Contesting Koreanness:
Migration as a challenge to the ethnic identity of the Korean Chinese

by
Amelia Schubert
B.A., Arizona State University, 2007

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written by Amelia Schubert
has been approved for the Department of Geography

_____________________________________
Tim Oakes

_____________________________________
Emily Yeh

_____________________________________
Fernando Riosmena

Date ______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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ABSTRACT

Since China and South Korea established diplomatic ties in 1992, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Korean Chinese have migrated to South Korea for work or marriage. Their ethnic return migration has not gone smoothly; despite their perception of a common Korean identity, the populations have adapted and evolved differently in over sixty years of separation. Contested definitions of Korean identity resulted. Employing a cultural political economy framework, this thesis explores the complex situation of the Korean Chinese within the Chinese state, their shifting position in South Korean immigration policy, and their eventual reorientation away from South Korea. The problems experienced by the migrant and host populations grew from a misconceived notion of ethnicity as simply shared racial and cultural background. In fact ethnicity is the complex, variable, and manipulable result of long histories experienced in specific places. Understanding ethnic identity requires consideration of territorially-defined group membership and state-sponsored attempts to claim space. Specifically addressing minority groups in China, but relevant to all multinational states, I argue for a contextualized approach to examining changes and conflicts in group identities.
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INTRODUCTION

On January 7, 2008, a warehouse owned by the company Korea 2000 caught fire in the South Korean city of Icheon, killing 40 workers and sparking a nation-wide debate about the treatment of foreign labor in South Korean industry. Seventeen of the dead were foreign workers; fifteen were ethnically Korean Chinese, and two were Uzbeks. Public outcry centered on the fifteen Korean Chinese workers. These people were the ethnic brethren of the South Koreans, yet they were relegated to the least desirable jobs and the worst working conditions, left to perish in unsafe cold-storage warehouse explosions, denied even the basic ventilation system that could have expelled the combustible fumes. Newspapers were filled with testimonials by friends and family, mourning the victims and shaming the nation that had allowed the abuse of its own ethnic population.

Was this South Korea’s own Triangle Shirtwaist fire? Would it prompt drastic reform in labor safety standards, increasing oversight and finally putting workers’ well-being before profit margins? The short answer is no. Within a week the clamor had faded, in two weeks it was gone. No legislation was proposed. Callous, I thought. But the repercussions of the fire did inspire me to question my own understanding of ethnic identity, eventually spurring me to this thesis. At the time of the fire I was teaching English at Chungnam Internet High School, a vo-tech school offering programming and graphic design classes to students in the greater Nonsan area of Chungcheongnam-do, South Korea. It was not glamorous. My bus stop is pictured below (see Figure 1).
Nonsan is a rural town, agricultural with no industry to speak of. No Korean Chinese people lived there. Yet I was struck by the vehemence of the debate over the Korean Chinese, in the newspapers, with my students, and among teachers. The blood connection between the South Koreans and the Korean Chinese made those fifteen workers matter in a way that the two Uzbeks and even the twenty-three South Koreans did not. Uzbeks were foreigners, to whom the South Koreans had no obligation, and the South Koreans could have (should have?) looked after themselves. But the Korean Chinese were the unfortunate kin of the South Koreans. They were victims of geography and history and foreign meddling, cut off from the homeland by the redrawing of borders in the mid-twentieth century and left to the mercy of Chinese communists since then. South Korea had a duty to the Korean Chinese, and it apparently consisted of offering them low-wage jobs that didn’t kill them. South Korea had failed.

Americans steeped in an ongoing celebration of individuality tend to believe that descent should not matter. Phenotype and bloodlines are the stuff of racial discrimination. But in South Korea, descent overtly matters. South Koreans can trace their family trees back for hundreds of
years. Three surnames (Kim, Lee, and Park) account for roughly fifty percent of the population, mirroring a belief that there are only three original branches of the Korean nation. Within these three surnames though there are thousands of clans, and asking a South Korean about “which Lee clan” he or she belongs to can be a very long lesson in lineage. South Koreans know their bloodlines, and this colors their understanding of the Korean nation as a pure descent-based group. The relative isolation of the Korean peninsula has certainly encouraged this belief in Korean homogeneity. But the re-introduction of the Korean Chinese to the South Korean population has problematized this descent-based understanding of the Korean nation.

The Korean Chinese do not live so far away from the South Koreans. Indeed, ignoring political boundaries, the Korean Chinese, North Korean, and South Korean people would still constitute one contiguous ethnic group. None of these groups have out-married in any significant numbers; all retain Korean as their primary language; in dress, food, naming, and family patterns they all follow Korean tradition. But we cannot ignore political boundaries. Political boundaries now order the world, assigning every person to a state and a particular citizen-group. Descent-based group identities of course still matter, but compete with place-based definitions of group membership. It is into this fraught battle that I wade.

I began this thesis with two theoretical questions. First, how do people understand and enact personal identities with conflicting components? Ethnic and civic loyalties can make very different demands on people. The phenomenon of the hyphenated identity is by no means unique to the Korean Chinese, of course\(^1\). However, I believe this case is complicated by aggressive state intervention on behalf of both the ethnic Korean and the civic Chinese identities.

\(^1\) While I choose not to actually hyphenate Korean Chinese, it is functionally the same as Korean-Chinese, in that they are both compound nouns. The first term adjectively describes the ethnic heritage and the second term denotes political citizenship. I will use this system consistently throughout the thesis when discussing dual-identity individuals.
This leads me to my second framing question; what is the role of the state apparatus in affecting personal and group identity? The ability to define borders is not necessarily the ability to claim sovereignty over populations, but attempts often go hand-in-hand. I did not expect to produce absolutely conclusive answers to these questions in the course of this writing, and have met that non-expectation. Still, I believe I have made fruitful headway in understanding some possible approaches. In the process, too, I have addressed three smaller questions specific to the Korean Chinese. First, how their tumultuous early history and tenuous claim to Chinese land continues to affect them; next, how they are differently understood in and through Chinese minority policy; and finally, how South Korean conceptions of hierarchical nationhood are imposed on the Korean Chinese through preferential immigration law.

I also began this thesis with a few assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, I assume that descent-groups are rarely if ever truly descent-based. Rather I think descent-groups are belief-based. As I address in Chapter 1, membership in an ethnic group does not clearly rest on either racial or cultural characteristics. Instead there is a shifting weight assigned to different characteristics at different times, and by different assigners. The boundaries between supposedly descent-based groups are easily blurred. This leaves racial categories unreliable but interesting, and implies a certain fluidity in categories often perceived as rigid. I also assume that reality has an ontological or material basis. Understandings of identity do not randomly attach themselves to individuals; individuals develop identities based on the material experiences of their lives. Changes in material experience then allows for the possibility of changing identities, and every material experience results from a long history of human works, be they political, economic, or cultural.
The Korean Chinese then are not Korean because of a biological relationship that literally stems from the shared genetic material of an actually-existing Korean originator. If they are Korean – and I hope to raise doubts about this – then their Koreanness is not a natural fact. Similarly, their possession of Chinese passports marks them as Chinese but does not explain why or how they became so. I do not wish to imply that these categories hold no meaning. They clearly bear on most aspects of daily life – the Korean Chinese speak the Korean language, they are subject to Chinese laws, they eat kimchi with breakfast, they pay with yuan. Instead I want to ask how these categories arose and why the people now identified as Korean Chinese are called so, through what historical and cultural processes do these categories come to hold salience, and particularly how is this a spatial question.

I will argue that while understandings of ethnic nationhood are explicitly descent-based, they are implicitly spatial. Korean people can only be truly Korean by existing within Korean space. Thus the Korean Chinese, in fact having a historical, cultural, and genetic claim to membership in the Korean nation, are nonetheless denied parity with peninsular Koreans. Territorially-based group membership thus trumps descent. The Chinese state would agree. As I hope to demonstrate, the Chinese state has put tremendous effort into convincing people of this. I was much inspired in this argument by Shelley Rigger’s chapter “Voices of Manchu Identity, 1635 – 1935,” published in Stevan Harrell’s 1995 book *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers.* I address this further in Chapter 2, but briefly here. Rigger argues that the people known as Manchu were given that name by the Han Chinese upon the two groups’ encounter in Chinese space. Outside of Chinese space, ‘Manchu’ did not and would not have existed as any kind of meaningful mark. It is therefore a geographic identity. Why then was it used as an *ethnic* marker in China? I argue this is because simple territorially-defined identities can be lost
upon leaving the territory. The Chinese state stakes a claim on those people living within its spatial authority, and has no wish to relinquish that claim just because people move. Naturalizing this territorial identity required a purposeful conflating of geography and ethnicity.

The Korean Chinese are a unique case in China. It would be difficult to argue that the Chinese state began with an intentional colonizing project among them, and I will not try. Instead the Korean Chinese are the originally-unintended subjects of Chinese minority policy. That policy was designed for restive and potentially independently-minded minority groups who might have some grounds for a claim to statehood. The Korean Chinese did not contest Chinese state sovereignty. They generally acknowledged that they were recent arrivals onto Chinese land and were happy to be there. This has changed though with shifts in the global balance of power. The rise of South Korea in the late twentieth century reminded the Korean Chinese of their dual identity. Geographically uneven economies and diplomatic maneuvering allowed large numbers of Korean Chinese to migrate to South Korea for work or marriage. Indeed South Korea created an entire legal framework for incorporating ethnic Koreans of disparate geographic origin into the South Korean state. Did this result in the re-ethnicization and de-territorialization of the Korean nation?

I say no. In fact, the effect has been quite the opposite, leaving migrants and hosts alike disillusioned with their belief in a culturally-homogenous transnational Korean nation. Ethnic return migration has made the Korean Chinese reconceive themselves as not essentially Korean. Their identity, like the Manchus', was not born into them as a genetic legacy. It came to exist and can only exist within the context and the geographic space of China. It is not a Han Chinese identity, but a Chinese identity nonetheless.
I arrived at this argument through eight months of reading articles, books, and newspapers, two months of correspondence with other researchers, two months of interviewing Korean Chinese migrants in Seoul, four months of re-reading and analyzing transcripts, and a final two months of writing. Initially, the marriage migration of Korean Chinese women seemed the most interesting and problematic aspect of Korean Chinese ethnic return migration. Prompted by gender-skewed birthrates and a resulting shortage of women in South Korea, the immigration of Korean Chinese women rested on the assumption that they would be a perfect substitute for domestic reproductive labor. The populations’ shared Koreanness – conceptualized uncritically as both racial and cultural characteristics – was thought to trump politically-defined citizenship. But ensuing media reports and academic literature revealed the problematic results of such assumptions, which played out on the intimate scales of the home and body. Domestic violence, discrimination against immigrant women and their children, failed marriages and allegations of fraud came to characterize the public understanding of Korean Chinese marriage migration (Freeman 2005, H.K. Lee 2008, Kendall 1996). Yet research was dominated by South Korean opinions; Caren Freeman’s 2005 article was the only instance of Korean Chinese women being interviewed for their perspectives. I hoped, then, to give greater voice to Korean Chinese women.

A number of media reports mentioned support groups formed by or for Korean Chinese marriage migrants as resources for migrant women (Chosun Ilbo 2007, Hankyoreh 2009, H.J. Kim 2011). In addition, I contacted Caren Freeman, a woman who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on the routes of Korean Chinese marriage migration. She advised me to find South Korean international marriage agencies, who would hopefully introduce me to their successful matches, and from there use snowball sampling to meet other migrant women. In Dr. Freeman’s case,
these women had then introduced her to social support groups for Korean Chinese women, which I also hoped for. Unfortunately, soon after I got to Seoul, a Vietnamese marriage migrant was brutally murdered by her South Korean husband; they had been married just a week prior, and it turned out that the man had severe mental problems. The Vietnamese government was accusing the South Korean government of lax regulation, and the South Korean government quickly began a crackdown on international marriage agencies (Chosun Ilbo 2010c). When I arrived asking for interviews, the marriage agencies proved unwilling to do more than assure me of their legitimacy.

Instead I opted for a participant-observation style of ethnography, spending afternoons studying Korean in coffee shops in the Korean Chinese neighborhood of Daerim-dong and chatting with the baristas and waitresses whenever possible. I also interviewed three employees at the publicly-funded Yeoungdeungpo-gu Multicultural Village Center (족영등포구 다문화빌리지 센터), established to provide services to long-term foreign residents in that district; one researcher at the privately-funded Korean Migration and Diaspora Research Institute (사이주 동포 정책연구소), which published policy recommendations on immigration issues as well as offering legal services to ethnically Korean immigrants; two pastors at the Ansan Migrant Center (안산이주민센터, affiliated with the 다문화교회, Multicultural Church) which provides health and childcare services to the children of immigrants; and most helpfully, a legal aid officer at the privately-funded National Association of Returned Koreans (귀한 동포 연합 총회). This National Association was founded by the first wave of Korean-Chinese return migrants, who arrived in the early 1990s. It remains funded and run through subscription service by ethnic Koreans born overseas, mostly Korean Chinese. Because of its large membership and diverse activities (legal aid, education services, job training, healthcare), it is viewed as an authoritative
representative of the Korean Chinese population in Seoul, and serves as a legal advisor to the South Korean National Assembly on co-ethnic immigration policy.

Ultimately I ended up with nine formal interviews, five with South Koreans and four with Korean Chinese return migrants. Through the course of these interviews, and in casual conversation with people, I found that I was hearing two very different stories. The South Koreans overwhelmingly complained about Korean Chinese being old-fashioned and doing particular things that the South Koreans found “Chinese”. They seemed baffled and frustrated that these ostensibly Korean people were somehow not living up to their name. One South Korean government official, giving me a sympathetic explanation, said “They identify with South Korea, but they are foreigners here. […] They do not build connections with the local community. Most of them do not even own their homes, they only rent” (personal interview, July 13, 2010). The Korean Chinese, on the other hand, seemed frustrated by their cold reception, saw the South Koreans as unwelcoming and prejudiced against them, and attributed this behavior to the Western influence in South Korea, because true Koreans would treat each other with proper respect.

Probing this difference led me to my two framing questions. First, how do individuals and groups deal with conflicting sources of identity? These populations shared a Korean ethnic identity but each had other identities as well, which the other group seemed to take as irreconcilable with a Korean identity. South Koreans saw a politically Chinese identity as incompatible with a Korean ethnic identity, and Korean Chinese saw a Western-inspired individualistic competitive capitalism as directly at odds with Korean values. I wanted to investigate how they negotiated this difference when they were brought together in the same space through ethnic return migration.
Second, growing from the first question, I wanted to look specifically at the state’s role in identity formation. South Korea and China both have unique and tumultuous political histories; and their extreme political divergence seemed like an important issue. Both states themselves emerged at the same time the Korean population was divided; in trying to establish themselves as legitimate authorities, they needed to shore up their credentials as representatives of the people on their land. I imagined that both states would try their hardest to align the people’s identity with the state, and I was curious if this really happened and if so, how.

But these two framing questions are broad enough to apply to most people in most places. To address them specifically in the experience of the Korean Chinese, I narrowed in on three more specific, and answerable, questions. First, I wanted to excavate how the early history of the Korean Chinese, their group formation fleeing famine, colonization, and war, continues to affect their position within China. Second, how they are viewed and treated by the Chinese state, vis-à-vis China’s minority policies. Last, how South Korean conceptions of hierarchical nationhood get acted out through immigration policy, and how that affects the Korean Chinese.

The remaining chapters of this thesis then aim to explore how this came about and to suggest how this might inform future study. I will begin with a theoretical discussion of ethnic return migration, explaining why and how a cultural political economy framework best informs academic approaches. I then address the role and impacts of Chinese minority policy on ethnic groups as a whole and on the Korean Chinese specifically. The third chapter examines the South Korean state’s attempts to manage its ethnic diaspora, and the results as felt by Korean Chinese labor migrants. Extending the discussion beyond legislative and labor relations, in the fourth chapter I consider how marriage migration as a much more direct connection between Korean
co-ethnics has in fact exacerbated divisions. In my conclusion I return to the questions raised here, and end by raising more.

The fifteen Korean Chinese who perished in the Korea 2000 warehouse fire were uniquely mourned because South Koreans didn’t know how to mourn them. Korean Chinese were expected to fit neatly into the same category as the South Koreans themselves. South Koreans could then put on their white funeral garb, hold a banquet, collect envelopes of money for the families of the dead, and rest assured that they had acted properly. But the unsettling process of ethnic return migration had shaken their understanding of propriety. Korean Chinese were not foreigners, and so deserved special recognition in death. But neither were they Korean. Liminal beings, the Korean Chinese are pushing the boundaries of both descent- and place-based identities, engaging in new practices, evolving new understandings of territoriality, and ultimately creating new forms of identity that traverse traditional ethno-political definitions.
CHAPTER 1:  
A Theoretical Approach to Understanding Ethnic Return Migration

1.1 Ethnic Return Migration

Ethnic return migration refers to the migration of people out of their country of citizenship and into a country of ancestral heritage. Ethnic return migration stems from a diverse range of causes, for economic, political and nationalistic reasons. This process has occurred among diverse groups of people around the world, perhaps most visibly in the Jewish diaspora’s return migration to Israel, but also among Germans at the end of the Second World War, Eastern Europeans at the end of Cold War, and Japanese peoples during Japan’s booming 1980s and 90s. While ethnic return migration is a relatively small subset in international migration studies overall, it raises important issues of ethnic identity, belongingness, and the power to define the nation.

Like many forms of migrations, ethnic return migration is often motivated by global economic inequalities. Migrants seek not merely a new place, but a better place in the world. Most leave from poorer areas and go to richer areas, seeking jobs. Most ethnic return migrants are therefore also international labor migrants. They share many common experiences of non-ethnic migrants, including low-paying and low-skilled jobs, discrimination, language barriers, visa legality issues, and the creation of migrant enclaves in the host community.

Yet in many ways ethnic return migration is a unique phenomenon. Unlike other migrations, it is complicated by perceptions of a shared history, the expectation of social, political, and economic equality, altered or corrupted forms of a shared language, and kinship

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2 See Tsuda (2009) for detailed accounts of these migrations.
ties in the receiving community. Takeyuki Tsuda, discussing ethnic return migrants in Japan, writes

"[e]thnic return migrants are interesting because many have become immigrant minorities in their countries of ethnic origin despite their ancestral ties and presumed ethnic similarities with the host populace. Because of the ethnic affinity that the Japanese Brazilians feel with the Japanese, their ethnic and socioeconomic marginalization in Japan is quite disorienting and introduces complications in their identity and adaptation that other immigrants in Japan do not face" (Tsuda 2003, xv).

