

*Transborder Mobility and the (Re)construction of Boundaries  
in the Sino-North Korean Borderland*

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the migration history of the Sino-North Korean borderland. Contrary to traditional understandings of borders within the framework of nation-states analyses, and the idea of boundaries being static and fixed entities, mobility in this borderland has been an everyday reality for the people living in the region. Using the perspective of long-term historical shifts and regional transformations, this paper argues that boundaries are interactional and continuously (re)constructed. Focusing on migration in Chinese-North Korean borderland provides an example of how macro-regional contexts have shaped the mobility of people, who, in turn, have shaped the fortunes of the borderland. Tracing the trajectories of family separations and reunions, I contextualize the boundaries of the mobile subjects in the local context as a dynamic process of negotiating ethnicity and belonging.

Keywords: Sino-North Korean borderland, transborder mobility, North Korean migrants, ethnic identity, kinship networks

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## **Introduction**

Borders have traditionally been understood dichotomously as they are based, to a large extent, on the consolidation of two respective national entities. However, the everyday reality and practices in the Sino-North Korean borderland area show the processes of scrutinizing and managing local residents' belonging and mobility. In this sense, this paper attempts to illuminate the diverse forms of mobility and networks based on transborder kinships. In particular, this work investigates how local circumstances matter to migratory movements, focusing on the contexts where time and structure meet. More importantly, while tracing the processes of a people becoming contextual and flexible subjects, I seek to address the contestation over ethnic identity and the negotiation of familial relationships that have constantly been (re)constructed within the structural constraints in a historical perspective.

The Sino-North Korean borderland has mainly been portrayed as a place of North Korean migration, which started in the wake of the North Korean famine in the mid-1990s. Their mobility has been treated as a transnational phenomenon in recent years. The existing literature has provided little attention to the transborder linkages pertaining to the historical fluidity and everyday reality of this situation, whereby a significant number of North Koreans have crossed back and forth across this border, both legally and illegally. Tracing the long-term historical connections of flow and exchange in the borderland between North Korea and China can help explain why border crossings into China have been a common option and strategy for many North Koreans. To employ a concept put forward by Martinez (1994), boundaries are contextual phenomena, and they can vary from alienated to coexistent ones, and from interdependent borderlands to integrated ones. This variation may be seen even in the case of a single boundary when analyzed from a historical perspective. In this sense, this paper aims to contextualize boundaries as social processes (Passi, 1998; Newman, 2006; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2001) that entail the (re)construction of social boundaries and the (re)definition of identities, existing in socio-cultural actions. Thus, this work suggests a new perspective for border studies.

Applying a snowball sampling technique in 2015–2016, this paper used in-depth interviews with six North Koreans who settled in South Korea and who have family ties in China as well as two North Koreans who do not have family ties in China. The interviewees gave their personal experiences and reflections, after which I asked specific questions of the respondents. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the agreement of the interviewees.

### **Historical Context: The Japanese Empire and its Legacy**

In 1910, the Japanese empire began to accelerate Korean migration to Manchuria, and Japan claimed all Koreans in China as Japanese subjects (Olivier, 1991). In the early colonial-era, the citizenship status of the ethnic Korean migrants in Manchuria was contested, as China and Japan competed for control over the region and its peoples. The immigration and settlement of the Koreans were seen as a positive, given their ability to cultivate rice in the paddy fields. As Park (2005) writes, the Korean migration “[w]as a mechanism in the formation of the Japanese empire and its capitalist expansion” (p. 20).

It was primarily the immigrants from Hamkyong who formed the core population of the Korean community in this area, the region of eastern Manchuria along the banks of the Dooan (*Tumen* in Chinese) River, and across from Korea, known today as the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of China's Jilin Province. Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931 and established a puppet government, Manchukuo in preparation for a full-scale war with China, in which began the following year. To develop Manchuria as a food supply for the war, Japan organized a series of collective migrations from southern Korea to Manchuria in the late-1930s. Japan strengthened its grip on this region, as a result, Manchuria became more like an informal Japanese colony (Duus et al., 1989).

