

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders

...One bite at a time”

The Sino-North Korean borderland is a fine location from which to assess the state of Northeast Asia. Many fates intersect there. Even today, deep into the 21st century, it is one of very few places where you feel it is possible to receive an answer to the “North Korea question”.¹ It is there that China, North and South Korea carefully watch each other, and we watch them in turn. And it is there that local elites and ethnic Korean communities subvert central attempts to bring the frontier under control.



Travelling its meandering length, rendered more than feasible by immense Chinese investment in transport infrastructure, is to parse multiple borderlands. High-speed rail has integrated the population of most of Dongbei (东北). Fast, comfortable and cheap, trains connect Beijing with Shenyang, the “Gateway to Manchuria” and home to both a US Consulate-General and Korean War memorial. From there the mainline shoots inexorably

New Bridges, Old Problems: Watching the Sino-DPRK Borderland

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onwards 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 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. Yet there is no 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,

¹ This research was made possible by an Academy of Korean Studies grant (AKS-2015-R-49) and the War of Words project at Universiteit Leiden.

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just as it has been for decades. This exacerbates pre-existing inequalities between borderland communities.

Most border journeys start at Dandong, as do most journeys by land out of North Korea. That is why, per South Korean anthropologist Kang Ju-won, who spent more than a year embedded in the city, Dandong is primarily a zone of human exchange. Kang's second book, *The Amnok River flows differently*² is a rich depiction of the who, why, where, when and how of North Korean livelihoods in the city, in which 20,000 workers from the DPRK quietly labor. It is the prevalence of firms employing these workers that draws the attention of economists Kim Byung-yeon and Jung Seung-ho. They use the municipality to partially quantify the basis of Chinese trade and investment with North Korea.³ Though they do not openly admit it for security reasons, the authors of *Person to Person* seem also to have conducted their re-



Figure 1: Two blocks from the Yalu River, North Korean trucks line up to cross over into China. (all images by Christopher Green unless otherwise stated)

search 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.⁴

² Kang Ju-won, *Amnokkang-ŭn tarŭge hŭrŭnda* [압록강은 다르게 흐른다 / *The Amnok River flows differently*], Seoul: Nulmin, 2016.

³ Kim Byung-yeon and Jung Seung-ho, *Chungguk-ŭi taebuk muyŏkkwa t'u-ja: Tandongsi hyŏnji kiŏp chosa* [중국의 대북 무역과 투자: 단동시 현지 기업 조사 / *China's Trade and Investment with North Korea: Firm Surveys in Dandong*], Seoul: SNU Press, 2015.

⁴ Kang Dongwŏn and Pak Chŏngnan, *Saramgwa saram: kimjŏngŭn sidae 'pukchosŏn inmin'ŭl mannada* [사람과 사람: 김정은 시대 '북조선 인민'을 만나다 / *Person to person: meeting Kim Jong-un era 'North Chosun people'*], Seoul: Neona, 2015. For North Koreans who intend to return to their homes, even those on legal visit visas, talking is risky. Imprisonment beckons for she – it is predominantly she – who pulls back the curtain on the DPRK for foreign – nay, worse still, South Korean – researchers. That here is China, foreign sovereign territory, offers scant protection. Close historical links between the security services of the two countries at the local level mean that agents dispatched from North Korea operate with relative impunity in this borderland.

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Today's visitor to Dandong is struck by a lingering sense of unrealised potential. It takes an extreme form of relational dysfunction

for two modern nation-states sharing a 1400km frontier to still be conducting 80% 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 without accounting for the 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.



Figure 2: Watching bilateral trade in action at the main entry point into North Korea.



Figure 3: The foot of the as-yet unopened (New) Yalu River Bridge. The bottom four floors of the n-shaped building are occupied by (presumably under-employed) Chinese customs officials. The other floors are up for grabs.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Seven kilometres downstream in Dandong's impressive New City there is a second, much bigger road bridge connecting dynamic Dandong with the North Korean city of Sinuiju.⁵ Except that it doesn't. With the bridge agreed upon in 2009, when Wen Jiabao went to Pyongyang, it looked for all the world as if North Korea was considering a serious economic policy shift.⁶ If the neon lights of the Dandong skyline were not jarring enough for the North Pyongan Province locals, the new bridge now hangs on their horizon, pregnant with possibility. Yet every-

⁵ Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green, "Xi's Belt," chapter 9 in Tiang Boon Hoo (ed.), *Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017.