This highlights the importance of the geographical imagination in constructing diasporas.

The idea of the diaspora itself has been used in increasingly diverse ways since the 1970s, growing from a synonym for the global Jewish population to a more general description of globally-dispersed communities of various affiliations (Brubaker 2005). But the continued emphasis on a shared homeland and a distinctive identity fit well with broadly accepted ideas of ethnic grouping. Ethnicity is everywhere a complicated idea; here I follow Max Weber’s definition of ethnic groups as “those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both” (Weber 1978, 389). Thus a belief in both ancestral and cultural commonality comprises ethnic identification. Ethnicity can serve as the basis for the political nation, but need not; often ethnic nationalism is juxtaposed with civic nationalism, when race- or culture-based group memberships do not conform to political boundaries (Hansen and Hesli 2009). But both civic and ethnic nations can be characterized by Anderson’s classic definition, “an imagined political community […] imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1983, 7). Thus definitions of both the ethnic and diasporic group hinge on members’ own belief in their group identity.
An important result of the subjective nature of ethnic identity is its potential for manipulation and re-interpretation (Harrell 1996). Within a nation-state, ethnic interpretations can be dominated by entrenched local institutions – legislation, the media, education systems, tax codes. All of these institutions have the ability to enforce a particular understanding of group characteristics. The shared space of the nation-state brings different interpretations into direct contact, resulting in conflict, consensus, or dialogue. However, diasporic people see themselves as sharing a particular identity across long distances. Characteristics of the shared identity can be mediated through family ties and traditions, newspapers, and increasingly internet-based technology. But the dispersed nature of diasporic people means that many aspects of their collective identity do not share the same space, and are not directly revealed to group members in other places.

Conflicting understandings of group identity can be unproblematic across wide distances. However, when dispersed groups come back together – as in the case of ethnic return migration – the imagined similarities come face to face and can suddenly appear quite different. Ongoing changes in language, diet, dress habits, and standards of behavior can make commonplace interactions difficult and jarring experiences. Ethnic Germans scattered through the former Soviet Union repatriated in large numbers from 1950 through the present day; not fluent in German, under-educated compared to German youth and unfamiliar with the German socialist system, long-term unemployment and high crime rates have created a public backlash against them (von Koppenfels 2009). Swedish Finns migrating into Sweden in the 1990s cite their unique intonation of the Swedish language as a strong and divisive display of difference (Hedberg 2009, 175). Often it is the very characteristics that migrants believed marked them as
belonging to their ethnic group – unique food, language, or dress – that instead exclude them from it upon return.

One result of this unforeseen conflict can be disillusionment with prior ideas of ethnic brotherhood and contestation over the true definition of the shared identity. In the case of the ethnic Germans, “uniformly poor success in the hard-won ‘homeland’ – with immigration achieved only after a long, bureaucratic process – is particularly demoralizing and causes Aussiedler [ethnic Germans] to look again at their own self-worth and identity” (von Koppenfels 2009, 116). A similar “discovery of difference” was made by Spanish natives upon the arrival of their Argentine Spanish co-ethnics; “Locals observed that despite religious and linguistic differences, Romanian immigrants were ‘more like us’ than the Latin American newcomers in their ethic of hard work and modest expectations” (Cook-Martin and Viladrich 2009, 145, emphasis added). Unexpected boundaries demarking us and them leave ethnic return migrants wondering what ethnic identity, if any, they truly possess.

Ultimately the conflict over divergent cultural identities is a struggle for the power to define cultural boundaries and the nation itself. That power usually remains in the hands of those who control the physical homeland. These people have the ability to legally define citizenship and belonging, and by extension can define who is foreign. This appears prominently in the literature on co-ethnic policy; as Skrentny et al (2009) describe, “in deciding how to treat co-ethnic nonnationals, states are in effect defining the boundaries of the nation” (45). That boundary can stretch and shrink as necessary. Its flexibility is enabled and encouraged by the flexible and multi-dimensional definition of ethnicity itself.

Ethnicity is usually conceptualized both racially and culturally. However, these two aspects of ethnicity can be conflated. Ethnic return migrants’ descent, previously unquestioned,
can suddenly become suspect as cultural differences emerge. That a supposedly place-based identity should not belong in its supposed place raises questions about where it does belong. Ethnic return migrants’ sense of identity, previously tied up with their imagined homeland but suddenly uprooted and without a spatial fix, often turns back to the country of migratory origin. Their claim to belonging to the ethnic nation, a claim based causally on descent and materially on shared daily practices, is denied by their more powerful, homeland-based co-ethnics on the basis of cultural divergence. This cultural divergence is often described as a loss of cultural heritage (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim, 2005). Culture thus appears as a proprietary commodity, something which can be owned, lost, claimed, and denied at will.

These contestations have been academically treated most often in terms of economic relationships. In fact most ethnic return migration in the context of East Asia is economically-motivated, with migrants seeking industrial jobs and host countries seeking cheap labor.\footnote{European and Israeli ethnic return migration has arisen more in response to perceived persecution of co-ethnics living as minorities outside of the ethnic homeland; this difference will be discussed in greater detail below.} This is certainly true in China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, all of which have experienced growing ethnic return migration in the last twenty years. The Japanese experience has been discussed extensively in academic literature (cf. Linger 1997, Cornelius 1994, Tsuda 2003, Tsuda 2009). Chinese and Taiwanese ethnic return migration, especially from Southeast Asia, has received less attention, perhaps because of the smaller numbers (Skrentny et al 2009). The South Korean case, though, has been mostly ignored, despite clear connections to these similar processes elsewhere. In South Korea, ethnic return migration, mostly of the Korean minority in China, has been economically motivated with poverty in the sending area as the primary “push” factor. Large-scale ethnic return migration for the explicit goal of reunification has not been reported.\footnote{There is, however, a growing literature on both students and tourists who travel to their nation of ethnic origin explicitly to experience and “reclaim” their ethnic heritage; see Su and Teo 2009.}
1.2 The Role of Culture

Is it possible, then, to understand ethnic return migration through a political economy approach? Can it be read as an attempt to call in connections to more powerful players in order to advance a migrant’s personal standing in the global economy? As will be discussed in the second chapter, the Korean Chinese were first suggested as a co-ethnic labor force by a South Korean business coalition, opposed by South Korean labor unions. Occurring at a time when wages were rapidly rising to compensate for a lack of low-skilled workers, the shared cultural characteristics could be read as a tool in this labor struggle. Images of cultural affinity were used to persuade the South Korean public to accept foreign workers; similarly, South Korean labor unions have played on the Korean Chinese’ "Chineseness" to push back against perceived labor competition (N.H.J. Kim 2008). The governments of both South Korea and China initially had little to do with this migration, but fairly quickly introduced regulations that served their national economic interests. Their Korean heritage is the means by which Korean Chinese gain entry to the South Korean labor and marriage markets, with clear economic benefits for the Korean Chinese. The power to define Koreanness obviously has material implications for all involved, and struggles over that power could push us to understand this case through political economy. Yet after the legal framework for Korean Chinese in-migration had been established – a process largely completed by 1992, and modified just twice since then – public discourse has centered on issues of assimilation, not economic positioning. The government has clearly defined the economic spaces that Korean Chinese may occupy: labor migrants may work in the 3-D (dirty, difficult, dangerous) industries, or for marriage migrants, the domestic sphere. The Korean Chinese in general have not contested this. Rather they have disputed their systematic
cultural disenfranchisement, protesting not their limited access to labor markets based on their Chinese citizenship but their social exclusion as not-Korean- enough.

South Koreans, for their part, fault the Korean Chinese for failing to act properly Korean. But one government official interviewed declared that “their dialect is almost another language, and their clothes and makeup look strange. They don’t understand public courtesy either – they tend to drink in public” (personal interview, Aug. 9, 2010). Special co-ethnic work and marriage visas were issued on the assumption that Korean Chinese people would not bring such foreign cultural elements with them. This deal was sold as something of a quid pro quo for the South Korean public, a way to allow South Korean businesses to access low-cost labor without tainting Korea’s prized ethnic homogeneity. South Koreans seem to have initially viewed the Korean Chinese as a non-foreign cultural group, whose nonetheless foreign political status allow them to occupy the low-skilled and low-wage economic positions that South Korean citizens reject for themselves. The problems inherent in this contradiction – in treating Korean Chinese as sometimes-foreign and sometimes-domestic – did not become apparent until the Korean Chinese ‘failed’ to live up to cultural expectations.

The Korean Chinese, while accepting the areas of employment open to them on their special visas, express indignation, frustration, and anger over their cold reception by their South Korean co-ethnics. They are keenly aware of their predicament as almost-foreign. During one interview with a Korean Chinese man, I asked how he and other Korean Chinese people felt about their treatment in South Korea. He stopped our interview to find a dictionary and translate the word “betrayal” for me, concerned that I might not fully understand. Continuing in Korean, he said “We thought we were Koreans, but here we aren’t. The Korean Americans and the Korean Japanese are more welcome, because they aren’t coming from poverty” (personal
interview, July 20, 2010). Other foreign groups in South Korea are not expected to speak Korean well, but the Korean Chinese are often criticized for their "old-fashioned" Korean which is closer in dialect to North Korean. Southeast Asian migrant wives are celebrated for bringing "multiculturalism" to South Korea, while Korean Chinese migrant brides complain that their South Korean husbands won't eat their Korean cooking, because the husbands find it too Chinese (Freeman 2005). But the Korean Chinese see no reason to view their version of Korean culture as inauthentic; indeed, official Chinese minority policy has worked to preserve Korean cultural markers in ways that South Korea has not. Thus the Korean language is legally protected in the Korean minority area, and has not taken on foreign loan words for new technologies (unlike in South Korea, where words like computer, camera, and internet are all phonetic renderings of their English translations). Similarly, the South Korean diet has adopted new ingredients especially from the West, while Korean Chinese cooking tends to rely on traditional home-grown ingredients. The Korean Chinese are thus understandably perplexed when they are accused of being culturally foreign.

All of this indicates that culture operates not as a discursive tool in a struggle over political economy, but as its own site of struggle. This is not to deny that cultural struggles are political and economic, or to suggest that culture exists as a realm apart. There are clearly vested interests seeking to define cultural boundaries, with the benefits including power and money on a transnational scale. But the important point is that neither power nor money is the ultimate objective of the groups in this discourse. People are here instead seeking legitimacy for their very sense of selves, for their traditional understandings of their heritage and their family traditions and their deeply held beliefs about themselves. Debating whether rice-noodles qualify
as Korean food has few large-scale economic repercussions, outside of the rice-noodle industry. Such debates instead highlight how boundary-making functions in shaping group identities. Here then, I hope to address how this struggle to define cultural boundaries, meanings, and identities manifests in national policies and personal decisions. Immigration policies, citizenship requirements, government-sponsored Korean cooking classes, marriage, employment, and migration decisions, all demonstrate particular understandings of who and what is Korean. While these decisions certainly have political and economic repercussions, their larger effect is to further one idea of proper Korean culture at the expense of others. The power of such decisions is clear in South Korean co-ethnic policy, where a legal definition of different types of Korean people is explicit. But it can also be seen in the assumptions and effects driving the personal decisions of participants.

Both labor and marriage migration are highly gendered processes, and reinforce shared and conflicting beliefs about proper gender roles. For both the Korean Chinese and the South Koreans, it is acceptable that either single or married men can leave families in China to work industrial jobs in the South Korea and send their earnings home. It is less typical for married women to migrate, and South Koreans tend to feel shocked by this. Single women though are encouraged to migrate and to find work in bars, coffee shops, small restaurants or shops, or best of all, to marry South Korean men. As one Korean Chinese informant told me, “Korean Chinese women are really encouraged to come for work, and then they can meet a South Korean husband. It’s better than the agency-arranged marriages” (personal interview, July 27, 2010). Some conflict has arisen over the proper place for Korean Chinese women after they have married South Korean men: whether they should work outside the home and send their earnings back to

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5 In two interviews, South Koreans cited the eating of a particular type of rice-noodle as evidence of the Korean Chinese people’s un-Korean behavior. Several Korean Chinese women took strong issue with this, insisting that their mothers (who were Korean before the category of Korean Chinese existed) made and ate these rice-noodles.
China, or focus their energies on reproducing their marital households. This is discussed more fully in the Chapter 4, but should be noted here as it highlights the division of loyalties created by the conflict over Koreanness. South Koreans hold that Korean women give up their natal families at marriage; by retaining ties with parents, siblings, and extended family in China, Korean Chinese women are accused of showing Chineseness.

Not only gender but also racial beliefs become apparent in the debate over whose Korean culture is legitimate. The South Korean state, only 63 years old and covering less than half of the Korean peninsula, nonetheless considers itself the only legitimate political representative of the Korean nation. The Korean nation, in turn, is most widely perceived as racial; Shin (2006) reports on a Hallym University survey in which “68.2 percent of the respondents in South Korea consider ‘blood’ the most important criterion of defining the Korean nation” and that in his own survey “[n]inety-three percent of the respondents reported, ‘Our nation has a single bloodline’” (2). The state thus grants differential access to visas based on a person’s perceived blood-purity. Korean Americans, the most recent out-migrants, have the most generous and readily-accessible visas; Korean Japanese, most of whom were taken there forcibly during the Second World War and many of whom have still not given up Korean citizenship, are second-best.⁶ Korean Chinese, who are assumed to have left Korea willingly during the Japanese occupation (although this is not universally true, as will be discussed in Chapter 2), appear to South Koreans as having embraced a Chinese identity and become in many ways racially polluted. This debate arises because of the already-mentioned problematic definition of ethnicity, which encompasses and often conflates culture and race. Racial discourses about the Korean Chinese tend to reflect a belief that racial characteristics manifest as cultural practices. Thus South Korean fears of

⁶ Tsuda (2003, x) reports that “There are approximately 600,000 Korean Japanese who are still registered in Japan as ‘foreigners.’” Although 90 percent of them were born and raised in Japan (Ryang 1997:3), they are not granted Japanese citizenship, and many have not naturalized.”
cultural pollution are deeply tied to their understanding of the Korean nation as a racially homogenous group.

Ultimately the Korean Chinese are given special treatment in South Korean immigration policy because of assumptions about shared cultural values and practices. South Koreans expected Korean Chinese migrants to act like South Koreans; this was the reason the Korean Chinese were granted preferential access to labor and marriage markets. Korean Chinese migrants, encouraged for 60 years by the Chinese government to preserve Korean cultural traits, had no reason to suspect that their habits would differ from South Koreans’. Initial assumptions did not necessarily reflect empirical reality though, and the meeting of idealized imaginings with unexpected reality resulted in disillusionment for both sides. Understanding this disillusionment requires more than an orthodox political economy framework can offer, because those initial assumptions were based on cultural expectations. We must bring in critical understandings of how culture interacts with politics and economics to comprehend what has and is happening in Korean Chinese migration.

### 1.3 Cultural Political Economy in Geography

Such cultural influences have certainly been noted within the discipline of political economy. Neoclassical political economy has been roundly and effectively criticized for discounting cultural and social aspects of life and treating the economic as a sphere apart. Marxist approaches began here in addressing the social class consequences of various means of production. Later critiques, especially those arising after the cultural turn of the 1960s, have gone further in expanding the analytical range of political economy. Among these newer approaches, cultural political economy (CPE) seems to offer a multi-faceted and nuanced
approach that does not resort to oversimplification or reductionist explanations. However, CPE has been defined and deployed in different and inconsistent ways by various authors.

Critics of political economy have long noted its problematic assumption of “the economy” as a separate ontological reality. But this was not present in the earliest classical articulations of political economy. Indeed the very theorists who worked to establish political economy as a discipline apart commented on the necessary social impacts of their theories; Adam Smith, in his *Wealth of Nations*, explicitly predicts the human impacts of pursuing economic prosperity at an aggregate level; the capitalist division of labor leaves “the great body of the people […] confined to a few very simple operations… [with] no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur…” For the common man then,

“the torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part of any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. […] It corrupts even the activity of his body, and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigour and perseverance, in any other employment than that to which he has been bred” (Smith 1976, 302 – 303, quoted in Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, 39).

Despite this clear connection drawn between the economic system and its social impacts, later neoclassical political economists seemed content to treat the economy as a sphere apart. It was this treatment that Polanyi (1944) noted, explicating the unprecedented attempt to sever economic activity from the social sphere. Removing the social ties that structured the economy, and instead encouraging people to calculate personal gain based on money alone was indeed a radical shift. But as Best and Paterson (2010, 3) point out, “the ‘disembedding’ of markets never in fact detached markets from culture, they rather reconstituted the content of that culture.” Still, neoclassical political economy (and most mainstream economists) overwhelmingly accepted that
economics constituted a separate and rational (acultural) sphere of human life (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010, 32).

In part as a response to this, Marxist political economy pushed for recognition of the oppressive nature of capitalism by emphasizing the necessarily hierarchical relationships in capitalist endeavor. But Marxist approaches often fail to explicitly note the equally cultural structures that enable this, instead giving ultimate causative power to distribution issues. As one example, Don Mitchell (2000) writes “while culture itself does not exist, the idea of culture has been developed and deployed in the modern (and postmodern) world as a means of attempting to order, control and define ‘others’ in the name of power and profit” (75, emphasis in original). Culture is here reduced to an exercise in power. Similarly, Harvey (2006) argues that “‘Difference’ and ‘otherness’ are produced in space through the simple logic of uneven capital investment, a proliferating geographical division of labor, an increasing segmentation of reproductive activities and the rise of spatially ordered (often segregated) social distinctions” (295). There is certainly value in examining the ways in which culture can be manipulated for political and economic ends. The question of who defines culture, and which culture gets replicated, produced, and consumed (Mitchell 1995, 112), reveals important ways that power operate in everyday life. Yet Jackson (2002) highlights the folly of making political economy primary or outside of culture; as he points out, “the apparently rational calculus of the market is inescapably embedded in a range of cultural processes” (5). To disregard culture, to write it off as a purely instrumental ploy of social control, is to deny its embodied and enacted reality. For capitalism to exist in the first place, people must accept competitive exploitation as socially tolerable and allow for the very results that Adam Smith predicted – poverty, deprivation, and gross inequality. If such behavior and such results were beyond the pale of social acceptability,
then such a distribution system would also be rejected. The economic system is thus predicated upon particular cultural norms, which can themselves develop and change.