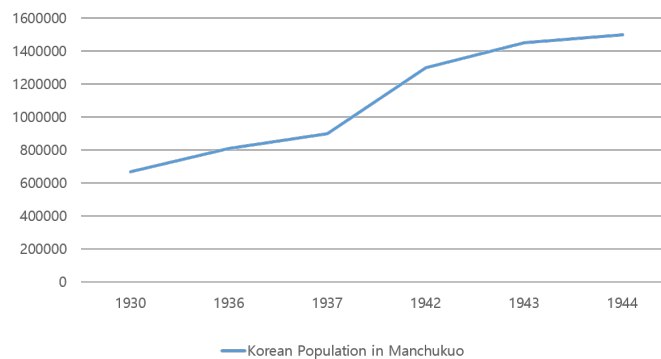


Figure 1: Korean Population in Manchukuo

By 1930, the Korean population in Manchukuo was over 670,000, and by 1937, it was over 900,000. The population continued to expand in the following few years, approaching 1.5 million by 1944 (“The Japanese population in Korea and the Korean Population in Manchuria,” 1946). Korean mobility thus has its roots in the historical circumstances of relocation by a colonial power. These migration flows were “internal,” in the sense that people moved within the territory of empire as an intended and unintended consequence of empire-building (Kim 2009). After 1945, a series of return migrations to the Korean Peninsula occurred, where, eventually, approximately one-third returned to Korea (Suh & Shultz, 1990). Land relations in the Manchukuo era and with the Japanese agricultural policies in Yanbian created aggravated relations (Kraus & Cathcart, 2013), which (re)produced boundaries and (re)constructed a relationship of “otherness” between the ethnic Koreans and the Chinese. This can be seen as the colonial legacy of the Japanese imperialism. Even after the massive wave of repatriation that swept the region in the post-colonial period, 1.3 million Koreans remained in northeastern China (Kim, 2004).

The postwar conjuncture created a situation where millions of imperial subjects suddenly found themselves in newly nationalized territories, where they felt that they no longer “belonged” (Kim, 2009). The ethnic Koreans in the Sino-Korean border region and their descendants were neither Chinese nor Korean nationals. When the transformation of nationality into fixed, the national and ethnic identities of the Koreans living in Yanbian remained ambiguous and contested—a situation that persisted, even after 1945 (Kraus & Cathcart, 2013).

## Mobility in the State-Building Period

### The Korean War, Repatriation, and Reconfiguration

With the ongoing territorial and political reconfiguration, the relationship of the ethnic Koreans in China to the post-colonial Korea began to be newly problematized. When China finally entered into the war in Korea in October of 1950, the Koreans of northeastern China were ambivalent about taking part due to their in-between position: on the one hand, they had a duty to defend China, their newly built “home state”; on the other, some felt they had a moral obligation, as Koreans, to help their brethren in their ancestral “homeland” (Olivier, 1991).

In this region, boundaries were created to erase territorial ambiguity and ambivalent identities in order to shape cohesive order. Between 1956 and 1960, North Korea and China signed a series of agreements and protocols related to their border to delimit their boundary lines (Shen & Xia, 2013). Nevertheless, as a series of North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP) dossiers illuminate, the documents were generously interpreted by the Chinese government (Smith, in NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012). Illegal border crossers, in principle, were supposed to have been punished severely and repatriated; however, in reality, the punishment was relatively lenient. By the end of 1957, the Chinese army stationed in North Korea officially even after the war for the reconstruction of DPRK. In early 1958, these Chinese troops began to leave North Korea, and their withdrawal was completed by the end of that year (Lee, 2000). Pyongyang wanted laborers to balance out the potential loss of Chinese workers while, for their part, the Korean Chinese wanted jobs. After the withdrawal of their military personnel, the Chinese government arranged for the relocation of the ethnic Koreans in China back to North Korea to support the economic reconstruction of the DPRK (PRC FMA 118-00777-01). During this time, approximately 50,000 ethnic Koreans returned to North Korea. The North Korean government provided incentives for the Koreans to stay in the DPRK, giving the new settlers from China housing, grain, money, and work on cooperative farms (Smith, in NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012). Interviewee C’s parents were “some of those who wanted to go back their hometowns, and they were sent there”:

My Mom and Dad left China in the early 1960s. It was said that after the war, Mao and Kim made an agreement, they let *Chaioxianzu* (Korean Chinese) who wanted to be sent back to their hometowns. It was a kind of support for postwar reconstruction. Because during the war time, males were killed, so young adults and middle-aged people from the three provinces in the northeast went to North Korea. My father was educated and wanted to become successful by escaping the rural area. At that time, college students were part of the “Down to the Villages” Movement. He studied to get out of the countryside; he didn’t want to be sent to his hometown. So, he decided to enter North Korea. (Interviewee C)

As this interviewee mentions, political shifts were ongoing in China, and a series of portents followed before the Chinese Cultural Revolution began.

