of time and money on public diplomacy in the Korean-speaking Yanbian region of China’s Jilin Province: books flowed into the region’s schools and public libraries; television newscasters had a noticeable North Korean lilt; and the local newspaper, the *Yanbian Ilbo*, regularly published pieces by journalists from the North Korean Cabinet’s own daily *Minju Joseon*. Many a Chinese Korean from the region embraced opportunities for upward mobility that took them to Pyongyang.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Times have most certainly changed. Young people in Yanbian today feel alienated from and indifferent to North Korea, and few care to visit (Green and Denney 2016). To them, the DPRK is a closed and socially exclusionary place. It is a country that offers few chances to develop mutual understanding – a handful of educational exchanges, temporary and infrequent work opportunities, and tourism – are nowhere near enough to foster the kind of bond that is felt by their grandparents’ generation, which was raised in the fog of revolutionary warfare.

Born mostly in the northern regions of what is now the DPRK, a great many of those who relocated during Japanese rule over the Korean peninsula and Manchuria retraced their steps to participate in the Korean War of 1950-1953 as Chinese ‘volunteers’. There they were counted as Chinese combatants, but the restoration of North Korean sovereign integrity was a motivating factor. The bonds of brotherhood that emerged would inform perceptions of the DPRK for decades to come (Cathcart and Kraus 2011).

This generally positive orientation rooted in shared wartime experiences was further cultivated by out-migration and cross-border people flows during China’s Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The disastrous economic and social policies of the Great Leap led to food shortages in many regions of China, including the Northeast. Not only material deficiencies but cultural pressures pushed countless Chinese Koreans southward across the Tumen and into the safe haven of North Korea. During the Cultural Revolution, political and ethnic persecution – acute in Yanbian – led more to follow suit (Shin 2016).

Through yesteryear’s turmoil, Chinese Koreans came to regard North Korea as a place of comparative stability and material abundance. Given such a tumultuous shared history, it is hardly surprising that those who lived through it all would have a deep reservoir of mutual empathy and compassion for their neighbour. But for the young of Yanbian today, that is an old story. The pool of positive affiliation has been greatly depleted.

China relinquished the ideological fervour of the early 1970s as the new decade of the 1980s arrived and embraced the siren call of industrial growth and stability. The economic miracle that followed offers ample explanation for the new proclivities of Yanbian’s youth. The road to success does not lead to Pyongyang; like Chinese everywhere, it leads to Beijing, Shanghai and the other east coast cities of the mainland.

Within this new reality there is space for South Korea, and it exerts the influence that it retains with some aplomb. South Korean goods are common in Yanbian stores and its cultural industries are widely enjoyed via satellite television – long gone are the days when China would fulminate over the South Korean ‘cultural invasion’ (Maliangkay 2006, 1). South Korean education and employment opportunities also have an obvious impact – a steady stream of Chinese Korean youth go from Chinese universities to South Korean graduate schools, where they collect ‘spec’ in the form of a Master’s degree before darting off to the big cities of their own land, or take employment in one of South Korea’s leading industrial behemoths for a few years to accrue CV-boosting experience.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The early 1990s was a moment of transitions in this part of the world. China and South Korea established relations in 1992 as Beijing was accelerating its ‘reform and opening’ policy. Seoul, staying true to *Nordpolitik*, opened its borders to Chinese Koreans, who had throughout the Cold War been categorized *persona non grata* because of a presumed Communist affiliation. The preferred destination for outward bound Chinese Koreans shifted accordingly. Diplomatic détente found Chinese Koreans taking advantage of opportunities in South Korea and South Korean firms doing the same in China. For North Korea, conversely, things could hardly have gone worse.

Although life has greatly improved in North Korea since the ruinous famine of the mid-1990s, to Chinese Koreans there is still nothing to envy about such an economically backward and political repressive place. Institutionally underdeveloped, joint ventures between North Koreans and Chinese partners regularly fail. North Korea is, in the upward-looking eyes of Chinese Koreans, the antithesis of modernity. South Korea and increasingly China are its affirmation.[[24]](#footnote-24)

During a recent trip to Yanji, the literal and metaphorical hub of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Jilin Province, many young Chinese Koreans spoke openly about their feelings toward China and the two Koreas. Aside from a few distant relatives across the border or fleeting moments of work experience in Pyongyang, North Korea is nowhere to be found on their mental map. For the youngest generation of Chinese Koreans and their Chinese boyfriends or girlfriends who hang out on Friday nights at stylish bars and clubs that would not be out of place a stone’s throw from Hong-ik University in Seoul, the question of who is ‘winning’ is likely moot. More choices and cheaper prices win out over at­tempts at preserving the traditional, Confucian, and Korean past that one finds in Yanji’s curated parks.

Indeed, Yanji, while modern and clean, is not all that Ko­rean (save for a few coffee shops and restaurants). Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture has completed a large, new history museum, containing almost no mention of the DPRK (or the controversial proto-Korean state, the Koguryo) and a few slight nods to business ties with South Korea. The goal of the museum is clearly to bind Chinese Koreans into the national Han-centred narrative, rather than presenting a balanced picture of borderland interactions.

**Conclusion**

It is inaccurate to speak of a single China-North Korea border zone. Go coast-to-coast from Dandong all the way up to Rason and one will pass through very different environments; from the economic dynamism of Dandong and Sinuiju on the Yalu to the rugged geography of Mt. Baekdu, rugged mentality of Hyesan/Changbai, and then to the kinship and historical bonds between Yanbian and the people of Hamgyong.

The border region was never monolithic, of course. But the changing face of modern China (and the absence of comparable change in North Korea) is making it even less so. The historical processes that drove borderland developments are being supplanted by new, contemporary realities of China-North Korea relations and new social, economic, and political facts on the ground. Chinese citizens, including ethnic Koreans, feel less of a pull towards Korea; South Korea is a place to study and maybe work and North Korea is best avoided altogether.

Of course, tight international sanctions complicate the economic relationship between China and North Korea, but that is not the whole story. Defectors and daring entrepreneurs may cross the border, but doing so today is certainly harder than it was even as recently as the 1990s. Globally, borders are hardening, and the story here is no different. Yet the geographies of the China-North Korea border area remain diverse, and though the border may be ‘harder’ today than it once was, the flow of goods and people continues.

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Part II

Towards a Methodology of Sino-Korean Border Studies

The Sino-North Korean border region is at the best of times a difficult research environment. Visiting North Korea for research purposes is effectively impossible and other means of entering the country often preclude the opportunity of visiting peripheral areas. Access in China is relatively better; one can take a high-speed train from Beijing to the very border at Tumen, Jilin Province.

However, as is well-documented, conducting research or moving about the area unencumbered is also virtually impossible. Where access is restricted or denied and where data are already scarce, how can we do research? What tools are at researchers’ disposal? Border studies is not a discipline with clear guidelines, so there is no preferential or tried-and-true way of collecting and analyzing information. That is both a problem and an opportunity.

The problem is that, unlike in established disciplines, there is no proper training available or well-established practices and procedures for researchers to follow. But the relative novelty of border studies cuts both ways. The lack of established practice or tradition leaves open the possibility of collaboration and experimentation that other subjects and disciplines lack. Border regions, especially the Sino-North Korean border, require a niche area specialty and linguistic capacity; area studies scholars – Koreanists and Sinologists – are needed. Yet, there is obviously room for history and social science.

Each chapter in this section reviews and/or employs a different tool kit for collecting data in or about the Sino-North Korea borderland from various disciplines. Steven Denney and Christopher Green use a survey methodology, gathering insights and opinions from those who traverse the border between China and North Korea: defector-migrants. Markus Bell and Rosita Armytage look at the same population, but use ethnographic means, mainly participant observation, as their method of choice. Kent Boydston reviews the benefits and pitfalls of using North Korean trade data, and Adam Cathcart shows how archives and other primary source materials can be used in the study of borderlands.

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**4 Unification in Action?**

The National Identity of North Korean Defector-Migrants: Insights and Implications

*Steven Denney and Christopher Green*

**Abstract**

What can the resettlement of North Korean defector-migrants into South Korean society today tell us about Korean national identity and the likely challenges of integrating the two Koreas tomorrow? In this chapter, we review the use of defector-migrant for interview and survey purposes. We then report findings from a national identity survey of 243 North Korean defector-migrants, run by the authors in 2016. The analysis compares responses to that of native South Koreans using propensity score matching, a statistical technique that allows us to reduce selection bias and make controlled comparisons. Overall, we find small but no substantive identity divergences between those from North Korea and native South Koreans.

**Keywords:** North Korean defector-migrants, national identity, unification, public opinion, methods

**Introduction**

Considering the relatively small size of the ‘defector-migrant’ community in South Korea, there is no shortage of academic and media commentary about both the community’s circumstances and the various government policies designed to aid its integration into South Korean life.[[25]](#footnote-25) Partly, the abundance of this discussion springs from the conception of defector-migrant integration as something of a test case for a future Korean peninsula unification. Prominent areas of concern for academics and increasingly policy-makers are discrimination in the personal and professional lives of defector-migrants, and the provision (or lack) of appropriate welfare services by the South Korean state (Lankov 2018; Noh et al. 2018; Chosun Ilbo 2017).

One intangible but equally vital discussion concerns identity and national belonging. What do North Korean migrants themselves think about their national identities as newly resettled members of South Korean society? How do these attitudes compare with native-born South Koreans? This chapter confronts these questions. It zooms in on the North Korean defector-migrant community, and asks what the migrants themselves think defines their national identity as new citizens of the Republic of Korea across three dimensions: 1) the importance of ethnocultural characteristics to national membership and belonging; 2) feelings of ‘closeness’ to South Korea; and 3) levels of pride (otherwise known as patriotism) toward South Korea’s political, social, and cultural achievements.

The empirical basis of this research is an opinion survey of 243 North Korean defector-migrants who were residing in South Korea in 2016. The survey is based on the ‘Korean identity survey’ but adjusted with migrant-relevant questions. To determine whether there are any differences between this resettled migrant group and native South Koreans, we compare averages between the migrants’ survey responses to those from the original Korean identity survey. Then, we look at whether there are any within-group differences in the migrant survey responses across relevant demographics and pre-/post-migration experiences.

And what do we expect to find? First, scholars argue that democratic institutions, like those consolidated to a large extent in South Korea, discourage closed or ascriptive conceptions of national identity. Accordingly, ethnic nationalism is felt to be incompatible with democratic norms. Emma Campbell concurs, finding that younger South Koreans feel little sense of national solidarity with other ethnic Koreans based on a shared ethnicity (Campbell 2016; Delury 2018). If so, one should expect North Koreans, who come from a dictatorship that still actively promotes a national identity based on ethnic purity, to put greater emphasis on ethnocultural characteristics of national identity.

Second, defector-migrants from North Korea are provided automatically with citizenship of the Republic of Korea (a term we will use interchangeably with South Korea). They receive a package of resettlement expenses that is not merely generous when compared with the treatment of other incoming foreigners, but also generous by global standards. Coupled to this official generosity, defector-migrants tend to come with positive comparisons with conditions in North Korea that they left behind. Therefore, we would further expect North Korean defector-migrants to feel a strong sense of closeness to or pride in the Republic of Korea.

However, caution is merited. In particular, this second expectation is caveated by recent research that has tended to highlight the extent of discrimination felt by North Koreans in the process of resettlement, which translates into often rather grave disappointment that a shared Korean ethnicity does not translate into smooth integration (Choe 2017; Song and Bell 2018). That said, we would still expect the official welcome provided by the South Korean state to trump negative feelings accumulated in daily life. We would anticipate this being particularly the case for young people, who arrive in good time to receive free South Korean higher education, and older people, who benefit from South Korea’s welfare system. Finally, therefore, we anticipate these groups feeling more positive about their adopted home than the cohort of individuals who arrive in South Korea in middle age.

**Overview of Defector-Migrant Flows from North Korea to South Korea**

In 2017, a total of 1,127 defector-migrants arrived in South Korea, followed by another 488 in the first half of 2018.[[26]](#footnote-26) More than 31,500 defector-migrants had arrived in the South to date, the vast majority since the 1990s. They came from a variety of geographical and socio-economics backgrounds and left North Korea for a multitude of different reasons. Some of those reasons were political and ideological; others – a majority – were not. Figure 1 shows the number of resettled North Korean defector-migrants by year and gender, as reported by the Ministry of Unification.

**Figure 4.1 North Korean defector-migrant resettlement in South Korea by year**

[hier Figure\_4.1]

Data: Ministry of Unification

Six major cohorts of North Koreans resettled in South Korea have been observed, each linked to a specific period in post-WWII Korean Peninsula migration history (Chung 2008).[[27]](#footnote-27) They fall into relatively neat periodization. Using South Korean terminologies to describe these waves, they are:

1 ‘system selective migrants’ of the period 1945-1950;

2 war refugees of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953;

3 Cold War ‘heroes who returned to the state’ between 1962 and 1993;

4 post-Cold War ‘returning brethren’ of 1993-1997;

5 the ‘escaping residents’ of 1997 to 2004; and

6 ‘new settlers’ of the mid-2000s to the present day.

Due to the general societal upheaval surrounding decolonization, the partition of the Korean peninsula in 1945, and the Korean War, groups one and two were once both vast – hundreds of thousands of people, far larger than anything we see today. Group three is very small, being made up of people who were in a position to earn a reward known as a *borogeum* from the South Korean government for bringing military secrets from North to South Korea during the military dictatorship era (1961-1987).

Groups four and five are distinguished by two factors: the way in which they were treated on arrival in South Korea; and by conditions in North Korea at the time of their departure.[[28]](#footnote-28) Group four was assisted with the financial cost of resettlement by the Kim Young-sam government (1993-1998), which introduced the Act to Protect North Korean Brethren Who Returned to the State. The law provided resettling North Koreans with $15,400 each in resettlement and housing assistance. Conversely, people arriving in South Korea after 1997 were subject to the law that superseded it, the Act on the Protection and Resettlement Support for the Residents Who Escaped from North Korea. This provided noticeably more resettlement funding: $36,000 for each arrival, as well as a broader range of programmes to address the psychological and practical difficulties that accompanied resettlement.

At the same time, due to the ‘Arduous March’ famine that peaked in 1995-1997, most of the people in group four describe themselves as having been in grave economic difficulty in the period immediately prior to their departure from North Korea.[[29]](#footnote-29) Conversely, group five consists of a mixture of people; both those who departed to South Korea to escape economic distress, and those who left because they decided to accept the offer of a better – or at least different – life in South Korea.

Group six is distinguished by the preeminence of ‘chain defection’ among its members. After 2005, ‘chain defection’ became a much more common phenomenon than had previously been the case. The rising prevalence of the phenomenon in group six shows how the cost of escaping North Korea declined markedly after 2005. Thanks to comparatively generous resettlement payments, money is relatively easier to acquire, and information and money is easier to pass to family members in North Korea, making it less risky for those in North Korea to cross the border as bribes may be paid in advance. Grave dissatisfaction with life in North Korea and/or desperation cease to be necessary conditions for departure (Chung 2008, 12). Chain defection refers to people who follow other members of their family or close friends in migrating out of North Korea, and is a phenomenon that emerged with the appearance of brokers – people facilitating defection in exchange for cash payments – in the early 2000s (Son and Kim 2017, 59). Those who leave North Korea first provide information and guidance to others following on, as well as the funding needed to facilitate escape, thus dramatically lowering the cost of migration and encouraging, or, in some cases, presumably discouraging escape (Son and Kim 2017, 57-81).

Given that socio-economic conditions in North Korea improved steadily in the early 21st century, people in group six are more likely than those in group five, and far more likely than those in group four, to have left North Korea for purposive reasons that may not be related to political repression or existential economic distress. Naturally, this can impact upon views of the state left behind.

**Brief Overview of Existing Research on the Topic**

Contemporary projects that involve resettled North Korean respondents tend to take one of three forms: large sample surveys, small sample surveys, and ethnographic and anthropological research. Large sample surveys are rare, but include ones conducted by the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) and Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). These are a de facto part of the defector-migrant resettlement process, which includes an extended period of intelligence service questioning and debriefing followed by twelve weeks in a government resettlement centre in either Andong or Hwasong, both of which are located in rural areas of Gyeonggi Province, which encircles Seoul. These large-n surveys include interviews with every incoming North Korean arriving in South Korea. Quantitative methods are used to analyze the resulting data and make claims about trends in North Korean society, public opinion, etc. and/or comparative claims about the populations of North and South Korea. Many of the conclusions stay outside the public domain.

One of the few large sample surveys whose results (though not the data tables themselves) are freely available are the annual surveys conducted by the state-funded Hana Foundation (Pak 2013).[[30]](#footnote-30) These are by no means exhaustive, but do use a weighted scale to draw conclusions about the defector-migrant population from a randomized sample of between two and three thousand (2419 in 2015; the size of the sample varies slightly each year, dependent upon response rates). The resulting annual publication used only to be available in Korean. In 2015, for the first time, the report also appeared in English.

The second group are small sample surveys that analyze the identity, knowledge, preferences, opinions, and/or values of either the defector-migrant population or limited reference populations in the borderland or in North Korea itself. Small sample survey research projects are much more common for practical reasons of cost and necessary time commitment. Small sample survey questionnaires and data tables are often publicly available through the Korean Social Science Data Archive, a non-profit organization that charges a small annual administrative fee, but otherwise does not place barriers to entry.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Surveys at this scale are conducted with purposive (targeted, often non-random) samples numbering in the tens, hundreds or low thousands. As is the case here, projects often combine a structured survey with semi-structured or unstructured interview methods to achieve greater causal leverage – in other words, to make the results more credible. Circumspection about causal leverage demands that a restricted selection of analytical methods be used, and conclusions be drawn at lower statistical certainty due to the higher margin of error that comes with smaller sample sizes.

Studies of this scope and scale cover a wide range of subjects. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland use two surveys with a combined sample of 1646 people in both China and South Korea to investigate North Korean state-society relations in the era of marketization (Haggard and Noland 2011).[[32]](#footnote-32) Yang Munsu and Kim Byung-yeon use a sample of 876 (of whom 672 were surveyed in 2004-2005 and, using different questions, another 204 in 2009,) to look at trends in the development of the North Korean economy in the ‘marketization’ era (Kim and Yang 2012). To review the make-up of the informal North Korean economy, Kim Byung-yeon uses a sample of 361 – of whom 227 resided in Hanawon (implying they were very recent escapees from North Korea) and a further 134 interviewed at Seoul National University, all of whom, Kim notes, escaped North Korea between 2007 and 2011 (Kim 2017). Kang Won-taek et al. (2015) use a sample of 848 people, 344 resettled North Koreans and the remainder from South Korea, to parse the similarities and differences in youth (ages 18-39) attitudes toward unification. A rare example of this type of research involves North Korean citizens who have *not* left the DPRK permanently; they intend to return to their homes inside the country. The authors use a structured survey to garner opinion on a range of subjects including South Korea and prospects for unification. The work is derived from a purposive sample of just 100 North Koreans legally visiting China (Kang and Pak 2015).[[33]](#footnote-33)

Third and finally there are the projects that do not use surveys at all. Instead, these rely on interviews and ethnographic methods to garner detailed information about very small samples of people. This particularities research is usually not designed to generalize about any referent population, although that does not make the research any less useful or interesting.

Examples of this type of project include Kim Seok-hyang work with twenty former residents of Hoeryong for her volume (Kim 2013).Our previous work uses a sample of ten (Green, Denney, and Gleason 2015). At the farthest end of the spectrum are those projects that have samples of one, such as the work of Myonghee Kim, who wrote about education for North Koreans in the resettlement process through the experiences of one female in her 30s who struggles, but ultimately succeeds, in learning English (Kim 2015). In all three cases, semi-structured interviews were used without structured surveys, with quotations from respondents used to highlight themes and, where possible, draw out patterns.

**Overview of Data**

The survey used in this study is comprised of questions from the ‘Korean identity survey’ administered by the East Asian Institute (EAI) and the *JoongAng Ilbo* newspaper.[[34]](#footnote-34) As a survey designed for host residents, the original questionnaire does not ask migrant-relevant questions, such as where else they have lived or when they arrived in South Korea, among other questions. These questions were added, making the survey similar to new immigrant surveys, such as the New Immigrant Survey (NIS) in Canada.

Because of problems related to size of case, research into migrants’ values and identities using random sampling is difficult even under more ideal circumstances. Targeting new South Korean citizens who defected from North Korea is even harder. Given the security vulnerabilities of this group, completely random sampling of North Korean migrants in South Korea is not possible for most investigators. There is a database of all resettled North Koreans in South Korea, but, given its usage by the Hana Foundation, it is inaccessible for security reasons.

Therefore, the research here uses a combination of semi-random and selective, purposive sampling methods. Respondents were recruited and surveyed in summer 2016 by government-supported NGOs who maintain migrant databases inaccessible to researchers; they were also selected from the researchers’ extant network connections in the North Korean defector-migrant community. Different from completely random sampling methods, which can be used to infer about the population targeted, purposive sampling is pursued when random sampling isn’t possible. Accordingly, the sample used in this study is not representative of either the approximately 31,500 North Korean defector-migrants residing in South Korea, or the North Korean population.

Despite its limitations, though, purposive sampling method is still useful as it can be used to test the relationship between key variables. A total of 243 members of the North Korean migrant population in South Korea were sampled, using a mixed-method of face-to-face and online interviews.[[35]](#footnote-35) Those who spent fewer than twenty five years in North Korea were excluded from the sample, as their pre-adolescent experiences are unlikely to have had any lasting effect.[[36]](#footnote-36)

We explore responses from our sample to three relevant measures of national identity with a nationally representative quota sample of 1006 native South Koreans surveyed for the 2015 Korean identity survey. Variables include 1) importance of ethnocultural traits to Korean nationality; 2) how ‘close’ one feels to the Republic of Korea; and 3) level of pride in achievements of the ROK. Questions chosen for comparison are identical between surveys. Original questions can be read in the Appendix.

The first variable considers the extent to which ethnocultural characteristics are important to national identity. Respondents were asked to state how important ‘ancestry’ and ‘history and tradition’ are to being ‘truly South Korean’. The ordered responses were combined, resulting in an index ranging from 2-8. North and South Korea’s sense of a shared ancestry and history form the basis of claims for national reunification. Differences in opinion regarding the importance of ethnocultural characteristics would point to a potential schism in an otherwise shared national identity.

The second variable measures respondents’ feelings of ‘closeness’ to the Republic of Korea. Responses are reordered from their original scale as either ‘close’ (combination of ‘very close’ or ‘somewhat close’) or ‘not close’ (combination of ‘not particularly close’ or ‘not close at all’). How close – or how distant – a North Korean migrant feels to South Korea provides a measure how welcome and integral they perceive themselves in their new host country.

Lastly, responses to questions measuring respondents’ level of pride in multiple characteristics of South Korean state and society were combined to create a pride index ranging from 7-28. Items include pride in political influence, economic achievements, scientific and cultural achievements, sports, and military influence.

We estimate a propensity score using a logistic regression model where the dichotomous outcome variable is whether one is native to North Korea (the ‘treatment’ group) and the matching covariates are demographic and socioeconomic covariates for which we can reasonably compare native-born North Koreans to native-born South Koreans.[[37]](#footnote-37) This method allows us to find pairs of respondents that have similar propensity scores but differ on the treatment variable. We use the ‘nearest neighbour’ matching technique to pair South Korean respondents who are most like their North Korean compatriots. The resulting dataset contains paired Korean respondents like one another than be the case if they were randomly paired and will yield more valid inferences than comparing responses between non-matched samples. This matching technique permits more meaningful (and accurate) comparisons between North and South Koreans.

Next, we estimate the treatment effect (being from North Korea) on the matched comparisons using an ordinary least squared regression method (for the continuous outcome variables) or logit regression (for ‘close’ variable). Table 4.1 shows regression findings for the matched observations.

**Table 4.1**

[hier Table\_4.1]

The regression estimates show a treatment effect for ethnocultural salience. Those native to North Korea are estimated to score .44 points higher than those born and raised in South Korea. Defector-migrants score of 6.74 out of 8, whereas native South Koreans score 6.30 out of 8. Figure 1 plots estimates for the salience of ethnocultural traits. For the pride and closeness variables, there are no statistically significant treatment effects – identities do not diverge, in other words.

**Figure 4.2 Ethnocultural score for the combined North-South Korean sample by country of origin (n = 486; DPRK = ‘treatment’)**

[hier Figure\_4.2]

Error bars at 95% confidence interval

**Discussion and Conclusion**

As the above statistical analysis demonstrates, there is some but limited difference between the national identities of North Korean defector-migrants and native-born South Korean. Defector-migrants who came of age in North Korea are somewhat more likely to think that ethnocultural characteristics of national identity are important to national membership and belonging than native-born South Koreans. What explains this treatment effect? And what do the non-findings mean?

Studies in the comparative literature on nationalism and national identity find that authoritarian political systems tend to promote more closed or ascriptive national identities. In the absence of legal and institutional frameworks supporting social equality and equal opportunity, things like ethnic nationalism and ethnocultural conceptions of belonging tend to prosper.[[38]](#footnote-38) Such is the system into which North Koreans are born and come of age. On top of that, the state actively promotes a siege-like mentality, where the Korean *minjok* (ethnic group) facing off against a hostile foreign environment and a bastardized/colonized southern Korea.[[39]](#footnote-39) Under such circumstances, we would expect ethnocultural traits to have greater importance and for this attitude to remain enduring across the life-cycle.

What about closeness and pride variables, for which no effect shows? Here, we find no origins-based difference in national identity. Defector-migrants feel just as close to the South Korean nation and have are as prideful in the achievements of South Korea as native-born South Koreans.

Overall, using a propensity score matching technique we have found some evidence of identity divergence between North and South Koreans. Is there any cause for concern? Based on the evidence presented here and our understanding of defector-migrant resettlement, there is little to be concerned about. Defector-migrants do not feel distance from South Korea nor are they any less proud of what South Korea has achieved. If Koreans native to North Korea were not successfully resettling or otherwise felt distanced from the South Korean national community, we would expect to see evidence of that in the measures used here. The higher ethnocultural scores are entirely expected, and if anything, are helpful in the resettlement process as the idea of national belonging by ascription (being an ethnic Korean) is a mechanism that defector-migrants can use to claim their constitutionally guaranteed right to full membership.

**Appendix**

***Question wording (translated from the Korean by the authors) for defector-migrant survey and native South Korean survey***

*Ethnocultural variable*. ‘How important is [ancestry (i); understanding history and traditions (ii)] to being truly South Korean?’ Possible answers: ‘Very important’, ‘Somewhat important’, ‘Not particularly important’, ‘Not important at all’

*Closeness variable*. ‘How close do you feel to South Korea?’ Possible answers: ‘Very close’, ‘Somewhat close’, ‘Not particularly close’, ‘Not close at all’.

*Pride variable*. ‘How proud of the Republic of Korea are you in the following areas?’

Areas used: 1) political status on the international stage; 2) economic achievements; 3) technology; 4) sports; 5) art and culture; 6) military power; 7) fair and equal social treatment Possible answers: ‘Very proud’, ‘Somewhat proud’, ‘Not particularly proud’, ‘Not proud at all’.

***Variable construction***

Demographics:

*Female*. Males = 0 and females = 1.

***Socioeconomic variables***

*Education*. Continuous variable, where 1 = less than high school education; 2 = completed high school education (or equivalent); and 3 = university and above. Same measure used for North and South Korean samples.

*Material well-being in DPRK.* Continuous variable determined by a question about respondents’ standard of living 3 years prior to leaving North Korea. Five levels were possible (see below). Lower class (1) = levels 4 and 5; middle class (2) = level 3; upper class (3) = levels 1 and 2.

*Level 1:* I have no problem purchasing expensive things, including: an apartment, car, etc.

*Level 2:* I had no problem purchasing consumer items, such as a refrigerator. But I had difficulty purchasing very expensive items.

*Level 3:* I could purchase rice and produce, but I had difficult purchasing consumer items necessary for daily living.

*Level 4:* I had enough to eat and live, but I had no money to buy new clothes.

*Level 5:* Surviving each day was difficult.

*Material well-being in ROK*. Continuous variable for level of income. Survey categorizes income levels into 11 cuts (see below). Cuts 1-3 = 1; cuts 4-6 = 2; and cuts 7-11 = 3.

1. 100,000 won (read as 100K or 100 *man won*) per month or less.
2. 101K-200K
3. 201K-30K
4. 301K-400K
5. 401K-500K
6. 501K-600K
7. 601K-700K
8. 701K-800K
9. 801K-900K
10. 901K-1,000K
11. 1,001K+

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**5 Ethnography and Borderlands**

The Socio-political Dimensions of North Korean Migration

*Markus Bell and Rosita Armytage*

**Abstract**

Studies of North Korea have primarily conceived of North Korean migrants as the detritus of national state policy and the unfortunate casualties of inter-state relations. Yet the lived realities and hidden histories of these migrants reveal valuable insights into North Korea’s state and society and the broader geopolitical relations in East Asia and beyond. Drawing on participant observation and the life histories of four generations of a North Korean family now living in Japan, we examine the accumulative effect of multiple migrations on the social mobility of North Koreans in exile. In doing so, we reveal a facet of the North Korean experience that without long-term fieldwork would remain largely opaque.

**Keywords:** ethnography, methodology, borderlands, mobility, genealogy, North Korea

**Introduction**

Studies of North Korean society have primarily been the terrain of political scientists and scholars of international relations. These studies have often conceived of North Korean forced migrants as the detritus of national state policy, and the unfortunate casualties of inter-state relations and geopolitical trends.[[40]](#footnote-40) Yet the lived realities and hidden histories of North Koreans’ mobility, both in the countries in which they settle, and in their recollections of life in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), reveal important insights into both the North Korean state and society, and to broader geopolitical relations in East Asia.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Ethnographic research is the empirical study of social and cultural systems and has customarily been the means for researchers to reveal both the emic views (the insider’s view) of groups of people as well as an etic analysis (the outsider’s view) of their behaviour, values, and social structures. Such emic experiences and understandings are often left unexamined in studies of forced migration due to the difficulties associated with researching people compelled to move undocumented. How is ethnography conducted when the site of study is off-limits to the researcher? What can long term fieldwork and genealogical mapping reveal about borderlands?

This chapter examines the means by which ethnography can offer insight into the lives of forced migrants’ experiences of movement and resettlement. In this chapter, we use ethnographic data to discuss two forms of mobility: social mobility and transnational movement.[[42]](#footnote-42) Drawing on participant observation and the life histories of four generations of a North Korean migrant family now living in Japan, we examine the accumulative effect of multiple migrations on the social positioning of North Koreans in exile. In doing so, we reveal an aspect of the North Korean experience that, without long-term fieldwork, would remain largely opaque. This chapter underlines the significance of ethnographic methods as a key part of the research methodologies of borderlands and border people – people for whom a relationship with boundaries political, economic, and social are defining features of everyday life. The two chapters following provide further illustrations of how anthropologists carry out research in difficult to access sites, on sensitive research subjects, and with vulnerable migrant populations.

**Ethnographies of Forced Migration**

The narratives of individuals who have undergone multiple undocumented cross-border movements often reflect shifting power dynamics both at the local and the global level, and provide critical insights into larger geopolitical trends. Paul Farmer (2005, 125) explains, ‘Narratives of suffering and trauma are embedded in social and political contexts, providing a springboard for examining some of the larger processes, historical forces, and related structures that are implicated in so much of the violence characterising both the twentieth century and our current times’. North Korean migrants’ life stories are often punctuated by tragedy. Memories of political persecution, frustrated upward economic mobility, and sexual exploitation are central to many North Korean exiles’ life narratives, reflecting regional histories of colonial exploitation, Cold War ideological violence, and both the benefits and inequalities of globalization.

Migration to and from the Korean Peninsula is certainly not a new phenomenon, given a long history of invasions, internal migration, and the movement of people to places such as Japan or Manchuria in search of lands and the attendant economic opportunities envisioned. We categorize the twentieth century history of migration of Koreans between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago into four phases. The first phase consists of the mass migration of men and women from across Korea as colonial labour for the expanding Japanese empire (1910-1945). The second phase consists of a return movement of individuals from Japan back to Korea in the years immediately following the end of the Pacific War and the subsequent liberation of Korea (cf. Morris-Suzuki 2010). In between the end of the Pacific War and the beginning of the Korean War (1945-1950) there was also a significant amount of migration between the newly founded Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) and Japan as families responded to structural pressures that culminated in the 1950-1953 Korean War.[[43]](#footnote-43) The third phase is the mass migration from Japan to North Korea of ethnic Koreans and some Japanese, primarily in the 1960s and 1970s (Morris-Suzuki 2007; Bell 2016), and the fourth phase comprises the outward movement of North Koreans that started in response to the collapse of the DPRK economy in the early 1990s and the nationwide famine that followed (Smith 2015, 136-164). The life-threatening conditions that emerged as a result acted as a strong enough push factor to send hundreds of thousands of North Koreans into China in search of food, employment, and everyday necessities. Most North Koreans who crossed the Sino-Korean border during this period later returned to North Korea, but a significant number migrated onwards, to South Korea.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Despite the value of migrant narratives in illuminating shifting social, economic, and political processes, conducting research with forced migrants and displaced populations is notoriously difficult (Perera 2017; Donnan and Wilson 2010). Many successful asylum applicants remain fearful for their safety, or for the safety of the family members they leave behind. Forced migrants have often endured extreme instability and dangerous escapes from their country of origin. Following arrival in the receiving country, these individuals are likely to struggle with complex bureaucratic systems. Their source of income may come primarily from government benefits or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A dependence on social welfare, unfamiliarity with the cultural norms of the host society, and social isolation means that their transition into the host society is often marked by ethnic, cultural, economic, and political tensions. The bureaucratic obstacles forced migrants are required to navigate within the host society are compounded by everyday struggles, for example learning a new language or finding employment. Consequently, forced migrants are often also highly distrustful of figures of authority and of the motivations of government representatives and researchers who seek to elicit information from them. Scholarship in the political and social sciences illuminating the psychological effects of migration from North Korea can be a valuable repository for demonstrating the challenges of the host society when resettling North Korean new arrivals (Yoon 2001; Yi et al. 2007, 2009; Park et al. 2011). However, these studies also risk presenting a distanced view of the challenges of migration and resettlement as they often lack the rich qualitative descriptions and attendant insights which are now emerging from a growing body of ethnographic inquiry (Bell 2013, 2014, 2016; Han 2013; Jung 2013a, 2013b; Koo 2016).

**Why Methodology Matters**

The methodological preference of some researchers, combined with the reluctance of undocumented migrants to disclose personal information, means that research on forced migration and the experiences of displaced people is often over-reliant on government statistics and elite informant interviews (Bohmer and Shuman 2007). Elite informant interviews are particularly ill-suited to gathering nuanced information about the experience of migration or accounts of refugees’ lives in their country of origin, given their inability to access the everyday lived experiences of ordinary working and middle class people. Conducting fieldwork over short periods of time, and relying on interviews with individuals working in official capacities in government, community services, or religious leadership risks overlooking the very different experiences and perspectives of ordinary members of a migrant group.

Similar difficulties emerge when working with forced migrants. For example, when a researcher interviews an interlocutor, the interviewee’s responses are often circumscribed by respondent bias – the phenomenon of respondents providing the information they think the researcher wishes to hear (cf. Mikecz 2012). These challenges are particularly pronounced in closed societies (Abbink and Salverda 2013b), and in contexts characterized by distrust and political instability (cf. Green 1994; Robben and Nordstrom 1995).

In the case of a forced migrant, this could be a response that the respondent perceives may be more advantageous to his or her own claims for asylum, or their desire to protect family members from persecution in the host country (Bohmer and Shuman 2007). With short data collection periods, most political and social scientists have little time to build rapport before asking deeply personal and sensitive questions, and little time to observe vital discrepancies between what they are told and the behaviours and routines they observe (Armytage 2018).

During fieldwork within a vulnerable group, respondents may be unwilling to discuss the details of their personal lives, including their family histories of migration. This reluctance, entirely understandable under the circumstances, requires that the researcher build a rapport with the respondent through shared social experience, a demonstrable willingness to reciprocate in sharing personal details of their own lives (cf. Armytage 2018), and a significant investment of time. Takeyuki Tsuda (2003, 38) explains that such long-term engagement with research participants requires the anthropologist to, ‘Identify closely with the natives, reducing the distance between the observer and the observed […] [leading to] not only better rapport but also greater in-depth access to native experiences’.

North Koreans’ migration stories usually include experiences of political instability, distrust of authorities, and illegal and/or extra-legal acts. During fieldwork, we were privy to stories of sexual abuse/forced prostitution, labour exploitation, economic fraud, family breakup, and substance abuse. Further, many North Korean forced migrants experience high levels of anxiety regarding family members who remain in North Korea (Bell 2013). As emigration from North Korea is not legally permitted by the state, all North Korean migrants carry with them histories of subverting the laws of the state, engagement with people smugglers, experiences of evading state monitoring, and memories of escape from state authorities. Many others flee North Korea upon falling into disfavour with local cadres. A fear of exile to the inhospitable areas of North Korea, or experiences of internment in a state operated labour camp might be a strong push factor in each of these cases. Such fears, and an attendant reluctance to discuss personally traumatic events are more likely to reveal themselves after researchers have invested time in building personal relationships of trust and care over an extended period. On the other hand, the time constraint inherent in all non-ethnographic methodologies is amplified, in these instances, by the difficulty of building rapport with people who have developed strategies to guard their identity and the identity of their family members.

Memories of traumatic experiences in the homeland affect forced migrants’ success in resettling in the host society (Kim 2013). In interviews we conducted with North Koreans in South Korea and Japan, respondents might lower their voice to a whisper when using the names of the North Korean leaders. They would use abbreviations or pseudonyms to reference places and events: ‘North Korea’ became ‘the North’, and the famine that incited many to flee became the ‘Arduous March’.[[45]](#footnote-45) If we conducted interviews in a public place and the conversation turned to politics or their outward migration from North Korea, respondents would instinctively glance around, checking that no curious bystander could overhear their potentially treasonous act of condemning the DPRK state. During a home-interview in Osaka with a couple that had experienced multiple migrations between Japan and North Korea, for example, the sight of a pen and paper on the table provoked the young woman to freeze and fall silent. Despite having met with the researcher on multiple occasions and in various social situations, engaging in a formal interview provoked unexpected anxiety, a reluctance to speak, and even fear. ‘I’m sorry’, explained her husband, ‘My wife was arrested while trying to cross the border into China. The security personnel sat in front of her with a pen and paper, just like you are now, and interrogated her’. The interview was immediately discontinued. In this case, it appeared as though the interlocutor had internalized her experiences crossing the heavily guarded Sino-Korean border.

The intimate details of a person’s life and family histories are difficult to ascertain through interviews conducted over only one or two sessions. In most cases, such details are unlikely to emerge at all under these circumstances. Consequently, long-term ethnographic fieldwork is particularly important for understanding the experiences of individuals who, unconsciously or for reasons of self-interest, may present incomplete, misleading or highly choreographed narratives. Further, ethnographic research provides insights into the migrant’s experiences in their country of origin, their relationship with the state, and the features of everyday life that might be dismissed by researchers as inconsequential, but that illuminate obscured aspects of North Korean society.

**Histories of Social Mobility**

An aspect of North Korean migration that is often left implicit in the literature is the socio-economic trajectories of those who migrate throughout the region, and what happens to the individual’s social positionality across multiple migrations. Social mobility has been largely overlooked in the literature on North Korean migration, perhaps because it has appeared tangential to larger state processes and migration trends, or because the political economy of the DPRK has fostered a number of assumptions about the economic situations, occupations, and social status of North Koreans both within and outside of the country. The examples that follow demonstrate that such assumptions obfuscate the social and economic realities of North Korean migrants and their shifting political, social, and economic identities.

Analysis of the social mobility of North Korean migrants reveals a great deal about the marginalizing effects of multiple migrations across generations. From the Japanese colonial period, Koreans who had their lands confiscated by the Japanese, or individuals who struggled to find work migrated to Japan for employment in the factories, mines, docks and spinning mills manufacturing supplies for the expanding Japanese empire. Some 90,000 former colonial labourers later migrated to North Korea as part of a so-called ‘repatriation project’, organized by the Japanese and North Korean governments and the International Committee of the Red Cross.[[46]](#footnote-46) In the last 15 years, approximately 300 repatriates to North Korea have returned to Japan.[[47]](#footnote-47) These return migrants are known as ‘*Zainichi* returnees’ (Bell 2016). Many Zainichi returnees come from families who have migrated between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, both prior to and following the bi-furcation of Korea into two competing states.

Spurred on by political, emotional, and economic motives, Zainichi Koreans[[48]](#footnote-48) have made multiple migrations between the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. Yet in each place of resettlement, they struggle to move from the periphery of the host society. Their status, in the eyes of the Japanese majority, is similar to that of foreign workers, occupying a position at the bottom of the racial and socio-economic structure of Japanese society (Shipper 2002, 41). These individuals have struggled because, in each place to which they migrate, their ethnic identity and working-class status has rendered them a ‘negative minority’ in the eyes of the majority population (Tsuda 2003, 103). In other words, they are regarded as a drain on national resources and a potential threat to national security. With each migration, the stigma of moving from a comparatively politically and economically weaker country has been projected onto the individuals who have moved across the Sea of Japan/East Sea. This stigma has also been inherited by their offspring and, in some cases, has been a significant factor contributing to a cycle of onward migration through subsequent generations.

In colonial Japan, migrants from Korea represented a subjugated people who were stigmatized primarily by their ethnic and subordinate backgrounds as unskilled labour for Japanese capital. Similarly, Koreans who emigrated to the DPRK to escape Japanese discrimination experienced social marginalization in North Korea. The DPRK government promised that Koreans moving from Japan would be rewarded with employment, free housing and education. Yet, upon arrival, many repatriates were viewed as little different to the only recently departed Japanese colonizers (Bell 2018). Repatriated Koreans’ ‘hostile status’ would later make them vulnerable to political persecution; indeed, Koreans from Japan were disproportionately represented in the political purges of the 1970s (Morris-Suzuki 2007, 239).[[49]](#footnote-49) Further, interviews with returnees from North Korea revealed that many respondents were able trace their ancestry to the south east of Korea or to Jeju Island. The southern ancestry of the Koreans who later emigrated from Japan to North Korea meant that local North Koreans regarded them as a source of political impurity. Others were treated with suspicion as a result of their links with Japan. A number of interlocutors told us that when they arrived in North Korea, they did not speak any Korean, nor did they have experience of living in either of the two Koreas.

**Figure 5.1 Niigata harbour; repatriation towards North Korea of Koreans living in Japan**

[hier Figure\_5.1]

For a small minority, however, migration from Japan to North Korea in the early 1960s facilitated upward mobility. Ko Yong-hui, the mother of North Korea’s current leader, Kim Jong-un, is the example, par-excellence, of the opportunities that awaited a lucky few: Ko’s family initially migrated from Jeju Island, off the south coast of the Korean Peninsula, to Tsuruhashi, Osaka during the Japanese colonial period. Ko’s father, Ko Tae-mun, worked in a uniform sewing factory operated by the Japanese Ministry of War.[[50]](#footnote-50) Like tens of thousands of other Koreans in Japan at that time, the Ko family subsequently migrated to North Korea, attracted by the promises of North Korean propaganda. Following their arrival, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un’s father, arranged a meeting with Ko after observing one of her performances as part of the Mansudae Art Troupe, a North Korean operatic and dance group (Seldon et al. 2011). Ko’s relationship to Kim helped to facilitate her family’s upward political mobility and mitigate her family’s undesirable associations with both South Korea and Japan. The reality for the majority of repatriated Koreans, however, was quite different. In the eyes of the ‘native’ North Koreans, new arrivals from Japan were not returning ethnic compatriots. On the contrary, to ordinary North Koreans, the new arrivals were little different from Japanese.

Many returnees we spoke with in Japan have experienced both social marginalization and downward socio-economic mobility. Though the men and women who migrate from North Korea to Japan have varied occupational backgrounds and skills, most have entered into low-skilled positions in their new home. The occupations of our interlocutors have also been differentiated along gendered lines, for example the men we interviewed had initially worked in factories or as meat packers, while many of the women had taken up positions as care-givers or in the service industry. In these occupations, they performed the labour-intensive ‘dirty, dangerous, and difficult’ work that is looked down upon by many Japanese (Tsuda 2003, 171-176; Tsuda 2010, 630).

The marginalization of returning Koreans in Japan is further entrenched by their status as representatives of an enemy state- the DPRK. In the eyes of many Japanese, returnees from North Korea embody multiple threats to the security of the Japanese social body: ethnically Korean, largely working class, from an enemy state, and lacking in the cultural and linguistic skills that would enable them to pass as Japanese. Further, members of the Zainichi Korean community from which they initially emigrated some fifty years prior regard returnees as unwanted reminders of the past. They remind Zainichi Koreans of their perennial status as outsiders in Japan and the continued fragility of their social positioning, even after so many years. Consequently, returnees are tolerated, but not accepted as belonging by the either the broader Japanese society or the ethnic Korean community in Japan.

**Four Generations of Transmigratory North Korean-Japanese**

The genealogies of four generations of transmigratory families united by marriage, the Ko’s and the Lee’s, speaks to the shifting socio-political positioning of people whose lives have been changed by their relationship to borders and borderlands.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The first generation of the Ko family were born in the south of the Korean Peninsula in the late nineteenth century and migrated to Japan following land reforms implemented by the Japanese colonial administration (Weiner 1989, 38-40). Katashi, amongst the first generation of the Ko family to have been born in Japan, migrated to North Korea in 1961 with his Japanese wife, Kaori, as part of the repatriation project. Following their arrival, the North Korean government resettled the Kos in Hyesan city, close to the Sino-Korean border.

On the advice of others who had repatriated from Japan, Katashi reverted to his Korean name, Dohyeon. Dohyeon completed the training he had started in Japan and was allocated work as an optometrist, positioning him within the intellectual strata of North Korean society. Kaori, however, was unable to find work in the formal economy, struggling with both the Korean language and an absence of social networks. Instead, she contributed to the family by cultivating and trading vegetables with local North Koreans and collecting fuel to heat the family’s apartment. Despite the greatest efforts of Kaori, not all of the Ko family survived the ‘Arduous March’, as the famine years of the mid-1990s to early 2000s are known in North Korea. The death of Dohyeon and four of their children was the catalyst for Kaori to leave North Korea and return to Japan.

With the financial support of Kaori, who was by this time working in an Osaka supermarket, Yun-seok, Kaori’s daughter, also escaped North Korea in 2004. But arrival in Japan was the beginning of a new set of challenges. Unable to overcome the stigma of being associated with North Korea, and unable to speak Japanese, the only work Yun-seok could find was as an unskilled labourer in a Tokyo factory. Yun-seok pooled her wages with Kaori to pay a people smuggler to bring her niece and nephew to Japan. Her nephew, Ho-seong found work in the same factory. While Yun-seok’s and Ho-seong’s migrations resulted in definitive downward social mobility, her niece, Hye-won Ko retained some of the status and economic advantages of her grandparents through an advantageous marriage in Osaka to Min-cheol Lee, another returnee from North Korea. Using capital loaned from Min-cheol, Hye-won opened a small retail store in Tsuruhashi, Osaka.

Similar to the Ko family, the Lee family’s narratives of mobility also include cross-generational upward and downward mobility for family members who return to Japan from the DPRK. Members of the Lee family who migrated to North Korea in the early 1960s were rewarded for their support of the nascent DPRK with entry into the political elite. Both Manseok and Seong-ja, Min-cheol’s grandparents, were born in Jeju Island during the Japanese colonial era. Upon migrating to Japan they supported North Korea’s unofficial representation in Japan, *Chongnyeon/Chōsen Sōren*.[[52]](#footnote-52) Following their migration to North Korea, Min-cheol’s grandmother, Seong-ja, transitioned from working in an Osaka cardboard factory and living in the Korean ghetto to living in a new apartment in Sinuiju, a border city in the DPRK’s northwest. The family’s improved living conditions in Japan were the result of their loyalty to Chongryunand their use of items they received from family in Osaka to bribe low-level Party officials. Manseok and Seong-ja had three sons, two of whom went on to hold roles within the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP), granting them a high status and privilege in North Korean society. Their only daughter, So-yi, also benefited from the family’s relationship with the KWP, participating in North Korea’s mass games, receiving a university education, and eventually gaining employment as a teacher. Through a marriage arranged by their families, So-yi married another repatriated Korean, Byeong-ho Park, who worked as a doctor in the Sinuiju People’s Hospital.

After her husband died in 1999, So-yi fell out of favour with the North Korean government. Threatened with expulsion to the rural areas of northern North Korea, she crossed into China with her two children and sought asylum in the Japanese Consulate General in Shenyang. Upon resettling in Osaka, because she was unqualified to work as a teacher in Japan, So-yi became a caregiver in a retirement home, a position requiring no qualifications or special skills. She worked in this position until she was forced onto social welfare by the physical pains she had experienced as a result of the interrogations she had undergone at the hands of DPRK state security. Despite the family’s move out of the North Korean elite and into the working classes of Japanese society, Soyi’s children retained their middle-class status. Her daughter completed a university degree in Japan and used her education and skills in Korean, Japanese, Chinese and English to embark on an entry-level professional career. Min-cheol used his ability to read and write in Japanese, Korean and Chinese to obtain a mid-level managerial role in a trading company in Osaka. With his desirable position and salary, Min-cheol was viewed as a promising marriage match by other returnees from North Korea. Indeed, Hye-won Ko was regarded as having done well in marrying him. With the savings from Min-cheol’s salary the couple invested in a small fashion outlet, importing South Korean fashion to Osaka.

Min-cheol and Hye-won’s respective family backgrounds represent quite different socio-political and economic trajectories but have several points in common. In both families, each generation migrated between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, in some cases they moved multiple times. For each of these families, migration to North Korea entailed complex fluctuations of social and political mobility as the migrants’ professional skills (in the case of the Ko family in the 1960s) or loyalty to Chongryun were recognized and rewarded by the North Korean state.

Members of both families felt compelled to emigrate due to either negative push factors, such as political persecution in the DPRK or positive pull factors, such as expectations of the economic opportunities that waited in Japan. In some cases, moving to Japan after years in North Korea brought personal benefits of being reunited with extended family, escaping a repressive regime, and of restarting life in a more economically secure environment. Yet, for both the Lees and the Kos, returning to Japan precipitated economic hardships and an initial downward movement in their economic and social positioning. The Ko family, for example, tentatively positioned in North Korea’s intellectual class, transitioned into the working class of Japanese society. Prior to his death, Dohyeon’s salary had been sufficient for the family to live a comfortable life in comparison to some other repatriated Koreans. But the socio-political status (*Chulsin-seongbun*) of the Ko family limited opportunities for upward social mobility. Their children subsequently inherited their ‘hostile’ status, a result of the family’s kinship ties to Japan and South Korea.

In Japan, both families have experienced the challenge of having few transferable skills relevant to the Japanese labour market, the stigma of being Korean and, in particular, of being ‘from North Korea’. Their migration into working class immigrant neighbourhoods in Japan was compounded by the difficulty of finding employment outside of menial factory work.

For both families, transnational mobility was also a highly gendered experience. Like most Zainichi returnees form North Korea now living in Japan, the women of the Ko and Lee families are employed in service industry jobs. They have managed to gain at least primary and high school certificates in Japan while also studying the Japanese language and, in a few instances, have also completed tertiary education. In contrast, with a few exceptions, the majority of men returned from North Korea in the family are employed in poorly paid labouring positions. While there is a need for further research on the gendered aspects of the resettlement of North Korean migrants and the emergent North Korean diaspora, initial findings suggest that North Korean women often have a smoother transition than men in transitioning into life in Osaka, Tokyo and even South Korea, if we use markers of economic and social adaptation – linguistic ability, earnings, development of social networks – as indicators of success.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the importance of ethnographic approaches to researching vulnerable migrant populations and to understanding the complex relations between migration and socio-political positioning. Researchers use ethnography to address questions often out of reach of other scholarly approaches. We have shown how ethnographic data drawn from long-term fieldwork, participant observation, and serial interviews can reveal otherwise hidden life histories of North Korean migrants.

The inter-generational migration histories of the two families discussed in this chapter illustrate the difficulties experienced by individuals and families migrating back and forth across the Sea of Japan/East Sea throughout the twentieth century. Each generation of migrating families emigrated with expectations that were rarely met. In colonial Japan, Koreans were unequivocally colonial subjects of the Japanese empire. Worsening social and economic conditions for Koreans in Japan following the end of the colonial period motivated many Koreans to migrate to North Korea, where they had been promised opportunities unavailable in the former colonial metropole.

Life in North Korea, however, presented enormous challenges for immigrants from Japan. For a small number of new arrivals, a history of loyalty to the North Korean state brought rewards from the DPRK government in the form of entry to the political elite and the attendant material symbols of success that this entailed. But for the majority of Koreans from Japan, relationships to family in Japan and South Korea, their poor Korean language skills and an unfamiliarity with North Korean socio-political norms marked them as outsiders. Any sense of ethnic solidarity that North Koreans may have felt with comrades from Japan was overshadowed by the stigma of the new arrivals’ association with both the former colonizer and the enemy to the south. Unbeknownst at the time to repatriates from Japan, they were situated at the bottom of the North Korean socio-political order and would be unlikely to improve their socio-political positioning.

Individuals who return to Japan from the Koreas are again on the margins of Japanese society. Just as their parents and grandparents carried the stigma of being Korean colonial subjects, they are representatives of an economically struggling, politically hostile state. As such, they struggle to assimilate into Japanese society. Perhaps the best that most new arrivals from North Korea can hope for is that their children will be able to pass as Japanese, find employment, and gain an education that will facilitate assimilation. This chapter has underlined the accumulative effect of multiple migrations on the social mobility and marginalization of people in exile and the significance of ethnographic methods as a research methodology of borderlands and border people. The two chapters following provide further examples of how anthropologists research people and places that would seem opaque to the casual observer.

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**6 Measuring North Korea’s Economic Relationships**

Evidence from the Borderlands

*Kent Boydston*

**Abstract**

Paradoxically, North Korea’s economy is more isolated than ever but remains markedly dependent on foreign partners to stay afloat, especially China. By understanding North Korea’s economic relations with China, researchers can draw conclusions about the North Korean economy. This chapter explores North Korea’s economic relationship with China in order to better understand the milieu surrounding the Sino-North Korean borderland, with an eye on understanding how economic circumstances in the borderlands affect the rest of the DPRK. Bilateral trade data have implications for the Sino-DPRK borderlands, and can serve as a crude proxy for the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang.

**Keywords:** balance of payments, China-North Korea trade, commodity prices, data transparency, economic data, market exchange rate, Marketization, official exchange rate, economic sanctions, satellite imagery

**Introduction**

As North Korea’s economy becomes more isolated it remains markedly dependent – even increasingly so – on foreign partners to stay afloat. While during the Cold War, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) relied on trade and economic aid on beneficial terms primarily from the Soviet Union, after the Cold War, Kim Il-sung was tasked with finding new sources of foreign income to fill his coffers (See Haggard and Noland 2017, 70-71). The natural choice for Kim – and more of necessity than choice – was China, which has historically played an avuncular role toward North Korea and with whom the DPRK shares a 1400-kilometre border. Chinese exports to the DPRK grew during the 1990s with a significant uptick in total Sino-DPRK trade starting in the early 2000s (Haggard and Noland 2007, 156). In 2016, China accounted for approximately ninety percent of North Korea’s licit trade (KOTRA 2017, 12; Boydston 2017b). The locus of economic engagement between China and North Korea is the Sino-DPRK borderlands, with hubs of trade at Dandong-Sinuiju, Ji’an-Manpo, Changbai-Hyesan, and an array of smaller nodes in the northeast, including Hunchun and Rason.

China is inarguably North Korea’s most important trade partner. Beyond aggregate trade figures, China is North Korea’s principal supplier of petroleum products, a strategically vital import for the DPRK’s economy. For the Kim regime, China offers a political and economic lifeline even as North Korea faces incrementally tightening sanctions both unilaterally, as well as by multilateral bodies. Even as China has agreed to tighten sanctions against North Korea – with a significant shift starting in 2016 – Beijing has weakened sanctions proposals at the United Nations Security Council, dampening momentum for stricter sanctions measures advocated for by the United States and other U.N. member states (Jun 2017; Kim 2019; Wang 2017; Blanchard 2017).

There is relatively scarce data available on the DPRK economy compared to most other countries. However, by understanding North Korea’s economic relations with China – where data from China are much more available – researchers can draw conclusions about the North Korean economy as a whole. This is especially true given the weight of China’s economic influence on the DPRK. The qualification that it is very difficult to ascertain what goes on inside North Korea continues to apply; those who analyze the DPRK’s economy do well to do so with humility commensurate with deficiencies in the economic data available.

This chapter aims to shed light on data collection pertaining to North Korea’s economic relations with China in order to better understand the Sino-North Korean borderlands, with an eye on understanding how economic circumstances in the borderlands affect the rest of the DPRK. The strongest data, and those which are most continuously updated and released, are China-DPRK trade data. These data have implications for the Sino-DPRK borderlands, and even if incomplete, can serve as a crude proxy for the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang.

**Reading North Korean Trade Data**

North Korea’s trade with the world can be broken down into licit and illicit trade, although these categories are not static but subject to interpretation by the countries, international community, and regional bodies that trade with and regulate trade with the DPRK. Illicit trade is by nature difficult to measure even as several recent studies have made strides in doing so (C4ADS 2016 and 2017; Park and Walsh 2016). Given the paucity of illicit trade data, this chapter focuses on North Korea’s licit trade with China, where better data are available. However, just because data on North Korea’s illicit activities in China are poor, does not mean that it is of less importance for the Kim Jong-un regime. Indeed, it is even more important today given that such a high share of North Korea’s past licit trade now falls under product categories subject to economic sanctions.

According to the South Korean government-affiliated Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), in 2016 North Korea traded with eighty-two different countries, excluding South Korea, and 93 percent of the value of this trade was with China (KOTRA 2017). Since the early 2000s, North Korea’s trade with China has increased significantly, both in absolute and relative terms (Haggard and Noland, 2017, Chapter 3; Haggard and Noland 2007, 156). More, following former South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s withdrawal of South Korean firms from the joint South-North Korean Kaesong Industrial Complex in February 2016, inter-Korean trade has plummeted to almost zero (Boydston 2017a; International Crisis Group 2019). Thus, in terms of North Korea’s reliance on external trade partners, China’s relative importance to North Korea has grown in recent years.

Sino-North Korean trade occurs along their shared 1400 kilometre border. Although China does not report its share of trade with North Korea broken down by port of entry, anecdotal evidence suggests the highest amount of Sino-DPRK trade occurs between Dandong, in China’s Liaoning Province, and Sinuiju in the North Pyongan Province in the far northwest of the DPRK. Although official trade along the border is captured in Chinese General Administration of Customs (China Customs) data, official figures do not account for goods smuggled across the border. Official Chinese trade data also includes goods traded by ship between ports in China and the DPRK (Eberstadt 1998, 203; Paek and Cheo 2019)

Beyond the trade data, scholars have conducted important primary document and survey-based research on North Koreans living in China’s northeast regions, Chinese business people working with North Koreans and North Korean institutions, and China’s use of Korean connections (both North and South) to develop the economy in the borderlands (Haggard and Noland 2011; Haggard and Noland 2017; Kim 2017; Luova 2007). This research has contributed to an understanding of government-driven economic development in the region, firm-level microeconomic decision-making, and the economic circumstances of North Koreans in China, many of whom are in the country without approval from the DPRK government and subject to imprisonment, torture, and even death if they are caught and repatriated.

China employs a network of North Korean labourers officially sanctioned by the DPRK government to live and work in China, although the Chinese government does not publicize data on these labourers. However, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2397 passed in December 2017, mandated that North Korean overseas labourers be repatriated by the end of 2019. Many of these labourers are believed to work in the Sino-DPRK borderlands.

In terms of human flow or economic statistics, measuring North Korea’s trade with China is an exercise in estimation, not precision. The DPRK reports very little information on its economy, and none that is reliable. Thus, in order to analyze North Korea’s trade it is necessary to use mirror statistics, relying solely on the DPRK’s trading partners for export and import trade figures pertaining to North Korea.

**Inferring North Korean Trade Balances**

In theory, exports are simply the opposite of imports: one country’s exports are its trading partner’s imports, and vice versa. Unfortunately, even with trade between developed economies with reliable statistical reporting agencies, exports and imports often do not equal each other, which could be the result of everything from simple human error such as a customs official mistaking the country of origin for a certain product, or political considerations affecting reporting. Further, it is generally understood that import data are more reliable than export data because import data are directly related to the collection of duties, whereas exports typically are not. Therefore, countries have a stronger incentive to ensure that import data are properly documented.

China-North Korea trade data, then, relies almost exclusively on data entries from China Customs, which reports trade data every month. Typically, China Customs announces selected trade data from the previous month near the middle of the following month. The agency then releases product-specific data from the previous month’s trade a few weeks later near the end of the month. The figures from earlier in the month and those from later in the month do not always align (Haggard 2017a). Nevertheless, these trade numbers do provide a useful means to measure China’s trade with North Korea on a month-by-month basis, even with caveats on the data’s reliability.

There are indeed a variety of international data agencies and statistics organizations that report Chinese trade from North Korea including the United Nations Comtrade database, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)’s Direction of Trade Statistics, Global Trade Atlas (GTA), and KOTRA. Although these data sources report the data in different ways and make their own modifications to the data, because none of these agencies are directly embedded in the customs houses in China, their underlying data fundamentally comes from that reported by China Customs. Thus, China Customs is the gatekeeper of China-DPRK trade data even if other international data organizations make their own assumptions or assessments about the underlying figures in their own data releases. In general, trade data is only as good as what is first reported. International data agencies, therefore, cannot reasonably be expected to smooth out significant deficiencies in the underlying data.

The most comprehensive open-source report on North Korea’s trade with the world comes from the annual South Korean-government affiliated KOTRA report (2017; see also Boydston 2017b). The annual KOTRA report is a comprehensive report on North Korea’s trade with the world from the previous year; the agency releases its analysis on the previous year’s trade the following summer. The report compiles data from a variety of sources and importantly supplements China Customs figures where it is clear China has obfuscated information. For instance, the KOTRA report imputes Chinese crude oil exports to North Korea, data which China Customs has not reported since 2013, but which KOTRA estimates constituted $230 million in Chinese exports to North Korea in 2016. KOTRA estimates this figure holding quantity estimates from past years constant and multiplying the volume by an updated global price of oil. The report shows that North Korea’s position as a crude oil importer in balance of payments terms has improved recently with the downturn in oil prices. As North Korea’s oil imports have come under increased scrutiny recently – including bans or caps on certain oil products in U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2375 and 2397 – KOTRA’s imputations are an important contribution precisely because Chinese oil exports to North Korea are politically sensitive and deemed vital to the stability of the Kim regime.

China’s refusal to report crude oil exports to North Korea presents a challenge to any analysis of China’s North Korea trade; effectively, the data has been politicized. This is evident, too, in data China releases on its coal imports from North Korea, previously North Korea’s largest export before the U.N. imposed a full ban, with no ‘humanitarian purposes’ exemptions allowed, in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2371. In February 2016, China announced a full ban on North Korean coal imports, reporting a drop from $97 million in imports in February to zero in March 2016. Anecdotal evidence suggests that China did disrupt coal imports from North Korea while other evidence suggests that some shipments were still allowed to go through (Boydston 2017c). Although China likely cut back on North Korean coal imports, a drop to absolute zero in the following month is implausible. China Customs data should be viewed judiciously within the context of China’s political objectives.

KOTRA contributes to knowledge of Sino-DPRK trade, because it offers a somewhat reasonable estimation of North Korea’s trade balance. For the last several years North Korea has been running a significant licit trade deficit with the world, and most importantly with China. North Korea has been importing a significantly larger amount of products than it has been exporting. It is worth noting that balance of trade estimates from KOTRA or other data agencies do not factor in North Korea’s illicit trade or account for Pyongyang’s foreign reserves. Nevertheless, these estimates offer a glimpse into how the DPRK’s current account balance may be changing. The longer North Korea runs large trade deficits without access to traditional finance channels, the closer the regime will come to running into a balance of payments crisis, which would lead to broad economic problems for the country. Through 2017, North Korea saw its largest trade deficit in recent history (Haggard 2017b). How North Korea is able to sustain this ballooning trade deficit is an open question and greatly depends on how much North Korea is able to hold in foreign reserves and income from illicit activities, two sources of cash where transparent data are unavailable.

**Local Data and Satellite Imagery**

Apart from the data agencies that report on North Korea’s trade through its trading partners, there are media that leverage their contacts within North Korea to regularly publish data both publicly and on a proprietary basis. These data include information pertaining to the China borderlands region both directly and indirectly. The two most prominent media publishing regular reports on North Korean commodity prices and exchange rates are *Daily NK* and *NK News*, both based in Seoul, South Korea. *Daily NK* reports on commodity prices such as rice, corn, and pork, as well as the market rate of the North Korean won in three different cities in the DPRK. Daily NK’s ‘Market Trends’ publishes raw data on the U.S. dollar to North Korean won rate as well as rice prices going back to August 2009, shortly before the November 2009 North Korean won currency redenomination. *NK News* also publishes a variety of price data – from gasoline to official exchange rates – that it offers on a proprietary basis based on sources inside North Korea.

The causes for fluctuations in the exchange rate of the North Korean won and commodity prices are not all directly related to trade with China, but they provide a useful complement to official Chinese data on North Korea’s foreign trade. These data are reported by sources inside North Korea, and importantly without DPRK government sanction. Even if these data are limited, this allows a reasonably reliable glimpse into the macroeconomic situation in North Korea by measuring inflation of staple commodities and shifts in exchange rates. The *Daily NK* assists by releasing approximately monthly figures of the U.S. dollar to North Korean won rate and price of North Korean rice in three different North Korean cities. Significantly, this data goes beyond the capital, Pyongyang, and covers two different Chinese border cities, Hyesan and Sinuiju. In those northern border cities as elsewhere, North Korea maintains a Public Distribution System (PDS) that allocates food to North Korean citizens. However, the famine and economic collapse of the 1990s rendered the PDS ineffective to feed North Korean citizens, leading to marketization out of necessity (Haggard and Noland 2007). The DPRK government also maintains an official North Korean won exchange rate, which is highly overvalued compared to the market exchange rate. Official North Korean won rates are reported by major finance websites as well as by NK News, again leveraging its sources in the DPRK. For most intents and purposes, however, the official exchange rate is not a particularly useful macroeconomic indicator because it is artificially set by the government.

The market exchange rate, therefore, is a better market indicator. Interestingly, data on market exchange rates and the market value of rice show that prices in Pyongyang and the North Korean cities along the Chinese border have reached near parity. It is worth noting, however, that Pyongyang is clearly an atypical city given its privileged position both in terms of its economic development and rent allocation; non-border provincial cities may experience different price conditions. Nevertheless, growing marketization and improved distribution and transportation networks throughout the country have recently made it easier to transport goods around the country, including to the inner regions (Park 2017). Given the growth in markets under Kim Jong-un it is reasonable to suspect that North Korea’s non-border provincial cities are seeing greater economic gains from trade with China than in the past. However, more empirical work is necessary.

Market exchange rates and commodity price indicators are also useful for measuring the effect sanctions are playing on the North Korean economy. As North Korea’s trade deficit increases, the first sign to the outside world of a major economic crisis in the country would arrive in data indicating inflation in staple goods and depreciation of the North Korean won. Yet in 2017, despite a ratcheting up of bilateral and multilateral sanctions, the price of rice and the North Korean won remained remarkably stable. This suggests that the North Korean government had large enough reserves to keep prices stable, was generating enough income through unconventional or illicit means, or that China was not making the good-faith effort at enforcing sanctions in which it had claimed to be engaged.

China’s economic weight has also been felt in the North Korean economy through increased use of the Chinese yuan in North Korean markets. After Kim Jong-il’s disastrous currency reform in late 2009, North Koreans have increasingly come to trust in foreign currency for economic stability. In fact, North Koreans hold most of their savings now in foreign currency, primarily in Chinese yuan near the border regions and U.S. dollars in non-border regions (Mun and Jung 2017). Moreover, North Korean banks now issue bonds and offer financial products in foreign currencies. Reports on these recent phenomena have emerged from media publishing information obtained from sources in the DPRK, as well as by survey work of North Korean refugees who have relatively contemporaneous knowledge of DPRK markets (Ji 2017; Mun and Jung 2017).

Indeed, survey work of North Korean citizens, who are best categorized as migrants or escapees, offer a particularly useful tool to measure the economic situation of North Korea and the Chinese borderlands. The underground environment in which these individuals operate makes conducting regular survey research difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Nevertheless, important survey work has been done in measuring the economic situation of North Koreans residing in the Chinese borderlands (Haggard and Noland 2011). North Korean migrants, or escapees, have a unique role and impact on the economic situation in the Chinese borderlands and within the DPRK.

Escapees may be able to deliver more granular detail about market practices in the border region, but for an overview of the massive entirety of the border and its role in the North Korean economy, it is difficult to match the scope of commercial satellite imagery. The Stimson Center’s 38 North and the North Korean Economy Watch blog publish regular analyses based on satellite imagery related to economic development in North Korea, including the emergence of new physical North Korean markets and power plants linking China and North Korea (Melvin 2018; Bermudez and Melvin 2017). The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), through a collaborative project with the North Korea Development Institute, has also documented the development of markets throughout the DPRK via satellite imagery, open-source material, and North Korean defector interviews (Cha and Collins 2018).

The future of North Korea is greatly dependent on its relationship with China. This will remain true if Kim Jong-un pursues his *byungjin* strategy marrying the development of nuclear weapons with the development of the North Korean economy, or pivots toward a reoriented ‘New Strategic Line’. In either case, Pyongyang’s relationship with Beijing is more important than ever, even if at times frayed. Although important to take North Korean economic data with a grain of salt, there is demand for data in the government, non-profit, and even the business community. As information penetration has greatly improved the opportunity for North Koreans to access outside information, entrepreneurial journalism and North Korea’s economic interconnectedness with the world has improved the outside world’s access to information about North Korea. How – or if – the North Korean economy continues to grow in an increasingly sanctioned environment depends greatly on North Korea’s economic relationship with China. With appropriate humility, we should be watching the economic relationships and corresponding data emerging from the Sino-DPRK borderlands closely.

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**7 Ink and Ashes**

Documenting North Korea’s Mythic Origins in the Border Regions, 1931-1953

*Adam Cathcart*

**Abstract**

The cross-border narrative of Kim Il-sung’s exile experience and guerrilla warfare in Northeast China is the cornerstone of North Korea’s national myth. However, the pursuit of existing evidence of Kim Il-sung’s activity is hampered not simply by distortions and exaggerations, but also by documentary absences. This chapter provides new perspectives from published diaries, travel accounts, and archival documents, juxtaposing these against Kim Il-sung’s disputed memoir *With the Century*. The chapter provides perspectives into Kim’s time along the border, new details from his time in the Soviet Far East from 1941-1945, and unearths a folder from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives about the first major state-sponsored historical research trip from Pyongyang into Northeast China for evidence of Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla exploits.

**Keywords:** history and myth, World War II in Asia, documents and forgeries, anti-Japanese sentiment, Manchuria, nationalism

**Introduction**

Among the many evocations by the North Korean state of Kim Il-sung’s *tongbuk chigu hyongmyong chonjokchi* (‘revolutionary footprints in northeast China’), the eastern perimeter of the Second Ring Road in Beijing rarely makes an appearance. Yet, just a few short blocks from the North Korean embassy in Beijing, a small satellite building of the PRC Foreign Ministry houses documents describing precisely Kim’s ‘footsteps,’ or, rather, the efforts to recover them following the end of the Korean War (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953). The archive tells a story of a journey of North Korean cultural and foreign affairs officials to Northeast China in autumn 1953, a trip that coincided with Kim Il-sung’s own travels to Moscow and Beijing for postwar aid. The North Korean historical delegation was engaged in alliance building, but more importantly, were on a quest to bolster Kim Il-sung’s historical narrative. The trip also made obvious the fact that North Korean institutions could not expand their investigation and subsequent glorification of Kim’s past without active Chinese assistance.