Since the cultural turn in the 1960s though, these cultural factors have received greater attention. New critiques of political economy have arisen and revealed greater complexity, highlighting “globalization, governance, non-governmental organizations, networking, the knowledge-driven economy, the primacy of geo-economics over geo-politics, new forms of warfare, new forms of risk, environmental change, bodies and embodiment, and temporality and spatiality” (Jessop and Sum 2001, 90). Andrew Sayer, writing in 2001, reviews the past twenty-five years of work that seeks to bring the cultural turn to political economy; in his view, those concerned with the cultural turn have in fact gone too far in neglecting the political and economic aspects of their topics. He argues for increased dialogue between work emphasizing systems and their emergent properties and the newer work which examines how “new and progressive moral-political influences […] attempt to counter those economic problems that originate in the lifeworld as consequences of various forms of discrimination and misrecognition” (Sayer 2001 705).

Since then though, CPE continues to include a broad range of work with sometimes-conflicting theoretical frameworks. It does seem possible to say that work in CPE approaches phenomena with the initial assumption that all human activity is simultaneously constituted though cultural, political, and economic interests. Authors claiming this approach do not seek to reduce causation to one factor alone. Yet disputes continue over how much relative weight and attention should be given to each aspect. Mike Davies, reviewing the state of the field in 2010, finds that CPE is often taken to mean either a political economic analysis of cultural phenomena, or standard political economy with some cultural elements or influences noted. He characterizes
these approaches in three general veins, as “suggest[ing] that crucial political economic processes have taken on a increasingly cultural characteristics”; “see[ing] cultural meanings as embedded in or even determining economic life”; or “call[ing] for an ‘ethnographic international political economy’” (49 – 50). Yet, as Davies points out, all of these approaches continue to separate culture and economy at a fundamental level. Following Lefebvre’s critique of the separation between mental and manual labor, we cannot view even basic manual labor as somehow devoid of cultural significance.

Among the most visible and persistent advocates of a CPE approach are Jessop and Sum, co-founders of the Cultural Political Economy Research Centre at Lancaster University. Beginning in 2000, these authors began publishing work on CPE, inspired partly by the decline of disciplinary boundaries and the decline of area studies in favor of “variations on institutionalism (historical, economic, rational choice, sociological, ideational) [which] offer different routes to a unified approach to comparative analysis” (2001, 90). Jessop in particular has published prolifically on this subject. His critique of standard political economy rests on four major points found lacking in standard political economy: the socially constructed nature of the objects of inquiry, the materiality of all social relations, the explanatory and interpretive power of semiosis, and the recognition of the reductive nature of all economic imaginaries (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, 1156 – 58). By 2009 Jessop offers a fairly concise definition of his approach to CPE. A CPE approach recognizes the role of semiosis in co-constituting subjects, objects, and social relations, yet remains concerned with “the materiality of social relations and […] the structural properties and dynamics that result from such material relations” (Jessop and Sum 2009, 161).
In ten years of attempting to ‘bring culture in’ though, Jessop (and usually Sum) continuously and problematically equate culture with semiosis (semiosis defined as the “social production of inter-subjective meaning” (Jessop and Sum, 2010a 445)). They do note that “in taking the ‘cultural turn’, political economy should continue to emphasize the materiality of social relations” (2001, 94) but seem to see these material aspects of life as falling under the domain of political economy, while “culture” is limited to discursively-constructed and immaterial “meaning”. Thus the cultural turn adds discursively-constructed semiotic analysis to a critical political economic analysis of the material world, which is apparently devoid of inter-subjective meaning. Yet as early as 2001 they offer an explicitly materialist definition of CPE, claiming that their approach to CPE arose directly from “Marxism as a pre-disciplinary intellectual tradition committed to the critique of political economy” and that their version of CPE seeks to “transcend the action/language distinction and to explore the complex ‘discursive-material’ nature of practices, organizations, and institutions” (2001, 92). In 2004 they continued to criticize standard political economy for its tendency “to naturalize or reify its theoretical objects (such as land, machines, the division of labour, money, commodities, the information economy) and to offer impoverished accounts of how subjects and subjectivities are formed and how different modes of calculation emerge, come to be institutionalized, and get modified” (2004, 160). However, Jessop’s approach does seem to border on the problem Davis described by continuing to accept culture and economy as separate spheres of life, albeit co-constituting ones.

What Jessop hints at, but does not make explicit, is that no economic system could even theoretically exist outside of or apart from its cultural and social context. Just as early political economy refused to see material distribution as separate from power distributions, so too must
culture be considered fundamental but not ultimate. Culture should be understood as both constitutive of people’s political and economic decisions, as well as materially created through those same choices.

Despite some disagreement on their understanding of culture though, the methodological approach advocated by Jessop and Oosterlynck (2008) offers a practical way to consider cultural, economic, and political factors acting simultaneously. Noting the reliance of economic imaginaries on semiotic meaning, it becomes necessary to probe how and why only certain meanings arise and hold salience. The progression of variation, selection, and retention forces analysts to consider the specific cultural, political, and historical context in which a given economic imaginary arises. Thus any economic phenomena is preemptively understood as culturally, politically, and economically affected.

Taking this understanding of cultural political economy as a starting point then, it informs a discussion of ethnic return migration in several key ways. Migration itself cannot be viewed as a purely economic decision regarding allocation of labor; it is instead a complex social process open only to certain people, varying in different contexts based on age, gender, education, ability, and social capital. Murphy (2009) raises this point in her discussion of Chinese labor migrants, showing the diverse range of causes and effects involved in migrations. Everything from infrastructure to family structure is drawn in. Migration can only occur between areas with certain characteristics; conditions in sending areas must allow for out-migration physically and socially, and receiving areas must provide some (even minor) draw, as well as basic facilities like accommodation and transportation. While migration is often motivated by uneven economic development, it cannot be divorced from the social and political conditions in which it occurs.
And conditions are always unique. Migration between South Korea and China is limited to the very recent past, beginning in 1992 with a rush of migrants and remaining steady since then. South Korea had just at that time become a migrant-receiving country, and has struggled mightily with that new role. Building a legal and social system to accommodate foreign migrants is far more than an economic issue. China, long a migrant-sending country, has found new ways to benefit from its population abroad, instituting educational programs to facilitate the migration experience and to ensure that migrants retain a strong sense of loyalty to the home nation.

From a local governance perspective, this loyalty is best expressed through the sending of remittances. Sending money home from abroad must then also be viewed as a cultural process that makes, re-makes, or retains ties between the migrant and the sending family or community. The central and local governments in China overseeing the Korean Chinese migrants’ home communities have especially emphasized the importance of remittances, going as far as offering classes in how to transfer funds back from abroad (Luova 2008, 39). Even with this official encouragement though, the decision to send one’s earnings elsewhere is made by individuals enmeshed in social relationships. Questions of how much to send, to whom to send it, and how to use the sent money are all affected by extra-economic forces. A cultural political economy approach allows us to consider these other forces, and better understand the full range of meaning tied up in migrant remittances.

Perhaps most importantly, ethnic return migration must be viewed as a special sub-set of international migration which draws heavily on ideas of cultural and historical affinity. Not to downplay the cultural aspects of all migration, the flows of ethnic return migration arise explicitly from an assumption of ethnic (hence racial and cultural) continuity between the
migrants and the receiving area. While all conceptions of set or unified cultures can problematically erase difference, ideas of cultural continuity with an unknown area or group can be especially far off-target. This assumption could produce contrary results. It could be a force in actually creating continuity; people thinking they ought to share cultural characteristics may be motivated to seek common ground. On the other hand, when a group of people is unexpectedly faced with ‘others’ when they had anticipated the ‘self,’ the shock could produce a negative backlash.

1.4 A Case for Comparison: Ethnic Return Migration of the Japanese Brazilians

In actual studies of ethnic return, there has been a mixture of these results. The majority of academic work investigating ethnic return migration focuses on Eastern Europe and Russia in the post-WWII era. This work can be divided into several sub-groups, most prominently the work on the general Jewish diasporic ‘return’ to Israel (Joppke 2002), but also including the post-Soviet return of specifically Russian Jews (Remennick 2009), ethnic German migration from the former Soviet bloc (Rock and Wolff 2002), Hungarians returning from Romania (Fox 2009), and the post-Soviet migrations of ethnic Russians (Lazareva 2008), Poles (Iglicka 1998), Swedes (Hedberg 2009), and others. However, as Skrentny et al (2009) point out, European ethnic return migration policies have been designed to provide a form of protection for co-ethnics living outside the national boundaries. That is, the co-ethnics who live as minorities elsewhere are assumed to face persecution; return migration is a way for the homeland to assist its people. Return migration in East Asia though is quite different. In China, South Korea, and Japan, ethnic return migration policy has been framed in economic terms. Co-ethnics abroad are
described as potential assets to the homeland, available to contribute labor, skills, or investment capital to the national economy. The co-ethnics in this case are expected to assist the homeland.

This expectation is well-illustrated by the example of Japanese Brazilian ethnic return migration. The Japanese minority in Brazil, a group of about 1.2 million people, began migrating to Brazil in the early 1900s. Japan was suffering economically at that time, and Brazil’s plantation economy was starved for labor due to the recent abolition of slavery (Tsuda 2003, 56). Ongoing migration continued through the 1960s, and the Japanese Brazilians now have up to four generations of residency in Brazil. Despite this hundred-year history, the Japanese remain a distinct minority. This is partly due to the distinguishing East Asian phenotype; as Tsuda writes, “this racially inscribed ‘Japaneseness’ is experienced by the Brazilian nikkeijin [Japanese descendents] as a primordial ethnic identity based on innate characteristics acquired by birth that cannot be denied or changed” (2003, 64). Yet the Japanese Brazilians have actively maintained a separate cultural identity as well, speaking Japanese at home and marrying mostly fellow Japanese Brazilians. Their economic success within Brazil has led non-Japanese Brazilians to construe them as a positive minority. This has been encouraged as well by the positive association with Japan, perceived in Brazil as an advanced nation on the world stage. A Japanese Brazilian minority identity thus has tangible benefits, a fact that has discouraged greater assimilation. Japanese Brazilians in Brazil then maintain a fairly high socio-economic position while experiencing both racial ‘othering’ by non-Japanese Brazilians and a degree of cultural self-segregation.

By the 1980s though, the economic balance that had encouraged migration to Brazil had shifted. The Japanese economy boomed, but the Japanese population simultaneously aged and experienced high standards of living and levels of education. Japan found itself in need of
younger, low-skilled workers. While Japanese immigration policy in the 1980s restricted work visas to first- and second-generation Japanese, by the 1990s this was relaxed to allow for up to third-generation Japanese descendents. Visas for non-Japanese remained rare. With even basic factory jobs in Japan paying 5 to 10 times more than middle-class jobs in Brazil, the Japanese Brazilians were reasonably enticed (Tsuda 2003, 85). The Brazilian economy at this same time experienced ongoing decline. Brazilians of all types suffered and turned to international migration as a coping strategy. The U.S., Germany, England, Australia and Spain each received thousands of Brazilian labor migrants through the 1980s and 90s. But the Japanese Brazilians chose almost uniformly to seek work in Japan. The trans-national ethnic link was clearly not the motivation for leaving the natal country, but rather channeled migrants in a unique direction.

The wealth accrued by Japanese Brazilians working in Japan produced a steady stream of trans-Pacific migration, and out-migration to work in Japanese factories became a common and accepted occupational choice among well-educated middle-class Japanese Brazilians. Chain migration among friends, families, and neighbors encouraged this trend. By 2000, over 250,000 Japanese Brazilians were registered as foreigners in Japan (Tsuda 2003, 98). But such high numbers do not mean this migration has been unproblematic or easy for either the migrants or the host population. The Japanese Brazilians, professing a strong sense of Japanese identity when in Brazil, anticipated strengthening their Japanese identity upon immersion in Japanese society. Expressing similar expectations, the official Japanese immigration policy gave preference to ethnic Japanese from abroad not for explicitly economic reasons, but instead “as an opportunity provided by the benevolence of the Japanese government to those of Japanese descent born abroad to explore their ethnic heritage and visit their ancestral homeland” (Kajita 1994, quoted in Tsuda 2003, 92). While there is undoubtedly some irony to this statement, it
does highlight the belief in an ethnic and cultural connection as the enabling factor for migration. When the two groups’ understanding of how to properly enact Japanese identity was found to differ then, both groups were left frustrated. As Tsuda (2003) summarizes,

“…[D]espite geographical separation and different national backgrounds, a consciousness of transnational ethnic commonality with nikkeijin has been created among the Japanese because of essentialist ethnic feelings of cultural similarity based on the primacy of racial and blood ties […] Therefore, the cultural foreignness of the nikkeijin and the inability of most of them to speak the language properly are disillusioning and disappointing for most Japanese” (117).

Within Brazil, the Japanese minority is clearly marked racially as Japanese. But their Japanese identity also rests on cultural practices such as speaking the Japanese language, eating sushi and noodle dishes, and participating in Japanese hobbies like flower arranging, tea ceremonies, and karaoke (Tsuda 2003, 71 and 158). These visible performative activities are enough to clearly mark them as a cultural minority in Brazil. In Japan though, these behaviors are not enough. Countless other actions, done or left undone, differentiate the Japanese Brazilians from the Japanese. In Tsuda’s interviews, Japanese people cited behaviors such as jaywalking, wearing brightly-colored clothing, playing the guitar, singing in the shower, speaking loudly on the streets, improperly sorting garbage, and standing idly about in groups as clear evidence that the Japanese Brazilians were foreign (Tsuda 2003, 124). True Japanese would know better.

These actions, construed as contrary to proper Japanese behavior, are observed in individuals and then abstracted to the entire group of Japanese Brazilians through ethnic attribution. This feeds into a larger dialogue of cultural purity in Japan. Many Japanese are fairly explicit in their disdain for foreign influences in Japan. Since the 1868 – 1912 Meiji era, Japan has consistently encouraged a discourse of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity as the basis
for the Japanese nation (Shikama 2005, 183). Clear distinctions between the Japanese and the foreign have been entrenched through both tradition and law, with strict citizenship laws based on *jus sanguinis* and, since 1990, immigration law based also on direct Japanese descent.

Relatively recent discussions of multiculturalism continue to reinforce the idea that the (pure) Japanese can exist among (impure) foreign elements. The Japanese Brazilians though blur this distinction, by appearing physically Japanese yet failing to conform to Japanese behavioral norms. Shikama (2005) also articulates this point; “Because they share some features with the Japanese but not others, the *Nikkeijin* are affecting, however subtly, notions of Japanese identity, undermining the simple binary opposition of ‘Japanese v. non-Japanese’ which has long been taken for granted” (188). While this use of nikkeijin refers to all ethnic Japanese people of foreign citizenship, the experience of the Japanese Brazilians is further affected by the global economic position of Brazil relative to Japan. Just as Japan is a respected country in Brazil, so Brazil is perceived as a backwards, poor, and of low cultural standards by the Japanese. Existing in Brazilian space, the Japanese Brazilians have absorbed the impure foreign elements and are no longer purely Japanese. “Because of this foreign cultural contamination, the Japanese Brazilians have become anomalous and ambiguous beings who are racially Japanese but culturally foreign” (Tsuda 2003, 132). Existing somewhere between the Japanese and the foreign, the Japanese Brazilians are even stranger than the clearly foreign. This framing of the Japanese Brazilians as impure appears repeatedly in Tsuda’s interviews; as he quotes one Japanese informant, “[w]e feel culturally superior to the nikkeijin because we have real Japanese culture while they have *only contaminated* Japanese culture. They aren’t pure Japanese anymore, even if they look just like us” (131, emphasis added).

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The liminal existence of the Japanese Brazilians is further reinforced by their occupational status. Despite continuing labor shortages, non-Japanese-descent foreigners cannot obtain unskilled work visas into Japan at all, reflecting a general xenophobic attitude in Japan. That Japanese Brazilians are allowed to work unskilled jobs indicates that they are not the same as other foreigners. Yet by working the low-skill jobs that the Japanese themselves shun, they are also marked as non-Japanese, implicitly sub-Japanese. The economic positioning of the Japanese Brazilians thus reinforces a cultural stereotype that serves to legitimate and propagate the ethnic hierarchy.

Japanese Brazilians thus come from a home country where they are a successful and positive minority group, and arrive in their ethnic homeland to find themselves again not of the majority population, instead a new and negative minority. “In response to such negative experiences, many of them distance themselves from their previous transnational ethnic affiliation with the Japanese and assert a much stronger Brazilian counteridentity in opposition to Japanese society” (Tsuda 2003, 155). This Brazilian counter-identity consisted of engaging in explicitly Brazilian behavior such as eating Brazilian food and dancing samba – things that the Japanese Brazilians admitted avoiding in Brazil. Reactionary nationalism in this sense reflects an irony of migration; when people become physically untethered from their place of territorial citizenship, they may become more emotionally attached. Migration thus does not necessarily result in a post-modern, post-national consciousness, but can actually exasperate conflicts, retrench territorial ideas of nationhood, and create new boundaries between peoples (Tsuda 2003, 221).

Tsuda argues that the experience of the Japanese Brazilians upon return migration to Japan eventually creates a new minority, one that does not have an ethnic homeland but exists
between two others’. The Japanese Brazilians are identifiable as a minority group in both Japan and Brazil. Their reaction has been to identify more strongly with their natal country and with the Brazilian aspects of their identity. Tsuda questions why this has not created a deterritorialized identity, one that does not require a bounded nation-state to root in but grows instead from the shared experience of a mobile population. “Ironically, the most distinctive aspect of a transnational migrant community is not what it has, but what does not have – a consciousness” (Tsuda 2003, 258). Rather than becoming a subversive or counter-hegemonic experience that transcends national identity, ethnic return migration in this case reinforces the importance of the nation-state.

