

Decoding the Sino-North Korean Borderlands



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Edited by

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney

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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.

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.¹ 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

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.

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 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 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 However, a violent purge in Pyongyang

2 On the various kinds of borders and their conceptualizations, including an explanation of 'hyper boundaries', see Brantly Womack (2016).

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).

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).

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 Yuancong 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 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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