Today, the internationalism of the early Cold War that allowed for such cooperation feels short-lived, and Chinese-North Korean scholarly exchanges in the social sciences rarely reach the scale of the 1950s.[[53]](#footnote-53) When I found the document about the 1953 delegation in the PRC’s Foreign Ministry archive, I could hardly swivel around in my chair to a North Korean scholar with whom to digest the discovery. Indeed, from about 2006 to 2011, the period in which I worked intermittently in the archive, I never ran into any North Korean scholars, since foreign research trips, let alone collaboration with foreign scholars, are so rare for them (Schmid 2018, 452). Thus, when I bumped into two North Korean Embassy officials on a train from Sinuiju to Beijing, I attempted to gauge their interest in the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive’s holdings about Kim Il-sung’s past, but these overtures were declined, if not quite met with the ‘blank stare of no recognition which the North Koreans specialize in’ (Cumings 1992, 210). Even if they were prepared to contradict the post-1957 consensus that historians exist to embroider and celebrate national narratives (Petrov 2006), North Koreans would find that archival research in foreign countries is of course expensive and onerous. Put in a more paranoid frame, historical documents donated to North Korean institutions by outsiders are unlikely to penetrate through to their intended audience (Klein-Ahlbrandt 2013), may be interpreted as an attempt to embarrass or subvert the nation through cultural exchanges, and would probably necessitate the filing of onerous reports. Training in contemporary Chinese history and the Chinese language is another obstacle for North Korean scholars.

North Korean researchers are not always helped by the interpretive frame extended to Kim Il-sung’s revolutionary activity by comrades today on the Chinese side of the border. Chinese local researchers located near the Yalu and Tumen rivers, in cities like Yanji and Tonghua, tend to embrace Kim Il-sung’s actions within a Sinocentric frame of ethnic Koreans battling for inclusion in a Chinese nation-state against Japanese imperialism. Consider the case of ethnic Korean researchers in Yanbian, as Dong Jo Shin does at length in Chapter 9 of this volume. For them, embracing a more Kim Il-sung-centric narrative of what looks like North Korean state-building on Chinese soil could create (and has created) major problems. Yet there are documents relating to Kim Il-sung in Chinese borderland research facilities, just as there are in the PRC Foreign Ministry Archive. These papers and books represent a typical problem, one with which North Koreans ought to be familiar: Documents vital to chronicling the prehistory and early history of their country are often more abundant outside of North Korea, and therefore occluded to North Korean scholars. Indeed, in some cases the richest archival documents on the foundations of the North Korean state are housed in and exploited by scholars from the very enemy states which had looted them from North Korea in the first place.[[54]](#footnote-54) Perhaps this is why artistic depictions of Kim’s revolutionary activity are today far more accessible ground for North Korean officials and citizens than less politically manageable documents about the period.[[55]](#footnote-55) Perhaps there is no need at all for North Koreans to go to Beijing to retrieve these materials or to seek out references to them.

Recognizing the difficulty in controlling narratives outside of the country, the government in Pyongyang orients students, scholars, and the masses toward material that appears safely within the territorial space of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), focusing on the story of Kim Il-sung. It is a commonplace observation that Kim Il-sung’s personal history has become national history. The southern banks of the small but turbulent Tumen River and the upper Yalu, near Paektusan/Changbaishan are therefore the narrative focus for North Korean readers (Cumings 2004, 107). The state places the brunt of its narrative emphasis on Kim Il-sung’s operation near the sacred mountain starting in the spring of 1936, and upon the cross-border raid of Kim Il-sung and his anti-Japanese guerrilla unit into the Korean river town of Pochonbo on the evening of 4 June 1937. In Pochonbo, the holes from bullets fired by Kim’s men have allegedly been preserved in the old Japanese police station, and a huge monument to the battle is in central Hyesan and can be observed from the Chinese side of the border.[[56]](#footnote-56) The forests of Rajin-Sonbong are purported to contain evidence of the charismatic power of Kim Il-sung.[[57]](#footnote-57) Here the story goes that Kim’s bold action against Japan was of such magnitude during the period of Japanese occupation of Korea that people carved his name and slogans referring not only to him, but to his wife Kim Jong Suk, into local pine trees (Winstanley-Chesters and Ten 2016). These carvings are now shielded by elaborate plexiglass, or preserved in local museums by the state, for regular use in mass education and broadcasting material (Rodong Sinmun 2015; Lee 2012).[[58]](#footnote-58) Mount Paektu is territorially split between North Korea and China; the portion of it along the northern edge of North Korea’s present-day Ryanggang province serves as a revolutionary theme park for both Kim Il-sung and his successors (Kwon and Chung 2012).

The years in Soviet exile are less actively portrayed by the state. Kim Il-sung’s son Kim Jong-il was born in the Soviet Union just as fighting in eastern Manchuria was beginning a hiatus of four years. The younger Kim did not set foot on Paektu until he was in middle school, if we are to believe a North Korean documentary film released after his death, which alleged that he visited the mountain as a teenager in 1956. If most of the narrative of the Paektu Secret Base Camp is fictionalized, we can at least perceive how the evolution of the story took a dramatic turn in the late 1960s when Kim Jong-il seized command of arts and propaganda areas, taking a creative approach to North Korean history which allowed Kim Jong-il, in effect, to ‘orchestrate his own conception’ (Wegner 2009, 70-71).[[59]](#footnote-59) The site has been a focal one since the early 1980s as a site of youth pilgrimage (Gittings 1988; Straily 2018, 19). Under the more recent direction of Kim Jong-un, the socialist resort of Samjiyeon, near Mount Paektu has taken a more prominent role in braiding the stories of the revolutionary hardship of the first two generations of North Korean leadership with a more ostentatious display of relative luxury for the elect (Berger 2019). Although it is no longer surprising in retrospect, Kim Jong-un’s succession process and the visual and musical manifestations of his power were positively littered with references to Kim Il-sung’s revolutionary footsteps (Frank 2010), and his appropriation of the Paektu rhetoric and embodiment has been more or less total.[[60]](#footnote-60) Even the purge and execution of Kim Jong-un’s uncle was decided upon in late November 2013 whilst Kim stayed at Samjiyeon near Mount Paektu.[[61]](#footnote-61) Kim Jong-un has left Party History Research Institutes intact and siphoned much resource and attentiveness to the Mansudae Arts Studio as a vehicle for the depiction of Kim Il-sung’s activities (Cathcart 2016).

Across all three generations of Kim family leadership in North Korea, Kim Il-sung’s biography has been the locus of literary legend-making, less so archival documentation. This has held since the very beginning years of the postwar, starting with Han Sorya’s poetry and biographical writings (Seiler 1994) and reaching an apogee with Baik Bong’s hagiography of the late 1960s.[[62]](#footnote-62) The North Korean state has put extraordinary efforts into bolstering awareness of the period of the 1930s in the border region, an effort which was crowned by the publication of Kim Il-sung’s own memoirs *With the Century* (*Segiwa deobuleo*) in the early and mid-1990s. Whether or not scholars outside of North Korea choose to take the bait and treat Kim’s history as the history of North Korea writ large (Schimd 2018, 454-455), they are forced to deal with the state’s tendencies in the production of historical evidence. In short, the North Korean state is structurally inclined toward the production of a wide yet very particular set of narratives and historical data about Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla resistance, but does a poor job of recognizing and exploiting sources which are held in foreign archives or documentary centres.

There are a number of fortunate North Koreans who are not formally trained as historians who are at least able to travel to China with official passports, where, for at least one fully dedicated day per year, they can soak up evidence of the leadership’s revolutionary activities in at least one corner of Northeast China. However, this group is focused on commerce rather than historical research. Every year on the anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s birth on 15 April, North Koreans living and working across Northeast China gather at the Yuwen Middle School in Jilin City, in what for most is an obligation backed by coercion (i.e., loss of privilege) at least as much as it is a desire of the participants to attend.

A four or five hour drive due west from the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin is in an ethnographically and linguistically Han Chinese area. During the period of Japanese domination of the region, Jilin City was significant for the growth of Korean communism, whereas Changchun was more of a centre for pro-Japanese collaboration, becoming the new capital of the puppet state of Manchukuo. Indeed, Northern Irish missionaries slighted Changchun as ‘a city free from any encumbrance such as a political historical background of significance’ (Johnston 1935). It was in Jilin city at the Yuwen Middle School where as a fourteen-year-old in 1926, Kim says he embarked on the road to revolution (Kim 1992, 227-292). Jilin City is thus a point of pilgrimage for some North Koreans and was the site in 2010 of a visit by Kim Jong-il and then-Secretary of the CCP Hu Jintao.

Beyond Jilin, it is hard to see other Chinese cities in which North Koreans might as freely point out Kim Il-sung’s contributions without possibility of dispute or controversy. There is Shenyang, where China’s dedicated Korean War museums in China’s northeast have increasingly elided North Korea’s overall contribution to China’s defense in that conflict and even highlighted reconciliation with South Korea (Denney 2017). Monuments to the Northeast United Anti-Japanese Army dot the landscapes of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, but again Kim’s role within that group is minimized, and there is no Yan’an equivalent (Lin 2015) for Kim’s descendants or followers today. Most Koreans who come to northeast China for historical tourism are South Koreans (Schmid 1997, 42). The choreography of diplomacy and commemoration in Beijing may evoke the history of Sino-Korean communist anti-Japanese solidarity in the border region (Delury 2015), but it does not create or even encourage movement of more North Koreans into the historical spaces of Kim Il-sung.

**Destroyed Documents: Revisions and Absences in North Korean Guerrilla History**

Kim Il-sung’s history in Northeast China is disputed and full of exaggerations, but this does not make it some uniquely controversial phenomenon in an otherwise settled historiographical terrain. Successive Chinese republics have engaged in myth-making and mutual dispute about nearly every aspect of the anti-Japanese resistance in Manchuria, having done so essentially from the moment of the northeast’s full severance from Chinese governance in September 1931 (Mitter 2000). Japanese historians continue to debate the meaning of the Manchukuo project (Fogel and Yamamuro 2007), with the role of Koreans particularly disputed. And as for cults of personality and their distortions, a competing cult across the Tumen and Yalu Rivers resulted in fantastic omissions and disclosures from China’s history. In other words, while the Cultural Revolution further deepened the alienation of Chinese Koreans from Kim Il-sung’s guerrilla struggle, that same movement resulted in the mass release of Mao’s own production in a haphazard way which would be anathema to the careful and orderly North Korean leaders (Schram 1974).

Even with access to more orderly archives, writing about commemoration of the many interconnected conflicts in and around the Korean peninsula in the twentieth century can be a confounding business. The politics of memory are a minefield (Jager and Mitter 2007). There are still untapped masses of emotion and grief stemming out of the warfare of the twentieth century, and oral histories have an important role to play here (Hwang 2016). Some authors have found the best way of dealing with past violence of empire and decolonization as manifested during the Korean War is to, in effect, overthrow the history of division and communal violence altogether by resorting to surrealism and the elaborate reshaping of oral testimonies (Ryu 2015). The imaginative approach is taken up, albeit in a very different way, by North Korean museums such as the one in Sinchon in which oil paintings and sculptures by the Mansudae Art Troupe sit alongside testimonies (Cumings 1992, 220-222; author field notes 2016).

Fortunately, scholars do not suffer from a total documentary blackout in dealing with the Japanese occupation of northeast China from 1931-1945 and its management of Korean subjects and resistance in that period. Historians can plumb the publications and available archives of Japanese organizations such as the South Manchurian Railroad (Young 1998), or consider the manifold effects of Japanese capitalism and Chinese nationalism for Koreans in the region (Park 2000). Other historians delve into the archives of the Japanese army (Suh 1967) and the Japanese Foreign Ministry police forces in Korean-populated areas of China (Esselstrom 2006). Chong Eun Ahn (2016) and Michael Kim (2010), respectively, have crossed the 1945 divide to blend the post-Manchukuo experiences of Koreans in northeast China with the occupation experience, drawing in some cases from oral histories. Ahn’s writings in particular aid readers in recalling that Kim Il-sung’s ostensible ‘base’ of rural and urban Koreans were in most cases completely caught up in acts of daily survival in the market economy of Manchukuo. Personal and family networks were far more useful to most Koreans than affiliation with a communist movement that was not only politically dangerous but also, in the years of the Minsaengdan Incident, tearing itself apart. Cold War approaches, such as that of Scalapino and Lee, added much to the understanding of Kim Il-sung’s history from 1931-1945 (Scalapino and Lee 1960 and 1961). But destroyed evidence is still a major problem, something that became particularly apparent in the 1990s.

Two sources published in the 1990s allow us to have a much greater degree of clarity about Kim’s guerrilla activity, as well as the difficulties caused by destroyed documents. The sources are Kim’s own memoirs *With the Century,* and the diaries of Zhou Baozhong. To take the case of Zhou first. He was one of Kim Il-sung’s closest comrades and co-revolutionists in the period of armed struggle in Manchuria, and worked as Kim’s superior officer during his joint exile with the Korean fighter into the Russian Far East from 1941-1945 (Zhou 2011). Kim il-Sung and Zhao Baozhong continued their close association into the period of the Chinese civil war, to the extent that Zhou was sent to Pyongyang in 1947 to coordinate aid from North Korea to the Chinese Communist Party’s new struggle in Manchuria, namely, against Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang/Nationalist Party (Areddy 2018; Kraus and Cathcart 2014; Shen 2017). Zhou’s papers and official biographies as presented from Party presses in Beijing are remarkably useful in tracking Kim’s growth and activities in the 1930s and 1940s – but the trail only really begins in earnest in 1936. This is because Zhou’s diaries from 1931-1935 were swept up in a Japanese army raid on a CCP secretariat in Ning’an county, and were either lost or destroyed by the Japanese security forces in Manchuria (Zhou 1991, 2). The Japanese sources on Kim Il-sung’s activities in Manchuria are extensive (Suh 1967), and even include some publications from Korean-language presses in occupied Seoul (Scalapino and Lee 1971, 220). However, many Japanese records were ‘burned up at the time of the bombing of Tokyo’ (Morozov 1946). Even if not destroyed, Japanese records from police and guerrilla research agencies were fragmented and generally did not survive the war in an integral fashion (Fogel and Yamamuro 2007). Even Soviet records, while among the most useful for tracking Comintern interactions between Chinese and Korean communists, have emerged only slowly.

Kim Il-sung himself was prone to destroying documents. In his memoirs, Kim describes at length his acquiring of a tranche of personnel files on Koreans who were said to have sold out the revolutionary movement to Japanese spies: ‘The more carefully I examined the documents, the more enigmatic they seemed to me,’ Kim recalled. ‘These papers vividly recorded serious crimes, which nobody could dare deny.’ Bruce Cumings, writing about this section of the memoir, said Kim Il-sung undertook a ‘purgatory bonfire which gave him some unlikely human material’ (Cumings, 2004). But Cumings leaves out Kim’s rather detailed recollection of his mental state at the time of the bonfire: ‘I closed the documents. Any examination of the papers could only do harm. If I believed these papers, I would lose so many people. I could not believe what had been written on sheets of white paper, which could absorb all kinds of ink’ (Vol. 4, 342). Ink is associated with one’s past; in order to purge the past, the documents must be destroyed. Kim explained further: ‘While setting fire to the documents, I wished to burn away the dishonourable past of ‘Minsaengdan’ suspects and hatred and mistrust in human beings […]. The destruction of these papers is still vivid in my memory, after much more than half a century, no doubt because I wished for something too great and serious to be forgotten’ (Vol. 4, 353). Archives could become the basis of mistrust, and, like the photographs that Kim Il-sung both loved and feared, they could fall into enemy hands.

Whether or not Kim Il-sung’s destruction of the Minsaengdan archives truly was foundational, it bears thinking about the scope documentary foundations of his state. A typical way of downplaying Kim Il-sung’s significance or experience in state-building or base area construction in the 1930s and early 1940s is to look at questions of scale: He commanded only a few hundred troops at most, and could not have led any massive assault to dislodge Japanese power from the Korean peninsula (Lim 1982, 108-110). Kim himself, in 1958, admitted as much in remarks on the founding of the Korean People’s Army. But these same problems of small scale also create an impact for historians; there were fewer scribes around Kim and the documentary footprint of himself and his unit is relatively light.

Compensation for the documentary gaps is arrived at via source fabrication, or the absorption and bulking up of biographies of other participants. The conclusion is therefore inexorable that something momentous occurred in Manchuria, that the foundations of the new state were being laid, that Kim Il-sung was at its heart, and that this vision for a communist Korea was and is destined to triumph amid the adversities. Kim’s writings from 1930-1945 as represented by the North Korean state are almost wholly spurious (Myers 2015, 156, 158, 170).[[63]](#footnote-63) A huge official biography published (Baek 1969) was likely the result of several years of effort, but it very much reflected the cult of personality institutionalized by the Workers’ Party in 1967 (Tertitsky 2017). There is a tendency to read *With the Century* backwards as indicative of depth of guerrilla methods, psychology, or nationalism throughout the duration of the DPRK’s history. As North Korea struggled with famine, *Korean Studies* published an article (Armstrong, 1995) which argued that the influence of the Manchurian guerrilla experience ‘has shaped the ideology, historiography, and domestic and external policies of the DPRK to the present’. As a pattern for understanding the North Korean state in embryo, and a key for its behavior today, the Manchurian guerrilla struggle has clearly attracted a significant number of adherents (Buzo 1999). This is a logical method of lending coherence to analysis of North Korean leadership, at least under Kim Il-sung, but it also can be dangerous if we assume that the lessons from the guerrilla period have all been sifted down already, or further assume that Kim’s activities during that period are all perfectly clear.

**Border Space and Korean Resistance in Western Accounts in the 1930s and 1940s**

If Kim himself is an unreliable elderly narrator of events that occurred when he was in the border area, as well as being an unproductive writer during his militant youth, how then are we to assess the environment in the Sino-Korean border region at the time that Kim Il-sung was active within it? Some of the most ostensibly useful documents were destroyed or lost during the war – in particular, the loss of Zhou Baozhong’s revolutionary diaries in 1936. But we can also widen our scope outwards from the specific search for Kim Il-sung and recognize that the Manchuria and Korean border region was not a complete backwater. Global interest in Japan’s regional expansion meant that for many, Northeast China was the ‘cynosure of the world’ at that time (Ishikawa 1946). In the spring of 1936, Kim Il-sung was maneuvering from what is today Heilongjiang province down and southeast to the areas along the border, and a number of foreign observers were in the region. During the decade of the 1930s, Western reporters and occasional foreign academics would travel to the Korean-Manchukuo border area and record their activities and impressions. Among the many details recorded during and after these trips were assessments of banditry, the role played by Koreans in the Japanese empire, along with more standard writings about Japan’s strength as a burgeoning imperialist state. Some such writers included German scholars like Gustav Fochler-Hauke (who was in the border region in 1935-1936) who were affiliated with the Nazi party and formally hosted by the Japanese military (Cathcart 2017; Cathcart and Winstanley-Chesters 2018).

However, apart from a few Soviet exceptions, such accounts tend to either skim over or surpass completely the complex interrelationships between various communist groups, or downplay the Korean role in the anti-Japanese resistance insurgency in the Northeast (Cumings 2004, 115-116). Even those who were fluent in Asian languages in the missionary community were not really ever on the mark. Missionaries embedded in Manchuria tended to refer to Korea as a convenient means of travel and mention Koreans as drug-dealers and collaborators rather than resisters, finding a certain kinship in analysis of these matters with the writings of Kim Saryang (Tikhonov 2018, 7). Perhaps there was a narrative pressure, too, from the Chinese Nationalist government, which was ambivalent about sponsoring Korean resistance organizations of any kind, and mindful of the interests of Chinese capitalists. The extensive publication activities for foreign audiences in the Republic of China not under Japanese occupation after 1937-1938 tended to mention Koreans as often in their role as brutal collaborators of Japanese soldiers in China (Keng 1940), rather than resisters who were closer to the Chinese Communist Party. The United Front policy in China did not in itself solve Kim Il-sung’s propaganda issues in the parts of China not occupied by Japan.

One authentic perspective on Kim Il-sung at the time of his activity can be found via his ultimate rival in Korean statecraft, Park Chung-hee. In the early 1940s Park was a Korean cadet at the Manchuria Military Academy in Xinjing (present-day Changchun), the capital of Manchukuo. Changchun was one of the few places where young Korean men could work their way up in Japanese militarist systems, accelerating their ‘interiorization of imperialization’ (Hughes 2011, 122-124) and in some cases receive university education (Kishida 2013). Park Chung-hee and his counterparts there actively debated Kim Il-sung’s relationship with the Chinese Communist Party and actually empathized with Kim’s need to align with the Chinese (Eckert 2018, 199). At the same time, those same Korean men were impelled to support Kim Seok-won’s hunting down of the communist Kim as a kind of necessary operation to remove a cancer on the eastern fringes of the realm (Suh 1967, 286-287). How colonized Koreans on different sides of the conflict in Manchukuo viewed one another is a revealing indicator of the complex realities of the time, but tends to be filtered through the prism of postwar memories.

European correspondents in eastern Manchuria or northern Korea rarely interviewed pro-Japanese Korean commanders like Park Chung-hee, or showed much interest in collaborator military units. George Taylor’s first-hand investigation of Japanese puppet organizations in North China circa 1935 provides a blueprint, but he was not particularly interested in Koreans, unlike his then-friend and colleague Owen Lattimore. However, some European accounts are exceptional, in that they reported from precisely the areas purported by North Korean histories to be in the vicinity of ‘Kim Il-sung’s secret camp,’ at about the time that Kim had allegedly arrived. The accounts therefore have some value either as corroborative instruments or as a kind of small piece in the larger mosaic of sources in efforts to reconstruct the period and the border region more fully.

Sven Bergman provided just such an account of a trip to the Manchurian-Korean border area in 1935 and 1936. Bergman was one of a type of northern European travelling geographers, botanists, and adventurers for whom travels were less fixed on politics, per se, than the geographical landscapes which he took in along the way. Having ridden up to the border on a train from Pyongyang, Bergman arrived at Mount Paektu in the spring of 1936. Probably recognizing that Bergman would be journaling the experience for a foreign audience, a large contingent of about fifty Japanese troops accompanied him around and up Mount Paektu (Bergman 1938, 71-81). The Japanese had apparently been harassed by bandit groups, but their depiction in Bergman’s account is generally triumphant, including a spirited ‘Banzai’ at the apex of the mountain’s volcanic lake, Chonji. For contemporary readers for whom Paektusan is the symbol of the North Korean regime’s purity, Bergman’s account amounts to a sullying event, a confirmation of the colonizer’s dominance over a quasi-sacred space. Bergman’s description of the bandit threat to his trip builds upon prior foreign accounts from 1930s emphasizing that when travelling in Manchuria or its border regions, guerrillas represented ultimately a challenge of raw physical displacement or economic disruption for the Japanese (Struck and Rifkli 1934, 37, 116-120, 155), rather than a coherent ideological counterweight.

Does Bergman’s account therefore clash with Kim Il-sung’s own narrative of arrival in 1936 in the border area around Mt. Paektu a few short months later? Not really. The Swede’s narrative in a sense coheres with Kim Il-sung’s later critique of the Japanese portrayal of guerrilla activity to foreign audiences: Korean activity is not political or nationalist, instead, Koreans in the mountains are simply bandits (Kim 1994, Vol. 5, 75).[[64]](#footnote-64) Bergman did not record having had any contact at all with ethnic Koreans in the area, keeping his human portraits to spirited Japanese settler-hunters living in the bogs around Mount Paektu. So Bergman neither confirms nor denies Kim’s reputation and bonds of loyalty among the base areas around Mt. Paektu was allegedly growing so substantially (Kim 1995), since he appears not to have consciously spoken to any Koreans at all.

The theme of banditry or Korean resistance activity is worth pursuing just a bit further, since foreign reporters who made a pilgrimage to northeast China and its frontiers had divergent tendencies of view, often with the broader global struggle in mind. The accounts of two very different journalists embedded with Japanese units patrolling the frontiers of Manchukuo in the summer of 1932 are salutary. Peter Fleming was a writer for *The Times* of London, and described Japanese ‘pacification’ activities in rural areas east of Mukden, present-day Shenyang, as largely reactive violence rather than the ongoing eradication of a Chinese nation-state.[[65]](#footnote-65) Korean ethnonationalism or even simple banditry plays no role in his analysis (Fleming 1941, 99-135). Less prone to irony than the Englishman was Roland Struck, a German reporter also in Manchuria in the summer 1932.

Roland Struck was seeking out violence that summer, and his itinerary was therefore more northern-oriented. He was concerned primarily with the titanic struggle between the Chinese republic and the Japanese empire, not the diffusing impact of Japanese imperialism on Koreans. However, Struck conveys an impressive encounter in a dining car of a Manchukuo train, where he meets a German-speaking Korean with a degree from the University of Heidelberg. This gives the reporter some insight into Korean nationalism, although when he later learns that the student (named ‘Bom-hai’ in the book) has thrown a grenade at a Japanese official in Shanghai, the act is essentially disconnected and senseless (Strunk and Rifkli 1934, 51-55). A bowdlerization of Strunk’s Manchuria experiences published not long after his death in 1940 heightens the German reporter’s concerns about the spread of Bolshevism across Asia (Volck 1938), but seems to believe that all communist resistance to Manchukuo was Chinese rather than, or also, Korean. Naturally some sources from the period reflect the fact that their authors were being paid by Japanese agencies for their troubles in the global propaganda war over Tokyo’s adventurism (O’Connor 2006), or, far less often, see journalists being cultivated by Soviet diplomats in search of military data about Japan’s military dispositions (Strunk and Rifkli 1934, 128-129). Globetrotting journalists like John Gunther showed little interest in the Korean partisans, but the Swiss journalist Anton Zikscha, though primarily enchanted with Japan’s heavy industrial and urban achievements in Manchukuo, gave the Korean communist fighters a relatively intelligent précis (Zikscha 1938; Cathcart and Winstanley-Chesters 2018). Perhaps with such an informational landscape in mind, the elderly Kim Il-sung took pains in his reminiscences and their account of the years 1936 and 1937 around Changbai county to emphasize that his unit had taken steps to inform local Japanese in the border region that the group was more ideologically rigorous than normal ‘banditti’ (Kim 1995, 179-180). These messages clearly did not make it out to the outside world, and the long passages in Kim’s memoirs attesting to his strong awareness of international opinion currents prevailing at the time very much reads like a presentist add-on (Kim 1994, 246-249).[[66]](#footnote-66)

The Korean communist resistance to Japan in Northeast China in the 1930s was largely ignored in Western languages during the Second World War, with one notable exception. This was Kim Sun and Nym Wales’ 1941 *Song of Ariran* (Kim and Wales 1941; Armstrong 1995, 15; Kim 1946, 235-254). Kim San had extensive experience with anti-Japanese internationalism, having moved around China and East Asia extensively in his youth. He had multiple pseudonyms, nearly ten in one obituary, most of them Chinese (Zhonggong Beijing Shiwei Dangshi Yanjiushi 2013). The book-length account of his life and his ambitions for Northeast China was first compiled and then published in English by Nym Wales, the pen name of Helen Foster Snow, companion of the reporter Edgar Snow. Wales was Kim’s interviewer in the summer of 1937, when *Song of Ariran* was dictated or elicited in a few days of work at Lu Xun Arts University in the Chinese Communist Party stronghold of Yan’an. Kim San apparently had no awareness of Kim Il-sung, and had not been very active in northeast China, and, in fact, it was his desire to go and fight there against the wishes of the broader Party that got him into trouble with his Chinese colleagues. About a year after his conversations with Helen Foster Snow, he was placed under investigation and imprisoned, and silenced; his execution was performed secretly at the orders of Li Lisan in the summer of 1938 (Yi 2006; Shen 2017). Kim’s connections with Lin Tiefu, another Korean figure from Hamgyong but working in Tianjin (Tianjin Ribao 2007), may have been what ultimately brought him into suspicion (Wang 2018, 65-66).

While Kim San’s account was deemed ‘largely exaggerated’ and ‘distorted’ by Dae-sook Suh (1967, 271), Bruce Cumings (1974) later argued for its rehabilitation as a historical text. During the Second World War*,* *Song of Ariran* never reached the heights of popularity as did Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*, but it did at least lend Helen Foster Snow some credibility in acting as the kind of voice for Koreans trying to resist tyranny over the peninsula. The book was translated into multiple languages, meaning it had an impact well into the 1950s in Japan, when it was translated and published shortly after the U.S. occupation and its censorship ended (Bak and Gim, 2015). It is unclear at what point Helen Foster Snow became aware that the subject of her book had in fact been killed by his Chinese comrades.[[67]](#footnote-67) In a 1942 article in *Pacific Affairs,* she cited Kim San as her source for the claim that ‘the half-million Korean exiles in the Chientao [Jiandao] triangle in Manchuria…constitute a most strategic centre of unrest’ (Wales 1942, 32). In a bit of obfuscation which will be familiar to contemporary readers marshalling defector testimonies in support of diverse claims, Snow also made it appear that conversations with Kim San had helped her circumvent a Japanese tightening of information cordons after 1938 (Wales 1942, 15). In the postwar, writers and memoirists like Kim Saryang had to explain their experiences of the past several years in China (Tikhonov 2018), but also did so to throw off shadows of collaboration. Kim Il-sung had fewer such problems. He never met Kim San, and might have been purged himself had he decided to ally with the revolutionary in Yan’an. At the same time, the future North Korean leader may have benefitted marginally from the kind of romanticization that Wales brought to the notion of Korean partisan resistance in the northeast.

**The 88th Brigade and the ‘Postwar’**

If Western correspondents were ignorant of Kim Il-sung’s activities, the Soviets and Chinese communists were anything but. Kim’s path to power was accompanied by extensive interactions with international forces and friends. The diaries of Zhou Baozhong from (1936-1945) are a particularly excellent prism for understanding Kim Il-sung’s milieu from 1941-1945. It was at this time that Kim Il-sung and his growing family were residents in a camp outside of Khabarovsk on the extreme northeastern connection point between China and the Soviet Union. As in Manchuria, Kim’s relationships with Chinese comrades, including Zhou, were significant; it was clear that the Chinese were the dominant non-Soviet group. It seemed clear that although the future of northeast China was still hazy, the CCP was attempting, even in the camp, to be sensitive to the Korean partners in its small but important coalition – as Zhou Baozhong put it somewhat patronizingly, ‘*minzu gongzuo renhe shihou bu ke fangsong*’ (we can at no time relent from doing our ethnic work) (Zhou 1991, 787). The historian Shen Zhihua puts less emphasis on ethnic identity or proto-nationalism among the Koreans in the Soviet camp, bluntly stating: ‘In principle, it was an anti-Japanese guerrilla force led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but in actuality it was directly supervized by the Soviet Far Eastern Command’ (Shen 2015, 3). The scholar Dai Maolin’s new history of the Northeastern Bureau of the CCP is comprehensive and depicts the new Party orthodoxy on that group, including a minor rehabilitation of Gao Gang, who was purged and committed suicide after the Korean War. Dai’s book plays down the role of the Red Army but does acknowledge that the Chinese Communist fighters along with Kim Il-sung who were in Khabarovsk at this time were all indeed ‘in Soviet uniforms, led by the Soviet Red Army’ (Dai 2017, 20). Political slogans at the camp were fervently internationalist (Zhou 1991, 789-790). There was little to no overt discussion about the future of Korea here, much less a vision of Kim Il-sung being installed at its head.

While Kim had operated under CCP pressures in Northeast China, it was another level of control entirely that he encountered in the Soviet Union. North Korean histories tend to treat this period as one of strategic planning, but Kim was also acting as a cog in Stalin’s long-standing practice, one followed since 1933, of treating expellee Chinese soldiers as Soviet labour force augmentation. In June 1944, Kim and his brigade were expected to to set aside six days per month to do manual labour, or *shehui laodong gongzuo* (‘socialist labour work’)(Zhou 1991, 786, 789; Shen 2015, 9).While Kim had been able to escape repercussions for burning the Minsaengdan dossiers when the Comintern appeared very much to want them, he still needed to be concerned in this camp space about accusations of espionage or a potential betrayal. Two Korean comrades in the camp, known by their surnames of Chai and Lee, had been purged but their families still appeared to be living in the camp in 1945, precisely the kind of people in need of help and healing that Kim’s propagandists would later demonstrate he invariably helped, but Kim had to be careful not to be too assertive on behalf of Koreans only; his unit was a mix of amid ethnicities and a lack of *huxiang* (mutual trust) could be laid at his feet (Zhou 1991, 791, 793). As Japan’s defeat approached in 1945, Zhou Baozhong’s diary included various notes that a ‘suspicious person [had been] dealt with’ or ‘suspected person purged’ (Zhou 1991, 788-789, 810). When Zhou Baozhong finally had his breakthrough meeting with a Soviet general – in which Zhou is informed after years of waiting that the Soviet Union is going to enter the war against Japan – it was the Chinese leader rather than Kim who inquired after the purged Chai and Lee and appeared to remind the Soviet patrons that the men’s families needed assistance (Zhou 1991, 787, 807, 811-813). Children of the partisans were required to join the branch of the communist youth league in the camp, a good indicator of what Kim’s son Kim Jong-il may have seen in the short term as his organizational future (Zhou 1991, 790).

When the Red Army unleashed its attack against Japan’s northeastern continental colonies in early August 1945, it became clear that the Khabarovsk camp’s purpose, if it was to have any beyond being a holding area for highly trained partisans, was about to be fulfilled. With the declaration of war against Japan, Kim’s brigade could finally demand some basic travel supplies like batteries (Zhou 1991, 817). On 10 August, there was a meeting at the camp at which a mass pledge was given of revolution before the ‘counteroffensive’ began. At the meeting, Kim Il-sung made a speech which pledged to support the soldiers in their ultimate ‘counterattack’ toward final victory in the War of Anti-Japanese Resistance (Dai 2017, 20-21). But another two weeks were spent in the camp until 26 August, when a more substantial step was taken by the Soviets who told them they would split Zhou Baozhong and Kim Il-sung’s commands. On 27 August, Zhou Baozhong said that pregnant women, sick, and youth should stay behind in the USSR, and that others should come with him. According to the Chinese sources, the main event was not the liberation of Korea but the upcoming ‘protracted war with the Guomindang […] going into the mountains [of Northeast China] and launching guerrilla attacks’ after assisting the Soviet Red Army (Dai 2017, 20-21).

Kim Il-sung left the Soviet Union with a group that included his young Korean counterpart Gang Sintae on 5 September. This was two days after Japan had surrendered to the United States in Tokyo harbor, and nearly a month after hostilities had commenced in earnest between the Soviet Red Army and the Japanese in northeastern Korea and then the border town of Hunchun, the easternmost periphery of Northeast China (Zhou 821).[[68]](#footnote-68) Gang Sintae was one of Kim’s younger colleagues; he would go on to prominence in the early liberation of what was then still known as Jiandao, current-day Yanji, and the epicentre of ethnic Korean populations in northeast China. Ultimately Gang would end up back in North Korea, commanding troops in the Korean People’s Army and dying in the initial fighting of the Korean War in 1950 (Kraus and Cathcart 2014). Gang’s deployment to northeast China, and Kim’s to Korea, is a reminder that Kim Il-sung might have had a very different postwar history. This is in part because, in his four years in the camp with the 88th Brigade in Khabharovsk, his patron within the camp and upward reporting command chain was Zhou Baozhong, who himself was occupying an ambiguous and uncomfortable position with respect to the right to participate at all in the invasion of Northeast China. Korean communists were one of the smaller assets (or, less charitably, pawns) in the much broader Sino-Soviet-American debate over whether the CCP had the right to accept the Japanese surrender at all, much less engage actively in fighting the Japanese (Dai 2017, 20; Shen 2015). Little wonder that North Korean histories tend to inflate this period to a massive extent, since Kim was robbed of agency at the time.

Kim Il-sung’s ‘revolutionary footsteps’ in the Sino-Korean border region did not entirely cease in 1945. Kim is occasionally seen as a positive player in the Chinese Civil War of 1945-1950, and did provide extensive aid to the Chinese communist forces in northeast China during this conflict. One North Korean narrative has Kim Il-sung personally provisioning the Chinese Communist armies in 1946-1947 with explosives via Dandong, then known as Andong, indicating charismatic traces of the North Korean leader in the Yalu River border city from the violent years in Northeast China’s periphery (Kim 2013). Certainly, North Koreans did help the Chinese during this period, even printing propaganda for the CCP in Sinuiju and receiving wounded Chinese communist troops (Cathcart and Kraus 2010). However, attempts to locate confirmation of Kim’s activities in Andong in foreign sources from the late 1940s only turn up small signs of North Korean security weaknesses in that border juncture between Sinuiju and Dandong. One American intelligence source from Dandong dating from 1947 has ‘wealthy elements of the North Korean population [having] lost faith in Kim Il-sung’s government [and] contriving methods of transferring capital to South Korea…through Antung [Dandong]; some persons are transferring funds [from North Korea] to Antung under the subterfuge of buying goods there’ (Central Intelligence Agency 1947). The CCP has produced some memoir literature on how Kim Il-sung was helpful to the Party during the Chinese civil war, but standard histories of that conflict in the northeast generally do not mention him, or North Korea, at all. When the CCP’s head of the Northeastern Bureau, Chen Yun, travelled from Harbin to the Yalu River town of Linjiang, he did so via North Korea. This protection and reliable behind-the-lines transport was vital for the Chinese Communist Party during their civil war, much in the way that Northeast China became a vital rear area for the North Koreans during the Korean War. However, Chen Yun’s ability to travel through North Korea is generally not commented on or explained at all in Chinese historical texts, and Kim Il-sung’s opening the door for his Chinese comrades on the border is simply ignored entirely (Liu 2017, 268-270). In the most recent renaissance of Chinese historical writing and release of historical materials about Chen Yun, this trend holds, with Changbaishan/Mt. Paektu set as a goal for the Chinese revolution rather than brotherhood with Korean communists (Dong and Han 2019, 221).

In looking at the years from 1945 to 1949, the the histories and memoirs of Kim Il-sung’s time in Manchuria ultimately are placed into dialogue with another border region: the 38th parallel and its armed clashes after the founding of the two rival Korean republics in autumn of 1948. Here there is a literal displacement or continuation of the struggle from the Sino-Korean border region to the new contested frontier of struggle. Bruce Cumings has done much to augument our understanding of the intensity and importance of the violence along the 38th parallel in this period. He frequently evokes the repetitions of colonial-era patterns on the Korean Peninsula in the 1950s and 1960s, when men who had been tasked with hunting down Kim Il-sung as a Manchurian bandit fighter were now leading whole segments of the new Republic of Korea army in fighting Kim’s mobilized forces (Cumings 2005; Cumings 2004). Kim Il-sung’s memoirs do the same work of repetition and displacement. In one section of his memoirs covering the immediate Japanese mobilization following his 1937 Pochonbo battle, the North Korean leader recalls how a collaborationist Korean, Kim Sok-won, was tasked with hunting him down in the Changbai region. Kim Sok-won, he recalled, travelled from Hamhung to Hyesan with a unit meant to kill him (Kim 1995, 214-215; Baik 376-377). After helping to mobilize the military draft for Koreans on the peninsula in 1944, Kim Sok-won ended up fighting the North Koreans along the 38th parallel in 1948 and 1949. There were other longer-lasting repetitions that sprang out of the Chinese civil war. In 1945 and 1946, John Singlaub was acting as the key American spymaster for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in Dandong, inserting anti-communist Koreans into North Korea. The American intelligence officer ultimately became Chief of Staff for US Forces in the Republic of Korea in the mid-1970s, facing off more directly against Kim Il-sung more than a quarter century later (Singlaub and Mcconnell 1992, 143-144).

**Chinese Documentation of Kim Il-sung’s Borderlands History, 1953**

During the Korean War, North Korean historians and propagandists had a large reading public across the communist bloc, including in northeast China. Readers in the PRC were able to get some basic biographical details about Kim Il-sung, and celebrate his anti-Japanese lineage. But it was not until after the war concluded that cross-border research teams got involved in earnest into the research of a new type of Kim Il-sung biography. In the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China rests a twenty-four-page file from the summer of 1953 describing such a research trip (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953). This was a period when the Korean Armistice had just been signed, and when both North Korean and Chinese leaders, soldiers, and civilians could all at last turn to the future – or, in this case, the past. The file describes how Kim Il-sung’s partisan history was sought out, and in the process demonstrates the dependence that the North Koreans had on China in order to dig deeper into Kim’s history. This was the DPRK’s first major effort following the Korean War (1950-1953) to deepen the documentary roots of Kim Il-sung’s years in exile as an anti-Japanese partisan fighter.

The document describes how a delegation of ten North Koreans undertook to visit Northeast China in the autumn of 1953. They did so for the purpose of collecting histories and artifacts of the anti-Japanese struggle in which Kim Il-sung had participated (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953). While the typescript of the document is incredibly dirty and difficult to read at points, it is clear that the reasons for the work had multiple justifications. These were listed as ‘inculcating loyalty of the people’ to the centre in North Korea, and ‘heightening patriotic and internationalist thought’ in both North Korea and China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 18). One of the first agenda items for the North Koreans was to locate old base areas in which Kim Il-sung had been active. While the delegation had two leaders of indeterminate political vintage and three material collection specialists, the rest had some connection to propaganda apparatus: a writer, a musician, a photographer, a poet and a sculptor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 9).[[69]](#footnote-69) Evidence of both comradeship and struggle would be useful for the historians, but the process of artistically rendering the anti-Japanese struggle of Kim Il-sung, numerically speaking, was more important to the North Koreans.

As described in the preparatory section of the document, relics of all kind were needed, ranging from knives or bayonets used by Kim’s men or even artillery buried and hidden by the Korean revolutionaries in Manchuria. Photographs of ‘architecture and sites associated with General Kim’s leadership of the Korean revolutionaries’ armed anti-Japanese struggle’ were also sought. The vehicle for interaction would not be the PRC Foreign Ministry or the respective countries’ ministries of culture, but instead the CCP Northeast Bureau’s Political Committee (*Dongbei xingzheng weiyuanhui*), led by the powerful Gao Gang. Kim still had ethnic Korean contacts working in Yanbian who had served in his armed forces previously, but they were not named as leaders in coordination, merely as people ‘who should accompany the delegation anytime they wished’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 10-11). In the meditation on the lack of photographs of himself existent during his partisan years, Kim Il-sung appears to refer to one result from this visit, or a subsequent one in the 1950s by North Korean researchers into the northeast, when Chae Ju-son ‘finally gave a photograph [of the young Kim Il-sung] to a group of our visits to the old revolutionary battle sites in northeast China’ (Kim 1995, 190).[[70]](#footnote-70)

The areas of investigation for the North Korean delegation in 1953 ranged widely across the northeast. It was a very ambitious itinerary, anchored in preliminary work done by a memorial group based in Harbin, the city which the CCP had occupied for the longest during the prior Chinese civil war. The Harbin historians held collections of Japanese documents on ‘communist banditry’ in the 1930s (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 4), finding them useful in nailing down specifics of partisan activity. There was also a good concentration of Koreans in the city of Harbin in 1952 and 1953, who had their own women’s and youth association, as well as a library housing Soviet and North Korean texts (Central Intelligence Agency, 1954). After Harbin, the group moved on to document Yuwen Middle School as an important site on Kim’s revolutionary journey. This required a visit of no less than three days. The Chinese cadre then planned for their comrades to travel to Dunhua county, Wangjing county, Yanji county, Helong county, Antu county, Changbai county, and further south, Tonghua county, Linjiang county (the site of Chen Yun’s stand in the Chinese civil war discussed earlier) and Hunchun in the extreme northeast. Beyond the site visits, some bibliographical material was sought out. ‘Enemy publications’ such as magazines or the puppet newspaper *Manzhou Ribao* (or *Manchuria Daily*) were to be obtained when possible (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 11). Prefiguring the work which Chong-sik Lee (1967) would undertake a dozen or so years later, the Chinese work group in Shenyang worked up a listing of some thirty-one sources most of which appeared to be from Japanese records in which Kim’s activities might be discussed, or at least relevant (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 16).

The journey of the delegation was to start not on the border directly, but in Changchun on the resonant anniversary of Japan’s surrender on 3 September. Five days were slated for Harbin for connection with China’s main centre at the time for documenting the anti-Japanese war period in the northeast, as well as the Jilin Prison where Kim had been held in 1929. For a full week, 14-20 September 1953, the group would stay in Yanji city and then foray outward into the various small towns and counties in which Kim had been active. Wangqing, some 40 km north of Yanji and the site of some of the worst violence in the transitional six months after the August 1945 Japanese surrender, received three full days for investigation of revolutionary sites. The direct border region was a major destination for the group. The North Korean delegation spent six days in Helong, an agricultural Korean-majority county which spreads south of Yanji and along the Tumen River. This was followed by a week each in Antu and Fusong, Kim Il-sung’s adolescent hometown and also a site of some battles. But Changbai county merited a ten-day stay, the longest of any locale for Kim’s group of researchers. Changbai would be the site of at least two follow-on visits by North Korean delegations in the 1950s (Hou 1993, 306-309), and local or provincial archives in Changchun surely contain more details. The 1953 delegation continued on with three days in Qingyu county, named for Kim’s executed Chinese colleague Yang Qingyu. This was followed by four in Linjiang, a single day in Tonghua county and three in Shenyang city (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 13).

Among the more interesting aspects of this itinerary is its relationship to the boundaries of the Korean autonomous region which had been set up in 1952 with a centre in Yanji.[[71]](#footnote-71) While allowing acknowledgement of Kim’s achievements in Korean-majority areas of the People’s Republic of China runs counter to the more Han-centric currents of the later Mao years, for the CCP to provide North Korean historians and artists with such entree to Korean-majority areas within China’s territory fits in clearly with Mao Zedong’s rhetorically generous approach to Kim in the years after the Korean War (Shen and Xia 2018).

One interesting blank space in the work documents is that that North Koreans made no mention or requests whatsoever in the document to Kim Jong-suk, the guerrilla-in-arms wife of Kim Il-sung. Today, North Koreans have placed her at the centre of the exile narrative. Her various hometowns and places of exile would have been natural targets for the scholars, but interest was not expressed. Perhaps it is no wonder that the North Koreans have turned to the drive to fabricate or create what is convenient. It emerges out of the same impulse, along with the need to find and emphasize a narrative that can go beyond the near-destruction of the Korean War.

What mark if any did these delegations leave in the Chinese historical record? If contemporary narratives indicate accurately, very little. Kim Il-sung does turn up in a relatively new history museum near the North Korean border in China’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, where counties like Longjing and Wangjing had deep histories of Korean partisan activities. But he is never placed at the forefront. In the Yanbian museum, his name appears but once, about 1.5 centimetres high, on a tiny panel laying out the administrative graph for anti-Japanese militias led by the CCP in the Northeastern regions in the 1930s (author’s fieldwork notes 2016). Perhaps this should be no surprise, but, like the years-long renovation of the Resist America and Aid Korea War Museum in Dandong, it does indicate that the Chinese Communist Party historians and propagandists are not as keen as they once were to promote the myth and the reality of Kim Il-sung.

**Conclusion**

The North Korean state has never engaged in the kind of wholesale and openly malevolent approach to the scholarly practice of history that its Chinese neighbours did during the late Mao years. But the process of creating a new history from scratch has been one in which the scalpel has of course been wielded, and the constant retouching of paintings has a verbal and written equivalent as well. The PRC Korean Autonomous Prefecture Library in Yanji has reasonably good connections in Pyongyang, so it is a good place to gauge how prevalent the fabricating impulse has become in recent North Korean historical publications. One spring day in 2016, I spent a couple of long afternoons in the library, looking out the windows upon huge piles of dirt and broken brick, and fields destined for further development in the outward direction of a high-speed train station. I was able to compare several different versions of Kim Jong-il’s *Works*, produced in the 1980s, the early 2000s, and in 2012 just after his death. With each subsequent production, the young Kim Jong-il becomes more productive, such that his work as a poet and theorist and military planner has effectively been backdated to when he was eight years old. The 2012 edition of Kim Jong-il’s *Works* is deeply tied to the succession process, and an endorsement of the Songun or military-first line for Kim Jong-un.

But whatever the details, it is hardly news that North Korean history tends toward forgery, fabrication, and mythification in service of the cult of personality. If we are to take a more holistic survey of sources surrounding Kim Il-sung’s relationship to histories of the border region – both on the Korean and the Chinese sides – we ultimately need to come to grips with the deeper entanglements of the CCP and the Kim-led partisans in the border region in the 1930s and 1940s. Paradoxically, going to the region does not always help to do that – although new facilities are open in Hunchun and new archives in other parts of the border region, as Charles Kraus has shown most are closed (Kraus 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Access to North Korean archives (let alone provincial archives) for the years after 1950 are a pipe dream, which is why we are so dependent upon the centralized state narratives and the biographies and memoirs, and the Japanese documents as used by Suh and Scalapino and Lee. Local materials centres in small libraries like Tonghua can be very helpful in the search for related evidence, as can second-hand booksellers or ‘grey markets’ for texts in Yanbian with connections to North Korea. While purchasing troves of local documents is difficult, even the acquisition of rare or out-of-print texts (or ‘*neibu*/internal circulation’ texts) from the Chinese border regions can be extraordinarily helpful. Even with the effective closure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, Beijing remains a relatively fertile site. Many documents still remain to be translated or incorporated into analysis of what happened to Kim’s men and the Koreans he purported to lead in the border region in the months just after September 1945 (Kraus and Cathcart 2014). Zhou Baozhong may have lost his early diaries, but there is more to be found in his diaries even as the thirty-year anniversary of their publication approaches. Until such time as the archives do further open, arraying a number of flawed but useful sources has to be one way in which historians can reconstruct the various monoliths against which Kim was operating and the newly monolithic myth – as played in reverse – by the North Korean state.

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**About the Author**

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Part III

Histories of the Sino-Korean Border Region

As described in Chapter 7, the North Korean histories of the border region tend to be stuck in the 1930s and 1940s, anchoring a national revolutionary history and giving it coherence in what was in fact an international and confused milieu. Problematically from North Korea’s perspective, the history of the Sino-Korean border region predates not merely the birth of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 but also Kim Il-sung himself in 1912. Yuanchong Wang reminds us that China’s tributary relations with the Joseon court in Seoul created deep traditional pathways between the two states, and certain practices and patterns along the recognized border.

Japan’s arrival into Northeast Asia as an imperialist power broke this amity, and, in 1894, coincided with a revolt in northwest Korea led by the Tonghaks, flipping Chinese influence back over to the northern bank of the Yalu. Further north along the Tumen River, Korean migrants began to move in greater numbers into Manchuria, overflowing in a process of ‘territorial osmosis,’ in Hyun Ok Park’s memorable phrase which also evokes the rice cultivation by Koreans that made the region so productive. Although largely spared the peninsular trauma of the Korean War (1950-1953) and celebrated for their role in the intervention of the Chinese People’s Volunteers in that conflict, their assistance in reconstructing North Korea along with the occupying Chinese troops (1950-1958), Dong Jo Shin demonstrates that ethnic Koreans in China may have been special, but they were not immune from harsh discrimination during the Great Leap Forward.

The historical upsurges covered in Warrick Morris and Jim Hoare’s co-authored chapter are firmly post-Maoist ones; by 1990, the Cultural Revolution was distant in terms of daily practice, and the main explosion had been at Tiananmen Square the prior year. This augmented record of British diplomats is rather like the more famous 17th century European travel diaries of John Evelyn; that is, they are interpolated with new materials and reflect new research on the period in question. In none of the chapters does North Korea loom as a kind of threat, but a humanitarian time bomb was ticking on the south bank of the Tumen River, and newly released documents from Médecins Sans Frontières and journalists would soon teem to the border region in its first major external fascination point since the Korean War. While the deeper history of the tributary relations would remain largely buried, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un have done their level best in the period of editing this book to reprise a certain level of imperial connectivity and progress in their meetings both in northeast China and Pyongyang.

[onder aan de pagina plaatsen]

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**8 Revisiting the Forgotten Border Gate**

### Fenghuang Gate and the Emergence of the Modern Sino-Korean Borderline, 1636-1876

*Yuanchong Wang*

**Abstract**

China’s Qing Dynasty built a willow palisade in Manchuria in the early seventeenth century that connected with the Great Wall and segregated the imperial court’s home territory from Mongol and Han Chinese regions. The fence gate of Fenghuang City was located at the southwestern corner of the palisade. This chapter shows that from the 1630s to the 1870s, Fenghuang Gate served as the cultural, ethnic, psychological, and commercial boundary between China and Korea and prompted Korean intellectuals to re-envision the Qing and strengthen Korea’s national identity. It also argues that the expansion of China’s provincial system into this area and the new immigration policy in Manchuria in the 1870s permanently neutralized the importance of Fenghuang Gate.

**Keywords:** Qing China, Joseon Korea, Fenghuang Gate, the Willow Palisade, borderline

**Introduction**

In 1637, the Great Qing (1636-1912), founded by the Manchus, conquered Joseon Korea (1392-1910), which had been a subordinate country of Ming China (1368-1644) since the 1390s, and established a tributary relationship with it. The ensuing Sino-Korean hierarchical arrangement lasted for 258 years until 1895, when it was terminated by the Sino-Japanese War. In the bilateral framework that took shape between the two countries, the Qing, which Joseon had hitherto seen as benighted ‘barbarians’, replaced the Ming as the Central Kingdom – a step that was a *sine qua non* of the Qing’s new identity as ‘the civilized’. Joseon had identified itself as So Junghwa (‘Little China’) since Ming times, and it refused to endorse the Qing’s new position as the Central Kingdom. Anti-Qing attitudes, rooted in the conventional civilized-barbarian distinction, were widespread among its intellectuals.[[72]](#footnote-72) However, on the level of high politics, Joseon cautiously accepted its subordination to the Qing and dispatched a steady stream of tributary emissaries to the Qing capital in Mukden (present-day Shenyang) from 1637 to 1643 and then in Beijing after 1644. The Qing reciprocated by sending imperial envoys to Joseon.

On their overland route to the Qing capital, the Korean emissaries had to cross the Yalu River from Uiju in Korea and spend three days traversing a distance of about 62.5 kilometres, or 125 Chinese *li*, before reaching the fence gate of, in Chinese, *Fenghuang cheng* *bianmen* (Fenghuang City, hereafter referred to as ‘Fenghuang Gate’). This was one of the crossing points in the *Liutiao bian* (‘Willow Palisade’) that the Manchus had started to construct in the late 1630s to protect their ancestral territory. Although the Yalu River has been the geographical border between the two countries at least since the first years of the establishment of Joseon Korea in the 1390s, the strip of land between the river and Fenghuang Gate was a special zone in which all settlement was prohibited in accordance with the Qing policy of secluding Manchuria, which was not lifted until the 1870s. Before the 1870s and 1880s neither Qing China nor Joseon Korea applied modern concepts of territory and sovereignty to their borders, but it was clear to both sides that the land between the lower Yalu River and the Willow Palisade, including the strip between the river and Fenghuang Gate, was part of Chinese territory, not merely an ambiguous ‘borderland’.[[73]](#footnote-73)

The area took on an unexpected focus during the Cultural Revolution period in China, not because of Chinese disputes with North Korea, but with the Soviet Union. In 1969, during the Sino-Soviet border dispute over Zhenbao, or Damansky, island on the Ussuri River in northern Manchuria, the Soviet side identified the Willow Palisade as the northern limit of the Qing empire, which elicited critical refutations from Chinese historians (Edmonds 1979, 618-620). To rebuff the Russian claim, the Chinese historian Yang Shusen issued an edited volume on the palisade in 1978 (Yang 1978, 3-5). The American historian Richard L. Edmonds also published a long article about the Willow Palisade in 1979, endorsing Yang’s work and the Chinese response to the Russian statement (Edmonds 1979, 618-620). While written under Cold War pressures, the works by Yang and Edmonds serve as important works in the historiographical development of the topic of study of borderlands and border issues between China and Korea.

The Yalu River was unanimously identified as the Sino-Korean borderline in the diaries of Korean emissaries to Beijing. Although China allowed the Korean tributary emissaries and their assistants to pass through the area between the river and the gate, it strictly prohibited other Koreans from crossing the river and from entering or immigrating to the area. As a result, for two and a half centuries Fenghuang Gate served as the singular place where Chinese and Koreans met and interacted. Korean visitors were still steeped in the discourse of the civilized-barbarian distinction, which identified the Korean side as the civilized following the Ming and the Qing side as barbarians. For them, Fenghuang Gate became a constant reminder of the great changes brought about by the Ming-Qing transition in the Chinese world. On the Qing side, Manchu imperial envoys visiting Hanseong (today’s Seoul) also had to pass Fenghuang Gate before they could cross the Yalu River for Uiju. Once outside the gate, they were welcomed by Korean officials. The Chinese and Korean activities in the area of the gate thus consolidated the hierarchical relationship between Qing imperial authority and Korean sovereignty.

When the Qing ended the seclusion of Manchuria in the 1870s and 1880s and established Dandong County to encompass the land outside the Willow Palisade along the lower Yalu River, Fenghuang Gate lost its role as an ethnic boundary, a customs gate, and a cultural symbol. During the twentieth century, as the modern Chinese state redefined its national borders, Fenghuang Gate, along with all other gates of the Willow Palisade as well as the palisade itself, disappeared from Chinese historical narratives, except for a brief reemergence in the debate between China and the Soviet Union in the 1970s (Yang 1978, 3-5; Edmonds 1979, 618-620).

### **The Gate and the Border: The Willow Palisade and the Yalu River**

The Willow Palisade was constructed in the Liao River basin on the basis of the Ming’s border walls in Liaodong, which had been built in the 1440s and 1460s, but the Qing significantly extended the existing boundary line (Yang 1978, 32-33). In 1638, in order to prevent people from Korea crossing the Yalu River to search for ginseng in Manchu territory, Hongtaiji (1592-1643) started to construct the eastern part of the Willow Palisade by restoring the Ming border wall connecting Fenghuang City and Jianchang.In the Shunzhi period (1644-1661), the Qing government extended the palisade north from Jianchang to Weiyuan Village, from where another part of the Willow Palisade extended southwest until it connected with the Great Wall. Weiyuan Village thus served as the junction of the eastern and western wings of the palisade, which was known as the *Laobian* (‘Old Fence’). The Old Fence was about 950 kilometres, or 1900 *li*, long. Between 1670 and 1681, Emperor Kangxi built the *Xinbian* (‘New Fence’) by extending the palisade from Weiyuan Village to Fateha Gate, a distance of about 345 kilometres, or 690 *li*, as seen in Map 1 (Yang 1978, 34-42). The Willow Palisade connected with the mountains that were quite close to the Great Wall near the Shanhaiguan. Under the Manchu court’s seclusion policy, the fenced area belonged to the Manchus only, and no Han Chinese or other non-Manchu immigrants were allowed to settle in it. The palisade segregated the Manchus from Mongols in the west, from Han Chinese in the southwest, from various nomadic peoples in the northeastern section of Manchuria, and from Koreans in the southeast. It thus served as an ethnic boundary demarcating these groups under the Manchu empire.

**Map 8.1 The Willow Palisade on the Complete Map of Shengjing (*Shengjing yudi quantu*)**

[hier Map\_8.1]

Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC, call number G7822.M21736.S5

Fenghuang City, which was located at the southeastern corner of the east wing of the Old Fence, and Fenghuang Gate were under the supervision of the Manchu general of Mukden. Fenghuang Gate, known to Korean visitors as the *Jakmun* (‘Fence Gate’), lay about four kilometres (eight *li*) to the southeast of the city when it was built between 1638 and 1639. Between 1685 and 1690 the gate was extended toward the Yalu River up to a location fifteen kilometres, or thirty *li*, from the city, as seen on Map 2.[[74]](#footnote-74)

**Map 8.2 Fenghuang City, the Fence Gate, and the Yalu River on the Complete Map of Shengjing**

[hier Map\_8.2]

Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC, call number G7822.M21736.S5

By the end of the seventeenth century, the distance between the gate and the Joseon town of Uiju was about 60 kilometres or 120 *li*.[[75]](#footnote-75) In 1741, an official who had visited Fenghuang Gate reported in a palace memorial to Emperor Qianlong (1735-1796) that the distance was actually about 80 kilometres, or 160 *li*.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Fenghuang Gate was the first place where Koreans could conduct trade after passing through the palisade. This restriction contributed to the development of a prosperous border market near the gate, creating a site for commerce that endured until the late nineteenth century. The Manchu officials from Fenghuang City also supervised the border markets in Zhongjiang (Middle River Island) in the Yalu River (Boming 1801, 1b-4b). Thus, Fenghuang Gate, along with the Willow Palisade, became a distinct marker of the Qing frontier, and this was made clear on various maps produced in both the Qing and Joseon. For instance, the imperial atlas *Huangyu quanlan tu* (‘Complete Map of the Imperial Territory’*)* prepared by Jesuits serving the court of Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) clearly noted the fence, with its southeastern wing ending at Fenghuang Gate. The gate was identified as ‘Funghūwang cing duka’ in the Manchu version of the atlas preserved by the Manchu court, and as ‘Fonm-hoam touka’ in Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville’s French-language *Nouvelle atlas de la Chine*, published in 1737.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The Manchu court had prohibited civilian access to and settlement in the land between the gate and the Yalu River and sent soldiers to patrol the boundary on a regular basis every quarter. Nevertheless, Korean emissaries could pass through this area without being subjected to any security checks by the Chinese side. In the post-1644 period, Korean emissaries travelled to Beijing along an overland tributary route, which was about 1530 kilometres long and linked Hanseong and Beijing via around 82 stations. On their way, the emissaries had to pass through Pyongyang, Uiju, across the Yalu River, Fenghuang City, Mukden, Shanhaiguan, and Tongzhou. Fenghuang Gate was the point at which the Korean emissaries entered the Qing home territory in Manchuria. After crossing the Yalu River, the emissaries would generally spend a night at Jiuliancheng and another at Tangzhan before reaching the gate, where they would be welcomed and accommodated by the Manchu officers of Fenghuang City. The itinerary of Yi Gyeong-am (1579-1652), an associate emissary of the Korean tributary mission to Mukden, provides an interesting example. On 13 November 1641, Yi and his mission crossed the Yalu River, and two days later, having travelled about 55 kilometres, they reached Fenghuang Gate. After breakfast outside the gate, the mission was welcomed by two Manchu generals and six servants attached to the gate who guided the visitors into the gate structure (Yi 2001, 422-423). Similar accounts can be found in numerous travel journals written by other Korean visitors. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Fenghuang Gate was known to Chinese as *tong Chaoxian zhi kongdao* (‘the key pass to Korea’) (Boming 1801, 2b).

The land between the river and Fenghuang Gate belonged to the Qing, as Emperor Qianlong made very clear in the 1740s in the course of debates concerning the establishment of an outpost in Mangniushao.[[78]](#footnote-78) In November 1745, the Manchu General of Mukden, Daldangga (?-1760) suggested to Emperor Qianlong that the Qing set up a border outpost at Mangniushao near the Yalu River in order to prevent Koreans from crossing the border river illegally to sell or buy grain or harvest ginseng in Manchuria. Daldangga was not the first official to make this proposal. In June 1731, his predecessor, Nasutu (?-1749), had also proposed establishing an outpost at Mangniushao by sending two banner officers and 40 banner soldiers to the location, equipped with six ships (*Qing shilu* [Yongzheng] 1985-1987, VIII, pp. 399-400). Since the location bordered Joseon, Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1723-1735) had instructed the Ministry of Rites to seek the king’s opinion on the matter. The king unequivocally opposed Nasutu’s proposal, citing a similar exchange in 1715, and successfully convinced the emperor to follow the precedent of his father, Emperor Kangxi, and reject the plan (*Qing shilu* [Yongzheng] 1985-1987, VIII, 458). But in the wake of increased instances of illegal border crossing, Daldangga resurrected Nasutu’s plan in 1745 and sought permission to send four banner officers, 100 Han Chinese banner soldiers, and four big ships to Mangniushao with the aim of reinforcing the empire’s border control around Zhongjiang, which was the primary route for trespassers. In addition, Daldangga proposed to repair and extend the Willow Palisade and to cultivate lands outside the palisade that had hitherto been closed off by the Qing’s seclusion policy (*Dongmun hwigo* 1978, I, 913-918). Emperor Qianlong anticipated that the Joseon king would again object to the erection of an outpost at Mangniushao, so he instructed Daldangga to clarify whether the proposal was likely to cause trouble for Joseon (*Qing shilu* [Qianlong]1985-1987, XII, 256). Daldangga immediately instructed the Manchu commander in Xiongyue to investigate Mangniushao in person. The commander reported that Mangniushao lay completely on China’s side of the border.

While Qianlong deliberated on Daldangga’s proposal, he received petitions from the Joseon king, entreating him not to authorize the Mangniushao outpost or cultivation of the lands outside the palisade because such moves would make it more difficult for Joseon to control the borderlands (*Qing shilu* [Qianlong]1985-1987, XII, 527-528, 532-533; *Tongmun hwiko*, I, 916-918). As Seonmin Kim (2017, 98) has argued, the Koreans used the customary tributary discourse between the Qing and Joseon ‘to bolster their claim against the military post’. Although the emperor called the petitions ‘despicable’ and suspected that the king’s real motivation was to protect Koreans who stole into Manchuria in search of ginseng, he nonetheless instructed a Mongolian minister, Bandi (?-1755), to visit Mangniushao to make sure that it fell *xi Zhongguo jienei* (‘within China’s borders’) (*Qing shilu* [Qianlong] 1985-1987, XII, 527-528). In October 1746, Bandi confirmed that Mangniushao lay in Chinese territory and that it would consequently be appropriate for the Qing to establish an outpost there. It seemed that Daldangga would achieve his goals. At the last moment, however, Qianlong changed his mind and decided to follow the precedents set by his father in 1731 and his grandfather in 1715, as well as another case handled by himself in 1737: he rejected Daldangga’s proposals on the grounds of ‘cherishing’ the king and ‘the small country’ (*Qing shilu* [Qianlong]1985-1987, XII, 535-536, 573-574).

In the discussions over Mangniushao, the king took a highly active and even aggressive role, whereas Emperor Qianlong was largely passive, captive to the precedents appealed to by the king. Both sides invoked the tributary discourse in the course of the negotiation. Reviewing Joseon’s success in opposing the Qing’s border plans in the four cases between 1715 and 1746, Qianlong found himself in an awkward position and worried that the Qing’s standing in Joseon’s eyes might be compromised if the Qing always acceded to Joseon’s requests. Nevertheless, instead of taking a stand against Joseon, the emperor chose to address the dilemma on the domestic front by instructing Daldangga to refrain from making similar proposals to the court in the future and commanding Daldangga and his successors to follow established rules in managing border affairs (*Qing shilu* [Qianlong]1985-1987, XII, 535-536). The emperor thus closed the possibility of future arguments between the two countries over the establishment of China’s outposts near the Yalu River in this area. This approach contributed to the stability of the bilateral relationship by helping to maintain the status quo in this region for another hundred years. In the 1800s, a local official in Fenghuang City explained that the seclusion of the area between the river and the palisade reflected the Qing’s considerate policy of protecting its tributary from trouble caused by Chinese subjects at the border as well as the Qing’s benevolence in ‘cherishing the men from afar’ (Boming 1801, 4a).

Before the Qing court lifted the seclusion order on Manchuria and allowed people to cultivate the land outside the palisade this area in the nineteenth century, the members of Joseon’s tributary missions were among the few people to reach this area. This situation led some Western observers in the late nineteenth century to see the land between the ‘wall of stakes’ and the Yalu River as a ‘neutral territory’ or a ‘neutral strip’ (Griffis 1894, 83-85, 361, 364). Similarly, for some Chinese before the nineteenth century, the area seemed to be *qitong outuo* (‘a piece of abandoned border land’) (Boming 1801, 4a).

### **The Civilized-Barbarian Discourse and the Experiences of Korean Emissaries at Fenghuang Gate**

The Korean scholar-officials who served on tributary missions to Qing China identified the Yalu River as the borderline between the two countries in the geographical sense, but given the widespread anti-Manchu cultural context of the post-Ming period they simultaneously regarded the river as the boundary between the civilized (Joseon Korea) and the barbarians (Qing China). In the winter of 1682, the Korean tributary emissary Kim Seok-ju (1634-1684) composed a poem for the head of Uiju Prefecture before the mission crossed the Yalu River into China. In the poem, Kim emphasized that ‘there are three big rivers between the heaven and the earth, while a tall pavilion stands between the civilized and the barbarians’. The three big rivers were the Huang River, the Yangtze River, and the Yalu River, and the tall pavilion referred to as the *Donggunjeong* (‘Donggun Pavilion’), set on the highest hill of Uiju (Pak 1956, I, 1).

For Kim, the Yalu River was the divide between the civilized Joseon and the Qing, a barbarous country that he could see from the Donggun Pavilion. He was not alone in defining in this matter the respective positions of Joseon and the Qing in the civilized-barbarian context. For example, in 1790 Seo Ho-su (1736-1799), who visited Rehe as an associate envoy on a mission to celebrate Emperor Qianlong’s eightieth birthday, made the same comment before crossing the Yalu River for Fenghuang Gate and Beijing. During his sojourn in Uiju, Seo (2001, 335) wrote in one of his poems that the Yalu River served as the ‘boundary between the civilized and barbarians’, although in his diary he used the Qing’s regnal title. Fenghuang Gate, in this cultural and psychological context, served as the real border between two worlds for the Koreans, and simultaneously changed Korean visitors’ perceptions about the Qing.

As noted earlier, after crossing the river, the Korean emissaries typically spent two nights in the area between the river and Fenghuang Gate. Uninhabited for decades, the territory was covered by forests, thick with vegetation, and roamed by wild animals. As a convention, Uiju Prefecture always dispatched a group of gunners to accompany the mission through this zone; the gunners would blow their horns and fire their guns three times each night to drive away tigers and other animals (Seo 2001, 169). The mission’s tents and food were also provided by Uiju Prefecture. The Korean visitors had their first sight of Qing habitation at Fenghuang Gate, where they had to wait for some time for security checks before they were allowed to pass through the gate.

Compared with the Yalu River, where signs of Qing authority and imperial presence were largely absent, Fenghuang Gate was bustling with activity. Chinese merchants gathered in the area to trade with the Koreans, which contributed to the growth of a local market at the gate. Fenghuang Gate thus presented the Korean visitors with a window into the Qing that challenged their preconceptions. Eighteenth-century Korean emissaries’ observations of the prosperity and efficient management of the town near the gate as well as other cities on their route to Beijing complicated the simplistic Korean perception of the Manchu regime that had prevailed in Korea since the Manchu conquest of Korea in the 1630s. In their travelogues, the emissaries delivered a more nuanced geopolitical, psychological and cultural picture of the Qing and argued that Joseon could learn many useful statecraft skills from the Qing. Among the most important of these emissaries was Pak Ji-won (1737-1805), who visited Beijing as an affiliated scholar in the tributary mission of 1780 and later became a pillar of the ‘School of Northern Learning’.

Pak Ji-won was born an aristocrat of the hereditary *yangban* (‘two classes’). In 1780 his cousin, Pak Myeong-won (1725-1790), was appointed the emissary to Beijing on the occasion of Emperor Qianlong’s seventieth birthday.[[79]](#footnote-79) The mission gave Pak Ji-won a good opportunity to visit China. As he was not an official member of the mission, Pak later told his Chinese counterparts that the purpose of his visit was ‘tourism in the Upper Country’. Thanks to his special status as the emissary’s cousin, Pak attended the imperial audience and met with the Sixth Panchen Lama at Rehe. He also participated in intensive written conversations with Han Chinese and Manchu intellectuals and officials in both Rehe and Beijing. Shocked by the prosperity that he witnessed throughout the Qing realm, from small border towns to the metropolitan areas of Beijing, Pak Ji-won realized that the Joseon meritocracy’s stereotypical view of the ‘barbarian’ Qing had become an obstacle for their accurate understanding of the Qing and ability to make comparable progress in livelihoods in Korea.

Pak began his travelogue, *Yeolha ilgi* [‘The Rehe Diary’] immediately before crossing the Yalu River from Uiju, which indicates that Pak, like other Korean visitors, saw the river as the boundary between the two countries.[[80]](#footnote-80) After crossing the river, Pak’s group followed the convention of spending two nights in the land between the river and Fenghuang Gate, and during that time he met several Manchu soldiers who were headed north on a routine patrol. Pak’s first glimpse of the small Qing town at Fenghuang Gate astonished him: he noted that the houses, walls, doors, and streets of the town were well designed and maintained and that the town had no ‘indication of inferior rural style’. He reasoned that such scenery at the ‘eastern end’ of the Qing could only mean an even more prosperous world in the inner lands. The realization made him so uncomfortable that he wanted to return to Hanseong immediately. In his prejudiced view of the Qing, there was no way that a territory under the ‘barbarian’ Manchu rulers could have been so efficiently and impressively managed. Pak raised the issue with his private servant Chang Bok, who retorted, ‘China is barbarian, so I do not want to be born in China’ (Pak 1956, I, 10b). The young and illiterate servant was probably only trying to please his master, but his answer was precisely what his master had sincerely believed. It was also a reflection of the ubiquity of the perception of the Qing as ‘barbarian’ among Korean people. Nevertheless, Pak must have realized that his visit would not be as peaceful as he had wished.