The Japanese Brazilian example speaks in many ways to the situation of the Korean Chinese. Both groups start the migration process as a positive minority in their natal homeland. Both groups have consciously maintained their ethnic culture over the past hundred years, and showed marked economic and educational success as a minority. Their ethnic homelands explicitly value homogeneity in their populations, conceptualized in both racial and cultural terms and enacted through preferential immigration policies. Both groups then receive favored migration opportunities back to their ethnic homeland, based on their supposedly pure ethnicity which will not contaminate the host population, but based also on the need fill the low-skill economic positions that true citizens of the ethnic homeland shun. These ethnic preferences, irrational and deeply held, affect and are affected by local and global economic inequalities and national, international, and ethnic hierarchies of power. Ethnic return migration therefore cannot be understood as an isolated economic process. Any approach to this issue must include
consideration of the historical, cultural, and political context in both the sending and receiving areas.

Korean Chinese return migration too has apparent and unique cultural features that drive and shape it. Social, political, and economic conditions in South Korea had to first create the opportunity for in-migration. While the South Korean population has long touted their homogeneity as a source of internal stability, in the last ten years the foreign population residing there has increased dramatically. This has initiated a public debate about the value or desirability of multiculturalism. Like Japan, a growing middle class unwilling to perform unskilled labor prodded the South Korean government to liberalize its policy towards foreign workers. However, unlike Japan, South Korea was simultaneously motivated by a national gender-ratio imbalance that left almost two generations of South Korean men with limited and increasingly competitive chances for marriage or reproduction. This gender-ratio imbalance, as a precondition for Korean Chinese marriage migration, itself reflects the complex interaction between culture, politics, and economics, as it appears to result chiefly from the high costs associated with raising a successful child in South Korea, combined with a traditional preference for boys. Absent these distinctive demographic and economic conditions, it is unclear whether the Korean Chinese would have been granted preferential work visas in South Korea.

The initial placement of the Korean Chinese within China also created a population willing and able to out-migrate. The linguistic isolation of the Korean Chinese, as well as their limited social and economic ties to other areas of China, left them at a disadvantage in the post-reform era. Chinese minority policy had encouraged them to preserve their Korean cultural identity; while few of the Korean Chinese can actually trace their ancestral roots to South Korea (most come from regions in present-day North Korea) they nonetheless retained a belief that they
were *Koreans* in China. Through daily reenactment of this Korean identity in language, food, work and family habits, the Korean Chinese constructed an emotional rapport with South Korea that did not exist with other potential migratory destinations. Their ability to retain this identity is not itself a natural fact. To understand how the Korean Chinese remained Korean within China, a more thorough discussion of their history and interactions with the Chinese state is necessary.
CHAPTER 2:

Chinese Minority Policy and Ethnic Nationalism

2.1 Background of the Korean Chinese in Northeast China

The Korean Chinese have developed their present identity within the geographic and political bounds of the People’s Republic of China. This history itself is not isolated from the larger history of China, from the experiences of other minorities therein, or from developments in the larger northeast Asian region. Therefore the social, political, and economic situation of the Korean Chinese prior to the beginning of migration in 1992 sets the stage for out-migration. This situation must be understood as the result of 100 years of change in northeast Asia, changes which have given rise to the political divisions dominating the region today.

The area that comprises present-day Jilin Province in Northeast China was in 1850 a peripheral region held weakly by the Qing Dynasty. The Korean peninsula, then under Chosun rule, experienced a series of droughts and famines through the mid- to late-1800s which prompted many Korean rice farmers to seek cropland elsewhere. The area directly north of the Korean peninsula was largely unpopulated, and many Koreans settled there despite an official Qing ban on immigration (J.Y. Lee 2002, 119). By the 1860s, an estimated 77,000 Koreans from the northeastern Korean peninsula were residing north of the Tumen and Yalu rivers, on Chinese territory (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005, 83). This economically-motivated migration continued through 1900. In 1905 though, with the Japanese encroaching on Korean territory, political refugees began to flee north. When Korea became a full colony of Japan in 1910, the influx of refugees increased dramatically. The immigrating Koreans were a mixture of political
refugees and dispossessed farmers who migrated voluntarily to escape the Japanese. By 1920, the Korean population was an estimated 298,900 (J.Y. Lee 2002, 119).

The situation changed again in 1931, when Japan pushed north of the Korean Peninsula and established the semi-independent state of Manchukuo in what is now Northeast China. Given the vast terrain and sparse population, the Japanese initially had trouble asserting any degree of real control. They attempted to redress this by forcing large numbers of Korean “settlers” to relocate to distant parts of Manchukuo, where they lived in enclosed “villages” from which they could not leave. This practice ended after 1942, when labor shortages in Japan inspired the deportation of Koreans to Japan instead. Still, Jeanyoung Lee (2002, 120) estimates that by 1945 the permanent Korean population in northeast stood at 2,163,514, having grown rapidly due to this forced resettlement program. This number is contradicted by Si Joong Kim (2003) who puts the number closer to 1.7 million. Both agree though that the Korean population in northeastern China more than doubled under Japanese rule.

The early history of Koreans in northeastern China brings up several relevant points. First, and most importantly, the Koreans immigrated into China mostly within living history. Unlike most other minorities in China, they were not conquered by the Chinese. Even those Koreans brought to China by force could not fault the Chinese for this, and also had the option at the end of the Second World War to return to Korea. This element of choice does much to explain the good relations between the Korean minority and the Chinese. Additionally though, most Korean immigrants went to China in search of refuge. Driven by crop failure, dispossessed of their land and rights, sometimes deported by force, the Korean communities in present-day Jilin Province moved or remained there because it proved a better residence than Korea.
Northeast China additionally served as the political base for the Korean resistance movement and the related Korean Communist Party during the Japanese occupation (Jian 1994). Many Korean political refugees in China during colonial times chose to join the movement against the Japanese, which was organized primarily by the communist group. Once the Japanese moved north of the Tumen River and into China proper, this group joined the People’s Liberation Army (the Chinese Communist army, at that time allied with the Chinese Nationalists and fighting against the Japanese). Kim Il-sung was one of these early organizers; his military leadership positioned him to transition quickly into a political role at the end of the war. Indeed, the new government of North Korea consisted almost entirely of the core military leaders from the Korean resistance, who had worked and fought alongside the Chinese communists during the Second World War.

World War II ended in northeast China with the arrival of the Soviet Army in August 1945. The Soviets remained in control of the region until the following May, giving the Chinese Communists time to regroup in the area. The Soviets expelled all Japanese settlers in the region, thereby opening up land for Korean farmers. Most of the Koreans who migrated (or were forced to migrate) during the war chose to remain and were allowed to do so (J.Y. Lee 2002). The treaty ending the war was actually signed by the Chinese Nationalists, allied at that time with the Chinese Communists. But the war against the Japanese in Manchuria had been fought primarily by Soviet Union troops, so the Japanese surrender left the Soviet Union in control of much of Northeast China. The Soviet departure left the Communists in charge; the Communists’ aggressive guerrilla tactics against the Japanese during the war in the Northeast also gave them a base of popular support. With civil war between the Nationalists and Communists resuming in 1946, the Nationalists began to push heavily into the northeast. In a reversal of the WWII
situation, the Chinese Communists fled into North Korea and based their operations there, aided by the communist North Korean government.

This arrangement had huge benefits for the ethnic Koreans in China after the Communists’ eventual triumph in 1949. The new government viewed the Korean minority as loyal and trustworthy members of the communist movement. They were recognized as one of China’s *minzu*, or component nationalities, and awarded limited self-government in their own autonomous prefecture, Yanbian, in 1952. Designation as a minority *minzu* is more than merely a formality; it entitles a group to privileges within the Chinese state, such as lower admission standards for universities, exemption from some birth control policies, and preferential hiring in government positions. Thus the wartime alliance between the Chinese and Korean communists paid dividends far beyond the war itself.

One additional effect of this has been the ongoing association between the Korean Chinese and North Korea. Conditions of life for the Korean Chinese have varied with the diplomatic relationship between China and North Korea. The Chinese army fighting in the Korean War included over 60,000 Korean Chinese soldiers (Connor 2009, 45). A fairly open border until the 1960s meant that Korean Chinese with family ties in North Korea could exchange visits regularly (Lankov 2004). During this time the Korean Chinese enjoyed marked economic success, with standards of living and educational levels higher than even the Han (Colin 2003). Unfortunately, with the political break between the Soviet Union and China in 1959, the geographic location of the Korean Chinese and the Yanbian prefecture became an area of suspicion, with fortified borders and an increased military presence. This situation escalated

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8 Of the total Korean Chinese population of 2 million, the 1990 census revealed that 62% of them live in Jilin Province, and 43% specifically within Jilin’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. An additional 24% live in Heilongjiang Province and 12% live in Liaoning Province; only 3% live outside of the three Northeast provinces (Si Joong Kim 2003, 105)
further after 1967, when the Korean Chinese became targets during the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong’s nephew Mao Yuanxin personally oversaw the imposition of martial law in Yanbian at this time, and assimilationist policies sought to eradicate the Korean language and cultural practices from the area (Colin 2003, footnote 13). Many Korean Chinese fled to North Korea in this period, prompting the Chinese government to close the border entirely.

Overt persecution of Koreans in the Yanbian area continued until 1978. Tensions remained high for another five years, until Deng Xiaoping personally visited the Yanbian area in 1983 and called for a “swift and improved building up of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture” (Colin 2003, quoting Li Delong 1991). This translated into a revival of political autonomy and a concerted effort to bring economic development to the area. While the Yanbian area had been among the most successful agricultural regions and produced a moderately high standard of living prior to the Cultural Revolution, by the end of the 1970s this had stagnated. In the early 1980s especially, coastal China’s urban economy was exploding and the Korean-inhabited areas remained primarily agricultural. A sense of relative poverty, combined with resentment over Cultural Revolution grievances, resulted in previously rare conflicts between Korean Chinese and Han. Concern for the stability of the border region then undoubtedly motivated Deng’s visit. The result of that visit was an increase in industrial production in the area between 1980 and 1990, especially the launch of the Tumen River Development Project.

Yanbian’s geographic position leaves it cut off from the sea by about 15 km, after an 1860 treaty transferred control of the coastal area to Russia. The Yanbianese city of Hunchun then sits at the confluence of Russia, China, and North Korea, with the Tumen River serving as Yanbian’s border to the south. In light of Yanbian’s continuing dependence on agriculture

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9 Ethnic Koreans were residing in this area at the time of the transfer; their experience is examined in more detail shortly.
through the 1980s, the Chinese government in 1990 proposed an infrastructure development project in the Tumen River area to be funded and administered by the United Nations Development Programme (Davies, 68). A new port city built on Russian land would “channel cargo not only from China, Russia, and Mongolia to Japan and South Korea, but also from Japan and South Korea to Siberia, and from there to Europe via the trans-Siberian railway” (Freeman 2010, 141). Unfortunately, the project foundered on political instability and regime change in both Russia and North Korea. Scaled back in 1996 to more modest (and vague) goal of “regional development,” the Tumen River Project was and remains the cornerstone of the central government’s economic hopes for Yanbian (Freeman 2010).

As modest gains were made economically in Yanbian during the 1980s and 90s, the relationship with South Korea began to warm. Relations with North Korea had cooled throughout the 1970s and 80s, as North Korea threw its lot in with the Soviet Union; the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 sent North Korea’s economy into freefall (M. Connor 2009, 95). Ironically, this further chilled its relationship with China. Famine through the 1990s left perhaps over 1 million North Koreans dead of starvation (Goodkind and West 2001)\(^{10}\) and raised the possibility of an exodus of hungry refugees in Northeast China. The Chinese government had no desire to deal with a humanitarian crisis like this, and North Korea sought to hide the humiliating spectacle of its starving population (Scobell 2004). It thus suited both governments to strictly enforce the closed border, leaving the Yanbian Koreans completely cut off from North Korea. In this same timeframe, the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics highlighted the economic success of South Korea and brought a new awareness of their South Korean connection to Yanbian. When

\(^{10}\) Goodkind and West address the uncertainty surrounding famine-related mortality rates; they survey the various reports on the death toll, which range from 200,000 up to 3 million, and eventually conclude that 1 million is a likely and reasonable estimate.
China thus established official diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, the pump was primed for a rush of inter-Korean exchange.

2.2 Experience of Koreans in Soviet States

This background on the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and population takes for granted the continuation of the Koreans as a distinguishable minority in China. However, it is worth questioning why this is so. Why should they have maintained their language, traditional food and clothing styles, kinship patterns and social structures for 100 years while living within the political boundaries of another culture? Minority assimilation has been a goal and reality for various peoples and states; this can be seen even within the global Korean population. Large Korean minorities in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are now distinguishable only by phenotype and historical claim; Korean cultural practices and language have been replaced by local habits. In comparing the experiences of the Korean minority in Russia and the former Soviet states with those of the Korean Chinese, it is clear that the preservation of Korean culture is not inevitable.

Roughly 100 Korean families were already living in the territory that China ceded to Russia in 1860. As in the case of China, famine and drought had pushed more Koreans north into this land throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, increasing the population to 8,400 by 1870 (J.Y. Lee 2006, 3). Japanese incursions motivated further migration in the early twentieth century. Estimates put the Korean population in eastern Russia at 250,000 by the 1920s (Songmoo Kho 1987, quoted in J.Y. Lee 2002, 120). Again similar to the Korean experience in China, many Koreans in Soviet Russia joined the Bolsheviks to fight against the Japanese, earning them a favorable reputation within the Soviet Union. Koreans were quickly
allowed to become Soviet citizens, and Korean lands were converted to collective farms. Up to one-third had already adopted Russified names and joined the Orthodox Church by 1917, yet pressure increased on the Koreans to further assimilate. Stalin especially felt that minority populations could not be trusted in border regions. This culminated in the 1930s with forced deportations to Central Asian Soviet states. The Korean population of Central Asia in 1939 then was 182,300; at the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, this number had reached 438,650 (J.Y. Lee 2002, 121). As of 1999, the ethnically Korean populations of Russia and the former Soviet Central Asian states totaled over 470,000 (J.Y. Lee 2006, 5). The former Soviet Koreans remain physically distinguishable in Central Asia and Russia; however, they do not speak the Korean language or wear Korean clothing even at ceremonial gatherings, have adopted Russian patronymic names, and have not sought political representation for themselves as a group (J.Y. Lee 2006). Compared to the Korean Chinese, former Soviet Koreans have assimilated considerably.

2.3 Chinese Minority Policy

The difference grows from the Chinese government’s different approach to minorities. China currently divides its population into 56 minzu. The largest minzu is the Han, with over 90% of China’s total population (S.J. Kim, 2003). Non-Han groups were defined and classified by the Chinese government through the 1950s and early 60s using a Stalinist model of ethnic identification. Prior to that though, ethnic identities and majority/minority divisions in China were generally vaguer and more flexible. As far back as the fourth century, “raw” minority groups could be “cooked” by Chinese culture and become accepted as Chinese themselves (Ebrey 1996). Harrell (1995) discusses this approach as China’s first civilizing project, closely
connected to Confucianism. Minority groups, “inferior but potentially educable” (14) had the opportunity to learn and accept Confucian values and thereby become Chinese regardless of ethnic origin. This cultural model of membership in the Chinese nation leaves open for debate the degree of change required by minority peoples. Indeed, while it was rhetorically applied to anyone, the actual cases of peoples unquestionably “becoming” Chinese are rare. This became especially apparent after the CCP began their minzu classification project and successfully rediscovered the many differences that marked minorities apart.

Brown (1996) addresses this issue and brings some clarity by differentiating between acculturation and assimilation. Sinicization, the change that brought a group into the Chinese people, refers to a process of acculturation in which full assimilation and self-identification as Chinese was not necessary. This distinction allows for the recognizable shift in behavior and identification that minorities underwent, without pretending that all groups were (or even could be) completely subsumed within the category of “Chinese.” Minority groups in contact with the Han majority did adopt practices, beliefs, and knowledge from the Han, while the local Han in many cases took on practices of local peoples. While hypothetically local behavior and beliefs could co-exist with the “proper” Confucian values, in most cases clear divisions remained. Brown notes that some Han officials actually sought to prevent prompt minority assimilation and preserve local cultures, to minimize conflict between Han settlers and long-time residents, predicting that too rapid a rate of change could create a backlash among local populations.

Brown suggests intermarriage with Han Chinese was the “short route” to identity change; to avert this too-rapid change, Aborigine Taiwanese were prohibited from intermarrying. In other cases though, cross-cultural marriages were employed strategically by the Han as a tool for maintaining alliances. Bulag (2002) raises the issue of heqin, or peace marriages, in which Han
Chinese women were given as brides to Inner Asian leaders. Such marriages were on the one hand an act of submission by the Han, who, by using women’s bodies as payments for peace, represented themselves as feminine. On the other hand, within the Han Chinese territory these marriages were presented as a type of genetic conquest of the Mongol barbarian hordes, who would eventually join the Han in the great Chinese motherland. It was these Han representations that held salience in China, and with the consolidation of Han power through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was these discourses that mattered.

Indeed, in many cases Han representations of minorities mattered more than the reality of minority existence (Crossley 2006). Regardless of a group’s held memories or current practices, Han discourses were typically accepted by those (Han) in power and minority groups had to work within the terms of those discourses. The impact of accepting the Han definition was often a complete change in a non-Han group’s identity. This comes out strongly in Rigger’s 1995 discussion of Manchu ethnicity. The Manchu people did not conceive of themselves as a cohesive group until after their contact with the Chinese in Chinese territory and their externally-imposed definition by the Chinese. The Manchu identity is thus a Chinese identity; that it is also a minority and non-Han identity does not negate its native character. It appeared only through sharing space with the contrasting Han majority, through Han representations.

The lasting impacts of Han representations were keenly felt by minorities through the revolutionary period, as well. As the Japanese attempted to win minority sympathy during WWII, Chinese Communists and Nationalists both made appeals to the various ethnicities in contested regions (W. Connor 1984). The Chinese Communist Party especially, driven into the borderlands of southwest China and relying largely on the kindness of minority communities during the Long March (1934 – 36), found good reason to engage with minority histories.
Throughout the ensuing civil war the Communists vehemently denounced the legacy of Han oppression in minority areas and called for autonomy for China’s ethnic minorities. After the Communist triumph though, they realized that full independence for China’s non-Han inhabitants would dismember much of China’s territory. The Communists instead offered *cultural* autonomy within sovereign Chinese territory. This was a significant shift for two reasons. First, it explicitly sought to end minority sinicization. Second, and related, it was a fundamental change in the definition of the Chinese state.