While the Sino-North Korean borderland was being influenced by the war, the political processes of erasing ambiguity and shaping order were proceeding.

Beginning in the late 1950s, ministries in the Chinese government began to draw clear distinctions between legal and illegal border crossers (NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012). As a series of dossiers point out, around the beginning of the 1960s, the Chinese government began to tighten its border and to adopt measures to settle ethnic Koreans for the sake of “social order” in northeastern China (NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012). Nevertheless, in the early 1960s, a large number of ethnic Koreans who had been living in northeastern China illegally crossed the Sino-North Korean border into North Korea. The Chinese government discussed this phenomenon as a “historical habit” (NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012).

In 1957, a huge anti-right political campaign began, and rightist intellectuals were sentenced to reform through labor in the countryside. In 1958, this movement merged with the Great Leap Forward, which caused major political and economic shifts in China. The subsequent organization of people’s communes demanded a standardization of society at the expense of individual lifestyles and the customs of the *minzu* (minority groups) of China. This campaign paid greater attention to the common characteristics found among the *minzu*, rather than looking at their distinctive and unique traits (Olivier, 1991). One respondent described the situation this way:

Back then, China was poor. China had people’s communes (人民公社), which did not allow every household to cook; we were all poor together [in China because of the famine]. And then, Kim Il Sung said, “We will accept all the crossers. They are our *minjok* [nation].” [When I moved to North Korea in 1961], North Korea was quite wealthy. When I went to restaurants, there was fish soup, they offered rooms, and several kinds of side dishes. They gave us a lot of rice, and meat soup, as well. When I went to the stores, they sold candies, fabrics, and so on... The food was different. In North Korea, we used spices; the Chinese didn’t. In North Korea, we received food rationing, as well, but the portions were large. In China, the portions were small, but the sides were enough. The Chinese used a lot of oil, but North Korea didn’t. In North Korea, they ate a lot of Kimchi; Chinese people didn’t. (Interviewee A)

As this respondent described, when she crossed the Dooman River from China to North Korea in 1961, the nationwide famine was underway as a result of the failure of the Great Leap Forward. She pointed out not only the economic gap between the two countries but also the general complaint about the significant societal shift of the area and the new politico-economic needs for the conformity and uniformity of the people’s lifestyles. In the late 1950s, the anti-rightist movement was specifically directed against the minority leadership; it was, therefore, called the “*minzu* rectification movement,” and the Chinese warned that a “poisonous influence” was prevalent among the Korean capitalists and intellectuals, who advocated the “thesis of multiple fatherlands” (Lee, 1986). Interviewee B’s parents made a decision to return to North Korea, leaving Yanbian for the DPRK because of “the mood of persecution toward the intellectual class.” Additionally, a series of documents reveal that the Chinese government attempted to strengthen the political and ideological education of the people, carried out in part to prevent the emigration of the border residents to North Korea in the early 1960s (NKIDP e-dossiers, 2012)

Both the nation-state building and the cross-border mobility in the Sino-North Korean borderland have deeply been embedded in the dramatic macro-historical transformations of twentieth-century northeastern Asia. Here, two post-colonial states attempted to create nationals out of the colonial-era migrants, who had never held either Chinese or Korean nationality, in the modern sense of the term. The dynamic reconfiguration of the territorial and political boundaries in the context of the emerging interstate order engendered massive migration out of China. Illegal, short-term, or frequent border crossers were not considered or treated as “international” migrants. Going back to Interviewee A’s experience, when she crossed the river into North Korea, she told me that she did not have a sense of “going to a foreign country.” When she settled in North Korea in the 1960s, people like her were called *gwiguk-min*, meaning “the people who returned to their home country.”