Indeed, the onward journey from Fenghuang Gate turned out to be extremely challenging for Pa. By passing through Liaoyang, Mukden, and smaller towns and villages, Pak was favorably impressed by the magnificent buildings, thriving markets, and flourishing urban and rural communities, where he received friendly treatment from local civilians and officials alike. He gained further insights into the country via his correspondence with Han Chinese and Manchu intellectuals and officials and his visits to local sites of scenic and historical interest. Pak’s diary entries on these encounters are conspicuously devoid of the charge that the Qing was ‘barbarian’. His cumulative experiences during the trip prompted him to reassess critically Joseon’s popular perception of the ‘barbarian’ Qing. He put forward the idea of ‘using techniques to benefit people’s livelihood’ and justified it with a taxonomy of the Qing among Joseon’s intellectuals. He divided Korean intellectuals into three categories: *sangsa* (‘Upper Savants’), *chongsa* (‘Middle Savants’), and *hasa* (‘Lower Savants’). Pak relays a hypothetical scenario in which Koreans who had never seen the Qing asked visitors returning from Beijing about the most impressive thing they had seen in their journey. Many such visitors, according to Pak, would list certain things without hesitation, such as the white pagoda of Liaodong, Chinese markets, and the Shanhaiguan. The Upper Savants, however, would assert that ‘nothing is impressive’ because the people of China, from the Son of Heaven to common subjects, were ‘barbarians as long as they shave their hair’. Since ‘barbarians are dogs and sheep’, nothing in their realm was worth praising. Similarly, the Middle Savants would argue that ‘the mountains and lands became barbarian, and nothing over there is impressive until we lead 100,000 forces to cross Shanhaiguan to recover China’ (Pak 1956, II, 1a-2a).

Identifying himself as one of the Lower Savants who supported an attitude of ‘revering China and expelling the barbarians’ of the Upper and Middle Savants, Pak passionately called on his peers to ‘learn the good ways and useful systems as long as they can benefit our people and our country, even if these ways and systems were created by barbarians’. He argued, ‘If we want to expel the barbarians, we should learn all the good Chinese systems [in order] to change ours, after which we might be able to say that China has nothing impressive’. Pak pointed to such admirable features as the Chinese technique of making efficient use of waste materials such as stools and broken tiles to benefit people’s everyday lives.

Witnessing Qing China’s affluence and success at Fenghuang Gate and beyond, Pak was compelled to reconsider and revise his understanding of the Qing.[[81]](#footnote-81) His experience was shared by many other Korean emissaries who passed through the gate. But acknowledgement of the Qing’s achievements inevitably blurred the conceptual boundary between the civilized and the barbarian. In this sense, then, Pak’s argument was a double-edged sword not only for himself but also for the general moral foundation of his country.

### **Imperial Authority at the Border: Korea’s Reception of Manchu Envoys from Fenghuang Gate to Uiju and Hanseong**

During the two and a half centuries of the tributary relationship, Korea sent about 698 tributary missions to the Qing and the Qing dispatched about 172 imperial missions to Korea (*Dongmun hwigo*1978, II, 1700-1744; *Jeong seon go* 1972, II, 404-502; Liu 2002, 154-251).[[82]](#footnote-82) The Korean tributary emissaries and the affiliated members of their tributary missions wrote hundreds of travel journals and diaries, known by the generic title *Records of Journeys to Beijing*. These journals detailed the Korean authors’ private experiences and individual activities during their trips to China, including descriptions of imperial audiences in Beijing or Rehe, such as the famous one recorded by Pak ji-won in September 1780 (Pak 1956, III, 32a). In stark contrast, China’s imperial envoys to Hanseong did not leave many records, and it is sometimes even difficult to ascertain their names from the Qing-era archives available to scholars thus far.[[83]](#footnote-83) As a result, previous scholarship has described the envoys’ activities in Korea primarily through the lens of Chinese and Korean ritual codes, creating the impression that the contacts between the envoys and the Korean king and officials were highly programmed and changeless. How the Qing missions were welcomed by the Korean side after leaving Fenghuang Gate also remains largely unknown.

Some Korean royal archives, however, provide us with clues to the dynamic contacts between the imperial envoys and the Koreans at border. A particularly important source is the *Jiksa ilgi* [‘Diaries of Welcoming Imperial Envoys’], an unpublished nineteen-volume collection of reports concerning eighteen visits to Korea by imperial envoys between 1723 and 1890.[[84]](#footnote-84) The collection includes many unique accounts of ritual practices between the guests and the hosts, descriptions of the envoys’ various activities in Korea, and detailed records of conversations between the envoy and the king. They demonstrate the remarkable durability of the highest-level ritual practices between the agents of the Chinese emperor and the Korean monarch. The collection also describes the actions taken by the Koreans to welcome and accommodate the imperial envoys along their route from the border to the capital. There materials reveal that the ritual performed by the Korean side to the Qing side underwent some inconspicuous but critical modifications as a result of impromptu negotiations between the Chinese guests and the Korean hosts. Such negotiations reflect the flexibility of the tributary system outside China’s borders, which later evolved into conventions free from textual ritual codes. As these conventions were continuously practiced and cited by both sides, they served as a vehicle for demonstrating and strengthening the bilateral familistic and hierarchical relationship. They also helped ease anti-Manchu attitudes in Korea, on the one hand, and enabled Qing China to present itself to Korea as a Confucian empire representing a homogenous Chinese cultural identity, on the other.

The Korean side would learn of the coming of imperial envoys when three or four Manchu banner soldiers crossed the Yalu River at Zhongjiang and arrived in Uiju Prefecture to deliver the news. These bannermen were from Fenghuang Gate and they generally carried three items: a wooden board with a paper notice on it, prepared by the Ministry of Rites in Beijing and delivered from Beijing via Mukden; an official notice from the Ministry of Rites in Mukden; and an official notice from Manchu garrison major of Fenghuang City (*Jiksa ilgi*, XIII, 3b). The paper notice was not issued to the Koreans; rather, it was a notification to local Chinese officials and officers along the envoys’ route to Korea, informing them of the envoys’ mission, names, ranks, and positions, as well as the date on which they departed from Beijing. The notice also required local officials and officers to provide necessary services to the envoys, including accommodations and meals, horses, carts, sedan chair bearers, and soldiers for security. Fenghuang Gate was the envoys’ last station on the Chinese side, but as a matter of convention the local officer there sent the notice onward to Uiju, passing the responsibility of taking care of the envoys to his Korean counterpart (*Jiksa ilgi*, XVI, 3a-3b). In some cases, the paper on the wooden board was partly broken when the board arrived in Uiju, so the Manchu major of Fenghuang City would make a copy of the official notice and send it, too, to Uiju (*Jiksa ilgi*, V, 1a; XVI, 3b).

This transition between Fenghuang City and Uiju was critical partly because it was customary for the Korean side to welcome the imperial envoys after they left Fenghuang Gate toward Korea, even though they were still formally in Chinese territory. The prefect of Uiju dispatched Korean officers, interpreters, and servants to meet the envoys at three stations on the route between the Yalu River and Fenghuang Gate, at Congxiu, Mazhuan, and Sanjiang (*Manbu jijig sarye*, 12). At each station, the Koreans would erect eight first-level and three third-level temporary houses with thatched roofs to accommodate the imperial documents, envoys, interpreters, and assistants. The rooms of these houses were equipped with colourful curtains, chairs, beds, cloth-wrappers, mats, pillows, carpets, candles, and candlesticks. At each station, the Koreans would provide the imperial envoys with sumptuous meals that usually contained more than 30 different items, including white rice, sticky rice, beef, pork, soy sauce, salt, chicken, dried and fresh fish, cooking oil, shrimp, honey, dates, beans, ginger, and yellow wine. After the envoys arrived in Uiju, the prefect treated each envoy to an official banquet featuring more than 130 categories of food (*Manbu jijig sarye*, 19-37).

As soon as he learned of the impending arrival of the imperial mission, the prefect of Uiju would report the news to the governor of Pyongan Province, who would immediately forward the news to the king in Hanseong. The records in the *Diaries of Welcoming Imperial Envoys* show that in many instances during the Yongzheng and Qianlong (r. 1736-1795) periods in the eighteenth century, the Chinese authorities provided the Korean side with a general information of the visit without any further details; this was the case with the missions of 1724, 1729, 1731, 1748, 1749, 1750, 1755, 1762, and 1763. This uncertainty was underpinned by China’s authority and the threat of possible punishment or admonishment if it deemed Korea neglectful of its tributary duties. It also made Fenghuang City a rumour mill for Koreans. Consequently, upon receipt of a notice from the Chinese side informing him of an approaching mission, the prefect of Uiju swiftly sent an officer and a translator to Fenghuang City to obtain more information about the envoys and their mission from local residents.

In Fenghuang City the Korean messengers generally gleaned news from four groups of Chinese: bannermen garrisoned at Fenghuang Gate, officials and clerks of the local government of Fenghuang City, postmen who transported messages between Mukden and Fenghuang City, and merchants who conducted business across the two cities (*Jiksa ilgi*, IV, 4a; V, 3b; VIII, 7b; IX. 9, 2a; X, 10b; XI, 3b; XII, 6a). More often than not, the messengers could not send accurate information back to Uiju until the envoys and their attendants arrived in Fenghuang City, at which point the messengers were allowed to pay a visit to the envoys to access certain documents to secure the necessary information. The situation changed in the Jiaqing (r. 1796-1820) period, when the Ministry of Rites began to include detailed information about the imperial missions in the notices that it issued to the Korean side. This change could be attributed to China’s overall documentary institutionalization in the Qianlong period and the resulting elaborateness of all official documents, but it could also be seen as an indication of the decline of the Manchu court’s control over Korea, which was a prolonged process that had already began in the late years of the Kangxi period.

In addition to the envoys’ titles, ranks, ethnicity, and names, the information sent from Fenghuang City to Uiju and then to Hanseong also included the Korean messengers’ observations about the envoys’ characteristics. Such observations remained common until the late nineteenth century. For instance, in 1876, the Korean messengers described the 37-year-old envoy Jihe as ‘smart but apparently impatient’ and the 48-year-old vice envoy Wulaxichonga as ‘serious on the outside but arrogant on the inside’ (*Jiksa ilgi*, XVII, 12a). In 1878, the messengers described the 52-year-old envoy Jige as ‘serious on the outside but rash on the inside’ and the 56-year-old vice envoy Enlin as ‘very shrewd and meticulous’ (*Jiksa ilgi*, XVIII, 14a). Although the Korean records do not reveal the purpose of such descriptions, it seems that the messengers’ reports were aimed at assisting the Korean side in providing appropriate accommodations for the envoys in Korea – a particular concern in the case of the capricious envoys of the early Qing period. Since the second half of the eighteenth century, however, reports of the imperial envoys’ visits focused mainly on the very limited and uncontroversial routine activities of the envoys in Korea.

Although an imperial mission generally comprised around twenty members, since the 1730s the mission group that crossed the Yalu River and arrived in Uiju often contained about 200 people, the majority of whom were soldiers and servants. For instance, the mission of 1762 was made up of 222 people, including two envoys, five interpreters, and nineteen attendants from Beijing as well as two Manchu majors (Ma., *janggin*), one higher-ranking Manchu officer (Ma., *bošokū*), one clerk of the Fenghuang City government, eight lower-ranking Manchu officers (Ma., *funde* *bošokū*), 95 banner horsemen, and 89 Manchu servants from Manchuria (*Jiksa ilgi*, XI, 11a). The mission often arrived with more than 70 horses, mules, and carts, in addition to the horses ridden by the banner soldiers. The Uiju Prefecture usually provided the Chinese guests with 18 piculs of rice and nine piculs of salt (*Jiksa ilgi*, VII, 9a; VIII, 9a; IX, 7a; XI, 11a; XII, 11a; XIII, 29b; XIV, 15a). The horses and mules from China stayed in Uiju, and the core members of the mission proceeded south toward Hanseong in the company of the *Wonjeob sa* (‘Welcoming Officer’), who was appointed by the king on a temporary basis to take care of the imperial mission; meanwhile, the Chinese entourage returned to Manchuria with the financial support of the Uiju prefect. The Korean descriptions of the attending Manchus in the *Diaries of Welcoming Imperial Envoys* underwent a significant change in the 1750s. Since the 1630s, the Koreans had regarded the Manchus antagonistically as ‘barbarians’, and this attitude persisted into the early eighteenth century, as Korea sought to strengthen its identity as Little China and the exclusive representative of Chinese culture after the fall of the Ming Dynasty of China in 1644. Accordingly, in the 1750s the *Diaries of Welcoming Imperial Envoys* still referred to the Manchu servants who came to Uiju as *jonghu* (‘attendant barbarians’). But after 1755, this term was replaced by *jongin* (‘attendants’), a neutral term with no pejorative ethnic or cultural connotations (*Jiksa ilgi*, X, 14b-15b).

From Uiju, the imperial mission moved southwardly for Hanseong by passing Pyongan Province, Hwanghae Province, Kaesong Special Prefecture, and Kyeonggi Province. In ideal circumstances, after departing from Uiju, the imperial mission would reach Hongjewŏn, the final station in a western suburb of Hanseong, in ten days, having travelled 530 kilometres, or 1060 *li*, and passed 24 stations. The Korean Welcoming Officer sent daily reports of the mission’s activities to the king, specifying, for example, how far along the route the mission was and where its members had had lunch and dinner, whom the envoys and interpreters had met and talked with, what poems the envoys had composed and what placed they had visited, and what the envoys and interpreters had said. The king thus could closely monitor the situation and progress of the mission. Since Korea’s conquest by the Manchus in 1637, the Korean court had treated the Manchu envoys with extreme caution to ensure that nothing in their treatment would give cause for punishment by the Manchu court. Although the king often made only very brief comments on the reports, he punished any local official who failed to treat the envoys well. For instance, in 1755, the king stripped the governor and the commander-in-chief of Hwanghae Province of their official ranks because the province had not treated the imperial mission appropriately (*Jiksa ilgi*, X, 24a).

When the imperial envoys returned from Hanseong to Uiju, the Korean prefect would provide the mission with eighteen piculs of rice and nine piculs of salt in order to support their journey from Uiju to Fenghuang Gate. The mission would retrieve their horses and mules from their Korean trustees and prepare to cross the Yalu River to China with hundreds of bags and boxes of silver and material gifts. For the members of the Chinese mission, a visit to Korea was a highly profitable business opportunity, one that sat uneasily with the Qing’s stated policy of ‘cherishing the men from afar’, although the Chinese authorities did treat the Korean tributary emissaries and mission members well in Beijing. The prefect of Uiju also sent several soldiers and servants to accompany the imperial mission on its return to China. In some cases, the Korean attendants would return to Uiju as soon as the mission reached Zhongjiang, the official boundary between the two countries in the middle of the Yalu River, but in other cases they would not turn back until the envoys arrived in Fenghuang City (*Jiksa ilgi*, XIII, 88a; XVIII, 46a-46b).

### **Conclusion**

For Korean tributary emissaries after the 1640s, entering Fenghuang Gate meant, for a long time, encountering a Chinese society governed by Manchu barbarians. The emissaries interpreted many of their experiences on their missions beyond the gate, whether in Manchuria or in Beijing, by invoking the discourse of the civilized-barbarian distinction. In the late eighteenth century, however, some Korean intellectuals were so impressed by the Qing’s statecraft skills and achievements during their trips to Beijing that they began to call for a new approach to understanding the Qing, one that involved abandoning Joseon’s narrow worldview. In a very practical sense, these intellectuals acknowledged that the Qing had transformed into a civilized country, the Central Kingdom – a view that was diametrically opposed to the mainstream perception of the Qing within Joseon’s borders. This new approach, therefore, significantly complicated Joseon’s understanding of the Qing. By the late nineteenth century, several decades later, no Korean emissary would challenge the Qing’s status as the civilized Central Kingdom as Pak Ji-won had initially done in 1780. Both Joseon and the Qing had accepted the reordering of the categories ‘barbarians’ and ‘the civilized’ on the two sides of Fenghuang Gate.

The Korean records in the *Diaries of Welcoming Imperial Envoys* reveal the interactions between the imperial envoys and the Koreans in this border area. The Qing visitors and the Korean hosts sought to maintain a balance between showcasing the supreme authority of Qing China and highlighting the unique status of Korea through, inter alia, presentations of the Chinese emperor’s supremacy and the Korean king’s sovereignty in different circumstances. In addition, the Korean records expose the heavy financial burdens shouldered by Korea in accommodating imperial missions, particularly in the provinces through which the mission passed after crossing Fenghuang Gate.

In the late 1860s, Beijing began to ease its seclusion policy in Manchuria in response to increasing immigration by Han Chinese who had suffered wars and droughts in northern China. These people migrated to the Fenghuang City area and crossed the gate in order to cultivate the lands between the gate and the Yalu River. In 1867, the Qing court allowed these immigrants to stay where they were and integrated them into the governmental household registration system. Simultaneously, it recorded the amount of cultivated lands in the region, which amounted to more than 33,500 hectares (500,000 *mu*; 1 *mu* = 0.067 hectares). In 1875, the Manchu general in Mukden dispatched armies to combat bandits in this area and launched a comprehensive reform that was aimed at incorporating all of the area’s inhabitants and lands into the household registration system. A year later, Beijing decided to establish a new county, Dandong County, to contain this region, thus extending the domestic administrative system to the empire’s borderline at the Yalu River (*Andong xianzhi* 2006, III, 4-5). From that point on, Dandong County, rather than Fenghuang Gate, was the first place that visiting Koreans reached after crossing the boundary river. In the early 1880s, the Qing and Joseon signed three treaties that strengthened the Yalu River’s role as the state border, although the Sino-Korean tributary contacts along the overland route continued with no substantial changes until 1895. As a result of these shifts, Fenghuang Gate, along with the entire Willow Palisade, lost its pivotal position on the border and became part of largely forgotten history for both Chinese and Koreans.

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**9 ‘Utopian Speak’**

Language Assimilation in China’s Yanbian Korean Borderland, 1958-1976

*Dong Jo Shin*

**Abstract**

China’s ethnically Korean citizens in the Yanbian borderland underwent language suppression during the era of high socialism, driven by a sweeping vocabulary of Maoist social utopianism. As China’s ‘leading ethnic group’, the revolutionary Han undertook an ‘Anti-Local Nationalism’ campaign denunciation advising that ethnic Koreans learn Chinese for their own good, and with the Great Leap Forward campaign the full-blown theory of materialism was applied to linguistic assimilation. The Korean language was relegated to a conceptual category of ‘superstructure’, while labour efficiency posed Korean itself as a barrier and undermined ethnic Korean attainments in economy and education. This study demonstrates evidentiary weaknesses in the era’s prevailing political theory and identifies ideological fault lines under China’s ethnic language policies.

**Keywords:** maoism, ethnic identity, Great Leap Forward, Korean language, Yanbian Daily, Yanbian University

**Introduction**

North Koreans, South Koreans, and ethnic Koreans in China (*Choseonjeok / Chaoxianzu*) all speak Korean.[[86]](#footnote-86) However, neither North nor South Koreans would understand the following conversation fragment of their Chinese counterparts, as recorded by the linguist Dong-zhe Li (2012, 141):

A: ‘*Yeonbyeon ilbo reul dding* (订) *haetso*?’ (Did you subscribe to *Yanbian Daily*?)

B: ‘*Mae yoo a* (没有阿), *geugeol dding haeseo moo’eol hagaetso*?’ (No, what good would it do to subscribe?)

The use of the underlined Chinese words ‘*dding*’ and ‘*mae yoo a*’ effectively alienate Koreans in two Koreas from this dialogue. Given that their language has the same root in Ju Si-gyeong’s modern reestablishment of Korean in the 1900s, this different language use reflects the process of history through which ethnic Koreans passed in the last century. It further reminds us not only of the hybrid nature of Korean language in China, but also its protected status. Article IV of the ‘Ordinances of the Yanbian Autonomous Government’ adopted by the People’s Republic of China in 1952 stipulated that the Korean language had to be the primary vehicle for exercising authority and that Chinese must be used alongside Korean in the government. However, in practice, the reality differed greatly from this bilingual ideal (Yeonbyeon Publishers 1984, 162). This study reveals the history that has resulted in the ‘hybrid language’ of the ethnic Koreans in China today. Examining the assimilationist language policy during China’s high socialist era (1958-76), I contend that the political economy and utopian communism of Maoist China resulted in the subjugation of the Korean language to that of the dominant Chinese.

**The Political Economy of Assimilation in Late 1950s**

Going through the period of Communist radicalism accompanied by cultural persecution in Maoist China, many ethnic Koreans came to have a better command of Chinese than before. But it was clear that very few of them could use Chinese fluently in the late 1950s. Even in Yanbian University, the highest educational institution in the Korean autonomous prefecture, there were few ethnic Koreans whose use of Chinese could truly be characterized as fluent. According to the memoir of a contemporary student, even the then-president of the university could not speak Chinese well. Throughout the 1950s, ethnic Koreans would envy those who could speak or even write in Chinese in much the same terms as they envied those who had ‘foreign’ language skills (Zheng 1995, 246).

Although the Han population reached around 30 percent by the early 1950s in Yanbian, the past century of immigration histories and separate labour environments between the Han and the Koreans had hindered them from learning each other’s language. This condition began to change as prefecture-wide collectivization took place in the mid-1950s, and became sharper as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture incorporated Dunhua, an area which was about 90% Han, in 1958.[[87]](#footnote-87) As the size of production units grew year by year, the combination of the two ethnic groups grew inevitable. Mao’s Socialist Transformation campaign, launched in 1955, ‘called for the rapid expansion of collectivized farming, including in nationality (minority) areas’ (Goldstein 2014, 473-478). Accordingly, throughout the Yanbian prefecture, about 80 percent of the entire farming households joined ethnically combined cooperatives by 1956 (Gim 1990, 157). As the Great Leap Forward drive toward large production cooperatives continued, almost all ethnic Koreans came to work together with the Han. Commune members were supposed not only to work but also to eat and learn all together, so unprecedented close contacts occurred between the Han and the Koreans. Under these circumstances, basic communication failures between the two ethnic groups rose as one of the new problems in socialist China. For example, a local newspaper article reported that ethnic Koreans and Han Chinese residents in a household compound in Yanji, the capital of the prefecture, could not communicate with each other (Pan 1958, 3).

This new mixing coincided with the rise of CCP descriptions of the Han, the majority ethnic group in the PRC, as the ‘leading ethnic group’ above all other China’s ethnic minorities (Kwon 2019, 81-82). Having taken the lead in the 1949 Communist Revolution, the Han now took the responsibility of ‘helping’ their ethnic brothers to industrialize the country. The value of ‘unity’ came to be emphasized less as a value for ethnic egalitarianism than as a tool for increased economic efficiency. Going beyond raising productivity, moreover, the reason why ethnic minorities should learn Mandarin and not vice versa was not only that the Han were the most dominant ethnic group but that they were, as one advocate put it, the ‘main ethnic group in politics, economics and culture’ (Yang 1959, 13). One Han journalist in a propaganda magazine urged ethnic minorities to ‘reform their bad customs’ and ‘adopt the Han Chinese correct attitude’ by learning Mandarin (Liu 1959, 15). According to state propaganda of the late 1950s, learning Mandarin was the first priority for ethnic minorities. In this sense, Chinese was not just a language that Han Chinese spoke but a *lingua franca* of socialism. In fact, when the PRC was founded, Han Chinese had already been elevated above all of the other ethnic groups.[[88]](#footnote-88)

In Yanbian, the government encouraged ethnic Koreans to learn from the ‘leading ethnic group’, a phrase that first appeared in *Yeonbyeon ilbo* on 31 October 1957 (Hong 1957, 3). Subsequent articles would argue that ethnic Koreans could not develop their politics, economy, or culture without the aid of the Han who were the main and leading ethnic group in socialist modernization (Yanbian Daily 1958, 1). Concrete actions followed the changes in official discourse. The central government made steady progress in sending skilled Han labourers to Yanbian so ethnic Koreans came to rely on them for industrialization. For instance, at the Yanbian weather station, an important institution for agriculture, almost all the meteorologist positions were filled by Han Chinese (Zhang 1958, 3). Adding its weight to the given situation, the CCP argued that such placements were aimed at increasing ethnic Koreans’ own advantage in order to achieve advanced scientific and economic development for their own communities and, by extension, the whole country.

The launch of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in June 1957 further politicized the nature of learning Mandarin. In Han regions, the Anti-Rightist Campaign was the campaign that hunted down the political opponents to the CCP and silenced critics who had voiced concerns during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-1957 (Teiwes and Sun 1999, 54-56). In Yanbian, the Anti-Rightist Campaign was transformed into the campaign to punish potential secessionists or the preservationists of ethnic culture. Even the title of the Anti-Rightist Campaign changed when it came to ethnic regions like Yanbian, where it was known as the ‘Anti-Local Nationalist Movement’ (Ch. *Fan difang minzu zhuyi yundong*. Kr. *Ban jibang minjok ju’ui undong*).

Under the impetus of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the central government made a major push into the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. It singled out ethnic Koreans in warning that, among such minorities as the Korean, Mongolian, Hui, and Uighur groups, there were still ‘national separatists’ (*minzu fenlie fenzi*) and ‘federalists’ (*lianbang zhuyizhe*), who were refusing to assimilate (Liu 1958, 7). Upon receiving this intense criticism directly from the central government, a wholesale punishment took place throughout Yanbian. Those most targeted during the Anti-Local Nationalism Movement were those ethnic Korean linguists and scholars of Korean literature who had criticized the flow of Chinese loanwords into Korean during the prior Hundred Flowers Movement (Zheng 1995, 143). For example, Gim Chang Geol (1911-1991), a professor of Korean literature, was charged with local nationalism by the CCP in 1958 for having presented his opinion that ethnic Koreans should preserve the purity of their language. Gim was publicly denounced as a ‘bourgeois local nationalist’ and removed from his teaching post (Jeong 1997, 381). Li Min Chang (1901-1966) was an academic at Yanbian University, and one of the most prominent of the accused ethnic Korean intellectuals during the movement. Li’s offense was having published an article entitled ‘On Our Language’, which had argued for ethnic Koreans to reform their linguistic lives, removing foreign language influences, especially Chinese. Li was charged with local nationalism by the university’s Rectification Campaign Leading Group (*Yanbian* *daxue zhengfeng lingdao xiaozu*). Although Li was not formally expelled from Yanbian University, his wages were slashed by 64 percent, and he was placed under strict surveillance (Jo 2009).

Such political punishment of ethnic Korean intellectuals during the Anti-Local Nationalism Movement had repercussions throughout the entire Korean enclave. The movement ensured that ethnic Koreans would refrain from speaking up for their cultural rights in fear of persecution. Since those who merely agreed with the denounced people were subject to harsh criticism, no one was willing to have contact with, or support, those charged with local nationalism. Being a local nationalist meant not only political and economic punishment, but also amounted to social death. Jeong Pan Lyong, who had come back to Yanbian University after studying literature for six years in Moscow, recalled meeting Gim Chang Geol in the Yanbian University library in 1958 after his persecution for ‘promoting local nationalism’:

When I came back to school, I found that Professor Gim was relegated to working in the library, checking out books. He was sitting at the library reference desk with his head hung low. I did not know what to say to him, because if I said anything to console him, I might get in trouble. In the six years that I had seen him, Professor Gim had aged greatly. I was told that he, naturally a man of few words, now spoke very little since he had been branded a ‘local nationalist’. Professor Gim looked very glad to see me at first, but soon left the room without saying a single word, fearing that he would cause me trouble. His eyes were filled with tears. I ran out wiping tears from my eyes as well (Jeong 1997, 382).[[89]](#footnote-89)

Facing such quiet acts of recognition and complicit silence, the CCP would soon demand more urgent and active support among ethnic Koreans for the campaign.

Going beyond punishing those elite Koreans who advocated for the development and preservation of the Korean language, the central government began to urge ethnic Koreans to learn Mandarin. In the midst of this Anti-Local Nationalism Movement, another national campaign called *Hanyu xuexi Dayuejin* [‘Great Leap Forward in Learning Chinese’] was launched in summer 1958. Under the fear that opposition to this campaign could be criticized as local nationalism, learning Mandarin became an urgent political task for ethnic Koreans in Yanbian. The level of Chinese language usage became a barometer that would judge the national loyalty of Koreans in China.

If self-interest were not enough, the superheated rhetorical conditions of the Great Leap Forward further accelerated the pace of ethnic Koreans’ learning Chinese. The central government argued that the translation of Chinese into Korean could not keep up with the hyperactive speed of ‘one year bears the equivalence of thousands of years’ in communist China (People’s Daily 1958, 4). A local government publisher in Yanbian argued that the translation of Chinese into Korean was too slow to meet the quickly developing trends in Beijing during the Great Leap Forward (Li 1958, 3). For example, a *Yanbian Daily* editorial criticized Korean intellectuals who forced themselves to translate *dazibao* (‘big-character poster’) into *keun guilja byek sinmun* (lit. ‘big-character wall newspaper’). While such key political methods were targeted as evidence of local nationalism, so too were aspects of daily life such as ‘*mantou*’ (steamed bun) which Koreans had translated as *jeung gi ppang* (lit. ‘steamed bread’). In fact, ‘*keun guilja byek sinmun*’ was longer than ‘*dazibao’* and ‘*jeung gi ppang* was not actually a word included in the dictionary. As a common noun, ‘*jeung’gi ppang*’ could mean any kind of steamed bread, not necessarily ‘*mantou*’.

The editorial further pointed out that it was not practicalities of language, but rather a manifestation of ‘local nationalism’ that the ethnic Korean intellectuals refused to use Chinese in translation, thus implying that they were promoting secession from China because they would not use Chinese words. Korean intellectuals were criticized for their ongoing use of the Korean language when it had little to do with China’s social and economic reality – or ‘base’ in socialist terms. The logic of historical materialism was marshalled to argue that language was nothing but a social phenomenon that constantly transforms as society changes and develops (Yanbian Daily 1958b, 1). So, in denying this principle and refusing to evolve into Mandarin, Korean intellectuals, the writing implied, were denying historical materialism itself. According to this radical interpretation of materialism, the Korean language was regarded as superstructure incompatible with the socialist base of China so as to be changed. Accordingly, Yanbian University lost its status as the regional stronghold of Korean cultural education and required 90 percent of the faculty to teach in Mandarin (Jin 1958, 6). Although Han Maoists showed every confidence that their radical ethnic policy would be understood by ethnic Koreans on the basis of shared revolutionary agenda of communism, they actually defied their ideology. Had the Chinese cadre setting policy been more attuned to socialist theory, they might have recalled that Karl Marx did not regard language as something that could be changed abruptly as the economic base of the speakers changed. Indeed, he argued that human consciousness was a social product and language was bound to consciousness (Marx 1978, 158). Neither did Stalin advocate one common language under his regime. In his speech to the Party Congress in 1930, Stalin declared that the theory of the fusion of different languages into one was itself nationalist-chauvinist and anti-Leninist. In 1950 again, he said that ‘language was not part of the superstructure’ (Slezkine 1996, 219, 227-228). When it came to language, radical Maoism was a departure from socialist doctrine, not an evolution.

Even though the Han Chinese logic of denouncing ethnic culture was based on pseudo-Marxism, it was hard for ethnic Koreans to argue against it. This was not only because of the dogmatic nature of the CCP but also because of the geopolitical status of Yanbian as borderland between the PRC and North Korea. Absurd and even comical as Maoist justification of assimilation was, both Han and Koreans knew that it was not a cultural but instead a political and national issue. For example, the CCP criticized that the ethnic Korean intellectuals were promoting secession from China’s social and economic reality and preparing for the day that they would return to North Korea. An editorial in the *Yanbian Daily* attributed the foundation of this problem among ethnic Koreans to the *minzu wenhua xuetonglun* (‘blood lineage theory of ethnic culture’), in other words, the idea that people must have one unified cultural form with those who are bonded by clanship rather than by nationality (Yanbian Daily 1958b, 1). This understanding of culture was unacceptable in the PRC, which positioned itself as a multi-ethnic state in which all the ethnic minorities belonged to one nation of Chinese (*Zhonghua minzu*), regardless of their different cultural forms with the Han. As another editorial in the *Jilin Daily* discussed in December 1957, clanship and nationality were two completely different notions and one’s motherland (*zuguo*) should be determined not by clan affiliation (*zongzu*) but by nationality (Yanbian Daily 1957, 2). According to the article, ethnic Koreans who wanted to follow the Korean language custom in North Korea understood ethnicity in a blood relationship rather than a notion of nationality. Although ethnic Koreans had clan (blood) relationship with North Koreans, they should use the Chinese language because their nationality was by all means the PRC, which means that their material base was now Chinese. If one denied these changes in one’s linguistic life, it was tantamount to denying not only China as their nation but also historical materialism. When socialism was realized in China, or so the argument went, different ethnic groups would cease to exist in due course. For Han radicals, their political consideration seemed more compelling than the welfare of ethnic minorities.

As the extent of the Great Leap Forward debacle and its impacts on minority relations appeared clear, however, moderates in the CCP temporarily prevailed on Mao to back off from its drive toward radical communism and restore a more practical economic course in the early 1960s.[[90]](#footnote-90) From winter 1960 on, the central government began to issue orders that would revoke the radical economic policies of the Great Leap Forward. With moderation in economy, cultural policies in Yanbian relaxed during this period, as the central government returned to a posture of measured tolerance for ethnic Korean culture. For example, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai made a visit to Yanbian in 1962 and stressed the importance of Korean mass media such as *Yanbian Daily* and Yanbian Television. Ethnic Koreans were again allowed to learn their language, and the local governments in each city and county organized Korean classes for Han Chinese cadres (Yeonbyeon Publishers 1984, 155, 163). Yet this period of moderation was short-lived.

**Ideological Radicalism and the Cultural Revolution**

As factionalism in the Cultural Revolution developed along with ethnic differences in Yanbian, ethnic Koreans’ cultural life was completely attacked, persecuted, and banned (Shin 2016). Among many cultural forms, the Korean language came under the heaviest criticism and revision because language was one of the most universal and distinctive differences between the Han and Koreans in China. Contrary to the Great Leap Forward period when criticism of the Korean language was mostly oriented toward Korean cadres and the intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution expanded it to the entire populace. Mao Yuanxin, who was sent to Yanbian in December 1966 by Mao Zedong and Jiang Qing, propagated the slogan of the ‘uselessness of the Korean language’, arguing that Korean would disappear within ten or fifteen years (Seong 1977, 3; Hyeon 1994, 277).[[91]](#footnote-91) His words turned out to be more than mere rhetorical sloganeering. His directive was strongly enforced, abolishing all Korean classes in schools and closing schools for ethnic Korean students.

Radical Han Maoists’ instrumental interpretation had always been at the centre of the efforts to justify this policy of ethnic persecution. As the Han-led Maoists claimed that communism, a state with no class differences, must be the reality in here and now; anything that slowed down the great unification of the country was regarded as reactionary in nature. Under this radicalism, those who supported differences between ethnicities were purged as reactionaries, and the previous ethnic policy of the CCP that guaranteed the autonomous rights of ethnic minorities became regarded as outdated. The Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution attacked the use of ethnic minority languages, not only because it was one of the Four Olds – old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits – but also because there should be no ethnic difference at all under communism. They categorically refused to recognize the reality of ethnic difference out of their communist zeal. It is important to note their strong ideological conviction, expressed in a tone of excitement, that the PRC had already entered the communist stage in which differences along ethnic lines had in fact disappeared, not just that they still existed but would need to be dissolved in due course. As for the Cultural Revolutionaries, they acted as though communist ideals had already been realized in China, and they acted accordingly, as if, mirroring the language of a prominent *People’s Daily* denunciation of the Gang of Four, ethnic differences did not even exist (*shehuizhuyi le, haiyou shenme minzu bu minzu*). Under this radical outlook, the cultural differences of ethnic minorities were the objects of complete denial and removal rather than of debate or criticism, since one could not debate or criticize over something that did not exist.

Those ethnic Koreans who refused to use Chinese loanwords were now criticized as ‘North Korean spies’ during the Cultural Revolution. They were perceived as dismissing the Chinese social and economic reality on which their language was based in order to follow what North Koreans spoke as a way to support a foreign country. The biggest spy in Yanbian, in the eyes of the Maoists, was Ju Deok Hae, an ethnic Korean who lived from 1911-1972 and served as General Secretary of the Yanbian Party Committee (Cathcart 2010; Park 2014, 162-177). As Ju became the main target, all of the policies implemented for the development of Korean before 1966 were used as evidence that retroactively ‘proved’ ethnic Korean divisionism. Ordered by Kim Il-sung, according to the criticism, Ju tried to sell Yanbian to North Korea.[[92]](#footnote-92) The criticism also alleged that Ju’s policy on Korean, which did not include loanwords from Chinese, was a strategy to unite the language of Yanbian Koreans with that of North Koreans so as to prepare for the time when Yanbian would be incorporated into North Korea. Yeon Gyek Mun, the critic of Ju, presented plenty of ‘evidence’ as to how Ju blocked the inflow of the revolutionary language, Chinese, in order to preserve the so-called revisionist language, Korean.[[93]](#footnote-93) Yeon’s article was published in 1970 and combined a very close reading of how ethnic Koreans had wrongly translated and therefore corrupted Maoist terms. Yeon pointed to ethnic Korean divisionism stemming out of their choice of terms of the military units such as *tuan* (‘regiment’), *ying* (‘battalion,’), *lian* (‘company’), *pai* (‘platoon’), and *ban* (‘squad’) which, Yeon noted, were not rendered directly but instead translated into the terms of the North Korean People’s Army such as *ryeondae*, *daedae*, *jungdae*, *sodae*, and *bundae*. It was indeed true that the units of Yanbian militias used Korean terms in the late 1940s, as seen in historical documents published in Yanji from 1947 (Yanbian History Research Office 1988, 60; Jilinsheng Yanjishi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1994, 359). As with many other criticisms generated during the Cultural Revolution, however, this one was also anachronistic and incorrect. The Koreans in Yanbian in the late 1940s, a period when ethnic and national identity on the northeastern Chinese frontier with Korea was evolving and fluid, could not have foreseen the meaning of such choices within a very specific matrix of PRC ethnic categorization that at that time was still nearly ten years in the future. Occupied with revolution and civil war against the Guomindang or Nationalists, and with a multitude of regional backgrounds of their troops, was natural for the Koreans in Yanbian in the late 1940s to follow North Korean military organization practices, rather than the Chinese. In spite of these historical circumstances, it was argued in the article that following the unit terms of North Korean People’s Army had been done with the purpose of allowing the North Korean government to directly conscript soldiers from Yanbian at a future date.

Yeon’s attack on Korean language ultimately had a human target: Ju Deok Hae. Ju, the article argued, had conducted a revisionist policy on language that went against materialism, because he would not accept the new vocabulary of Chinese, which was built on China’s economic and social base, and instead followed the language of North Korea which had little to do with the economic or social base of ethnic Koreans. For example, Chinese words, *fanshen* (‘overturning/emancipation’) and *huzhuzu* (‘mutual aid team’), were translated respectively into *sinse reul gochida* (‘retrieve one’s fortune’) and *pumasijo* (‘labour-exchange team’) as used in North Korea, which did not fully reflect the true meanings of the Chinese words. The two Korean translations could convey the general meanings of *fanshen* and *huzhuzu*, but do not contain the exact meanings of the words that rooted in Chinese history of its own. For example, *fanshen* does not convey ‘to retrieve one’s fortune’ but represents the historical change that the 1949 Communist Revolution brought to the Chinese, including the emancipation of the peasants out of the landlord yoke and the violent throwing off or overthrow of all the feudalist ideas. In short, it meant ‘to create a new world’ (Hinton 1966, p. vii). Also, *huzhuzu* follows the same meaning change, as it was translated as *pumasijo*, which carries no historical context that is implied in the Chinese word. *Huzhuzu* does not just mean a ‘team that exchanges work’ as the Korean translation conveys, but it indicates the first form of the China’s agricultural collectivization in the 1950s. Although these two Chinese words could be transliterated as *beonsin* and *hojojo* in Korean, it was argued in the article that ethnic Koreans under Ju’s guidance intentionally rejected them out of their wrong national consciousness and reactionary ideas.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The Korean translation of Chinese words in Yanbian drew explosive political attacks upon ethnic Koreans during this period. Ju was criticized for ordering the ethnic Korean scholars not to translate certain Chinese words directly into Korean. For example, although *kou maozi* (‘to put a political label on someone’) could be translated as *moja reul ssiwodda* in Korean, transliterating *maozi* (literally, a hat) into *moja* in Korean, Ju let them find a different word for this. Well aware of these subtle differences in the translation, the article argued that ethnic Korean scholars persisted in using the word *gamtu* (‘a black gauze cap of government officials in imperial times’), a term which they found in the *Selected Works of Kim Il Sung*,to translate *maozi*.[[95]](#footnote-95) However, *kou maozi* and *gamtu reul ssiwodda* hardly carry the same meaning. *Kou maozi* usually means to brand someone with a derogatory label in political campaigns, while the Korean translation can be a sarcastic expression of these punitive activities. As North Korea was viewed as more revisionist by all the more radical Maoists, the problem was that not only did Ju refuse to use the Chinese letters in translation, but that he chose a source written by the ‘revisionist’ leader for translation.

Ju was even accused of perverting the history of Land Reform by allowing ethnic Korean scholars to disregard Chinese terminology for the core actions associated with those reforms. For example, ethnic Korean scholars translated *tudi fenpei* (‘distribution of land’) as *toji bunye* (the Korean pronunciation of *tudi fenyu*), even though they could have transliterated it more directly into *toji bunbae* (the Korean pronunciation of *tudi fenpei*). The article argued that this linguistic choice amounted to a conspiracy to water down the fierce class struggle during the Land Reform into a process that suggested the land was peacefully distributed to farmers, rather than seized by force (Yeon 1970, 2). At the risk of diving too deeply into the terms, it is nevertheless important to understand the distinctions behind the criticisms. There are at least two reasons why, from the revolutionary Han perspectiveof the time, *bunye* was not seen as a satisfactory translation of *fenpei*. First of all, there is no such word *fenyu* in Chinese; *bunye* is a word used in the two Koreas. Since both *bunye* and *bunbae* were available in Korean vocabulary, there must be an iniquitous political reason that the ethnic Korean translators chose *bunye* over *bunbae*, argued in the article. Second, *pei* and *yu* have a slightly different meaning from each other. While *pei* has a meaning of ‘to distribute’, *yu* is just ‘to give’. Therefore, *fenpei* implies more subjectivity than *bunye*. The criticism in the article implies that the translators intentionally undervalued the revolutionary will of the CCP in the Land Reform by translating *fenpei* as *bunye*. The reason why ethnic Koreans used *bunye* rather than *bunbae*, even though both terms were available in Korean, could be because they wanted to maintain the cultural autonomy in their prefecture by avoiding direct transliteration of Chinese words. Even though the less ‘violent’ translation would be used in Beijing’s later official translations of Mao’s writings on land reform, this small act of cultural politics came to be regarded by Maoists as reactionary and treasonous.

The principal argument that penetrates all the complicated linguistic issues was that language had to be united into the Chinese that was being used in Beijing, the heart of the world revolution, and one that was used by Chairman Mao, the leader of that revolution. I argue that this focus on a unifying language was an inevitable outcome of the combination of China’s radical communism and the personal cult of Mao. The communist revolution, which was in progress under the guidance of Mao as an unprecedented phenomenon in world history, was never to be translated into any other languages than that used by Mao himself. For example, Mao’s Cultural Revolution was something too sublime to be translated into the North Korean revisionist language. From this perspective, ethnic Koreans who spoke the language of their ancestral land would be unable to participate in China’s communist revolution, regardless of their high level of education. The revolutionary sublimity flooded over ethnic difference and overpowered its centrifugal force.

Based on this ideology of cultural assimilation, the Korean language, and those who used it, became targets of attack during the Cultural Revolution. In Myeongsin School, Dunhua County, for instance, all Korean classes were cancelled, and every class was required to be taught in Chinese only, even though there were only nine Han students out of 110 with only one Chinese-speaking teacher out of nine in the school (Yanbian Daily 1977b). Mao Yuanxin and his adherents told ethnic Koreans that the Korean language would disappear in ten years and it was the policy that they should learn only Chinese. His supporters also argued that all Korean dictionaries should be burnt and the Korean words of days such as *Wo’ryoil* (Monday), *Hwa’yoil* (Tuesday), *Su’yoil* (Wednesday), and so on must change to Chinese, such as *Xingqi yi*, *Xingqi er*, *Xingqi san*, and so on (Yanbian Daily 1978, 2).

One of the most prominently damaged institutes for Korean education was Yanbian University. Although the university had been built for higher education for ethnic Koreans with the approval of the central government in 1949, the Han Maoists cried out that it was ‘ethnic separatism’ for an ethnic group to have a university only for its own people. All the courses had been taught in Korean in the university since its founding, but new regulations required that even courses on Korean literature had to be taught in Chinese (Jeong 1978, 2). Another regulation was that the number of Korean students should not exceed one third of the entire student body, and that the number of Korean faculty members should not exceed half of the entire faculty. As a result, when the university was reopened in 1970, after being closed in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, there were fewer than 60 Korean students who matriculated out of about 200, and the department of Korean literature was changed into a department of ‘foreign’ language whose main function was to cultivate translators for Korean (Jeong 1992, 158).

As the Cultural Revolution quickly transformed into a violent political struggle, cultural differences with ethnic Koreans became a useful excuse to attack ethnic cadres. Many Korean cadres in Yanbian, including the general secretary of the Yanbian Party Committee, were charged with local nationalism and espionage, because they were involved in the policy of preserving the Korean language. In addition to those in government posts, those who advocated the use of Korean were attacked by Han Maoists. For example, seven of the fourteen linguists in the Korean Language Institute were charged as ‘reactionary intellectuals’ and ‘capitalist roaders’, and the Yanbian History and Language Institute was dissolved completely, with all research documents and materials destroyed (Yanbian Daily, 1978, 2).

**Korean Reaction to the Persecution of Their Language Life**

Confronted with such cultural persecution during the Cultural Revolution, how did the Koreans react? Since language assimilation was predicated on Maoist communism, and ethnic Korean leaders had already accepted communism not only as a political programme but also as the ultimate truth directing the course of human history, they were ideologically hamstrung and disarmed in the struggle. The irony was that the very communist ideology embraced by the Koreans in an earlier time, which had brought them closer to an equal status with Han communists, had, by the time of the Cultural Revolution, rendered them defenseless against Maoist radicals. While the Han-led political party seized the ideological high ground, the ideological ground shifted under the feet of the ethnic Koreans, who struggled in vain to have any say in what buzzwords like national unity, socialism, or communism ought to mean in policy terms in the particular context of their Korean region. Not until 1976, after Mao Yuanxin had lost power, could there be anyone who was finally able to refute the radical ideology of cultural assimilation by employing the system of Marxism-Leninism in self-defense. Only in the year after the Cultural Revolution relented could *Yanbian Daily* authors safely quote Lenin’s argument that those who recognize no equality among different ethnicities and languages are not Marxists (Minjok gongjak jeol’lam junbijo 1977, 3). During the Cultural Revolution, whether it was in the centre or on the periphery, government organs of expression were held by the Maoists so that it was basically impossible to set forth an opinion that went against the ideology of Maoism.

However, this does not mean that there was no reaction from the ethnic Koreans at all, or that they accepted the radical policies as inevitable. Although the Maoists forced ethnic Koreans to learn Mandarin, they could not stop those Korean writers who wrote poems and essays praising Chairman Mao. Considering that all the classes taught in Korean were cancelled, it was an exceptional case that Korean literary works were allowed publicly. For instance, the *Yanbian Daily* printed a Korean folk song written by a Korean farmer which praised Chairman Mao in early August 1966 (Yanbian Daily 1966, 3). On 1 March 1969 when Yanbian was going through severe ethnic persecution under the rule of the Revolutionary Committees, the *Yanbian Daily* published a Korean poem written by an ethnic Korean worker. The title of the poem is ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Chairman Mao’:

The greatest and the best name in the world – Mao Zedong, Mao Zedong!

The bravest and the passionate song in the world – ‘Dongbanghong’

Dear Chairman Mao, Chairman Mao!

The people of Yanbian would like to sing for the benefits we receive from you. […]

Dear Chairman Mao, Chairman Mao!

The people of Yanbian […] cry toward Beijing at the top of our voices even thousand and tens of thousand times – ‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Chairman Mao, Hurrah! Hurrah! Chairman Mao’ (Yanbian Daily 1969, 4).

If read by itself without considering the context of its publication, nothing in the poem, whether words or tone, would suggest any resistance against the ethnic persecution. But it is important to remember that its publication occurred in a political context in which the use of Korean language and literature was denounced as reactionary. Regardless of its content, the fact of its publication and circulation, and other Korean literary works like it, continued the use of Korean and, in so doing, these Korean literary works played a certain role in language preservation (Jeong 2006, 81). In an interesting contrast, while the Han-dominated Chinese literary scene saw diminished productivity during the Cultural Revolution, quite a number of Korean literary works were created and published during this period in Yanbian. Seven more collections of poems were published between June 1972 and May 1976.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Apart from this kind of passive resistance, there were a few Koreans who tried to protect Korean even under the deadly threat of persecution during the Cultural Revolution. One of the most remarkable Korean intellectuals who resisted the radical policy on language was Gim Hak Cheol (1916-2001). One year before the Cultural Revolution started, Gim was completing a manuscript that criticized the Anti-Rightist Movement and the personal cult of Mao Zedong. His criticism and satire on 1950s-China and Mao in the book are so caustic that it is still proscribed in the PRC today. Here I introduce several examples from his book, *20 segi ui sinhwa* (The Myth of the Twentieth Century):

The People’s Communes that fed people for free turned into the nursery of gluttons and the People’s Communes that ignored one’s effort turned literally into the gathering place for idle good-for-nothings (Gim 1996, 14).

The cannibalistic concept, ‘Might is right’, which was overthrown by Lenin for the first time in human history, opened the lid of the coffin and reappeared upon the scene of history, and was resurrected wearing the mask of the ‘Mass Line’ in Mao Zedong’s socialism (Gim 1996, 35).

Mao Zedong was the biggest impostor in the history of mankind who gambled on the fates of six hundred million people in his hand. He was a despot in the mask of a communist. He was a tyrant. He was an emperor (Gim 1996, 136).

The neighbourhood kids’[…] first motion was to crane their necks and shout ‘Mok’ as they smacked their napes [The pronunciation of the neck in Korean is similar to the last name of Mao in Korean: His full name in Korean is *Mo Taek Dong*]. After this, lifted up their chins and shouted ‘Taek’ as they propped them up with hands [The pronunciation of the ‘chin’ is similar to the middle name of Mao]. Then bent over moving their hips back and shouted ‘Ddong!’ as they slapped hard on their buttocks [*Ddong* is also a pun that has double meanings in Korean: it sounds like ‘dung’ and similar to the pronunciation of ‘dong’ in Mao Zedong] (Gim 1996, 190).[[97]](#footnote-97)

The last excerpt is particularly a mockery in Korean rendering in which the pronunciations of the three letters of Mao’s name are similar with ‘neck’, ‘chin’, and ‘dung’, respectively. When the Red Guards of Yanbian University searched his house, they found the manuscript, which led to his imprisonment for ten years from 1967 to 1977. Even under gruesome torture from the Red Guards and the soldiers of the Revolutionary Committee later, Gim never withdrew his opinion.

Another example of resistance is that of Jeong Pan Lyong (1931-1994) who, while he did not defy the Cultural Revolution in the same way as Gim, did make efforts to refute the radical policy of the Cultural Revolution toward the Korean language. One day in 1974, a Korean professor was criticized by the Workers Propaganda Team, which controlled Yanbian University under the support of the PLA, because he publicly propagandized a ‘revisionist scholarly thought’ in class. The revisionist scholarly thought was that the Korean alphabet was created by King Sejong of the Joseon dynasty in the fifteenth century. Although this was a historical fact, the Workers Propaganda Team persisted in criticizing the professor for having a ‘bourgeois historical view’ that a language was created by a ‘feudal ruler’ rather than the masses, which went against the communist historical view that it was the masses, and not the elite, who led history. Many ethnic Koreans including Jeong knew that this was a ridiculous charge, but no one in the university could dissuade the Workers Propaganda Team. At the time, Jeong found the *People’s Daily* article that described the propagation of Tang China’s culture into the Tufan (now Tibet, or Xizang in Chinese) as Princess Wencheng (*Wencheng gongzhu*) was married to Songtsen Gampo (*Songzan ganbu*), the king of the Tufan. The important part for Jeong, however, was that it showed the Tibetan alphabet was created by Songtsen Gampo. Based on this, Jeong ran to the Workers Propaganda Team and questioned them on why King Sejong could not have created the Korean alphabet as a feudal ruler if Songtsen Gampo, also a feudal ruler, could create the Tibetan alphabet. Given that his source was from the most authoritative document, the *People’s Daily*, the Workers Propaganda Team could not counter his argument. The planned criticism meeting was called off (Zheng 1995, 261).

But these cases were exceptional, as there was no other case of conspicuous resistance from ethnic Koreans against the ideological radicalism at this time. On the contrary, many Koreans participated actively in learning Mandarin or even persecuting fellow Koreans, voluntarily or unwillingly. Pressed to report Koreans’ improvement in learning Mandarin, Korean cadres urged ordinary ethnic Koreans to learn it and those who found the political opportunity in this campaign falsely reported their Mandarin skills, because the ability to speak Mandarin became a barometer of political loyalty to the PRC. Just as presenting higher goals of production than others could make them politically loyal during the Great Leap Forward, many Koreans were pressured to demonstrate their ambitious learning goals in Mandarin in order not to fall behind politically.

**Outcomes of the Assimilation**

The status of Korean as an official language along with Chinese in Yanbian was denied during the Cultural Revolution. Under the perception that the ethnic minorities should remove their cultural differences from the Han in order to make one unified communist state, Korean was considered an ‘anti-communist language’. During the Cultural Revolution, Korean was banned in public spheres such as at mass meetings and in schools. The faculty in the Yanbian University offered to teach their courses in Chinese themselves, although they knew that they were unable to do so (Zheng 1995, 141). Ethnic Koreans also inflated their learning goals in improving Mandarin, as the political environment became more radical and oppressive. According to a *Yanbian Daily* article issued at the time, about 95 percent of ethnic Korean teachers could understand Mandarin and about 70 percent of them could communicate in Mandarin in a middle school in Wangqing County (Gim 1958, 3). One *People’s Daily* article published in late 1958 reported that most of the ethnic Korean cadres in Yanbian did not need Chinese translation any more in their meetings (Jin 1958, 6). These reports, however, were not at all accurate.

The rapid progress to improve Mandarin was not exactly as smooth as reported in the newspaper articles. Certainly, it takes longer than a couple of years to build up foreign language skills. One Korean professor recalls his experience in learning Mandarin as this:

No matter how hard I tried to learn the damn four tones, I was not able to distinguish them. Learning Chinese for half a year, it was true that our Chinese improved to some extent. But isn’t it so obvious that we could not write and teach in Chinese? […] How could we Koreans living only among ourselves for life teach in Chinese? Although we knew that we could not teach in Chinese, not a few professors volunteered to do so, because we did not want to be criticized as opponents to this campaign. So we started teaching in Chinese from fall semester last year [1959], but some quitted doing it after trying a few hours and others stuck to this but their students would not understand at all. This seemed to draw ridicule a lot upon us at the time (Professor Li’s memory, quoted in Zheng 1995, 140-141).

During the Cultural Revolution, the policy was not just focused on urging ethnic Koreans to learn Mandarin but to reject Korean completely. The impact of the radical policies on Korean culture persisted even after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. As Korean was removed in schools during the Cultural Revolution, their Korean skills dropped to the extent that even high school graduates were unable to write in Korean (Seong 1977, 3). By 1977, when the Gang of Four was purged and the policies made by them were repealed, ethnic Korean students were virtually illiterate in Korean.[[98]](#footnote-98) For instance, a young Korean cadre who was responsible for the political report in Ma’ansan Elementary School could not even read the newspaper to his work unit members, which was one of his duties, because he could not read Korean. A *Yanbian Daily* article reported on the Korean soldiers who joined the army right after graduating from high school but still could not write letters in Korean to their parents (Yanbian Daily, 1977b, 3). During the Cultural Revolution, when the reality of cultural differences between the ethnic groups were denied, all central and provincial government documents were conveyed only in Chinese to the local government offices and units of Yanbian without a Korean translation. As a result, contemporaries recalled that they usually did not understand what their cadres read for them, which caused administrative confusion rather than efficiency (Li 1978, 1). This was the reality of the ethnic policy in Maoist China, which propagandized that ethnic Koreans in China did not need translations any more as they had supposedly improved their Chinese skills enough to communicate and accomplish socialist modernization at the same time. Although the reduced level of education was a common phenomenon throughout China during the Cultural Revolution, the ethnic Korean case was remarkable due to their relatively high literacy rate, which had been higher than the Han Chinese in Yanbian prior to the Cultural Revolution.

**Post-Cultural Revolution**

Although the Maoists maintained that the Chinese only policy was implemented in order to help ethnic Koreans achieve communism, the reality was far from it. As all political and ideological documents were given in Chinese only, ethnic Koreans were unable to learn and practice them effectively. As a result, apart from its political usefulness in purging ethnic Korean leaders, the radical policy on language achieved neither its ideological nor educational goals. As I have illustrated, the Chinese only policy did not bring unity or harmony to the different ethnic groups, to say nothing of creating a communist paradise in Yanbian, since it was unrealistic to improve foreign language skills in such a short period of time.

Even though Han locals suffered from the radical campaigns in Maoist China, ethnic Koreans emerged as the biggest victim in Yanbian. When I say ‘victim’, it includes not only those ethnic Koreans who were persecuted for the faith in their culture but also those who kept silence over, or even participated in, the persecution of their own culture. Whether it was to protect themselves or to make a career, they had to be insulted by the Maoist cultural assimilation in the long run. Especially those ethnic Koreans who were in the leadership positions of Yanbian, their sense of loss was beyond description when their efforts in preserving Korean culture, which were initially endorsed by the CCP, were fashioned into treasonous crimes within a decade. In the dilemma between ethnic identity and political safety, which were both important factors for them to settle in the border area as an ethnic group since the nineteenth century, ethnic Koreans in Maoist China made their own way. Whichever path they forged, however, they had to significantly compromise with the communist regime.

After going through the dark age of the Cultural Revolution, the cultural environment of Korean literature started to recover. For example, the first joint conference of the Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning provinces to discuss Korean language and literature, was held in Harbin to lay out a plan for school examinations of the Korean language (Yanbian Daily 1977, 1). Moreover, the Korean schools that were closed were reopened and the classes that had been eliminated were once again taught. Those schools, where students from different ethnic groups were once forcibly combined, were now permitted to be separated by ethnicity after the Cultural Revolution.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Even with these favorable changes, the dark period of Maoist radicalism in cultural policy left indelible marks on Korean ethnic culture. As language proficiency levels among ethnic Koreans declined dramatically through the Cultural Revolution, the lack of quality literature by ethnic Korean writers became a glaring problem in Yanbian’s Korean literary and educational circles. Making this problem difficult to remedy was the fact that the Korean language has never recovered its loss of official language status since the Cultural Revolution. According to a survey in 1980, more than ninety percent of local government documents were not translated into Korean (Olivier 1993, 231). The main language of instruction used at Yanbian University remained Chinese after the Cultural Revolution (Setsure 1979, 104-5). For example, the school newspaper of Yanbian University (*Yanbian daxue*) had been written in Korean, but has been published only in Chinese since the Cultural Revolution.

**Figure 9.1 From bilingual to monolingual: the campus newspaper of Yanbian University, 1953-1980**

[hier Figure\_9.1]

Via Yanbian University Library and Archives

As relations between PRC and South Korea normalized since 1992, language usage among Korean Chinese entered a new phase of change. Growing contact between Yanbian and South Korea through migrant labour and popular cultural circuits has led to increasing preference for South Korean linguistic habits, which are considered more prestigious and useful than those of North Korea. This trend continues as language differences between north and south grow wider, for example in vocabulary, expressive style, and the quantity of borrowed Chinese characters. One important difference, however, is that this change is the result of cultural exchange and global capitalism, as opposed to an outcome of ideological coercion as during Maoist China. Korean Chinese today have the freedom to speak whichever language they choose. Yet because of the coercion by the government to speak and write Mandarin during the radical years in Maoist China, the standards of the Korean language that Korean Chinese use is now clearly deteriorated. In Yanbian today, for example, it is not difficult to find public signs with incorrect Korean spellings. The misspelling of Korean words on public signs has become a social problem in Yanbian.[[100]](#footnote-100) An overflow of incorrect Korean signs in Yanbian seems to result in a unique ‘ethnic language’ of its own, understandable to only China’s Korean ethnic group. This cultural development is an aspect that differentiates Koreans in China from both North and South Koreans.

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**10 The Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region 1990**

A Journey to the Border in a Time of Flux

*Warwick Morris and James (Jim) E. Hoare*

**Abstract**

This chapter provides a unique account of the borderland space of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture at a time when it was only beginning its economic development, and before it took on public attention as a destination for North Korean refugees seeking relief after the collapse of the public distribution system over the border. Written by two former officials in the UK Foreign Office, the reminiscences here are buttressed by sources on China and the Koreas contemporary to the time of the journey.

**Keywords:** China, North Korea, South Korea, international relations, border economy, border securitization, Asian borderlands

**Introduction**

In late June 1990, Koreans on the peninsula were marking the fortieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War. Kim Il-sung was still in power in Pyongyang, with his son ensconced as a successor figure. South Korea had emerged from the 1988 Olympics with an upward global trajectory, and under the leadership President Roh Tae-woo, the Republic of Korea was rapidly recognizing Eastern European states, expanding its trade with China’s northern provinces, and working toward formal diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the summer of 1990, it was difficult to foresee the manifold impacts of the coming disintegration of the Soviet Union, and that North Korean economy would be so badly damaged by this occurrence, much less to forecast a massive North Korean famine.

In China in June 1990, the government in Beijing was about a year beyond the Tiananmen Incident, its most severe internal crisis since the death of Mao Zedong. China had been censured by Western powers for violently suppressing student protestors on 4 June 1989 in Beijing. In terms of its dialogue with the United Kingdom at that time, the Chinese Communist Party was seeking to insulate the pending 1997 handover of Hong Kong against further turbulence (Wilson 2012). Only with the visit of Sir Percy Cradock to Beijing in December 1989, and the visit of Peter Middleton (Permanent Secretary to the Treasury) to Beijing in April-May 1990, had China’s relations with the United Kingdom begun to warm again.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Against this larger backdrop, we visited the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region of China, generally known as Yanbian, from 22-26 June 1990. We were both members of the British diplomatic service, with considerable experience of East Asia. Warwick was then Head of Chancery in the British Embassy in Seoul (capital of the Republic of Korea – ROK/South Korea), and Jim held the same post in the British Embassy in Beijing. Warwick had begun his diplomatic career in Seoul in the mid-1970s, when he was only the second Korean-language student since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1949. Jim, who had served in Seoul between 1981 and 1985, had no more than minimal survival Korean. We were not the first British officials to visit Yanbian; as we found out, members of the Beijing Embassy’s Commercial Department had been there before and there had been some British tourists as well as at least one journalist. We were, however, probably the first political officers to have visited since the 1940s or even earlier.

Both of us wrote official reports, the originals of which no doubt lie somewhere in the archives, waiting to be discovered.[[102]](#footnote-102) Fortuitously, one of these authors found a copy of one of the reports, and the present account is partly based on that document and on our collective memories of the visit. We both took a number of photographs, some of which are reproduced here. The quality of the photographs is not great and has probably not been improved by transferring from slide to digital, but, like holiday photographs the world over, they have a certain period charm. The overall result is probably more travelogue than political thesis but is offered as a piece of reportage from an area that has changed considerably since our visit nearly thirty years ago.

**Figure 10.1 Korean Air hoarding, Beijing Airport Road Spring 1990; no flights as yet, but getting ready**

[hier Figure\_10.1]

Photo: Jim Hoare

**Background**

Our visit took place at a time when there were no diplomatic relations between South Korea (the Republic of Korea/ROK) and China (Chung 2007). Chinese trade relations were developing apace, however. Korean Air had erected a huge sign near Beijing Airport, at the point where the airport road joined the road into the city. This was rather curious, since Korean Air did not fly to Beijing – that would not happen until 1994 – but clearly the Korean flag carrier knew which way the wind was blowing and had decided to get ready. Other Korean firms were already established. Within the airport, the luggage carts all advertised Samsung or Hyundai, and the arrival and departure screens came courtesy of LG. There were plenty of South Korean businessmen visiting China, and a fair number of officials. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) firmly denied that there were negotiations going on with the ROK, but the diplomatic tide was clearly in the ROK favour, and Chinese denials were taken with a very large grain of salt.

Chinese relations with North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea/DPRK) appeared still to be good at this point. The DPRK had uncritically supported the crackdown following the student demonstrations of April and May 1989 and the occupation of Tiananmen Square (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1989). Some British students, and at least one member of Parliament, had travelled to Pyongyang in 1989 (Oppenheim 1989). As far as the British embassy was concerned, North Korea might as well have been a totally different planet. Britain neither recognized the DPRK nor had any form of diplomatic relations with it, and, although the DPRK and British embassies in Beijing are quite near each other, there were no contacts whatsoever. One could occasionally see North Korean diplomats shopping at the Friendship Store or in the distance at diplomatic receptions, but there were no dealings with them. For diplomats from most Western European countries, this was the case. In the 1970s a few countries had established diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, but these were without much by way of substance. Various Scandinavian countries had established relations with the DPRK after the United Nations dissolved the Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK), which removed the formal legal obligation on states not to recognize the DPRK (United Nations 1973; Kraus 2017). The British position was in contrast to the Americans, who had been talking to the North Koreans since 1988, and the Japanese, who were in serious – and tough – negotiations that it was hoped would lead to full diplomatic relations (Sanger 1991; Cho 2019). So close was British purdah as far the North Koreans were concerned that Jim only met one North Korean official in three years in Beijing. At the Polish National Day reception in 1991, an American colleague introduced a young North Korean woman who was part of the DPRK Defence Attaché’s office. She left for home a few days later, though no doubt this was pure coincidence. In any event, it is clear why the idea of getting close to the North Korean border with China had such a strong appeal.

The place where that could happen was the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, the main centre for the ethnic Korean community in China. This community had begun to move into China in the late 19th century and was well-established by the time of the Chinese Revolution in 1911. After the Japanese takeover of Korea in 1910, it became an important base for Korean anti-Japanese guerrilla activities until these forces were driven into the Soviet Union in 1941. Unlike the Koreans in the Soviet Union whom Stalin, fearing that they would form a Japanese fifth column, had removed to Central Asia, the Korean population in China was not moved from the frontier region (Gelb 1995; Kim 2012).[[103]](#footnote-103) During the Chinese civil war years of 1946-1949, most Koreans sided with the Chinese Communist Party against the Guomindang / Nationalist Party. This led to the establishment of a Korean Autonomous Region in 1952, which became the Korean Autonomous Prefecture after the Korean War in 1955. The region contributed large numbers to the ‘Chinese People’s Volunteers’ during the Korean war (Li and Ren 2018, 183; Masuda 2012; Hoare 1988).

The Koreans are regarded as a well-integrated minority, with high levels of education (Lee 1986; Ma 1989). Korean is still widely spoken but most (at the time of our visit) were bilingual. The area was never wholly Korean, and the balance has tipped formally towards the Han Chinese since the 1980s. The region suffered badly in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) but recovered slowly thereafter (Tsurushima 1979). Although more is now known about the events of those years, the reluctance to discuss them in Yanbian is similar to that one finds in the rest of the country.

**The Visit**

Neither of us can now remember how the idea of visiting the Korean Autonomous Region emerged. But it was an area that we both wished to see. An approach was made to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the visit was agreed. Although foreigners’ travel in China had steadily become easier in the 1980s, 1989 had led to some tightening. In any case, resident diplomats (and journalists) normally needed permission to travel much beyond the major cities.[[104]](#footnote-104) One curiosity involves the Chinese refusal of our request to visit to Hunchun, a town which sits at the point where the Chinese, Russian and North Korean borders meet. Warwick had been told in Seoul that it would open in July 1991 as a special economic zone. However, when we asked in Beijing to visit, we were refused. Our formal hosts, essential for such a visit, would be the Foreign Affairs office of the local Yanbian government. We set off on a Friday evening, on a flight to Shenyang, where we would spend a night and part of a day before flying on to Yanji, the capital of the Yanbian area. At that time, there were no direct flights from Beijing to Yanji.

The evening was clear as we started out, but we were not long past the Great Wall when a massive thunderstorm began, with spectacular lightning among the mountains. When we arrived in Shenyang, we saw the results. The city was flooded and the car from the Phoenix Hotel – then claiming to be the best in town, now long disappeared - had failed to get through. Eventually we found a taxi driver who was willing to take us. It was a highly circular route, avoiding deeply flooded streets. The journey took 90 minutes; next day in reverse it was twenty minutes. Not surprisingly, he rejected our standard tip, demanding and getting quite a substantial sum.

By the next morning, there was little sign of the rain and the sun shone. We spent part of the morning in a call on the United States Consulate General, a somewhat beleaguered outpost. Although it was a Saturday, several members of staff came in to brief us. They clearly had a difficult time, with the People’s Armed Police carefully monitoring all visitors, not just Chinese as in Beijing. (We were not allowed past the gates until a member of staff came to collect us.) Sino-US relations were publicly in the doldrums because of the presence of the dissident scientist Fang Lizhi on the US Embassy compound in Beijing since the previous year.[[105]](#footnote-105) Access to the US compound was closely monitored as was staff travel. All customs clearances had to be done in Beijing, causing much delay, although, they conceded, probably not much more than Chinese consulates had to undergo in the USA. The absence of an expatriate community made life more difficult.[[106]](#footnote-106) Even the US ‘foreign experts’ employed in the region tended to avoid the consulate. The staff thought that this was because most of them were clandestine missionaries.

They briefed us on the local political and economic scene. Shenyang was going through economic reforms led from the top. What happened on the ground did not necessarily reflect the aims of the leaders. Although there was supposed to be a bankruptcy law in force, no real bankruptcy had occurred. Enterprise debt was growing, which to some extent was got around by barter trade. Cross-border economic links with the Soviet Union were important and growing. As well as conventional trade, there was a steady growth in labour trade, with increasing numbers of Chinese skilled workers (from 900 to 11,000 in two years) working over the border. In addition to the Chinese, there were Vietnamese female textile workers.

The largest group of industrial workers, however, came from North Korea. The consulate general was interested in both the Yanbian region to which they made regular visits, and North Korea. The former was an area of high educational attainments and increasingly active people. They noted that there was a well-established cross border trade in the region. Recently, however, North Korean traders had been slow in paying. This they attributed to two successive bad harvests in the North, which had begun to affect the ability of even small traders to meet their debts. Had we but known it, this was the harbinger of the catastrophic developments later in the decade.

We then spent a brief period of strategic tourism, looking at Manchu remains including the miniature Forbidden City, a little forlorn among the factories, and flew on to Yanji in the afternoon.[[107]](#footnote-107) The flight to Shenyang had been mainly Chinese but the flight to Yanji provided our next surprise, since it was full of South Korean businessmen. (It was in fact a charter flight for South Koreans officially on holiday but many of them made it clear that they were going in search of business opportunities.)

Even from the air, it was obvious that Yanbian was different. Partly this was because the steep mountains between Beijing and Shenyang were replaced by more gentle rolling hills, but it was also the neatness of the farms and fields. On arrival, we were met by Mr. Wei Yunbin and Mr. An Zhengshan from the local Foreign Affairs Office, who guided and looked after us during our visit. The Office must have been busy at the time, since the Chinese Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, was on an inspection tour, possibly related to China’s efforts to both open up more formal trade links with South Korea and simultaneously communicate these moves with North Korean comrades (Qian 2003, Chapter 5). But apart from Mr. Wei disappearing to take part in a briefing for the minister one evening, this did not affect our visit.