Previously, peoples of all lineages could become Chinese through acculturation. In the face of Western colonialism and a new discourse of territorially-bounded nation-states though, China’s rulers could no longer rely on weakly-held borderlands to remain within Chinese control. The rise of nation-states necessitated firm borders. This shift then, from an empire surrounded by borderlands to a nation as a bordered land (Leibold 2007), required China to become not a cultural concept but a territorial entity.

Within this new territorially-defined China then, controlling the representation of minorities became even more important. For Chinese Communists to succeed in this redefinition, they had to convince a large and disparate group of people that, by virtue of their existing within Chinese space, they were unquestionably Chinese. Kaup (2000) explicates how this process played out among the Zhuang. The Zhuang are far and away China’s largest ethnic minority, with over 16 million members. They consist largely of scattered groups in Guangxi and Yunnan, most of whom did not consider themselves Zhuang prior to their official *minzu* classification as such. The area currently designated as Zhuang was previously a mix of scattered communities, in which most villages had their own ethnic identity and were largely unaware of links with neighboring groups. Kaup attributes this fragmentation to “the isolating mountainous terrain,
poor infrastructure, self-sufficient economies, and lack of a unified religious or political
leadership” (47). The new communist government’s decision to classify them as one minzu did
not reflect a unified ethnic reality but political necessity. In order to consolidate political control
over the region, it was expedient to label the area as one autonomous minority region and
convince the many minorities there that they one shared history within the greater Chinese state
– and further, a stake in the success of Guangxi as an autonomous minority region. To build that
history, the central government commissioned the recording of local folktales and customs and
ethnographic studies of daily Zhuang life. Educational initiatives succeeded in creating a
Zhuang elite, capable of running the local government. Ironically perhaps, the Zhuang party
elite has since begun making demands on the central government for further minzu privileges to
compensate for their oppression as a minority.

This example of an ethnic group arising in response to their creation as a category is
echoed in many other instances. Wu (1990) chronicles the lumping of various scattered groups
into the minzu category of Bai. He further observes how the benefits of minority minzu status led
the Bai to self-consciously reject practices that might be too Chinese, instead embracing
previously-neglected markers of Bai identity such as “ancestral worship, belief in geomancy,
[and] the ‘Bai’ house style” (9). The definitions given by the Chinese state clearly influenced the
understanding and performance of ethnic identity among the minorities. This was apparent, and
did not trouble the Chinese officials and scholars involved in the minzu identification project.
They seem to have faith in their superior ability to understand the true position of the minorities.
Fei Xiaotong (1981), himself an anthropologist assisting in the CCP’s minzu classification
system, reflects this belief in his description of the Chuanqing and Daur classification decisions.

The Chuanqing, despite many cultural differences, were ultimately classified as Han
people due to locally-forgotten common descent (thus again contradicting the cultural model of membership in the Chinese nation). The Daur, on the other hand, received a separate minzu category because of their long independent existence, despite the Daur’s own opinion that they still belonged to the Mongol people. Fei demonstrates the government’s position that official scientific inquiry can enlighten people as to their true position within the Chinese state; discussing the ultimate decision on Daur classification, he writes “[t]he conclusions provided them with a correct understanding of their position and met with their general approval” (71).

Minzu classification was not always met with general approval though. Cheung (1996) presents the case of the Ge, a self-proclaimed ethnic group in southeastern Guizhou, who have worked to gain official recognition as a minzu since 1956. During the initial investigation of the Ge’s claims, state officials reached an inconclusive decision and tentatively classified them as a sub-group of the Miao. The Ge have steadily resisted this classification. As part of their long-term response, the Ge in the 1980s produced a 550-page reassessment challenging their classification; this was denied, but did provide a rallying point for the Ge. Cheung highlights how group identities such as the Ge gain legitimacy through self-representation in narratives, or, in this case, are denied legitimacy because they are not permitted to represent themselves. Their massive research project dismissed, the Ge began a campaign of civil disobedience, “defied their obligation to procure citizenship cards, withheld their grain tax, and pledged to defy birth-control and military subscription policies” (253). Cheung interprets both the massive report and the resulting protests as attempts at self-representation, in defiance of their treatment as objects of state discourse. Yet he simultaneously notes how the insult of Miao classification was felt primarily by Ge elites, who better knew the implications of the classification system and who stood to lose their positions as leaders of a distinct group. I further add that this case
demonstrates how minorities – or would-be minorities – have accepted the legitimacy of the minzu classification system imposed on them by the Communist Party, and in doing so have strengthened its power over them.

*Minzu* policy was thus clearly driven by the CCP’s desire for political centralization. Using historical and ethnographic narratives to re-present minority groups to themselves, the new storylines emphasized that Chinese citizenship was not only natural but inevitable. That this same processes occurred among the Korean minority is thus unsurprising. Min-Dong Paul Lee (2005) traces the evolution of historical narratives of the Korean Chinese, finding contradictory themes in versions published by the central government and by the Korean Chinese themselves. The clearest differences lay in origin of the Koreans in China, and in the role the Korean minority played during the Japanese occupation of the 1930s and 40s. Regarding the origin of the Korean minority, the official narrative appearing in the 1995 *Dictionary of the History of China’s Minorities* states that the Korean Chinese (Chaoxianzu) are a separate people from the Koreans of the Korean Peninsula, and that the Korean Chinese in fact originated in their currently-occupied area in the Northeast, then migrated back across the Yalu and Tumen rivers onto the Korean peninsula, only to return again in the nineteenth century (M.D.P. Lee 2005, 103). This in effect denies any lines of descent or blood linkages to either North or South Korea and roots the Korean Chinese primordially in China.

Few Korean Chinese have taken issue with this claim, at least publicly; much more controversy surrounds the history of the revolutionary and civil war eras. Official narratives stress that “[a]lthough Koreans were active participants of the anti-imperialist and anti-Japanese struggles, the ultimate victory was accomplished only through the guidance of the CCP” (M.D.P. Lee 2005, 107). Koreans are relegated to mere pawns of the Chinese Communists. Korean
Chinese scholars have denied this interpretation, arguing instead that the Koreans had an active and able resistance movement that joined and invigorated the small and weak branch of the CCP existing in the northeast in the early 1930s. This insistence itself though shows an acceptance of the Korean Chinese positioning as properly within China; Korean Chinese historians argue not for a separate history, but for a more prominent Korean Chinese role in the origin myth of the Chinese state. Complicating the debate is the controversial Minsaengdan massacre, in which Korean Chinese scholars claim that Chinese Communist leaders executed more than 1,000 Korean Communists between 1932 and 1935, to consolidate control of the Korean population for Han Chinese cadres. According to Lee, the Korean Chinese were in fact at that time so powerful within the resistance movement that the Han felt threatened to the point of murderous action (M.D.P. Lee 2005, 110). This incident has never appeared in official histories of the area, and has only been discussed in Korean Chinese publications since the late 1980s.

Lee’s overarching purpose is to highlight how ethnic identity is constructed and contested through historical narratives. Following Stevan Harrell (1995), he argues that “[t]he question, then, is not whether national identities change, but how they are constructed and manipulated” and that “the main channel through which national identity is actively contended and negotiated is through historical narratives” (101). Lee does not address diverse motives for why groups should choose to construct and manipulate national identities. In cases such as the Ge, minority national identity has concrete material benefits at stake, and the object of the contestation is thus clear. The Korean minzu is a different situation. Korean Chinese were granted their own minzu, along with their own administrative region, as early as 1952 and with no agitation or pressing on their part. There have been no calls for Yanbian independence; Korean Chinese are better-off economically than most of China’s inhabitants; they continue to show higher rates of literacy and
tertiary education than their Han counterparts. They appear to be a true model minority. If anything, this discussion has sought to show that no such appearance is a natural, given, or pre-ordained fact. Identities need maintaining; the central government seeks to maintain the Korean Chinese identity as a docile model minority. While Chinese minority policy was initially designed to incorporate restive and potentially independent groups into the Chinese state, the Korean Chinese were included as a more preventative strategy.

What they sought to prevent was the rise of a politically-minded ethnic nationalism in a sensitive border area. Ethnic identity, already briefly questioned, is clearly a subjective belief rather than an objective fact. The difference between ethnic identity and national identity, when national identity is understood as something other than political state-based citizenship, is ambiguous. Brubaker (2009) discusses the problems of their overlapping meanings, arguing that “distinctions can be drawn on a number of dimensions, but these do not map neatly onto conventional distinctions between race, ethnicity, and nation” (26). Membership in the ethnic group and national group can rely on patterns of behavior, claims of descent, territorial or social boundaries, economic practices, historical claims, and on. Brubaker suggests that attempting to clearly define and separate ethnicity from nationhood is futile, and a better project would be examining how the use of the terms has evolved over time and across space. Crossley (2006) addresses this issue similarly, concluding that ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic’ are usually applied to distinguish a non-dominant group. Hence ethnic nationalism is the nationalism of the minority; unqualified nationalism belongs to the majority nation within a state.

The Chinese state’s approach to nationalism seeks to incorporate multiple understandings of ethnicity and nationhood and eventually subsume them within a larger idea of loyalty to the state. Leibold (2007) traces how historical narratives sought to establish a common ancestry
between Han and minority groups. Intermarriage became a frequent theme in these narratives, similar to the heqin peace marriages discussed by Bulag (2002). Official histories constructed a vast and geographically-dispersed family tree that incorporated all of China’s ethnic groups. Cultural diversity was acknowledged, but the various peoples of China were bound together through involuntary and immutable genetic legacy. Thus descent-based understandings of group membership were fitted to the geographically-defined Chinese state, reinforcing and naturalizing its cohesion.

2.4 Korean Chinese as a minority minzu

The Korean Chinese case is here again somewhat different. Korean migration into the area occurred only within the last 150 years, within two or three generations of the present population. The Korean Chinese retain clear and well-documented memories of this migration, tied up as it is with the traumatic experiences of war and famine. Most Korean Chinese still have distant family in North Korea, and thanks to carefully preserved family records can prove that they have no Han blood (Colin 2003). Hence their official history must go even further back to account for their origin on Chinese soil, their migration to the Korean peninsula and their eventual return migration north (M.D.P. Lee 2005). I have found little discussion of this narrative in academic work on the Korean Chinese; most accepts that the Korean Chinese belong to the same family tree as the North and South Koreans, and that they moved into Chinese territory between 1850 and 1930 (J.Y. Lee 2002, S. J. Kim 2003, Colin 2003, Chang 2003). Despite the weakness of the Chinese state’s historical claim on the Korean Chinese though, there has been no significant political unrest among the Korean Chinese disputing the state’s authority. This is likely because negative effects of coming under Chinese state authority have been
minimal for the Korean Chinese minority; unlike other minority minzu, the Korean Chinese were not suddenly denied political authority or power that they had previously enjoyed. Instead, because of the uncertain and menacing circumstances that brought the Korean minority under Chinese authority, the Korean Chinese minority early on accepted Chinese state rule as a not unfair price to pay for security and stability.

This is emphatically not to say that the Korean Chinese minority has acquiesced to Han Chinese cultural authority. As Min-Dong Paul Lee (2005) emphasizes, ethnic assimilation remains the anathema of the Korean Chinese elite (105). In my own interviews conducted among Korean Chinese labor migrants in the Seoul area during the summer of 2010, several informants claimed that the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture remained the most purely Korean space in the world (interviews at Multicultural Village Center, July 2010). In separate interviews, four different Yanbian Koreans each claimed that Korean culture in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) had been corrupted over the last sixty years by materialism and consumer culture, mostly introduced through Westernization. The Korean culture of the Yanbian area remained unaffected by external influences and thus uncorrupted. Ironically though, three South Koreans interviewed together about their government-sponsored work with the Korean Chinese all complained that Yanbian Koreans had not evolved with the times and were 50 to 70 years behind South Korea in terms of development (interview, July 29, 2010).

These conflicting ideas of how to properly characterize Korean culture, at what point it can be fixed and defined, reflect decades of ideological indoctrination on both sides and stark differences in degrees of power and agency. Unnoticed in isolation, these differences became readily apparent after diplomatic ties between China and South Korea were established in 1992 and transnational migration began. While these understandings could be read as successful tales

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11 All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
of indoctrination by the Chinese and South Korean states, it is more productive to approach the experience of migration from the overarching goal of state-building on the part of both sides. In the next chapter, I will address how both states sought to employ Korean Chinese labor migrants as human capital that ultimately ‘belonged’ to their respective governments.
CHAPTER 3:
Korean Chinese Labor Migration into South Korea

3.1 Labor Migration in Northeast Asia

Labor migration is a common practice in most of the world, with globalizing technologies dispersing migrants ever farther and faster. But its prevalence should not be mistaken for ease. When people leave their home communities for years at a time, economic, social, political, and cultural systems are affected in both sending and receiving areas. Migration entails a range of decisions and possibilities, is influenced by local conditions and global hierarchies, and itself can reinforce, alter, or push back against the conditions surrounding it. As mentioned in the first chapter, East Asian governments have tended to treat migration and especially ethnic return migration as an opportunity for co-ethnics to contribute to the state; the people become sources of human capital contributing to both the sending and receiving areas (Skrentny et al 2009). This is especially true in the Korean Chinese case. Remittances have been providing important sources of revenue for Yanbian locals since migration to South Korea began in the early 1990s, but the local government was slow to recognize this. The South Korean government, by contrast, made explicit from the beginning that they viewed the Korean Chinese migrants as a resource for the South Korean state. This was buttressed by a legal system established specifically to receive co-ethnic labor migrants. The Korean Chinese initially accepted the status assigned to them by both the Chinese and South Korean governments, as sources of remittances and labor respectively. Other expectations or desires on their part seemed overshadowed by the opportunity to earn wages many times higher than available at home.
But over the two decades since labor migration began, Korean Chinese have begun to demand more than simple monetary compensation for the disruptions they endure to migrate. This new sense of entitlement is closely tied up with an emerging identity apart from the South Koreans, by which the Korean Chinese no longer view themselves as distant ‘country cousins’ but as their own separate people deserving of rights and treatment equal to any other person or any other Korean, regardless of geographic origin.

China’s reform period began in earnest in the 1980s, with changes in the *hukou* (household registration) system. These reforms allowed rural people to migrate within China, without official pre-approval, for the first time since 1958. An estimated 20% of China’s rural workforce had thus migrated to cities by 2003, seeking non-agricultural work and a higher standard of living (Zhan 2005, 14). However, minority ethnic groups to a large extent did not participate in this migration (Zhan 2005, 20).

The Korean minority has shown lower rates of out-migration than the Han Chinese in China overall, but higher than most other ethnic minority groups. Rather, rural-to-urban migration has appeared within Northeast China, with rural Koreans giving up agricultural livelihoods for low-skilled work in small local towns and cities. This is due in part to the benefits of the local *hukou* system, but also to cultural and linguistic traditions that disenfranchise them within the larger Chinese state (Chang 2003, 40). But as Si Joong Kim documents, a significant number of Korean Chinese have found a niche in working for South Korean companies in Chinese cities; “that is, ethnic Korean people have become employees of enterprises with Korean investment or of branch offices of Korean companies in China, as
translators, regular workers, or occasionally business partners” (S.J. Kim 2003, 117). Thus rural-to-urban migration within China has provided some benefits to the Korean minority.\(^\text{12}\)

Compared to internal migration though, the opportunity to migrate to South Korea has proven a much larger draw for the Korean Chinese. After China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992, South Korea gradually developed a special immigration policy for the ethnic Korean Chinese (N.H.J. Kim 2008). This policy initially allowed Korean Chinese to come to South Korea as “industrial trainees” and remain for three years with guaranteed employment. The industrial trainee program created a large pool of cheap labor available to South Korean employers, with the added benefits that the immigrants spoke Korean yet remained unprotected by South Korean labor laws. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this resulted in “intense exploitation, discrimination, and abuse” for the migrants (Lim 2010, 55). Nonetheless, this opportunity drew as many as 250,000 Korean Chinese laborers by 2006 (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 152).

### 3.2 South Korean immigration policy development

The South Korean immigration policy was designed around the idea of transnational ethnicity. South Korea was not an immigrant-receiving nation until the late 1980s, when democratic reforms allowed for greater political stability and rapid economic development at home. Nora Hui-Jung Kim (2008) identifies three stages of development in South Korean immigration policy. The first stage, running roughly from 1987 to 1997, was characterized by the lack of a cohesive national immigration policy. Instead, the government allowed South Korean businesses to ‘sponsor’ inexpensive foreign workers as needed. This evolved by 1992 into the industrial trainee system (ITS). Kim emphasizes that “ITS was not governmental policy, \(^{\text{12}}\) A more detailed discussion of the Korean migratory experience within China follows later in the chapter.
but a recruitment scheme managed by a private interest group representing economic liberals, the Korean Federation of Small and Medium Businesses” (586). Importantly, because the foreign workers were considered “trainees” rather than immigrants, they had no legal protection for their labor rights. Further, under ITS there was no stated preference for ethnic Koreans. South Korean businesses turned voluntarily to ethnic Koreans in China, primarily because of the shared language and prejudice against non-Koreans.

The second stage of South Korean immigration policy began in 1997 during the Asian financial crisis. South Korean industry was hard-hit and production slowed, decreasing the need for factory labor. In search of foreign investment and high-skilled workers to reinvigorate the economy, the South Korean business lobby promoted the passage of the Overseas Koreans Act. This act granted special rights and privileges to anyone who had ever been a Korean citizen and their descendents, essentially granting them full citizenship barring voting rights. However, the definition of a Korean citizen was limited to citizenship within the Republic of Korea – a state that has only existed since 1948. Koreans who left before 1948, including the entire Korean Chinese population, were excluded from the legal Korean nation in an attempt to prevent a flood of unskilled laborers from entering the country (N.H.J. Kim 2008, 588).

Yet the new policies did not abolish the industrial trainee system, leaving Korean Chinese available if and when the South Korean economy should recover and demand cheap labor again. This prompted some reaction from labor rights groups and migrant advocacy organizations. Eventually, with Supreme Court intervention and extensive negotiations between liberal and conservative politicians, immigration policy was again overhauled in 2003. The industrial trainee program was gradually abolished by 2007 and replaced by a more liberal “employment permit system” which granted basic labor rights to all foreign workers. Ironically perhaps, given
its stated intention of bringing South Korean immigration law in line with international human rights standards, this new system enshrined ethnic preference even more solidly than before. Under the new regulations, “Special Work Permits” and a new type of visa (H-2) became available to the Korean Chinese (N.H.J. Kim 2008, 591). However, the employment permit system created even more generous visas and work permits for ethnic Korean citizens of Japan and the U.S., thereby angering many Korean Chinese.