### Processes of Demarcation and Separated Families

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was launched in the name of abolishing bureaucracy and feudalism. Korean intellectuals and leaders were denounced and punished either as “regional nationalists” or as “spies from North Korea or the Soviet Union” (Yoon, 2012, p. 417). Several of this study’s interviewees testified to the radical atmosphere at that time. For instance, Interviewee E’s father started studying at Kim Il Sung University in 1962. When he graduated, he did not return to China because of the Cultural Revolution, but instead, remained in Pyongyang and became a *Choson gongmin* (DPRK citizen). In China, her father was labeled a “counterrevolutionary” spy, as he chose to settle in North Korea. Moreover, because of his choice, his remaining relatives in Yanbian were jailed. His father died while in custody.

Meanwhile, in the DPRK, the political and social exclusion of persons with relations to China functioned as an invisible stigma (Choi, 2015). As told by Interviewee E, while her father was in college, he was blacklisted. Further, as Interviewee C explained, when someone joined the party in North Korea, they needed “two guarantors.” However, it was not easy for the returnees to get guarantors, and thus, her father’s joining the party was delayed. In her recollection, “We were the kind of people who could not be too successful,” and “people who are not in good class in anyways.” She recalled that the returnees were “not easy to promote politically,” and that sometimes promotions depended on the DPRK’s “diplomatic relations with China.”

I also conducted two interviews with individuals who did not have any family networks within China. According to them, there existed certain implicit limitation.” In this sense, the returnees needed to be “more cautious in everyday life,” and when they did something wrong, they could be “more stigmatized.” Practices of inclusion and exclusion were thus framed by the nation-building projects of both states.

When the national demarcation was finally completed on the basis of political power, families were sometimes divided on either side of the border. The establishment of the monolithic ideological system in North Korea and the Cultural Revolution in China entailed closing the border and instigating strong respective national identities. Such (b)ordering processes reproduced “latently existing differences in identity” (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2001), and the processes strengthened their “belonging to,

and identity with, places and groups, while perpetuating and re-perpetuating notions of differences and othering” (Newman, 2006, p. 143). In the 1960s, Pyongyang and Beijing started to slowly close the Sino-North Korean border to “individual” and “informal” crossings. Both governments began to strictly determine and control who belonged where, and border crossings between the two countries started to have a more official character. However, family ties reached beyond the territorial boundaries of the two modern states. Even after the border was firmly established, throughout the 1960s, ethnic Koreans in China and North Koreans preserved their family ties with those on the other side. At the same time, both groups learned to engage in self-censorship to monitor themselves as ethnic minorities. Here, we find that the practices of “othering”—and of cultural fragmentation, in general—were not only international affairs but also took place within the nation-states, as well.

### **Mobility in the Post-Cold War Period**

#### **The Openness of the Border and the Revival of Connections**

In China, certain political and economic reforms have been promoted since the late 1970s. In 1982, Jilin Province resumed trade with North Korea (Chen, 2005), and the people who had ties with China were granted permission to visit China. Since then, it is assumed that a number of North Korean returnees from China and ethnic Koreans in China once again began to travel back and forth across the border. Many interviewees mentioned that they had started to reconnect with relatives in China. For instance, Interviewee E remembered that in this period, she “helped two aunts in Yanbian since the end of Cultural Revolution.” She sent fresh seafood and small household appliances to her aunts in several times in the 1980s.

However, from about the 1990s, this situation was “totally overturned,” as much more movement began to occur. In the 1990s, transborder mobility and exchange in the Sino-North Korean borderland—both legal and illegal—has increased since the great famine. People began to cross the rivers again, but in the 1990s, the pattern of migration was reversed. Various records indicate that during this time, the border between North Korea and China was “not aggressively policed” (U.S. Department of State, 2005). Pyongyang’s control over the administration of the North Korean-Chinese frontier became very loose during the peak of the North Korean famine (Plsek, 2013). The border between the two countries became quite porous and “thinned out” once again (Balibar, 1998).