**Figure 10.2 Standard housing in the countryside**

[hier Figure\_10.2]

Photo: Jim Hoare

Yanji itself was also a surprise. In some ways, it was typical of many Chinese provincial towns at the time. It was a relatively new development in what had originally been the Manchu lands. Its population in 1991 was about 240,000 (it is now some 400,000); Koreans were about 59 per cent of the total. This too appears to have remained constant. The main streets were paved but few of the side streets were. There were some grand buildings, including those of the local government, but there were also a lot of very ramshackle constructions, especially shops, restaurants and houses. Women carried goods on their heads, as in Korea. But the biggest surprise was to see Korean language signs everywhere. The majority of signs were in both languages, but a good per centage were in Korean only. Korean was also clearly the main language. People would respond to Jim’s limited Chinese but when Warwick addressed them in fluent Korean, they were really interested. Korean customs clearly dominated entertaining habits.

**Figure 10.3 Businessman off to work through the back streets of Yanji; note shop and restaurant signs in Chinese and Korean**

[hier Figure\_10.3]

Photo: Jim Hoare

The name of our hotel has completely disappeared from memory. The Daewoo and other ‘international’ hotels had not then been built and the contemporary *Lonely Planet* guide tells me that when we visited, the two main hotels were the Yanji Binguan and the Minzu Fandian. I think it was probably the first of these. The guidebook noted that a ‘fancy female flunkey’ ushered you in and you were then ignored. It sounds familiar. Most of our fellow travellers from the aircraft were there too. Apart from breakfast, we did not eat there, though we may have had the occasional drink. What we did eat was generally Korean food – for obvious reasons, then more akin to North Korean style than to South Korean, though one suspects that this has changed over the years.

Once in Yanji, we again raised the question of visiting Hunchun – in China, unlike North Korea, things often became possible locally which had not been possible in Beijing – but got nowhere and our hosts denied any knowledge of a special zone being opened. Nevertheless, in our general briefing, there was much stress on the hoped-for benefits of the Tumen River Development Region, just getting under way, and described further in the next two chapters in this book. There were high expectations of developing links with the ROK and no pretence about the direction in which Sino-ROK relations were moving. We had many facts and figures. The Yanbian area was 81 per cent forest, and totalled 42900 sq km. It had eight cities and three counties, seven ports and 600 villages. There were ten newspapers and fifteen journals, and illiteracy was virtually unknown. It had a 562.5 km border with North Korea and 182.7 km with the Soviet Union. It was also an area that was very keen on links with the outside world. With the reform and open-door policy since 1979, it had begun to attract a steady stream of visitors. These had included both business people and tourists. The first British had come in 1985. In 1989, 2000 people had come from 21 countries. Perhaps paradoxically, the events of June 1989 had worked to their benefit in that visitors wanted to avoid Beijing. Only one foreign expert had left during that period and he had soon returned. Already the current year, they had received more visitors than in the whole of the previous year.

In addition to tourists, there were foreign business people, including South Koreans. Visitors from the ROK were increasingly common, in part drawn to Mount Paektu along the border, as a British journalist had reported shortly before the Olympic Games (Gittings 1988). Foreign trade in 1989 amounted to 150 million Yuan, two thirds of which was with the Soviet Union or North Korea. There were 34 joint ventures and one fully foreign-owned venture. The joint ventures included a number with North Koreans. Most of the latter were probably small, like one of the restaurants in which we ate reasonably well, served by the Kim Il-sung badge-wearing North Korean manager. There was also a Sino-Japanese joint venture in Longjing which processed ginseng.

We were also briefed on the area’s history and revolutionary tradition. Chinese Koreans were not a resentful conquered minority. They had come to the region voluntarily and were well integrated. Yanbian had been a strong centre of resistance in Japanese days. Liberated in 1945, it had never been under Nationalist rule. This had not prevented revolution-era cadres being denounced during the Cultural Revolution, but the implication was that this was all now forgotten. That this might not be entirely true was shown at Yanbian University, where a permanent exhibition on the university’s history showed scenes of teachers being denounced during the Cultural Revolution, the only time Jim had seen such a display in a Chinese university or anywhere else. Apart from this, the Cultural Revolution was passed over in silence.

**Figure 10.4 Dancing on the banks of the Tumen River, Tumen Town**

[hier Figure\_10.4]

Photo: Jim Hoare

There followed a couple of days travelling around the area, visiting Yanji town itself but also going further afield. We saw trim villages with houses in Korean style, often still with thatched roofs. Around them were very neat and prolific vegetable patches. Collectivization had long gone, and the farms were individual enterprises; some had tractors. The North Korean style of traditional costume was much in evidence among women on what appeared to be special occasions such as an outing; we saw no men so dressed. In the group, we saw dancing in a small city that we recall as Tumen, most of the women were so dressed while the men were all in Western-style suits, most with ties. Younger women tended to dress in western-style clothing, at least for going about ordinary business. As in other minority areas, the ‘one child’ policy was not enforced, and Koreans could have two children. Away from the few main roads, the rural roads were uniformly bad, though no worse, it seemed, than most South Korean rural roads had been in the late 1970s-early 1980s. Talking to our guides, one reason given for refusal to let us visit Hunchun was that the road was in particularly bad shape. Given the state of the roads that we did go on, this seems highly likely.

As noted, our visits included Yanbian University, a place very proud of its relatively long tradition as the oldest university in a minority area, founded in 1949. For the first ten years, it had only taken Korean students but since then, it took all nationalities. With a claimed literacy rate for the area of 98 per cent and with over 99 per cent of eligible children attending school, it clearly had a solid foundation on which to work. Even allowing for some exaggeration and local pride, these figures were impressive and gave the area the highest rate of literacy in all China. However, possibly reflecting the Cultural Revolution years (1966-1976), the total number of graduates was said to be only 15,000. (The total number of university graduates in China between 1949 and 1991 was said to be two million.) The university offered masters’ degrees in fifteen subjects and a PhD in Korean studies. Few of its postgraduate students went abroad to study but some staff had done so. Only one had been to Europe, although several had been to North Korea for study. Close links were developing with South Korean educational institutions and academic visitors were frequent. The library had a reasonably up-to-date collection of South Korean newspapers and journals, and received material from the Japanese, German and US embassies. These countries had also provided teaching assistants, as had Canada and Australia. There were no links with Britain.[[108]](#footnote-108)

The main industrial enterprise that we visited was a tobacco processing factory; agriculture and service industries aside, this seemed to be the main local employer, with 3000 staff. We were told that it accounted for one third of the Jilin Province tax revenue, though it was not the largest taxpayer in the province. It seemed to have links with the British-American Tobacco Company, and, we were shown with pride, much of the equipment was British, evidence of past links with the British embassy commercial section. Some of the senior management had visited Britain for training. We were told that the Director was currently there, looking at rigid packaging which would be needed if they expanded, as they hoped to do, into the South East Asian market. They also noted increasing links with South Korea. The Chinese government had just started a campaign to draw attention to the dangers of smoking and we asked about the effects of this on the company’s output. We were assured that it was having no effect since the Chinese people had long since grown accustomed to government campaigns and tended to ignore them.

Otherwise, we spent much time travelling around, visiting villages and the other major town of the region, Tumen. We also visited Longjing. Apart from a briefing by an attractive young woman, we seem to have no record of what we heard and saw in Longjing. Tumen, about a third of the size of Yanbian, had few distinguishing features, apart from the Tumen River on which it stands, and which marks the Sino-North Korean border (Gittings 1988). We had another briefing here, concentrating on the prospects for the future once the Tumen River Development Zone got underway and on the cross-border links with the DPRK (Christian Science Monitor 1993). We were told that at the Tumen border crossing, one of three between China and North Korea, numbers crossing had risen from about 200 in 1983 to over 120,000 in 1990. The DPRK was clearly visible on the other bank. We were told that when the bridge across the river was open (Monday to Saturday), people from either side could cross without travel documents. Although the majority of Koreans in the Yanbian Region were descendants of those who had crossed into Chinese territory – and later the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo – in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many families still had links across the border.

While in 1990, North Korea was generally more prosperous than Northeast China, there were already signs of economic difficulties (Kristof 1992). Many coming from the North brought local products or simple manufactured items for sale in Tumen’s market (Tyler 1994). If they could not sell these themselves, they would leave them with relatives. Often the latter would pretend that they had sold the goods and give their relatives the money. Tumen’s museum was closed but we were shown the former Japanese Consulate General buildings, now the local government and party headquarters. It was a formidable reminder of what Japanese imperialism had meant.

**Figure 10.5 The thriving market in Yanji city**

[hier Figure\_10.5]

Photo: Jim Hoare

When we visited the Yanji free market, we could see the problem. The market was a substantial two-story building with a huge range of foodstuffs available, fruit and vegetables and plenty of seafood and meat. The quality of the fruit and vegetables was particularly good. This our guides attributed to the economic reforms of recent years (Li and Ren 2018). Until the mid-1980s, Koreans in Yanbian had been forced to concentrate on rice growing but since then they had been allowed to develop vegetable and fruit growing as well and the result was the abundance available in the market.

We were anxious to buy something from North Korea. Although much of the ground floor was devoted to North Korean goods, these were for the most part basic rusty tools and shoddy shoes. We searched high and low for souvenirs, but, foodstuffs apart, there seemed little worth buying. Eventually, Jim settled on a small oil lamp. Boat shaped, it was of a type that would have been familiar to the Romans. It was never used, and it soon rusted badly. Warwick bought an illustrated fan that had been prepared for the previous year’s Pyongyang World Festival of Youth and Students (Becker 1989). There were clearly many left unsold. The market had other attractions. For many of the North Korean women visiting, one prime attraction was the chance to dress up in South Korean-style traditional dresses, which were displayed on the second floor. The pleasure was in dressing up rather than buying. People did not take photographs since no doubt such things could get you into trouble at home.

**Figure 10.6 Overseen by his mother and a stuffed panda, a small boy prepares for military service on the banks of the Tumen River**

[hier Figure\_10.6]

Photo: Jim Hoare

We took photographs at various points along the river but most of those posing for their own photos at more touristic junctures were Chinese-Koreans rather than North Koreans. Clearly, the best picture was to have the river and North Korea as the backdrop. For boys, there were model tanks, MIG aircraft and miniature uniforms. Girls had to make do with Korean dresses. Women, presumably Chinese rather than Koreans, could also pose behind cut-outs of Korean-style dresses. We are not sure what men did!

We spent much time driving along the river and looking at North Korea. The northern banks were clearly visible, and we saw a station with the standard portrait of Kim Il-sung, as well as sections of collective farms. Large slogans were prominent on the hillsides. All seemed quiet. There were few people about on the DPRK side. No border guards were visible on either side. We saw some people from the Northern side fishing in the river. It was clearly very shallow in places and the fishermen waded out with nets. Crossing it would clearly not be difficult when the waters were low or when it froze in the winter. While we must have been as clearly visible to the North Koreans as they were to us, nobody waved or showed any interest.

There was no heavy military presence, although a few soldiers were about. We saw some light field guns lined up near Yanji with their barrels covered and nobody paying much attention. On arrival at Yanji airport, we saw some fifteen MiG fighters some way from the civilian runway, all covered. On Sunday and Monday, we saw some of these in the air, and on our departure on the Tuesday, there were about 30 of them uncovered at the airport, apparently being fuelled for takeoff.

**Conclusion**

We visited at a time when Yanbian was just on the point of undergoing a boom. With the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the ROK, there seemed limitless opportunities for both sides. ROK investment was already underway in 1991, although the visitors were officially described as tourists. One South Korean businessman who was running a pharmaceutical factory in Yanji confidently expected to expand his business. The Tumen River Development project seemed to be on the point of takeoff.

Some of the hopes were met but many were disappointed. Yanbian remained a place for investment but some South Korean companies felt that they were being exploited. Perhaps needless to say, the same feeling existed among many of the Chinese and Sino-Koreans. We were told that South Koreans promised more than they delivered. Kinship ties counted for little.

And the problems in North Korea also impinged more and more on Yanbian by the mid-1990s. As economic difficulties increased, there was a change in the nature of the cross-order traffic. People now came from the North and did not go back. The Chinese operated a policy, long agreed with the DPRK, that there was no right of asylum for North Koreans in China and those caught were returned. This had apparently operated in the opposite direction in the past at times such as the famine in the late 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution. As the 1990s moved on, the flow was all of North Koreans to China. Those who managed to remain hidden were always at risk, even when they married Chinese citizens. Before long, Yanbian became a centre where humanitarian groups, intelligence agencies, criminals and others all competed. The Tumen River Project, although nominally still in existence, has not met any of the hopes that were expressed to us in 1990. There has been some regional development, but international cooperation has been minimal, and the project seems unlikely to amount to much.

There was no follow-up to our visit. Warwick returned to Seoul for another year, although he did visit North Korea via Hong Kong and Beijing in May 1991 as an advisor to the British delegation to the Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting in Pyongyang (Reuters Pyongyang 1991). He and a colleague from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Parliamentary Unit were probably the first British officials to visit North Korea since the Korean War. Jim left Beijing in December 1991. The local government officials who were our hosts expressed the hope that the ambassador and the Cultural Section of the embassy would visit but this did not happen. At that stage, there was not much interest in North Korea in the Beijing embassy; indeed, a colleague later said that it was of no interest to them, since it was not listed in the ‘objectives’. As the North Korean refugee issue attracted more international attention (Higgins 1998) and with emerging international concern over its nuclear programme (Frankland 1994), this view changed somewhat. Staff from Beijing have made visits to the border area. But these have tended to be confined to Dandong at the western end of the border and a long way from Yanbian. So, our 1990 visit remains something of an oddity, but one recalled with pleasure and not a little fascination.

Perhaps one day we will get back there.

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Part IV

Contemporary Borderland Economics

The North Korean economy has a storied and troubled history, especially over the past 25 years. It is a history that has seen dizzying highs and crashing lows. Emerging from the Korean War in 1953, much of North Korea’s infrastructure lay in ruins. The industrial economy had sustained massive damage, and there was a grave shortage of food and housing for the population. The man who had initiated the destruction with his invasion of South Korea three years prior, Kim Il-sung had managed to stay in power, but now faced the challenges of rebuilding.

The results were astonishing. With the (largely unacknowledged) help of North Korea’s socialist bloc allies, so successful was a decade or so of exhortative ‘speed battles’ and mass mobilization that the North Korean economy was soon in better shape than that of the South, a situation that would continue into the 1970s.

However, as Hwang Jang-yop recalls in his memoir, the wheels started to come off in the middle of the decade, and by the time Kim died in 1994, the country was on the road to famine. Explaining North Korean economic development from 1948 to roughly 1990 requires only that we focus on the actions of state-owned enterprises and farms, their interactions with a centralized planning mechanism designed in the classical Stalinist mould, and the assistance rendered by the Soviet Union and others. But to understand anything that has happened in the North Korean economy thereafter, one must turn to the border region.

It was in the border region that a process of ad hoc marketization began in response to North Korea’s infamous ‘Arduous March’ famine of 1995-1998, aided and abetted by ethnic Korean businessmen in Yanbian and Han Chinese traders throughout the region. It was there that North Korea situated all of its special economic zones bar the Kaesong Industrial Complex (2004-2016), from Rason (1991) in the east to Sinuiju (2002) in the west. It is there that we find Sinuiju, facing the Chinese city of Dandong across the Yalu River. It is the most business-savvy city in all of North Korea.

That is why, as analysts of North Korea, we have no choice but to centre the borderland if we are to understand the North Korean economy as it stands today. This section does exactly that. Peter Ward and Christopher Green deal in depth with the marketization of North Korea that began in the borderland. Théo Clément and Andray Abrahamian, respectively, look at the special economic zones side of the docket. For Christopher Green and Adam Cathcart, meanwhile, the focus is on the politics of border region economic development and the impact of the untimely and brutal death of Kim Jong-un’s paternal uncle, Jang Song-taek, revealing the brutal and banal reasons behind a relative lack of economic progress in the borderlands.

[onder aan de pagina plaatsen]

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**11 Change on the Edges**

The Rajin-Sonbong Economic and Trade Zone

*Théo Clément*

**Abstract**

The Rajin-Sonbong Economic and Trade Zone is the oldest Special Economic Zone in North Korea and, despite erratic development, is considered to have high economic potential due to its key geographic location. This chapter reviews the growth of the Rajin-Sonbong SEZ and its difficult enmeshment with neighbour states and transnational initiatives. Drawing on fieldwork in and around the zone and interviews with North Korean officials, this chapter demonstrates that while central authorities have consistently pushed for greater autonomy and a more flexible business environment, foreign actors have shown limited investment interests. The chapter argues that the most important roadblock for the zone to live up to its potential is the lack of balance and reciprocity in China-DPRK economic cooperation.

**Keywords:** Special Economic Zones, Rason, investment law in North Korea, economy of Northeast China, Jilin sea access, international trade North Korea, Tumen River Area Development Program, Tumen River, United Nations development projects

**Introduction**

The Rajin-Sonbong Special Economic Zone opened its doors to foreign investment in December 1991.[[109]](#footnote-109) Located in the Tumen River area, on the extreme northeastern tip of the Korean peninsula, the location of North Korea’s very first SEZ was chosen because of Rason’s historical legacy as a commercial hub. The port infrastructures of Rajin date back to 1938; much of the urban layout had been built by the Japanese colonizers following the autumn 1931 invasion of Northeast China and the subsequent creation of the Manchukuo puppet state. Japan’s move to revive the Qing monarchy in a new Tokyo-dominated continental empire therefore had to contend with logistical problems left by the Manchus, namely, the fact that the Qing empire had lost its access to the Sea of Japan (East Sea) when the ‘unequal treaties’ of 1858 and 1860 had been signed. Three coastal ports were designed and built in order to better link the Japanese Empire and its Manchurian puppet state, including Rajin and Songbong, currently part of the Rason SEZ.

After the establishment of the new North Korean state, the Rason area quickly attracted the attention of central authorities in Pyongyang in the context of the early diversification of foreign trade partners in the 1950s (Kim 1983). Eventually, in 1983, its role as a hub for international trade and interaction with foreigners was explicitly mentioned by Kim Il-sung, in tandem with Chongjin, a neighbouring coastal city with a shipbuilding and fishing industry:

Chongjin and Rajin are virtually open cities. Many foreigners come to Chongjin Port because they are trading with the Japanese through this port. Many people from those countries which have trade relations with our country also come to Rajin Port. […] Chongjin and Rajin should be built up as modern international cities like Nampho. Nampho produces a good impression on foreigners and earns a lot of foreign currency because it has built many high-rise apartment houses, and an international hotel and restaurants in the Waudo area and its surroundings. If Chongjin and Rajin also build many tall houses, modern international hotels and restaurants, and improve their services to foreigners, they will be able to earn foreign currency and exert a favourable influence upon foreigners just as Nampho does (Kim 1995, 130).[[110]](#footnote-110)

Kim Il-sung’s reference to ‘open cities’ is almost transparent here. Rason is meant primarily to impress foreigners rather than spur economic development in its own right. But even if Kim’s rhetoric echoes the steady trumpeting of North Korea’s idiosyncratic development path, the timing of the mention of ‘open cities’ was more than a coincidence. This occurred only six months after Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il had jointly visited Shenzhen and Shanghai in February 1983, just prior to the latter city’s being declared an Open Coastal city (Funabashi 2007, 439). Indeed, the Chinese inspiration of the project was partially acknowledged (Murphy 1996). From Pyongyang’s perspective, this was a relatively safe choice: remotely located from the political and economic heart of the country, Rason was considered an ‘exception’ in the DPRK economy as it was largely dependent on port-related activities, especially trans-shipping activities or exports of goods from China. Moreover, Rason was mostly unconnected to the mainstream of the DPRK economy, meaning that capitalistic practices or a foreign influx would have limited effects nationally. The flow of population through the region was scarce. In 1993, there were less than 140,000 inhabitants for the whole 726 km² zone (UNDP 1998, 3). It had little industry and limited agriculture, for exploited lands constituted only 13% of the zone; indeed, two-thirds (67%) of the landmass of the Rason SEZ consisted in 1998 of unexploited forests. Therefore, the area’s unique economic interest was its ideally located port facilities. Rason had a reasonably strong basis for success, with roots in both Chinese and Japanese practices and background, with sufficient if limited endorsement from the North Korean leadership.

**Entanglement: Rason and the Tumen River Area Development Plan**

The potential for Rason to play a major role in North Korean development and regional economic integration was highlighted in the early 1990s, as the end of the Cold War seemed to usher in a new era. In July 1990, at the conference on Northeast China Economic and Technical Cooperation in Changchun, a Jilin provincial government delegate raised the issue of economic development in continental Northeast Asia and unveiled his vision on how to turn the Tumen River Area (TRA) into an international industrial, trade, and transport hub (Tsuji 2004, 1). The TRA encompasses the Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture in the PRC, North Hamgyong province and Rason in North Korea, as well as the southern part of Primorsky Krai in Russia. The Chinese vision was unveiled in a context of increasing demand for enhanced regional economic integration in Northeast Asia, with the concomitant opening of different Russian port cities in Primorsky Krai (like the Nakhodka Free Trade Zone in November 1990), which had previously been closed to foreigners and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). China’s Hunchun, bordering both the DPRK and Russia, was opened to foreigners only in 1992, after Rason. Hunchun became an ‘open city’ before Rason, in November 1991, but it was only turned into an ‘open border city’ (allowing border crossings) in March 1992. As Warrick Morris and James Hoare explain in the previous chapter of this volume, in 1990 and 1991, at the very beginning of the Tumen River Area Development Plan (TRADP), even foreign diplomats had difficulties accessing Hunchun city. Rason had competitors across the border, but there was potential for further cooperation.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) quickly saw potential in this project and announced its full support for the TRADP at its Northeast Asia Sub-regional Program Conference in Ulaanbaatar in July 1991, ordering an expertise mission on the implementation of the TRADP, the so-called ‘Miller mission’ (Zhu 1995, 99).This presented an enthusiastic (and, in James Hoare’s words, even ‘grandiose’) vision for the future of the TRA, which would require no less than 20 billion dollars in infrastructure development. Chinese scholars sometimes provide an even higher figure of $30 billion (Chen 2009, 180). The findings of the Miller mission were introduced to officials from different countries involved in the project in October 1991, in Pyongyang, and the Rajin-Sonbong Free Economic and Trade Zone was officially established in December 1991.[[111]](#footnote-111)

It is important to note that Rason’s positioning in the scheme was well beyond simply acting as a channel for expanded North Korean trade with China. Strictly understood, the TRADP involved countries that were outsiders to the Tumen River Area, including for example Mongolia and South Korea. The Program Management Committee (PMC), the executive institution of the plan, encompassed China, North Korea, South Korea, the Russian Federation, and Mongolia. Japan was granted observer status on the committee (Zhu 1996,108). The complementarities of the economic profiles of countries involved in the project were seen as a springboard for the TRADP, but the very heterogeneous socio-political nature of Northeast Asian countries at that time also constituted a hurdle to the economic development of the TRA. China, for instance, was first and foremost trying to find a direct access to the sea. Beijing stubbornly tried to impose upon other partners its ‘Fangchuan plan’, which aimed at creating river port facilities in Fangchuan, fifteen kilometres upstream from the mouth of the Tumen River, and to open the river to Chinese, DPRK, and Russian ships (Tsuji 2004, 5). Not only did this plan pose extreme technical difficulties, since it necessitated the construction of new port facilities and the constant dredging of the river, but it also entailed an agreement on navigation rights on the Tumen River that would provide China access to the Western Sea/Sea of Japan without any concurrent advantage for the DPRK or Russia. In the early years of the Russian Federation, Moscow’s attitude to the TRADP also radically changed: SEZ projects in Vladivostok and Nakhodka were abandoned in 1991 and 1993 due to concerns over Far East territories’ competitiveness in a context of increased economic integration.

Thus, the meeting of the Program Management Committee in July 1994 in Moscow witnessed a spectacular leap backwards, as the UNDP withdrew its 20-billion-dollar plan because of the project’s lack of political momentum. The TRADP office in New York closed its doors in 1994, replaced by a lower-ranking Tumen River secretariat office in Beijing in 1998. The UNDP, however, maintained residual support and kept on funding some key projects in the area, including a $4.4 million-dollar technology transfer project to the DPRK and a $1.3 billion investment in roads near Hunchun in the Chinese region of Yanbian (Chen 2009, 185). The UNDP also published an investor’s guide to Rajin-Sonbong at the end of the 1990s, which likely was the most detailed source available on Rason’s business environment at that time, and maybe still (UNDP 1998). Accordingly, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed stasis in Rason economic growth. Controversy would soon reemerge over North Korea’s nuclear weapons development, and the TRADP project never did take off. Nevertheless, the zone had put down foundations.

**Rajin-Sonbong: High Potential**

There is a consensus among scholars and DPRK watchers that Rajin-Sonbong is among the DPRK’s higher-potential SEZs (Abrahamian et al., 2014). Rason indeed has several cards to play in the battle to attract FDI from Northeast Asian countries

**Locational Advantages**

Rajin-Sonbong has ‘locational advantages’ (Dunning 2001). First, Rason is a borderland SEZ; second, it is located on a coast; and third, it has the potential to be located on major trade routes. Rajin-Sonbong is at the extreme northeastern tip of the Korean peninsula and is the only part of Korea that borders two different countries (China to the north and Russia to the east). Moscow’s involvement in the zone had been extremely limited until 2014, when Russia pardoned a large, unpaid North Korean debt to the USSR, triggering renewed Russian interest in the zone. Rason’s second neighbour, China, is clearly the more important economic partner of the DPRK, as it nowadays is not only the first investor in the country, but also by far its most important trade partner with over 90% of the DPRK’s external trade made with the PRC in 2014 (Thompson 2009; Frank 2015). Jilin Province, and Yanbian in particular, suffer from their remoteness from the mainstream of the Chinese economy and especially from their lack of access to the sea. The northeastern or *Dongbei* provinces (historically inner Manchuria, or today the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang), depend mostly on the busy port facilities in Dalian in order to reach both domestic and foreign markets like South Korea and Japan. For Yanji, the port of Dalian is very remote – some 900 km to the south. According to a principle known as *neimao waiyun* (‘internal trade, external transport’) businesses in the northeastern provinces therefore aim at exporting goods to Southern China via Rason. Port facilities in Rajin-Sonbong thus offer important opportunities for Chinese companies based in Yanbian, Jilin, and Heilongjiang, as they open up a faster and cheaper trade route to export markets.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The Rajin-Sonbong SEZ has numerous ports, but only three of them can host foreign ships (Rason Law 2010, article 78).[[113]](#footnote-113) The biggest one is in Rajin. This three-pier port was built by the Japanese in 1938 and can handle ships weighing between 30,000 and 40,000 tons, on nine different berths (Abrahamian 2011, 3). Total port capacity is around six million tons a year (Naenara n.d. - a), but the port is in fact mostly idle. In 1979, at its busiest time, it handled 800,000 tons a year versus only 200,000 tons in 2011 (Abrahamian 2012, 3). In 2014 a DPRK-Russia joint venture known as RasonKonTrans and JSC Trading House RZD, a Russian State-owned company, refurbished a wharf in Rajin in order to transship Russian coal coming through the Tumangang-Khasan railroad to ships leaving for foreign markets, including South Korea (Hong 2014; Yonhap 2015a). The southernmost pier was leased by a Russian company for 49 years, starting in 2008 (Abrahamian 2012). The middle pier is used by North Korean and foreign companies, and the northernmost is exclusively used by Chinese companies. In 2010, a ten-year lease on this pier was announced (Chosun Ilbo 2010) and it was renovated at a cost of 3.6 million dollars by the Dalian-based Chuangli Group (Lin and Hao 2012). The port is equipped with relatively modern cranes, supplied by Yanbian Hyuntong Shipping Group Co., but is only able to load or unload about six containers per hour, hardly an impressive speed, indicating that more infrastructure work would be required for additional growth.

The second port in Rason, located in Sonbong, handles oil. It has a capacity of about 250,000 tons a year and is close to the Sonbong thermal power plant and the biggest oil refinery in the DPRK, the Seungri Chemical Plant (built between 1968 and1973 by the Soviet Union). A Mongolian company reportedly invested approximately $10 million USD in a twenty per cent share of the North Korean firm owning the plant, seeking to bypass dependence on Russian oil refineries (Melvin 2013; Cankao Xiaoxi 2015). Rason also has a port in Ungsang which specializes in handling timber (UNDP 1998, 21).

While ports in Rajin-Sonbong are certainly small, especially if compared with those in Vladivostok, Dalian, or Tokyo, they have a strategic importance that goes far beyond providing access to the sea to the Chinese hinterland. Rajin-Sonbong is said to have the northernmost year-round ice-free port in continental Asia, providing North Korean ports a competitive edge over Russian ones in the region. Port infrastructures near Rason, for instance in Zarubino or Posyet, can only deal with very small volumes of cargo and suffer from the competition of the bigger and more modern ports (Vladivostok, Nakhodka) of the region. In spite of grandiose announcements that Zarubino would multiply its cargo handling capacity 50-fold, nothing suggests that actual construction has followed, making Rason comparatively advantageous.

Rajin-Sonbong is also located on the fastest route from South Korea to Europe via rail (through the Trans-Siberian railway or the well-worn project of an ‘Eurasian land bridge’) making it nominally part of the South Korean project of creating an ‘Iron Silk Road’ running from Busan to Moscow (Burns n.d.: 460; Russia Times 2013). Although North Korea has resisted overt incorporation into the more general framework of the Chinese ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, Rason constitutes the most direct link between the economically depressed Yanbian prefecture and South Korea or other foreign markets in Southeast Asia (Hunchun Shifan Ouwang 2015). Last, as the northernmost year-round ice-free port in continental Asia, Rason also is ideally located as a transport hub for future Arctic routes. While port facilities in Rason can cannot currently host icebreakers able to cross the Bering Strait and the Arctic ocean, the PRC and South Korea are preparing for the opening of Arctic routes, as both countries recently built large icebreakers like the Chinese Xuelong and the South Korean RV Araeon (Pelaudeix 2015). The opening of Arctic routes would be a major shift for China and would give a definite impetus to the economic development of China’s Northeast. Test-runs were made in 2013, leaving from Ust-luga in Russia to Rajin (Benett 2014). Shipping goods from Hunchun to Europe via the Arctic instead of via the Suez Canal would cut in half both transportation time and distance (Jo and Ducruet 2007, 2).

As anywhere in the DPRK, Rason has a pool of cheap and high-quality labour. Contrary to most other Asian countries, at the end of the millennium, unskilled labourers in Rason worked on a six days and 48 hours per week basis for $80 dollars a month, plus potential benefits (UNDP 1998, 14). Unlike the inter-Korean economic zone in Kaesong, detailed information is not available on wage benefits such as overtime pay or potential incentives. Wages are transferred directly to authorities in the area, and actual salaries received by workers are not publicly known (Rason Law 2010, article 50). The minimum wage does not seem to have increased since at least 15 years (or marginally). As a result, with minimum wage in Yanji and Hunchun currently being set at around $210 a month (Yanbian Ribao 2015), the Rason workforce is approximately two and a half times cheaper than in neighbouring Chinese borderlands (Lin and Hao 2012, 15). Indeed, when asked about the costs, businessmen in the zone confirmed that it was sometimes hard to recruit workers in Yanbian, leading some to think about closing all their businesses in Yanbian and to simply focus on Rason in spite of the risks. SEZs in North Korea have the particularity that the cost of labour most often is higher in SEZs than in the rest of the country. Indeed, several Chinese entrepreneurs investing in North Korea more broadly, namely, outside of SEZs, have explained to me that the wages paid directly to the DPRK administration did not exceed $60 a month per worker, versus $80 in Rason. Workers of Rason are relatively educated, with specific *ad hoc* education centres located inside the zone, most notably the Rajin University of Maritime Transport. This university, located less than a kilometre north from Rajin harbor, is rumoured to be the *alma mater* of former Prime Minister and long-time minister of marine transport Kim Yong-il. According to Chinese scholars interviewed in May 2018, the institution has active cooperation programmes with Chinese universities established in the borderlands.

In terms of its own natural resource potential, the zone has some advantages in the North Korean context. Its extensive forest cover (again encompassing 67% of the zone) is quite rare in the DPRK, construction materials like sand, granite or gravel, and, most notably, seafood. In addition to Rajin, Sonbong, and Ungsang SEZs, Rason has several small fishing ports. As explained by the UNDP (2011), there are important deposits of more strategic resources like coal, ores, magnesite and ceramic clay, in areas neighbouring the zone, which can be processed in Rason. However, the latest version of the Rason ETZ law states that imports of raw materials from the DPRK to Rajin-Sonbong have to be negotiated not with local partners but directly with Pyongyang (Rason Law 2010, article 47), whereas raw materials from abroad can be imported without any tax duties (Rason Law 2010, article 50). Surprisingly, this law provides an incentive to import raw materials instead of using local resources.

**Constitutions and Contradictions**

What makes a Special Economic Zone is the fact that in a particular area, trade- and investment-related laws differ from the rest of the country, often offering a more business-friendly institutional framework. Since 1984, the DPRK has been continuously developing its legal framework related to investment, and Rajin-Sonbong seems to have been the focus of particular attention from North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly: as of 2018, the law on Rason has been amended no less than six times (in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2010, and 2011) since the opening of the SEZ.

The DPRK Law on the Rason Economic and Trade Zone (‘Rason Law’), was adopted on 31 January 1993 more than a year after the opening of the Rason SEZ. Following the publication of the first Rason Law in 1993 and the establishment of the visa-free zone foreign investors started to pay attention to developments in Rason (Zhu 1995). Per the UNDP (1998, 7) report, in 1995, cumulative investment jumped from six to $37 million the following year, with 28 foreign-invested enterprises active in the zone.[[114]](#footnote-114) Until the Rason Law was adopted by the Supreme People’s Assembly, the law that applied to Rajin-Sonbong had been the ill-suited 1984 Joint-venture law (JVL). On 9 April 1992, the DPRK Constitution was amended; the addition of Article 37, specifically, allowed foreign businesses to invest in the DPRK (Lee 2000: 207). However, the fact that FDI was deemed lawful by the 1984 Joint Venture Law, but was not recognized in the Constitution, highlights problems in credibility of the North Korean legal system in general. Ultimately, the 1992 constitutional reform must be considered as a step away from the DPRK’s traditional legal praxis: the fact that the constitution had to be altered before adopting the first Rason Law reflects that ‘political policy and practice must work within the legal parameters established by the constitution… to be legitimate’ (Zook 2012, 135, 141). Regularly amended, the Rason Law gradually evolved towards increased decentralization and less strict constraints on foreign investors. The Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) made extensive efforts in order to provide preferential policies to foreign investors, especially in the latest version of the law, in 2011, an action which coincided with an opening of the zone to some foreign reporters (Wong 2011).

**Decentralization: Political and Administrative Aspects**

The 2011 revision of the Rason Law included increased local powers, a development which North Korean officials are often eager to highlight. One DPRK diplomat in Europe told me in November 2014 that 80% of the decision-making Rajin-Sonbong was done locally, but that strategic decisions were still made by the Pyongyang-based Central Guidance Authority (CGA) of SEZs. Before the 2011 revision, responsibilities had been split between the CGA and Rason People’s Committee (RPC), which were both considered executive organs of the State (Rason Law 2010, article 9). The CGA had extensive responsibilities, including the review of application of ‘major investment projects’, but its involvement and responsibilities in Rason were reduced in the 2011 version, where the CGA is tasked with identifying screening criteria for investment projects, but not with selecting projects themselves (Rason Law 2010, article 10). After 2011, the whole application screening process is performed locally and theoretically does not involve Pyongyang. In the latest version of the Rason Law, the CGA primarily serves in a coordination role with the rest of the DPRK’s economy. For instance, foreign companies in Rason interested in using DPRK raw materials from outside the zone were advised to first contact the CGA in Pyongyang. Limited decentralization processes led to reduction in delays: whereas in 1998, potential foreign investors were notified the results of their applications within 50 days (80 days for wholly foreign-owned companies), since 2011 it has nominally taken only ten days (UNDP 1998, 11; Rason Law 2011, article 37).

The Rason People’s Committee’s responsibilities also dramatically declined in the 2011 revision. The RPC is a political organ, and worked as a local executive branch, under central supervision. It had been tasked with relatively sensitive issues including, among others: Preparing rules for the implementation of the Rason Law, assisting investors in hiring workers, preparation and execution of the Zone’s budget, and ‘other work entrusted by the State’ (Rason Law 2010, article 13). After 2011, its role was reduced. The fact that the text mentions the CGA and not ‘the State’, appears to be an attempt at establishing stricter boundaries between competing DPRK institutions. In this regard, it should also be noticed that the very vague first article of the 2010 version of the Rason Law (more of a political declaration than a law article), was replaced by a much less optimistic sentence on the 2011 version, emphasizing legal security and ‘strict guidelines’.

The CGA was the central state’s proxy in local business affairs, and the Rason People’s Committee’s extensive powers were seen as potential obstacles for foreign businesses in the zone. The 2011 version of the law thus introduced a new organ in charge of the management of the zone, the ‘management committee’. Simply put, the management committee was tasked with what matters for investors, and was the result of an attempt by the Zone’s local authorities to create a more administrative and less political interface with foreign investors in the zone, even if the management committee is a sub-committee of the Rason’s People’s Committee and responds to the Pyongyang-based Central Guidance Authority (Rason Law 2011, articles 1, 14, 27, 29, 37). Ultimately, the centre rules, but some room has been carved out for local maneuver.

**Market Principles and International Standards**

To what extent does the law’s reference to ‘commitment to market principles’ (Rason Law 2011, article 23) represent ideological upheaval, or even reform, of the trade and investment-related legal corpus? However bold this ideological move, its concrete consequences still remain to be seen; indeed, most Chinese businessmen involved in the Rason SEZ and interviewed by the author had no knowledge about the law’s reference to market principles.[[115]](#footnote-115) The zone admittedly has important markets (in Sonbong and Wonjong) but these are ubiquitous in the DPRK and Pyongyang has been using markets to better allocate resources since the founding of the country (Silberstein 2015; Cha and Collins 2018). In reality, ‘market principles’ only apply to foreign companies and certain categories of goods: as everywhere else in the DPRK, basic commodities are heavily subsidized and most public services are free of charge. Pricing of basic consumer goods by the Rason People’s Committee at heavily subsidized prices thus constitute an exception to the rule and foreign-invested companies suffering from these market disturbances are technically eligible for financial compensation. DPRK zone managers have shown little interest in attracting investments or opening up competition in the country’s public services (Choi 2014).

As often in the DPRK, business-related legal dispositions are vague, opaque, and the actual implementation of ‘market principles’ in Rason is likely to be quite limited to some actors, sectors, or commodities. Nonetheless, the fact that DPRK lawmakers chose to use these specific terms should not be underestimated: business practices in Rason evolve in a very slow and incremental fashion, but authorities are capable of a certain ideological boldness (Zook 2012), in part reflecting consultation with foreign experts (including Chinese) on these issues (Lin and Hao 2012, 33).

The borrowing of foreign concepts and legal norms is especially important to consider as a measure of the DPRK’s willingness to adapt its own internal norms to better interact with the outside world. While this might seem ‘normal’ to anyone familiar with SEZs, this constitutes another upheaval for the DPRK: per the epistemological framework of Marxists economic thinkers like Samir Amin, who provided a fascinating formalization of Juche using Western concepts (Amin 1985), this move is a stretch from traditional economic policies of the DPRK. To Amin, increased attention paid to international standards and practices, like in Rason, contradicts traditional economic cooperation patterns with excluded any consideration for capitalist rationality. Clearly, the DPRK’s law governing Rason is influenced by (foreign) capitalist rationality, and to put it more bluntly, Pyongyang is not trying to impose its own terms on external exchange, but rather increasingly transposes dominant global norms (Hastings 2016).

In cases where the adoption of international norms could be seen as too harmful for the North Korean economic system, DPRK lawmakers chose to remain cautious and stick to the golden rule of ‘subordination of external exchanges to internal political choices’. The issue of dispute settlement provides an interesting example: disputes can be settled either by local or central authorities, by mediation, or by arbitration in a third country court (Rason Law 2010, Articles 80, 81,82, and 83). These are technically possible in the DPRK but if, and only if, both parties agree on the settlement method of dispute, ultimately giving the North Korea the upper hand, since if ‘arbitration through DPRK institutions [becomes] the only option for an aggrieved party’, the chances of success are essentially zero (Zook 2012, 160; Haggard and Noland 2018).

**Rajin-Sonbong: Mixed Results**

Rajin-Sonbong has ideal geographical advantages, but the efforts to nurture a more business-friendly environment to attract investment have not been successful. As noted, in comparison to SEZs in Asia or elsewhere in the world, North Korea’s reform and opening policies are lukewarm, even though they sometimes directly contradict the dominant State-centric economic discourse of the DPRK. They are intentionally vague, limited in scope and thus do not constitute a reform of the DPRK traditional policies per se, although Pyongyang seems willing to go relatively far as long as it does not contradict any of its ‘core policies’: external exchanges need first and foremost to benefit to the DPRK, and not interfere with its centrally-decided policies. There are clearly bold aspects to the opening of Rajin-Sonbong to FDI, but the DPRK state chose to protect itself from potential negative economic and ideological spillovers. At the economic level, the DPRK can only win from this opening, but this attitude certainly limits the extent of the ‘success’ of these opening strategies, if quantitatively measured in investments.

Most assessments of the Rajin-Sonbong SEZ vary between failure and moderate success at best. If compared with other SEZs in Asia or China, there is indeed much room for improvement. If compared with other SEZs in the DPRK or trans-border economic integration programmes involving North Korea, Rason has made substantial breakthroughs. As often with the DPRK, investment and trade figures are scarce and not necessarily reliable, but since (legal) interaction with foreign actors in Rason is much more frequent and institutionalized than anywhere else in the country (with the notable exceptions of Kaesong and Pyongyang), statistics on economic activities in Rason are easier to gather. It does not, however, mean that the assessment of the Rason SEZ is simpler to do, first because the objectives of SEZs in the DPRK not always match from those of other economic zones elsewhere; second, because key objectives of SEZs in North Korea, like technology or knowledge transfers, can hardly be quantified and do not appear in statistics.

When Rason was established in 1991, the North Korean domestic economy was facing important challenges both internally and externally, namely the collapse of the Socialist bloc and the incremental change of attitude from Beijing. The DPRK had defaulted on its external debt and had almost no access to international finance, except via sporadic loans from the USSR or the PRC. Even at friendly prices, the DPRK has tremendous difficulties in importing goods from abroad as it was not able to produce internationally competitive goods for export.

Originally, when Rason was still part of the TRADP, the objectives were to use FDI in the zone to turn Rajin-Sonbong into a trade, manufacturing and tourism hub (UNDP 1998, 22-25), emphasizing of logistics-related activities and transit trade. But Rason was opened as a 621km² (746km² now) zone encompassing several industrial parks, in addition to port and transportation facilities (Cotton 1996, 2). Parts of Undok county and Wonjong village were incorporated into the zone in 1993, in preparation for the establishment of the visa-free zone. The inclusion of Wonjong into Rason allowed for advantageous direct access from China via Wonjong Bridge.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and progressive withdrawal of the UN Development Program from the broader Tumen project both played their parts in preventing the Rason SEZ from taking off. The outbreak of famine in the middle of the 1990s was also detrimental to the success of the SEZ. At the end of the 1990s, Rajin-Sonbong paradoxically enjoyed the most strategic locational advantage in the region but received only very limited investment compared with other parts of the Tumen River Area. Rason in the 1990s received only about a sixth of the investment of both Yanbian and Primorsky Krai (Tsuji 2004, 15). The discrepancy in investments can be attributed to the fact that the Tumen River Area already had necessary infrastructure (port facilities), and the environment was much more ‘business-friendly’ and profitable in China than in the DPRK. China had clearly shown its political willingness to host more foreign investment and was already considered a relatively safe and lucrative pick for investors. The Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture was a choice target for South Korean investors due to the complementarities of the Chinese and South Korean economy at the time and because of rising wages in the South Korea. And the wage gap between Chinese and North Korean workers was not large enough to lead investors to take additional risks and invest in North Korea.

In the 1990s, Rason made substantial progress, including a few projects that, with today’s historical perspective, can be considered breakthroughs. First, reliable connections with neighbouring countries were established, including a highly strategic direct maritime route from Rason to Busan in South Korea (in 1995) with a relatively high annual output that local authorities in Yanbian and South Korean companies are still actively trying to revive today (Jo and Ducruet 2007; Hunchun Shifan Ouwang 2015). In 1999, an additional route from Rajin to Niigata was opened. Levels of investment, in the 1990s, were below what was expected on the North Korean side, with only one fifth of Pyongyang’s initial target achieved in 1996 (Babson 2003). DPRK planners have a tradition of setting overly optimistic goals as a performance incentive. In fact, investment projects in the zone were much more dynamic in the 1990s than in the following decade.

In 1996, zone authorities reached out in an effort to advertise investment opportunities in the SEZ. During this campaign, Kim Jong-u, chairman of the DPRK’s Committee for the Promotion of External Economic Cooperation faced the difficult task of convincing foreign investors that the Rason was a safe investment choice in spite of its restrictions of only taking ‘what was good for the country [of North Korea]’ (Murphy 1996).[[116]](#footnote-116) Kim Jong-u was able to gather about 440 potential investors from 27 countries in Rason for the zone’s first investment forum in September 1996, with the help of the UNIDO (Cotton 1996, 3).[[117]](#footnote-117) The level of investment in Rason henceforth doubled (Tsuji 2004, 7), and the number of projects implemented in the zone grew from twenty-eight to 75. By 1997, the zone had accumulated projects worth an estimated 80 million dollars (UNDP 1998, 8). Interestingly, during the 1996 briefing, eight important investment contracts were inked worth a total value of $285 million, and more than $800 million in further investment was agreed upon (Tsuji 2004, 7). The overwhelming majority of investment projects were from Asia and more than half of the ventures established with Chinese companies. Russia pledged minor investments ($7 million) in the port of Rajin [designed to facilitate chemicals and alumina transit through the port (Kim 1999)], a little less than Japan. The bulk of investors were Chinese.

Chinese investments in Rason (as in anywhere in the DPRK, even during the busiest periods) were mostly small-scale projects, with limited investments and transfers of technology (Xinhua 2004). While China accounted for 56% of the projects implemented in Rason until 1998, the value of Chinese investments represented only one quarter of the total investment in the zone. The Yanji-based Hyuntong Group was the only Chinese company to make a substantial investment, specifically in port facilities, small-scale factories and Rajin’s market, which opened in 1998. Investments from Hong Kong, on the other hand, were far fewer in number – consisting of just 10% of all foreign-invested ventures in the zone – but were all massive projects. The best-known example, the Emperor Casino Hotel near Pipa-do, was sponsored by Hong Kong tycoon Albert Yeung.[[118]](#footnote-118) This $180 million project hinged on attracting northern Chinese clients (gambling being forbidden in mainland China) and Russians. It opened its doors to foreign tourists in 1999. Other Hong Kong investments include a joint-venture bank, known as Peregrine Daesong Bank, renamed Daedong Credit Bank after Peregrine collapsed in 1998 (Martin 2005).[[119]](#footnote-119)

Rason’s Hong Kong investors point to further interest in the zone from southeast Asia, having to do with technology. One major success of Rajin-Sonbong, in the early years, was the highly lucrative deal made with the Thailand-based Loxley Pacific Group, through the medium of Singaporean entrepreneur Richard Savage (Martin 2005). Loxley Pacific invested about $28 million in the zone telecommunications network, most likely benefiting from a special cut in enterprise taxes due to the relatively high-tech nature of the project which included, inter alia, an international link via Pyongyang and an optical fiber connection to Hunchun, China. While the anticipated Thai wave in the North Korean economy more broadly never materialized, this joint-venture seems to be still working, with plans to extend the optical fiber network to additional branch offices per DPRK sources (Naenara n.d. - b). Loxley Group secured a 30-year monopoly on all media and communication developments in the zone and group delegations seem to regularly visit Pyongyang (Cotton 1996, 3; KCNA 2015a). One of Rason’s early main objectives was to attract technology, as it allowed investments in the zone under extreme constraints regarding technology transfers, not only by screening investment projects based on their ‘technological status’,[[120]](#footnote-120) but also because investment project applications had to include the ‘details of industrial property rights, technological know-how to be contributed’ (UNDP 1998, 11). More recent legal norms of the DPRK, like the Regulations on the Implementation of the Law on Foreign-Owned Enterprises (not applying to Rason), go even further, stating that: ‘A wholly foreign-owned enterprise may be established in certain economic sectors only if it […] supplies high-technology or other up-to-date technology’ (quoted in Zook 2014, 162).

Given the fact that the DPRK can hardly be described as an investor’s paradise and was only beginning to experiment with more liberal politics, the early achievements of the zone are not negligible. On the other hand, Rason certainly never lived up to its potential, and never met its overenthusiastic objectives. The distribution of investment by sector was also disappointing: most important investments were made in the tourism sector or in port facilities. Attracting more foreign tourism was a way for Pyongyang to bring in more foreign currency, and to a lesser extent, provide training and more efficient management techniques to the domestic workforce.

Investment in port facilities and the establishment of new linkages also brought in more foreign currency which North Korea direly needed. In 1995, the pioneering group Yanbian Xiantong Jituan opened a direct line between Rajin and Busan in South Korea. But investments in the manufacturing sector, a long-time objective of Rason, remained extremely low. In 1998, only 5% of FDI targeted export-processing industries including a seafood-processing factory (UNDP 1998, 8). According to the head of the TRADP, this was a major disappointment: ‘We would have liked to have seen more contracts signed in the manufacturing sector’, he stated (Jo and Ducruet 2007, 11). The DPRK economy was unable to export its unreliable, low-quality, expensive domestically manufactured products and had thus to rely on imports. Attracting investment in the manufacturing sector might have resulted in technology, know-how and management technique transfers that could potentially have upgraded the whole DPRK production apparatus, if, of course, authorities could diffuse these elements to the rest of the economy (Cotton 1996: 4). Based on the Fleming-Hayuth model of transportation hubs (Felming and Hayuth 1994), Rason was unable to add centrality to intermediacy.[[121]](#footnote-121)

**Rason’s Winter**

The initial project of the TRADP was to increase economic integration in the region, and to create a new ‘golden triangle’, or three closely linked economic corridors, with Rason at its southern tip. In the early years of the project, Russia stayed in the background, due to the severe economic recession in the post-USSR context and generally cold ties with Pyongyang. In addition, Russia was reluctant to open its economically depressed Far East, and effectively closed the Nakhodka SEZ in 1992, fearing China’s expanding export capacity. Russia and the PRC inked an agreement for the renovation and lease of Zarubino port in 1992, but handling of small volumes of Chinese cargo started only in 2003 (Tsuji 2004, 9). China thus focused its infrastructure development strategy on the southern economic corridor, towards Rason. As part of the ‘Changjitu’ (short for the northeastern PRC cities of Changchung-Jilin-Tumen) development plan, China invested twice as much in its transportation linkages towards the DPRK than Russia (Lee and Kang 2005, 11).[[122]](#footnote-122)

Whereas Russian involvement in the project was limited to start with, Chinese enthusiasm was also short-lived. Political developments might have played their part: three years after Kim Il-sung passed away, Kim Jong-il officially took power in 1997. At that time, the new leader had only been once to China in his politically active years, and that had been fifteen years prior. Unlike his father, the Dear Leader did not speak any Chinese, and several times expressed his disappointment at China’s ideological and economic *volte-face.* In 1998, two years after the investment forum, the ‘free’ in ‘Rason Free Economic and Trade Zone’ was dropped (Vogel 2011, 85) and, as if to highlight the rhetorical reemphasis, the border market in Wonjong closed and was then later ‘replaced’ by one in Rajin (Tsuji 2004, 8). Investors were also repelled by what they interpreted as a lack of financial commitment from Pyongyang. Infrastructure in the zone was present, but most of it was old and requiring renovation, including basic elements like roads and power. The DPRK government acknowledged the problem by promising to contribute one million dollars in the zone’s infrastructure, a relative pittance when considering the total investment needed to create the ‘Singapore of Northeast Asia’.[[123]](#footnote-123) Accordingly, local authorities almost entirely rely on foreign investment to develop the zone. During a pre-1996 briefing tour of Japan, one official in a delegation seeking investment and led led by Kim Jong-u was explicit in stating that ‘foreign investors [would] pay for infrastructure development’.[[124]](#footnote-124)

South Korean involvement in the project was also quite limited, mostly over political concerns but also because the strategic importance of Rason for the ROK decreased after the opening of a Zarubino-Sokcho direct maritime route in 2000. Japanese interest in the zone was also quite limited, first because of tensed political ties, second because Chongryon Koreans benefit from friendlier policies in the whole country and not only in Rajin-Sonbong. Strongly supporting the view that Japanese investment in the zone was mostly driven by ideological/nationalist considerations, the Japanese-funded ventures lasted longer than other projects in the zone: in 1998, twenty of the 113 ventures active in the zone were Japanese (UNDP 1998, 9), by 2000, when business activity in Rajin-Sonbong had already seriously slowed, only 67 of them were still active, but none of the Japanese-supported projects had closed their doors.

As a result of limited interest from several regional neighbours, Rason was ‘trapped’ in an almost exclusive dialogue with China, but both sides had divergent interests in the development of Rason. The DPRK was looking first and foremost for foreign ‘advanced’ technologies or foreign currencies that could be used to alleviate shortages. Beijing had no interest in investing in the manufacturing sector of the zone and was interested in Rason’s port facilities. Already hard to conciliate with the DPRK unorthodox political economic thinking, infrastructure investment in Rason was even more unlikely during the Arduous March, with Beijing’s priority being maintaining its peripheral stability and the North Korean regime.

Just prior to the North Korean famine, in 1993, Rason opened itself up to further connections with China by declaring the first visa-free zone of the DPRK. Large areas of Wonjong village were added to the zone, allowing visitors from China to directly enter the DPRK in Rason. As of 2016, the Wonjong Bridge was still the only direct linkage between the Rason and China, since other roads leading to Rajin-Sonbong from China cross North Hamgyeong province, requiring visitors to apply for visas.[[125]](#footnote-125) The bridge remained in a very poor shape until it was renovated in 2010 (with Chinese capital), and later doubled by a new four lanes bridge, the total cost (approximately 20 million dollars or 140 million RMB) being once again shouldered by China (Yanbian Ribao 2014).

Beyond the Wonjong bridge is a 50-kilometre road leading to Rajin via Sonbong, fully renovated in 2011-2012 (KCNA 2012). As for the Rajin-Namyang railway, the RPC published a call for offers for the Wonjong-Rajin road, with more success this time (ECBRPC 2010). In the call, North Korean authors drew from economic statistics on the Chinese Northeast, arguing that at least in two sectors (coal and grain) the ‘export’ routes from Northeast to Southern China via Rason are more profitable than through Dalian. Even if the methodology and the results of the report were debatable, it reached its target.[[126]](#footnote-126) The Wonjong-Rajin road was finally renovated by China, although following a cheaper development plan, and, true to form, the tunnels and bridges mentioned in the call for investment were never built.

China, in the context of its Changjitu development plan and, later, the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, has striven to develop its infrastructure network to Hunchun to unlock its landlocked territories of Northeast China. Since it might have only limited returns to develop infrastructures on the Chinese side of the border without having reliable access to the ocean, the Rason authorities might be tempted to believe that China, at some point, will finally make sizable investments in the infrastructure of the zone. To some extent, this is understandable, especially since the Changjitu plan initially called for enhancing infrastructure (especially roads) in China proper first and then, during a second phase, in Rason (Lin and Hao 2012, 17). This optimistic scenario, however, might have been delayed by Beijing’s growing disappointment vis-à-vis the DPRK’s economic reform. Investing in zone infrastructure, even if it would certainly help the economy of Jilin province, would send the wrong signal to North Korean leaders.

**In Search of Reliable Partners**

China’s reluctance to taek up the full burden of Rason’s infrastructural development lag highlights the PRC’s own needs on their side of the border. Since 2003, with the ‘Northeast Old Industrial Bases Revitalization Plan’ and the Changjitu plan, central and provincial governments of China have been pushing for the construction of infrastructure towards the northeast with the intent of spurring economic growth. The railway that used to end in Tumen was extended to Hunchun in 1996 (Tsuji 2004, 9), and then to Kraskino on the Russian border between 1998 and 2003. The Jilin-Yanji and Yanji-Hunchun sections of the railway were upgraded into high-speed lines (going from Yanji to Hunchun by train takes approximately 40 minutes, and the 350km journey between Jilin and Yanji now takes less than two hours). In a more long-term perspective, the idea would be to link with Russian railroad networks and port facilities (Yanbian Ribao 2015b). Road infrastructure development has been even more spectacular in Jilin Province especially after the 2000s, although road development programmes most often do not include developing infrastructure in Rason (with the notable exception of the refurbishment of the Wonjong-Rajin road mentioned earlier).

Despite improved transport links to the urban centres to its west, the Yanbian prefecture has been especially challenged by regional economic difficulties (Colin 2003), in spite of South Korean investment and increased cooperation with Russia. In 2012, Yanbian decided to create an Economic Development Park of its own, located in Hunchun, in order to bolster potential synergies between China, Russia, South and North Korea. Officially established under the name of ‘China Tumen River Area (Hunchun) International Model Cooperation District’, this area only involves the DPRK, Russia and China, with Japan, South Korea and Mongolia playing only an indirect role in the project (Yanbian Ribao 2014; Sina News 2012). The basic idea is to reprise the ‘golden triangle’ idea, but with a local business-focused approach much less ambitious than the TRADP and entirely managed by China. The initial economic performance of the Hunchun ‘cooperation district’ seems relatively promising as an indicator (Yanbian Ribao 2015a).

As the case of Hunchun indicates, the Chinese attitude regarding the development of an integrated economic corridor linking the DPRK and Yanbian tends to be extremely self-centred. At the beginning of the TRADP project, Beijing had already tried to ‘free-ride’ international cooperation by insisting on creating river port facilities in Fangchuan (the closest Chinese city to the East Sea/Sea of Japan), which would have required constant dredging of the remaining fifteen kilometres of the Tumen river to be used by Chinese ships, but could have offered the PRC direct access to the sea, bypassing both the Russian Federation and the DPRK. Nowadays, the region’s development plans designed by the Chinese side do not revive this idea, but only offer a background role for Rason, based on a division of labour that enshrines the development gap between China and the DPRK, at least if seen from a standard North Korean perspective. The seafood industry is a blatant example of this Sino-centric division of labour, one based on the ‘foreign raw materials, local processing, international sales’ principle (Yanbian Ribao 2015a). Hunchun would entirely rely on resources from either the DPRK or Russia, process them, and eventually export them through Rason to either foreign (South Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia) or domestic markets, according to the principle ‘domestic business, foreign transport’. In this pattern, Rason’s role is limited to the supply of natural resources to the Chinese neighbour, and the local economy would not benefit from technology transfers or managerial know-how that were key early objectives of the Rason SEZ. This spatial division of labour ignores the special and peculiar characteristics of Rason: buying North Korean resources and using a DPRK port can legally be done anywhere in the country.

From a North Korean perspective, creating a processing centre in Rason using both DPRK labour and Chinese capital and technology would have been much more in line with Rason policy objectives. Such a Kaesong-like project was recommended by scholars in Jilin like Lin Jinshu and Hao Fanglong, for whom the basic idea of the *Changjitu* plan was to benefit from economic complementarities between both countries so that both sides could climb up the industrial ladder and create more value-added goods (Lin and Hao 2012).

Russia presents a slightly different case for the North Koreans. On a local level, especially since the refurbishment of the Khasan-Rajin railway, Russian companies are timidly starting to take advantage of local facilities. However, in the medium term, Russia could turn out to be not much of a partner but rather a rival to Rason. Chinese involvement in the Russian Far East and more especially in the ports or Posyet and Zarubino could put Rason in a very difficult position: even if the ports of the North Korean special city enjoy a better location than the Russian harbors of Primorsky Krai, the attitude of DPRK central and local authorities might push Chinese actors to by-pass Rason. But in 2014, Moscow cancelled 90% of the DPRK’s $11 billion-dollar debt as a goodwill gesture, and started to intensify diplomatic, political and business contacts with the DPRK, in part due to the personal interest of the former Minister for the Development of the Russia Far East, Alexander Galushka (Toloraya 2014).[[127]](#footnote-127) Russia has expressed interest in sealing deals with the DPRK in various sectors including tourism, energy or railroads. Given the current state of the DPRK infrastructure, Russian interest in transport and energy sectors seems of special importance. In 2015, an agreement on cooperation in the field of electric power was inked (KCNA 2015b). Officials from both sides declared to be working a 20-years project to refurbish half of the railroad network of the DPRK (the Jaedong-Kangdong-Nampo railway, running through Pyongyang), with a total investment adding up to $25 billion dollars. These announcements, however, must be considered with extreme caution, given the history of failed projects in these sectors in the zone. Given the strategic location of the DPRK, Moscow and Beijing understandably hope to reach out to South Korean markets through trans-peninsular transportation corridor: China also has signed several agreements with the DPRK (including one dealing with a Sinuiju-Pyongyang-Kaesong high-speed railway), with similar success (NK Briefs 2013).

South Korean interest in cooperating with both China and Russia in the region around Rason has not facilitated direct South Korean participation in the Rason ETZ. This is mostly because of the tense ties between both countries, and the ‘May 24th Measures’ taken by the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration of South Korea, which basically prevent all economic activity between the DPRK and the ROK. The Rason Law explicitly explains that ‘Koreans residing outside the territory of the DPRK are welcome to invest’, implying that the zone could benefit from the strong trade ties between Yanbian and South Korea. There are nearly four hundred South Korean companies operating in Yanbian, and eight cities of the prefecture have established formal links with cities in South Korea (‘sister cities’) (Yanbian Ribao 2015c). In addition, South Korean companies, with the agreement of both Chinese and ROK governments want to build a South Korean Economic Park in the Korean prefecture. (Yonhap 2015b). A few examples of these kinds of cooperation already exist on the border, and creating an actual economic park would allow a better monitoring and a more efficient trilateral economic integration. [[128]](#footnote-128)

**Conclusion: Is Rason’s Winter Over?**

On 6 January and 8 September 2016, the DPRK detonated what it claimed to be hydrogen bombs. These nuclear tests were followed by new unilateral and multilateral sanctions, which are, according to their tenets at least, aimed at preventing the DPRK from becoming a full-fledged nuclear power. Further weapons tests and sanctions followed in 2017. While sanctions present an array of potential effects regarding international and security relations of Northeast Asia, it seems clear that they will take their toll on the development of Rason. The potential for trilateral cooperation between Russia, South Korea and the DPRK, had been made nearly impossible by Seoul’s decision of stopping economic cooperation project with the North, a position that Moscow seems to regret (Yonhap 2016a; Yonhap 2016b). Following the spectacular developments in North-South Dialogue under the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul in 2018 and 2019, authorities in Rason most likely have hopes to restart bi- or trilateral economic cooperation between both Koreas and China or Russia. Remotely located North Hamgyong province and Rason have however less symbolic value than other SEZs in North Korea such as Kaesong or Mt. Kumgang, which neighbour the DMZ. Even if Moon and Kim are able to restart ambitious bilateral economic cooperation programmes despite economic sanctions and American pressure, it seems quite likely that the Rajin-Sonbong SEZ does not constitute a priority for North-South cooperation and that authorities in Rason will have to keeping struggling with Chinese or Russian partners.

Relative to the rest of North Korea, the Rason SEZ has deep foundations for engagement with global firms, and the legal framework with which to handle Foreign Direct Investment. This chapter has surveyed the development both in the zone in terms of investment and the evolution of the Rason Law alongside these changes. But the contradictions in Rason’s development are themselves salutary, and indicative of the cycles of interest and neglect of the zone. Infrastructure is needed to attract investment, but North Korea wants foreign firms to provide the infrastructure. Rason’s location creates dreams of regional connectivity and even centrality, but sanctions keep North Korea’s economy well outside of the global mainstream. Russia oscillates between essential development partner and regional competitor. And North Korea and China have never quite found a balance point between allowing China access to Rason ports and the fears that given too much leeway, North Korea’s northeastern provinces and SEZs could be effectively absorbed into China’s economic plans and create anxieties like so many other trade-leveraged partners along the PRC’s ‘Belt and Road’ projects. The advantages will remain in place, from affordable skilled labour to the potential for raw materials export from seafood to local timber. But the goal of the North Korean government for Rason to become a high-tech innovation hub seems destined at the moment to be less the victim of long-term malaise and mismanagement than the blade of international sanctions, the edge of which remains quite sharp.

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**12 Tumen Triangle Tribulations**

The Unfulfilled Promise of Chinese, Russian, and North Korean Cooperation

*Andray Abrahamian*

**Abstract**

The Tumen Triangle sub-region is a place where attempts at localized cooperation have been consistently overwhelmed by the political and strategic concerns of distant capital cities. Consequently, the Tumen River area has failed to integrate in a way that would produce mutually reinforcing economic benefits to both residents of the region and their governments. Using interview data, this chapter gives an overview of the current geopolitical and economic relations among China, Russia, and North Korea before turning to on-the-ground interactions in the Tumen region. Particular attention is paid to how the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and Primorsky Krai approach Rason Special City, the centre of the Rason Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

**Keywords:** Greater Tumen Initiative, Special Economic Zone, Korea-Russian relations, China-North Korea relations, Rason, Hunchun

**Introduction**

Both the long-term and recent histories of the Tumen Triangle sub region – the area where Russia, China and North Korea meet – are the stories of regional aspirations being overwhelmed by the political and strategic concerns of distant capital cities. The contemporary post-Cold War aspirations for the region are rooted in the Tumen River Area Development Project (TRADP), an attempt to facilitate increased economic collaboration among China, the two Koreas, Russia, Mongolia and Japan. Despite a Cold War history of cross-regional conflict, scholars and policymakers developed TRADP in the early 1990s in an attempt to foster greater cooperation (Aldrich, 1997, 305-306). Ultimately, the results have been underwhelming. Christopher Hughes cites the counteractive dual processes of regionalizationand regionalismas the primary reason for the failure of TRADP and its successor, the Greater Tumen Initiative. Increases in regionalization through organically formed ties have been counteracted by the persistent lack of regionalism rooted in political mistrust. Regionalizationis the creation of organic economic ties among geographically close states, while regionalism is the ‘conscious attempt by nation state … or local government actors, as well as … non-state actors, to foster the principles and projects of regional integration’ (Hughes 2000, 5-6). A lack of regionalist thinking in the stakeholding political capitals has caused the Tumen River delta to fail to develop and integrate in a way that would produce mutually reinforcing economic benefits to both residents of the region and their governments.

A cynic might point out that these are regions where the three countries used to send internal troublemakers to be as far as possible from their political heartlands: a nexus of exile. A more positive onlooker might argue that in the 21st century, energy, access and infrastructure can transform erstwhile backwaters into economically important regions. Nonetheless, despite significant developments in some of these areas, the Tumen Triangle’s promise goes unfulfilled, with eager local residents in large part frustrated by the restraints their governments place upon them.

In order to understand the region, we will first give an overview of the current geopolitical and economic relations among China, Russia and North Korea before focusing on the interactions on the ground in the Tumen region, with particular attention to how the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and Primorsky Krai interact with and affect Rason Special City, the centre of the Rason Special Economic Zone (SEZ).

**A Troublesome Trilateral: Big-Picture Politics**

Closer Russia-DPRK relations over the past several years culminated in the North Korean government designating 2015 a ‘year of friendship’ with Moscow. Both governments have found solidarity in what they perceive as unfair treatment by Western countries (Toloraya 2014). Concurrently, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his economy minister, Alexey Ulyukaev, have made clear their intention to ‘Look East’ and rebalance economically and politically toward Asian nations (Mankoff 2015). Despite these friendly relations, Kim Jong-un reneged on his apparent promise to attend the Victory Day celebrations held in Moscow that commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Though other factors no doubt contributed to the decision, his absence suggested that much still separates the two countries. A source of frustration on both sides stems from a lack of progress in their economic relations. Russia forgave 90 per cent of North Korea’s $11 billion Soviet-era debt, and the remainder is slated for reinvestment projects.

Still, grand proposals remain unrealized: Russia’s longstanding dream of a gas pipeline linking Siberia to South Korea continues to go nowhere. In 2014, plans emerged for a comprehensive reconstruction of North Korea’s decrepit railway system, to be paid for in large part by rather complex mining concessions for Moscow (Kim 2014). However, it is unclear how far this project progressed. An article titled ‘DPRK-Russia Economic Ties Make Significant Headway’ in the DPRK’s *Foreign Trade* magazine could point to the formation of a DPRK-Russia Business Society as the only concrete outcome of this ‘headway’ (Foreign Trade 2015). However, one of Rason’s most important companies, the Taehung Corporation, was present at the meeting. Given that Taehung’s seafood operations have since been targeted by sanctions, its participation in DPRK-Russian business groups is not in itself more than indicative of connectivity rather than hard progress on the infrastructure projects.[[129]](#footnote-129) Complex projects such as those apparently on the table between Russia and North Korea face challenges anywhere, though the sense of frustration is compounded on the Korean side both in Rason and at large because hoped-for organically formed ties between smaller North Korean and Russian corporations have also failed to appear.

Sino-Russian relations have warmed considerably in the past few years, though they still face a lengthy legacy of mistrust. Diplomatic and economic cooperation are best symbolized by a $400 billion gas pipeline agreement and the presence in Moscow of China President Xi Jinping for May 2015’s 70th VE day Anniversary. Xi was seated next to Putin and was the only major world leader to attend (Courtney et al. 2015). Beijing returned the favor to Putin at its own parade on September 3. High-level dialogue between the two countries has continued, with China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Xi, proclaiming ties to be at ‘the best level in history’ in April 2018 (Xinhua 2018a). China even sent a supporting contingent to the ‘Vostok-2018’ military exercises, Russia’s largest since the Cold War. However, competition over influence in the Central Asian region complicates the Sino-Russian relationship, as does Moscow’s continuing suspicion of Beijing’s influence in the Far East.

The conceptual background of contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation is driven by one key idea: a mutual rejection of unilateral American power (Gabuev 2015, 4-5). Practically speaking, however, Russia has been nudged toward China by the sanctions that resulted from the Ukrainian crisis. Ultimately, China’s economy – four times that of Russia’s – calls attention to the fact that this might be a growing partnership, but it is not an equal one (Courtney et al. 2015). Despite a degree of asymmetry caused by Russia’s relative lack of options, ‘three strategic shifts in cooperation’ focused on ‘energy, finance, and infrastructure and technology’ between Russia and China have become apparent (Gabuev 2015).

The $400 billion energy agreement between Russian oil company Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation is the most significant expression of this, with 38 billion cubic metres of gas to be pumped through the Sila Sibiri – the Power of Siberia – pipeline annually starting in 2019. Groundbreaking took place in September 2014 after tortuous ten-year-long negotiations were concluded. (It is said that the conclusion came about in part because Russia’s descent into recession weakened its negotiating position.) Negotiations for a second pipeline in the region are also moving slowly, amid a global slump in oil prices.

If one can speak of imbalance in Sino-Russian relations, Sino-DPRK relations are another level of asymmetry. Of late, North Korea has become extremely wary of its own dependency and optimistically has sought to balance its erstwhile Cold War allies against each other as it did during the Soviet era. Beijing, for its part, has been frustrated by Pyongyang’s nuclear programme. So, while the two countries remain formal allies (China and the DPRK reinstated the 1961 Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 2001, renewing the Chinese promise to provide military assistance to North Korea until 2021), relations have been tense for several years (Volodzko 2015). Beijing has consistently refused to implement sanctions to the extent that they would completely strangle its ally but did begin punitive measures following Pyongyang’s 2013 nuclear test and ramped up enforcement in 2017, at least on exports of coal and seafood. The 2013 execution of Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong Un’s uncle-in-law and a vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, created a huge strain, as described in the following chapter in this volume. Foreign diplomats in Beijing spoke of Xi Jinping’s personal animosity toward Kim Jong Un, at least until the two leaders met thrice in 2018. The tensions of the past several years between Beijing and Pyongyang inspired North Korea’s attempted shift towards Russia (Eberstadt and Coblin 2014, 2).