Overtly different treatment for ethnic Koreans of various citizenships has two broader implications for the global Korean population. It shows firstly that the South Korean state continues to employ descent-based understandings of Korean identity; far from the liberal ideal of equality for all, Korean heritage continues to grant special privileges in the eyes of the state. Secondly though, it reveals the position of power that the South Korean state holds with respect to Korean peoples abroad. The local Yanbian government has no ethnic immigration policy, and if it did, it would be unlikely to affect many Koreans from abroad. It is instead South Korea, with a higher economic position in the global hierarchy, which has the power to order and rank degrees of global Koreans.

3.3 Chinese state interventions

The South Korean government has thus selectively deployed definitions of the Korean nation to either bring in or exclude the Korean Chinese population as the South Korean economy requires. The Chinese government too has attempted to employ the Korean aspects of the Korean Chinese population for their political and economic ends. Initially hesitant about the political repercussions of trans-national migration, early migrants out the Yanbian area were screened carefully. There was some concern about their loyalties to China; the Chinese
government even formally protested an early South Korean suggestion to offer Korean Chinese people permanent resident status (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 153). However, no political agitation has been reported. On the contrary, labor migration to South Korea has had the doubly-beneficial impacts (from the Chinese state’s perspective) of strengthening a geographically Chinese understanding of the Korean Chinese identity while also bringing in unprecedented cash flows.

The flow of Korean Chinese migrants has been channeled to South Korea by the shared sense of Koreanness. But of course, the motivation for migrating in the first place is the opportunity to earn a much higher return on one’s labor in South Korea than in Yanbian. Ethnic Korean Chinese in South Korea could “earn in one month a sum equivalent to several years’ average income in Yanbian” (Luovo 2009, 432). Wang Bae Kim (2004) reports that Korean Chinese migrants in South Korea earn on average 1 million won ($800) per month, which is “six or seven times higher than the average income in Yanbian, which is about $110 per month” (326). In 2001, this resulted in remittances sent to Yanbian of over $300 million, more than total income in Yanbian that year of $208 million (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005, 95). By 2007, the Yanbian government reported that remittances had reached one billion U.S. dollars (Luova 2008, 34). As in many other cases, these remittances were spent on consumption. Often though at least part of the remittances were saved for the migrant to use upon return. As Louvna (2009) describes, “many returnee migrants operated small businesses such as restaurants, karaoke bars, or hair-dressing salons, since to do so did not necessarily require a large investment, but very few established a larger business or invested in production” (439).

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13 This suggestion produced a massive backlash within South Korea too, and never made it even as far as a legislative proposal there.
Such astoundingly high levels of remittances can be attributed at least partly to an aggressive Chinese government policy. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the national, provincial, and prefectural governments enacted a series of policies intending to “ensure, by various means, the proper conduct of migrants before, during and after migration…” with the particular goal of “sustain[ing] migrants’ links with their home region in order to ensure a steady flow of remittances to Yanbian” (Luova 2008, 40). These policies included required courses on citizenship and patriotism prior to migration, visits by Chinese government officials to migrants overseas and to their families back home, and assigning certain migrants to carry out “ideological work” among their fellow migrants abroad. Thus the government sought to turn large-scale out-migration into a local development strategy.

The Yanbian government saw development opportunities not only in sending labor to South Korea, but in receiving foreign investment from South Korea and Korean communities in the U.S. and Canada. This was accomplished by playing up the Koreanness of the area. For example, 1992 saw the first-ever Korean Cultural Festival in Yanbian, with over three hundred ethnic Korean businesspeople attending as guests from abroad (Luova 2009, 434). The Yanbian government has also sought to promote tourism to the Mount Baekdu area, not only for its scenic beauty but also for its fabled location as the birthplace of the Korean race.¹⁴ Their efforts have resulted in over 1.7 million domestic Chinese tourists and over 100,000 South Korean tourists annually since 2000 (Greater Tumen Initiative 2011). The Yanbian government has also sought to burnish their Korean cultural credentials by rebuilding several traditional Korean villages and

¹⁴ According to Korean legend, the son of God wanted to live in Korea, and so descended to Mt. Baekdu. There he turned a bear into a woman, they married and their son Tangun established the first Korean kingdom of Joseon. Mt. Baekdu continues to play a huge role in the Korean imagination; in North Korean narratives, Kim Il-Sung defeated the Japanese on the mountain, and his son Kim Jong-II was reportedly born there. Recent volcanic activity on the mountain (frequent tremors since 2002, and a 6.9 magnitude earthquake in February 2011) has created widespread concern about an upcoming eruption, even prompting a meeting of North and South Korean geologists in March (http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/03/30/2011033000422.html).
funding exhibitions on local Korean folk customs (Luovna 2007). These efforts seem to have had resounding success. According to South Korean statistics, Yanbian has received over $6 billion in direct investment from South Korea between 1992 and 2002 (S.J. Kim 2003, 113). The majority of investment coming into Yanbian from sources other than North and South Korea also comes from ethnic Koreans elsewhere (Luovna 2007). The local Korean Chinese government then approaches the global Korean community in the same way as the South Korean government – the people are a resource for the state, rather than the state existing to assist and protect the people.

3.4 Emboldening labor migrants in South Korea

In similar ways then, the South Korean and Chinese governments seek to cash in on the migratory decisions of the Korean Chinese. But both governmental strategies rely on the durability of the Korean Chinese dual identity. Without an active Korean identity, the Korean Chinese could just as well migrate to Chinese cities, denying South Korean businesses the cheap labor they have come to expect. Without a compelling bond to China, these same migrants might settle permanently in South Korea, keeping their remittances and their investment capital for themselves. Through the 1990s these strategies held. But it remained an uncomfortable situation, in which Korean Chinese were constantly reminded of their lower status in the Korean ethnic hierarchy through both legal and illegal discrimination in South Korea. Meanwhile a fledgling foreign labor rights movement began in South Korea, headed up by South and Southeast Asian workers who faced even higher barriers. The Korean Chinese were initially excluded from this movement. But by the early- to mid-2000s, Korean Chinese labor migrants began to identify more strongly with other foreign laborers in South Korea. This led them to re-
conceptualize their own status in South Korea, shifting from being co-ethnics in the motherland to just one more group of foreigners.

Officially-documented unskilled foreign workers in South Korea increased from near-zero in 1987 to around 350,000 in 2002 (W.B. Kim 2004, 321). The majority were Korean Chinese, arriving as part of the industrial trainee system with temporary non-renewable trainee visas and no path to citizenship. They further had no labor rights and were ineligible for the public health, education, or social benefits that extend to South Korean citizens and non-‘trainee’ foreigners in South Korea. This led to widespread labor abuses. Delayed wage payment, extremely long hours, unsafe conditions with no accident insurance, and sudden layoffs without final payment were common complaints (W.B. Kim 2004, 326). Public discourse on these issues began in 1995, when thirteen Nepali migrant workers in South Korea staged a dramatic protest at the symbolic Myeongdong Cathedral in Seoul (N.H.J. Kim 2009, 683; discussed also in Lim 2010, 55).\footnote{Myeongdong Cathedral served as a center for the resistance movement during Japanese occupation, openly defying the Japanese by offering protection to resistance fighters on humanitarian grounds.} This sparked the creating of several South Korean migrant worker advocacy NGOs and introduced a politically liberal discourse of universal rights into the previously economically liberal approach to immigration policy.

The original focus of the migrant labor advocacy movement was on South and Southeast Asian migrants. Easily distinguishable physically and typically less than proficient in the Korean language, they faced much greater discrimination and harassment in all aspects of their daily lives in Korea (Kang 1996). However, this clear demarcation of difference also assisted in bonding them together to push back against South Korean discrimination. The Korean Chinese were not originally part of the labor rights movement, despite their majority share of the total foreign labor population. This can be partly attributed to the legal separation of the Korean
Chinese from other foreign workers, but on a larger scale it demonstrates the early identification of Korean Chinese with the South Korean population and not with the non-Korean workers occupying the same social and economic position. The Korean Chinese workers then remained somewhere between the domestic and the foreign. It was unclear if their interests would be better served through closer alignment with their fellow non-citizen workers or through pushing for full equality as Koreans.

Certainly any attempt to achieve parity with South Koreans – or Korean Americans, or Korean Japanese – would have been hindered by the South Koreans’ rejection of ethnic equality. The South Korean population, especially employers, did not consider the Korean Chinese true co-ethnics. As Seol and Skrentny (2009) report, “Korean citizens do indicate a preference for Joseonjok [Korean Chinese] to other foreigners, but it seems clear that they usually treat them as just that – foreigners – and employers sometimes have negative attitudes towards them that may go beyond what they harbor towards other foreigners” (158). This reflects employers’ appreciation for the linguistic compatibility and relatively low cost of labor that Korean Chinese bring to factory jobs, but also the Korean Chinese’ ability to move more freely in the labor market and thus their higher rates of employment turnover. Surveys beyond the labor sector show similar sentiments among South Koreans; compared to Korean Americans, the Korean Chinese were much less likely to be called dongpo, which literally translates to “Korean citizen abroad” (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 160). Apparently some discrepancies existed between the ethnic-brethren discourse of South Korean policy-makers and the population at large.

The Korean Chinese, who had generally arrived in South Korea understanding themselves to be members of the greater Korean nation, found themselves marginalized by South Koreans and sharing instead the experiences of foreigners. Eventually accepting the status quo,
Korean Chinese workers joined the foreign workers’ labor rights movement by the late 1990s. While not an extremely active or visible element, they lent critical numbers to this push and helped to highlight the widespread nature of human rights abuses experienced by foreign workers in South Korea (Kang 1996). Interestingly then, the South Korean Ministry of Justice took concrete steps in 2003 to ease entry and visa requirements for Korean Chinese – but no other group (Y.W. Lee 2004, 9). This gesture may have been intended to draw the Korean Chinese away from the foreign labor rights movement, but if so was fairly ineffective. Korean Chinese workers continue to swell the ranks of labor protests and pro-union movements in South Korea.

3.5 Impacts on Sending Areas

The Korean Chinese and South Koreans thus continue to negotiate the ways that co-ethnicity can manifest in labor relations. The results of this negotiation are felt far beyond the workplace though, and even beyond the reach of South Korean policy. The economic fortunes of Korean Chinese migrant workers are closely tied to the future of the Korean Chinese population in China. Successful out-migration seems almost antithetical to successful development in Yanbian. And indeed, demographic data shows that the ethnic Korean population in Yanbian is waning, decreasing from a peak population of 860,000 in 1995 to a 2000 population of 842,000 (S.J. Kim 2003, 115). This is the result of three trends in the population: increasing dispersion, declining birthrates, and rapid aging.

Although intra-national migration has not proven an extremely lucrative economic strategy for the Korean Chinese thus far, there is some evidence that this is changing – at least in terms of departure from agricultural areas in Yanbian. Zai Liang and Kerry Dohm (2006) reveal
that when looking only at the Jilin provincial population, the Korean minority has actually shown a higher participation rate in both interprovincial and intra-provincial migration than has the Han population in the area. However, internal migration among the ethnic Koreans has shown a more limited pattern of dispersion than their Han counterparts; rates of interprovincial migration were similar (1.05% for Han and 1.42% for Korean), while Koreans were much more likely to migrate within Jilin province (5.95% of Koreans were intra-provincial migrants, only 2.42% of Han; Liang and Dohm 2006, 9 – 10). This reflects a much lower initial rate of urbanization in the Yanbian area, where many of the internal migrants originated. Further, the majority of Korean interprovincial migrants went to the neighboring provinces of Heilongjiang and Liaoning, both of which have substantial Korean minorities. Han migrants from Jilin were more likely to choose farther-flung Han areas like Beijing.

The higher rates of less geographically diverse migration reflect the benefits of remaining within Korean minority communities. Harris Kim (2003) addresses this phenomenon through the framework of the ethnic enclave economies, specifically looking at Yanbian. His research supports a positive interpretation of ethnically-based economic activity; “statistical results provide evidence that working for a co-ethnic employer in the private sector has non-trivial earning advantages” (H. Kim 2003, 823). This is discussed too by Fang Gao (2009), who explores the role of minority ethnic education in Yanbian. Those students who attended ethnic Korean schools and did not study the Chinese language felt themselves to be at a disadvantage in the larger Chinese economy. Doo-Sub Kim and Jung Min Kim (2005) further reiterate this point, claiming that “the Korean language does not work advantageously to the upward mobility of Koreans in Chinese mainstream society. Koreans are limited in work and promotion as an ethnic minority” (93). Koreans face difficulties in trying to move beyond their ethnic networks,
restricting their internal migration patterns to areas with co-ethnics and thereby reinforcing the closed circuit of minority populations.

Divisions between Han and Korean ethnic groups appear also in their fertility and aging patterns. Interestingly, ethnic Korean Chinese demographic patterns reflect and amplify characteristics of the South Korean population. The Korean Chinese minority has already reached below-replacement fertility rates. South Korea too has lowest-low fertility, recording the lowest in the world in 2005. Within South Korea this is attributed to strong Korean cultural values that are incompatible with “socioeconomic changes such as the rising cost of children, changing labor market conditions, and increasing female labor force participation” (Suzuki 2008, 31). Since the Korean Chinese fertility decline has coincided with the opening of diplomatic channels between China and South Korea and new economic development, similar factors may be at play in Yanbian (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005, 88). Rapid aging, too, is becoming an issue in South Korea; while 8% of the population was over age 65 in 2007, that proportion should reach 34% by 2050 (B.J. Kim and Torres-Gil 2009, 81). Again reflecting the South Korean trend, Doo Sub Kim and Jung Min Kim (2005) report that “the aging trend of the Yanbian Korean population is even speedier than South Korea” (88).

One important result of these demographic trends has been the decline of ethnic education in the Yanbian area. Korean Chinese, again similar to South Koreans and most other overseas Korean populations, have markedly high levels of educational attainment. Fang Gao (2009) discusses this, noting that in China, among all 56 ethnic groups including the Han, “the Korean minority is widely believed to have the highest level of college attendance and lowest level of illiteracy… while also sustaining a strong ethnic identity” (17). However, due to falling

16 South Korean fertility patterns will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
17 Another important factor affecting Korean Chinese fertility rates has been the rapid out-flux of reproductive-age women to South Korea for marriage; this too will be addressed in the following chapter.
enrollment, ethnic Korean schools have been forced to close. Si Joong Kim (2003) reports that “the number of ethnic Korean elementary schools in Yanbian Prefecture decreased from 419 in 1985 to 177 in 1995, and the number of ethnic Korean middle and high schools decreased from 118 in 1985 to 49 in 1995” (121). More recent statistics show that new enrollments in ethnic Korean schools in Yanbian in 2000 were 45.2% of the new enrollments reported in 1996 (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005). These numbers, undoubtedly high, should be seen as a reflection of a number of factors. Obviously, the sharp decline in birthrates since 1990 has reduced the total number of children. But Gao (2009), Doo Sub Kim and Jung Min Kim (2005), and Si Joong Kim (2003) all stress that significant numbers of ethnic Korean Chinese children are being enrolled in either Han or mixed-ethnic schools in the region. Fluency in Chinese language is now accepted as a vital skill for ethnic Koreans. Thus far, no evidence suggests that the Korean language is being lost as a result. Korean remains the first language, used in most homes and businesses in the Yanbian area. But a 2003 law mandating the use of Korean language alongside Chinese in all Yanbian government capacities reveals a degree of linguistic insecurity (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005, 14). Other subject matter taught in ethnic Korean schools though, such as Korean history and traditional Korean cooking and crafts, may be even more at risk.

Additionally, migration has altered family structures and resulted in the dispersion of families in the Yanbian area. In Tumen City, for example, 63.8% of elementary students report having one parent overseas (D.S. Kim and J.M. Kim 2005, 94). How this will affect the social structure of the Korean Chinese population is unclear. While most of these migrants initially intend to return after making their fortunes, thus far a significant portion has not come back. This has prompted researchers such as Doo Sub Kim and Jung Min Kim (2005, 96) to conclude that “social integration and cultural identity are in the process of weakening” and “the socio-
demographic basis of the Yanbian autonomous prefecture [by 2020] will be seriously threatened.” The demographic composition of large-scale out-migration will thus have lasting consequences for the Yanbian population.

3.6 The Future of Yanbian?

These mournful discussions foretelling the decline of Korean society in China assume a clear and declinable Korean identity as their subject. But defining what constitutes Koreanness proves problematic. In comparing the Korean features of the Korean Chinese and South Korean populations, important differences are readily apparent. Linguistic changes during 60 years of separation have caused significant problems for Korean Chinese employees of South Korean companies in China, especially those using technical vocabularies (S.J. Kim 2003, 117). Gender expectations are also widely divergent. Among the Korean Chinese, gender roles have evolved towards greater equality, but the South Koreans maintain highly patriarchal ideas of chastity, household division of labor, and subservience to elders. These differences have caused widespread problems in transnational marriages between Korean Chinese women and South Korean men, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Problematic differences in workplace practices have been recognized as an issue in labor migration as well, prompting the Yanbian prefectural government to set up several migrant training centers for ethnic Koreans in Yanbian. These training centers provide pre-migration education on South Korean manners, ethics, and workplace regulations (Luova 2008, 39).

Thus fears about the erasure of Koreanness ignore the adaptive and evolutionary nature of cultural traits. Differences and fragmentation exist within ethnic groups across space and especially across national boundaries. The appearance of a substantive Chicano/a identity in the
U.S. is a good example of this, whereby an ethnic sub-group experienced unique historical events which crafted a new collective identity, albeit one not severed from the older and more inclusive ethnic identity (Allatson 2007, 61). This possibility is hinted at in discussions of a proper name for the ethnically Korean Chinese. Their official name in China is *Chaoxianzu* (朝鮮族), which implies that they are a Chinese nationality group of Korean descent. Their most frequent designation in South Korea is *Joseonjok* (조선족), meaning roughly the same thing, a Chinese person of Korean heritage (Choi 2006, 1). However, in a meeting this summer with a legal advisor to the South Korean National Assembly on Korean Chinese affairs, I was informed that *Joseonjok* is now considered a discriminatory term in South Korea because it negates the fundamental Koreanness of the Korean Chinese (personal interview, July 15, 2010). Newly acceptable terms include *Jungguk dongpo* (중국 동포), meaning an overseas Korean residing in China, or the blander *Yanbian salam* (연볜 사람), meaning literally a person from Yanbian. This debate, instigated primarily by Korean Chinese advocating for labor rights in South Korea, reveals a growing awareness of nuance in discussions of Korean ethnic membership.