Since both economic exchange and social relationships between the two countries have been reinstated, a greater population flow has occurred between the two countries beyond the border, using both formal and informal routes. The North Korean socialist economic system was ruined, and the public networks lost most of their original functions. At the same time, the societal networks began to be revitalized, especially kinship networks, which began to be reconstructed after having been severed for decades. All the interviewees in this study have reconnected family ties, and many have had the opportunity to reunite with family members. Many interviewees testified that they “went through difficult years crossing back and forth”:

If we had not had China [and relatives there], it would have been harsh [to make a living]. But others [who don't have ties in China] might have had their own ways. Our way was our Chinese family. (Interviewee E)

In principle, visitor passes were limited only to those who had lineal family members in China; however, by paying bribes, it was possible to “create non-existing lines.” In this process, so-called “acquaintanceships”—interpersonal relationships with public officials, and even some in charge of guarding the border—were also necessary. In the mid-1990s, Interviewee F was able to overload seafood “by offering a few cigar boxes” to border officials on the way to China, and when coming back, she gave “blankets and cigars to customs.” Interviewee E also used the relations and bribes whenever she was given “stuff from China, such as rice, clothes, towels, medicine, and so forth,” and that her family “ate some, and then sold others in North Korea.” She had a few “privileged relatives who didn't like us in Pyongyang,” so she chose instead “to seek the routes to China.” Additionally, Interviewee D told me that throughout the 1990s, she went back and forth four times legally, and twice illegally. When she crossed the river into China, she took fish, and when she came back from China, she carried household electrical appliances. During this period, the interviewees gained profits in the process of capitalizing on family ties. After the economic crisis in the 1990s, the returnee group transformed into an emerging group—one who developed their agency by having these experiences abroad and by having distinctive transnational networks. These sociopolitical changes provided and reproduced spaces for the returnees to form another dimension of their identities, signifying their reunion with “fatherland,” and especially with their own relatives.

### Life Between “Here” and “There”

The ethnicity of the North Korean returnees was reconstructed through their diverse experiences of boundaries. While their identities were once marked by discrimination and exclusion in North Korea, they began to identify themselves as a “beneficiary group”:

Whenever I went to Seo-shijang [a market street in Yanji], I used to be engrossed in the street. Once when I was looking around, the traders said, “[South] Koreans are coming here.” Whenever we come over to China, we kept a vow to behave well and to wear a badge of [of the leader]. But I didn't wear the badge, because they [the Chinese] looked down on North Koreans, but they looked up to [South] Koreans. Until then, I was so innocent; I thought that [South] Koreans were penniless. I believed that as the truth. And Korean Chinese blamed Kim Jung-il—they did it quite provocatively. In North Korea, I have never heard those kinds of stories. (Interviewee F)

As read here, the North Koreans were able to observe the South Koreans with curiosity, to hear the criticism of their “Great Leader,” and to begin to feel that “their minds were opened.” After returning to North Korea, they could not share what they had seen and heard; however, their change was obvious,” the experiences abroad were embedded in their subconscious and bodies. As some scholars write, such experiences can be thought of as “social remittances” (Levitt, 2001) that can influence local culture, politics, and community development (Blue, 2013). The returnee group had the opportunity to “transmit” Chinese products, to rethink their regime, and to revive



the practices of transborder contact and exchange between kin. Though this influence was limited, the increased communication, visits, and the embrace of Chinese-style materialism embodied possibilities to transform the grammar of North Korean society and the dynamics of social norms. At that time, the border between North Korea and China was “not operated in a unified manner” (Balibar, 1998), and was “blurred by actors of everyday practice” (Paasi, 1998; Newman, 2006). Those seeking illegal entry into China relied on the porous land borders, where the possibility of transborder kinship networks could still be imagined, attempted, and recovered. As one respondent discussed,

During the “Arduous March,” we who had ties in China escaped to China. I guess most of us ran away from [North Korea]. We are the decedents of people who came over from China in the 1960s, and then in the 1990s, we returned to China. When China was difficult, we moved to North Korea, and when North Korea was in crisis, we crossed over to China. We were called “traitors.” But for us, that was the right decision. (Interviewee D)

As heard here, this group was seeking to both circumvent and benefit from the different nation-state regimes by selecting different geographical sites while “learning the localizing strategies who seek to evade, deflect, and take advantage of political and economic conditions” (Ong, 1999). In this process, their identities were formed as situational, contextual, and flexible.

Looking more closely at the particular facets of the transborder mobility of the interviewees, the cases of the family reunions were diverse. For some, it was their first time to meet their relatives. In one instance, Interviewee A bumped into her brother by accident on a street of Wangqing, her hometown; she recognized him at once “because of the familiar face originated from the same blood.” For Interviewee C, most of her relatives were in China, and therefore, it was hard to trace the degree of kinship. After the returnees had moved to China, they spent time “reasserting family ties” (Valtchinova, 2006) and reconstructing the connections to the places they had left. Many of them stayed in China for three years or more. This was not just because their Chinese relatives supported them by hiding them but also because the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture—the ethnic Korean space providing a type of “cultural and linguistic zone,”—made room for them (Kim, 2013). It is hard to deny that the networks of Chinese relatives played an important role for the North Korean migrants who were able to settle in China.