In reality, North Korean emancipation from the Chinese economy is all but impossible in the near future. More than 90 per cent of the DPRK’s foreign trade is with China; prior to its 2016 shuttering, trade via Kaesong at the inter-Korean industrial park provided balance (IFES 2015). An unrecorded but massive amount of subsidized and non-subsidized food and energy products are also imported from China.

**The Tumen Triangle: Local Aspirations, Central Suspicions**

Looking at the overarching political-economic relations, China, North Korea and Russia appear to have a high degree of alignment. However, zooming in on the Tumen Triangle subregion, more careful observation finds that local aspirations for greater connectedness, investment flows and integration are stymied by the political and strategic concerns that emanate from Beijing, Pyongyang and Moscow. These concerns are not aligned with creating the conditions necessary for economic integration. Essentially, development loses out to suspicion and high politics.[[130]](#footnote-130)

It should be noted that these are not evenly sized regions: within Jilin Province is Yanbian, the autonomous Korean prefecture, and a sizeable ethnic enclave; Primorsky Krai of the Russian Far East is a huge province; and Rason is merely an amalgamation of two small cities and their hinterlands. Indeed, other North Korean towns outside of Rason sit along the Tumen River – they also must have on-the-ground traders and officials with cross-border aspirations. Rason is important because of the access offered, strategic value it holds and longtime promise that it has held for 20 years. Similarly, Primorsky Krai, a large and diverse territory, was chosen so as to include not merely the sparsely populated border regions, but also the population centre of Vladivostok. Both as a potential economic territory and conceptual space, the triangle of Yanbian-Rason-Vladivostok is a cogent one.

**Primorsky Krai’s Connections to Yanbian and Rason**

From Moscow, this has taken the form of two policies: the first was the willingness to endure economic contraction due to the fallout over the Ukraine crisis in order to pursue what it considers a core strategic interest in Crimea; the second is long-running hostility toward Chinese economic influence in the Russian Far East.

The province of Primorsky Krai is the most populous in the Russian Far East region. It is worth recalling that its capital, Vladivostok, was a city closed to all foreigners throughout the Cold War, as it was home to the USSR’s Pacific Fleet. The economy is fairly diverse, with significant fish processing, defense, construction and agricultural sectors, but it has underperformed the rest of Russia in the post-Cold War era. The region, far from political oversight in Moscow, suffered ‘wholesale pillaging’ of resources by organized crime following the collapse of the USSR (Satter 2002). It remains exceptionally corrupt even by Russian standards, at one point described as ‘the most criminalized enclave in the whole country’ (Strangio 2011).

The 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit was supposed to rebrand Vladivostok as open for business, Russia’s Pacific gateway. Instead, its enduring legacy was the world’s longest cable-stayed bridge, linking the city to an island with virtually no economic value.[[131]](#footnote-131) The annual Eastern Economic Forum, started in 2015, is supposed to highlight investment opportunities in the Russian Far East. Xi Jinping attended for the first time in 2018 (Xinhua 2018b).

As for the recent recession in Russia, this has had a direct impact on both Yanbian and Rason. Hunchun (the easternmost town in Yanbian) has by far the most Russian atmosphere in Yanbian: Korean cultural and linguistic influence is far less prevalent than in most of the region. Russian signage is common, and many shops and restaurants employ Russian speakers. It is estimated by residents that before the Ukraine crisis, something like 1,000 Russian visitors a day would cross the border during the peak season, mostly to shop for consumer goods. This year the figure was estimated by local residents to be around 200.

The Ukraine crisis has brought Pyongyang and Moscow closer together politically, but the impact on Rason of the ensuing Russian recession is keenly felt and frankly expressed: ‘The Russians have no money’, one DPRK official stationed in China bluntly noted.[[132]](#footnote-132) Moscow’s willingness to endure economic pain over Ukraine has had a direct impact on Pyongyang and Rason’s ability to attract Russian investment. The sanctions placed on Russia in 2014 have led to a reduction in foreign investment generally in the Russian Far East, including Sakhalin, leading to a knock-on effect of Russian firms’ ability to operate with sufficient resources in Rason (Izotov 2018). Quite apart from sanctions and high politics, the situation is compounded by what seems to be a difference in investing cultures between China and Russia. Smaller Chinese investors seem much more willing to ‘have a go’ or ‘roll the dice’ and see what happens. Russians are more conservative and tend to want a clearer path to a return on investment.

The single major cooperative project, the refurbishment of Pier 3 in Rajin Port and a rail line linking the pier to the Russian town of Khasan, was completed in September 2013 (Shatalova 2013). This was overseen by RasonKonTrans, the joint venture between Russian Railways and the DPRK Railways Ministry that continues to operate the pier and the rail line. Plans to ship Russian coal down to South Korea have appeared to have only resulted in two pilot runs of coal through the port down to Pohang (Yonhap 2014). Anecdotal reports suggest that ships berthed at the Russian pier two or three times a month, at least prior to sanctions. Indeed, since June 2014, regular deliveries of Russian coal to southern China have taken place through Rason. By the end of 2015, these shipments could add up to 1.4 million tons per year, according to Russians with knowledge of the project. This was still far short of the estimated 4 million tons needed to become profitable.[[133]](#footnote-133)

Container traffic, not just coal, was always the Russian idea behind the port renovation. Container shipping between South Korea and Primorsky Krai’s southwest would allow for two-way traffic through Rason and a much quicker return on investment. To promote such traffic, Russian Railways has tried to woo South Korean investors into purchasing a stake in the joint venture, but nothing appears to have come of that effort (Chosun Ilbo 2014). A South Korean delegation comprising steelmaker POSCO, Hyundai Merchant Marine Company and Korail Corporation and the South Korean government observed the pilot run in November and December 2014.

Seoul’s political environment may have prevented further engagement, as well as skepticism about the economic viability of the project. Under the May 24th sanctions Seoul imposed in 2010, no north-bound investment has been possible. As of mid-2018, however, the political context is in flux and a breakthrough on the nuclear issue might result in renewed interest in Rason by South Korean companies. Meanwhile, the same consortium of POSCO and Hyundai Merchant Marine completed the first stage of a 1.5 million square-metre distribution centre in the city of Hunchun in 2013 in cooperation with the Jilin provincial government and Hunchun city government. A POSCO press release stated that they ‘expect great synergy once the Najin-Khasan project gets on track’ (Oh 2013).[[134]](#footnote-134)

Indeed, the logistics park is very much focused on linking the Chinese Northeast to other markets through Rason. In private conversations, company managers have stated that this is a very long-term play whose fruits may not be seen for some time. That said, despite perhaps slower development than expected of Hunchun-Rason linkages, there is enough logistics demand in the region that the first phase of the park began regular operations in March 2015. Expansion is planned when trade volume justifies it.

Hunchun itself has been some form of economic cooperation zone since 1992, but it was expanded and rebranded an ‘international cooperative demonstration zone’ in 2012 (China Daily 2012). Hunchun’s ties to Primorsky Krai are limited less by short-term geopolitical concerns than by Moscow’s circumspection regarding a China-dominated Far East. This is not a new phenomenon: it has in some form or another existed ever since the Russian Empire’s consolidation of power in the region in the 19th century. The difference between the political centre and the on-the-ground actors in the Far East, however, can be huge. One author describes an internal conflict over China policy, largely between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is widely suspicious of Chinese influence, and pro-China business interests (Kuhrt 2013).

The depopulation of the economically backward Far East exacerbates such tensions. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev once described the demographic situation in the region as ‘the most alarming, most dangerous tendency we have to deal with’ (Kuhrt 2013, 84-85). A cautious Russian observer might well point out that the northeast Chinese provinces and Russian Far Eastern territories that border each other have about 100 million and 4.3 million people, respectively; hardly balanced. Moscow fears being unable to compete with an influx of Chinese capital, labour and products, and this anxiety has contributed to the lack of integrative projects since the beginning of the TRADP and beyond.

An important exception to this way of thinking is represented by the recent proposal for a $400 billion Sila Sibiri pipeline, the project involves no components that could lead to greater Chinese immigration or transnational economic integration between the regions; it was thus a relatively safe choice for Moscow, politically.

Similarly, and back in the Tumen region, plans exist for transshipment via Hunchun, through the Russian port of Zarubino located in Troitsa Bay. This would greatly facilitate the PRC’s goals of better access to sealanes. Zarubino is only 18 kilometres from China, and development of the port is a joint project of Summa Group, Russia’s largest transport and logistics company, and Jilin Province. A total investment of $3 billion was earmarked, with the plans to open in 2018 (PortNews 2014). By 2017, however, this project appeared to be on shaky ground, with Russian Deputy Minister of Transport calling its prospects ‘cloudy’ (Gerden 2017).

From Russia’s perspective, this new linkage to Chinese trade ought to be seen as a fairly politically innocuous project: other than a handful of Russian staff in Hunchun and Chinese staff at the port, like the Siri Sibila pipepline, it would not involve large-scale social or economic interaction with China. It could, however, create a direct rival to Rajin Port, and one wonders if the North Koreans are planning for how to compete. Projects that do increase Chinese access and competitiveness, such as the announced high-speed rail project, are unlikely to see the light of day (Gertcyk 2015). Regulatory blockages mean that no officially approved direct buses from Hunchun to Vladivostok yet exist; a traveler has to purchase a ticket to Slavyanka then hand the driver extra cash to continue to Vladivostok. One doesn’t get any kind of ticket for this part of the journey. On the other hand, Hunchun and Rason have a near-daily direct bus connection, meanwhile, as do Yanji (Yanbian’s capital) and Rason.

There are plans for multiple casinos to vitalize the Vladivostok economy, with Macao gambling tycoon Lawrence Ho helping start the only one in operation as of 2018 – the Tigre de Cristal. Perhaps typically of investments in the region, though, delays and paperwork caused problems in the leadup to the scheduled October 2015 grand opening (World Casino News 2015). Further infrastructure and amenities to create an entertainment hub have yet to be realized.

**Yanbian’s Economy and Its Rason Linkages**

The Changjitu (Changchun, Jilin city, Tumen) development plan has transformed eastern Jilin Province’s infrastructure through an extensive, Beijing-mandated series of developments. The Changjitu economic zone includes the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, and its most recently completed project is a high-speed rail link that now extends to Hunchun, the Yanbian town that borders both Primorsky Krai and Rason. Tumen, another border town in between Yanji and Hunchun which has had traffic lights for only about the past dozen years, now has a high-speed railway station. For part of the journey, the high-speed rail tracks are within a couple of hundred metres of the North Korean border. They do not run up to the North Korean border in Tumen, but this is in keeping with other stations including Yanji and Hunchun where the high-speed stations are placed on an edge of the cities with plans to then fill in new suburbs and apartments between the stations and the city centres.

Central development of Yanbian was given another push when President Xi Jinping made his first visit to the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in July 2015, putting a focus on the ethnic Korean population. Due to outward immigration to South Korea, the Korean population in the prefecture has dropped from 1.83 million in 2010 to just 1.6 million in 2015 as working-age residents leave to find employment elsewhere (Yonbyon News 2015). The decline is crucial for Yanbian: the ethnic Korean population comprises 36 per cent of the overall population, just six per centage points higher than the 30 per cent required to maintain its status as an autonomous prefecture. Although Xi Jinping did not provide real incentives for Koreans to stay, his activities and rhetoric were designed to demonstrate the importance of the region to national agricultural and industrial development plans.[[135]](#footnote-135)

Yanji, the prefecture’s capital and biggest city, was at least for a time in the 1990s one of China’s richest cities, as South Korean investment and remittances from ethnic Koreans working abroad poured in (Chen 2001, 54-55). Its links to South Korea still underpin the local economy, with some estimating that remittances from Chinese Koreans working there exceed the prefecture’s annual revenue (Han 2013, 75). Anecdotally, many ethnic Koreans there speak of a smaller per centage of people moving to South Korea as China has become wealthier and South Korean prejudices against Chinese-Koreans grow.

Hunchun, Yanbian’s easternmost city, has long been a remote arm and secondary to the prefectural administrative centre of Yanji, but of late has experienced strong growth, despite the drop-off in Russian shoppers and sanctions on exports from North Korea. As well as the South Korean logistics centre, the seafood industry holds an important place in the International Development Zone, taking seafood from Russian and North Korean ports and processing it for sale around China before re-exporting it to other markets. Prior to sanctions on the North Korean raw materials, two-thirds of the 300,000 tons of seafood came from Russia, with the remaining one-third coming from the DPRK (Yanbian Government Website 2015a). Distributors and retailers in Hunchun emphasize the high quality of North Korean seafood but in spring 2018 were experiencing disruption in their supply chain, due to sanctions.

For several years, there were persistent rumours of plans to import power into Rason from a thermal power station in Hunchun, to be sold at Jilin Province rates. The level of detail with which this rumour was discussed on both sides of the border in 2011 and 2012 – stages of development, amount of electricity, cost per kilowatt-hour – suggested a high degree of credibility. Such a project would truly solve the last major piece of Rason’s infrastructural puzzle, but it was apparently put on hold after the 2013 nuclear test and ouster of Jang Song-taek. Interlocutors in Yanbian no longer speculate on this plan, and Chinese academics suggest it will require a breakthrough on the nuclear issue for it to be revived. The most recent major point of cooperation on infrastructure has been the Quanhe-Wonjong border-crossing bridge. In 2017, a Chinese construction firm completed the four-lane bridge to replace the old two-lane bridge.

Hunchun’s role as a trilateral trade and logistics hub has, to a degree, risen along with Rason’s inability to attract larger investments. As of 2015, there were 129 foreign firms with operations in the Rason SEZ, but still almost no major companies with a presence. (The exception to what might be called a ‘major’ company in this case might be Jilin Tobacco.) If, over time, relations with Beijing improve, especially following a breakthrough on the nuclear issue, one can imagine infrastructural projects such as electricity supply being resurrected, making the investment environment significantly more attractive to Chinese and other investors. Indeed, having Chinese control over such a commanding height of the economy might be exactly what larger companies are waiting to see, along with, of course, a reliable supply of electricity.

Some Chinese businesses are finding ways to utilize North Korean labour without having to deal with infrastructural problems or political risk. A ‘China-Tumen-North Korea Industrial Park’ sits on the outskirts of the town of Tumen, employing 1600 North Korean labourers to work on textiles. This mirrors a trend in Dandong, whereby DPRK workers are sent to factories just across the border. There has been some flux in hiring following December 2017, when UN Security Council Resolution 2397 banned the export of DPRK labourers. Still, it is clear the practice hasn’t been stopped completely (Wong 2018). In the long run, this may harm North Korea’s attempts to attract Chinese investors into factories across the river: why invest there, when the workers can come to you?

These companies would have been pleased at the choice to base in Tumen over the winter months of 2014-2015. The biggest instability seen in commercial relations in 2014 along this section of the border was not related to infrastructure but to policy, namely the DPRK’s decision in late October 2014 to implement a 21-day quarantine for any person entering the country. The quarantine was ostensibly to limit the spread of Ebola, a disease without any cases in all of Asia at the time and lasted until March. What it did limit, however, was economic activity, with both immediate and long-term effects. However, in Rason they spoke of the Ebola quarantine being an issue that lasted ‘three months’, compared with the four-plus months that most businesspeople had endured elsewhere in the DPRK by the time the policy was quietly lifted in early March 2015. These assertions are corroborated by conversations Choson Exchange staff had with Yanji businesspeople in November 2014 that indicated crossings were still happening throughout that month. It would also imply a degree of local resistance to implementation was possible for a time, though not for long: by the end of November, the Wonjong-Quanhe border to Rason was subject to the same restrictions as other points of entry to the DPRK.

Yanji-based businesspeople who work in Rason described a degree of ‘negativity’ emerging even before the Ebola policy was imposed, meaning that it is possible to see the quarantine policy as occurring within a tightening trend, rather than emerging purely out of public health concerns. The border and associated immigration and registration procedures had been made more onerous over the summer of 2014, while the unofficial payments to carry out normal tasks became higher, adding to the transaction costs of doing business in Rason. Indeed, the issue of rent-seeking has yet to be comprehensively tackled in Rason. As one businessperson put it, the difficulty lies in making the right amount of money: earning too little creates suspicion, while earning too much profit invites too much attention and too many ‘partners’ trying to claim a share of it. Not only did permissions become generally more difficult to obtain, but fundamental business inputs were scarcer in the months before the Ebola ban. There were, for example, restrictions placed on the sale of fuel to foreign-registered vehicles, and less electricity was provided to foreign-invested companies. Finally, Rason officials are looking to agglomerate foreign businesses as new business licenses have become harder to get. Creating conglomerates is often an unappealing solution, however, as it can create awkward pairings of industries, expertise and individuals.

These general frustrations from 2014 were then aggravated by the Ebola quarantine, which ground many businesses to a near halt over the winter. Some Chinese businesses that could not bridge cash-flow shortfalls and did not have too much fixed capital on the ground appear to have simply decided against returning to the DPRK, essentially giving up on Rason. ‘The whole country just forms a barrier that stops us connecting to South Korea’, one Chinese-Korean businessman complained over coffee. ‘We should be one belt of trade and wealth’.

Despite complaints from actual and potential investors in the zone, there can be little doubt that Rason remains ‘the most capitalist place in the country’, as one Pyongyang official describing Rason quipped to us in conversation. Rason has, after all, been some form of special zone since 1991. Notably, some of the autonomy won with reforms in 2010 and 2011 remains, mostly regarding locally issued travel permits and business licenses. It even has banks that can deal with foreign currency, something that Rason officials claim annoys Pyongyang’s Foreign Trade Bank. (Rason has eight banks altogether – an incredible amount for North Korea.) These rules, combined with the port, give Rason an advantage over any other northeastern region of North Korea.

However, while the SEZ possesses several important tools that can allow for independence in action, it does seem as if more decision-making is again being deferred to the capital. Any major business concession ‘should be’ confirmed with Ministry of External Economic Affairs staff in Pyongyang before it goes forward.[[136]](#footnote-136) Other requests related to projects involving foreigners appear to be more frequently directed to Pyongyang for permission. Previously the messaging from Rason officials was decisively the opposite: ‘don’t involve Pyongyang; we’ll organize things on our own’.

The move toward a reassertion of central control in 2014 was likely connected to personnel reshufflings that took place after Jang Song-thaek’s ouster and to the bureaucratic reorganizations that took place in various organs of economic governance. There is a risk of overstating the former, however. Hwang Chol Nam, the charming, English-speaking former vice mayor of Rason, was no longer involved in the SEZ, having been very much in the public eye for high-profile cruise trials and the first trade fairs. Yet further down the chain of command, most of the staff in Rason’s Economic Cooperation Bureau in the aftermath of the purge were comprised of much the same group as in previous years, namely, they made it through the Jang Song-taek affair unscathed. Indeed, the bureau still cooperates with officials from Jilin province on a joint Rason management committee.

**Rason, Still Part of the DPRK**

While the picture of a North Korean power elite decimated by autocracy has its attractions for journalists, in fact the SEZs have probably been impacted more significantly by changes in bureaucratic structures. In 2014, both the Joint Venture and Investment Commission and the State Economic Development Council – at some point both involved in managing SEZs – were absorbed by the Ministry of Foreign Trade, which was renamed the Ministry of External Economy. Rason, notably, was also brought under the governance of the new ministry, along with most of the other SEZs created in 2013 and 2014, rather than being allowed to stand as a separate entity. This change is almost certainly behind the relatively less flexible environment in Rason today.

If this more negative and inflexible environment has hurt morale on the Chinese side of the border, one gets the impression that this has taken at least as great a toll among the Rason business community and local bureaucrats. One foreign visitor to the 2015 Rason International Trade Exhibition described the event thus: ‘It didn’t seem as if anyone was really chasing investments. They were happy to collect the booth fee and let businesses come in and sell cheap products for a few days’. The trade fair still has elements of a bazaar-type atmosphere, with vendors hawking consumer goods, alongside industrial textiles, electronic components and heavy equipment.

As of 2018 the fair has moved into a more modern facility, though it still lacks the buzz of the first event, where local and Chinese companies alike were seeking much more significant manufacturing and trade deals. It is now across from the new Rajin market, which, already one of the biggest in the country, has been expanded. (It also has a modern-looking, multistorey distribution centre.) The increased difficulty in doing business in 2014-2015 in Rason seemed to reflect a broadly more challenging environment in North Korea, Ebola aside. Diplomats living in Pyongyang then claimed that generally, permissions for things were less readily granted. American organizations (or organizations with US citizens) reported finding visas harder to obtain.

Resident nongovernmental organizations faced greater scrutiny and less cooperation, most dramatically expressed in the expulsion of key staff for *Welthungerhilfe* (German Agro Action) from the DPRK in the spring of 2015 (Pearson 2015). Impressions of the business environment worsened further when one of the more successful and visible Western-DPRK joint ventures dissolved its partnership in an electronics-making company, Hana Electronics (O’Carroll 2015). Perhaps most important from a negative-PR perspective, Global Telecom (formerly Orascom Telecom) appeared to be unable to remit profits from its joint venture with the state-owned Korea Post and Telecommunications Corporation, Koryolink, which runs the country’s main mobile network (Williams 2015). Infrastructural issues remained pressing; businesses faced difficulty as electricity supply encountered reliability issues in 2015, with reports of increased idle time at factories around Pyongyang. Embassies also reported having to use generators for nearly all their electricity needs in the winter and spring of 2015.

Both in terms of increased sanctions and strained relations with Beijing, the DPRK’s commitment to its nuclear and missile programme has affected the whole economy. Rason has not escaped the impact of this commitment. Behind-the-scenes battles over the direction of economic policy and control over key industries and locations are no doubt also influencing Rason’s success, though the opacity of debates in this realm makes extended commentary difficult and competing theories nearly equally plausible.

**Conclusion**

From 2010 to 2013, prospects for social and economic integration, certainly between Yanbian and Rason, as well as between Primorsky Krai and Rason, seemed strong. A Chinese consortium was building a modern road to link Rajin with the border crossing at Quanhe, while RasonKonTrans was refurbishing part of Rajin Port and the rail line to the Russian border.[[137]](#footnote-137) These were not small projects and together they have certainly increased Rason’s functional capacity, even if the road experienced flood damage in 2015.[[138]](#footnote-138) Rason was also hosting a brand new annual trade fair, and the team leading the SEZ seemed relatively PR-savvy and sophisticated.

Since then, developments have slowed significantly. The Ukraine crisis and subsequent collapse in commodity prices left Russia in a deep recession, which turned back toward minimal growth in 2017 but has not led to a fully robust recovery (Marson 2018). Russia’s lack of capacity and long-term suspicion of China have held back Sino-Russian cooperation in the Far East, while investors willing to take a chance in North Korea have become even scarcer: Russia, it seems clear, will not be the balancer of China that Pyongyang had hoped for (Rolland 2019). Beijing’s opprobrium over Pyongyang’s third nuclear test and execution of Jang Song-taek put a hold on Chinese interest in supporting major projects in Rason or elsewhere in the DPRK. This relative freeze in major cooperation could change as talks on the nuclear crisis progress, however.

There were certain small signs that the warming trend of 2018 might lead to more interactivity around Rason. In August 2018, Rason held its 8th International Trade Fair. Reflecting the DPRK’s improving international relations, both the Chinese and Russian Consul Generals came up from Chongjin to take part in the opening ceremony. The prior year, the Russians had sent a more junior diplomat and the Chinese sent no one. However, a few diplomatic visits are hardly a counterweight to much larger structural issues in the region.

Overall, China maintains its roughly *laissez-faire* stance toward Sino-Korean cooperation on smaller business projects. Beijing does not appear to be invigilating the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2375’s ban on joint ventures with China: indeed, that was always going to be a difficult item to enforce. There are also few anecdotes that suggest the textile export ban (also under UNSCR 2375) is being enforced. Still, coal and seafood exports clearly have been hurt, and abundant anecdotal evidence suggests as much. In September 2018, a pile of coal on the second pier sat in Rason, as it had for weeks and weeks, unable to find a buyer. Until priorities in Beijing, Pyongyang and Moscow change, efforts aimed at the integration of the Tumen region will continue to be stymied.

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**13 Purges and Peripheries**

Jang Song-taek, Pyongyang’s SEZ Strategy, and Relations with China

*Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green*

**Abstract**

This chapter investigates the politics of North Korea’s Special Economic Zones (SEZs) on the frontier with China, focusing on the fortunes of two failed SEZs on the Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa islands. When the manager of these two islands – Jang Song-taek – was abruptly executed in December 2013, it ushered in a period of inactivity, which was not changed even by the marked upswing in China-North Korea relations in 2018-2019. The chapter reveals how China’s strategy over North Korean SEZs in the border region cycles between optimism and extreme caution. It aims to balance questions of personal/national loyalty and political economy.[[139]](#footnote-139)

**Keywords:** Jang Song-taek, Special Economic Zones, China-North Korean relations, political purges, North Korea, economic strategy

**Introduction**

In 2018, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un took a number of steps that led to speculation that the country’s economy might soon embark upon fundamental economic liberalization. At a plenum of the Korean Workers’ Party in Pyongyang that April, Kim declared the emergence of a ‘New Strategic Line’ in which economic production would take primacy over military spending (Choe 2018a; Rodong Sinmun 2018a). At a minimum, this rhetorical term seemed to portend that a doctrinal punctuation point had been reached with respect to the Songun (‘military-first’) politics associated with Kim Jong-il and the Byungjin (‘parallel advance’) line of Kim Jong-un’s early years in power (Cathcart, Green and Denney 2016). The new line was reaffirmed and amplified domestically. The modification of tone was accompanied by vigorous diplomacy with China, South Korea, and the United States, whose leaders all in their own ways held up the latent potential of a regionally integrated North Korean economy. Accordingly, laws for foreign investment were dusted off (Song et.al 2019). North Korean officials visited Hanoi to study Vietnamese economic reforms (Ross and Harris 2018; Tan et. al 2017). Even Russia began to revisit transnational economic cooperation projects with North Korea (Joo and Lee 2018). South Korean conglomerates established task-force teams to examine future options for investment, and a liaison office was opened within the confines of the Kaesong Industrial Complex to coordinate inter-Korean economic and political affairs (Choe 2018b). While the pursuit of economic gains relied on a resolution to the nuclear issue and the relaxation of international sanctions, it felt as if the region could be approaching the cusp of a new era. China’s role in the bullishness was critical; in addition to playing up increased tourist ties, Chinese news outlets praised North Korea for taking a new strategic line focused on developing the domestic economy. Yet there was a missing piece of the Chinese discourse amid the many meetings between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping, namely, any discussion at all of the Special Economic Zones in the shared border region with North Korea. This chapter aims to explain why the CCP might be so guarded in promoting what would otherwise appear to be a win-win proposal for SEZs in the mouth of the Yalu River.

**North Korea and Special Economic Zones**

Special Economic Zones (SEZ) play a key role in the matrix of North Korean international and economic relations under Kim Jong-un. Located on or near North Korea’s land borders, an array of notional SEZs have the potential to serve multiple purposes in a context of growing regional integration and economic engagement. Those that do ultimately become operational are sources of hard currency and a means of putting under-utilized labour to work. To a degree, the announcement of SEZ plans can serve a diplomatic strategy, in that North Korea can use the zones to send signals about its willingness to attract foreign direct investment and experiment with less centralized economic models. As Théo Clément argues in Chapter 12 of this volume, the country’s economic officials have a degree of experience with SEZs, meaning that the country at least has a kind of managerial baseline for ongoing experimentation in that field.

At the same time, though, there are multiple barriers to the spread of SEZs in North Korea. International sanctions are significant, but hardly the key on their own (Hu 2018). Along with access to markets, SEZs require significant political and economic reorientation. Zones inevitably require limited freedom of movement, expose North Korean workers to international practices, and result in foreign managers coming in to manage those workers in semi-autonomous areas of North Korean sovereign territory. This imposes informational and ideological costs on a risk-averse regime that, from Pyongyang’s perspective, range from the trivial to the existential.

Moreover, in terms of sheer capacity, North Korea simply does not have the highly trained and loyal human resources required to open up more comprehensively along the lines envisaged by optimistic outsiders. Training thousands of economic officials versed in foreign investment practices takes years. Bold steps raise questions of control within the regime, and lead to competition within the highest levels of the Korean Workers’ Party to control and manage revenue lines. Foreign trade is essential for the regime, but it also comes with a wealth of dangers at the elite political level – corruption whilst abroad, alienation from North Korea’s internal political life, and the danger of effectively independent power bases emerging with the potential, even when it does not directly challenge the centre, to siphon resources and loyalties away from the glory of the leadership rather than toward its affirmation and strength.

With these facts in mind, this chapter seeks, first, to assess to what extent struggles at the centre of the Korean Workers’ Party have been reflected by changes in SEZ strategy in the border region, and to what extent SEZs have been undermined by domestic power struggles as well as bureaucratic stonewalling of partners. Second, it looks at China’s role in North Korea’s SEZs, and how the northern frontier of the DPRK and China acts as a case study for the many things that can and do go wrong when Pyongyang takes steps to engage in cross-border cooperation. It uses the SEZ at Hwanggumpyeong in North Pyongan Province, designated as an SEZ in 2011, to demonstrate how joint economic projects can easily end up as hostages to both the bilateral PRC-DPRK relationship and Pyongyang’s internal politics (Daily NK 2014).

**Background to the Sinuiju SEZs**

North Korea’s interest in setting up a Special Economic Zone in the Sinuiju area dates back to the early years of Kim Jong-il’s functional leadership of the country, following visits to a number of Chinese zones during trips with his father.[[140]](#footnote-140) North Korea did not act on the idea at the time; instead, a Special Economic Zone was created at Rason in the far northeast of the country in 1991.[[141]](#footnote-141) However, return trips to the PRC in 2000 and 2001 may have inspired Kim. In the following year, 2002, he initiated the setting up of a Sinuiju Special Economic Zone along the border with the Chinese city of Dandong, at the time a sleepy if growing regional city.[[142]](#footnote-142)

One of the authors travelled to Dandong in 2001 and again in 2002 and found the North Korean presence to be largely residual. On the Dandong side there were few signs of commercial movement other than a few hotels and some North Korean officials in the streets. On the Sinuiju side, the commonplace observations all held true; its riverine side was a picture of dead theme parks, rotting small boats, a small amount of clam digging, and quiet factories. But whereas Rason is unquestionably peripheral, Dandong-Sinuiju is anything but. Situated on the main trunk route from Korea to China and at the Yalu River estuary, Sinuiju was already a major city in its own right. For decades, 80% of bilateral trade between North Korea and China has flowed through the Sinuiju-Dandong hub, as it still does today. If geography is destiny, then the North Pyongyang border region with China’s Liaoning province remains a logical place for an SEZ which could further enhance the dynamism of commercial exchange between the two countries (Kwon 2014).

However, even these auspicious surroundings could not save Kim Jong-il’s plan, which famously collapsed almost before it had begun when Yang Bin, the Chinese businessman tapped to lead up the Sinuiju SEZ as a kind of extraterritorial governor, was arrested in Shenyang for tax evasion. A tulips magnate, Yang Bin was ranked by Forbes magazine as the second wealthiest man in China at the time, with a net worth of $900 million. A few hours before he was arrested by Chinese police, he told a journalist that his role in the SEZ was ‘more than that of a businessman…I am also an international diplomat and political leader’.

Yang’s arrest on 8 November 2002 was, at a minimum, tangible evidence of a wholesale lack of North Korean coordination with China. But the timing of the arrest also had meaning on the Chinese political calendar: occurring just prior to the 16th Party Congress in Beijing, the arrest was a way of showing that even Jiang Zemin’s acceptance of capitalists into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had limits. Yang Bin had ‘formed a friendship with Kim Jong Il’, something accomplished because he ‘built greenhouses in the capital, Pyongyang, to ease the country’s food shortage, and donated more than 100 million yuan or $12 million to help North Korea buy rice and other necessities’ (Kahn 2002a, 2002b). Only 39-years old at the time, he symbolized a new type of internationalized entrepreneur in Liaoning province, but also the dangers of overreaching in the political realm. Whatever the reasons for his downfall, the result so far as Sinuiju is concerned was the end of Kim’s idea. The notion of a special economic zone at the mouth of the Yalu would not gain currency again for seven long years (French 2014, 246-270).

The trigger for reassessment was the succession to power of Kim Jong-un. In January 2009, with Kim Jong-il in poor health following a stroke the prior August, Kim Jong-un was internally anointed as successor. This was followed by North Korea’s second nuclear test in May 2009, which amplified international attention on North Korea for several months.[[143]](#footnote-143) While the spring 2009 test angered the Chinese leadership. China’s paramount strategic interest remained the stability of the peninsula, and support for the pending succession would be granted. PRC Premier Wen Jiabao arrived in October 2009 at Sunan International Airport in Pyongyang, less than half a year after North Korea’s shocking nuclear test. Wen was bearing a massive economic package, but this was not a grand bargain for China to essentially buy North Korean denuclearization; indeed, Chinese academics noted that China’s influence in that core area for Pyongyang was limited (China Daily 2009). Rather, Wen’s largesse primarily served China’s desire for a smooth succession. The Chinese leadership understood as well as any dictatorship can the importance of ample funds to finance the process of acquiring and holding on to power. Xi Jinping, still two years away from achieving the top position in the CCP, was very much part of the collective decision-making that supported North Korea’s succession process. The joint discussion around Special Economic Zones along the North Korean side of the border with China thus emerged out of a period where heightened cooperation was occurring, but under significant political pressures relating to succession and North Korea’s future.

As part of the economic agreement reached between China and North Korea during Wen’s visit, the two sides agreed to create new SEZs at Hwangumpyeong and Wiwha Island. Both locations are administratively parts of Sindo County, situated across the Yalu River from the port of Dandong at Donggang, 35km southwest of central Dandong. On paper, the preferred industries for the 16.6km2 zone were to have been garment processing, consumer electronics, agriculture, culture, creative indsutries and even financial services. The first of these, garment processing, was always going to be the most feasible given North Korea’s economic strengths and the training of its workers. As analysis of the now-shuttered Kaesong Industrial Complex shows, North Korea’s comparative advantage rests in the textiles industry, with its reliance on cheap technology and skilled labour (International Crisis Group 2019). That said, the Chinese side had grander ambitions. They hoped that banks would receive permission to set up branch offices in the zone in order to transfer currencies and allow for foreign remittances of legitimate profits. Chinese firms further wanted the capacity to employ 10,000-20,000 North Koreans at low cost without the added complications of bringing them into Chinese territory and immigration and labour regimes.

Although its construction was not physically connected to the SEZ project, China pumped about RMB 2.2 billion ($354 million) into one massive supporting project, a new bridge from Dandong to the outskirts of Sinuiju. The cable span bridge was designed to handle what were expected to be new and very heavy traffic flows, which would ultimately make both sides of the Yalu richer. The new bridge was not just a symbol, it was a much-needed upgrade over the famous Friendship bridge between Dandong and Sinuiju which had been built by the Japanese during the colonial period of the early 1940s. That older span has no capacity at all for two-way traffic and the port facilities around it on the Chinese side are cramped in the middle of the city centre. In 2012, the project for the new bridge was underway, and Chinese and North Korean leaders discussed it in meetings in Beijing that summer (Glaser 2012, 14).

While construction on the SEZs had yet to begin, authorities in Dandong, armed with much central government largesse, were also busy creating ‘facts on the ground’ in the wider region. This included building an entirely new suburb (the Xinchengqu, or ‘New City District’) at the end of the new Yalu River Bridge, as well as refurbishing Dandong’s airport. CCP Party Secretary in Dandong, Dai Yulin was a key player in this process. Dai had been appointed to the post in Dandong in August 2010, as plans began to materialize for accelerated ties with North Korea, re-upped for the position by a CCP Party Congress in Beijing in July 2011. (He ultimately left in January 2015 to serve in various Party posts in Shenyang.) Dai’s offices, and those of most of the CCP Party Committee, were in Xinchengqu; the impetus to complete the Hwangumpyeong Island SEZ could hardly be more obvious to those who looked at the area on a daily basis.

**Early Concerns**

Although the Chinese side was bullish about the project at the outset and advertised its advantages, doubts began to appear virtually immediately. In summer 2012, Kim Jong-un and a group of his closest associates purged General Ri Yong-ho, an important member of the National Defense Commission, one of eight bearers of Kim Jong-il’s casket the previous December and seen by outsiders as the younger Kim’s mentor in military affairs. Chinese analysts noted their satisfaction with the move, hoping only that, given that it portended the return of monopoly economic rights from the military to the ruling Korean Workers’ Party, Ri’s removal would speed up North Korea’s drive toward economic reform and opening up (Zhang 2012). The purge was not connected to the SEZs or the new bridge across the Yalu; however, the purge was a sign that problems were lurking.

One of several Chinese concerns was that the North Koreans seemed reticent to take physical steps to shore up and protect the SEZs from flooding. Tang Longwen was one such vehicle of concern. Writing in *Shijie Zhishi* (World Knowledge), a magazine affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tang expounded the dangers of flooding for China’s investment in the SEZ. He noted that in the absence of proper preparation, decades’ worth of construction achievements and huge capital investment could in a moment be popped like so many proverbial bubbles (Tang 2011). Although this was a gloomy assessment and might count as a semi-official statement from China given the publication in which it appeared, Tang was in fact a lecturer at a relatively small institution, the *Dandong shiwei dangxiao* (Dandong City Communist Party Committee School), meaning that the expression of his doubts could not be confused with disapproval of the entire project from Beijing.

Tang’s assessment was grounded in history, recalling Japanese work on flood control in the Yalu River delta in the 1930s and 1940s and implying that the North Korean comrades had not done much to extend upon the imperialist infrastructure. Tang noted instead that since Deng’s policies of opening and reform took hold in the Northeast in the early 1980s, China had put great financial strength into constructing and extending protective dam projects, and that these had improved the security of Dandong considerably. Praise for Deng frequently precedes a Chinese critique of the DPRK, and Tang was not no exception to the pattern: ‘But in this regard, North Korea has invested extremely little, and as a result, every time a flood comes, all suffer its harm’. He also referred to the 2010 floods in the Yalu River estuary in a passage meriting extensive quotation:

In the 2010 Yalu river flood hazard for example, due to the widespread rainstorm in north eastern China, the water level of the Yalu river quickly rose to its upper reaches, and located its lower reaches, North Korea’s Sinuiju [city] and Wihwa Island were encountered severe flooding, the like of which comes once in 30 years.

In the event various kinds of businesses and public facilities were constructed on the [Hwanggumpyeong] island, if they suffered such bitter flooding, it would cause huge damage. From the significance of this it can be said that if these two islands become free trade zones, then of necessity floods must first be protected against. And managing the floods will require the construction of huge flood-defenses, that is to say, will require huge capital and financial resources investment as a prerequisite. But these kinds of resources are not abundantly available, and the development value of these two small islands is not at all great, and if investment exceeds productive value, whether or not the project is worthwhile still needs to be demonstrated.

In addition, we can try to borrow from the experience of North and South Korea’s Kaesong Industrial Park. It can be said that in the absence of China’s support, North Korea would find it hard to have the huge economic strength to develop the two islands, but without North Korea’s complete economic opening, the actual significance of the development of the two islands is not at all very great.

As a consequence, the key point is not whether or not the DPRK’s two islands are developed, but rather whether or not the DPRK is really prepared to open up (Tang 2011).

Tang’s criticisms of North Korea’s lack of action on flood control in the period from 2010-2012 were entirely justified. One of the authors was in Dandong for the great flood of 2010; while the Chinese preparations and emergency responses were roughly effective, virtually nothing was done in advance on the North Korean side. Whole villages and suburbs of Sinuiju were inundated, and the only visible North Korean emergency action involved a few helicopter flights well after the flood had crested (Cathcart 2010). In 2012, a few hundred metres of shoreline along the Yalu appeared to receive some North Korean attention for purposes of flood control for the ostensible SEZ. But the land of the SEZs themselves remained simply used for farmland.

Yet while North Korea resisted the need for infrastructure investment, at the same time Pyongyang made a few declarations in early 2012 which indicated that the DPRK was working on a more palatable legal framework for the Chinese businesses that would – it was hoped – set up on Hwanggumpyong. The DPRK developed and publicized a new law on natural disasters which may have been related. Even in glowing reviews of the SEZs in Sinuiju published in the Chinese news media, there was much left to do. In a long 3 December 2012, article focusing on those SEZs, China Economic Weekly called the zones ‘an innovative model of international cooperation [that] still needs much work, thought and human talent’ (Liu Yonggang 2012). A long list of issues had yet to be resolved, including visa issues, banking regulations, and communications. For those aware of the manifest failings of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the story sounded very familiar. Even North Korea’s lifting of a ban on foreign cell phones in Pyongyang was pointedly not extended into Sinuiju or Rason at that time, a virtual necessity if North Korea had really wanted Chinese business partners to be functional in special economic zones (Cathcart 2013b). As many major issues remained unresolved, a Sino-North Korean cultural and trade festival went ahead anyway, if about four months later than initially announced, in October 2012.

Multiple visits by these authors to Dandong and Shenyang in the 2010-2013 period, along with conversations with experts in China, all confirmed a generally shared Chinese desire at this time to increase economic activity in the Liaoning-Korean frontier zone. Few people we spoke with showed much faith in Kim Jong-un’s ability to do this, however, for the new North Korean leader had not associated himself with the projects in any way, for example through *hyeonji jido* (‘on-site inspections’) of nearby areas. In Chinese trips to Pyongyang, the SEZs were conspicuously absent from public pronouncements. While North Korea might have appeared rudderless or uninterested in the SEZ projects, there were individuals involved on the ground who gave counterparts on the Chinese side a degree of confidence. In June 2011, an opening ceremony at Hwanggumpyong brought some renewed sense of momentum to the project (Demick 2011). North Korea’s main representative at that event was Jang Song-taek, a shrewd man with grand plans for Sino-North Korean development in the border region.

**Jang Song-taek as Interlocutor and as Traitor**

Jang Song-taek had long been a player in the North Korean economy. He rose to prominence in the 1980s as head of the Party’s Youth Projects Division at a time when the country sought to overcome its economic difficulties primarily through mass mobilization of the young on a grand scale (Ra 2019, 81-82, 91; Miller and Green 2013). In the 1990s, with the regime under threat of collapse and famine menacing the border provinces, Jang was the only one with both the authority and bravery to present Kim Jong-il with plans for an ‘era-defining transition’ to a different economic structure (Ra 2019, 96).[[144]](#footnote-144) In 2002, a high-water mark for inter-Korean exchanges under the liberal presidencies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, Jang famously led an economic delegation to South Korea, where those with whom he interacted were left in no doubt of his deep knowledge of economic matters.[[145]](#footnote-145) In 2000 and again in 2007, Jang was present at inter-Korean summits in Pyongyang, whereupon he took every opportunity to convey the ideas of South Korean economists up the chain to Kim Jong-il, in the hope that advanced economic thinking would infiltrate the mind of the Supreme Leader, who was aware of the need for economic change but lost as to how to achieve it without endangering Kim family rule.

As the husband of Kim Jong-il’s sister, Kim Kyong-hui, Jang had solid political-familial pedigree. While he was not of exemplary revolutionary stock and had been reprimanded or purged for indiscreet behaviour on multiple occasions, it was long assumed that Jang’s marriage was by itself enough to make him politically untouchable (Ra 2019, 86-88). That Jang would prove to be falliable only goes to show how brutal North Korean politics became in the early Kim Jong-un era.[[146]](#footnote-146)

By 2009, with Kim annointed as successor but not yet revealed to the North Korean public, Jang was not at the leading edge of economic policy with China. According to Ra (2019, 144), he was busy with a range of domestic economic projects designed to buttress the succession of Kim Jong-un. However, having been appointed to the National Defense Commission in April that year and with prominent public appearances throughout the summer under his belt, Jang’s stock was rising globally, and he had begun to be cited as a potential regent figure. At least one of these authors was of the view that, based on past experience, Jang might guide North Korea toward a reformist path (Cathcart, 2013a).

It was not to be. Jang Song-taek’s final act as a major player in the North Korean economy was his sojourn to China in 2012 at the head of a fifty-man delegation. The delegation, unusually large given the absence of the North Korean leader at its head, crossed the border to attend the third meeting of a joint steering committee established to guide the development of the Hwanggumpyong and Rason SEZs (Nocut V 2012). In this Jang was successful, signing an agreement with China’s Minister of Commerce, Chen Deming (Ra 2019, 153). There was not a massive enthusiasm for Jang on the ground in Dandong, but he was at least generally present and far more responsive and available to Chinese counterparts than the average North Korean interlocutor. Jang’s plans to obtain a loan of $1bn to kickstart the reforming North Korean economy failed (Ra 2019, 153), but the visit to China cannot be called an outright failure and he was hosted by then-Chinese leader Hu Jintao in Beijing in friendly circumstances (Choe 2012).

In 2013, Jang came crashing down, and he brought border region economic ties down with him. The brutal purge and execution of Jang Song-taek in November and December 2013 was first and foremost a demonstration of how power moves at the top of the North Korean political hierarchy. But it also opened up a new rift in bilateral relations with China, trashing all that burgeoning investment and cooperation in the border zone and sketching out a pessimistic view of the future.[[147]](#footnote-147)

With no less an implement than Jang’s very execution indictment, the North Korean state brought specific grievances with China to the forefront, plastering them across the world media for all to see. The accusation document was ‘a mishmash’; it played many roles and incorporated multiple voices (Jang, 2013). But whatever else it did, particular dissatisfaction was reserved for Jang’s handling of SEZs. Leaders in Beijing could hardly have missed the point that North Korea wanted roles to change and that the SEZ elements would be revised if not scrapped altogether. Some Chinese experts forecast nothing less than a wholesale renegotiation of cross-border economic relations (Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014).

In the aftermath of the purge, it appeared that in the midst of purging Jang, North Korea was likely calling basic elements of the SEZ projects into question. Kim Jong-un’s government was using Jang’s death to reset multiple policy areas, including getting out of prior agreements (Branigan 2013). Observers in Japan assessed that this would dampen or paralyse borderland development (Ishida 2013), Analysts in China admitted that Jang’s death would be bad for bilateral relations but hoped that any effect on the SEZs would be ‘short term’ (Zhou 2013). Jang had been not just an interlocutor for Beijing on economic issues but was the co-chairman of the two countries’ biggest joint Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project, at the mouth of the Yalu River: Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa. There was soon a visible shift that perhaps bore this fear out, as North Korea moved away from the two zones near Sinuiju and into supporting smaller SEZs along the Chinese-North Korean border.

Even earthquakes are survivable, of course, and Jang’s purge did not lead the utter implosion of the Sino-North Korean trade relationship, nor some final death of the DPRK’s moves to set up SEZs on its northern frontier. But from 2013, North Korea appeared to shift its focus away from the previously-agreed zones near Sinuiju and into smaller, different SEZs along the Chinese-North Korean border, doing so at the regional level, with what appears to be minimal consultation with Beijing.

**Purge Triggers Chinese Debate**

At the time of the purge and immediate aftermath, it had not been at all certain how the situation would play out: Would the DPRK continue the development of the existing zones at Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa Island, which was in any case already moving slowly? Why did North Korea start a number of new SEZs along the frontier with China just prior to Jang’s purge, apparently without coordinating with Beijing? What would this unilateral recalibration by North Korea of its own use and geographical location of SEZs with China reveal about internal debates over ‘reform and opening up’ in Pyongyang? Chinese and Korean sources, combined with evidence garnered from fieldwork in the Sino-Korean border region, assist in illuminating the argument and narrative.

The immediate aftermath of the purge prompted careful discussion in the Chinese press of the implications. To one analyst, nothing was out of the ordinary. A conservative voice on North Korean affairs based at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences in Shenyang, Lü Chao had been dispatched immediately to Dandong to deliver a message of calm resolve and stability to a Chinese public nervous about the goings-on in Pyongyang. As Lu explained to the mass foreign affairs tabloid *Huanqiu Shibao*:

In the two years since Kim Jong-un took office, continuous smooth progress has been made on a number of projects, including the development of two islands [i.e., Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa], new bridge construction over the Yalu River, and Rason terminal expansion. While Jang played an important role in Sino-DPRK economic cooperation, including his key part in driving the Hwanggumpyeong agreement, the shared policies of China and the DPRK retain strong continuity. As of December 12, the general feeling in Dandong is that the Hwanggumpyeong project remains entirely unaffected (Huanqiu Shibao 2013).

In other words, Jang had carried the ball of Chinese-North Korean economic cooperation forward a certain distance, and his achievements stood, even if the future appeared to be somewhat murky.

However, it did not take long for frustration to emerge as a dominant theme. Zhang Liangui, professor at the Central Party School in Beijing, dismissed the North Korean implication that Jang alone had taken sole responsibility for North Korea’s SEZ policy. Instead, Zhang bluntly asserting instead that the brutal death of Kim Jong-un’s uncle had been used by the North Korean state to discredit the entire SEZ project at a stroke:

In conducting economic cooperation with China, we noticed that it was Jang Song-taek who came forward to set up last year’s agreement with China to develop the two islands of Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa. In terms of China’s economic cooperation with North Korea, although Jang was involved in a lot of it, many of the really important decisions were not ones that he alone could have made – for example, deciding for how many years to rent out ports. Obviously, this wasn’t a case of whatever Jang said went, as these involved issues of national sovereignty and so on. But now that Jang has been gotten rid of, he is said to have been responsible for all of these things (Zhang 2014; translation in Dirks 2014).

Jang had indeed been the point person on the North Korean side, but his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interlocutors had made sure to at least spread nominal power widely. The steering committees for the zones were big, and the institutionalization of seemingly pat slogans about tending to the relationship ‘from generation to generation’ were also, in a sense, a way of depersonalizing the ties so that political shocks could be endured. A few months after Jang’s purge, a senior professor in Yanji who is closely connected to cross-border developments stated that North Korea had been ‘extremely indecisive in following through’ on its economic agreements with China, but Jang had been ‘a bridge’ between the two states, and self-evidently an economic leader in his own right. Jang’s purge, he continued, created a new ‘obstacle’ for relations with China. Not only that, he stated, it wasn’t simply that Jang was gone, it was that the locating of new interlocutors on the DPRK side would take time, and so the recovery from Jang’s removal could hardly expected to be instantaneous.[[148]](#footnote-148)

It is not even really just a relatively simple question of locating new interlocutors. If it were, reviving relations would have been easier. If the leadership in Pyongyang willed it, North Korea could assign officials to the various China portfolios almost instantaneously. But all officials are not created equal, and very few have the right mix of characteristics to lend sufficient weight to sensitive cross-border exchanges. As one prominent South Korean scholar with close links to North Korea suggested in the aftermath of the purge, the emergence of another senior official with the right mix of political protection and economic know-how would likely take a decade or more.[[149]](#footnote-149) In the six years (as of the time of writing) since the purge, that prediction appears to be holding up.

Jang’s purge and death may then not have resulted in ‘a total reset of the relationship’ with China as some feared in the immediate aftermath, but it was undeniably a political earthquake both within and without North Korea, one that threw several predictions about the future evolution of the border region into serious doubt (The Economist, 2013). As one journalist in Seoul put it, ‘a violent cocktail of Stalinist realpolitik’ put Chinese investment on the back burner (Faletti, 2013). The stern rhetoric about a thwarted coup in Pyongyang, and the anti-Chinese elements in the indictment for Jang were clear indicators that some level of alarm was needed in Beijing. Even while Jang was alive and unchallenged publicly, the SEZs were never a particularly sure bet. But Jang’s fronting of economic cooperation with Chinese partners would be made part of his downfall, bringing the curtain down (for now) on the Hwanggumpyeong and Wiwha Island SEZs.

**After the Purge: Stasis, and Kim Jong-un**

The reluctance of the Chinese Communist Party – either itself or through its various proxies in the media or academia – to strike back at North Korea directly for its purge of Jang Song-taek is among the strongest testifiers to Beijing’s long-run pragmatism toward the DPRK. China had been attacked more or less directly in Jang’s indictment and a number of signals indicated the CCP’s displeasure with Jang’s removal and its method, the SEZs would still be available as a vessel for bilateral cooperation, even if it were a tarnished symbol. Developments in the following years would bear this out.

The period following the purge and demolition of Jang’s political and economic legacy can be divided into two periods, bisected by the January 2016 North Korean nuclear test. Until the end of 2015, there was political stasis in Pyongyang and helplessness in Beijing over who and how to replace Jang’s networks of connections meant that business went on largely as it had before. But the nuclear test, North Korea’s fourth, exasperated Beijing, and when accompanied later in the year by the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., the result was a storm of strengthened UN sanctions and heightened enforcement along the China-DPRK frontier that lasted until the end of 2017. North Korea’s major export earner – coal and other natural resources – withered and given the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in February 2016 by the South Korean government of Park Geun-hye, only labour exports really stood out as an ongoing source of hard currency for the North Korean regime. 2018 saw the first meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, mostly focused on issues of bilateral political concern. The dream of Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa Island, whatever it had once been, did not even feature.

As described in the introduction to this essay, in 2018 a number of breakthrough developments occurred in China’s high-level relations with North Korea, resulting in further speculation that SEZ plans along the shared border region would be revived. In January 2019, en route to what would be his fourth meeting with Xi Jinping in the period of about a year, Kim Jong-un passed through Dandong on his special armoured train. Kim there met Ge Haiying, the Party Secretary for Dandong municipality, and Chen Qiufa, the CCP Party Secretary for Liaoning. This was at least his second meeting with these leaders, for Kim had met a variation on this delegation back in March 2018 during a previous trip through Dandong, and the meetings took place on Kim’s train (Rodong Sinmun, 11 January 2019). Kim’s stopover in Dandong and his meetings with Chinese officials there were muted in the Chinese mainland media. While this taciturn approach might be ascribed to safety concerns or a desire to keep the propaganda focus on Xi Jinping, the lacuna also had the effect of lowering expectations for North Korean actions in the development of the Sinuiju-Dandong corridor.

As Kim Jong-un was slowly making his way back to Pyongyang, where he finally arrived at 3 p.m. on January 10, the new mayor of Dandong, Zhang Shuping, had what would be the last word. She held forth at a meeting of the Dandong Frontier Economic Cooperation Zone around Xinchengqu, speaking to people whose responsibilities include the area around the new and still-unused Yalu River Bridge, overlooking the disused North Korean island of Hwanggumpyeong that was to have served as a centrepiece of joint economic development with the DPRK. Her remarks included the following:

The Frontier Cooperation Economic Zone is an important driver for Dandong’s development and revitalization. We must have a long-range stance, establish and develop confidence, gather momentum for development, abandon the psychology of ‘being content to extend sovereignty over only part of the country’ enhance the consciousness of development and opening up, focus on core business, and build the border area as a pilot area. [We should also] establish a new form of relationship between government and business.

Zhang seemingly did not so much as mention the Hwanggumpyeong or Wihwa Island SEZs and their joint management with North Korea. This was not the stuff of a breakthrough. But it perhaps counts as maintaining readiness. At the very least, it should have sent a signal to Kim Jong-un and North Korean counterparts that China is serious about the matter and remains ready to cooperate on cross-border trade and to move forward with the SEZ projects previously agreed upon. Cross-provincial contacts went forward thereafter, including a Sinuiju government delegation to Dandong on 27 and 28 December 2018. This group included some of the same officials who had been present at Kim Jong-un’s 16 November 2018 briefing on a hugely ambitious new city plan for Sinuiju. Both Ge Haiying and Zhang Shuping met with the head of that delegation, Ri Chong-ryol, the chair of Sinuiju Government People’s Committee.

No mention was made whatever of economic cooperation, much less the joint committees for Hwanggumpyeong. Nevertheless, the North Koreans surely got the message that Xi Jinping is driving the Liaoning government and cadre in Dandong to find ways to get the economy of the region moving faster. This is easier said than done, though; while the lights may be bright indeed in Beijing, in Dandong the reality of interacting with North Korea prevents the kind of focused progress to which China has grown accustomed.

**Conclusion**

As North Korea continues to define the economic parameters of its ‘New Strategic Line’, it seems unlikely that the country will disavow the basic idea that its nuclear programme is too important to sacrifice in favour of growing the domestic economy. In the cold light of day, policy makers in the Republic of Korea, the United States, Japan and elsewhere surely recognize that under the prevailing political circumstances, North Korean Special Economic Zones with China, or at the very least near China, represent the closest thing we are likely to see to a North Korean policy of ‘reform and opening up’. Unfortunately, then, the extent to which those zones, particularly those in the northwest, have failed to produce any such changes, and in fact have failed to actuate themselves in any meaningful sense, does not give much cause for optimism.

North Koreans will continue to work in Northeast China. Even as the 22 December 2019 deadline approached for the return of all labour to North Korea, a deadline imposed by the UN Security Council in December 2017, Chinese officials and scholars gave signals that North Korean workers could be allowed into the PRC on student visas instead. But sanctions or not, some form of North Korean accelerated interaction with Chinese firms along the frontier, either in or outside of an SEZ framework, feels inevitable. As North Korea seeks a way forward toward greater economic prosperity, the Special Economic Zone at Hwanggumpyeong and nearby Wihwa Island may or may play a vanguard role, but they are undeniably part of the history of Sino-North Korean joint development. Likewise, Jang Song-taek’s dealings with Chinese leaders will not be forgotten anytime soon in the region. Although his photograph was swiftly covered up in a display we observed in the Yanbian History Museum in 2014, we and others surely knew whose image was hidden underneath that thick blue tape. His projects, the SEZs on the borders of Dandong, will remain a great ‘what-if’ for both the region and the world as North Korean continues both to change, and not to change at all.

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**14 From Periphery to Centre**

A History of North Korean Marketization

*Peter Ward and Christopher Green*

**Abstract**

North Korea today is a marketizing society, nowhere more so than in its northern border region. The national economy may appear to be Stalinist in organizational form, yet relations between North Korean people, between the people and their state, and between state and private actors and foreign firms are characterized by money and market transactions rather than administrative orders and bureaucratic allocation. How did this happen? Why did this happen? The present chapter discusses the socio-political implications and mechanisms of North Korean marketization as seen through the lens of the South Korean academic literature on markets and marketization in North Korea from the 1950s to the present day with a focus on border cities.

**Keywords:** North Korean marketization, Jangmadang, capitalism in North Korea, Stalinism, Public Distribution System, North Korean state-owned enterprises

**Introduction**

From a political and economic perspective, North Korea still appears upon casual observation to be Stalinist in organizational form. Industrial and manufacturing enterprises are nominally state-owned and subordinate to a central planning mechanism. Though small-scale trade is demonstrably private, the authorities act as if that trade constitutes a very small per centage of overall economic activity, such that it does not impact the designation of the system as a whole.

However, the reality is starkly different. Relations between individuals and enterprises, and their relations with the state are actually characterized by money and market transactions, not administrative orders and bureaucratic allocation. Statistics on private economic activity as a percentage of total economic activity are inconclusive, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the percentage must be very substantial. North Korea today is a marketizing society. Then, the question for us in this chapter is not if, but when, how and why the ‘marketization’ transformation occurred.

Marketization is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, involving the commercialization of existing relationships and spread of new commercial ties to parts of society where they were previously absent. In the North Korean case, the process has involved marketization from both below (ad hoc, unguided by the state) and above (guided by the state).[[150]](#footnote-150) Private commerce (retail and wholesale), agricultural production (private plots and animal rearing), private workshops, fishing, and logistics services all initially emerged without government support of any kind. As the process continued and formalized in the 21st century, however, the constitutive role of state agencies as the central actor in foreign trade and of State-owned Enterprises (SOEs) and Foreign Trade Companies (FTCs) in domestic markets became apparent. The deepening of marketization in recent years (especially after 2005) has been largely driven by state actors.

While marketization is now a nationwide phenomenon, it began in the border region. ‘Marketization from below’ from the 1990s forward occurred most rapidly in towns and cities within twenty kilometres of the China-North Korea frontier. Accordingly, this chapter demonstrates the primacy of border region dynamics in processes of marketization in the early years. It reviews the South Korean academic literature on markets and marketization in North Korea from the 1950s to the present day, discussing the socio-political implications and mechanisms of that process. It discusses primarily South Korean works because these constitute the most historically accurate and detailed corpus on North Korean marketization, yet also one that is not adequately understood outside Korea.[[151]](#footnote-151)

**Markets before ‘Marketization’, 1950-1993**

In the years following the Korean War of 1950-1953, North Korea under former anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter Kim Il-sung rapidly became one of the most authoritarian and least market-orientated societies on earth, even by the standards of the day. This had, however, not been the case in the period 1945-1950. In the very earliest years of the nascent northern Korean state that emerged from World War II, markets for consumer goods were tolerated (though these were not cherished), a merchant class existed (though it was not loved), and individual farmers and fishermen produced much of the country’s food supply (though food was never plentiful).

This was not to last for long, however. The imperative of post-war reconstruction resulted in a series of campaigns to bring farms, fishing cooperatives, and the entire retail sector under state control at high speed between 1954, when North Korea was plunged into its first famine, and 1958 (Kim 2010; Salontai 2006). These changes alone shrunk the size of the market sphere dramatically, with farmers and fisherman no longer allowed to own their own factors of production such as land, or tools like boats and tractors. Strict limits were also placed on the amount of land that farmers were permitted to use for private plots, and the number of animals that a farmer could own was also reduced (Scalapino and Lee 1972, 1057-1063 and 1083-1131). Not only did the potential size and scope of private business greatly narrow; the role of private retail was also severely curtailed by the nationalization of the retail sector.

Around this time, the state-run Public Distribution System (PDS) was first framed as the centrepiece of the regime’s emergent ‘communist’ social contract. In reality a system with several parts, the PDS included a cereals (i.e., staples/grains) system called *baegeupjaedo* and a separate system for other foods called the *gonggeupjaedo.* While there were clearly debates over issues such as whether or not to abolish rationing and whether or not to allow food to be sold at prices closer to actual cost, the PDS was ultimately retained in this bifurcated form, and over time became a core part of the social fabric of North Korea (Ward 2017).[[152]](#footnote-152) As a corollary of this, markets for a whole range of foodstuffs, chiefly grains, were next-to non-existent. Across the border in China, the Chinese Communist Party had achieved control of grain markets through a national system that had gradually taken over every aspect of the acquisition, processing, storage, and supply of grain (Li and Cathcart 2020). Cross-border trade in grain was minimal.

The period of maximalist Kim family control of North Korea from 1958 to approximately 1990 was a period in which economic life for most North Koreans was regulated by rationing and mass mobilization campaigns for the purposes of state construction (Lankov 2004). Both the consumer and urban industrial economies were largely demonetized. State-owned enterprises controlled essentially all production, and transactions between them were mediated through administrative orders rather than supply and demand.[[153]](#footnote-153) This process was christened ‘bureaucratic coordination’ by the distinguished Hungarian economist of state socialism, János Kornai (1990, 131-147).[[154]](#footnote-154)

The evolution of markets in this period was partially the result of the limits of bureaucratic coordination in the North Korean context, hardly a phenomenon unique to North Korea (Joung 2011, 220-283). For instance, a wide range of traditional items used in marriages, births, ancestral rites and the like were either not made or not made in sufficient volumes by state enterprises, and their production could not easily be standardized (Joung 2011, 224-226). Markets could not be completely eliminated, and the government was well aware of it. This meant that remnants of a market system still played an important role in the trade of niche goods, luxury items, cottage industry production, foodstuffs and daily necessities, facilitated in large part by the community of Korean migrants from Japan (Joung 2011, 233-235).

Historical facts further exacerbated the problems faced by the civilian state economy. During the course of the 1960s and 1970s, military spending – or rather, the siphoning of civilian production for military use – placed enormous strain on the civilian economy, coupled as it was with the large reductions in aid flows from both the Soviet Union and China. Simultaneously, the pressure created by the post-Korean War ‘baby boomer’ generation entering adulthood put pressure on the PDS, forcing North Koreans to look to markets for supplementary foodstuffs and other daily necessities (Joung 2011, 237).

In 1966, the state responded to this pressing food issue by abolishing the system of in-kind taxes that farmers in collective farms had previously paid on harvests. This was replaced by a system in which the entire harvest was is theory to be requisitioned by the state and then redistributed from the centre. Farmers were henceforth to receive their grain distribution through their own version of the PDS (*bunbae*). However, presumably in response to rural discontent, the state almost immediately created a system of now-famous private plots (in North Korean known as *teobat*) that farmers were allowed to cultivate for personal consumption. These rapidly turned into a major source of supplementary income for rural households; much of what was produced via the approximately 99m2 of land that farmers were permitted to privately till ended up in markets (Joung 2011, 237). The state seemingly felt it had little choice but to recognize and regulate the markets. Kim Il-sung (1969, 389-390) even gave a speech in which he said that markets should be tolerated until such time as communism had been constructed, since to eradicate them before the state sector was producing ample goods would only lead to flourishing informal markets. Needless to say, he did not intend the wait for ample state production to be long.

From the late-1970s onwards, however, and quite contrary to Kim’s wishes, the planned economy began to be squeezed out by the rising ad hoc market sector. Kim Jong-il (presumably unintentionally) helped the process along, mobilizing state inventories in the pursuit of a rapid uptick in production during the 70-day speed battle in 1974 and Three Revolutions campaigns in the latter half of the 1970s, all in the service of his own political succession. One result was misallocation on a vast scale, meaning the diversion of resources into markets, and corruption that actually promoted both marketization and capital accumulation (Joung 2011, 245-249). Kim Jong-il’s rise to power presaged the decentralization of foreign trade in the early 1980s, with major privileged institutions of the Central Party, the Ministry of State Security (the secret police) and the army beginning to manage their own foreign trade activities. These activities also became intertwined with market forces, though outside observers tended to fixate more on Kim Jong-il’s alleged desire for foreign investment (Gittings 1986).

Markets, then, persisted everywhere, and began to encroach on the state sector. They did not rise from nowhere in the 1990s, as one might imagine from the literature on so-called ‘marketization from below’. Certainly, the market economy began to expand very rapidly once the planned economy entered a period of stagnation and decline in the 1980s and early 1990s. From that point on, markets grew in size and emerged in significance. But though they were comparatively marginal in prior decades, markets nevertheless formed a key part of the system. And the border region was always *the* major locus of market expansion.

Looking back to the ‘tolerated’ markets of the 1960s and 1970s, Choi and Koo (2003) focus on three cities, all of them borderland settlements: Sinuiju, Cheongjin (Chongjin) and Hyesan. The authors used semi-structured interviews with 49 North Korean defector-migrant participants in addition to reading North Korean official publications. Their findings indicate that markets played an active albeit marginal role in the economic life of the three cities through the 1960s and 1970s. Fittingly in light of their ambivalent place in the ideological and political structure of the society, markets were physically located on the outskirts of the three cities. Notably, also, these markets were almost exclusively for the sale of what farmers produced on private plots. Goods manufactured in cottage industry settings were not yet being widely sold (Choi and Koo 2003, 145-146, 161-163).

In Hyesan and Cheongjin, the market structure seems to have amounted to little more than a handful of part-time merchants selling edibles like stew, dyes, and chilli powder. Sinuiju, with its borderland tradition of commercial agents, also had a few brokers who scraped a living helping ordinary people find suppliers of hard-to-acquire foodstuffs like cooking oil.Ethnic Korean returnees - hailing not from China, but instead from Japan - were the ones who mostly supplied all three cities with imported goods, exploiting their privileged links to Asia’s most advanced economy. At various times these imported goods included watches, furs, clothing, and food additives.[[155]](#footnote-155) But such products were not sold in physical markets; instead, to the extent that they happened at all, these transactions – which were illicit – took place in people’s homes (Choi and Koo 2003, 158-160).

It was only in the early 1980s that the market system began to play a more significant role in the lives of ordinary people living in the three border cities, as the wider North Korean economy entered a period of prolonged stagnation. Whereas in the 1970s, household (cottage) production had not been linked to markets, this changed from the 1980s, especially with the launch of the 3rd August Consumer Goods Movement 1984 (*8wol 3il Inmin Sobipumundong*).[[156]](#footnote-156) As the food situation got worse throughout the 1980s, the regime began to tacitly encourage household production, one consequence of which was the growth of new markets where a variety of daily necessities came to be sold, though still technically illegal. Chinese market reforms and increased inflows of goods from China via both Hwagyo (ethnic Chinese permanently in North Korea) and Chosunjok (ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship living in China) also appear to have had a real impact (Choi and Koo 2003, 165-170). Transnational kinship networks played an important role in this stage of the marketization process, exceeding the earlier role played by Japanese returnees.

The role of markets in the trade of imported consumer goods that started in the 1980s was recognized by researchers as far back as the early 1990s. Seo (1994) notes the role of Chinese-Koreans as trade brokers between the Chinese and North Korean economies in a report for the Korean Institute of National Unification (KINU). North Korean refugee testimony at the time indicates that the North Korean government saw Chinese merchants as a problematic source of the spread of ‘anti-socialist phenomena’, and tried to limit their access to the country and control what they could bring in, even going so far as to ban them from engaging in trade inside North Korea in 1991. Chinese merchants protested in front of the Musan offices of the ruling Workers’ Party and in Jilin, ultimately managing to get the ban lifted (Seo 1994, 35-36).[[157]](#footnote-157) This led to the creation of specialized Chinese markets near the border, spaces where taxes could be collected and the police could ensure that contraband was not being sold.

In 1996, a publication on North Korea’s retail system explained that farmers’ markets in North Korea were being opened every ten days according to orders issued by Kim Il-sung, with each county being permitted to have one market (Hong 1996, 118). In May 1985, the cabinet issued an order that allowed for each county to have up to two markets, and for them to open daily (Hong 1996, 119). The publication does not disclose the source of these claims, but if they are accurate, it may imply that the government promoted or otherwise accepted a greater role for markets in the 1980s – before attempting to clamp down on them again in the 1990s. Seo (1994, 26), however, claims that markets began to open daily only around 1989.[[158]](#footnote-158)

The South Korean government-controlled North Korea information wire agency (*Naewaetongsinsa*) issued a book in 1995 that included a compendium of information about life in North Korea compiled from the testimonies of North Korean refugees. A somewhat problematic source given close links to state intelligence, it still offers some interesting information about North Korean government policy toward markets. The volume states that post-1990, the North Korean government tried to clamp down on them again in 1992, closing unregistered markets, and briefly restoring the ten-day market regulation (Naewaetongsinsa 1995, 71-72).

This did not last long, either. Subsequent research published in 2000 indicates that by 1993 the government had decided to allow markets to open daily (Jeong et al. 2000, 105) – the table below summarizes the name changes and changes to the operations of markets from 1945-2000. The authors of the study estimated that North Korea had around 300-350 markets in 2000, with each county hosting between one and three marketplaces, and each city between two and five – varying significantly in size (from as little as 66m2 to over 3,000m2) depending on location and interviewee (Jeong et al. 2000, 106).

**Table 14.1 Terms used to refer to markets and how they operated over time (1945-2002)**

[hier Table\_14.1]

Source: Jeong Jeong-gil and Jeon Chang-gon (2000, 105)

In investigating markets before marketization, the contours of three sources of marketization clearly emerge: household production (marketization from below), marketization through foreign sources (marketization from the outside), and economic growth beginning to be led by state agencies (marketization from above). Though it did not welcome them, the North Korean government did not consistently repress markets; it tried to regulate them, though this was done inconsistently and contingent upon other factors such as the pursuit of social stability.

**Marketization from Above, Outside, and Below: 1994-2011**

The conventional view is that marketization spread rapidly through the North Korean economy after 1994. As we have seen, markets existed in many parts of the country prior to this and, from the 1980s expanded considerably in scope. But at this point much of the country’s economic activity was still in state hands, and most products were produced within SOEs or state-controlled collective farms. The North Korean government did make a push to bring in foreign investment and increase trade with the outside world by passing Joint Venture Laws and opening a Special Economic Zone in Rajin-Sonbong (now ‘Rason’) on the northeast border with China and Russia. There was also an attempt to set up an SEZ in Sinuiju on the northwest border with China. However, neither of these efforts yielded significant results for the North Korean economy, as discussed in Chapter 14 of this volume, or the institutional position of market forces and mechanisms within it.

The process by which an increasing amount of production and marketing slipped from the state’s grasp after 1994 has been branded ‘spontaneous marketization’ by Lee (2005); Lee (2009, 94) dubbed it ‘primitive marketization’. Similarly, Haggard and Noland (2007, 33) note ‘the first stirrings of the “reform from below”’ that occurred during the famine’. Either way, this stage of marketization was a consequence of twin economic shocks: (1) the loss of oil and other products from North Korea’s major trade partner, the Soviet Union; and (2) an 80 per cent drop in grain imports from China in 1994 (from over 1 million tons to just 200,000) due to reduced corn production in the Chinese Northeast and Sino-North Korean diplomatic conflict (Lee 2009, 93). To this we may add (3) the less readily quantifiable psychological trauma of the death of Kim Il-sung on 8 July 1994. These shocks played important roles in North Korea’s growing food crisis in the early 1990s and the famine that resulted.