Some scholars, too, have recognized new possibilities for the Korean Chinese. Si Joong Kim (2003) suggests that increasing economic ties between South Korea and China will open future opportunities for the Korean Chinese in China. ‘Koreatowns’ in major Chinese cities are appearing to cater to growing Korean populations; one Korean suburb of Beijing has as many as 10,000 residents (124). Kim and Kim (2005) point out that these ethnic concentrations in more economically developed areas can create vibrate cultural communities (97). While rural depopulation in Yanbian continues apace, formerly rural people are engaging in new and better-paid work elsewhere. Activities by “overseas Korean” support groups, aiming to facilitate social
and economic ties within the Korean diaspora, have increased notably since the 1990s (Luova 2009).

A final point to be made regarding the future of the ethnic Korean minority in China is the absolute immutability of China’s minority policy. As discussed in Chapter 2, anthropological studies conducted throughout the 1950s resulted in the official recognition of 56 ethnic groups within China. Despite numerous other groups petitioning for recognition and some recognized groups being in fact contesting their minority status, the Chinese government has declined any requests for redress (Harrell 1990, Kaup 2000). Even very dramatic demographic fluctuations seem unlikely to alter the status of the Koreans as a minority group or the designation of Yanbian as a minority autonomous prefecture. This is reinforced too by the ongoing investment in the Tumen River Development Project. China is committed to maintaining its multinational state designation.

The ethnic Korean minority then is not necessarily facing annihilation, but drastic socioeconomic and geographic change. Official development strategies having failed, Korean inhabitants of the Yanbian prefecture have found in migration their chance to participate in the global economy. Their ethnic heritage has proven detrimental to joining China’s urban development, but has simultaneously opened new doors vis-à-vis their links to South Korea. Yet the opportunities provided by migration have had serious demographic impacts; a rapid decline in fertility and accelerating aging of the Korean Yanbian population call into question its long-term viability. These impacts are not only the result of out-bound labor migration though, but also and as importantly the marriage migration of large numbers of Korean Chinese women to South Korea.
CHAPTER 4:

Korean Chinese Marriage Migration into South Korea

Between 1990 and 2005, almost 110,000 Korean Chinese women came to South Korea for marriage to South Korean men (J.Y. Lee 2008, 111). Given the total Korean Chinese population of roughly 2 million, this is a huge percentage. The history and conditions that led to this figure are closely tied to the background of Korean Chinese labor migration. Thus the political divisions that created a Korean Chinese population, the Chinese policies that sought to maintain Korean culture within China, the uneven economic geographies and shifting diplomatic relationships of northeastern Asia all bear on the marriage decisions made by Korean Chinese women. Another important factor though is the socio-demographic profile of the South Korean state. Every state demands reproductive labor for the biological, social, and cultural reproduction of the nation. However, most states can meet that demand from within their own populations. This is not true of South Korea. Extremely low fertility in conjunction with a strangely disproportionate gender ratio at birth has created an unsustainable and somewhat warped demographic profile for the country. Accounting for this requires consideration of the recent history of the South Korean state.

4.1 A South Korean Demography

Since the end of the Second World War South Korea has undergone rapid social, political, and economic transformations. Extreme deprivation after the Korean War led to a series of military dictatorships and coups. Rapid industrialization through the 1970s and 80s increased
standards of living and brought South Korea in closer contact with Western countries. However, South Korea has not precisely followed the Western model of economic development. South Korea remains a Confucian society, with a strong cultural preference for men over women. In terms of economic effects, this has prevented women from entering the workforce on a large scale. In 2009 the proportion of working-age women in the South Korean workforce actually fell to 49.2% (Chosun Ilbo 2010a). According to much demographic theory (cf. Caldwell 2009), this implies that the opportunity cost of reproduction is low, therefore encouraging fertility. Yet in 2009 South Korea also registered the world’s second-lowest birthrate of 1.22, just behind Bosnia and Herzegovina’s 1.21 (BBC 2010). This 1.22 is even an improvement over the nation’s all-time low in 2005, with a TFR of 1.08 (Suzuki 2008, 30). These extremely low numbers qualify the country’s demographic profile as “lowest-low” fertility rates. Lowest-low patterns appear when total fertility rates drop below 1.3 (Billari and Kohler 2004, 161); when this occurs, a population risks rapid and perhaps irrecoverable decline. This lowest-low behavior has shown a correlation with more traditional family patterns. Delayed marriage, low levels of extra-marital fertility, late departure from the parental home, and low frequency of divorce all are predictors for lowest-low fertility. Traditional gender roles also contribute to lowest-low fertility in modern capitalist society, because women are less willing to shoulder the double burden of paid labor and unpaid domestic work; when dual-income households become the norm without efforts at ameliorating domestic inequality, birthrates decline. Scandinavian countries have successfully countered this effect by instituting a public childcare system and encouraging gender equality in all spheres, which did result in a rising birthrate through the 1990s (Suzuki 2009). South Korea, however, has moved towards the dual-income domestic model without addressing gender
equality on a significant scale. Not unique to South Korea though, these behaviors are also characteristic of other Confucian societies like China, Japan, and Taiwan.

South Korea’s demographic profile has also been distorted by a large sex-ratio imbalance. Rapidly adopting computer-based technologies since the 1970s, pre-natal ultrasounds allowed South Korean parents to learn a fetus’s sex prior to birth. Again with Confucian preference for boys still strong, sex-selective abortion has resulted in a widely skewed birthrate between the sexes. This peaked in 1990 at 116.5 boys born per 100 girls (Choe 2007) and remained above 114 throughout the early 1990s (Guilmoto 2007, 2). This gender imbalance has appeared not only in South Korea but in China, India, and several Southwest Asian nations as well. However, the South Korean government was initially the only one to address gender-selective abortion at the national scale. The government attempted to increase public awareness and sensitivity to the issue using slogan campaigns during the 1980s. As of 1987, doctors were no longer allowed to inform expecting parents of their fetus’s sex. These changes have affected the skewed-sex birthrate only gradually; a decline was not seen until 2002, and by 2006 the rate had dropped to 107.4 (Choe 2007). A return to normalcy is good news, but the effects of a 30-year imbalance will not be quickly erased.

One obvious impact of this gender imbalance is the lack of marriageable women. The shortage of women, combined with educational and economic opportunities in the cities, leaves women with little incentive to settle for marriage to a poor farmer. Rural and urban women alike could afford to be picky and still expect to marry. However, this left the least desirable men with few options. Koreans traditionally viewed marriage as the marker of adulthood. Unmarried people regardless of age are called “boy” or “girl,” and the marriage ceremony itself is often granted transformative power in the maturation process. To remain unmarried in South Korea
has traditionally carried a very negative social stigma. As late as 1980, “eighty-four out of every eighty-five women in their thirties would have been married” (Kendall 1996, 4). This new plague of bachelor farmers became much more visible in South Korea during the 1980s and 90s, with protest suicides by bachelors drawing attention to the issue (Kendall 1996).

At roughly the same time, in 1992, South Korea and China normalized diplomatic relations. This renewed awareness in South Korea of co-ethnic peoples outside of the Korean peninsula. The Korean Chinese especially, having retained their strong Korean identity, appeared compatible with South Korean wifely ideals. In December 1990, a small organization called the Overseas Korean Institute run by a political science professor and former National Assembly member made the first match between a rural South Korean man and a Korean Chinese woman from Yanbian (Chosun Ilbo 1990). This event was much publicized in the South Korean national media. As a result, local governments and agricultural associations in rural districts of South Korea began arranging and subsidizing “marriage tours” in which South Korean farmers traveled to China to meet and marry ethnic Korean women there (Kendall 1996, 5).

4.2 Marriage migration in theory and practice

Marriage migration was at that time a very unusual practice in South Korea. Most South Koreans through the 1970s had married within their provincial boundaries, and rarely more than one province away (Kendall 1996). Outside of Korea though, marriage migration is a fairly common practice. Marriage migration refers to the long-distance (usually transnational) relocation of a person for the primary and explicit purpose of marrying at the destination. Marriage patterns that fit this definition are practiced throughout the world. While either sex
could theoretically be a marriage migrant, women form the overwhelming majority (Constable 2005a, 4). The physical means through which these marriages are arranged and concluded stretch from traditional to cutting edge, and from the freely chosen to the coercive. Outcomes equally reflect the diversity of human relationships. And yet marriage migration does occur across various and sundry places, indicating its durability as a means of structuring kinship relations. Family and household formation, socially-acceptable sexual activity and reproduction, the division of unpaid labor in the home, inheritance systems and legal privileges are often predicated on marriage-based kinship. Thus humans have very real material incentives to marry, and often face severe social and economic stresses if they do not.

However, for a variety of reasons, people may seek a spouse outside of their local community. Often, and especially true of the Korean case discussed here, failure to marry reflects some disadvantaging factor in the marriage market. For men, this is associated with an inability to perform the traditional breadwinner role, such as personal disability, low levels of education, or poverty. For women, economic factors such as dowries may be at play, but personal histories such as previous marriages could also impinge on local marital options. Another perceived benefit to marriage migration, also relevant to the Korean Chinese experience, is the preservation of particular cultural traits. Long-distance marriages often take place within geographically dispersed cultural, ethnic, or religious groups. The desire to maintain traditional values through marrying a “traditional” woman is expressed by otherwise very diverse populations. Delia Davin (2008) relates how within China, “village” girls are considered the best brides in urban areas because of geographically-based assumptions about purity and the ability to properly reproduce a household. Similar assumptions motivated the South Koreans in explicitly seeking out ethnic Korean women as brides.
Marriage migration is thus a complicated set of decisions and processes. This complexity is further revealed by a brief review of scholarly attention to the issue. Anna Cottrell (1990) chronicles the development of academic interest up to that time. Initial interest in marriage migration began after the Second World War in light of rising numbers of “war brides.” This trend continued with American involvement in the Korean and later Vietnam wars, and was compounded by the similar phenomenon of “colonial brides” resulting from long-term military occupation. These marriages typically occurred between American servicemen and Asian women. Most studies reported that the men involved were “alienated, loners, insecure, dependent, and disproportionately from families split by divorce, separation, or death” who were therefore “threatened by the strength and independence of American women and consequently to idealize Asian women as supportive and subservient” (Cottrell 1990, 154). These marriages were characterized as isolating and essentially anti-social, with high rates of failure. Cottrell emphasizes the inadequacies of this research, pushing for recognition of the diversity of participants in marriage migration, both within and beyond the “war bride” paradigm.

Perhaps heeding this call, Glodava and Onizuka (1994) provide a damning overview of more recent developments in marriage migration. In their presentation, poor women from the global South are deceived into thinking that marrying a rich man in the developed world will solve their problems, then essentially sold into sexual slavery. This analysis does consider a broader range of participants, including especially Eastern European women left destitute in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, yet it does little to theorize either the women or men involved. Kojima (2001) works to further broaden discussions of marriage migration, both geographically and theoretically. Examining the rapidly growing popularity of mail-order brides
in Japan, Kojima suggests that “the MOB system may be considered a subsystem within the patriarchal order that provides substitutes to maintain the sexual division of labor” (200). Here, then, women in more developed countries are failing to meet market demand for domestic and reproductive services, and women from poorer nations are a substitute for this market failure. This view necessarily ties the functioning of capitalist systems to patriarchal systems, very much in keeping with Carol Pateman’s influential argument in *The Sexual Contract* (1988). Women are invariably disadvantaged participants in social and economic negotiations, if they are really participants at all.

However, this treatment of marriage migration has been widely refuted since the early 2000s. Simons (2001) describes the initial shift away from market-based explanations as a recognition of the diverse reality. Early work, which focused on the “twin concerns of immigration fraud and exploitation of women” (5), treated women as either direct victims of trafficking or indirect victims driven by poverty to sell themselves on capitalist markets. Simons especially critiques Glodava’s work, which was based primarily on media reports rather than fieldwork or interviews. The agency of women was discounted, as by Pateman, as structurally compromised beyond redemption. This is supported largely by reports of domestic violence, gold-digging wives, and general social deviancy on the part of all involved (Simons 2001, 29). Yet increasing numbers of academic studies throughout the 1990s, based on interviews with geographically diverse groups of marriage migrant wives and their husbands, seems to point in other directions. Instead, the decision to marry out of one’s natal community or country appears to very often reflect an assertion of will on the part of the women. In place of a simple supply-and-demand framework, Robinson (2007) argues “there is a need to understand these marriages as an aspect of the new ways in which personal relationships are being renegotiated in social
space constituted on a global level and facilitated by the global reach of capitalism” (484).

Invoking Doreen Massey’s 1994 argument for new “power geometries,” more recent work has granted women status as decision-making subjects in their own lives.

Indeed, the agency of female marriage migrants has been a persistent theme in the literature since 2000. Robinson (2007) suggests that through advertising with marriage brokers, women “actively seek their own disposition as brides […] to realize their own dreams and ambitions” (486). Constable (2005b) chronicles the experiences of two marriage migrants seeking greater equality in marriage than their homelands (China and the Philippines) could offer them. These women initiated their matchmaking processes by choosing to advertise, then vetting their respondents based on their personal preferences, finally agreeing to meet only those men whom they deemed acceptable. Even after personal meetings, in which men traveled to meet them, they had the choice to end the relationship at any time. Gallo (2008) provides a fascinating study of Malayali Indian women who migrate to Italy. Coming from families too poor to afford proper dowries, they had little hope for advantageous marriages at home. Rejecting their other options, including marrying similarly poor men or remaining unmarried within their natal families, these women chose to leave for Rome with the intention of becoming nuns. Upon arriving in Italy, they discovered a range of opportunities previously unavailable to them; many obtained professional training and married local Italian men. Alternately though, it is of equal importance to note studies like Blanchet (2008) who describes the tragic circumstances of Bangladeshi girls whose families, also too poor to afford dowries, instead sold them into abusive and exploitative “marriages” to elderly Indian men. These studies reflect the wild variation in degrees of women’s agency.
Looking specifically at marriage migration within East Asia, recurring themes quickly become apparent. Geographically unequal economies feature prominently (Bossen 2007, Davin 2007), as does government policy in controlling marriage migrants (Sargeson 2006) and racism experienced by (particularly Southeast Asian) marriage migrants (Suzuki 2008, Tsay 2004). Yet little work has examined the larger histories of sending and receiving areas, focusing instead on individual experiences. Ignoring the broader social, historical, and cultural context risks naturalizing the flow patterns of marriage migrants. Individual acts of marriage migration must occur within a larger enabling framework and result from long histories developed in and between these places. The complex relationship between the Korean Chinese and South Korean areas and people testifies to this. Marriage migration between Korean Chinese women and South Korean men emerged from Japanese colonialism, Cold War tensions, Chinese efforts towards a multinational state, diplomatic fluctuation between China and South Korea, as well as uneven development. The divergent effects of these events on sending and receiving areas are revealed through the ensuing human experience of transnational marriage.

4.3 Korean Chinese marriage migration: Rise of an industry

Marriage migration in South Korea, similar to labor migration, took as its starting assumption the desirability of ethnic homogeneity. With local governments providing the early impetus and funding for marriage tours, the practice was soon expanded into a private industry. The Korean Chinese were initially sought out as the most desirable foreign spouses, because of the perceived ethnic purity of the Korean Chinese and their retention of Korean cultural traditions and language. This understanding was encouraged by South Korean awareness of Chinese minority policy, allowing South Koreans to approach the Korean Chinese as a
population apart from the rest of China. The existence of a specifically Korean political region within China also contributed to South Korean belief in the uncontaminated and pure Koreanness of the Korean Chinese. South Koreans thus widely assumed that the ethnic Korean Chinese could integrate seamlessly into South Korean society. Similarly, the Korean Chinese often viewed South Korea as an ethnic homeland, where they would be received as ethnic equals and would have the same economic opportunities and standard of living as South Korean citizens. These ideas were facilitated by the South Korean government’s public relations campaign leading up to the 1988 Seoul Olympics and their later lobbying attempts to get the World Cup (Seoul and Tokyo were jointly selected in 1996). These campaigns promoted South Korea as a thriving democracy that was embracing globalization. Thus marriage migration was approached by both populations as beneficial and fairly unproblematic.

However, as reality has shown, the Korean Chinese and the South Koreans had formulated mismatched expectations for marriage migration. The Korean Chinese women expected to marry into a highly developed society, where they and their children would have greater opportunities and a higher standard of living than they could expect in China. In reality, those South Korean men who sought wives abroad were those who had essentially failed in the highly competitive domestic marriage market. This was often because of marked poverty, lack of education, or social stigmas like physical or mental disability (Abelmann and Kim 2005, 109). Thus the Korean Chinese women often found themselves married into poor rural families where they were expected to shoulder a heavy burden of agricultural labor and produce children who would eventually do the same.

The South Korean men, by comparison, viewed the Korean Chinese as an economically disadvantaged group who should be grateful for the opportunity to leave China, regardless of
their new circumstances. This is another manifestation of the hierarchical nationhood discussed by Seol and Skrentny (2009) and experienced by Korean Chinese labor migrants. It further reflects South Koreans’ geographic understanding of the hierarchy of world states. Obviously both South Korea and China have geographically uneven internal economic development; within China, economic production is concentrated on the east and southeastern coast, while South Korea’s wealth is overwhelmingly located in Seoul. Despite this, South Koreans imagine all of South Korea to be a highly developed and well-off nation, and China by contrast is uniformly poor within its boundaries due to its lower GDP. Following this logic, anyone leaving China for South Korea is moving up socially and economically. Thus it surprises some South Koreans when the Korean Chinese women are not satisfied with marriage to even a locally undesirable South Korean man.

As a result of these mismatched expectations, “these marriages [between Korean Chinese women and South Korean men] have been fraught with considerable marriage fraud and domestic violence, high divorce rates, and cultural tension” (Abelmann and Kim 2005, 110). Statistics for 2007 show that roughly 13% of international marriages involving South Korean men ended in divorce within the year (Chosun Ilbo 2007). This rate increased to 16% by 2009 (Hankyoreh 2009); for comparison, South Korea’s overall divorce rate in 2007 was 2.5% (UN 2008). Specific reasons for divorce vary, but tend to relate to differing expectations of gender roles within the marriage. Korean Chinese women, having experienced sixty years of communist ‘reeducation’ on gender equity, in fact expect far greater participation by men in household labor. South Korean men, by contrast, retain very traditional expectations of gendered divisions of labor. When those expectations are disappointed (typically by the woman failing to meet the man’s definition of a proper wife, or by the man imposing perceived unfair restrictions
on the woman), the result tends to be either physical abuse by the man or “disappearance” by the woman.