Yet, the massive invasion of illegal migrants from North Korea, who could possibly threaten the social order in Yanbian, soon started to be experienced negatively. As time went by, the Korean Chinese moved from feeling like they had been reunited with their “lost families” and their “brothers in bondage” to feeling that the North Koreans were “bothersome beings” and “strangers.” For the North Koreans, they felt that “it [had become] more like walking on eggshells.” Their Chinese relatives also began to see the Koreans as potentially dangerous:

I was a daughter-in-law who could be deported back to North Korea at any time. They [her in-laws] did not accept me as their family member. For them, I was just the mom of their precious grandson. At home, they kept me from

coming out of my room because they were afraid of the police. (Interviewee B)

These experiences of discrimination, and exploitation by the Korean-Chinese community made the North Koreans begin to distance themselves from their Korean-Chinese relatives. Their “outlaw” status in China placed them in a very vulnerable position. The North Koreans learned “how to speak in Yanbian dialect” in order to behave like the Korean Chinese, and they lived “just as if they were Korean Chinese,” even though they realized that they were not able to be “real Chinese citizens.” They found themselves in their position as illegal aliens and liminal individuals in the fatherland.

Ironically, their illegal status was more easily noticed in the Korean-Chinese communities than in Han Chinese communities. In this process, the sense of being North Korean was strengthened, allowing them the ability to renegotiate relations and boundaries. For them, the ethnic Korean society in the Sino-North Korean borderland was a space for both inclusion and exclusion, ultimately motivating many to migrate to South Korea, which offered them citizenship. Some began to consider moving to South Korea as an optimal choice. In this process, their Chinese relatives, as well as the other family members who were already in South, supported their journey to South Korea.

At the same time, this group often maintained ties with their remaining relatives in North Korea. Initially, Interviewee A crossed the river without any intention of settling in either China or South Korea. She thought that after China, she would return to North Korea with her daughter. Instead, she began sending rice, money, and other household goods to her son, who remained in North Korea, using her Korean-Chinese brother-in-law as a conduit. She sent money that she had “saved one by one working as a housemaid.” These transnational practices continued after she moved to South Korea in 2006. When she and others like her transitioned from illegal migrants in China to legal citizen in South Korea, the relationship between them and their Chinese relatives became reversed:

I disliked them [the Korean Chinese] when I was in China. But now I have a Korean-Chinese son-in-law here. I heard from a few nieces who are working here. Their salaries are delayed for months, so they are worried about it, and they are mostly given all the harsh jobs. And also, they are experiencing discrimination. I think that they are pathetic though. (Interviewee A)

Looking back at her insecure position in China, when she transitioned into being a refugee in South Korea, the relationship between her and her Chinese relatives was transformed. North Korean returnees from China, who were used to being in a vulnerable position in the hierarchy due to their ethnicity and nationality, gradually became empowered via their mobility, managing to reach a social state from which they could reverse their position in the hierarchy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has illuminated the space of the Sino-North Korean borderland, which has been (re)constructed by ethnic and kinship ties in relational interactions at each historical juncture. Even when the North Korean-Chinese border was fixed by the two states in the aftermath of the Korean War, border crossings continued to be an everyday reality for the people living in this border region. Separate from the state level, everyday practices were reconstructed through the communication and exchanges of the residents who were divided by the territorial border. Transnational practices, such as constant mobility, small trade, and kinship ties, blurred the boundary line that had been formed under the nation-state system. In this historical context, their transborder mobility can be explained as a localized practice.

As migrants physically move, their personal and social boundaries shift. In this context, migration entails a constant process of the (re)construction of networks and self-(re)definition. Their identities involve complex ethnic circumstances, transborder kinship practices, and a complex understanding of what it means to “belong.” In this sense, the identity of the returnee group was constructed through the process of overcoming otherization both in North Korea and in China. Due to their in-between status and their ambivalent identity as marginal subjects, they constantly negotiate the idea of belonging, and their ambiguous position created their mobility and flexibility.

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