From 1994-1998, the market system described in the previous section saw a sudden influx of new participants as people struggled to survive in rapidly changing (i.e., deteriorating) circumstances. Ad hoc markets, known by colourful names like ‘grasshopper markets’ (*maeddugisijang*) and ‘alley markets’ (*golmoksijang*) sprang up near public areas where people often gathered, including rivers, town centres, and near existing markets.[[159]](#footnote-159) Traders built up connections and created new networks, with fixed market locations soon beginning to emerge as centres of commerce (Joung 2011, 30).

To give some sense of the scale of marketization in the 1994-1998 period, it is worth citing the findings of now-Minister of Unification, Kim Yeon-cheol, who wrote a report on the collapse of the PDS in 1997. The table below that notes the representative markets in North Korea by region circa 1995-6 is from his report and gives some indication of how large markets had become in major North Korean cities and on the border by 1995-1996.

**Table 14.2 North Korea’s major urban markets circa the late 1990s**

[hier Table\_14.2]

Source: Kim (1997, 33)

The period of 1998-2002 can be described as a grey period, marked by a fluctuating mixture of government suppression of markets coupled to adjustment to the new marketized realities. In 1998, Kim Jong-il officially became leader of North Korea; from this point on, the regime began a dual policy of pressuring informal markets and institutionalizing existing markets (Joung 2011, 19). In this way, markets gradually evolved from ad hoc gatherings of pedlars on the sides of streets and rivers jumping and running from officialdom to formalized stalls and, increasingly, physical shops.

The 1 July Economic Management Improvement Measures (7.1 Gyeongjaegwalligaesonjochi) of 2002 are sometimes considered a watershed in North Korea’s contemporary economic history, with the creation of ‘General Markets’ (*jonghap sijang*) in 2003 being the key follow-up measure to these reforms. This view is overblown, but the measures did nevertheless have an impact on marketization processes. Yang Moon-su (2009, 131) offers an appraisal of how the reforms of 2002 and 2003 offered a significant departure from established institutional arrangements, especially after 2003 when North Korean trade companies could sell imports directly on the market. The regulations given in the table below showing a list of products that could be sold on farmers’ markets appear to have remained unchanged post-2002.[[160]](#footnote-160) However, while the sale of imports on markets remained illegal, this did not stop trade companies and traders from doing so (Yang 2009, 124). Foreign trade companies will be discussed further below.

**Table 14.3 The legality of the acquisition and sale of different products and assets in North Korean markets**

[hier Table\_14.3]

Source: Yang (2009, 124)

Joung (2011) points to the growing institutionalization of markets through a policy of ‘shop creation’ (*sangjeomhwa*) – i.e., turning stalls into actual shop spaces, a policy implemented post-2002. The 2006 *Commerce Common Sense Dictionary* (*Sangeopsangsiksajeon*) obtained by one of the authors from the DPRK indicates that the policy of ‘shop creation’ had become official policy by then (Commerce Common Sense Dictionary 2006, 128). But at the same time as markets were becoming more deeply institutionalized, the state sought to rein in rapidly spreading decentralized economic processes. From 2005 to the infamous currency reform of November 2009, a concerted effort was made to clamp down on marketization altogether (Green 2016; Yang 2012).[[161]](#footnote-161) Part of this was an effort to control access to goods imported from China.[[162]](#footnote-162) This indicates the significant, if difficult to quantify, role that Chinese imports had come to play in North Korea’s retail and consumption economy.

The policy failed for a number of reasons. The biggest single cause was precisely the same one that prompted markets to spread in the first place: the state was simply unable to provide for the needs of its people. The collapse of the PDS meant that workers, farmers, and agents of the state all had strong incentives to engage in market activities, including illegal border crossing into China, in order to survive.

In addition, deconstructing the populated market system and substituting a command administrative system for it would have required reintegrating supply chains and complex commercial relations back into the state, a task for which the government had neither plans nor capabilities. Market actors in North Korea did not only have funds; they also had social capital, networks (Kwak 2013), experience and expertise. Deconstructing the markets would have required the state to make all the necessary actors into state employees or replace them with state employees who could perform the necessary roles. It would have been nothing less than a root-and-branch remodelling of an economic system that had evolved over almost 40 years. In the end, the state’s efforts never approached anything resembling success.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the state has moved rapidly. Where once it was a passive observer of a marketization that it did not initiate, the state has become a facilitator of marketization, and recently an active market participant (Hastings 2016).

Some of the roots of this relative fluency can be traced back to the early 1990s when trading organs were given financial autonomy, with their own separate bank accounts. Trading organs also obtained the right to trade in markets under the 2002 reforms (Yang 2008, 7). Pivotal to the operation and ‘competitive advantage’ of Foreign Trade Companies (FTCs) and other organizations is the ‘*wakeu* system’ of trade permits. These confer exclusive rights to deal directly with foreign clients. FTCs without *wakeu* are forced to ‘borrow’ them from companies and agencies that hold them, and usually have to pay a fee for the privilege (Yang 2008, 12-13, 16-18). Centralized granting of rights to trade within the market system post-2002 is the central point of ‘marketization from above’: foreign trading state institutions are officially recognized as the sole legal conduit through which goods can enter and leave the market system.

Yet these ‘arms of the state’ already had in any case a great deal of autonomy before this and engaged in many illegal trade activities long before 2002; hence, the reforms effectively ex-post legalized what had been widespread practice (Yang 2008, 21-22). The state proved often unable to exercise control over prices that these organizations pay and levy, and while many such organizations are supposed to render 70% of their profits to their superior institution via state bank accounts, there seemingly was – and there presumably remains – a great deal of ‘tax evasion’ (Yang 2008, 22-25).

Access to foreign trade, overwhelmingly with China, has proved instrumental in funding the elite and military economies of North Korea over the past thirty years. The FTC network has been at the centre of operations, and the supply of Chinese consumer goods and foreign currency (via exports of raw materials) is in the hands of institutions that are, on paper, owned and run by important parts of the central state/party/military apparatus. Yet decentralization, both in the form of fiscal autonomy and access rights to foreign and domestic markets, has been a key driver of both marketization at home and expansion of foreign trade abroad. Moreover, the rise of the semi-autonomous FTC has been marked not only by capital accumulation outside of the state, but also by the rise of corruption in both management of nominal state assets and in trade; in other words, smuggling (Yang 2008, 26-30). Decentralized access to foreign markets has done much to prolong the Kim regime, yet it has also created a class of quasi-independent wealthy trading entrepreneurs who cross the border with China with relative ease.

**Toward a Synthesis**

The questions at the heart of the debate over North Korean marketization today look something like this: whose market is it? With the institutional arrangements as they are, can marketization serve as the basis for future economic growth? What would a more marketized type of growth look like, and who would benefit? The role of foreign trade has been in a pro-market direction for much of the last 30 years, but to what kind of market and to whose ultimate benefit we cannot compellingly say. Competing views share the same limited evidentiary basis, and the ultimate power of the North Korean state in economic affairs and how this power will be exercised remains an open question – one that is often starkly politicized, the pre-eminent failing of South Korean academia in this area of inquiry.

There are more scholars working on North Korean economics than a short chapter can do justice to, and the material cited herein deals largely with the later Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il periods. The situation under Kim Jong-un appears to be significantly different, with most state-owned enterprises now being given the right to trade on domestic and foreign markets, and even enter into joint ventures with foreign partners. Further decentralization must be presenting a challenge to centralized decision-making, and thus potentially also to social control, but it is not clear how that challenge manifests.

Under Kim Jong-un, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have been given greater power to find and keep talented workers through the ability to set wages. This step may also serve as a legal mechanism to place market actors inside state firms and give them a legal position within SOEs. SOEs have the right to innovate and develop products, set prices for products they have developed, and enter into contracts on commercial terms with other state enterprises (so-called ‘order contracts’). They also have more say over wages and other incentives – including loan contracts with market actors. In many very important regards, North Korean factory managers are becoming more empowered to act as capitalists, albeit on behalf of the state.

South Korean literature hints at an important role for foreign trade in extractive industries, and at the significant role that foreign capital has played in deepening marketization processes. Yet, the overall role of China in the process is difficult to measure – and fluctuates for a whole host of reasons. Whether transnational networks have promoted greater central control over markets or greater fragmentation away from the state remains to be seen. The answer may well prove to be a messy one: both yes and no. What is clear is a paradox: the mechanism which confers the funds that the Kim family regime uses to survive has also resulted in the emergence of a market system that can no longer be controlled by *diktat* from Pyongyang.

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Part V

Human Rights and Identity in the Borderland and Beyond

The year-long documentary gathering process and 2014 publication of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on North Korean human rights was unprecedented in scale but dealt with abuses that were well known. The issue of North Korean human rights had been a focus of international attention before and a specific concern of the United States, as seen in the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. Throughout the 2000s, defector-migrant memoirs (or biographies, such as Blaine Harden’s *Escape from Camp 14*) proliferated and helped to enhance the general popularization of the plight of North Korean citizens and those defecting from the country.

But the COI report has had some interesting and unpredictable responses. North Korea’s various state responses to the COI report have been manifold. To the expected rhetorical blasts in Rodong Sinmun and verbal protestations by its diplomats in Geneva and New York, the DPRK has added physical disruption of events featuring North Korean defector testimony and videos discrediting individual defector narratives. Pyongyang has also published an extensive human rights counter-report of its own, which unsurprisingly disputes the findings of the COI report and that of many human rights-focused NGOs – that human rights are being grossly violated in North Korea. The COI has also coincided with a tremendous drive to document North Korean human rights conditions via escapees who come via China and to varying degrees socialize there; defection or exile is not merely an inter-Korean concern.

Among the many things that an international focus on human rights in North Korea has done is to bring to the forefront the related topics of identity, dignity, belonging, and law. What does it mean to be ‘illegal’? How does the action of crossing a border change the way one is perceived and perceives oneself? The chapters in this section explore different aspects of this complicated web of issues.

Chapters by Nicholas Hamisevicz and Andrew Yeo look specifically at the human rights of North Koreans in China, using a plethora of documented evidence. Sarah Bregman brings gender into focus, looking specifically at imagery of female defectors circulating in an altered international media landscape and public sphere. Hee Choi, a defector-migrant herself, considers the social and legal dimensions of defector-migrants residing in China and Ed Pulford looks at differing manifestations of Korean identity, or ‘Koreanenss,’ in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture since the end of the Cold War.

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**15 Land of Promise or Peril?**

The Sino-North Korea Border Space and Human Rights

*Nicholas Hamisevicz and Andrew Yeo*

**Abstract**

For many North Koreans, crossing the border with China brings economic opportunities and the first route of escape from North Korea. However, those illegally traversing the border and intent on defecting face serious risks in China. This chapter analyzes the North Korea-China border region as an important space for exploring North Korean human rights and the promises and perils confronting North Korean defectors inside China. Using NGO and UN reports, defector testimonies, interviews with NGO activists, and official government statements, we explore the plight of defectors in China and the significance of border crossings. Specifically, we examine the experiences of defectors upon entering China and the position of the Chinese government regarding defectors and North Korean human rights.

**Keywords:** defectors, human rights, trafficking, China, economic migrants, activists

**Introduction**

I had often heard you could make a lot of money in China. So I decided to go to China and crossed the Tumen River in October 2004 with a North Korean man. I had been introduced to this man by a friend. The man took me to Longjing and handed me over to an ethnic Korean woman. The woman said she would find me a job and made me stay there for one week. Then, I was sent to Zhucheng in Shandong Province where I was handed over to a 36-year-old Han Chinese man who had been waiting for me at the station. I had to live with him in the Han Chinese village for almost two years… Right now, I am working in a South Korean restaurant earning 1,200 yuan per month. As I am living with other North Korean women, I sometimes go to karaoke bars with them to make extra money. All I want is to earn enough money to return to North Korea where my parents are.

– Case 46, Ms. Jung in Shandong Province, born in 1983(Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2009)

In April 2009, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) released the report, *Lives for Sale, which* included the personal testimony of 53 North Korean women living in China. The above excerpt from Ms. Jung’s account does not represent all of the women’s experiences who cross the China-North Korea border. However, her statement does illustrate the simultaneous push and pull mechanisms that put North Korean defectors in China in a precarious, if not abusive, place.

This chapter analyzes the North Korea-China border region as an important space for exploring North Korean human rights and the perils and promises confronting North Korean defectors inside China. On one hand, the border area provides greater economic opportunities and the first route of escape for North Korean defectors seeking freedom. On the other hand, North Koreans illegally traversing the border face serious risks in China, including exploitative labour conditions, poverty, and discrimination. The gendered nature of illegal border crossings and North Korean migration has also resulted in additional abuse for women, many of whom are subjugated to violence, sexual abuse, and forced marriages. Based on NGO and UN reports, defector testimonies, interviews with NGO activists, and official government statements, we highlight the opportunities and challenges experienced by North Korean defectors who traverse the Sino-North Korean border, drawing particular attention to human rights issues. By emphasizing experiences of abuse and persecution, but also care and hope from defectors who enter China, we address what one activist coined the ‘necessary evils’ confronting defectors residing (or trapped) in the Sino-North Korea border space.[[163]](#footnote-163)

Our chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, we provide a brief background regarding the North Korea-China border space, the demographic environment on the China side of the border, and the motives of North Koreans, particularly women, fleeing to China. In section two, we discuss the human rights situation confronting North Koreans in China and the Chinese government’s role in facilitating conditions of abuse for North Koreans. Section three then discusses North Korean human rights as practiced in the Sino-North Korea border space. Although human rights groups help facilitate passage to freedom for North Koreans, numerous risks and dangers attached to border crossings also cast a pall over defectors, particularly those precariously trapped in legal limbo in China. Section four concludes with our thoughts and observations regarding the North Korea-China border space in respect to ongoing human rights problems.

**Traversing the North Korea-China Boundary**

As the editors of this volume note in the Introduction, ‘refugee migrants making the flight from the DPRK through China constitute a new interstate political development and migratory pattern for peoples of North Korea’.[[164]](#footnote-164) For North Koreans, defecting into China is rife with difficulties.[[165]](#footnote-165) Border guards, prisons, human trafficking, prostitution rings, low wages for dangerous work, and the lack of legal status await the North Korean defector who successfully navigates his or her way into China. Yet for these illegal migrants, China still holds the promise of money, food, medicine, and merchandise. Most importantly, it exists as a stepping-stone to eventual political freedom. Before delving into the promises and perils of border crossing, this section presents basic information regarding the demographics of the border space and the economic and political motivations behind defection.

**Demographics**

North Korean defectors are by definition undocumented migrants in China. Estimates of both defectors and legal North Korean migrants in the border region therefore vary. In 2005, the humanitarian organization Good Friends estimated that the number of DPRK citizens in the Chinese provinces along the DPRK border was 50,000 (Cho 2013, 459). In 2006, the International Crisis Group estimated the number to be 100,000 based on interviews with local Chinese and Korean-Chinese interlocutors and other NGO reports (International Crisis Group 2009, 1). In a more recent article published in 2017, the *Financial Times* provided estimates of up to 200,000 North Koreans in China (Harris and Peel, 2017).

According to an HRNK report, 97.1 per cent of the Korean-Chinese population live in the three northeast provinces (2009, 17). A 2010 survey by Professor Courtland Robinson of Johns Hopkins University estimated the total number of North Korean citizens in the three northeastern provinces of China - Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning - at 6824 with an additional 7829 children born to North Korean mothers (Do et al. 2015, 429). In 2015, the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) estimated the total number of North Koreans living in the three Chinese border provinces[[166]](#footnote-166) to be around 8708 (with a range of at least 4402 and less than 13,706) adults and 15,675 (at least 11,028 and less than 21,214) children (Do et al. 2015, 429).[[167]](#footnote-167) Jilin Province is of particular significance since it is the province where most North Koreans first arrive when defecting into China (HRNK 2009*,* 18).

The large number of ethnic Koreans residing along the border has made it more feasible for defectors to be absorbed into the border space in China. As journalist Blaine Harden writes, ‘The area is not all that foreign – or unwelcoming – to Korean speaking migrants. When defectors cross into China, the first ‘foreigners’ they encounter are usually ethnic Koreans who speak the same language, eat similar food, and share some of the same cultural values’ (Harden 2012, 147). As HRNK’s *Lives for Sale* report states, ‘the presence of culturally similar, linguistically connected populations on the other side of the border offers an advantage to the refugees’ (HRNK 2009, 19).[[168]](#footnote-168) Cultural similarities notwithstanding, however, North Korean defectors are not necessarily treated with kindness or sympathy from Korean-Chinese people. Some ethnic Koreans in fact contribute to the trafficking and abuse directed at North Korean women in China.

**Motivation for Defection**

Entering China often requires crossing one of two rivers – the Yalu or Tumen River – which demark much of the border space between the two countries. Although border security ebbs and flows depending on political and economic conditions in North Korea, and to a lesser extent China, the border itself remains relatively porous. It is assumed that defections have become more difficult since the beginning of the Kim Jong-un era given the noticeable decrease in North Korean defectors entering South Korea since 2012 noted in Table 15.1. For instance, the 1418 North Korean defectors entering South Korea in 2016 amounted to only about half of the 2706 defectors who arrived in 2011.[[169]](#footnote-169)

**Table 15.1 Number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea, 2006-2016**

[hier Table\_15.1]

Data: Ministry of Unification

The vast majority of North Koreans fleeing into China do so for economic reasons. Although somewhat dated, a survey conducted between August 2004 and September 2005 by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland found that 95 per cent of defectors surveyed who were still living in China fled due to economic hardship. In contrast, political motivations for leaving were a distant second with under two percent (Haggard and Noland 2011, 30). An October to November 2008 survey of North Korean defectors living in South Korea found that 57 percent of those defectors surveyed left for economic reasons (Haggard and Noland 2011, 31). This pattern would appear to confirm the Chinese government’s claim that the North Koreans are ‘economic migrants’ rather than refugees fearing persecution. However, as economic circumstances in a totalitarian regime such as North Korea are closely tied to political characteristics, including restrictions on private activity, the authors urge exercising ‘cautio[n] in drawing a sharp line between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ motives…’(Haggard and Noland 2011, 31). The border provinces in North Korea such as North Hamgyong are populated with citizens more likely to come from a lower *songbun*, or social class, making them less likely to receive full economic and material support from the North Korean government.

Unsurprisingly, interviews with defectors who fled during or shortly after the great famine in the late 1990s were driven into China in search of food. Although hunger was a major driver for crossing the border, additional political-economic factors also contributed to increased migration throughout the 2000s. This included frustration with the lack of economic opportunities, loss of political status, political persecution because of one’s family history or crime committed by a relative, or a desire to live under better economic conditions as witnessed in China or South Korea (Human Rights Watch2002).

At the border, the promises and perils come into plain view. The lights from China and the shallow or frozen river make it seem entirely possible for a defector to leave North Korea and begin a new life. The positive aspects of traversing boundaries are even more palpable if the defector has family members in China they can turn towards for assistance.[[170]](#footnote-170) Once crossing the river, defectors increase their access to material goods, economic opportunities, and potential freedom. The promise of escape and freedom, however, is tempered by numerous risks and hardship confronting North Korean defectors in China. The borderland thus exists as a temporary space as most defectors seek to move onward to a third country such as Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam, or Laos in hopes of reaching South Korea.

**North Korean Human Rights and the Risks of Border Crossing**

For most North Koreans seeking to escape poverty or political repression, China becomes the first leg of the journey. Some may cross on their own, perhaps with little forethought. However, thousands of North Koreans who defect receive support from a network of groups and individuals, whether such networks are driven by altruistic motives or more nefarious purposes.

**Good Samaritans**

On the altruistic end, human rights organizations and Christian church groups facilitate an ‘underground railroad’ of supporters and safe houses to help North Koreans find passage to freedom (Becker 2003; Kirkpatrick 2014). In the early 2000s, the U.S.-based North Korea Freedom Coalition supported an underground network with the assistance of Korean pastors, Western NGOs, and Chinese or Chinese-Korean brokers. Supported by churches in South Korea and in the United States, Chinese-Korean churches in the Sino-North Korea border area of China offer a safe haven to defectors. For example, defector Joseph Kim recounts in his memoir how after crossing the Tumen River, a Chinese woman suggested he look for a cross to locate a Christian church in Tumen City. After finding a church, he encounters a network of Chinese-Korean Christians who helped him escape to South Korea and eventually the United States (Kim and Talty 2016).

In another example, a Korean-American businessman named Steve Kim, after being released from a five-year prison sentence in China for assisting North Korean refugees, mobilized 318 Partners as a non-profit organization rescuing North Korean refugees and building underground churches inside North Korea (Y. 2013). By 2008, his work had expanded to assisting North Korean women trafficked into China, supporting human rights campaigns and Christian missions work in North Korea along the border regions, and caring for North Korean orphans (Y. 2013).[[171]](#footnote-171)

Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) is another non-profit organization involved in ‘rescue missions’ to fund and support North Korean refugees in China to find safe passage into a third-party country. LiNK presents the following rationale for promoting rescue missions:

After hearing countless stories of North Koreans who have struggled to pay or even find brokers, or were exploited and abused by brokers and other individuals while in search of freedom, we committed to providing a way for North Koreans to make it to safety and freedom without cost or condition. We have steadily garnered information about escape routes through China and Southeast Asia and have established relationships with individuals on the ground who can help us move refugees safely across borders (Liberty in North Korea, 2019).

After crossing the Sino-North Korea border, many defectors do experience the hope and promise of a better life with the support of NGOs, churches, and other sympathetic individuals who may provide temporary food, shelter, or safe passage out of China. Nevertheless, despite ‘success’ stories of North Korean defectors making it out of China, such promises mask the severe risks and perils confronted by defectors once they decide to cross the Sino-North Korea border. Since Kim Jong-un’s succession to power in 2011, the regime has tightened security along border areas and known escape routes, thereby compounding the risks for defectors (Harris and Peel 2017).

**Economic Migrants or Refugees?**

The perils North Koreans face after entering China stem in large part from China’s own policy toward North Korean defectors. China is a signatory of the Refugee Convention of 1951 and the 1967 protocol on refugees. However, as mentioned above, China refers to North Koreans without visas or permits as illegal ‘economic migrants’ rather than ‘refugees’. North Koreans without legal status are thus routinely repatriated back to North Korea (Human Rights Watch 2017). North Korean defectors are not political refugees in need of protection but are instead viewed by the Chinese government as lawbreakers who must be repatriated to their country of origin.

The risk of political persecution or physical harm if repatriated is a key factor in determining whether an individual is granted refugee status. There are indeed North Koreans who cross back and forth into capitalist China transferring goods and money, and thus might be labelled as economic migrants.[[172]](#footnote-172) However, North Korean defectors seeking to escape political hardship may claim entitlement to refugee status given the high likelihood of punishment, including torture, once readmitted back to the DPRK. The UN Commission of Inquiry report on human rights in the DPRK noted that ‘with rare exceptions, every single one of more than 100 persons repatriated from China who were interviewed by the Commission were beaten or subjected to worse forms of torture during interrogations’ (United Nations Human Rights Council 2014, 115). Moreover, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the DPRK assessed that ‘the risk of forced repatriation to and detention in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea…remains high’; thus, the North Korean defectors should be given refugee status and protection once they make it into China based on the Refugee Convention (United Nations Human Rights Council 2017). In the Refugee Convention, ‘articles 1 and 33 together make clear that a state party to the Convention cannot send a refugee back to a place where he or she would likely be persecuted’ (Kurlantzick and Mason 2008, 35).

The Chinese government may have some legal maneuverability in that the Refugee Convention allows an individual state to adopt its own measures in determining refugee status, nor does the Convention specify the minimum requirements necessary for determining refugee status (Kurlantzick and Mason 2008, 35). Despite this potential legal loophole, the UN and other international legal experts have argued that North Korean defectors should be granted refugee status given the high probability of political persecution if repatriated to North Korea (Cohen 2010). China has also signed other international agreements which would protect North Korean refugees if applied. For instance, China signed the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment (the Convention against Torture) in 1986 and ratified it in 1988. The maltreatment, torture, and humiliation North Korean defectors face when in Chinese jails and detention centres violates this convention (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2019).[[173]](#footnote-173)

It is likely that North Korean women have already experienced some form of sexual violence even before crossing into China. Multiple reports and numerous interviews indicate that sexual violence has become normalized in North Korea (Burt 2018 and Human Rights Watch 2018). Respondents described stories of sexual violence in schools, workplaces, government institutions, marketplaces, and at home. A Korea Future Initiative report quotes a North Korean defector: ‘In North Korea, a women’s dream cannot be achieved without being raped or without selling her body’ (Burt 2018, 55). The North Korean government is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and in their limited interaction with the convention, the North Korean government defends its approach toward women’s equality by pointing to its new laws about women and its efforts to propagate the convention’s approach toward women (United Nations 2016). However, in reality, North Korean defectors indicate they were unaware of the new laws the North Korean government issued to address women’s equality (Human Rights Watch 2018). Moreover, defectors say a woman’s only defense against sexual violence is money and good *songbun* (North Korean government assigned socio-economic status) – and even that may not be enough (Burt 2018 and Human Rights Watch 2018).

**Absence of Legal Status**

In addition to not being granted political refugee status by the Chinese government, North Koreans in China face another legal issue when searching for employment. North Koreans in China need proper identification such as a residence permit (*hukou*) or an identification card (*shenfenzheng*) to find legal employment (Chang, Haggard, and Noland 2008, 13). Thus despite the promise of economic opportunities for North Koreans in China, such opportunities remain limited. Moreover, the risks of illegal employment include imprisonment and forced repatriation back to North Korea. A concrete example is given by North Korean defector Hyeonseo Lee. In her memoir, Lee describes a fellow defector, Soo-jin, getting arrested by the Chinese police for not having proper identification. Soo-jin was deported back to North Korea where she was imprisoned and beaten in a *bowibu* holding camp (Lee 2015, 135).

The paranoia and fears that stem from the absence of legal status in China are exacerbated by the dangers of Chinese police and North Korean agents searching for defectors in the borderlands. The governments of China and North Korea reportedly have an agreement to work together to track North Korean defectors in China and repatriate them to the DPRK (PRC Foreign Ministry Treaty Law Department, eds., 2004; North Korea Freedom Coalition 2019; U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2011; Kurlantzick and Mason 2008, 21). There is little reporting to suggest this agreement was terminated. Moreover, it appears North Korean agents are permitted into China and work with Chinese police to track down defectors and bring them back to the DPRK. North Korean agents also reportedly enter into China to capture missionaries aiding North Korean refugees (Kim 2008, 177-179). Some officials allegedly disguise themselves as defectors to locate and arrest actual North Korean defectors (U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2011). Thus, even in China, defectors are not free from the grip of the North Korean state.

**Forced Marriages, Trafficking, Sexual Exploitation**

Even if defectors manage to avoid detection by Chinese authorities or North Korean agents, they are still susceptible to exploitation in the absence of proper legal status. This vulnerability is especially acute for North Korean women who cross into China. Rape, forced marriages, human trafficking, and prostitution happen far too often to female defectors. The UN Commission of Inquiry also revealed testimonies of sexual exploitation, violence, and rape of North Korean defectors in Chinese jails (UN Commission of Inquiry 2014, 128-129).

Sexual exploitation and violence may begin with brokers assisting North Koreans across the Sino-North Korea border. For example, North Korean defector Yeonmi Park in her memoir describes how her mother was raped by their broker soon after entering China (Park 2015, 126). As Park claims, ‘the brokers were rapists and gangsters, and many of the women suffered terribly’ (Park 2015*,* 154). North Korean women are also sold to Korean-Chinese or ethnic Chinese men as brides during the escape process in China and are subjected to sexual abuse (Park 2015, 144-147). Hyeonseo Lee recounts a situation where she was coerced to marry a Korean-Chinese man. In her case, she was introduced by her father’s cousin and his wife. The Korean-Chinese man obtained a Chinese identification card for Hyeonseo, falsely indicating her age as 20, the legal age to marry. She was told she could only receive the coveted identification card after the wedding (Lee 2015, 120).

Forced marriages are particularly pronounced in the three northeastern provinces of China. The skewed gender ratio of the number of males over females in China, a result of China’s one-child policy, contributes to forced marriages near the Sino-North Korea border. Despite their relatively low economic status, however, Chinese families hold power advantages over North Korean defectors because of their lack of legal status.

Human trafficking has become a significant concern among North Korean human rights activists. The U.S. Department of State’s annual human trafficking report downgraded China in 2017, criticizing Beijing for deporting North Koreans and not investigating instances of trafficking (U.S. Department of State 2017, 126). As table 1 indicates, the majority of North Korean defectors (over 70 per cent since 2006) have been women. Given the vulnerabilities of North Korean women who lack formal legal status or Chinese language skills, combined with the financial rewards brokers can reap bringing North Koreans into China, this unfortunately creates significant incentives and opportunities for human trafficking. Women caught in the trafficking business, if not sold into marriage, or after having fled their Chinese husbands, also become involved in sex work. The authors of the HRNK *Lives for Sale* reportconducted interviews with sex workers in Shandong Province and reported the following:

Of the six (defector women), almost all had been sold into forced marriages in rural villages and found the sex trade one of the few options open to them after leaving these marriages. Some desperately needed money to pay for medical operations or treatments their new Chinese families would not, or could not, finance; others needed money to pay for Chinese registration documents for themselves and their children, or to help family members in North Korea. A few entered the sex trade with the knowledge of their new Chinese families who then reportedly received regular payments of money from them (HRNK 2009, 25).

Outside of brothels, North Korean women have been exploited through online pornography. For example, defector Yeonmi Park and her mother worked for a North Korean friend in China who started her own online pornography chat franchise. Through this medium, Park managed to communicate with a number of men from South Korea, one of whom provided her with money to help her try to escape to South Korea (Park 2015, 181-182).

The Chinese government has responded to accusations about violations of North Korean human rights defensively. Beijing persists in its claims that most defectors represent economic migrants (People’s Republic of China 2013, 25). They also remind detractors that they never supported the UN Commission of Inquiry and therefore do not treat the report’s findings seriously (Wu 2013). Finally, as a matter of sovereignty, China has raised cases in which North Korean defectors have broken and undermined Chinese laws, thus justifying North Korean repatriation. Reports that a North Korean defector killed four Chinese nationals near the border area lend credence to Beijing’s claims that North Korean defectors need to be repatriated (Ng and Jiang 2015).

**Conclusion**

Cathcart et al. note that the Sino-North Korea border has become a site of intensified cooperation and competition.[[174]](#footnote-174) This statement may refer to ongoing nuclear tensions on the Peninsula and the diplomatic efforts (or lack thereof) to stave off a looming crisis on the Korean Peninsula. While most attention focuses on the border between North and South Korea, the consequences further north along the Sino-North Korea border are equally significant for Northeast Asia relations.

Below the interstate level, cooperation and competition can be seen among individual actors within the border region. Cooperation among defectors, and between defectors and activists and brokers within the Chinese side of the border can offer the promise of freedom and economic opportunity for North Koreans. Unfortunately, daily life for North Koreans in China unable to leave the border area can also be a miserable experience filled with suffering and abuse. Human rights violations thus persist for North Korean defectors in the border region, even after they leave their country. For some North Koreans then, the perils associated with border crossings begin to overshadow the promise once offered by traversing boundary lines. The Sino-North Korea border region therefore remains an important space for international human rights activists. To secure the rights of North Korean defectors in China, the international human rights community will need to repeatedly press Beijing and Pyongyang to address the plight of North Koreans seeking emancipation from poverty and abuse.

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**16 Celebrity Defectors**

Representations of North Korea in Euro-American and South Korean Intimate Publics

*Sarah Bregman*

**Abstract**

The formation of the North Korean human rights movement in the 1990s coincided with a steady increase in North-South border crossings. This chapter attempts to understand how Cold War power structures and ideologies have intersected with the formation of the North Korean human rights movement and presents an ethnographic description of this movement based on fieldwork conducted in South Korea. Applying Lauren Berlant’s concepts of incipient and diva citizenship to compare the representations in Korean and Euro-American publics of two North Korean women, Park Yeonmi and Kim Ryeon-hui, the chapter explores how North Korean women, who constitute approximately 70 per cent of resettled defectors, have contributed to the North Korean human rights movement.

**Keywords:** North Korean human rights, non-governmental organizations, intimate publics, citizenship, Park Yeonmi, North Korean Human Rights Act

**Introduction**

The North Korean human rights movement emerged amidst the flow of migration from North to South Korea in the post-Cold War period. This movement first gained momentum at the turn of the 21st century, emerging out of a combination of transnational efforts and partnerships involving *talbukin* (lit. ‘escapees from the North’), South Korean activists and religious leaders, and American and European politicians and philanthropists.[[175]](#footnote-175) In 2001, a total of 1044 North Koreans had defected to South Korea, over half of whom were men. Nevertheless, highly gendered images and stories of North Korean suffering increasingly appeared in Euro-American publics. Images of emaciated children, reports of sex trafficking and forced marriage, and defector memoirs in which gruesome stories of torture, rape, hunger, forced infanticide and abortion became a new symbol of political atrocities in the last remaining nation materially divided by Cold War ideologies. Yet, these images have taken on different meanings in South Korean and Euro-American publics. In South Korean publics, these images reinforce the need to overcome the north-south border for the sake of national reconciliation, reunification, and divided families. Euro-American interpretations of and reactions to these images have been more hegemonic and only made previous ideological borders more pronounced.

As the influence of the United States in Korean politics has lasted well beyond the Cold War, this chapter draws on Lauren Berlant’s work on intimate publics, citizenship, and national fantasies, in an attempt to understand how Cold War power structures and ideologies have affected the formation and practices of the North Korean human rights movement. Berlant (1997) introduced intimate publics in her book *The Queen of America goes to Washington City,* explaining that intimate publics overstate individual agency, obscure long-standing structural and historical inequalities, and reproduce America’s national fantasy by exploiting the desires and labour of immigrants. In this chapter I apply Berlant’s concepts of the incipient and diva citizenship to analyse the involvement of *talbukin* women in North Korean human rights movements and show how human rights reinforces particular national fantasies in the United States and South Korea. The concept of incipient citizenship underscores the ways in which the energy, passion, desire, and ultimately agency, of immigrant women is exploited to reproduce America’s national fantasy. In contrast, diva citizenship makes visible the ways subordinated women can at particular moments in history reopen fixed social structures and make new radical social possibilities sharing intimate, personal suffering and effectively extending personal suffering to the experience of the nation as a whole. Unlike an incipient citizen, whose social belonging is dependent on partial or limited citizenship, a diva citizen enacts agency on a national scale (Berlant 1997, 223).

My interest in models of citizenship was sparked by interactions with the North Korean human rights movement. Initially, I volunteered as the education coordinator and grant writer for nine months in 2014 and 2015 at a non-governmental organization (NGO) for *talbukin* in Seoul, which had been funded in part by the US State Department. Later I gained permission from the NGO director to conduct interviews with interns, *talbukin* students, staff, and several donors. In Seoul, I was shocked by the disproportionate number of foreign interns from the United States, France, and Germany, foreign funding from the United States and Europe, and a general lack of concern with educational programmes to support *talbukin* women, who comprised an overwhelming majority of *talbukin* in South Korea. Having observed and participated in this movement since 2014, I have come to recognize that these NGOs have been at the heart of the production and reproduction of negative images of North Korea and the construction of oppressed North Koreans in need of liberation.

These observations echo fundamental questions raised by anthropologists about whether human rights work in the post-Cold War period itself is a form of moral imperialism.[[176]](#footnote-176) These concerns resonate with the increasingly frequent appearance of women in the North Korean human rights movement of Euro-America and raise important questions regarding the role of North Korean women in the North Korean human rights movement.

These broader shifts in critical perceptions of human rights movements during an emerging ‘War on Terror’ in the West coincided with a sudden demographic shift in *talbukin* entering South Korea in 2001. Currently, women from the northeast provinces of North Korea currently comprise more than 70 per cent of *talbukin* in South Korea (MOU 2019). The gendering of north-south migration is important when considering how it intersects with the formation of the North Korean human rights movement. In what ways have *talbukin* women contributed to the narratives and discourses of the North Korean human rights movement in various national public spheres? Why do some women’s stories come to occupy a privileged place in Euro-American media while other stories and counternarratives are silenced? Is the growth of the North Korean human rights movement a positive indication that *talbukin* in South Korea, Europe, and America have been empowered and liberated?

**Euro-American Power, Human Rights, and the Production of ‘Celebrity’ Defectors**

Representations of oppressed North Koreans in need of liberation are at the centre of the Euro-American North Korean human rights movement. Prison escapee memoirs and documentaries of the North Korean refugee crisis, which were directly and indirectly produced and circulated by Christian and anti-communist activists, were the beginning of a new genre of North Korean suffering in the post-Cold War era. The first prison memoir, *Eyes of the Tailless Animals,* was written by Lee Soon Ok in 1999,[[177]](#footnote-177) and ‘the second, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang,* was co-authored by Kang Chol-hwan with ‘the French anti-communist author’ Pierre Rigoulot.[[178]](#footnote-178) The *talbukin* authors of both prison memoirs were invited to provide testimony regarding North Korean human rights abuses at both national and international hearings, first at the 2002 US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea and later for the 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry report.[[179]](#footnote-179) In early 2000, the documentaries *North Korea Shadows and Whispers* (2000) and *Seoul Train* (2004) were released to politicize the movement of North Koreans in China. That is to say, these films partially visualized and displayed the effects of regional policies on the movement of North Koreans in the borderlands between North Korea and China in an effort to incite and justify political action directed at the North Korean and Chinese governments. These representations of North Korean suffering themselves incited fear, sympathy, and rage throughout Euro-America and provided moral justification for the intervention and interference of the United States in Korean politics.

This new genre coincided with critical political events taking place in the United States. In 2001, George W. Bush was inaugurated as the 43rd President of the United States, and in his 2002 State of the Union address he identified North Korea as part of ‘an axis of evil’. Later that year, US Senator Sam Brownback invited Lee Soon Ok as a ‘distinguished witness’ at the United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Citizenship. Brownback, a Kansas Republican, went on to sponsor the North Korean Human Rights Act, or NKHRA.[[180]](#footnote-180) The US congress formally passed the NKHRA in 2004, allotting $24 million a year ‘to promote human rights and freedom in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and for other purposes’ and authorizing the US State Department to ‘provide grants to private, nonprofit organizations to support programmes that promote human rights, democracy, rule of law, and the development of a market economy in North Korea’ (United States Senate 2002). It is important to note that Congressional efforts led by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) to ‘document North Korean human rights abuses’ is ongoing in 2019.[[181]](#footnote-181)

The role of non-governmental organizations in promoting US government values has a long history in Asia. Anthropologist David Price (2016) points to clear and explicit links between the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and covert anti-communist operations in Asia during the Cold War, which were concealed as academic or humanitarian organizations such as Radio Free Asia and The Asia Foundation. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which is funded by the US Congress, was established in 1983 under the Ronald Reagan administration to ‘strengthen democratic institutions around the world’ (NED 1984). In 2003, NED facilitated a conference titled Gulag, Famine, and Refugees: The Urgent Human Rights Crisis in North Korea’ after which it presented its Annual Democracy Award to An Hyuk, Kang Cheol-hwan, Lee Soon Ok, and Yoon Benjamin (NED 2003). The first North Korean human rights NGO, the Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), was founded in Seoul in 1996 and predated the passage of the NKHRA. Directors of NKHR included 22 founding members at Jongno Catholic Church (NKHR 1996). In Washington, the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) was founded in 2001 and supported by anti-communist activists and politicians. Perhaps the most prominent anti-communist Christian involved at HRNK is Co-Vice Chair Suzanne Scholte, who additionally founded the US non-profit The Defense Foundation (DFF) in 1987 to promote ‘a strong national defense’ and ‘freedom, democracy and human rights abroad’. In addition to running for Congress as a Republican from Virginia, Scholte has written a number of contributions about North Korean human rights violations for such groups as the non-profit organization Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (c.f., Scholte 2014).

Fundraising events in the United Kingdom revealed further transnational connections and partnerships between anti-communist and Christian networks. In addition to US State Department funding for defector organizations through the NKHRA, a United Kingdom charity, Prospero World, facilitated the fundraising event ‘How to Make Korea a Better Place’. In my interview with the United Kingdom charity that organized the 2015 event, Prospero World, I learned that they raised £71,108 and distributed funds to three organizations: People for the Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE) (£15,044 and £25,988), Radio Free North Korea £10,038), and Chosun Exchange (£10,038). Notably, Prospero’s funding report revealed that the £10,000 donated to Radio Free North Korea was made by Scholte’s Defense Forum Foundation.[[182]](#footnote-182)

In the five years following the passage of the NKHRA, there was a sudden surge in NGOs doing work related to North Korea. Many of these NGOs received direct or indirect funding from the US government in the form of US State Department or National Endowment for Democracy (NED) grants and opened offices in South Korea. In her master’s and doctoral work, Seo Yeon Park (2011) attempted to identify these NGOs and found nearly 300 relevant organizations. She noted that the Ministry of Unification maintains a database to monitor domestic NGOs, especially those related to North Korea; yet, only a fraction of the NGOs she found were formally registered at the Ministry of Unification. The number of North Korean human rights NGOs in South Korea was remarkable at the time for two reasons. First, most NGOs claimed to provide services for *talbukin*, such as resettlement or education assistance, which the South Korean government already provided through Hanawon Resettlement Centres throughout South Korea. Second, the number of North Korean human rights NGOs was disproportionate to the number of *talbukin* in South Korea at the time.

My own interviews with South Korean human rights activists at a small North Korean human rights NGO revealed a hostile political and social climate that dissuaded local engagement. South Korean student interns and older South Korean activists told me that doing work related to North Korean human rights was dangerous, because ‘in South Korea, helping North Koreans is considered communist’. One older activist explained that South Korean activists working for the socially vulnerable (*sahoe yakja*) have to be cautious, citing the tragic deaths of South Korean citizens resisting their forced eviction under South Korean development plans in Yongsan. Many South Korean activists involved in local human rights issues viewed this event, known as the ‘Yongsan Tragedy’ (*Yongsan chamsa*), as a reminder of the risks of resistance and activism, while others have framed this tragedy as a murder and have ceaselessly searched for a ‘third party’ perpetrator.[[183]](#footnote-183) This context, in part, explains why South Korean NGOs working on reunification or North Korean human rights have struggled to operate without the economic and political support of Euro-American governments, volunteers, and donors.

At the same time, the public endorsement of these NGOs in South Korea by explicitly anti-communist Euro-American groups raises important questions about sustained US involvement and intervention in Korean politics and the silencing of alternative frameworks or interpretations of human rights. Christine Hong (2014, 8) notes that ‘the past decade has been witness to the consolidation of a U.S.-funded transnational advocacy, propaganda, and intelligence network under the elastic banner of North Korean human rights’.[[184]](#footnote-184) NGOs with ties to Washington have looked for, coached, and funded *talbukin* who can speak to Euro-American publics as evidence of the efficacy of these programmes and the universality of democratic values.

Three human rights NGOs – People for the Succesful Corean Unification (PSCORE), Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR), and Liberty in North Korea (LINK) – are particularly noteworthy for their explicit ties to Washington and their role in producing so-called ‘celebrity’ defectors over the past decade. LINK, which has maintained an active partnership with HRNK in Washington, was founded at Yale on 27 March 2004 by two Korean-American students, Adrian Hong[[185]](#footnote-185) and Paul Kim, shortly after the passage of NKHRA. Initially, LINK operated on a small budget of $35,076 USD, most of which was listed as ‘contributions’. In 2006, their income soared. Freedom House, an NGO founded in 1941 ‘to promote freedom and democracy around the world’ gave LINK a grant in the amount of $29,990 (LINK 2006).[[186]](#footnote-186) The following year, in 2007, LINK had established an office in Seoul. Likewise, in 2006, People for the Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE) was founded in Seoul by North Korean Defector Kim Young-il and received a multi-year grant from the US State Department. PSCORE received between $350,000 and $375,000 from the US State Department between 2011 and 2013, which was partially matched by the South Korean Ministry of Unification and the City of Seoul over the same period.[[187]](#footnote-187) Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR) arrived in South Korea later, in 2013, after securing a partnership with the Atlas Foundation. Notably, it was later that year that the United Nations Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry (UNHCR COI) was released. These three NGOs helped to produce three notable celebrity defectors, Lee Hyeonseo, Park Yeonmi, and Shin Dong-hyuk, who have become the face of the North Korean human rights movement in Euro-America.

The next two sections of this chapter trace the representations of two prominent *talbukin* women, Park Yeonmi and Kim Ryeon-hui, in the intimate public spheres of America and South Korea in my attempt to contribute to understandings of the intersection of the North Korean human rights movement and Euro-American power. Berlant (1997, 186) suggests that certain forms of activism ‘subtract personhood from activists’, providing an important starting point for understanding what forms of activism are considered legitimate in America. It is my argument that the appearance and representation of Park Yeonmi as a defector activist in Euro-America reproduces Cold War ideological borders, entrapping rather than empowering her, and reveals a paradox in American human rights discourse. In contrast, Kim Ryeon-hui’s apparently tragic entrapment in South Korea and desire to return to North Korea can be understand as a form of *diva citizenship* (Sturken 2012) in inter-Korean politics of reunification*,* highlighting key differences between South Korean and Euro-American human rights movements. In the sections that follow I attempt to locate the images of Kim and Park in a genealogy of human rights to draw attention to the significance of human rights interpretations and practices for national fantasies and underscore the negative implications of Korea’s ongoing division on the agency and rights of *talbukin.*

**Park Yeonmi: Incipient Citizenship and the Reproduction of Cold War Borders**

One year after meeting TNKR Founder Casey Lartigue in 2013, Park Yeonmi had become an international celebrity defector and the new face of the North Korean human rights movement. By 2014, Park had risen to fame in Euro-America, after telling her story at a TEDx Conference, the Oslo Freedom Forum, and the One Young World Summit in Dublin. The following year, Park published her memoir *In Order to Live* in New York. The BBC (2014) named her one of the Top 100 Global Women, and she received considerable media coverage before she reached her 21st birthday. Park has become an international star through her stories of North Korea, which have increasingly focused on the impossibility of love and emotional and spiritual freedom in North Korea. Park tells of a place where people are driven only by hunger, poverty, and the will to survive.

Euro-American publics have regarded Park as the arbiter of truth and the real voice of North Korean people. English-language accounts of Park are overwhelmingly positive and encouraging, blaming her hardship on the North Korean and Chinese states for ongoing human rights violations. Scholars, journalists, and politicians in America praise Park for her political views, entrepreneurialism, and courage to represent ‘her people’. In Europe, journalists have constructed Park as a sympathetic young woman who escaped from a ‘murderous regime’ (Philips 2014) and who now faces ‘the wrath of North Korea’ (Vollers 2015).

The first critical interpretations of Park’s story appeared in 2014. Journalist Mary Ann Jolley was the first to publish an English-language article in *The Diplomat,* rebuking the rising celebrity before the release of her 2015 memoir. Jolley reveals a number of inconsistencies in Park’s story, points out her political ties to Lartigue’s for-profit libertarian organization ‘Freedom Factory’*,* and castigates Park for unabashedly creating The Yeonmi Park Foundation to solicit donations for her international speaking tour after being selected as one of the Atlas Foundation’s ‘Young Voices’. In early 2015, *The* *Korea Joongang Daily* echoed these critiques in a disparaging editorial about Park and other dishonest defectors. The editorial criticized her for ‘selling out’ to an English-speaking audience and picked apart inconsistencies in her story.[[188]](#footnote-188) Like Jolley, *The Korea Joongang Daily* presented the critical voices of other North Korean defectors, experts, diplomats, and human rights activists. The 2015 article can be rendered as ‘Controversies of Defectors’ Dishonest Testimonies… Overstating Disaster to Raise the Value of their Bodies’; its key concernwas why North Koreans change their stories. The president of Liberty in North Korea was quoted in the article, defending Park and other defectors by contending that just because they reveal new details later, it does not mean that they lied before.

Dramatizing these critiques, the North Korean-sponsored group *Uriminzokkiri* released a short video series in early 2015 intended to discredit Park. The video series scathingly rebukes Park, calling her ‘a human rights puppet’ (*ingwonui moryakgeugui kkokdugaksi*)and ‘a poisonous mushroom that grew out of a pile of shit’ (*omul deomisokaeseo dodanan dokbeoseot*). The video series presents interviews with Park’s family and neighbours in North Korea as evidence of Park’s lies. After the release of the videos, Park admitted that the people who appeared in the videos were in fact her family and neighbours. In a February 2015 Korean-language interview with *New Focus*, Park defends herself, stating: ‘North Korea says that because I can speak English I am a robot doll made and controlled by the US CIA, but even now I am a Hyesan girl’ (Sin 2015). The claims against Park were largely limited to inter-Korean publics, although inconsistencies between Korean and English interviews were briefly explained in a February *North Korean News* article*.* She explained in her interview that she hid some details about her father because she did not want her mother to seem ‘odd’ (Kim 2015). It is important to note that moving together with one’s father is the cultural and social norm throughout much of East Asia, so circumventing or avoiding questions related to her father was likely intentional and necessary for Park in Korean but not in English.[[189]](#footnote-189)

While these efforts to discredit Park took hold in North and South Korean public spheres, in Euro-America her fame and popularity remain relatively unrivalled. In her speaking tours in 2016, Park discursively erased the possibility of love and autonomous selfhood in North Korea and successfully drew sympathy from her Euro-American fans. In Park’s memoir, which she wrote with the help of ghost-writer Maryanne Vollers, she authoritatively explains North Korean culture to her anonymous readers and carefully frames her commentary in human rights discourse to reinforce negative images of socialist states as inherently oppressive spaces in which an individual has no choice and human beings become driven only by the need to survive. It is clear that Park is conflicted throughout the text, as she slips between claims that love could not exist in North Korea, because individuals do not have emotional freedom memories of the innocence and intimacy of life in North Korea. She at times longs for her past, writing that in North Korea ‘there was human intimacy and connection, something that is hard to find in the modern world I inhabit today’ (Park 2015, 25). Yeonmi further describes an ‘innocent’ romance between her and an elite North Korean boy, her father’s affair with a young North Korean woman from Pyongyang, and her insistence that her parents were ‘still in love’ even though their marriage ended in divorce.

In this Euro-American public sphere, she was expected and encouraged to lay bare the intimate details of her past in North Korea and China in exchange for a new life at a prestigious American university and a career as the controversial spokesperson of ‘her oppressed people’. After receiving an offer for admission at Columbia University in 2016, marrying an American in 2017, and giving birth to her son in 2018, it would be easy to conclude that Park has in fact ‘found love and freedom’ in America. Yet, a closer examination and comparison of Park’s previous appearances in South Korean and Euro-American media suggests that the feelings and memories Park is able to express are strictly limited in Euro-American public spheres.

Park was a rising celebrity in South Korea two years after arriving in South Korea with her mother. She had been recruited to star as the ‘North Korean Cinderella’ on the South Korean talk show *Now on My Way to Meet You.*[[190]](#footnote-190)Someone from the resettlement centre, where all North Koreans are re-educated before being integrated into South Korea, had recommended her to the show’s producers. Park and her mother had been living two hours outside of Seoul in a government-subsidized apartment and the show became a life changing opportunity for her. Park was cast because she was different from the majority of North Koreans in South Korea, who are women over thirty years old from the poor northern regions. During the 58th episode, which aired in 2013, the hosts flashed pictures of Park with her mother, father, and older sister, who were all wearing imported Japanese designer clothing. The photo had been taken at a time of severe flooding and acute famine, in 1996, when Park was only three years old. She explains to the host that her mother was known as the ‘Paris Hilton’ of North Korea. The female host gasped in surprise and asks Park, ‘Is the man wearing cool sunglasses your father? He is quite modern!’ The word ‘classy’ (*gogeupseureoun*)flashes across the screen in bright letters, sensationalizing her family while countering the dominant image of North Koreans in South Korea as uneducated, starving, and oppressed northerners who need to be liberated.[[191]](#footnote-191)

After her appearances on *Now on My Way to Meet You,* Park was able to pay to study English on the tropical island of Cebu and later began her own talk show with Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR) founder Casey Lartigue. Their talk show, *North Korea Today,* gave Park access to an international audience and was the linchpin of rise to international fame. Yet, early in her speaking career, Park frequently slipped between exoticizing and defending the lives of elite North Korean women and stressed that there was a sudden shift in sexuality and desire with the emergence of the ‘black market generation’. In Episode Six, ‘Dream Jobs for Women in North Korea’, Latrigue asks Park to discuss ‘particular jobs for ladies’ in North Korea and ideal images of men and women. Park explains that in Pyongyang beautiful girls around fifteen or sixteen years old from all across North Korea are recruited for the top positions entertaining and serving North Korea’s elite. She was recruited when she was just a child but was unable to continue as a teenager after her father was arrested for a large-scale smuggling operation. Each girl was not only picked for her beauty, but for her high status, or *songbun.*

**Kim Ryeon-hui: Diva Citizenship, Human Rights, and Inter-Korean Publics**

Tricked by a broker, who promised her that she could make money in South Korea to help her pay for her medical expenses, Kim Ryeon-hui arrived in South Korea in 2011. She had a husband and daughter, worked in Pyongyang as a dressmaker, and never intended to permanently defect. Kim knew nothing about South Korean laws or customs and did not realize that from the moment she stepped foot on South Korean soil she would become a South Korean citizen and never be permitted to go home to North Korea. Kim had been in South Korea for four years, living in poverty and working at a factory without her family or friends, and she was desperate to find a way to go home. As a married woman with a child, she was not interested in starting over in South Korea.[[192]](#footnote-192) She contacted the North Korean consulate, who persuaded her to spy for her country and collect telephone numbers and contact information from other North Korean defectors. South Korean authorities arrested her on charges of espionage, further foreclosing any possibility that she may have had to get a South Korean passport to leave the country. As a convicted felon, she was not permitted to leave the country, and as a South Korean citizen it was illegal for her to go to North Korea.

Desperate to return to North Korea and not be misunderstood as a traitor, Kim went to the Vietnamese Embassy in Seoul in March 2016 and begged them to grant her political asylum. The embassy explained that she would have to receive official permission from the Vietnamese government. The embassy officials called the South Korean police and forced her to leave. Kim drew the attention of reporters, who watched as she cried and pounded on the walls of the embassy doors and pleaded with them to let her go home to her family (Choe 2016). Kim attempted to draw the sympathy of the Vietnamese public and contacted one of Vietnam’s leading, government-run newspapers, *One World* (*Báo Điện tử Một Thế Giới*). An article was initially published about her situation in Vietnamese on 12 March but was quickly removed. She successfully appealed to the Hong Kong public, where an article was released on the Chinese website of the *The South China Morning Post* on the same day.[[193]](#footnote-193) Unlike the coverage Kim had received in American, European, and South Korean press, *The South China Morning Post* published the North Korean government’s official position on Kim: they demanded that South Korea send her home. One of the earliest stories published about Kim in Europe was printed in a 2015 BBC article. The article dismissed Kim as ‘an exception’ since ‘there are those who succeed in the South’ (Evans 2014).

Photos and videos of a Kim unable to hold back tears have been steadily published in South Korean media and on her personal website since 2015. In each story or video, she makes the same request, ‘Please send me back to my homeland’.[[194]](#footnote-194) There were more than 600 news articles released about Kim in Korean between 2015 and 2019, roughly double the amount of English language coverage.[[195]](#footnote-195) An American journalist from CNN arranged for her to speak virtually with her daughter and husband, who are still in North Korea, showing an image of a Kim and her daughter breaking down in tears. Their conversation was translated into English and circulated in an apparent appeal for international compassion and support. This video failed to gain the sympathy of an international public, and as of March 2019, four years after it was posted on YouTube, it has only reached 80,517 views.[[196]](#footnote-196) Kim’s daughter cries out, ‘Why, why, why can’t my mom come back? Why do we have to go through such suffering?’ The male journalist comments that this is the story of ‘one of thousands of families torn apart’ by the continued division of Korea.

Kim attempted to gain the attention of the human rights movement, arguing that under Article 13 of the Declaration of Human Rights she should be granted the freedom of movement. She held numerous public protests demanding that the South Korean government recognize her human rights and allow her to return to North Korea. The South Korean government and North Korean human rights NGOs failed to seriously consider or address Kim’s claim since it has serious implications not only for the South Korean state’s claim to political legitimacy but also the Euro-American human rights framework around the world. Instead, Euro-American publics have sensationalized her as the first North Korean defector who has ever wanted to return to North Korea, despite other recent reports of defectors who have successfully re-defected to North Korea.[[197]](#footnote-197)

Despite Kim’s overwhelmingly negative experiences with the South Korean government, in the South Korean public sphere Kim eventually gained recognition and sympathy as an example of the suffering of divided families (*isan gajok*) and other victims of division. This has resonated with South Korea’s national experience while eliding the more current causes of her suffering and the political measures that could be taken to resolve her situation. In 2016, Kim’s story gained increasing attention after 12 North Korean female restaurant workers arrived in South Korea. They claimed that their restaurant manager tricked them into going to South Korea. On 22 May 2018, CNN released a surprising article that provided necessary evidence in support of both Kim and the 12 female restaurant workers (Hancocks, Kim, and Seo 2018). The restaurant manager, Heo Hang-il, told international media outlets that South Korea’s spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), had asked him to trick the 12 North Korean waitresses to go to South Korea. In a February 2019 article published in the Korean language news outlet *Tongil News,*[[198]](#footnote-198)Kim’s situation was presented at a press conference together with the 12 restaurant workers as cases of North Koreans who did not choose to come to South Korea but were kidnapped. The chairman of the press conference was quoted in the article as follows: ‘There are humanitarian problems of numerous divided families, but there is a different direction of communication, and by comparison even the government has nothing to say about victims like Kim Ryeon-hui and the 12 employees who were kidnapped by force and not converted’ (Lee Seung-hyeon 2019). The article suggests that forced migration and resettlement occurred as early as August 2000 in South Korea, citing a group of 33 North Koreans whose request to return to North Korea was denied by the South Korean government. One anonymous netizen likened the two cases, writing a 2018 blog entry titled ‘Repatriation of Kim Ryon-hui, 12 Female Employees: The Key to Improving South-North Relations’ (Beureibeuking 2018). Notably, this view was in line with a new government position, expressed by the Ministry of Unification (2018) in its May 14th ‘Weekly Report on North Korea’. After sustained media coverage and support from both Christian and civic groups, the South Korean government finally issued Kim a passport in August 2018.

In contrast to Park, who was eventually rejected as a ‘sell-out’ in South Korea but praised in Euro-America, Kim has been represented sympathetically in South Korean publics of reunification and divided families. Unlike Park, Kim eventually gained the official recognition of *both* North and South Korean governments who view her situation as a tragic example of the ongoing human cost and violence of division. In contrast, the pain of divided families has largely been disregarded in the Euro-American human rights movement. Unlike the majority of middle-aged North Korean defector women whose voices have largely been silenced, I suggest, Kim has exhibited *diva citizenship* in an inter-Korean public sphere because her story resonated with the national experience and trauma of division. Recognizing Kim’s desire to go home would mean that South Korean, American, and European governments would have to recognize the legitimacy and sovereignty of the North Korean state and alternative interpretations of human rights.

**Reproducing Cold War Ideologies: North Korean Human Rights, Euro-American Power, and National Fantasies**

This chapter has suggested that the Euro-American North Korean human rights movement, which I describe as a transnational social formation comprised of North Korean defectors, South Korean political and religious leaders, and Euro-American anti-communist and Christian politicians and activists, has been key in producing and circulating a new genre of North Korean suffering since the late 1990s. The international circulation of these negative images and stories of North Korea in the post-Cold War period, I maintain, has strengthened Euro-American power by reproducing Cold War ideologies, has stripped North Korean immigrants of agency in America, and has ultimately undermined and silenced South Korean human rights movements focused on inter-Korean reconciliation and re-unification.

This movement consistently represents the suffering of the North Korean people as the result of failed governance, implicating not only North Korea but also China and Russia. The North Korean human rights movement, through a series of English-language memoirs, documentaries, speeches, and news stories, has produced a particular image of suffering North Koreans. The North Korean, Russian, and Chinese states are implicitly and explicitly identified as the cause of the North Korean people’s suffering. These stories, most of which are derived from paid interviews with *talbukin,* detail how North Koreans have been imprisoned for selling pots on the black market, killed or tortured for attending Christian churches in China, forcibly prevented from seeking asylum at local embassies in China, and overworked, underpaid, and trapped inside Russian labour camps. At the same time, the suffering of North Koreans in Euro-America and South Korea are silenced.[[199]](#footnote-199)

Inconsistencies between the language and practice of human rights in the North Korean Human Rights Movement and the elision of particular forms of suffering is comprehensible when human rights practices are considered along with the politics of the post-Cold War era. Efforts to alleviate everyday causes of suffering for *talbukin*, such as separation from their family and friends who remain in North Korea, discrimination and isolation, mental and physical health disorders, and poor educational and employment outcomes, have attracted little attention in Euro-America. Emphasis is placed not on the forms of suffering *talbukin* experience because of the ongoing division of the Korean nation, such as laws prohibiting them from contacting or visiting family and friends in North Korea, but the reasons why they *chose* to leave North Korea.

The differences in human rights movements, I hope, were clarified with Berlant’s framework on national fantasies and citizenship. I applied Berlant’s concept of incipient citizenship to the case of Park Yeonmi. As Berlant explained, the constrained citizenship of immigrant women is key for the reproduction of America’s national fantasy. I have argued that Park’s agency or empowerment as the spokeswoman for her ‘oppressed’ people is an illusion, as her story has been weaponized and used to justify infringement in North Korean sovereignty and depends on her public display of desireand lovefor America. I have contended that the images of suffering produced in the North Korean human rights movement and the stories of *talbukin* women have been appropriated to strengthen this national fantasy. It is not remarkable, then, that Euro-American human rights activists have dismissed the experience of Kim Ryeon-hi. In Euro-American publics, stories detailing human rights abuses in communist countries have not only become a valued commodity, providing a source of income for *talbukin* living in precarious neoliberal societies, but also have been presented as evidence at national and international hearings against the North Korean state. Berlant’s concept of diva citizenshipfurther explains why the activism of Kim Ryeon-hi has had a powerful effect on inter-Korean publics. Kim’s dedication to and sacrifice for her nation and family ignited a post-colonial subjectivity and fantasy of national re-unification and reconciliation, highlighting similarities rather than differences between North and South Korea. This radical opening in inter-Korean publics has no use or benefit for Euro-American power; rather, it risks exposing the zones of exclusion in and the violence of Euro-American national fantasies.

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**17 North Korean Border-Crossers**

The Legal Status of North Korean Defectors in China

*Hee Choi*

*Translated by Robert Lauler*

**Abstract**

The many North Koreans living in Northeast China exist in a state of crisis – living hidden lives as illegal residents, never sure when they might be detained and repatriated to North Korea. Females are having children, too, with men beyond normal marrying age, to whom the women have been bought and sold. The need for North Koreans in China to have legal status is abundantly clear, but what should South Korea and the international community do about their legal status? To answer these questions, this chapter looks at the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Chinese legal system, drawing also from the personal experiences of the author as a border-crosser from North Korea.

**Keywords:** UN Refugee Convention, legal status of North Korean defectors, Chinese law, human trafficking, North Korean migration

**Introduction**

We live in a time of global migration, but human beings have always moved to new environments to extricate themselves from poverty, conflict and environmental disasters. North Korean society is no different. While the country faces continued confrontation and conflict with the international community due to its development of nuclear weapons, North Koreans continue to move to new environments to disentangle themselves from poverty.

The positions of North Korean migrants are dependent upon larger structures and questions. The Korean people still confront each other, 75 years after they were divided into two by the political and military forces of foreign powers. The third clause of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) Constitution states that, ‘The territory of the Republic of Korea includes that of the Korean Peninsula and its subordinate cities’ and the ROK government takes the position that those in North Korea are ‘citizens of the Republic of Korea’. This is possible because the Korean War ended in an armistice and the Korean peninsula is still one. As a result, ‘North Korean residents’ (*bukan jumin*) who cross the 38th Parallel or migrate to South Korea via China or Southeast Asian states are protected by the South Korean government as citizens.

However, there is a limit to the direct protection that the South Korean government can give to North Koreans who cross the northern border into China and Russia. This is because of the stance that the international community has toward both Koreas. Korea is regarded as one people but is divided into two states, so North Koreans are viewed as ‘North Korean citizens’ rather than ‘North Korean residents’. There is a clear difference between ‘citizen’ and ‘resident’. ‘Resident’ refers to someone who resides in a specific administrative area, while a ‘citizen’ is part of a country and officially registered by the government – in other words, someone who has ‘nationality’ with a country. The ROK government sees those living in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula as ‘residents’ based on the third clause of the ROK Constitution. The ROK government as a result demands cooperation from the international community on this and has in place a variety of policies to protect North Korean residents wandering in territories other than North and South Korea.

From the moment that they leave the country, North Korean residents go from being referred to as ‘North Korean residents’ to ‘defectors’ (*talbukja*). ‘North Korean defector’ refers to a North Korean resident who has left North Korea by crossing a border. Why, then, are there defectors? The North Korean government seeks to demonstrate the reality of the country through its Internet-based propaganda channel, Uriminjokkiri.[[200]](#footnote-200) However, the website focuses on circumstances of those living in North Korea’s capital, Pyongyang. It is more difficult for a North Korean to get into Pyongyang than to cross the border into China or Russia, as the military surrounds and severely restricts movement in and outside of the capital city (Schwekendiek 2010, 468). The reality of North Korean life can only be grasped not through Pyongyang but through other regional cities.

**What North Korean Defectors are Called and Why It Matters**

Defectors on both sides of the Korean Peninsula have been an issue for a long time. Since 1945, there have been defectors who have chosen to escape both North and South Korea due to the ideological conflict between the two Koreas. The term ‘North Korean defector’ refers to those residents that live north of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL).

Terminology referring to North Koreans living in South Korea has developed over the years, as seen in Table 17.1. Before the 1990s, most defectors were male and former soldiers. During the Cold War, terms used to describe North Korean defectors treated them as symbols that further increased the legitimacy of the South Korean state in its diplomatic war against North Korea. By the 1990s, with the North Korean state veering toward economic collapse, a wider variety of North Koreans from all walks of life left the country, including women, and even children, and terms were therefore used to emphasize their ‘escape’ from North Korea. During the progressive governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s, toned-down terminology was adopted that emphasized both their refugee status and their economic reasons for leaving North Korea, i.e., their seeking of a better life in South Korea.

In English, North Koreans living in South Korea are almost uniformly referred to as ‘defectors’ - this terminology does have Cold War origins but also places emphasis on the fact that North Koreans who leave North Korea face punishment (along with their immediate families) if they return. Illegally crossing the border is considered an act of treason against the state. Broadly speaking, changes of terminology used toward North Korean defectors reflect their changing status in society. While Cold War era defectors - mostly male and former soldiers - were treated with accolades and even jobs, defectors in recent times have elicited mixed views from South Korea’s political elite and the general population. Variously they are described as ‘heroes’, the ‘first steps to unification’, or less positively, ‘state-support cases’. These terms are revealing, but they don’t answer the question of why North Koreans defect in the first place.

**Table 17.1 Changes in terminology referring to defectors**

[hier Table\_17.1]

Fish can peer out of their fishbowls, and it is this that allows them to understand what is happening outside. When a few fish start flapping around violently, they may even fly out of the fish bowl. Those that leave the fishbowl will die if they are ignored, but they can be saved if someone takes just a little bit of interest. This is a metaphor for the North Korean people.

From the 1990s, North Korea’s socialist economic system began to collapse. When Kim Il-sung died in 1994, Kim Jong-il declared the ‘Second Arduous March’ and for each region of the country to operate its economy ‘self-sufficiently’. Many North Koreans died of starvation because the ration cards they relied on to survive were no longer available. Many people who had jobs under the old economy moved to markets but there were more people selling household items to buy food than buyers. North Koreans sold their housewares to buy rice and survive day by day. After selling their houses and going to live on the streets, North Koreans displayed discontent toward their government as they saw people around them dying of starvation. This likely led North Koreans to commit the treasonous act of crossing the border to protest the government. This, at the time, was an act that was very hard to imagine happening in the North Korean context.

As North Korea’s planned economy disappeared, the country’s public distribution system (PDS) collapsed. North Koreans faced a myriad of troubles due to environmental disasters stemming from droughts and floods and the North Korean government’s ceaseless development of nuclear weapons. North Koreans were faced with extreme famine and economic crisis and the government’s political controls were severe as the regime fought to survive. The system of each person looking over each other’s shoulder to create solidarity became even more severe and organizational life (*jojik saenghwal*) activities were strengthened. This led to the starvation and death of many people who had only put trust in their government. Among those stricken by famine, many flocked to the ‘Farmer’s Markets’ that Kim Il-sung had deemed ‘anti-socialist behavior’.[[201]](#footnote-201)

The North Korean government attempted to hold onto the socialist economic system up until the 1990s, but when markets began sprouting up naturally it began to exert control over the farmer’s markets. The government referred to those in farmer’s markets as ‘infected with capitalist ideology’ and persecuted them for their crimes, including via public executions. All they had done was to learn the basics of market capitalism to relieve their hunger. Afraid that the regime would collapse, however, the North Korean government linked capitalist ideology and anti-socialism together in a political manner and used fear to control the population.

At the time, there were many thousands of people who starved to death. Yet, even where the roads were littered with the corpses of the starved, passers-by did not try to help. Many people believed that they could also be thrust into that same situation. Even the act of staring was frightening. By the mid-1990s, North Koreans had begun to wander into the provinces of Northeast China.

The North Korean government nonetheless aimed to prevent market capitalism from spreading by creating so-called Anti-Socialist Groups to enhance domestic surveillance. North Koreans were arrested as they tried to avoid this surveillance. Those who could not stand it anymore crossed the river into China in the ultimate act of anti-socialism. People still leave the country today, but observers need to recognize that the quest to find a better standard of living is seen by the state as evidence of hatred for the county’s socialist regime itself. There was a change in why people left North Korea between the 1990s and 2010s.

**North Korean Defectors Living in China: Identity and Status**

From the mid-1990s, as North Korea experienced some three million deaths by starvation, there were people who crossed the border into China to find food and those who escaped the country to avoid oppression (Im 2001, 16).[[202]](#footnote-202) Those North Koreans who migrated to China were considered by Beijing to be illegal immigrants.

The Chinese government officially considers those North Koreans guilty of the crime of illegal border crossing, and from the late 1990s began to repatriate them. There has always existed the danger that China’s position on the issue could create a diplomatic problem between South Korea and China, and in 2012 it did. At a press conference held by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 22 February 2012, a foreign reporter asked the following question: ‘The South Korean government believes that China is not following international norms regarding the North Korean defector issue and is considering bringing this issue in front of the UN Human Rights Council. What is China’s stance on this?’

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Hong Lei, answered as follows:

The Koreans that you have mentioned are not refugees but are instead illegal migrants who have crossed China’s border for economic reasons. China is uniformly dealing with the illegal border-crossing issue of the North Koreans in a prudent appropriate manner in accordance with domestic international law and humanitarian principles. This is an issue that concerns the interest of each country involved and international custom. The UN Human Rights Council is not the place to discuss the issue that has been mentioned. We oppose this issue from becoming one of refugees or becoming an international and politicized issue (Weekly Chosun 2012).

When two defectors who were arrested in Shenyang, China, on 31 February 2012, were in danger of being forcibly repatriated back to North Korea, South Korean civil society organizations and the media joined forces in their call to prevent the defectors from being forcibly returned. It was this event that catapulted the defector forced repatriation issue into the international community and led it to emerge as a critical issue of human rights. Regarding this situation, South Korean experts said, ‘The issue of survival in North Korea is more severe than a country in a state of war and this has led to the refugees’ (Im Chae-Wan, 2001, 16).

There are many estimates of how many North Koreans are currently in China. This is because North Koreans who live in China are generally in hiding. According to the NGO Good Friends (1999), at the turn of the century there were anywhere from 140,000 to 200,000 North Korean defectors living in the 2479 villages within the 29 cities/counties in China’s northeastern region. A study conducted by the American NGO Refugee International in June 2003 in China estimated that there were 60,000 to 100,000 factors living in China.