This has resulted in a two-pronged portrayal of these failed marriages in the South Korean press. Either the women are described as victims of abusive and uneducated rural men (Pak 2007) or as manipulative visa-seekers who never intended to remain married (Choe 2003). These perceptions continue today; in 2010 an official at the governmental statistics bureau implied that Korean Chinese women were gaining citizenship through marriage, then divorcing their South Korean husbands and using their own naturalized South Korean citizenship to bring Korean Chinese men over through marriage migration (“we have data showing that about 500 Korean women who married Chinese men last year are actually former Chinese citizens who were naturalized by marriage to Korean citizens” (Jung 2010)). Despite these pronouncements, Korean Chinese women remain the largest source of foreign brides for South Koreans.

4.4 State regulation of the body politic

While marriage is typically a private affair, governments do regulate and legislate the terms of these arrangements. This is especially true with international marriages, when citizenship and attached benefits are at stake. The South Korean government then has played a pivotal role in shaping the marriage migration of Korean Chinese women. The development of an international marriage migration policy has closely paralleled the development of international labor migration policy, with early patchwork laws revised into harsh legislation in 1997, and relaxed again between 2003 and 2006 due to human rights violations. This evolution, as with labor immigration, has generally occurred as a reaction and response to popular discourses of nationhood negotiated between the Korean Chinese and South Koreans. And again
similar to Korean Chinese labor migration, it has culminated in an understanding of the Korean Chinese as a group external to the Korean nation, one of several minority ethnic groups within the (South) Korean nation-state.

As mentioned, the first documented case of a Korean Chinese-South Korean marriage was arranged by a former member of the South Korean National Assembly, and widely publicized in the South Korean press (Chosun Ilbo 1990). This inspired several local governments in agricultural areas to finance marriage migration tour to Korean areas of China (H.K. Lee 2008, 111). Hence the state’s role in marriage migration was both vital and visible from the beginning. In the early years, up until 1996, the South Korean government had no specific procedure for dealing with international marriages and so essentially left it an open-door policy. Simultaneously though, Korean Chinese labor migration was becoming a larger phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 3, this labor migration was regulated by small businesses rather than national legislation, and the number of Korean Chinese people hoping to seek work in South Korea far surpassed the number of small businesses willing or able to bring them over.

Marriage migration though was a much easier route into the country; it resulted in immediate and unconditional citizenship for the bride, and offered the additional perquisite of two “parent” visas intended to allow a bride’s parents to visit her in South Korea. The lack of regulation left marriage migration open to abuses in the early 1990s. Three types of marriage fraud resulted. First, Korean Chinese women would legally marry South Korean men when neither party actually expected to enter into a real marriage. This usually entailed some payment to the South Korean man, and resulted in a speedy divorce. The second type of marriage fraud

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18 Early laws were extremely patriarchal as well, and reflected a government desire to limit marriage migration to incoming women; as Hye-Kyung Lee (2008, 112) reports, “female foreigners who married Korean men could obtain Korean citizenship immediately after their marriage, while male foreigners who married Korean women had to wait two years, and meet certain eligibility requirements in order to apply for nationality.”
was that of “runaway brides,” whereby a Korean Chinese woman would enter into a marriage with a South Korean man and then either disappear or file for divorce immediately upon receipt of citizenship, to the shock and horror of the new bridegroom (Freeman 2005, 93). Finally, the “parent” visas were often used not by the parents but by friends or relatives in search of South Korean employment, or even sold.

The runaway bride phenomenon especially garnered much attention in the South Korean press. Reports of heartbroken bachelor farmers who had invested their life savings in paying for a marriage tour played up popular images of cunning Chinese duping the honest Koreans (Freeman 2005).¹⁹ This eventually produced a legislative reaction, and between 1996 and 1997 an extremely strict Nationality Law was passed in South Korea. This required Korean Chinese women to prove first that they were unmarried, then register their new marriage with the Chinese government, then bring proof of marriage to South Korea to apply for a visa, then wait two years on a temporary visa before becoming eligible for citizenship (H.K. Lee 2008, endnote 4). Such strict requirements were roundly criticized by human rights groups, and for good reason. In fact many of the “runaway brides” were leaving abusive conditions.²⁰ The new law essentially criminalized this, demanding immediate deportation of foreign brides who leave their marriage within two years with no exceptions. Abused women had no recourse; this was especially atrocious in cases where the couple had children, in that the children remained the non-negotiable property of the husband. A non-citizen battered wife then had one legal option available to her, which was deportation back to her country of origin, leaving any children behind (H.K. Lee 2008, 113). Further issues with the 1997 law include the barring of non-citizen

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¹⁹ For a humorous treatment of the issue, see Hwang Byung Guk’s 2005 movie “The Wedding Campaign (나의 결혼원정기).”
²⁰ Domestic violence was and remains an unfortunately common practice in South Korea, especially in international marriages; see Ju-Min Park (2010).
foreign wives from working, from social security benefits, and from the state-run medical insurance program.

By 2003 though, public awareness of human rights abuses experienced by foreign labor and marriage migrants alike prompted the government to again revise the laws. The new law, which did not go into effect until 2006, took a two-pronged approach to international migration. Addressing both labor and marriage migrants, it eased visa and entry requirements for both groups. This had the immediate effect of decreasing the number of Korean Chinese women marrying South Korean men, while the number of labor migrants increased. The new law also sought to address problems and discrimination faced by foreign brides. Drastically expanding the South Korean governmental intervention into international marriages, it created a bureaucracy with seven explicit goals, worth quoting verbatim:

“(1) regulation of international marriage agencies and protection of foreign wives before into into Korea; (2) support for victims of domestic violence; (3) support and orientation for newly arrived foreign wives, such as offering Korean language and culture classes; (4) support for children of international marriages in schools; (5) providing social welfare to foreign wives; (6) raising social awareness of multicultural issues; and (7) making a comprehensive support system to attain the goals”


This mission statement constitutes the first use of the phrase “multicultural” by the South Korean government. It represents a sea-change in the South Korean government’s approach to foreign marriage migrants, essentially abandoning the ideal of maintaining cultural and racial homogeneity (Lim 2010, 52). It has since become a veritable buzzword in South Korea. South Koreans hope that it will bring the South Korean state in line with international standards of equality. But of vital importance to my discussion of the Korean Chinese is their inclusion in this category as ‘multicultural.’ First of all, the word ‘multicultural’ is now used in South
Korean media and government reports as a simple substitute for ‘ethnic.’ Drawing again on Crossley’s 2006 discussion of ethnic nationalism, ‘ethnic’ and ‘multicultural’ become politically-correct ways for majority groups to say ‘minority.’ That the Korean Chinese are now considered a ‘multicultural’ element in South Korean society amounts to a legal recognition that they are not of the Korean (mono)culture.

The marriage migration of Korean Chinese women to South Korea raised issues similar to those of labor migration. But the permanent and biological nature of marriage made it in some ways a more important target for state intervention. Unlike labor migrants, marriage migrants were joining the South Korean genetic pool and thus tapping more deeply into ideas of descent-based ethnic belonging. The initial hope of the South Korean government was that the new additions would not alter the South Korean population’s composite character. This proved untenable. Rather than allowing for a wider definition of the Korean nation though, this prompted the government to instead create a new category for understanding these semi-foreigners. Yet multiculturalism will not be the final solution for South Koreans; intermarriage will continue to produce a population that blurs the lines between the multiple cultures. Lim (2010) reports that “in 2007, international marriages accounted for 40 percent of all marriages among men engaged in agriculture” (66, original emphasis). How South Korea adapts to a native population with foreign blood will help shape its social and cultural future. South Koreans have made clear though that Korean Chinese people are already part of that foreign element.
Ethnic return migration is a strange phenomenon. For ethnic return migration to occur, migrants require an initial impetus to leave, a draw in the receiving country, settlement, a secondary impetus to leave and favorable conditions for reception in the country of initial departure. We can address it as a double migration, drawn out over several generations, because if the effects of the original out-migration from the ethnic homeland had died out completely then the subsequent ‘return’ wouldn’t be imagined as a return at all – it would be an arrival. Ethnic return migration hinges on this difference.

Most voluntary migration is undertaken hopefully, and in cases of ethnic return migration this is compounded by an optimistic expectation of reunion. In almost every case though, this second expectation is disappointed. Romantic ideals of long-lost kin and the warm embrace of the motherland give way to the blunt reality of hierarchically categorized difference. For Korean Chinese, this is experienced on multiple fronts. The legal process of entry into South Korean territory predesignates them as sub-South Korean, sub-Korean American, sub-Korean Japanese, and sub-North Korean (although higher than the Koreans of the post-Soviet states, a small consolation). They are then barred from skilled employment and the public benefit system, permitted only to engage in low-wage production or unpaid reproduction. Socially ostracized for linguistic differences and old-fashioned dress, Korean Chinese are constantly reminded that they are not full members of the Korean nation.

This sounds very bleak. But the Korean Chinese go to South Korea willingly, and continue to do so today, when those romantic ideals are pretty well dispelled. Certainly they are
influenced by global economic inequality that perpetuates a massive wage disparity. They hear the clear messages sent by government-sponsored lessons in remittances. But they are making their own decisions, sometimes in concert with the state and sometimes in conflict. Working in South Korea has real benefits for them personally; I was often told the saying “work for five years in South Korea, live for fifty years in China.” This is ultimately the decision that Korean Chinese are making.

To conclude this thesis, I return to Jessop and Oosterlynck’s 2008 discussion of cultural political economy. They propose an evolutionary understanding of semiosis, in which new meanings and practices arise continuously, but only some are selected and fewer still are retained. Such an approach allows for wide degrees of variation without chalking up the results to mere chance. The Korean Chinese population has been imagined in the global economy in various ways – as sources of remittances, as cheap manual labor, as docile domestic reproducers. Not all of these imaginings have held. The Korean Chinese in the last sixty-plus years have themselves evolved an understanding of Korean identity that includes elements forgotten, denied, or altered by the South Korean population, while adding elements found beneficial to their own situation. The South Koreans too have changed, incorporating and innovating new approaches to their group identity. The resulting identities are different. This reflects different narrators’ different degrees of success, indicative of unequal power structures and access to audiences.

The Chinese state has proven a powerful narrator, propagating discourses that “correspond to (or successfully shape) underlying material transformations, can mobilize different elites to form a new power bloc, can organize popular support, disorganize opposition, and marginalize resistance” (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, 1160). Its discourse of a multi-national China, whose component nationalities belong necessarily within the territorial bounds of
the Chinese state, seems now to be accepted by both the Korean Chinese and the South Koreans.
But as I have argued, this did not occur by simple Chinese state imposition and Korean acceptance. Particular aspects of state discourse are challenged and rejected. States must negotiate with other interests, and they sometimes fail, as the ongoing modification of South Korean immigration law reveals. In this instance, Chinese state discourse was enabled by other issues, including cultural divergence and unrealistic expectations of a shared ethnic background. This confluence of cultural, political, and economic factors gave rise to the ensuing experience of Korean Chinese ethnic return migration.

Returning then to my two framing questions, I have few answers to offer. People understand and enact conflicting personal identities through negotiation and compromise. Some nights they eat rice and some nights they eat rice noodles. The state apparatus affects this by legislating who can go where, what jobs they can perform, whether they can get a divorce or not. But the state cannot legislate the nation; rather people work this out for themselves. The Korean Chinese approached ethnic return migration from an understanding contrary to the wishes of the Chinese state, seeing themselves as constituent members of the global Korean nation. After twenty years of negotiation, they now oppose the wishes of the South Korean state, which would apparently like to retain them as second-string co-nationals. The new understandings of Korean Chinese identity are perhaps closer to the Chinese state ideal than before, but I see no evidence of a conclusive settlement. Instead, the failure of the Korean Chinese to dissolve into their imagined ethnic homeland indicates new possibilities for the future.

Firstly, the inclusion of the Korean Chinese in South Korea’s new (minority) category of multicultural does not signify their exclusion from the South Korean state. It may push the Korean Chinese closer to other foreign groups in South Korea, but I believe even this distinction
– between Korean and foreign – is weakening and will continue to decline. The impacts of South Korea’s sex-ratio imbalance have not been fully realized, and the number of new foreign brides has grown every year since 1990. The Korean Chinese continue to be the largest source of these brides, but as a percentage they are losing ground to Han Chinese and Southeast Asians. Blood-based understandings of the Korean nation will of necessity adapt. As a geographer, I look forward to a more place-based approach. I do not think that adaption will be an easy or smooth process. The South Korean government is already struggling to offer Korean language and culture classes to foreign brides, and many of these women choose not to partake. Discrimination against honhyol (mixed-blood) children is on the rise, and will be a serious issue that South Koreans will need to address. South Korea’s rapid aging also has implications for their demographic future; without creating a more liberal immigration policy, labor shortages will increase. This might even prompt consideration of abandoning ethnicity-based preference, although such a drastic measure has not yet been proposed.

Another issue related to the Korean Chinese experience in South Korea is that of the talkbukja, North Koreans in South Korea. I have not addressed this here; firstly because it deserves a far more complex discussion than I can merit it, but secondly because there is so little data available. The number of North Koreans in South Korea has been negligible – under 10,000 – until very recently. Their reception has generally been warmer than the Korean Chinese’, with special welfare policies, employment assistance, and remedial education offered in an attempt to incorporate them into South Korean society (Chosun Ilbo 2010b). Ironically though, North Koreans have fared much worse than the Korean Chinese, with high unemployment rates and reportedly extreme social isolation.21 But North Koreans in South Korea show strikingly similar

21 Unlike the Korean Chinese and other foreigners in South Korea, North Koreans remain under government supervision for several years after arrival; they have not formed ethnic enclave communities, and seem to have an
disappointment with the weakness of the ethnic bond; as one teacher at a South Korean school for North Koreans stated, “[t]hat whole ‘Korean brotherhood’ talk is a feel-good display by both governments… it really doesn’t extend to North Korean refugees who make it to the South” (Rusling 2007). Given that the number of North Koreans in South Korea has more than doubled in the last five years, hitting 20,000 in October 2010, South Korea may soon need to reconsider what co-ethnicity warrants. Unlike the Korean Chinese, whose foreignness can be attributed to the corrupting influence of Chinese space, the North Koreans have a fairly strong claim to ethnic purity. This will offer another challenge to South Korean concepts of ethnic nationhood.

The Korean Chinese will undoubtedly play a role in future negotiations of Korean identity. But it seems unlikely that these negotiations will continue as they have proceeded in the past. The initial post-division re-encounter between the Korean Chinese and the South Koreans was conditioned by global economic and political structures that have since changed dramatically. In particular, China’s advance as a world power will likely to raise the status of the Korean Chinese in relation to the South Koreans. Opportunities for Korean Chinese in Chinese cities are increasing; the percentage of Korean Chinese in the northeastern China and Yanbian is decreasing with Han immigration.

The redefinition of Korean Chinese ethnicity, and its reorientation towards China, also suggests a greater role for the Korean Chinese within the Chinese state. As discussed in Chapter 2, Korean Chinese historians are already beginning to challenge dominant narratives in order to secure a more prominent role in Chinese history. The surfacing of the Minsaengdan massacre implies an emergent willingness to dispute the Han Chinese, where previously the Korean minority demonstrated a subservient gratitude (M.D.P. Lee 2005). We could perhaps draw an especially hard time adapting to South Korea’s very competitive form of free market capitalism. See “N. Korean defectors bewildered by the South,” Washington Post, April 12, 2009; http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/11/AR2009041100766.
early comparison to Kaup’s discussion of the Zhuang (2000), who, after accepting their Han-
given minzu category, eventually came to defend it against perceived Han oppression. No longer
thinking of themselves as a recently arrived immigrant group in China, the Korean Chinese have
reconceived their position inside Chinese space and are beginning to demand their expected due.

Also important for consideration is the future of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous
Prefecture and the ethnic Korean population throughout northeast China. Changes experienced
there were discussed in Chapter 3, but the long-term impacts are unknown. Even if migration to
South Korea stopped today, the Yanbian population will have to deal with a gender imbalance of
their own. Will they too begin to import brides? Will the infrastructure development plan of the
central state succeed in invigorating the Northeast? The growth of Koreatowns in coastal
Chinese cities offers another possibility for the Korean Chinese. But since their minority
privileges remain tied to their hukou registration, the opportunity costs of internal migration are
higher than for Han Chinese. I find these imminent demographic, cultural, economic and
political choices of the Korean Chinese to be the most compelling in terms of future research,
and hope to direct later efforts there.

The Korean people were a geographically concentrated group until the twentieth century.
Not needing to consider the spatial aspect of their group membership, the Korean identity was
instead understood biologically and culturally. The rise of new borders and global dispersion
through the twentieth century divided the population for the first time, but did not dispel the
belief in a cohesive Korean nation. Ironically it has been the process of reconnecting that
challenges this. All culture is constantly shifting and changing, incorporating new ideas and
technologies; thus a fixed definition of Korean culture does not exist. Instead Korean culture has
been defined geographically, as the unique practices of the people in Korean space. This
The territorial understanding of nationality has been actively promoted by the Chinese state, eventually recognized by South Korea, and now accepted by the Korean Chinese themselves. The Korean Chinese have existed outside of Korean space too long to qualify for membership in the Korean ethnic nation.

Min-Dong Paul Lee (2005, 112) presents the following lyrics from Korean Chinese singer Cui Jian:

*I ask the heaven and the earth, “how much more must I travel?”

I beseech the wind and the rain, “please, go far away from me!”

Many mountains and many rivers, I can’t even distinguish east from west.

Many people and many mouths, no one clearly speaks the truth.

How should I say and how should I act to truly become myself?

How should I sing and how should I chant to finally feel satisfaction? ....

- “Rock and Roll on the New Road to Long March”

Cui Jian asks, “How should I say and how should I act to truly become myself?” This is not a hypothetical question for the Korean Chinese today; it is a real and pressing issue that they are actively seeking to resolve.
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