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one knows that, for now at least, on the North Korean side its four lanes end ignominiously in a field. Sinuiju is another city on the brink of something, but nobody seems quite sure what.



Figure 4: Farming in the shadow of Dandong; southern Sinuiju in the spring of 2016.



Figure 5: From the air, the absurdity of it all becomes clear, as the new bridge comes to a shuddering halt in a field. Taken in June 2016 on a flight from nearby Uiju Airfield to Pyongyang. *(image by Simon Cockerell)*

Travel away from the border to the south and there is yet another road, built with the same energy aroused by Wen's trip to Pyongyang. It is a simple, two-lane affair, but still a great improvement upon National Road No.1, the unpaved, axle-crushing dirt track that vehicles traverse en route for Pyongyang today. Unfortunately for driver and passenger alike, the new road, which begins east of South Sinuiju and culminates at the (paved) Pyongyang-Huichon Highway north of Anju, is also unconnected to the road network and lies unused, except by local cyclists. Today it functions as the widest, longest and arguably most expensive cycle path in East Asia.

Go up the Amnok (압록; aka Yalu) River for a few hundred kilometers 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

⁶ Adam Cathcart, "[Revisiting Wen Jiabao in Pyongyang, October 2009](#)," Sino-NK, January 10, 2012.

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(as, indeed, is a third one to the east near Hunchun.⁷ Another one at Namyang is under construction). Ji'an attained brief infamy at the turn of the 21st century as a key site in the bilateral struggle for ownership of Koguryŏ 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 their mutual enmity toward Japan. The town plays host to the Koguryŏ Museum, one of the least user-friendly museums I've ever encountered. Presumably antagonized by the risk of South Koreans taking umbrage at the content and, worse, uploading evidence of rather blatant historical revisionism 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 entirely.



Figure 6: Koguryŏ Museum in Ji'an.

North Korea is visible from all points in this town, but visitors from the DPRK present no obvious impediment to the Chinese government's creative reinterpretation of local history. At the nearby General's Tomb (将军坟/장군총), said to be the last resting place of the late-4th century monarch King Kwanggaet'o, I ask a



Figure 7: The General's Tomb in Ji'an, ground zero in an unseemly war of words.

guide whether, amidst all the squabbling over 1000-year-old relics, she has ever met a North Korean researcher from across the mountainous frontier. "One did come out here from Pyongyang once," she recalls with a chuckle. "But all he was interested in was proving that Pyongyang has always been the

⁷ Im Sangbŏm, "[tandok] Chung, hunch'un-najin innŭn 'sinduman'gang taegyo' kaet'ong [[단독] 中, 훈춘-나진 잇는 '신두만강 대교' 개통 / [Exclusive] China, Hunchun-Rajin-connecting 'New Tuman River Bridge' opens], *SBS*, October 2, 2016. <http://m.news.naver.com/read.nhn?mode=LSD&sid1=001&oid=055&aid=0000459789>.

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capital of Korea.”

Out of town toward the towering Mt. Paektu, the river gets progressively narrower.⁸ 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 it being a disruptive frontier settlement ; the kind of place that pays only selective attention to diktats from the center.

At Dandong, the Yalu is too broad to communicate across. By the time you reach Changbai it is possible to shout and be heard. Go east from Mt. Paektu along the Tumen River, however, and in places you could whisper. Human linkages are much more vibrant to the east of Mt. Paektu. The water freezes over in winter, and in places can be crossed on foot. This turns chilly

towns like Musan and the larger Hoeryong into hubs for escape from North Korea. There are just as many people who simply travel back and forth across the border, trading as they have always done.



Figure 7: On the border between the towns of Tumen and Namyang, the rules are made clear.