In contrast to the 1990s, by the 2000s North Korea could fulfil the basic food needs of its population. The Chinese government strengthened its monitoring of the defector population and continued with forced repatriations, leading to a drop in the number of North Korean defectors in China. According to a research report by the International Crisis Group (2006), the number of defectors living in China had decreased compared to 1999 but was still estimated to be around 100,000. But according to Cortland Robinson (2010, 15), part of the Johns Hopkins Center for Refugee and Disaster Response, there were 11,610 defectors living in the three northeastern provinces of China in 2009, and the number of children that had been birthed by North Korean women living in China was 13,079. In 2012, the Korean Institute for National Unification and the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health conducted a joint study of defectors and their children in China and found that at most there were 8,533 defectors living in the three northeastern provinces of China in 2012 and that defector women had birthed at most 22,321 children (Korea Institute for National Unification 2015, 429). This showed that the population of defectors has been reduced while the number of children has increased.

The reason for the reduction of the defector population was not due to improved political and economic conditions in North Korea but rather because North Korean defectors were staying in China for briefer periods than before. This was because of the fear of forced repatriation. Moreover, when Kim Jong-il died on 17 December 2011, North Korea further restricted the free movement of its population, which made it difficult for people to leave their villages and/or cross the border. New fences and cameras were installed in the border region, which likely prompted the reduction in the number of defectors. As Table 17.2 below shows, the estimates of the number of North Koreans living in China differ considerably.

**Table 17.2 Estimated populations of defectors and their children in China’s three Northeastern Provinces (*Dongbei*)**

[hier Table\_17.2]

Approximately 80 per cent of all defectors are female, and most have been sold to Korean Chinese Han Chinese disabled people or older men at some point. Even girls in their teens are sold in human trafficking rings. ‘The Sorrow of a North Korean Defector in China’ by Kim Sun-im (2006, 150) tells the story of a woman who was sold four times over four years by Korean-Chinese brokers. This woman knew she was a victim of human trafficking but was ‘afraid of forced repatriation’ and abandoned all hope of return to North Korea. This is the case for most women in the same situation.

Children born to defector women do not receive protection; they exist in what can be called a ‘dead zone’ for human rights. Women who enter China sometimes marry Chinese men, illegally obtain *hukou* (family register) and bear children, while others learn Chinese and find employment. However, in cases where women are reported to the police or are unable to obtain a *hukou*, they are forcibly repatriated or go into hiding in third countries. As demands for identification by the Chinese authorities have increased from 2013, defectors are reportedly finding life in China more difficult (Korea Institute for National Unification 2016, 344).

The second generation of defectors who were born to women sold into arranged marriages do not have *hukou* and are reportedly confused about their identities (Son Jae-min et. al. 2012). Of those children who no longer live with or know the whereabouts of their mothers, 50.7% had their mothers forcibly repatriated to North Korea while 44% reportedly ran away from home. This figure is based on interviews of 141 individuals surveyed in 2006-2007.[[203]](#footnote-203)

Recently, the Chinese government has introduced a system to reward those who report the whereabouts of North Korean defectors in the border region. Informers are rewarded with 1000 RMB, and 2000 renminbi if the informers physically turn North Koreans into the Chinese police. A fine of 3000 renminbi must be paid if a Chinese citizen is found to have helped North Korean defectors cross into China. While reporting that ‘most defectors cannot leave border region of China and are arrested after being reported by Chinese citizens’, Daily NK (Choi 2016) reported that two female defectors in their 30s were forcibly repatriated after being reported by a Chinese citizen. Despite these forced repatriations, defections to China still take place.

As the above has shown, research on North Korean defectors living in China has only been conducted informally by non-government organizations. This makes it difficult to comprehend the exact number of defectors in China. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), looking into the possibility of recognizing defectors as refugees, tried to start investigations in the China-North Korea border region but the Chinese government’s strong opposition led to the scrapping of such plans. Nevertheless, Ruud Lubbers, then the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said for the first time in 2003 that ‘North Korean defectors may well be considered refugees’ (Chang 2010, 208).

**Expert Perceptions about North Korean Defectors in China**

From the Chinese perspective, defectors are simply ‘economic migrants’. But are they just that? Or are they ‘political migrants’? Expert opinions on this question vary.

By the 1990s, the anti-socialist phenomenon in North Korea was termed the ‘social deviant phenomenon’ and those who had committed so-called acts against socialism were deemed instigators of ideological conflict. (Hwang 2016, 1). By the 2000s, North Korea had made anti-socialist acts and other social deviancy ‘crimes’ through reforms of its criminal law and began to hand down punishments in accordance with these laws. As a result, many people left the country in fear.

China argues that those North Koreans who left the country at the time were migrating for economic reasons. However, in North Korea their act of leaving is considered an act of social deviance. Such social deviance is considered an ‘anti-socialist element’. Even the act of crossing the border to China, regardless of the reason, is considered by North Korea to be a political act that goes against the regime and socialism (Hwang 2016, 1).

The act of crossing the border involves both push and pull factors (Heo 2014, 88) In other words, there are always factors that make it unavoidable for North Koreans to leave their beloved hometowns and other factors that force them into human trafficking. The ‘pull’ here is human trafficking by Chinese brokers and it is a weaker factor than the ‘push’ factors inherent in North Korean society. The ‘push’ factors are divided into political and economic elements and include the closed nature of the North Korean political system and the economic swamp of poverty.

The Chinese government has been working with the North Korean government to track down defectors and forcibly repatriate them. When defectors are returned to North Korea they are punished severely as political prisoners. Considering this, experts believe that they should be considered ‘local refugees’. However, China tracks down North Korean defectors who have married Chinese men and have children and returns them to China. Moreover, the Chinese government has introduced a system to reward those who report on defectors and has strengthened monitoring of the China-DPRK border by recruiting Chinese-Koreans to turn in defectors.

Many defectors are still living with Chinese citizens and have illegally obtained identification cards, and those living with children are living under the danger of being tracked down by the Chinese police. The Chinese government’s attempts to track down defectors in the northeastern provinces have left defectors in a state of wondering when they will be forcibly repatriated back to North Korea.

**History of Cases of Refugee Acceptance between North Korea and China**

China’s opening and reform process has led the issue of refugee protection to become a larger one. In 1971, China participated in the UN’s refugee protection activities for the first time as it regained its legal status in the UN. The country joined the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951; hereafter the Refugee Convention) and the Protocols Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967; referred to as the Protocols below) in 1982, and UNHCR opened an office in Beijing in 1979 to protect refugees entering China. There is no guide or legislation concerning the procedure to recognize refugees in China currently and as a result the UNHCR office in Beijing grants refugee status in accordance with the Convention and Protocols. This section will explore the history of China’s refugee acceptance policies and legal situation and the legal status of North Korean defectors in China from the perspective of a China that is actively participating in UN refugee protection activities.

**China’s Acceptance of Refugees and Background**

China has taken responsibility for refugee issues in the past. From 1979 to 1997, 10,000 refugees entered the country from Hong Kong, Macau and Vietnam, 27,000 refugees based in Japan in 1989, and 873 refugees based in Australia from 1995-1997 (Fang 2015, 47). The number of refugees living in various provinces in China is as follows: Guangxi (112,268), Guangdong (83,538), Yunnan (38,009), Fujian (27,409), Hainan (31,475), and Jiangxi (17,156). Around 300,000 refugees live in China currently, but there is no systemic legal structure concerning refugee protection (Sun Xiao-dong and Zhang Bo-Tao 2015, 116).

As a country that signed the CRSR and PRSR, China must provide refugee status for all those who apply for refugee status. Those who received refugee status may receive personal rights such as economic and social rights as presented in the CRSR and PRSR (UNHCR 1997, 32). Moreover, Article 12, Clause 1 of the Refugee Convention stipulates the rights to individual status of refugees.

The *hukou* system is a major roadblock to entering normal life for refugees and their children. It obstructs access to schools, jobs and marriage. In effect, refugees are not treated as members of Chinese society and live in the cracks of society (Fang 2015, 48).

**Cases of Refugee Acceptance by North Korea and China in the Past**

There are instances where China has accepted North Korean defectors as refugees. There was a massive purge after the 1956 Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee General Assembly and 1000 North Koreans who feared for their lives defected to China. China gave permission for the defectors to leave for a third country and/or recognized them as refugees (Kim et al. 2004, 139-141).

In the 1960s, China experienced a similar mass purge of its citizens. From 1958 until early 1962, Mao Zedong initiated the Great Leap Forward. However, China’s worsening relationship with the Soviet Union led to a halt in economic aid from the Soviets, while shortages of agricultural products and natural disasters severely damaged the economy and left millions starving. The failure of the Great Leap Forward led to the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 and the Chinese Communist Party engaged in massive purges of those who were perceived as opponents to Mao Zedong. Many Chinese who were starving and oppressed politically defected to North Korea, which was significantly better off economically than China at the time. North Korea provided them with houses and jobs and allowed their children to attend local schools. In the 1970s, some returned to China while the rest settled in the China-North Korea border region where they reside today. China and North Korea have both experienced accepting each other’s citizens as refugees.

But in August 1986, China and North Korea strengthened their monitoring of illegal border crossers through the Mutual Cooperation Protocols for the National Security and Maintenance of Social Order in the Border Region. This obliged China to detain defectors and provide a list of defectors to the North Korea government. China as a result classified defectors as illegal border crossers – criminals – and has since repatriated them (Ha 2012, 82). However, repatriating defectors as illegal border crossers goes against the Forced Repatriation Prohibition Principle which is part of international law (Im 2012), according to South Korean legal experts.

There is heavy controversy between Chinese and South Korean scholars over whether defectors in China are illegal immigrants or refugees. South Korean academics argue that defectors in China should be protected as refugees under international law (Park 2012, 53), but Chinese academics argue that under international law defectors do not fit the definition of refugees. Guo Rui (2013, 93) argues that ‘Defectors have emigrated from their country due to poverty caused by North Korea’s poor economic situation and lack of food, and under the Refugee Conventions and Protocols means they are not refugees but simply illegal border crossers.’ This is because, they argue, from the 1990s, selective research has been done of defectors entering en masse into China at refugee centres, but the requirements of a defector testifying do not meet the Refugee Law. If defectors are seized and detained by Chinese police at the border, they are unsure what will happen to them, so they have no choice but to say they defected because of ‘hunger’. Records of the testimony are then sent to North Korea’s Ministry of State Security.

Defectors cannot be defined as ‘illegal border crossers’ through a correct understanding and analysis of North Korean criminal law. However, China appears minded to accept the North Korean government’s demands because they are in Beijing’s own national interest. To prevent the defector issue from becoming an international matter, the Chinese government argues, ‘The defector issue is not an international one but an internal Chinese one and is not an issue where international law can be applied but rather one dealt with through Chinese domestic law’ (Kang 2009, 131). In China, there currently is no immigration law or foreigner law that can protect the rights of foreigners. According to Fang (2015, 49), the Chinese government has recently been exploring the legislation of a ‘refugee protection law.’ Currently, however, laws pertaining to the protection of foreigner rights follow related laws and ministry level procedures.

**Chinese Domestic Law and the Legal Status of Defectors**

**China’s Constitution and Changes**

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949, China’s Constitution was first implemented on September 20, 1954, based largely off the Soviet model with its emphasis on socialist principles. Many mistakes were discovered in this first version, so a second version of the Constitution was introduced on 17 January 1975, followed by third and fourth versions in 1978 and 1982. The Constitution implemented on 4 December 1982, was reformed four times through ‘People’s Republic of China Constitution Reform Acts’ in 1988, 1993, 1999, and 2004.[[204]](#footnote-204)

The Constitution has clear stipulations for the protection of foreigners. Article 32, clause 1 of the Constitution states that ‘China protects the legal rights and interest of foreigners residing within China’s borders, and foreigners within China’s borders must follow Chinese law.’ Article 32, clause 2 of the Constitution states that ‘Foreigners who request refuge for political reasons may be afforded the right of protection’. In other words, the Constitution clearly states that foreigners who enter China have the possibility of protection as political refugees, provided they follow Chinese law. Article 33, clause 3 of the Constitution states that ‘The state respects and guarantees human rights.’ China has generally used the term ‘basic rights of citizens’ in the place of ‘human rights (*in-kwon*)’ in Constitutional and legal contexts. The aim of adding a clause referring clearly to the protection of ‘human rights’ has been interpreted to defend China from criticism from the international community concerning China’s oppression of human rights (Kang 2009, 131). However, China has continually and uncaringly repatriated defectors in China back to North Korea and separated defectors who have family from their children. Defectors who have married Chinese citizens are unable to apply for marriage certificates even if they have children because of their ‘statelessness’ and are unable to be entered into a family register.

**China’s Legal System and the Legal Status of North Korean Defectors in China**

Section 2, Article 49 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China states that ‘Parents have the duty to rear and educate their children who are minors,’ and that, ‘Violation of the freedom of marriage is prohibited’. Article 6 of the Nationality Law states that ‘Even if their parents are stateless or have unclear nationality, children are Chinese citizens if they live in China and their place of birth is China’.[[205]](#footnote-205) Article 23 of the ‘Marriage Law’ states that ‘Parents have the right and duty to protect and educate their children’. Despite this, the Chinese government is forcibly dividing parents and children and parents who are forced to leave their children escape North Korea in search of their children.

Defectors who have been forcibly repatriated to North Korea have no choice but to go to third countries with their children on their return to China. However, they have difficulty doing even this because China has implemented a ‘real name’ system for purchasing express bus tickets. The system was implemented in March 2017 to prevent domestic terrorism and has made it impossible to buy tickets without government-issued ID. Article 15, Clause 4 of the 51st Premier Decree’s ‘Citizen ID Act,’ which has been in force since January 2012, states that ‘IDs must be shown to officials in areas that the government has stipulated at train terminals, bus terminals, ports, harbors, and airports or during major events’.[[206]](#footnote-206) The Chinese government implemented the system to prevent domestic terrorism prompted by terrorist attacks elsewhere.

China must be crossed by any defector seeking to reach another country. But it is also a place where defectors lead second lives, filling the places of Korean-Chinese women who have moved abroad. China’s economic development has led to major differences in wealth between major cities, smaller cities and rural areas, and the marriage of single men in agricultural areas has become a social issue. As a result, arranged marriages and mail-order brides from Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and other countries have become common. North Korean women are also potential brides. Not least because they are unable to communicate in Chinese, they are sold two or even three times over by Chinese-Korean brokers and subjected to rape and/or forced marriages (Kim Ho-yong, 2007).

Article 3, Clause 1 of the Marriage Law states that ‘forced marriages and marrying for financial profit are prohibited’. However, such things still go on, as vestiges of prior feudal marriage practices.[[207]](#footnote-207) Such marriage practices are considered to violate the freedom of marriage and lead to the destruction of the social fabric. Article 240, Clause 2 of the Criminal Law stipulates these acts are criminal and can be punished by five to ten years in prison. The Chinese government’s efforts have reportedly led to reductions of human trafficking overall, but defectors are reportedly still being forced into marriages and prostitution due to their illegal status in the country. Many have little choice but to continue their lives as wives to Chinese men because they are unable to return to North Korea.

What is interesting is that female defectors in China are many times not officially married to their husbands. Starting from the 1990s, the desire for marriage in the three northeastern provinces by the region’s male population led to an increase in arranged or ‘purchased marriages’ with North Korean defectors. Article 8 of the Marriage Law states that ‘A couple intending to get married must report directly to a marriage registration facility and register their marriage. The couple is considered married as soon as they receive their marriage certificate’. (Kang 2009, 138). However, couples who visit such facilities are subject to marriage registration procedures and because defectors are undocumented, they cannot receive a marriage certificate. However, Kang (2009) states that ‘The legal environment surrounding the concept of ‘common-law marriage’ has shifted from non-acceptance to relative acceptance, which means that if a Chinese man and a female defector are generally considered to be living as a couple they can receive the same legal protections under the law as women who have an official marriage certificate’. Many married defectors in China have one or two children. While they likely dream of living modestly with their husband and children, the Chinese government’s failure to officially recognize their common-law marriages has created another layer of separation between them and their families in China.

Isolated from the international community, North Korea counts on China as its only ally, yet North Korea’s generally unexpected military provocations have gradually become a burden for the Chinese government. China’s rise as an economic and political superpower has led to reforms in its Constitution from the 2000s following changes in the international community. Specifically, Article 33 of the Chinese Constitution now reads that ‘The State respects and preserves human rights,’ and the Chinese government has published a National Human Rights Action Plans three times (2009-2010, 2012-2015, 2016-2020) over recent years.[[208]](#footnote-208) China appears to be making efforts to change its perceptions about human rights but has nonetheless taken a defensive attitude toward the issue of defectors living in China.

China, as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, has accepted and still accepts many refugees. As a member of the UNHRC it holds joint responsibility for refugee issues and receives refugees held in places such as Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, Japan and Australia. However, China does not recognize refugees from North Korea. China classifies them as ‘economic refugees’ and alternates between allowing them passage to third countries and forcibly repatriating them back to North Korea. China does not have refugee-related legislation on the books and uses the Refugee Convention and Protocols as the basis to decide on refugee cases, which is then reflected in domestic law. For example, ‘If China signs an international treaty, China’s legislative institutions and government must approve of it and if the said international treaty is effective in China then it will be effective as China domestic law’ (Park 2012, 53).

**The Definition of Refugees According to International Law and the Legal Status of North Korean Defectors in China**

The Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (referred to below as the Convention) was adopted at the same time the UNHCR was created at the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons on 28 July 1951. The Convention was adopted on 31 January 1967. South Korea joined this convention and protocol in 1992 and in 2012 passed a Refugee Act that has been in force since 2013. The Convention currently has been signed by 140 nations and aims to officially define the term ‘refugee’ and regulate the actions of states regarding the legal status and treatment of refugees.

**The Definition of a Refugee and Prerequisites**

The concept of refugees has expanded from the 19th and 20th centuries through the Cold War and in the post-Cold War era. Article 1 of the Convention states that ‘As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it’.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Refugees are divided into several categories depending on their circumstances. There are modern refugees or 21st century refugees, or ‘economic refugees,’ who have emigrated to another country to avoid economic poverty and to survive; there are ‘environmental refugees’ who have had to leave their homes or strip themselves of their nationality due to massive natural disasters like volcanoes, industrial incidents or climate change; ‘war refugees’ who have received particular protections under international humanitarian law in order to remove themselves from conflict areas; ‘humanitarian refugees’ who, though not afforded full refugee status, are allowed to reside in other countries for humanitarian reasons; and finally ‘displaced persons’, who are in the same circumstances as refugees but are unable to emigrate abroad and are forced to wander within their own country (Lee 2007, 316).

Worldwide emigration increased significantly in the 20th century due to many events, including World War 2, the Korean War, the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the Vietnam War, the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Union (Tilly 1976). UNHCR has, in most cases, had restrictions placed on its activities by local governments. Governments have intervened because of the personal difficulties faced by the refugees and also because it believes the nature of social issues caused by refugees all fall under different contexts. Throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War period, the breadth of what constitutes a refugee diversified to include ‘political refugees’, ‘war refugees’, ‘economic refugees’, ‘environmental refugees’, and ‘displaced persons’.

The prerequisites for refugee status are stated in the Refugee Convention (Lee et al. 2016, 324-338). First, there must be a ‘well-founded fear’ of harm. The Convention stipulates that the person must have left their country of citizenship and that there be the possibility that harm could come to them.

Second, Article 33 of the Refugee Convention describes ‘oppression’. The fear of ‘oppression’ due to race, religion, nationality or affiliation with a social group or political opinion must be proven. Discrimination of race based on the colour of one’s skin, creed, nationality and or tribe is prohibited in Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. ‘Religion’ is considered a basic right important to the freedom of conscience and oppression of religion is a requisite for refugee status. ‘Nationality’ does not refer simply to citizenship but to the national and linguistic group someone is part of and can be used similarly to ‘race’. Oppression based on nationality includes poor treatment of national and linguistic minorities (Chang 1997, 181). The phrase ‘the member of a specific social group’ refers to the composition of those who have similar backgrounds, customs or social status and the criterion for this is based on Article 26 of the World Human Rights Proclamation and International Human Rights Convention (Convention B) that prohibits discrimination based on ‘national or social background, wealth, family and other status’ and falls under the ‘Specific Social Group Member Status’ (Lee 2007, 319). Finally, oppression of ‘political opinions’ does not mean that one can claim refugee status just by saying they have a different opinion to the government; rather it refers to those who could suffer oppression or the fear of oppression due to the political opinions they have or have expressed.

Third are the circumstances in which a person living outside of their country of nationality cannot receive protection from their government or, because of such fears, does not want to receive such protection. That a person must live outside of their place of nationality due to the fear of oppression is generally considered a prerequisite of receiving refugee status (Chang 1997, 182).

**Whether Defectors Can Be Recognized as Refugees through Perquisites for Becoming a Refugee under International Law**

South Korea has long demonstrated an interest in the issue of China-based North Korean defectors in its diplomacy with China. The issue, however, is whether the refugee status of these defectors can be recognized under the Convention. Of the requisites that are required for these defectors to be recognized as refugees, they could be considered ‘Convention Refugees’ or ‘Mass Exodus Refugees’. As already discussed, they would qualify as refugees under the ‘oppression’ description stated in Article 33 of the Convention. If they fulfil the requisites for one of the categories of oppression they may be considered ‘Convention Refugees’, but in those cases where they left North Korea for economic reasons and then returned to the country they would not be afforded this status. What is important to note here is that the act of a North Korean citizen crossing the border to another country is considered illegal. The most recently updated 2012 Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea states in Chapter 3, Article 63:

A citizen of the Republic who commits treason against the Fatherland by defection, surrender, betrayal, or disclosure of secrets shall be punished by reform through labour for more than five years. In cases where the person commits a grave offense, he or she shall be punished by reform through labour for more than five years and less than ten years.[[210]](#footnote-210)

As a result, cases of North Korean defector in China being arrested by the Chinese police or North Korean security agents and forcibly repatriated and cases where defectors return to North Korea of their own volition are wholly different. In cases where a defector is returning of their own volition they can be accused of committing a crime of ‘illegal border crossing’.[[211]](#footnote-211) However, if they are forcibly repatriated, their actions come under a different light and they can be charged with ‘Treason against the Fatherland’ (*joguk*) or ‘Treason against the Nation’ (*minjok*).[[212]](#footnote-212) The punishment they receive differs depending on the when, where, who, and what of the case. Treason against the Fatherland is committed when a North Korean citizen crosses the border and runs away to a foreign country. Treason against the Nation can be committed in several diverse ways, but it is based on whether the defector committed acts of treason under the control of enemies of the state. For example, if a defector meets with a South Korean citizen in China and then returns to North Korea the focus will be on whether they are a spy. In that case, they can also be charged with espionage.[[213]](#footnote-213)

Punishment of someone who leaves the country is severe because it is an act of protest against the North Korean government and system. The above articles of the Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea appear focused on punishing those who try to leave North Korea rather than secure control of the border. The legal stipulations in the Criminal Law clearly punish the act of something holding a particularly political opinion (Park 2012: 48), and as such defectors in China must be classified as being ‘political refugees’.

The forcible repatriation of defectors in China contravenes the UNHCR’s standing principle against forced repatriation and can also be a violation of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Article 3 of this Convention ‘prohibits parties from returning, extraditing, or *refouling* any person to a state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture,’ even providing for extradition protection for criminals (Lee 2006, 17). Moreover, Article 33 of the same convention states that ‘No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened because his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’. However, it also states that ‘The benefit of the present provision may not, however, be claimed by a refugee whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country in which he is, or who, having been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, constitutes a danger to the community of that country’. If defectors are forcibly repatriated to North Korea by China, their lives and liberty are clearly threatened; but do they then pose a threat to Chinese security? China’s Tencent News reported recently that there is a rise of criminal acts occurring on the Chinese-North Korean border. There have been cases of murders reportedly committed by North Korean military deserters, cases involving robberies by North Korean civilians on the border and an incident of drug smuggling across the border (Tencent News 2015). However, many defectors in China are married to Chinese citizens and are living quietly with their children. As such, it is not proper to directly link these crimes with those defectors living in China.

Defectors in China may also be viewed as part of a ‘mass exodus’. Somalians, Rwandans, Albanians, Kurds, and Vietnamese have all, in accordance with international practice, been considered as ‘de facto refugees’, essentially being recognized as refugees ‘without proof’ (Lee 2007, 234). The Roh Moo-hyun administration along with the US government attempted to construct a ‘refugee camp’ in Mongolia and other countries for defectors, but the plans for this were scrapped due to questions over the need for the camp and worries that it could lead to mass defections from North Korea. Unsurprisingly, China has shown opposition to such plans for refugee camps despite the South Korean government’s diplomacy concerning the issue (Kim 2016). South Korean experts believe that if there are mass defections from North Korea, defectors could be recognized as ‘mass exodus refugees’. (Lee 2007, 324). However, this status would be difficult to give to defectors in China at this stage. To be recognized as mass exodus refugees there must be a ‘specific event that gathers them at a specific location’.

Defectors in China have their own specific reasons for defecting, and their routes of defection are all different. But it is clear that those who cannot receive protection from their own government or, out of fear, do not want protection from that country, satisfy the prerequisites for being recognized as refugees. Those North Koreans who are brought into China to work as cheap labour, however, are not considered refugees because they are protected by North Korea. However, defectors living in China live in fear of oppression and thus do not desire protection from the North Korean government.

China classifies defectors living in China as economic migrants but their motivations for leaving North Korea, in the view of this researcher, make it difficult for them to be viewed as such. The reasons for defectors to cross into China vary significantly. There are those who defect because of poverty and the need to survive. Humans are driven by the desire to help their families survive at any cost. Many defectors cross the Tumen and Yalu rivers to China for this reason. Other defectors may enter China legally with a visa allowing them to visit family, but they may overstay visas in China (some by accident, others by design) and become illegal immigrants. Still other defectors leave North Korea because of discontent with the regime. They may have expressed discontent about the government and received punishment. Other defectors may leave North Korea because of religious oppression, despite Article 68 of the North Korean Constitution stating that ‘Citizens have freedom of religious beliefs’.[[214]](#footnote-214)

Other defectors may be accused of being traitors to the state and escape to China to avoid punishment. Defectors in China are different than North Koreans who live in China and have passed through legal channels to cross the border. Defectors who cross the border illegally cannot avoid punishment; only, the severity of the punishment depends on the details of the case. Crossing the border is considered by the North Korean government to be a sign of discontent toward the regime. Defectors are thus accused of committing violations under Article 63, 68, and 221 of the Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

Because they have ‘well-founded fears’ that they will be oppressed on their return to North Korea and have political opinions that are in opposition to the North Korean state, defectors should be considered ‘Convention Refugees’. Accordingly, defectors living in China who choose not to cross the border back into North Korea, regardless of how they left the country in the first instance, should be afforded refugee status or safe passage elsewhere.

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**18 The Limits of Koreanness**[[215]](#footnote-215)

Korean Encounters in Russo-Chinese Yanbian

*Ed Pulford*

**Abstract**

Chinese Joseonjok (ethnically Korean citizens of the PRC) and Russian-speaking Goryeo saram (Koreans from the former-USSR) have each witnessed unprecedented domestic shifts affecting their relationships and senses of belonging within their own countries, along with myriad new opportunities for international mobility. This in turn has led to contact with manifestations of ‘Koreanness’ very different from those which had emerged over the 20th century in the Chinese and Soviet contexts. This chapter deals ethnographically with the experiences of Russian Goryeo saram in Yanbian, a Joseonjok autonomous prefecture in northeast China, to examine the negotiations over ‘Koreanness’ and other forms of national and ethnic belonging which emerge in encounters between two peoples broadly classified as ‘Korean’, but neither from a ‘Korean’ country.

**Keywords:** Chinese Koreans, Chinese minority policy, Chosonjok, Korean identity, Soviet Koreans, Yanbian

**Introduction**

On а sweltering August afternoon on Century Square, an expansive plaza in the small northeastern Chinese town of Hunchun, I sit on a bench with Avram, a Goryeo saram[[216]](#footnote-216) in his mid-70s. A short distance across the square, a collective of middle-aged Han Chinese and Joseonjok women is practising a synchronized dance routine as the sun beats down, swaying and twisting to jaunty but distorted music emanating from a speaker perched on the paving.[[217]](#footnote-217) In another corner, a score or so of elderly locals is watching an impromptu performance of *errenzhuan*, a northeastern Chinese form of spoken and sung theatre accompanied by squeaky *suona* horn and plucked *erhu*, the two-stringed Chinese fiddle. Avram is enjoying these displays of uninhibited spontaneity among elderly locals, and gestures towards some of the dancers.

‘It’s great that they’re not shy about doing that, and no one’s laughing at them’, he says. ‘When I was out here on the square a few weeks ago a man approached me from one of the dance groups and started encouraging me to join in, showing me all the moves. If anything like that happened in Russia everyone would just think “what the hell is wrong with you, have you lost your mind? Get this guy to a mental hospital!” But here there’s none of that cynicism’.

Avram’s background makes him well qualified to perceive such differences between appropriate public and private behaviour, the reasons for which one might accuse others of being deranged, and many more Sino-Russian inter-cultural Othernesses. Born in Kazakhstan but raised in Uzbekistan by parents who were forcibly deported from the Soviet Far East to Central Asia in 1937 along with around 200,000 Goryeo saram (Martin 2001; Chang 2016), Avram has spent years of his life in each of Central Asia, Russia and, since 2011, China. As we talk, conversation about the broad contours of cultural difference between these countries and regions, as well as North and South Korea, features prominently, prompted only in part by my own line of questioning. He enjoys discussing the myriad ethnic and cultural differences in the multi-layered and shifting sphere of Soviet cosmopolitanism where he spent the first decades of his life. As well as the most obvious distinctions between groups who had their own Soviet republics – Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Russians, Soviet Uyghurs, Karakalpaks, Muslim Chinese Dungans, Koreans and many others – important lines of differentiation also existed, Avram reports, *among* Soviet Koreans.

‘We Central Asian Goryeo saram are all *otorvannye* (“cut off”) Koreans’, he says, in laconic reference to the deportation. ‘But Koreans from Kazakhstan are very different to those from Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is a huge country with few people, and they are a lot more Russianized, so the Kazakh Koreans there are more “civilized”. In Uzbekistan where I grew up, the population is much bigger and Koreans live in small villages among locals who are considered *ostalye* (“backward”) and only speak Uzbek, so we had to work a lot harder to learn good Russian and make progress’. Atypically for those born in Central Asia, Avram was raised speaking both Russian and Korean; many of his generation retain a passive understanding of the latter but fewer active speaking abilities. This was facilitated by the fact that despite the dislocation and high mortality rate of the deportation, his mother’s parents had managed to stay together with the family and lived with them.

The existence of discernible linguistic and cultural differences between sub-communities of Central Asian Koreans is testament to their enfoldment within Soviet logics of commonality and separation for much of the twentieth century. This retains a key bearing on recent Goryeo saram lives, particularly their inter-ethnic and international encounters in contemporary ‘post-socialist’[[218]](#footnote-218) northeast Asia. My aim in this chapter is to argue that contact between Russian- and Chinese-speaking Koreans in Yanbian, a Korean autonomous prefecture in northeast China (Map 18.1), as well as the experiences of both in South Korea, serve as revealing lenses through which to examine questions over ‘Koreanness’[[219]](#footnote-219) in the Sino-Korean borderlands today. Based on fieldwork in Hunchun,[[220]](#footnote-220) a town in eastern Yanbian on the North Korean and Russian borders, I explore how Avram and many other Goryeo saram have seen their sphere of inter-ethnic and international experience expand dramatically in recent decades far beyond the steppes, deserts, cotton fields and melon-rich valleys where they were born. Greater personal mobility and information flows across the post-socialist era’s porous state and communicative borders have not only brought collisions between the situational and negotiated ‘way of being’ Korean which emerged in the Soviet context, but has also had much the same effect among another group of partially ‘cut off’ Koreans, the Joseonjok. Encounters in present-day Hunchun invite a comparison of their case and that of the Goryeo saram, supplemented by examination of pertinent historical and social scientific literature, much of it by Goryeo saram and Joseonjok scholars themselves. Studying the two side-by-side reveals numerous striking parallels between the flexible modes of being ‘Korean’ which emerged in two large multiethnic socialist state contexts during the twentieth century, shown in the experiences of both groups in South Korea towards the end of the essay.

Diverse ‘outside Korean’ experiences in the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) have received some journalistic and scholarly attention, considered in terms of ‘diasporas’ or ‘transnational’ groups (Park and Mun 2016). But encounters between Koreans from the former-USSR and China have received more limited scrutiny. [[221]](#footnote-221) Hyun-Gwi Park’s work (2017, 2018) in Russia’s Primorskii krai (here also ‘Primorye’) is an insightful exception, but manifestations of Koreanness occurring in or beyond China remain understudied. Following a tradition laid down by Goryeo saram scholars themselves, my contribution to this area of study will in places trace a biographical trajectory, employing the views and life story of Avram, a pastor, translator, erstwhile scrap metal trader, farmer, and factory manager, as well as those of some other Yanbian-based Goryeo saram as vehicles for thematic movement. To begin, I provide a selective portrait of Hunchun which, in addition to serving as an account of the ethnographic field site under consideration, immediately raises a number of the thematic strands around contemporary ‘ways of being’ Korean in this borderland space.

**Shifting Referents**

**Figure 18.1 Quad-lingual, quad-script sign on Hunchun China Mobile outlet**

[hier Figure\_18.1]

Photo: Ed Pulford

Hunchun’s very urban fabric is clad in evidence of the ever-shifting mobilizations and reconfigurations of linguistic, ethnic and national identification – particularly Koreanness – in which local people are engaged. This is especially evident in the patchwork of cyphers which populate the town’s trilingual Chinese/Korean/Russian signage, which occasionally also includes English (Figure 18.1). Depending on the intended audience and purpose, various genres of Korean-related representation include (see Figure 18.2, follow clockwise from top left): cues for a solely Chinese-speaking clientele seeking Korean fashion; blurring between North and South Korean symbols in shops promoting their ‘international’ wares (the more international the better, regardless of geopolitical dissonance); shifts from ‘South Korean’ to generic ‘Korean’ labels when signs are translated Chinese-Russian; subtly exclusive Korean-only signals to local Joseonjok that an establishment is run by members of their own group; and Russian-only hints at Korean quality and clinical expertise.

**Figure 18.2**

[hier Figure\_18.2]

Clockwise from top left: ‘Myeongdong’ clothes shop – sign in Chinese only; Convenience store with flags of North and South Korea (plus China) to advertise (mostly South) Korean goods; Zhongyi ‘South Korea City’ trade centre – Chinese and Korean signage identifies with South Korea whilst Russian has simply ‘Korean’; Saebyŏl / Xinmingxing Karaoke – Korean-only sign under roller shutter identifies the shop as Joseonjok-owned; ‘Yunhe Oral’ dentist – Russian sign in top right reads ‘Korean Dentistry by Victor Pak’

Photos: Ed Pulford

In broad terms, this selection of snapshots reveals multiple concurrent visions of Koreanness being selectively invoked in Hunchun, variously linked to a generic identity (as with Russian-language ‘*koreiskii*’ labels above), to the Korean ethnic group within China (as at the Joseonjok karaoke parlour) or to one or more states (as with the flags and use of Chinese/Korean *Hanguo/Hanguk*). This situation provides a visual China-based counterpart to the flexible ways in which former-Soviet Goryeo saram in Hunchun narrate and perform their own shifting Koreanness.

**The Sons**

The Son family were sought out in their hometown of Ussuriisk by a Hunchun-based Chinese agent who was looking for someone who knew how to make authentic versions of the Russian honey cake *medovik*. Wildly popular in borderland China where, by some curious process of semantic refraction, it is known as ‘tiramisu’ (*tilamisu*)with which it has little in common), the cake is among the products manufactured at Mr. Son’s aunt’s large bakery in Ussuriisk. Since Mr. Son and his wife, both in their late-20s, worked at the bakery, they made a good fit, and agreed to relocate with their three children. They now make the cakes in a second-floor room overlooking one of Hunchun’s main roads, whilst downstairs a Han Chinese employee of the original agent sells their output on the Chinese social media app WeChat, dispatching several kinds of frozen *medovik*/*tilamisu* to all corners of northeast China.

Over dinner at the Sons’ apartment one day, I ask them about their decision to move to Hunchun and whether it had had anything to do with Yanbian being a Korean area. ‘No that didn’t matter to us at all’, says Mr. Son. ‘It’s only a few hours’ drive away and we wanted a change, so that’s why we came. It was as simple as that. Of course, the decision was made easier by the fact that Russia and China are officially friendly countries – it would have been different if we were thinking about moving to some other place’.

That the relationship between China and Russia here predominated over any Korean-oriented concerns was indicative of the Sons’ pragmatic understanding that what mattered in Hunchun was their legal ‘Russian’ status. Yet identificatory ties to their country of citizenship go beyond the inevitable strictures of bureaucracy: all the ingredients needed to make their exceedingly Russian cakes, from flour to vinegar and bicarbonate of soda, are brought from over the border, whilst their shopfront offers a telling vision of the essentialized fairy-tale Russianness they are involved in marketing (Figure 18.3).

**Figure 18.3 Russian cake shop**

[hier Figure\_18.3]

Russian cake shop run by Goryeo saram family in Hunchun soon after opening; note quintessentially ‘Russian’ window image of St. Basil’s Cathedral. Top right of the sign is the Russian medovik, bottom left (partly obscured) is the Chinese tilamisu and top left is the Korean Anglicism *k’eik’ŭ* (‘cake’)

Photo: Ed Pulford

Yet as we continue eating and begin discussing Russia itself, the pendulum of the Sons’ narrative swings decisively away from identifying too closely with the ethnic Russians who make up the majority population of Ussuriisk, and most of Hunchun’s Russophone residents.

‘I can’t stand Russians’, says Mrs. Son, using the term *russkie* which implies ‘ethnic Russians’ rather than *rossiiskie* (‘citizens of Russia’). ‘They’re all *zlye* (“mean”)’, she continues, ‘like if an old man falls over in the street in Ussuriisk, no one bothers to help him up. They have no concept of family or community values, and all anyone cares about back home is what you’re wearing and how much your car costs’.

Were Koreans in Russia any better? I asked.

‘Yes, I think we’re generally kinder, happier people, and we have that in common with local people here in Hunchun. Although of course lots of us Goryeo saram have sadly been influenced by the Russians’.

The meal which Mrs. Son had laid out before us seemed to capture a more benign version of this influence: uniquely Korean-Russian *puktiai* soup, a largely spice-free stew of potatoes and meat,[[222]](#footnote-222) sat alongside bowls of rice, processed pale pink Russian *doktorskaia* sausage, and a salad made with cucumber, tomato, mayonnaise and dill. As if in sympathy with the culturally syncretic nature of this spread, we move on to discuss culinary matters and I ask whether Korean food here in Hunchun differs much from that made by Goryeo saram back in Russia.

‘Yes certainly’, says Mrs. Son. ‘Mainly the two have become different because of the different ingredients and seasonings we use. We had to survive on what you could get in Russia or Central Asia, but the Koreans here have a much wider selection’.

Whole books have been written comparing the fate of Chinese Koreans to the sharp but robust taste of the Korean *gochu* pepper (Ryu 2000; see Figure 18.10 below), and adopting this culinary metaphor for how Koreanness has become differently ‘seasoned’ in Russia and China seemed tempting. But in any case, before my mind strays too far into this perhaps simplistic territory Mr. Son intervenes.

‘She doesn’t know what she’s talking about’, he says grinning, ‘I’m much more of a real Korean than her because I was born in Ussuriisk and so were my parents. How would someone from Dushanbe [the capital of Tajikistan] know about what Koreans are like?’

Does he speak Korean then? I ask in response to this provocative assertion of Ussuriisk’s status as a kind of Korean homeland.

‘Well, no, not really’, he responds. ‘Our grandparents still spoke it around 70 per cent of the time, our parents spoke Russian 70 per cent of the time, we can understand a bit, and as for them’, he gestured at the couple’s nine-year-old son who was sprawled imperiously in the middle of the living room floor watching TV in only his underwear, ‘well they won’t know any’.

Yet, as the Sons go on to explain, they were at least married according to Korean rites which involved wearing white and having all ceremonial functions completed by midday, although many of their Korean friends were choosing to do things the Russian way these days. Their youngest son will also be receiving the full Korean treatment for his first birthday party in several weeks’ time, they assure me, and it is thus evident that Koreanness remains something to be asserted in certain domains at least, however inevitably Russian many aspects of their lives are here and back home.

**Vova**

Equally emblematic of the distinctly Russian overlay to the Goryeo saram presence in Hunchun is Vova Kim’s position as leader of the town’s ‘Russian Club’ (*Russkii klub*), an organization dedicated mainly to assisting Russian visitors to Hunchun with consumer disputes arising from their shopping (mis)adventures. Uzbekistan-born and 29 years old, Vova is a devout Putinist and a teetotal bodybuilder who cites various proofs of his status as a Russian ‘patriot’, including the fact that he only listens to Russian music and, he tells me more salaciously, sleeps exclusively with ethnically Russian women. In part because of such outlandish statements, he is known to other Russian-speaking Hunchun residents as a particularly *kategoricheskii* (‘categorical’)individual, but he disputes this reputation, vocally asserting that inter-ethnic differences mean little to him.

‘The only boundaries that matter these days’, he informs me one afternoon, ‘are the limits of people’s efficiency. Can you work efficiently or are you just lazy? – that’s the key question of our time’. Seeing things this way, he says, allows him to look beyond racial or ethnic boundaries. As we pace Hunchun’s streets checking up on various Chinese vendor contacts of his, he follows up with various statements about which groups of people in the world he considers to be the laziest, and I begin to wonder about the true border-dissolving extent of his views.

Indeed, many of my conversations with Vova suggest that he sees Koreans – broadly understood – as being a particularly efficient category of people.

‘How is it that we are so able to adapt to different cultures?’ he asks me rhetorically on another occasion. ‘Let me tell you – it is because we have *nunchi*’, he goes on, citing a difficult-to-translate Korean word implying, among other meanings in different contexts, situational awareness. ‘It’s sort of like Russian *smekalka*’, he offers by way of explanation, using a term which has a more Russia-specific meaning closer to ‘being able to extricate yourself from intractable snafus’.

‘Koreans are successful everywhere – Russia, China, America – because we adapt. Like in Russia – we’re all called Vladimir, Andrei, Aleksandr and we speak Russian even between ourselves. What other minority does that so readily? That’s *nunchi*’. The difficult situation to which the Goryeo saram had to adapt was, of course, their tragedy-clouded deportation from the Russian Far East in 1937. But Vova’s views about that are equally categorical: ‘Stalin had to do it’, he says. ‘That was just the reality (*real’nost’*) at the time, Koreans really were spying for the Japanese and after all, Koreans were only one of many different peoples who were deported’.

So, are Russian and Chinese Koreans more or less the same, I ask, each employing their *nunchi* to deal with distinct challenges in different national contexts? Vova qualifies his view slightly:

‘Well, it is certainly true that the Goryeo saram have lost something during their time among the Russians. Koreans here at least have their own prefecture, they are Koreans operating in their own locale (*na svoem meste)* which I suppose in some ways does make them more Korean than we are…’

Vova’s allusions to varying ways of being Korean, and to the seemingly paradoxical state of affairs whereby the very act of abandoning certain Korean characteristics – names, language and so on – is considered an innately ‘Korean’ trait, provide insight into an attitude which was shared by most of my Goryeo saram and Joseonjok interlocutors. A consistent sense conveyed both explicitly and implicitly, peppered our interactions: Koreanness is a mutable thing to be identified with in a fragmentary and situational manner. More detailed discussion of this follows below, but first I return to the life of Avram to offer further evidence in this regard.

**Avram**

Avram’s family background was a complex product of the organic cosmopolitanism which pervaded early-twentieth-century Primorye. His father was in fact not Korean at all but Chinese, yet having married Avram’s Korean mother was swept up in the 1937 deportation which also carried a small proportion of local Chinese in its wake. Avram’s inherited Chinese surname, he reports, had often raised questions about his identity among fellow-Koreans, and his confusing background had also purportedly made it impossible for him to enter the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Birth in Kazakhstan and an upbringing in Uzbekistan were followed by four and a half years of military service in Sakhalin and Kamchatka, and a working life as a builder and later manager of a brick factory in southern Kyrgyzstan. But in 1990 Avram, his fellow-Goryeo saram wife and their three children elected to move ‘back’ to the part of Russia from which his parents had been ejected. The decision to return to Primorye followed deadly rioting in the Kyrgyz town of Osh near where they lived, a flare-up of interethnic Uzbek/Kyrgyz tensions which were later seen by observers as one of a number of warning signs of the USSR’s impending demise (Tishkov 1995). The relocation was thus intimately bound up with the fate of the Soviet polity whose vast geography and at-times-devastating policies had had a determinant effect on Avram’s life and those of his immediate forebears. As Hyun-gwi Park (2013, 82-85) has pointed out, a modest and little-discussed return of Koreans from Central Asia to the Russian Far East had actually begun as early as the 1950s and 1960s, but Avram’s move was part of a much larger-scale migration which followed late- and post-Soviet relaxations in mobility restrictions. Today, due in large part to this second wave of migration, an estimated 19,000 Goryeo saram live in Primorskii krai.[[223]](#footnote-223) The family settled in Partizansk (Map 18.1) in southeastern Primorye amidst a *fin de siècle* sense that everything was in flux.

‘With all that *sumatokha* (“chaos”) and the breakup of the Union, loads of different people were on the move’, commented Avram. ‘Koreans were returning to Primorye, South Korean Christian groups were coming into Russia and both Chinese and Korean Chinese were arriving from over the border to trade’.

This was the onset of a continuing period when myriad variant ways of being Korean have encountered one another. For a time Avram worked as a Korean-Russian translator for a group of South Korean Christians who were setting up operations in Partizansk, an experience which led him to a greater interest in spiritual matters. For a few months in 1993 he studied at a Moscow seminary funded by a Los Angeles-based Korean-American missionary group. Like many Primorye Koreans, Avram’s ancestors had been converted to Russian Orthodoxy by late imperial missionaries, but a century later this new brand of Christianity served as a vehicle not for identification with any Russian state, but for a version of transnational Christian Koreanness which was or would have been novel to any recent Central Asian returnee. However, reflecting a common theme underlying the recent history of Goryeo saram encounters with matters South Korean, Avram’s initial enthusiasm soon gave way to more equivocal views.

‘At first these new beliefs seemed to provide all the answers. But I ultimately came to understand that the South Korean Christians are too serious a lot of the time’, he reports. ‘They’re constantly stressing the question of belief, asking people if they believe or not and saying they’ll go to hell if not. People should be more tolerant and flexible. And I’m tired of them quoting chapter and verse in isolation just to back up their points. You should take the religion as a whole to understand the message […].’ Avram then cited a Russian *anekdot* – a type of usually humorous long-form joke – to illustrate the dangers of not digesting scripture *in toto*:

‘A thuggish-looking youth comes into a church, goes up to the priest, hits him in the face and then, laughing, says ‘well father, isn’t it written that if someone smites you on one cheek you should turn the other one?’ But the priest, a former boxing champion, responds with a swift left hook which sends the youth reeling into a corner of the church. ‘Yes, but it is also written that that which you give shall be returned unto you!’ he says quietly. Witnessing the scuffle, some parishioners ask the deacon, ‘what’s going on there?’ ‘Ah they’re just discussing the gospel’, he responds to the terrified onlookers’.

It is easy to see how Avram’s philosophical and relativistic approach to life’s deeper questions, embedded in a distinctly Russian sense of humour, derives at least partly from the extraordinary shifts in circumstance which he has seen over the decades. Indeed, during the life of the Union Soviet citizens became intimately familiar with a repertoire of context-free quotations similar in form to Bible verses, namely the orphan ‘dead quotes’ from Lenin which decorated much of Soviet political doctrine (Yurchak 2017, 172-175). Avram’s relativism emerges still more forcefully in his accounts of meetings with Joseonjok, which also began in the early 1990s, and took place in that most quintessential of post-Soviet spaces in the Russian Far East – the Chinese bazaar. Unbeknownst to many Slavic inhabitants of the area, significant numbers of the ‘Chinese’ people who crossed the border to work on these markets in Primorye from the 1990s were Joseonjok (see Park 2013, 88). In Partizansk Avram had taken up his sixth profession, after solder, builder, factory manager, translator and priest, farming. Once these agricultural operations were established, his wife soon started selling some of their surplus produce at the ‘Chinese’ bazaar in nearby Ussuriisk (Map 18.1). Here in this small-scale private business setting, the first encounters occurred.

‘Through my wife’s work at the bazaar we got to know all kinds of Joseonjok’, recalls Avram, ‘they were wanting to sell lots of Chinese manufactured goods – slippers, machinery, electronics, everything. They also wanted buy things like timber and scrap metal’. As interactions increased, trust grew and by the mid-90s some of Avram’s Joseonjok contacts had bought him a Japanese-made VW saloon car. In this vehicle he would drive the length and breadth of Primorye buying up scrap iron, cement and other detritus of the crumbling Soviet industrial base, and then arrange for it to be transported back to China where burgeoning post-reform industry was hungry for raw materials.

‘I first came to Hunchun to visit my business contacts in 1994’, Avram says, recalling a remarkably early first entry which was likely facilitated by inter-Korean connections: it was not until several years later in the late 1990s and early 2000s that Hunchun opened more fully to general Russian visitors. ‘The place was nothing more than *fanzy*[[224]](#footnote-224)back then’, he adds, ‘but it was still nice here and I made a big mistake: my Chinese Korean friends offered to help me come and settle down here, but I refused. If I had done that then I could own half the town by now […]’.

It was only after his wife’s death that Avram reconsidered, eventually deciding to make the move to Hunchun in 2011. He arrived having years of experience on both sides of the border to draw upon when assessing differences and commonalities among Goryeo saram and Joseonjok: ‘One key difference between Koreans here and us from Central Asia is language’, he notes. ‘Whilst most Goryeo saram of any age hardly speak a word of Korean, here you sometimes see the reverse, as many Yanbian Koreans of my age don’t even speak Chinese if they come from small villages’. Parting ways with Mrs. Son, Avram also cited several Joseonjok traits which he considered more traditionally ‘Korean’ than general Goryeo saram mores, including respect for elders and less individualistic thinking. Yet it was evident that such comparisons were made not against some kind of monolithic yardstick of ‘Korean’ identity to which one could conform or not conform, but among distinct but equally flexible Koreannesses.

**Unstable Referents**

The Sons, Vova, Avram and other Goryeo saram of my acquaintance all described an unstable field of referents for what constituted appropriate or desirable ‘Koreanness’ in present-day Hunchun. Some traits or practices, notably the Sons’ reference to their choice of wedding ceremony, were deemed to be more or less strong indications of being ‘Korean’ in a certain way. Yet others which might on the surface seem just as important as markers of ethnic identification appeared in fact to have become wholly uncoupled from association with Koreanness. Echoing some of the implications present in Vova’s assertion that relinquishing Korean language competency somehow represented an inherently Korean capacity for adaptation, Avram made it clear that he too saw language ability as relatively unimportant, and certainly insufficient to make Joseonjok *more* ‘Korean’ in any particular way.

Even the old Koreans here who hardly speak any Chinese have still picked up Chinese ways’, he said. ‘You can see it in their traditions like burial for example - nowadays pretty much all Yanbian Koreans cremate their dead because they have to. But when I was back in Russia a few months ago, one of my Korean friends there was complaining that Russian Koreans are forgetting the old burial rites and saying how he’d buried his parents in the traditional way. Goryeo saram want to hold on to what they imagine are their traditions. But I told him, ‘we have to look forward, not backwards’. This is one problem with Russian Koreans, they’re all focused on the past […].

Here then was an example of Avram rejecting efforts to identify more closely with ‘traditional’ Korean mores as incompatible with contemporary life. Adaptation was evidently important to him too.

Conversely, however, and adding another layer to the paradox, picking up the indisputably ‘modern’ habits of the world’s most well-known Koreans – South Koreans – was hardly seen as more validating in the eyes of Hunchun-based Goryeo saram. Viva, despite being widely considered by mutual friends of ours to be among the most wheeler-dealer-esque of Hunchun’s Russian-speakers, railed against what he saw as the excessive ROK-derived materialism of modern-day Joseonjok.

‘The South Koreans have done a good job’, he said. ‘But because of them the Koreans here are obsessed with money. Although’, he reflected further, ‘that might also have a lot to do with the Chinese as well’.

Avram too attributed a ‘modern’ tendency to conduct business in an aggressively capitalistic way among local Joseonjok to South Korean influence. Indeed, many of his past business dealings with Joseonjok partners had been plans to buy up hundreds of thousands of dollars-worth of Russian timber or import a new breed of pig from South Korea to Yanbian and Primorye. These quixotic schemes had come to naught, and this had left him with an impression that the influence of South Korean business in general was a pernicious one. But association of Joseonjok or Goryeo saram habits with explicitly labelled state entities such as South Korea was still no guarantee of attaining a version of Koreanness which could be unequivocally distinguished from generic ‘modern’ capitalist behaviour or indeed other national affiliations, such as the possible Chinese influence mentioned by Vova.

Taken together therefore, these reflections among people of quite different ages, experiences and dispositions – from the thoughtful Mrs. Son to the categorical Vova and the relativistic Avram – revealed an ever-shifting repertoire of reference points which echoed many of the variant genres of Koreanness represented on Hunchun’s shopfronts. Yet our talks also exhibited another trait which leads beyond the somewhat unadventurous conclusion that Russian-speaking Koreans have a ‘flexible’ attitude towards identity.[[225]](#footnote-225) Meta-reflection on Koreanness was a remarkably common conversation topic throughout my time in Hunchun, and this offers a clue as to the origins of these selectively deployed ways of being Korean. Claims made by interlocutors regarding intra-Central Asian distinctions among Soviet Koreans, language shift and Russification, *nunchi* and the deportation all reflect an impetus among Hunchun’s Goryeo saram themselves to account for the layered historical and sociological root causes of their own (non-)Koreanness. These trace lines of causality down two main trajectories, firstly competing state-derived influences – those of the USSR, Russia, China, the Koreas – and secondly variations in politico-economic conditions under socialism or the market era. Mirroring the two cognate meanings of the word ‘state’, these two strands are of course not easily separable, since for people who have moved vast distances, bygone socio-economic ‘states’ are also products of now-defunct political ‘states’. To take Avram or Vova’s judgements about noxious South Korean influence on Joseonjok materialism as an example, nostalgia for simpler, egalitarian socialist times (which Vova, incidentally, is too young to remember personally), is also nostalgia for a time when Goryeo saram were thoroughly encompassed within Soviet/Central Asian/Russian-speaking environments very different from their trans- or inter-national presents.[[226]](#footnote-226)

I now move on to discuss these increasingly trans/internationalized lives of many Goryeo saram in historical context. The following analysis is based on the past sociological contexts which many Goryeo saram friends themselves considered important in explaining their position. Through drawing on these I then move on to suggest both why situational approaches to Korean identity are common amongst my interlocutors, why these mirror the similarly flexible Joseonjok attitudes evident in Hunchun and, relatedly, why Koreanness emerges so often as a subject of contention and discussion. Ultimately, mobility in the China-Russia-Korea borderlands *and* the proliferation of self-reflexive identity questions are both intimately bound up with Yanbian and northeast Asia’s post-socialist and post-Soviet status.

**From Entangled to Parallel Fates**

From being essentially a single large cohort of people, Goryeo saram and Joseonjok embarked on separate but remarkably parallel paths in each of the non-Korean states where they ended up. With both today’s Yanbian – then ‘Kando’ (Kor.) / ‘Jiandao’ (Ch.) – and southern Primorye being settled simultaneously by famine-struck refugees from neighbouring Hamgyeong province from the 1870s (Jin 1993; Ban 1996), the two were in many regards not meaningfully distinct in their early years outside the Korean Peninsula. It was often chance as much as anything which determined whether the trip across the River Tumen left one in Russian or Chinese territory. Furthermore, and despite delineation of a Sino-Russian boundary via the 1860 Treaty of Peking, and its reaffirmation under the 1886 Hunchun Protocol, borders remained permeable for many subsequent decades, and those in Russia and China maintained considerable contact among themselves, as well as with people back in Hamgyeong. Tellingly, in the Chinese sector of this contiguous territory, the late-nineteenth-century Qing authorities termed these Koreans *Manzhou zhi Gaoliren* (‘Manchurian Goryeo people’), using precisely the Chinese-character term ‘高丽人’ since applied to Korean citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States in the ROK (Li 2012: 98).

Koreans on both sides of the Sino-Russian border were active participants in Communist, or at least leftist, struggles waged in the Russian (sBabichev 1959) and subsequent Chinese Civil Wars (Lee 1983), and also in resisting the Japanese occupations of southern Primorye (1918-1922) and Manchuria (1931-1945). The latter campaigns were inseparably linked to Korean liberation struggles against Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula itself (1905-1945), and 1920s-40s events in both northeast China and the Russian/Soviet Far East had a decisive bearing on the later establishment of a socialist state in North Korea (Park 2005). In many regards therefore, the early history of the groups which later became known as Goryeo saram and Joseonjok were not just similar, but entangled.

As new Russian and Chinese-dominated polities emerged around them out of these regional political cataclysms, there resulted not so much a radical divergence between Goryeo saram and Joseonjok lives as their embarkation down two remarkably parallel tracks in their respective empires-turned-socialist states. On the Russian side following the 1922 establishment of the USSR, some Koreans lobbied for their own autonomous republic in southern Primorye (Chang 2016, 44) where they comprised a majority population in many locales, particularly the Poset area adjacent to Hunchun. This bid for self-governance, coupled with more suspicion – justified in Vova’s view – regarding their possible allegiance to the 1932-established Japanese-backed Manchukuo state over the border, underlay their 1937 deportation. Conditions in transit, which occurred in livestock wagons, were extremely harsh, and thousands perished. Avram’s parents recounted to him that deportees were supposed to be given ten Soviet roubles each for the trip and five for children but did not receive the money. As Jon Chang (2016, 5-6) argues, even if the Soviet authorities justified their actions on the questionable basis that Koreanness was incompatible with socialism, this merciless treatment of the Goryeo saram was not a Soviet innovation but drew on longstanding Tsarist-era fears of a ‘yellow peril’ in the Far East. Those who, like Avram’s family, managed to survive were forced to make a new life in mostly inhospitable parts of Central Asia, opening up new land to collective agriculture and engaging in back-breaking work which emphatically disproved the claim that they were somehow ill-suited to life in a state where ‘labour’ was of totemic importance.

Back in East Asia, two decades of turmoil after 1945 saw states falling and being created in rapid succession: Japan was ejected from Manchuria and Korea in 1945, the Soviet-backed DPRK established in 1948, the PRC founded in 1949, and Yanbian created as an autonomous unit within China in 1952 (Tai 2004). By the 1950s therefore, and following decades of unsettled mobility and turmoil, both Goryeo saram and Joseonjok were living roughly where they would remain for the next several decades. Indeed, limited mobility for both groups was a hallmark of the ensuing high socialist period as material poverty and strict registration regimes governing population movements (in sensitive border areas and the Sino-Soviet frontier specifically) kept Soviet and PRC citizens similarly static.[[227]](#footnote-227)

**Domestic Koreannesses**

These parallel regimes of immobility were coterminous with a broader impetus for classification and registration in both bureaucratically centralist socialist states. Most significantly where Koreanness is concerned, this tendency was reflected in cognate Soviet and PRC regimes of categorization which, drawing on early Stalinist notions around what constituted a ‘nation’, determined officially permissible manifestations of ethnic difference.[[228]](#footnote-228) As was the case for all ethnic groups (Rus. *natsional’nosti*, Ch. *minzu*) in both places, identification as ‘Korean’ came to be expressed through a canonical repertoire of ‘national’ songs, dances, foods and other traditions which largely evacuated ethnicity of any claim to meaningful autonomy. Whilst motivated in large part by *realpolitik* concerns over controlling diverse populations, the softening of ethnicity was considered from a theoretical point of view to be a key step on the way to the Marxian ‘withering away’ of such categories, a process which would be followed by a similar disappearance of class and other social distinctions, and eventually the state itself.

In both contemporary Russia and China, the formalist understandings of how ethnic difference is demarcated laid down during the classificatory heyday of high socialism persist to this day. Avram’s above statement about the need for Goryeo saram to look to the future where funerary rites are concerned serves as one example of this, for the promotion of particular frames within which ethnicity could exist often meant that non-canonical ethnically-specific practices, including religious traditions, were dismissed as superstitious or even ‘feudal’ practices. To clarify, I do not wish to suggest here that Avram or anyone else is merely a brainwashed vassal of statist ideology, but traces of the accepted official genres of ethnic identification, promoted by Soviet ethnological and other academic work, are difficult to avoid today when Goryeo saram scholars discuss ‘Koreanness’. At the Overseas Koreans Foundation’s ‘Global Korean Convention’ held in Seoul in 2017, for example, a majority of papers by Goryeo saram scholars focused on subjects including theatre, music and other performance-oriented activities.[[229]](#footnote-229)

Where PRC-based sources are concerned, a Chinese-language search of the country’s primary database of academic papers, ‘Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure’ (CNKI), reveals that most work on the Joseonjok continues to revolve around form- and performance-based themes such as dance (*wudao*), music (*yinyue*), customs (*minsu*) and costume (*fushi*). Joseonjok-focused writing from Hunchun and Yanbian also stresses almost identical subjects (Jin 1993; Yi 2012), all of which buttress observations made by numerous anthropologists working on present-day PRC *minzu* concerning how ethnic identification has been canonized in often-Disneyfied song and dance-based terms.[[230]](#footnote-230)

In raising this point about both Goryeo saram and Joseonjok state contexts, there are several things that I am not suggesting. Firstly, I do not wish to imply that outward performative manifestations of ethnic belonging such as song or dance are not important components of identity. Secondly, it is of course not the case that PRC and Soviet categories of Koreanness were based on nothing or plucked out of thin air, for many sensitive scholars and indigenous experts worked tirelessly to observe, record and promote a rich array of actually-existing cultural in both countries’ early days of ethnic classification (Fei 1981 on PRC; Slezkine 1994 on USSR). Thirdly, I am not suggesting that these official visions for ethnic identity reigned hegemonic to the exclusion of all other possible conceptions of Goryeo saram or Joseonjok identification within their respective countries. Indeed, for all minority citizens of these vast polities, negotiations of ethnic difference were always much more flexible and emergent processes than state actors would have preferred, and populations did not have their ideas wholly subjugated to these notions any more than they became unable to think outside other state-promoted political categories.

What is key here, however, is the way in which these rigidly delineated state-sponsored schemata cast ethnic identification as a useful category only in certain contexts, thereby encouraging Soviet and PRC minority populations to adopt situational and negotiated approaches to ethnicity or, to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Stevan Harrell (2001), different ‘ways of being ethnic’ in different settings. Like many symbolic regimes within powerful centralizing states, ordinary people’s conceptions of their ethnic identity did not exclude state-fostered ideas entirely, for even orthodox and rather wooden frames for marking out identity did come to acquire real meaning in the everyday lives of citizens. But as much as they were funds of material for understanding one’s own wider group belonging, official *natsional’nost’* / *minzu* categories were also sites of struggle in negotiations over the place of minorities within larger polities. Much existing scholarship attests to how Soviet and PRC minorities have re-appropriated, selectively mobilized, and judiciously leveraged official categories to their own ends, including, to name a few, various Soviet groups studied by Svetlana Lure (2011) and Caroline Humphrey (2004), work in southwest China by Louisa Schein (2000), Ralph Litzinger (2000) and Stevan Harrell (2001), and Bulag’s (2010) powerful argument concerning ‘collaborative nationalism’ among China’s Mongols. Much of this work carries a strong historical inflection, tracing shifts in ethnic categorization over time to suggest that even in the pre-socialist Russian or Chinese empires, minority groups mobilized externally-imposed categories to their own ends.

Most applicable to the parallel Goryeo saram and Joseonjok cases are accounts of minority practices under high socialism. As Bulag suggests for the Chinese case, practices of ‘collaborative nationalism’ emerged in socialist conditions as minorities staked claims to a role as loyal co-creators of the multi-ethnic Chinese state, a position advanced in the Mongol case by revolutionary leader Ulanhu, who, as former-vice-president, remains the most important minority representative ever to attain a position of power in the PRC. During the 1980s, Ulanhu ‘def[ied] Chinese attempts to erase nationality identities during the Cultural Revolution… [and] launched a discourse that sought to win ‘recognition’ for the minorities’ equal ‘contribution’ to building the new China’, in part by sponsoring a 1984 ‘Law on National Regional Autonomy’ which affirmed that all nationalities had contributed to the state’s creation (Bulag 2010, 146-147). Korean groups in both Soviet and PRC contexts have made precisely cognate assertions of their importance as co-contributors to wider socialist state projects, with each self-describing in scholarship as among the most loyal leftists during Bolshevik (Pak 2013) and CCP (Li 1988) guerrilla struggles,[[231]](#footnote-231) as operators of the most productive collective farms in Central Asia (Khan 2011), most talented scholars and cultural figures (Ryu 2000), and as disproportionately successful in attaining positions of leadership (Khan 2011). In numerous quite separate studies, Goryeo saram and Joseonjok scholars have spoken of these Korean groups as ‘model minorities’ (Rus. *obraztsovoe men’shenstvo*, Ch. *mofan shaoshu minzu*) (Yu and Choi 2012, 14; Khan 2014, 346) in their respective states, with the achievement of this status attributed to the very flexible identification with ethnic categories highlighted in my conversations with Goryeo saram interlocutors; appearing throughout is evidence of the paradox highlighted by Vova, whereby those identified as ‘Korean’ appear to be most successful at adapting to non-Korean circumstances. Drawing on influential work by Brackette Williams (1989), Litzinger suggests that ethnicity becomes a particularly significant notion ‘when politically dominant groups set the terms of belonging to the national centre while subordinate groups are left to vie among themselves as to how best to mark their contribution to the national order’ (Litzinger 2000, 239): in just this way, Koreanness mattered most under high socialism when what was at stake was succeeding in non-Korean environments.

In the post-socialist era, increased mobility and marketization have offered myriad settings in which to leverage ethnic and national belonging in new ways. On the Chinese side, Joseonjok actors in Hunchun and Yanbian generally have leapt at the chance to participate in a vogue for *minzu*-based tourism, with precisely the same colourful song-and-dance-based version of Koreanness once promoted by a bureaucratic Chinese state now being marketed back at Han Chinese visitors to the area’s ‘ethnic villages’ and museums. Similar cases in which socialist-artefact identities have been re-purposed in the market era include Schein’s (2000) compelling account of Miao women mobilizing their treatment as exotically-dressed tourist curiosities in order to assert their own autonomy and earn money, and, in the political realm, Ron Suny (1999) and others’ observations regarding re-emergent identities during the post-Soviet breakup. For CIS and PRC Koreans, the ability to reappraise and reconfigure shifting ‘ways of being’ Korean – Russian-speaking, Central Asian, Chinese or others – has been most useful when grasping the opportunities post-socialism presents for straddling newly-open national boundaries between China, Russia, Central Asian states, and the Koreas.

**Post-Socialist Parallels**

Post-Soviet openings have brought Koreans to Hunchun, revealing differences between variant Goryeo saram and Joseonjok Koreannesses. Conversely, these same processes have, in a different geography, offered further evidence of the formal parallels between Russian- and Chinese-speaking Korean experiences. From the onset of the post-socialist era as Yanbian and Primorye opened up, South Korea emerged as a new ‘frontier’ for mobile Koreans (Park 2015, 134).[[232]](#footnote-232) Moscow and Beijing normalized relations with South Korea in 1990 and 1992, respectively. Yet as growing numbers of Joseonjok and Goryeo saram began to spend time in the ROK, both found themselves confronted by quite different, much fewer negotiable conceptions of Korean identity than those which had developed domestically in each case. On both sides, academic consensus holds that, after an early honeymoon period when interest in all things linked to the economically burgeoning ROK spiked, from work, trade, investment, educational and cultural opportunities, and latterly ‘Korean wave’ phenomena, Goryeo saram and Joseonjok have subsequently become disillusioned and reverted to accepting more readily their post-Soviet and Chinese/Yanbian contexts.

The Korea-focused organizations, cultural groups and social clubs which effloresced in Central Asia in the late 1980s were suggestive of the manner in which this dynamic began to play out among Goryeo saram. Bearing names such as ‘return’ (*vozvrashenie*), ‘rebirth’ (*vozrozhdenie*) and ‘homeland’ (*rodina*) (Kim and Khan 2014), these spoke of a sense of rediscovery around the ‘return’ of many Goryeo saram to Primorye, and their notional ‘homecoming’ to a South Korea which, despite being a place bearing little historical relation to Russian Korean ancestry, was now envisioned as a lost patria (Lankov 2009). Yet many who experienced the ROK directly, either through migration, visits, or contact with South Koreans back in Russia (as in Avram’s case), struggled with a sense that they were always viewed as a ‘foreigner’ (*oegugin*) (Kim 2017), or at best a kind of ‘poor relation’. For Joseonjok, whilst notions of ‘return’ have been less salient among people who have not been deported from their home abutting the Korean Peninsula, the levels of interest – and subsequent disillusionment – in South Korean contact have been comparable. Indeed, today’s Hunchun provides plentiful indications that these currents of fascination and disappointment run simultaneously. Shops such as *Myeongdong* and *South Korea City* attest to the Korean wave’s persistent presence, but many such establishments, like the town’s coffee shops and bars, are in fact owned and run by Joseonjok who have returned from the ROK having decided *not* to remain there. Although many do stay for long periods, and hundreds of thousands of Joseonjok comprise the ROK’s largest single group of foreign residents (Park 2017), the eventual choice to return is a common one. In many cases this is motivated by struggles with a sense of difference and, at times, deliberate exclusion from prevailing ways of being Korean in the notional ‘homeland’. As Caren Freeman (2004, 95) observes, these have come especially to the fore amidst efforts by policy-makers in South Korea to attract Joseonjok women to the country, both as cheap labourers and as wives for rural men who might ‘restore family life’ in depopulated rural areas. Promotion of the marriage drive in particular has asserted that Joseonjok integration will be a ‘culturally seamless process’ among members of the ‘same ethnic group’. Yet this ‘myth of ethnic homogeneity’ has revealed itself indeed to be a myth, and, Freeman notes, ‘contrary to […] expectations Joseonjok brides discover immediately on arrival in South Korea that they do not blend easily with the local population’. With the same dynamic applying to Goryeo saram, it is highly significant that the barrage of Othering rejection from ROK citizens and non-acceptance of either group as real ‘Koreans’ in fact reinforce exactly the kind of flexible approach to ethno-national belonging discussed throughout here: in the Joseonjok case, for example, many of the Freeman’s interlocutors in her rich ethnography ‘expressed ambivalence about belonging to any nation state’ (Freeman 2004, 96; see also 2011).

Furthermore, post-socialist collisions between powerful South Korean ideas about *a priori* and non-negotiable ‘Koreanness’[[233]](#footnote-233) and more flexible ‘ways of being’ Korean evident among Goryeo saram and Joseonjok have underlain not only difficult personal experiences, but also vigorous discussion among scholars and laypeople alike of the veracity of the oft-pronounced phrase ‘we are all Koreans’. This partly accounts for why the notion of variant forms of ‘Koreanness’ emerged as a salient emic concern for Hunchun-based Goryeo saram over dinner or conversations in Century Square. On the academic level, encounters between situational and more monolithic notions of Koreanness have led Russophone scholars to debate at a high theoretical pitch whether the Goryeo saram should be considered a coherent ethnic group at all, or perhaps a ‘meta-national’ (Khan 2014, 349), ‘super-national’ (Iugai 2003) or ‘sub-national’ (Kireev 2012) collectivity instead. A consistent theme running throughout much of this theorizing is the inseparable relationship between Goryeo saram identity and the multiethnic Soviet/Russian context in which it emerged, with particular attention devoted to the constant negotiations with non-Korean interests on both the state and the everyday levels which have long been part of Soviet Korean lives.

Elsewhere, similar debates have occurred around the extent of Joseonjok realizations of their own ‘Chineseness’. China- and ROK-based scholars examining Joseonjok migration from a political science perspective (Yu and Choi 2012), studying Yanbian-produced fictional work (Zhang 2016), and adopting a psychological approach to examine the outlook of Joseonjok students at Chinese universities (Piao and Qin 2012) invariably root the emergence of situational Joseonjok-ness within a multi-ethnic PRC context. Noting that Chinese Koreans are ‘Chinese people’ in important ways, these scholars employ terminology which in fact mirrors the above-noted distinction between *rossiiskii* and *russkii*, with Joseonjok being described as *Zhongguo ren* – ‘people of China’ – or even a category of ‘overseas Chinese’ (*huaqiao*) in their ROK encounters, rather than anything linking them to the ethnic Han (*Hanzu*) majority. For researchers such as Yanbian-based sociologistLi Meihua whose politically inflected work transparently buttresses orthodox CCP-promoted notions of unity amongst all *minzu*, inescapable Joseonjok Chineseness is a convenient conceit: experience of South Korean life has, Li (2012, 97) states, not ‘weakened the national identity of the Korean Chinese, but enhanced their national identity as Chinese citizens’.

Yet however declarative such statements, identity questions do, as discussed throughout here, remain more open for both groups than the CCP or long-defunct CPSU would prefer. Indeed, searches for definitions of Koreanness continues to exhibit striking parallels on both sides, a situation tellingly illustrated by the mirrored titles of books by Goryeo saram historian and philosopher Valerii Khan (2009) and Joseonjok culturologist Ryu Wonmu (2000).[[234]](#footnote-234) The refrain ‘who are we?’ echoes on.

[Figures 18.4 and 18.5 naast elkaar plaatsen]

**Figures 18.4 and 18.5 Russian- and (Joseonjok) Korean-language books entitled ‘Who are we?’ Note both covers’ mobilisation of canonical symbols of reified ‘culture’, notably architecture and cuisine**

[hier Figure\_18.4] [hier Figure\_18.5]

Photos: Ed Pulford

**Conclusion**

To Avram, Joseonjok appeared to have answered the ‘who are we?’ question successfully, to have ‘come to terms’ (*smirilis*) with life in their country of citizenship more fully than Goryeo saram. The long history of encounters with multiple Koreannesses which had led to him to this conclusion had also instilled in him a view of his own people as eternal malcontents, looking on as Joseonjok directed their energies towards improving their lot:

Yanbian Koreans understand that you need capital to move on in life these days, and so they work towards that’, he said. ‘But our lot are constantly looking backwards [*nazad*]. It’s ridiculous [*smeshno*], Russian Koreans are always boasting that their family used to be rich, or that they had a grandfather who lived in South Korea and owned a yacht. I tell them, ‘don’t you even know that in those days there wasn’t even a South Korea, and the whole place was a Japanese colony?’ It shows that our Koreans don’t know anything and are just living in the past.

Avram’s cynicism about the gloomy fate of his own kind, reflections, incidentally, redolent of those one hears from many Russians, offered further eloquent testament to the distinct post-socialist circumstances in which Sino-Russian Korean encounters today occur. Today’s Hunchun is indeed a place where capital is key, and as I have argued here, questions over identity and belonging are intimately intertwined with the new mobilities, money-making and -losing opportunities which have swirled around Primorye, Yanbian and the Korean peninsula over the past two and a half decades. In light of this, and the fact that each of the Goryeo saram and Joseonjok carry forward situational notions of ethnic belonging which emerged in classification-oriented socialist states during the twentieth century, the post-socialist condition of the area is key in the present-day. Also reflecting this is the fact that, as I have shown here, discussions over Koreanness take much more fragmented and demotic form than the semantic wrangling over Korean identity which, as Christian Park (2017, 3) notes drawing on John Borneman’s work on Germanness in divided Berlin, lie at the heart of questions over national belonging in North and South Korea, and bear on methodological nationalism in ROK-based social science.

The importance of post-socialist circumstances here will likely not endure forever, as younger residents of the area, the children of today’s adult Joseonjok and Goryeo saram returnees to the Russian Far East, will grow up with a more prosaic view of this confluence of Korean, Russian and Chinese spheres, and will be less preoccupied by questions of continuity and change than their forebears. But for now, a significant tool in perceiving where the limits of Koreanness lie, and ‘decoding’ the lives of many borderland-dwellers, will continue to be an understanding of this nexus of worlds as a distinctively post-socialist space.

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**Afterword**

*Kevin Gray*

**Keywords:** Asian borderlands, China-North Korea relations, sanctions, Xi-Kim relations, US-DPRK relations

It is perhaps no exaggeration to suggest that Chinese-North Korean relations form one of the most consequential bilateral relationships for international politics in East Asia today. A great deal of ink has been spilt in media and policy-related commentary over, for example, China’s enforcement of or alleged indifference to international sanctions against North Korea and its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programmes. Much debate in recent years on Chinese-North Korean relations has focused on the ‘high politics’ of Beijing-Pyongyang relations, or even more narrowly, on the dynamics of personal relations between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping. However, as the contributions to this volume attest, relations between the two countries are vastly more complex than representations of this bilateral relationship would suggest. The focus offered in this book on the seemingly remote Sino-North Korean borderlands provides a unique analytical approach to analysing the multi-faced nature and substantive quality of relations between the two countries and, by extension, into their importance to the broader dynamics of world politics.

Yet, the complex nature of these borderland encounters presents significant analytical and methodological challenges. As Leake has argued in her contribution to this volume, one fruitful approach to analysing borders and the borderlands is to distinguish between the state and the everyday life of borderland inhabitants at the grassroots level. States seek to govern their borders in the name of sovereignty, the national project and the question of citizenship. Perhaps no clearer example of this role of the state can be seen in Shin’s account of language policy in the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture, whereby the Han Chinese were designated as the ‘leading ethnic group’ and the use of Korean language was deemed unconducive to socialist nation-building, and was as a result targeted under the Anti-Local Nationalism Campaign. Furthermore, as Choi in his contribution argues, China’s contemporary domestic laws and (non-)adherence to international laws and norms have exerted a profound impact on the fate of North Korean defectors in China.

As the case of the Sino-North Korean borderlands suggests, however, the state is by no means a unitary actor and governance of the border takes place at a multiplicity of scales. Even when considering the relatively illiberal states of China and North Korea, it quickly becomes clear that these countries are no longer (if indeed they ever were) the ‘black box’ Westphalian states of mainstream International Relations theory, but have increasingly evolved into a multi-scalar structure of political authority. This profound process of rescaling has taken the form of the decentralization of authority from the centre towards provincial, municipal and other local actors. While the decentralization of the Chinese state following the onset of reform in the early 1980s has been well documented, the contributions to this volume explore in detail how provincial, city and regional governments have become key sites of political agency in shaping Sino-North Korean border/borderland dynamics. The role of local governments, however, has not been simply to govern the border but to promote the mobility of capital and people through cross-border economic cooperation projects. Thus, while the border has since the 2000s become increasingly securitized, it has also become a space of flows of capital and people integrated into cross-border production networks.

While the decentralization of political authority has been prominent and widely analysed in the case of the Chinese state, we have also seen in these pages that this has also been a feature of the North Korean state in recent years. As Clement has argued, the Rason Special Economic Zone (SEZ) authorities have a degree of autonomy from Pyongyang and are even able to issue their own visas to foreign visitors. The 2011 Rason SEZ Law saw efforts to increase the administrative autonomy of the zone as an attempt to reduce the possibility of political interference. This decentralization of political authority has not been uniform across the countries in the region, however, and the relatively limited degree of regional autonomy in, say, Russia, appears to provide the centre with more veto power over local level initiatives, even to the extent of stalling regional cooperation projects such as the Tumen River Area Development Project.

As we have seen, however, states are not the only force in shaping the borderlands. The state, at a multiplicity of scales, competes for dominance with the day-to-day activities of populations who disregard, undermine or exploit the border in their daily lives. On the one hand, such actors include the profit-oriented activities of typically small-scale Northeastern Chinese enterprises engaged in trade and investment with North Korea. Indeed, despite the highly politicized nature of Sino-North Korean relations, cross-border exchange at the grassroots level is largely profit-oriented rather than politically directed. As Boyston argues, it is right to be sceptical about the reliability of Chinese customs statistics. But they do at a very broad level confirm the hypothesis that the broad scope of Sino-North Korean economic exchange has been driven by the Chinese economic boom rather than by the vicissitudes of diplomatic relations. In this regard, Sino-North Korean relations are not exceptional but share much in common with the kind of dependent relations seen between China and many other resource-rich developing countries. This also underlines the constitutive role of economic actors at the grassroots level, albeit within the broad framework established by the two states. In this sense, economic exchange between the two countries appears to be situated within the framework outlined in 2005 by Chinese vice-premier, Wu Yi : ‘government guidance with companies taking the lead; market-based operations and mutual benefit’. The fact that enterprises take decisions largely based on profit expectations also shapes the broader economic geography of the borderlands. Although the Rason SEZ has had some successes in a country which is still in the early stages of transition, it has clearly failed to live up to the expectations of North Korean policymakers as a result of the decision making of Chinese enterprises.

Beyond trade and investment, the everyday actions of key actors in the region have created their own challenges and have shaped the borderlands in ways that go beyond the confines of, and in some cases directly challenge, state actors. The most prominent of this is that of North Korean refugees. As Hamisevicz and Yeo argue, a key feature of the Chinese border region since economic crisis of the 1990s has been the borderland’s dual status as a site of threats, such as border guards, prisons, human trafficking, prostitution rings, low wages for dangerous work amid the lack of legal status, but also the promise of money, food, medicine, and merchandise, and potentially, the role as stepping stone to eventual political freedom. Bregman, however, examines border crossings from the perspective of how they are received in both South Korea and the West. Through examining the divergent cases of two prominent refugees, she examines why it was that one defector, Yeonmi Park, was largely rejected by the public in South Korea but received a warmer reception in the West, whereas defector Kim Ryonhui, who repeatedly asked to be sent back from South Korea to the North, struggled to make her voice heard until her plight was reframed within the discourse of Korea’s divided families. Finally, Denney and Green utilize large-scale survey data to examine how defection to South Korea impacts upon issue of identity. Their findings show that defectors’ identities are on the whole quite malleable to the extent that views on the importance of ethno-cultural characteristics to national belonging, feelings of closeness to South Korea and pride in the latter’s social, political and cultural achievements show now substantive differences with their South Korean counterparts. In-group differences do exist, however, with older defectors more likely to view ethno-cultural traits as important to *Koreanness*.

In addition to these more permanent border crossings by high-profile defectors, there are also a number of illicit cross-border activities which neither alter the crosser’s nationality nor call attention to themselves once across. These activities include those of small-scale traders, many of whom engage in smuggling as a means of evading sanctions as well as customs duties. As Boyston notes, while it is impossible to calculate the scale of such illicit trade, it is surely significant enough to raise serious questions as to the accuracy of official trade figures. Furthermore, such transfers may provide the answer as to why North Korea seems to be able to consistently run trade deficits while maintaining a steady exchange rate. In this respect, it should be noted that one dimension of cross-border exchange that did not receive attention in this volume is that of tourism. In the context of international sanctions, this has remained one of the few remaining licit forms of exchange with North Korea and is a prominent means by which inter-societal exchange takes place within the borderlands.

At the time of writing, the Sino-North Korean borderlands appear to again be at a crucial turning point. In 2016, the Chinese government appeared to finally be making sustained efforts to enforce international sanctions. This had a chilling effect on cross-border exchange and suggested that political decentralization notwithstanding, Beijing remained the final arbiter of the scope and scale of cross-border relations. However, since the beginning of 2018, Kim Jong-un has held successive summits with Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Moon Jae-In. From the South Korean perspective, there is clear hope that a political breakthrough with North Korea will provide the opportunity for renewed inter-Korean economic cooperation. Needless to say, these plans are by no means limited to North Korea but seek to reconnect South Korea to the Asian mainland through the building of a trans-Korean gas pipeline and the (re)integration of the region’s railways. In this sense, the Sino-North Korean borderlands have again become a necessary and key component of South Korea’s geo-economic vision. Such plans are cooperative in nature but at the same time driven by a form of pan-Korean nationalism and anxiety over the recent economic influence that China has exerted over the north in recent years.

Though the substantive nature of the economic vision arising from the Kim-Xi summits are less clear, there is no doubt at least that economic actors in the border regions itself are hopeful with regards to the potential economic opportunities arising from the meetings. Though the building of Dandong’s New District in the 2010s reflected the debt-fuelled urbanization seen elsewhere in China, the fact that to date the New Yalu River Bridge remains closed as not helped the district. Yet, with expectations of renewed cross-border economic cooperation, property prices saw a rapid increase in the spring of 2018. Though speculative in nature, this optimism reflects not just the envisaged economic opportunities within North Korea itself, but also the potential of cross-border cooperation to connect with the much more lucrative opportunities in South Korea.

The success of the current round of diplomacy is by no means assured. If it fails, there may be an attempted return on the part of Washington to the ‘maximum pressure’ policy of the past. Washington’s ‘China responsibility theory’ notwithstanding, it seems unlikely in the current geopolitical climate however that China will become the executor of US foreign policy in Northeast Asia. Already since the beginning of 2018, there has reportedly been some relaxation of sanctions and a resulting recovery of Sino-North Korean economic exchange, though not yet to former levels it seems. But regardless of the outcome of the current round of diplomacy, it appears that once again the Sino-North Korean borderlands will be the key spatial nexus through which engagement or containment succeeds or fails. Analysts will continue grapple with the question of how the multitude of public and private actors constitutive of the border region will seek to assist or subvert the intentions of the major interested powers in the Korean peninsula. They will also be faced with a number of analytical and methodological challenges in terms of how to address this empirical question. As such, it is hoped that the analyses offered in these pages will have done much to clear the ground and offer new ways forward for addressing the question of how the Sino-North Korean borderlands will continue to shape broader geopolitical and geo-economic trends in the East Asian region.

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1. A good deal of critical attention has been focused on the border between South and North Korea, the Demilitarized Zone. Known as the ‘Main Line of Resistance’ during the long phase of Korean War armistice negotiations from 1951-1953, the Demilitarized Zone today is at once recognizable as a seam of national partition (Greenberg 2004; Paik 2011), verdant biodiversity (Kim 2015), and cultural grief and performance (Suk-young Kim 2014). It is also a military and securitized border *par excellence,* a ‘hyper-border’ (Gelézeau et al 2013). Around the DMZ, topics for scholarly investigation abound: They include naval clashes, fishing rights, landmines, defections, environmental pollution, continuous propaganda and intimidation leading to confrontation along the land border (Kang 2012; Kim 2016; Kim 2015). In spite of a number of summits at Panmunjom in recent years, the ‘securitization’ paradigm is alive and well in looking at the border and the forces that sustain it (Smith 2000). In terms of actual physical fracture, violent potential, and paradoxical natural beauty, the DMZ is a border space with few counterparts in the immediate region, although the Taiwan Straits and Kashmir come close. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the various kinds of borders and their conceptualizations, including an explanation of ‘hyper boundaries’, see Brantly Womack (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2011, 2,706 defectors resettled in South Korea. That number of annual migrants decreased to 1,502 in 2012 and has not increased significantly since. See Ministry of Unification statistics at: <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/>. (last accessed 29 September 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is evidenced in the commentary following Kim Jong-un’s visit to Beijing in March 2018. See a roundup of coverage by Rick Noack, in ‘China’s official release on Kim Jong Un’s visit, annotated,’ *Washington Post*, 28 March, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/03/28/chinas-official-release-on-kim-jong-uns-visit-annotated/> (last accessed on 30 September 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As NASA Earth Observatory (2014) notes, ‘North Korea is almost completely dark compared to neighbouring South Korea and China. The darkened land appears as if it were a patch of water joining the Yellow Sea to the Sea of Japan. Its capital city, Pyongyang, appears like a small island, [with] light emission […] equivalent to the smaller towns in South Korea.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In addition to its 1420km of border with China, North Korea also shares a 19km section of its northern boundary with Russia. For details on this little-studied border, see Golunov (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Curzon’s use of ‘frontiers’ shows a semantic slipperiness that still characterizes the engagement with borders in different fields. The most common terms in English are ‘border’, ‘boundary’, and ‘frontier.’ On the use and definitions of these terms, see Prescott (1987) and Rankin and Schofield (2004). However, different disciplines have utilized these terms in distinct, and not always consistent, ways, in order to temporally and spatially distinguish different types of divisions between polities. This chapter considers contemporary border studies to have largely collapsed these distinctions, as outlined later. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. China also reportedly constructed refugee camps in its northeast in 2017 in order to cope with a potential sudden influx of refugees over the border. See Perlez (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See the brief BBC report on illicit cross-border trade (Sudworth and Wang 2018). My thanks to Liu Wenyun for pointing me to this clip. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On ‘natural’ borders, Asian examples (Niu 2015) as well as European examples (Peter Sahlins 1990) are useful. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. + Much of the insight and many of the claims made in this chapter are based on fieldtrips to the China-North Korea border region between 2014-2017. In addition to unpublished field notes, the chapter also draws from previously published work, including: Christopher Green, ‘New Bridges, Old Problems: Watching the Sino-DPRK Borderland’, *Border Bites*, Kyushu University Borderland Studies, Course 5 (February 2017). <https://borderthinkingcom.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/border-bites-vol-5.pdf> (last accessed 19 July 2019); Steven Denney and Christopher Green, ‘How Beijing Turned Koreans Into Chinese’, *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/how-beijing-turned-koreans-into-chinese/> (last accessed 20 July 2019); and Christopher Green and Steven Denney, ‘From hero to zero: North Korea’s failure in Yanbian’, *NK Pro*, 14 June 2016, <https://www.nknews.org/pro/from-hero-to-zero-north-koreas-failure-in-yanbian/> (last accessed 20 July 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The authors have travelled extensively throughout Northeast China, including several trips to North Korea. The fieldwork insights provided here are primarily based on trips to the region made in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Northeast China, or *Dongbei*, consists of three provinces (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang) and is referred to as *dongbuksamseong* (three north-eastern provinces) in Korean. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For North Koreans who intend to return to their homes, even those on legal visit visas, talking is risky. Imprisonment beckons for any man or woman who pulls back the curtain on the DPRK for foreign researchers, and worse punishment may befall any North Korean who divulges information to South Koreans. That this is China, foreign sovereign territory, offers scant protection. Close historical links between the security services of the PRC and DPRK at the local level mean that agents dispatched from North Korea are permitted to operate with relative impunity in this borderland, so long as they do not become involved in Chinese politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The volcano is still alive, as volcanologist Kayla Iacovino (2014) explains. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Interview with an employee of a now-defunct NGO that worked in North Korea until 2014, June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. According to Ministry of Unification data, 17 per cent of all defectors hail from Ryanggang. After North Hamgyong, Ryanggang is the most common origin of North Korean defectors in South Korea. See official statistics on the number of resettled defectors at: <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The migration of ethnic Koreans from China to South Korea is sometimes referred to as the ‘Korean Wind’. Cultural anthropologist June Hee Kwon (2015, 477) describes this as ‘the shifting demography and emerging socio-economic landscape formed by massive Korean Chinese migration to South Korea beginning in the early 1990s, in the wake of China’s economic reforms.’ Simply put, many Chinese Koreans left their home towns for opportunities abroad, in South Korea. However, the economic conditions of the 1990s (and early 2000s) are no longer and while many Chinese Koreans still immigrate to South Korea for work opportunities, the pull is less strong than it once was. China is the economic centre of East Asia today and the work opportunities have changed accordingly. Our interviews with both elites and ordinary citizens of Yanbian suggest many Chinese Koreans see China as their national and occupational future (Denney and Green 2016). The shift in preferences is manifested in the decline in Korean-language schools. Take Ji’an, for instance, where in 1991 there were 14 Korean-language schools. In 2011, this number was one (Kim 2011). The pattern is repeated across the region (Lee 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Measuring public opinion and sentiment in China is difficult; and even more so in the border region. When it comes to understanding the attitudes of borderland populations towards North Korean defectors, we have little more than anecdotal evidence from defector interviews. These interviews suggest that, especially in the period of severe economic hardships for North Koreans (1990s-early 2000s), there was so small amount of sympathy shown and help provided (Lankov 2004, 861-862). While the local population is incentivized to provide information about defectors to local authorities, there is still evidence that defectors receive help from locals, or at least are not viewed in a completely negative light (Charny 2004, 80-87; Liberty in North Korea 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. North Korean women make up a vast majority of illegal border crosses and defectors. Those who cross the border to start a life in China often live on the margins of society, with reports suggesting that thousands (or more) are trafficked into China and sold into marriage and sometimes prostitution (Associated Press 2017; Yoon 2019). The experiences of those sold into marriage vary, with some living relatively content lives and others suffering abuse. Regressive Chinese policy choices prevent these women from fully integrating. Since they are illegal, they can officially marry their Chinese ‘husbands’ or legally resettle. This has the effect of either perpetuating a system of informal institutions prone to abuse or, at best, pushes these women toward resettlement and security in South Korea, a wrong-headed approach given the social cohesion these migrants could bring to troubled border communities. A presentation by Professor Cheon Sinja of Yanbian University in Seoul asserted that migrant North Korean women bring modest shots of revival in the form of family and labour to depressed borderland communities. Formalizing a process of integration for the women who migrate and settle in Yanbian would have positive ramifications, allowing the women to exercise more complete agency in borderland society, as well as cutting down on human trafficking. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Interview with former South Korean civil servant, June 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. These insights are based on interviews with Yanbian elites and focus groups with recent Chinese Korean university graduates during fieldwork in 2014 and 2015. For a historical overview of both North and South Korea’s strategies for courting diaspora populations, see Kim (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. These insights are based on interviews with Yanbian elites and focus groups with recent Chinese Korean university graduates during fieldwork in 2014 and 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. One young man the researchers interviewed acknowledged that a daytrip to the northeastern DPRK border town (and SEZ) of Rason had shed new light on his own identity and shown him points of convergence with his North Korean neighbours, but this experience was a stark outlier. The consensus across the people we interacted with or interviewed was clear: the star is China, and South Korea is in the supporting role. North Korea is more of a nuisance than anything else. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. We use the term ‘defector-migrant’ in this chapter to mean those North Koreans who escape from their country and resettle in South Korea, mostly in Seoul and contiguous regions of Gyeonggi Province. In using the term, there is no intent to transmit a political message of any kind, only that ‘defector-migrant’ conveys the wide range of possible motivations behind acts of abandoning North Korea for a different life in the South. Defector-migrant achieves this more accurately, we believe, than either ‘defector’ or ‘migrant’ (though we occasionally use ‘migrant’ for readability), the neologism *saetomin*, meaning ‘new settler,’ or *Bukhan ital jumin*, meaning ‘resident [of South Korea] who left North Korea.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Statistics on arriving defector-migrant numbers are published regularly by the Ministry of Unification. For the latest statistics, see <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>. Current numbers of arrivals are considerably lower than in the years 2006-2011, when more than 2,000 defector-migrants arrived annually. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. While Chung’s article is ten years old, the typology remains current. The author places the focus on changes in the structure of government support for incoming North Koreans, the impact of shifting South Korean societal views of resettled North Koreans on the identity of the defector-migrants, and the (frequently rather negative) ways in which the different groups of incoming migrants view one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. A resettled North Korean arriving in South Korea is presently eligible for a leased apartment and 13 million KRW ($11,900) in ‘key money’ plus 7 million KRW ($6400) in cash. The government also subsidizes 50% of the salaries paid by employers who take on resettled North Koreans as staff, while some receive free schooling through university level. Academic degrees from North Korean universities are accepted by the South Korean government, but technical qualifications are not, and even where a degree is accepted officially, private employers are often reluctant to follow suit. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The demographic data gathered in our survey asks respondents to categorize their economic status three years prior to escaping North Korea. This is one, but not the only, way to measure the relative social position of respondents. North Korean studies has yet to settle on a shared method of measuring the socio-economic wellbeing of respondents. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The annual surveys and several supplementary surveys of sub-divisions of defector-migrant society are available via the Hana Foundation website: <https://www.koreahana.or.kr/eGovHanaMain.do>. Demographer Pak Kyeong-suk at Seoul National University uses a large sample survey via demographic data from the UN census of 2008 and elsewhere to draw conclusions about the development of North Korean society through the famine and post-famine era. The Hana Foundation is a quasi-government body funded by the Ministry of Unification. The Ministry of Unification selects its board of directors, and some of its data are collected for government use only. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Korean Social Science Archive (KOSSDA) charges a small annual fee for access to its library of survey data. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Haggard and Noland (2011) use 1346 respondents from one survey conducted in China, and 300 from another conducted in South Korea using different questionnaires. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The same survey project also yielded a series of articles published by *Joseon Ilbo*. Published in the form of thematic articles over three days, the survey was done in cooperation with the Center for Cultural Unification Studies between January and May 2014 in Dandong and Yanji. All 100 participating informants were in China on official visas issued after Kim Jong-un came to power: four received their permits in 2012, 53 in 2013, and a further 43 in 2014. Most were in China in order to visit family or close acquaintances, and most also planned to work for between six months and one year before returning to North Korea. For a translation and summary of the articles, see Green (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The surveyed was administered in 2005, 2010, and 2015. The original datasets can be accessed via the Korea Social Science Data Archive, at: <http://www.kossda.or.kr/eng/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Participants were compensated for their time, in line with approved practices for surveying and interviewing resettled North Korean defector-migrants. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. What constitutes ‘coming of age?’ Twelve years of age is the minimum suggested cutoff point in the socialization literature, and it ranges from 12-25. See White et al. (2008). At twelve years minimum, we would have had a total sample of 334, but we opted for a higher cut-off point to better capture socialization experiences in North Korea and to negate effects of *new* socialization experiences that might affect those who arrive within their formative years window (ages 12-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Prior to matching, missing variables were imputed using predictive means matching (PMM) technique in the R ‘mice’ package. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Jack Snyder (1993, 9), writing about the rise of ethnic nationalism in former Soviet states, argues that absent robust and consolidated democratic institutions ‘ethnic nationalism is the default option: It predominates when institutions collapse, when existing institutions are not fulfilling people’s basic needs, and when satisfactory alternative structures are not readily available.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. There are numerous examples from North Korean state media that prove this point. See, among others, Choi (2006) and Daily NK (2006). Brian Myers (2011) popularized the claim that the North Korean regime’s raison d’être is its claim to ethnic or racial purity. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In this chapter, we refer to people who have left North Korea as ‘forced migrants’. This reflects the many different reasons North Koreans leave the DPRK and the contestable claims made by South Korea on DPRK territory. For more on this issue see Wolman (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This is a co-written paper, drawing on the experiences of both researches working as ethnographers. The data for this paper came from research Markus Bell carried out in in Osaka and Tokyo, Japan from 2014-2015. During this period, Markus worked with around 50 returnees from North Korea, interviewing approximately 30. Markus was based primarily in Osaka, where he interacted with returnees from North Korea on a daily basis, through studying at a Japanese language school, volunteering at a non-governmental organization (NGO) involved with the resettlement of returnees, attending social events held by the *Jae ilbon daehan minguk mindan* (Korean Residents Union in Japan/Mindan, which is loosely affiliated with the Republic of Korea), and eating and drinking with returnees on a social basis. Interviews with returnees lasted between one and two hours and were conducted in Korean. A portion of each interview was given to collaboratively construct a genealogy with the respondent. During this time, the respondent would write out his/her family line in as much detail and as far back as they could remember. The results of the interviews and conversations were coded using a ‘superindex’, in which each interaction was tagged using keywords. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. We use the expression ‘transnational’ to refer to the social and cultural connections that people create and maintain across long distances. Migrants, often moving multiple times, create networks ‘[m]arked by patterns of communication or exchange or resources and information along with participation in socio-cultural and political activities’ (Vertovec 2001, 573). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For more on the ideological violence that took place in the years preceding the Korean War see Ryang (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification (MOU), the number of North Koreans in South Korea reached 30,500 as of March 2017. See: <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/content.do?cmsid=1440> (last accessed May 9, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ‘북한’ (North Korea) 🡪‘북쪽’ (The North); ‘식량부족’ (famine) 🡪 ‘고난의 행군’ (Arduous March). For more on North Koreans’ use of indirect language, ‘smart language’, humour, and sarcasm for negotiating and making sense of the famine years see Fahy (2015, 166-210) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. For further reading on the controversy surrounding responsibility for the mass migration of tens of the thousands of Koreans from Japan to North Korea see Morris-Suzuki (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Various Japanese non-profit organization (NPO) members I spoke with agreed on this approximate figure. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. In Japanese ‘Zainichi’ means ‘foreigner residing in Japan.’ However, the expression ‘Zainichi Korean’ has been appropriated by long-term ethnically Korean citizens of Japan to distinguish them from the Japanese population and from Koreans who migrated from South Korea in the years that followed. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The DPRK government organises its citizenry into three broad socio-political categories in relation to the state: friendly, wavering, and hostile. Repatriated individuals from Japan were accorded the lowest category, because of their affiliation with Japan and South Korea. Such categories circumscribe the social mobility of individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For a detailed account of the living conditions for Koreans and other former colonial subjects in post-war Japan see Ryang (1997) and Caprio (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. These names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of informants. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. The General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, ‘Jaeilbon joseonin chongnyeonhapoe’

    (*Chongnyeon*) in Korean, is one of two organizations formed by *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan and has close ties to North Korea. It functions as North Korea’s de facto diplomatic presence in Japan. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Outside of the spheres of economics, business, medicine, and occasionally tourism studies, China’s academic exchanges with North Korea are nowhere near as robust as they once were. In the PRC’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, academic exchanges with North Korea are now outnumbered in size and scale by those with South Korea. As an example, the 70th anniversary celebrations of Yanbian University in September 2019 were attended by Choe Sang-gun, the President of Kim Il Sung University and North Korea’s Minister of Education, but Choe gave no speech, and did not appear to bring a large delegation (Xiao 2019). Amid the commemorations, no one made note of the fact that in the late 1940s, Yanbian University itself had been modelled in part after Kim Il Sung University (Cathcart 2010, 37-39). On the sidelines of the anniversary event, Yanbian University signed agreements for enhanced exchanges with universities in Japan and South Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. On the massive tranche of North Korean records in the United States Captured Documents Collection of the National Archives, Record Group 242, see Suh 1970 and Armstrong 2003. On the ‘positionality’ of Western researchers studying North Korea or the Korean War, Monica Kim (2019, 27) writes: ‘Telling the story of the Korean War requires not simply the offering of a narrative but an examination of the mechanics of our own attachments, repulsion, and investments in the narratives themselves.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Two peripheral anecdotal points may pertain here: In approximately 2013, the North Korean Embassy in Beijing was willing to receive a CD recording of my cello music arrangements of songs whose lyrics extolled Kim Il-sung’s partisan history, a contrast from the strict refusal of written documents described earlier in this chapter. A second anecdote comes from spring 2016, when, as I was leaving North Korea, customs officials carefully scrutinized the books I had purchased (all of which were published in Pyongyang, including several volumes of a new edition of Kim Il-sung’s *Works*) but paid no attention to the paintings and music obtained. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. For the Pochonbo battle, see Kim 1995, 141-172; Suh 1967, 287; Tertitski and Tertitsky 2019, 122; and Lim 1982, 80-82. Kim Il-sung’s own depiction of the battle in Volume 5 of his memoirs is a signal for the multiple uses in the DPRK of the 1990s and today: Six pages is spent to effectively encourage women in the textiles industry to imitate the anti-Japanese guerrillas, five pages is spent on the battle itself, and then six pages are spent to explain how important the youth organizations were to such victories over Japan, stretching an account of events in 1936 into support for the paramilitary training and regimes of discipline for youth in the DPRK of the 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. In Theo Clement’s chapter in this volume, the forests of Rason are discussed for their potential economic value. Two promising book-length new histories of Korean forestry in the Joseon and colonial eras are currently in progress by two environmental historians, namely John Lee (University of Durham) and David Fedman (University of California-Irvine). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. In a Chinese Communist Party-sponsored local history of Changbai county, Huang (1990, 24) notes that the carving of anti-Japanese slogans into trees was a regularity in the areas around Changbai in the 1930s and early 1940s. Changbai is on the Chinese side of the river, and relatively geographically distant from more fundamentally Japanese-controlled ports of Rajin-Sonbong, but the fact that Huang makes no reference to Kim Il-sung is, in a sense, salutary to the basic North Korean assertions that the practice was common in the broader border region. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Analysing an American dystopian film in a book chapter entitled ‘I’ll Be Back: Repetitions and Revisions in the *Terminator* Films,’ the cultural critic Philip Wegner (2009, 70-71) argues: ‘[The] narrative form draws cause and effect into a closed loop, where not only future events are caused by past ones, as in a conventional linear narrative, but where these same future occurrences in turn cause things to happen in the past.’ For a more specific application of how this applies to the Mt. Paektu mythification around Kim Jong-il’s early years and the evolving North Korean historiography around his mother Kim Jong-suk, see Winstanley-Chesters and Ten (2016, 154-162). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. In addition to a few stunning photo sessions on the mountain which followed his accession to the pinnacle of state, Kim Jong-un and his propagandists have thrust forward a number of new artworks and slogans referring to North Korea, for instance, as *Paektu Kangsong Taeguk* (the powerful Paektu nation). In October 2015, Kim Jong-un inaugurated a massive new structure near the border with China called the Paektusan Youth Hero Dam, observing a huge night time choral-orchestral concert on the site. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Having married into the Kim family, Jang Song-taek was Kim Il-sung’s son-in-law. However, he was still a ‘side branch’, and Kim Jong-un’s attitude toward him is neatly summed up in Shakespeare’s *Richard II,* Act 1, Scene 1, lines 119-122: ‘Such neighbour nearness to our sacred blood / Should nothing privilege him, nor partialize / The unstooping firmness of my upright soul. / He is our subject…’ On Jang Song-taek’s purge see also the chapter in this volume by Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The basic irrelevance of evidence to Baik Bong’s hagiographical treatment of Kim is summed up in the following passage (1969, 303): ‘The people of the Changpai [Changbai] areas were excited and overjoyed at the news of the General’s visit, saying that after the General arrived there, a new star began to twinkle beyond the Milky Way across the starry sky. Whether a new star shining in the Milky Way was really discovered or not, the people who respected and adored the General saw a new bright star of hope in their mind’s eye and adored him.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. A simple exercise of looking at how the documentary record of the first few months of liberation in 1945 has changed in recent years. The 2011 edition of Kim Il-sung’s *Complete Works* contains a number of new sources which had notappeared in the 1980 edition of Volume 1 of the *Works.* For the critical six weeks after 15 August 1945, the new edition of the *Works* included six completely new sources: a talk to Wonsan City Communist Party Organizations (19 September), remarks to Pyongyang workers in the electric power and cornstarch sectors (24 September), a talk to South Korean communists (26 September), a talk to political workers and officials in South Pyeongan province (29 September), and a paean to defense construction entitled ‘We Must Build Our Own Ordnance Industry’ (2 October 1945). A seventh new source (Kim 1945) had a more authentic feel to it, in that it indicated a more accurate picture of events, noting that his Korean comrades in the Soviet Union were being split with some sent to aid the Chinese revolution. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. According to Japanese statistics which gave no steer as to political motivations, cross-border banditry was fairly common around this time; in 1938 alone there were ‘3,898 cases of Korean bandits from the Manchurian side of the river’ (Grajdanzev 1944, 257-258). Schmid (2000, 220) describes problems earlier in the century with Chinese bandits crossing the border into Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. On establishment British views of colonial spaces in the early twentieth century, Will Jackson (2018, 1) examines the act of looking out of train windows, contesting the neat bifurcation of politics from landscape: ‘Through its seemingly universal, apolitical nature, the act of seeing made political claims; the power to rule rested on the racially delimited ability to convert land into landscape, sites into sights, and experience into the means by which the capacity for certain kinds of pleasure of satisfaction was claimed.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Such passages might be attributed to the active hands of editors in Pyongyang eager to find or create the earliest possible justifications and sense of unity within Kim’s work. For example, it would resonate with policies such as North Korea’s militant socialist internationalism and propulsion of the Non-Aligned Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, we might better read this section as Kim’s own writing, recognizing that it is highly likely to be ‘a mix of badly remembered event, politically determined context, and contemporary desire to say the proper thing, all of it overlaid with wish fulfillment’ (Cumings 1992, 143). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Further detail may be available in the personal papers of Helen Foster Snow, held at the Hoover Institution Archive in Palo Alto, California, starting with box 30, ‘Korea 1939-1961’ and a 1961 manuscript ‘Notes on Korea and the Life of Kim San.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. John Delury (2015, 799) appears to get this wrong, writing ‘Thus, on that historic September day in Tokyo Bay when surrender became official, Choe Hyun and Kim Il Sung were most likely in China.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. There are two different versions of the delegation persons list in the document and it is unclear which one superseded the other. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 1953, 9 and 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. In one of his first major interventions into monument-building on the northern frontier, Kim Jong-il also refers to the visits from North Korean delegations into Northeast China for research purposes, but dates them as occurring in 1959, and cites that year as the baseline from which subsequent ‘discovery’ of ‘major battle sites, revolutionary bases, secret bases […] invaluable relics and historic material’ (Kim 1968, 373-374). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. For more on the origins and evolution of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, see Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume, respectively by Dong Jo Shin and Warrick Morris/James Hoare. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. For research on the civilized-barbarian discourse and Joseon’s anti-Qing attitudes, see, for example, Chang (2011); Fuma (2015); Rawski (2015); Sun (2007); Wang (2017); Wang (2013); and Yamauchi (2018). This chapter uses the Pinyin Romanization system for Chinese terms (identified where necessary with ‘Ch.’), Möllendorff for Manchu (‘Ma.’), and Revised Romanization for Korean (‘K.’). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. The Korean historian Seonmin Kim has used ‘borderland’ to express the significance of the strip of land between China and Korea along the Yalu and Tumen Rivers that serves as ‘a zone of demarcation, a site at which the two neighbours encountered one another and clashed but nonetheless recognized their mutual boundary’ (Kim 2017, 15). But as this chapter shows, at least the land between the palisade and the Yalu River was definitively Qing China’s territory, not a mutual boundary. The location of the border near Mount Changbai and the Tumen River was not entirely clear before the late nineteenth century, but such ambiguity did not affect the land on lower Yalu River. For the Tumen case, see Song (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See Boming (1801, 2a) and Guan (2014, 158). One *li* is about 0.5 kilometres. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Kang, *Yeonhaeng nochinggi*, 447-50. Kang visited Beijing in 1660 as an associate emissary of the mission charged with paying the annual tribute. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Luqian’s palace memorial, 14 December 1741, *Gongzhong dang zouzhe*, no. 04-01-17-0004. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. ‘Touka’ is apparently the French transliteration of the Manchu word ‘duka’, which means gate. See Wang and Liu (2007, row 3, number 2) and Ribeiro (2014, 114). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. For the Mangniushao case, see Kim (2011, 69-97) and Kim (2018, 92-103). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For recent research on the mission of 1780 from the Korean perspective, see Koo (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. I want to express my sincerest thanks to Dr. Beatrice Bartlett at Yale University, who generously gave me the precious volumes of *Yeolha ilgi* that she had preserved for many years. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. For more details on Pak’s visit to Beijing, see Wang (2018), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. According to *Dongmun hwigo* and *Jeong seon go*, Joseon sent 56 missions to the Qing between 1637 and 1643, and 642 between 1644 and 1894. Hae-jong Chun has estimated that Joseon sent 664 missions to the Qing from 1637 to 1874, and twenty from 1875 to 1894. Chun (1968, 99-101) also indicates that the Qing sent a total of 247 missions to Korea from 1636 to 1880, this number including missions in which the imperial commands were carried by Korean emissaries. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. The most important Chinese archives on the imperial envoys to Joseon and other tributary countries, such as Annam (Vietnam) and Ryukyu (today’s Okinawa), which were produced by the Ministry of Rites of the Qing, remain classified in the First Chinese Historical Archives (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’anguan) in Beijing. These archives were available to scholars until 2003, when the Chinese State Archives Administration suddenly reclassified them along with almost all other diplomatic archives related to the Qing. The move was at least in part due to the controversy over the historical status of *Goguryeo* (*c*. 37 BC-AD 668) between China and Korea at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. The original copy of *Jiksa ilgi* is housed in the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies at Seoul National University. A second copy was made by the Japanese colonial government in Korea in the early 1930s, and this is now preserved in the Jangseogak Royal Archives at the Academy of Korean Studies in Gyeonggi-do, South Korea. The author’s textual comparison of the two copies suggests that the original copy is missing some pages, but the colonial version also omits certain information for unknown reasons. The citations in this chapter are based on the Kyujanggak copy. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Unpublished sources are indicated by an asterisk. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Throughout the article, *Chaoxianzu* will be translated as ‘ethnic Koreans’. *Chaoxianzu* is one of the China’s 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, which is often translated as ‘Korean Chinese’ in anglophone literature. Given that the *Chaoxianzu* whom I deal with in this article is a historical group in Maoist China, I will use the phrase rather than ‘Korean Chinese’ that would include any Korean residents or immigrants in post-Maoist China. Korean names rather than Chinese ones will be used in the chapter, i.e. Jo Deok Hye rather than Zhu Dehai. The main newspaper of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture will usually be referred to as *Yanbian Daily* for convenience; it is, however, published as *Yanbian Ribao* in its Chinese version, and *Yeonbyeon Ilbo* for its Korean version. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. By 1953, the Han population made up 37.4 per cent of the entire population of Yanbian. The population rate of Koreans in Yanbian then plummeted in 1958 as Dunhua, which would be the second most populated county after Longjing, became incorporated into Yanbian under a decision made by the Jilin provincial government in 1958. When Dunhua came to belong to Yanbian, its population was 193,162 with only 10.8 percent of them being Koreans. See Yanbian Chaoxianzu Zizhizhou difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bian 1996, 256-292. See also Cui 1992, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Influenced by the dominant social-Darwinist discourse, ‘ethnic minorities were understood as less developed than the Han by many scholars and educational cadres who insisted that most minority languages are less developed than Chinese and consequently unfit for a modernizing society’. See Hansen (2005, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Li Min Chang, the first professor at Yanbian University, also had a lonely death in late 1966. His wife died about a year after Li, but no record was left as to when, how, and why they died. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. At the Lushan Conference in mid-1959, Mao acknowledged the hasty and disorderly communization and labour mobilization. MacFarquhar 1983, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. However, it is unlikely that Mao Yuanxin created the slogan of the ‘uselessness of the Korean language’. Even before the Cultural Revolution, some young Koreans, especially those dwelling outside Yanbian, seemed to hold the idea that Korean would not be useful for them in a Han-dominated society. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. This is obviously one of the groundless allegations against Ju, because he, as governor of the prefecture, was in no position to hand over Yanbian to anyone. It was actually Mao Zedong who stated in 1964 that ‘[t]he whole of Northeast China is [North] Korea’s rear base…. Should a war break out [with the Soviet Union] in the future, the great rear base will be turned over to Comrade Kim Il Sung for a “unified command”‘. However, this did not mean that North Korea could own Northeast China. This statement was made in order to keep North Korea on China’s side against the Soviet Union. The statement of Mao Zedong is requoted from Shen and Xia 2018, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. This criticism was printed in both Chinese and Korean on the same date in *Yanbian ribao* [the Chinese edition] and *Yeonbyeon ilbo* [the Korean] in articles by Yeon 1970, 1-2 and Yan 1970, 2. The identification of the critic, Yeon Gyek Mun, or Yan Jiwen in Chinese, is known to be a pen name, referencing Yanbian and language itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Today in Yanbian, ethnic Koreans use the Korean-transliterated words for both *fanshen* and *huzhuzu*. Both *beonsin* and *hojojo* are the Korean pronunciation of the two Chinese words. See Yanbian Chaoxianzu Zizhizhou lishi yuyan yanjiusuo bian, *Chaoxianyu xiao cidian*. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. According to the dictionary of Korean published first in 1980, there is no entry for *moja* (the Korean pronunciation of *maozi*) at all. This does not mean that the Koreans did not use the word. The Koreans know and use the word as *maozi* as implied in Chinese. Instead, *gamtu* appears in the dictionary and has a meaning of *gamtu reul ssida* (to put on a black gauze cap) that means ‘to find oneself in the sorry position of being charged with a certain responsibility or a false charge’. *Gamtu* is still used for *kou maozi* among Koreans today. See Pan 1992, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Seven more collections of poems were published between June 1972 and May 1976. They are *Jangbaek san e ulli neun norae* (June 1972), *Taeyang ui bibbal are e* (April 1973), *Gyeokjeon ui norae* (January 1975), *Joguk e deuri neun norae* (May 1975), *Ureong chan jeon’go sori* (February 1976), *Gongsa ui achim* (March 1976), and *Pokpung roe* (May 1976). These are the collections of poems written by different ethnic Korean poets. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. This book is not published in China even now, but was published in South Korea in 1996, 31 years after Gim completed the manuscript. For the story about the publication and interviews with the author, see Gim and Gim 2009, 362-63, 405, 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Sam Cheol Choi, interview by the author in Seoul, 17 May 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Even during the Cultural Revolution, there was a short period when the union of the ethnic groups was re-emphasized and the radical policies on ethnic languages were restrained as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping’s influences increased over the CCP between 1972 and 1974. However, it was not enough to reverse the process since the Revolutionary Committees of Yanbian were still under the tight control of Mao Yuanxin’s adherents. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. The Education Ministry endorsed Professor Gim Il’s proposal on correcting these public signs in 2015. See: ‘Yanbian News, 2017. 1. 28’ on the *Yanbian guanbo dianshi wang* YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pdDMc5wfT4> (last accessed 18 January 2019). The news regarding Gim can be viewed between 17:24 and 17:57. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. At the UK National Archives, the Craddock mission file can be located at FCO 21/4502, and the Middleton visit at FCO 21/4518; both files were declassified in March 2018. In Parliament in 1990, there was virtually no interest demonstrated in Korea, but with respect to China the year saw passionate debates over the questions of possible British citizenship for Hong Kong citizens after 1997 (see Hansard records for 19 April and 13 June 1990), as well as Tibet (Hansard records for 23 July 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. As editing on this chapter concluded in 2019, we found that many of the records from the British embassies in Seoul and Beijing had been declassified in the past year and are therefore open to interested researchers at the UK National Archives in Kew. Files of the British Embassy in Seoul for 1981 were declassified and made public for researchers on 14 June 2014. See FCO 21/1997, 1981 Jan 01 - 1981 Dec 31, United Kingdom National Archives, Kew. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. See the chapter by Ed Pulford in this volume for more on the history of the Soviet Korean community. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. One of these authors, Jim Hoare is still awaiting the MFA’s answer to a request to visit Tibet made in May 1991. See FCO 21/4574 and FCO 21/4563 for 1990, and FCO 21/4787 for 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Fang Lizhi (1932-2012) was a Chinese astrophysicist and political activist who took refuge in the US Embassy in Beijing in June 1989 as the authorities suppressed the demonstrations. He remained there until June 1990, when he was allowed to leave on a cargo plane for London. During the period of his detention, US Embassy staff were closely followed and subject to petty vandalism such as slashing of car tyres, and locally, consular staff were harassed. See FCO 21/4495. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. There is now a larger foreign community, with French, Japanese and ROK consulates as well as the US. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. We believe the term ‘strategic tourism’ was coined by the late Dr. Gerry Segal at the International Institute of Strategic Studies, to justify tacking some sightseeing on to work-related travel. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Jim Hoare: ‘I later arranged for some material about Britain to be sent to the university and also wrote to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and to the University of Sheffield, then the main centres of Korean studies in Britain. I do not know if they acted on the letter.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. The official name of the Zone was initially Rason Free Economic and Trade Zone, but it changed several times afterwards, and the word ‘Free’ was dropped in 1998 (Tsuji 2004, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. According to Kim Il-sung’s *Works*, the North Korean leader personally advised against the expansion of urban and industrial areas in Rason, and instead asked them to be redesigned in order to accelerate the transition to a trade-focused harbor city (Kim 1982). This source stands against the analysis advanced by Cotton (1996, 6), that Kim primarily became interested in the area in 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. The specific vision put forth to the North Koreans by the Miller report is unclear, as the report only had a limited circulation (Hayes and Zarsky 2014, 16; Chai 1993; Lee 1993, 62). According to the author’s queries with UNDP offices in New York, the archive of the Miller mission, and the report itself, are not available to researchers. The lack of transparency with respect to UNDP documents regarding North Korea may have arisen out of subsequent developments: the UNDP went on in the mid- to late-1990s to focus on agricultural and food assistance to North Korea, and pulled out of the country in 2007 amid criticism from American officials in New York under criticism that ‘tens of millions of dollars for programmes that were supposed to help the poor appear instead to have been handed over to Kim’s dictatorship’ (Wall Street Journal 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. The route from Rajin (instead of Vladivostok) to Pohang, in South Korea, lasts about 36 hours, and saves approximately 15% in time and costs. The route from South Korea to Europe via Rajin is said to divide shipping time by two and to cut costs by 30% (Jo and Ducruet 2007). Lin and Hao explain that the Hunchun-Niigata route via Rason (instead of Dalian) divides terrestrial travel time by ten and maritime travel time by two (Lin and Hao 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. In this chapter, references to Rason Law are made by year and article. An archived overview of laws and regulations on Rason can be read at North Korean Economy Watch at: <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/category/policies/law-on-the-rajin-sonbong-trade-zone/> (last accessed on 15 July 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Tsuji (2004) is less enthusiastic and mentions only $4 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Fieldwork interviews in Rason and Yanbian, April 2014, November 2015, February 2016, and May 2018. It should be noted that ‘market principles’ have a different undertone in China where they do not necessarily contradict socialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. The Committee became later the State Economic Development Commission, which itself was merged with the Joint Venture Committee in 2014 to become the Ministry of External Economic Relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. The forum was held under the following name: Rajin-Sonbong Zone International Business and Investment Forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Rumours of an initial plan to build a 30-storey building, mentioned by South Korean outlets like *Daily NK* (Kim 2005), are false, as the initial plans published in the UNPD Report reveal. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Visitors to the Yanggakdo Hotel in Pyongyang can see the former Daedong Bank office in the lobby. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Article 6 of Rason Law (2011) explains that projects that are ‘economically and technically outdated’ shall be prohibited or restricted in the zone. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. The Fleming-Hayuth model was applied to Rason in Jo and Ducruet (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Changjitu is an economic development plan implemented by the Jilin Provincial government that aims to integrate the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and parts of Changchun and Jilin (Fusheng 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. The exact amount is 200 million won, which, per Tsuji (2004), equals $1 million based on the exchange rate in Rason at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Hwan Jong-nam, Director of the External Economic Cooperation Promotion Committee, at the Rajin-Sonbong Zone Business Promotion Seminar held in Japan, July 1996. Quoted in Tsuji (2004, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Among the 15 cross-border bridges in the DPRK (plus additional cross-border roads on Mount Paektu/Changbai), the ones in Musan, Hoeryong, Sanbong, Tumen, Hunyung, Kyongwon (Ryudasom) and Wonjong are strategically located to access Rason. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. The data was gathered on a single day, five years before the publication of the report. The report also states that based on growth projections, the number of vehicles taking the road will soar from 341,100 in 2005 to 2,394,000 in 2027 (a figure which is highly unlikely). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Also confirmed in an interview with Russia diplomats in Shenyang, May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. A South Korean entrepreneur explained to me in Pyongyang in 2015 that South Korea had already co-founded companies on the China-Korea border; their primary objective was to use DPRK labour either through joint-ventures or subcontracting. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Visits to Taehung’s facilities were not possible in 2018, though they had been common for foreign delegations prior to the passing of U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2371 or 2375, passed successively in August and September 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. It should be noted that to suggest ‘locals want integration, distant politicians do not’ is, of course, an oversimplification. Such impulses are not evenly spread, and there are local actors who do not seek integration, either for social/cultural reasons or to protect vested economic interests. Likewise, there are leaders in central positions who would place development above geostrategic concerns. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. The summit took place there, and Far Eastern Federal University has been moved there. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Both North Korean and Chinese officials were interviewed on condition of anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Noted in conversation, September 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Note: Rajin is referred to as Najin in South Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. According to Chinese government statistics, the prefecture’s 2014 GDP of 90.08 billion yuan ($14 billion) was an increase of 7 percent over the previous year. Prefectural GDP per capita reached 41,941 yuan ($6,600), an increase of 7.9 percent over the previous year (Yanbian Government Website 2015b). [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. The strong difference between ‘should’ and ‘have to’ in English doesn’t exist in Korean. In Korean, the speaker (a Rason official) said what appears to be ‘have to’ or ‘must.’ When pressed, in English, he said ‘should.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Both the road and rail line were damaged in severe flooding in August 2015. By November, it appears as if the railway has been repaired, while the road still has damaged sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Estimates by people connected to Rason range widely, from ‘95% destroyed’ to ‘just a bridge or two in need of repair.’ It took nearly two years to fully repair it as well as replace the housing for thousands of people who were displaced. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Part of this chapter first appeared as Cathcart (2014), within the Korea Economic Institute of America’s academic paper series. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Kim Jong-il did not formally succeed Kim Il-sung until the latter’s death in July 1994, but it is generally accepted that the younger man was in control of all the main levers of power in North Korea from the early 1980s. Hence, we refer to the period after the 6th Korean Workers’ Party Congress in October 1980 as the ‘Kim Jong-il era’ (Ra 2019, 53-54). [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. The SEZ at Rason is investigated at length and from multiple perspectives in the chapter in this volume by Theo Clement. Therefore, we do not dwell on it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Kim also signed off on the establishment of two SEZs on the country’s southern border: the Mt. Kumkang Tourist Region and Kaesong Industrial Complex (Jeong et al. 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. The nuclear test obscured a North Korean summer packed with succession propaganda and preparation for Kim Jong-un to be publicly revealed (in fact this happened some sixteen months later, in September 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Perhaps it can best be described as foolhardiness. Either way, the incident did not end well. Kim Jong-il became irate and threw a steel napkin holder at Jang, who, wise to the danger he was in, began to sing a song (Ra 2018, 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Jang was not officially at the head of the delegation to the South, but those who met the group recount that he was demonstrably its most authoritative figure. In a similar vein, South Korean officials who met three very senior North Korean officials at the Asian Games held in Incheon, South Korea in 2014 recall that Choe Ryong-hae was in complete control of delegation decision making, just as Jang had been in 2002. Such things are obvious to those watching on. Interview with a former Ministry of Unification official in the United States, spring 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. With that being said, some did predict Jang’s downfall at the start. Ra Jong-yil, extensively cited in this chapter, told one of the authors privately over breakfast in early 2012 that he expected Jang to be purged within two years. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Jang’s death was evidently shocking to the Chinese leadership, but even while Jang was alive, bilateral relations had been far from rosy (Duchâtel and Schell, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Adam Cathcart interview with a DPRK policy scholar at Yanbian University, April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Christopher Green interview with a former ROK intelligence official, January 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. The former, ‘marketization from below,’ has tended to receive privileged coverage in English-language analyses of contemporary North Korea. See, e.g., Smith (2015, 211-234). [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. That being said, even in Korean only a limited literature covers the quixotic subject of markets before marketization, most of it dating from after 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. The regulations for the cereals rationing system were first promulgated in 1946 and a new set in 1952. The system is believed to have been abolished after the war before being re-established in 1958. However, the regulations from 1952 set out the general norms for the cereal rationing system that remain in effect (though have likely been amended several times since. For the 1946 and 1952 regulations, see Lee (2005, 199-222). [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. This is why money under state socialism is often described as playing a ‘passive role’; it does not store value or act as a means of exchange (Grossman 1966, 204-236). [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Trade between so-called “state socialist” countries in this period usually took the form of barter planned over extended periods. Barter, or some form of disguised barter through a fictive currency such as the ‘transferable ruble’ was the norm, with ad hoc spot transactions occasionally conducted in US dollars. Though formal data is not available prior to 1982, there is enough anecdotal evidence to conclude that Sino-North Korean trade before the 1990s was conducted through long-term ‘barter’ agreements of this type (Choi 1992, 221-231; Eberstadt 1998). Trade was conducted between national governments and did not in any way promote marketization. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. On the emigration of Koreans living in Japan to North Korea in the late 1950s to 1960s, see Morris-Suzuki (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. On 3 August 1984, Kim Jong-il, who had been officially elevated as his father’s successor in 1980, declared the start of a new movement to produce consumer goods from industrial waste materials. Surplus labour – mainly housewives – was mobilized to do much of this production, presaging the massive changes in female labour force participation that came with famine-era marketization in the 1990s (Ryang 2000, 338-339). [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. North Koreans – and, in this case, Chinese merchants – are keenly aware of the limits of their ability to protest. In general, protesting the economic decisions of low-level officials is acceptable, but publicly criticizing the Kim family or the fundamental economic and political system is not. This was seen once again in 2009, when the state implemented a flash currency redenomination on 30 November. This incited angry public protest that was at times violent, but focused exclusively on economic officials and did not openly challenge, even rhetorically, the leadership of the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Given the lack of official North Korean documentation on the marketization phenomenon and concomitant reliance on defector-migrant testimony, these kinds of uncertainties over chronologies are very common, and largely unavoidable. However, in terms of the marketization process in the borderlands, the relatively large number of sources allows for more corroboration, and a higher confidence level in the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Grasshopper markets were so-named due to the fact that as soon as agents of state control would appear, the traders used to jump up and hurry off to a new location, like grasshoppers dodging the tremors of human feet. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. This table originally appeared in Yang (2005: 10). Translated and reproduced here is a slightly amended version that appeared in Yang (2009: 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Kim Jong-il said in a speech given in 2005 but published posthumously that certain officials had misinterpreted previous market-related instructions to mean ‘opening’ (i.e. Chinese-style reform) and that socialist principles must be upheld in economic management. See Kim (2013, 215). [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Joung (2011, 27) cites and analyses new regulations published in the North Korean refugee-run magazine *Rimjingang* back in 2009; these regulations include the requirement that traders entrust imported finished goods to state shops for sale. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Phone interview with activist Betsy Kawamura on 30 March, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. See the introduction to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. It should be clear that our chapter only focuses on illegal migrants and border crossings. North Koreans with visas and legal permits frequently cross the border to conduct business and trade. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. 97.1 per cent of Korean-Chinese live in these three provinces. See HRNK (2009, 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. For the approximate figure of 100,000 from another humanitarian organization, see Life Funds for North Korean Refugees (2018). See also United Nations Human Rights Council (2014, 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. In a 2005 survey, Chang, Haggard, and Noland (2006, 7) found that 88 per cent of defectors received direct help from the Korean-Chinese community once in China. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Statistics on North Korea defectors are provided by South Korea’s Ministry of Unification, provided at: <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. In an excerpt from Blaine Harden’s account (2012, 107) of defector Shin Donghyuk at the moment he prepares to escape, Harden writes, “Shin knew the camp. Park knew the world. Shin would get them over the fence. Park would lead them to China, where his uncle would give them shelter, money, and assistance in travelling on to South Korea.” [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. One of the authors also discussed the work of 318 Partners with a former volunteer. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. For instance, Seongmin Lee, who eventually defected to South Korea, initially entered China as a means to make money and survive the famine. Lee (qtd. In Kirby 2017) writes, “I realized there was a business opportunity. So, I started engaging in a cross-border business and started sneaking into China at night, making money to support my family. I bought items in the North Korean market, and I sold them in China with an added margin. I would buy Chinese items like grain or cigarettes or saccharin and other kinds of things. Then I smuggled them back to North Korea.” [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. However, China placed two reservations on the signature of the convention making it harder for the international community to address this potential violation against China. Specifically, the Chinese government “does not recognize the competence of the UN Committee against Torture to investigate and respond to allegations of torture in a party’s territory (as provided for in Article 20), and China does not consider itself bound by the provision concerning arbitration or referral to the International Court of Justice (paragraph 1 of Article 30).” See Kurlantzick and Mason (2006, 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. See Introduction to this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. 1 In this chapter, I use the Korean term *talbukin* for lack of a better term and to avoid particular political nuances of the analogous terms defector, refugee, or migrant. This is particularly relevant in cases when North Koreans do not self-identify with any of these categories. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Saba Mahmood (2011, 8) underscores the point: ‘One cannot simply stand for or against human rights but must locate one’s understanding of this conceptual practice in the field of violence that makes the discourse of human rights possible’. Over the same period, Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod and Laura Nadar (2006) have commented on the intersection of human rights and representations of Islamic women as the suffering Other in Europe and the United States. Abu-Lughod (2006, 5) urges us to recognize the dangerous potential of representations of oppressed Islamic women, writing, ‘Like the missionaries, liberal feminists feel the need to speak for and on behalf of Afghan or other Muslim women in a language of women’s rights or human rights. They see themselves as an enlightened group with the vision and freedom to help suffering women elsewhere to receive their rights, to rescue them from their men or from their oppressive religious traditions’. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. *The Eyes of the Tailless Animals* was first released in Korean in 1996 as *Kkori eomneun jimseungdeurui nunbit*. It was translated into English and published by Living Sacrifice Book Co. in 1999, and then published again in Korean in 2003 by a Christian publishing company under a revised title. It is available in Korean at major bookstores and university libraries, including Kyobo and the National Library of Korea. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. This characterization of Pierre Rigoulot as an ‘anti-communist author’ comes from an article by Christine Hong (2014). Hong (2014, 5) critically writes, ‘In his memoir The Aquariums of Pyongyang (2001), co-authored with the French anti-communist Pierre Rigoulot, Kang Chol-hwan, a major COI witness, states that Japanese and South Korean media paid him so handsomely ‘for opening [his] mouth’ about North Korea that he ‘occasionally felt [he] was trading [his] experience for a story…no longer entirely [his] own.” This critical interpretation is based on the following reflection from Kang and Rigoulot (2001, 224): ‘A huge crowd was at the press conference. Never in my life had I spoken in front of so many people. Nonplussed by all the cameras and lights, I expressed only a fraction of what I wanted to. The next day, our story was in all the papers. The television and radio stations called us for interviews, and the Japanese and American press were interested. In time, we got use to telling our story. Yet by repeating it so often, I occasionally felt I was trading my experience for a story that was no longer entirely my own.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. It is worth noting that Lee and her son were granted political asylum in the United States after providing key witness testimony. Both Lee Soon Ok and Kang Chol-Hwan’s testimonies have been called into question by South Korean researchers. The work of Jiyoung Song (2015) is noteworthy. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. See the United States Bureau of Democracy (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. All figures drawn from the author’s 2015 fieldnotes. The Prospero Report describes Chosun Exchange as follows: ‘Chosun Exchange is a Singapore based not-for-profit company, set up in 2007 by Geoffrey See, a former Bain and Co. consultant. The organization provides business training for young North Koreans who want to go into business. It has a special interest in training women and young entrepreneurs.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. This was famously argued in the 2009 South Korean documentary ‘Two Doors’ (*du gae ui mun*). For an English-language overview of the arguments presented in this documentary, see Claire Lee (2012) ‘Indie Documentary ‘Reconstructs’ 2009 Yongsan Tragedy’, *The Korea Herald,* 17 July,<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120717001181> [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. For clear examples of NED-funded media organizations, see The Daily NK, a recipient of NED’s 2017 Democracy Award; Unification Media Group was featured by NED in 2018. It is beyond the scope of this chapter, however, to address these media groups thoroughly. See, NED (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Adrian Hong has subsequently been charged with breaking into the North Korean embassy in Madrid just before the 2019 summit between North Korea and the United States in Hanoi. See Giles Tremlett (2019) ‘Inside the bizarre, bungled raid on North Korea’s Madrid embassy,’ *The Guardian*, 10 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/10/inside-bizarre-bungled-raid-on-north-korean-embassy-in-madrid-free-joseon>; and, Barbara Demick and Victoria Kim (2019) ‘A bizarre takeover of North Korea’s embassy in Spain has an L.A. man on the run’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-madrid-embassy-20190515-story.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. This report and LINK’s former website, [www.linkglobal.org](http://www.linkglobal.org), are no longer accessible online. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. All data from the author’s 2015 fieldnotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Please note that the name of this newspaper is *Joongang Ilbo* in Korean and *The Korea Joongang Daily* in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Most discussions of this can be found in literature on familism or kinship in East Asian societies are largely taking place in local East Asian languages and not in English. The restrictive nature of familism is evident not only in everyday social practices; it has been codified into laws and policies that limit access to basic social services. The family registry system and housing policies in Korea (hojuje) and Vietnam (ho khau) are the clear examples of restrictive familial laws in East Asia. Although the family registry system was abolished in South Korea, the family registry is still used throughout South Korean society to register for education programmes, cell phones, and other basic social services. For the detrimental impact of housing policies in Vietnam on migrants, see United Nations Viet Nam (2014). For a direct comparison of the kinship systems of Vietnam and Korea, see Bélanger (1998), or, for the socio-cultural significance of family for North Koreans in South Kore, see Bregman (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. See Green and Epstein (2013) for a detailed analysis of *Now on My Way to Meet You.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. c.f., Channel-A (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. During my fieldwork in Seoul in 2015, I first learned that many South Korean men have the perception that North Korean women ‘have it easier than North Korean men, because they can get married or find a sponsor’. Sponsors are wealthy, older South Korean men who financially support women in exchange for regular sex and companionship. There is also widespread media coverage of match-making businesses for North Korean women and South Korean men. See Borowiec (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Formerly available at http://www.nanzao.com/tc/international/15359f7ef5d039f/han-wei-yi-yao-qiu-fan-zhao-tuo-bei-zhe-xiang-yue-shi-guan-shen-qing-bi-hu-bei-jing-dai-chu. Accessed on 5 May 2016. The article is no longer available, as the *South China Morning Post* abruptly wiped out its Nanzao (Chinese-version) website in September 2016 amid accusations that the paper was working increasingly in tandem with the CCP in mainland China. See Sala, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. c.f., Kim Ryeon-hui (2015). This can be found written in Korean at the top of her website. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. I used Naver News and Google News to compare the number of Korean and English language media. In English, I entered different variations of her name in English (e.g., ‘Kim Ryon Hui’; ‘Kim Ryon-hui’; ‘Kim Ryeon-hui’; ‘Kim Ryeon-hi’) to maximize search results. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. This figure was accurate as of 15 March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Son Ok-soon is one recent case of a North Korean woman re-defecting to North Korea. Having written a memoir in English and Korean, she ripped it up on North Korean television. See Choi (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. It is worth noting that *Tongil News* often sympathizes with North Korean narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. See also Chapter 5 of this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. *Uriminjokkiri* is a North Korean propaganda channel that produces both text and audio-visual content online. It propagates the notion of North Korea as superior to South Korea. It is produced in Korean and targets South Korea. See: [www.uriminzokkiri.com/](http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/). [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Although, as the chapter by Ward and Green in this volume recalls, as late as 1969 Kim Il-sung articulated his support for ‘peasant markets’ as a generally welcome method of resolving shortages and logistical shortcomings in the command economy whilst avoiding opening up space for the rapid spread of black markets. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. There has been a heated debate for two decades about the number of deaths in the famine of the 1990s in North Korea. In acknowledging the famine publicly, a DPRK official from the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee in effect acknowledged a figure of 220,000 otherwise avoidable deaths (Wilmington Morning Star, 1999). Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard (2011, 6) place all figures between 600,000 and 1 million deaths into a sub-category of ‘sober academic research’. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Data from the Korean Peninsula Reconciliation Center, <http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201209272204315&code=210100> (last accessed 2 July 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. The most recent, 2004 version of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China is online at the website of the National People’s Congress. See: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm> (last accessed 19 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. The 1980 Nationality Law of the People’s Republic of China is online at the website of the National People’s Congress. See: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1384056.htm>. (last accessed 19 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. See the U.S. Library of Congress web page: <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/china-new-id-card-law-requires-recording-fingerprints/> (last accessed 19 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. The most recent, 2001 version of the Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China is online at the website of the National People’s Congress. See: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1384064.htm> (last accessed 19 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. China released its National Human Rights Action Plan for 2016 to 2020 on 29 September 2016. The plan is divided into six parts: 1) economic, society, cultural rights (labour rights, basic living standards, social guarantees, assets, health, right to education, cultural rights, and environmental rights; 2) physical body rights, right to a fair trial, freedom of religion, the “right to know” and participation rights, right to expression and supervisory power; 3) rights of specific classes; 4) human rights education and research; 5) implementation of human rights treaties and international exchanges and cooperation; and 6) implementation and monitoring. See National Human Rights Action Plan: [www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-09/29/content\_5113376.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-09/29/content_5113376.htm)). [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. The 1951 Convention can be read online. See: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-my/4ae57b489.pdf> (last accessed 29 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. The author used the original Korean of the amended Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2012) to write this section, and all references are to it. However, readers may wish to refer to an unofficial English translation published by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, for which see: <https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/2012DPRKCriminalCode_HRNK.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Chapter 7, Section 1, Article 221 (Illegal Border Crossing) [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Article 63 (Treason against the Fatherland) and Article 68 (Treason against the Nation). Notably, the latter of these opens up South Koreans to accusations of violating North Korean law even while not on North Korean sovereign territory. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Chapter 3, Section 1, Article 64 (Espionage) [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. The Constitution can be read online at *Naenara*. See: <http://www.naenara.com.kp/en/politics/?rule> (last accessed 29 June 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in 2014-2015 and 2017. I am grateful to the generous support of the pre-doctorial fellowship programme at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS) in Seongnam, ROK, which made available resources and a stimulating scholarly community greatly aiding the development of the ideas presented here. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Literally meaning ‘Goryeo person’, Goryeo saram (Корё сарам) is the self-designation of ethnically Korean citizens of the former-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK), this group is more often known as *Goryeo in* (고려 인), also denoting ‘Goryeo people’. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Joseonjok is the official label given to the Korean minority (population c. 2 million) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. My use of ‘post-socialism’ here follows Andrew Kipnis (2008, iv) application of the term to China and Chris Hann’s (2002, 7) use of it in the Eurasian context. Both scholars highlight the importance of continuities between socialism and what comes afterwards, whilst also gesturing at the new mobilities and institutional configurations which the term implies. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Whilst useful for my purposes here, this shorthand term lacks direct Korean/Russian/Chinese translations *per se*. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Having a population today of around 200,000 people (roughly 50/50 Han Chinese and Joseonjok), Hunchun has long been a key borderland node of multinational and multiethnic encounter. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. This is a South Korean term: *jaeoe dongpo* (재외 동포). [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Kor. *bukjai*, somewhat resembling the fermented soybean paste soup *doenjang-jjigae* and known in ROK as *bukjang*: lit. ‘North [Hamgyeong] soup’. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Results of 2010 census list 18,824 Koreans, comprising around 1% of the local population. Source: <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/perepis_itogi1612.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. A mostly pejorative term deriving from the Chinese *fangzi* (house) denoting in this case single-storey Chinese-style brick houses or rural dwellings. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Hyun-Gwi Park (Park 2013, 78) observes a similar tendency amongst Russian Far Eastern Koreans, focusing on the ‘relational’ approach they exhibit to ethnicity. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. On post-Soviet nostalgia see the work of Svetlana Boym (2002) and Alexei Yurchak (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. The area adjacent to Hunchun on both the Chinese and Soviet sides was subject to permit and registration regimes. Whilst PRC citizens had to carry a ‘border pass’ (*bianjingzheng*) to prove residency in Hunchun or the right to visit, those in neighbouring Primorye had the letters ‘PZ’ (*pogranichnaia zona* – ‘border zone’) stamped in their domestic passports. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. The existence of Soviet ‘nations’ was notionally predicated on common ‘language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture’ (Stalin 1936, 8). The system which put this into practice – through registration of ethnicity on all official documentation – was adopted in the USSR from the 1930s and borrowed largely intact by the PRC in the 1950s. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Global Korean Convention 27-29 June 2017, Lotte Hotel, Seoul, ROK. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. On Disneyfication of PRC *minzu* see Schein (2000) on the Miao, Litzinger (2000) on the Yao and Bulag (2010) on the Mongols. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Yanbian’s *Yanbian Ribao* newspaper began publishing in Korean in 1948, a decade before its Chinese counterpart and a year before the PRC was even established (Wu 1998). For more on the Sinification of this newspaper in the late 1950s, as well as the relationship between Marxism and nationalities theory in the PRC, see Dong Jo Shin’s chapter in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. The Russian east too was being seen in these ‘new frontier’ (Kim 1995) terms for the kind of mobile Joseonjok who bought Avram his car. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. North Korea too has of course long promoted a discourse of Korean oneness and its own ideas concerning who does and who does not constitute a ‘true’ Korean; but for post-socialist Russian- and Chinese-speaking Koreans, these have receded in importance along with the country’s increased isolation. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Khan’s volume was first published in Korean in Seoul in 1998; the cover here is from the later-released Russian version which was published in Bishkek in 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)