⁸ At 9,000ft, Mt. Paektu 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. The volcano is still alive, as volcanologist Kayla Iacovino explains. See: Kayla Iacovino, “Of Eruptions and Men: Science Diplomacy at North Korea’s Active Volcano,” *Sino-NK*, May 8, 2014. <http://sinonk.com/2014/05/08/of-eruptions-and-men-science-diplomacy-at-north-koreas-active-volcano/>

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Stretching out from the north-eastern face of Mt. Paektu 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 these days there is a net outflow of ethnic Koreans to the liberal visa regime of South Korea, too. Nevertheless, Yanbian retains its flavour, and is the easiest place for illegal migrant North Koreans to get around unimpeded. The local Korean dialect resembles that of Hamgyong



Figure 8: There is an exceptional collection of North Korean literature, journals, and newspapers at the Yanbian Library facility in the suburbs of Yanji (aka Yŏn'gil).

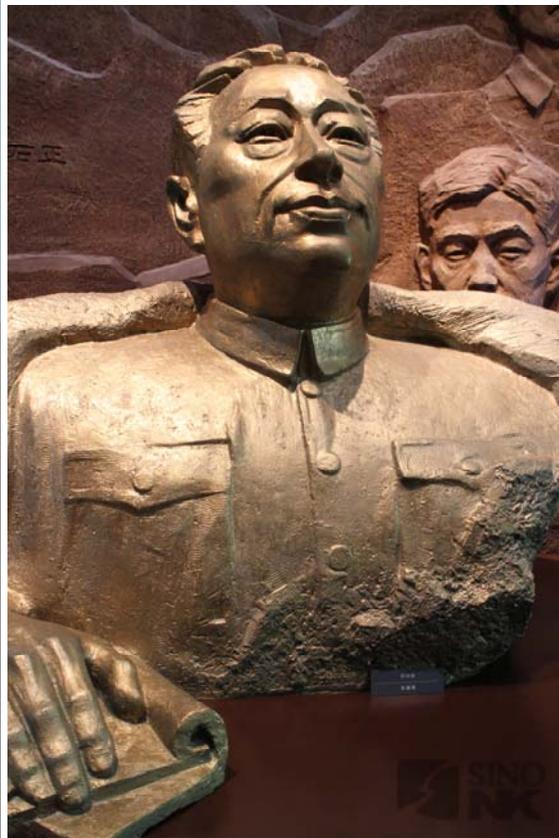


Figure 9: Zhu Dehai (朱德海), a prominent Chinese Korean. Chu Dŏk-hae (주덕해) in Korean, Zhu takes center stage of the revolutionary exhibit at Yanbian Museum, whereas Kim Il-sŏng is barely mentioned.

Province, the rebellious frontier land to the south, and there is a (albeit slowly dwindling) reserve of sympathy for those who flee. Blending in is quite feasible.

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. This has changed markedly in the intervening years, with both China and North Korea investing in fences, cameras, upgraded customs houses and other

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accoutrements of state control to try and bring the unruly border into line. 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.

North Korean women who cross the border illegally here often live on the margins as the wives of older Chinese men in rural Yanbian villages. Many of them remain connected to family back inside North Korea. It is said that many would, all other things being equal, be content to remain in the border region to tend to those linkages. However, regressive Chinese policy choices accomplish the opposite, pushing the women toward resettlement and security in South Korea, a seemingly wrong-headed approach given the social cohesion and economic growth brought to troubled border communities by these exchanges. A presentation by Professor Chŏn Sinja of Yanbian University in Seoul late last year asserted that migrant North Korean women bring family, labour, and the green shoots of a revival in rural schooling to areas where once there was a preponderance of despair and its natural companions, drinking and gambling.

That is not to deny the unwelcome prevalence of an illicit trade in North Korean women. But there is a close causal link, here. The exploitation of migrant women is exacerbated by their status as illegal border-crossers. 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.

In the end, 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 you pass through very different environments; from the economic dynamism of Dandong and Sinuiju on the Yalu to the kinship bonds between Yanbian and the people of Hamgyong. It was never monolithic, of course, but the changing face of modern China is making it even less so.