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# Koreans in Northeast China: Past and Present Challenges

*Jonghyun Lee*

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**M**y plane landed at Yanji International Airport in China. It was a fine summer day with a gentle breeze under a blue sky. All of a sudden, I felt a surge of excitement from actually being in a place where I had longed to travel for a long time. The city of Yanji welcomed me with the beautiful sunlight and fresh air of Northeast China. Finally, I made it to this city where I would learn about the lives of Korean people in Manchukuo.

Manchukuo was a puppet state created by the Japanese colonial empire in 1932 in Northeast China. Many Koreans migrated to the region, fleeing from poverty and forced by the Japanese authorities that had occupied Korea since 1910. When arriving in Manchukuo, Koreans had to deal with not only the Japanese, the invading forces in the region, but also with the local Chinese people. In Manchukuo, as colonial subjects of Japanese imperialism and as migrants to an unfamiliar land, Koreans had to endure political marginalization and social exclusion.

## Mini Korea Yanji

The City of Yanji is the capital of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, which was part of the former Manchukuo. There were Korean language signs all over the Yanji City. Even the airport signage was written in Korean. In fact, in Yanji City you can easily find people speaking in Korean. This may be why Yanji is often referred to as the “Third Korea” after South Korea and North Korea. “Mini-Korea” is another name given to Yanji. The hotel I stayed in Yanji, the Yanbian

Baishan Hotel, also has large signage written in Korean on its roof. From the hotel, I enjoyed the glittering multi-colored neon lights that the city of Mini-Korea turned on every evening.

It did not take long to be aware of the price of glittering neon lights in Yanji City and its economic prosperity. After the diplomatic relationship

was formalized between South Korea and China in 1992, a large number of ethnic Koreans in China migrated to South Korea in search of higher paying jobs. Because of their fluency in both the Korean and Chinese languages, ethnic Koreans had an advantage in searching for employment opportunities in South Korea. Due to their shared cultures, these ethnic Koreans could have a much smoother acculturation experience than those of other migrants residing in South Korea.

Despite their advantages, however, these ethnic Koreans have to endure various forms of discrimination and prejudice, including wages and xenophobia while living in South Korea. Unfortunately, in South Korea, they are not often seen as Koreans but as poor foreign migrant workers engaged in dirty, dangerous, and difficult labor-intensive jobs. In addition, a long separation between couples has caused an increase in divorce rates among ethnic Korean migrant workers. In 2014, the divorce rate among ethnic Koreans in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture area reached as high as forty percent. Moreover, because of the absence of their parents, many children



*Former Japanese Yamato Hotel in Changchun. (Author's Photo)*



*Bridge between China and North Korea in Tumen. You can see the apartment buildings with orange roofs in North Korea. (Author's Photo)*

suffer from various mental health and behavioral issues (Park, Choi, & Kim, 2012). Ethnic Koreans in contemporary China face multiple challenges caused by their experiences of migration.

### North Korean Refugees

In Yanji City, I encountered migration issues relevant to people from North Korea. According to the *New York Times* report by Hyeonsoo Lee published on May 13, 2016, there were as many as 200,000 North Koreans living

in China. Although most of them had left North Korea in order to escape from oppression and poverty, the Chinese government considers them illegal immigrants rather than treating them as refugees. These North Koreans live under the fear of being sent back to North Korea where they would be detained in horrific prison camps, said to be rife with torture, sexual violence, forced labor, and other inhumane treatment. Because North Koreans have no rights or legal status

in China, they cannot find jobs, which lead them to scrape by on the margins of Chinese society.

It is disheartening to learn that some people in China exploit North Korean refugees by taking advantage of their vulnerable circumstances. For instance, women comprise more than half of North Korean people living in China. Although some may find jobs as domestic workers and nannies, many of them fall prey to human trafficking including prostitution. Some may be fortunate to marry Chinese farmers, but they still have to live under the fear of deportation because of their immigration status. In China, marriage does not secure the legal immigration status of these North Korean women. There is much need to study the risk and resilience of North Korean people in China to find ways of ensuring their safety, rights, and well-being.

### Changchun: A Capital City of Manchukuo between 1932 and 1945

Changchun is the capital of Jilin Province where Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture is located.

...the agonies of the Korean people trying to make Manchukuo their new home left a deep impression on me. At the same time, I got to appreciate their resilience in cultivating the barren land of the Manchurian plain into fertile fields.





*China-North Korea border in Tumen. (Author's Photo)*

It is the center of the economy, politics, and education in Northeast China. The literal meaning of Changchun is “long spring.” Because of its long and harsh cold winter, the city was given a name that reflects its hope for a long spring.

Between 1932 and 1945, Changchun was the capital of the newly established government of Manchukuo by the Japanese colonial empire, which gave it the name Xinjing, meaning New Capital. Japanese colonialists redesigned the city following Western contemporary urban planning theories. Through Xinjing, the Japanese colonialists tried to demonstrate their vision, pursuit for modernity and, ultimately, colonial power.

In Changchun, I walked along Renmin Dajie, the main avenue in Changchun originally laid out by the Japanese colonialists. Visitors to Changchun can easily locate the grand neoclassical edifices still standing on both sides of Renmin Dajie. Facing the railway station, the glorious Yamato Hotel building stands on the left corner of Renmin Dajie. Owned by the South Manchuria

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I asked about the conditions in North Korea to the shop keepers and asked whether they had been to North Korea. But they all walked away from me as soon as I began asking questions. They seemed to be very reluctant to discuss anything related to North Korea.

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Railway Company, Yamato hotels were established in all the major cities across Manchukuo (Liu & Wang, 2012). First founded in 1906 by the Japanese, the South Manchuria Railway Company was equivalent to the East India Company in China.

Starting from the Yamato Hotel all the way down to the end of Renmin Dajie,

I was able to see various shapes and sizes of buildings including a library, a police station, a newspaper company, hotels, trading offices, and a post office built by the Japanese colonialists in the 1930s and early 1940s. Suddenly, I felt like I was walking down the crowded street of Xinjing in the 1930s filled with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean

speaking people. I could see the attempt made by Japanese colonialists to impose their vision of the future modern world onto their colonial subjects.

## A Dragon Well, Longjing

A taxi took me to Longjing City, which has many historical sites relating to the lives of Koreans during the Manchukuo period. In Longjing City, there was a well from which the city took its name. It was said that the well was found by a Korean sometime in the 1880s. The Longjing City is famous for the Korean poet Yun Dong-Ju, who was killed by Japanese police while studying at a college in Japan. Yun Dong-Ju was charged with “participation in the resistance movement” and sentenced to two years imprisonment. On February 16, 1945, about six months before the

end of World War II, he died in a prison due to chemical experiments that the Japanese police were conducting on prisoners during that time.

Wishing not to have  
so much as a speck of shame  
toward heaven until the day I die,  
I suffered, even when the wind  
stirred the leaves.  
With my heart singing to the stars,  
I shall love all things that are  
dying.  
And I must walk the road  
that has been given to me.  
Tonight, again, the stars are  
brushed by the wind.

Yun Dong-Ju wrote the above poem “Foreword” on November 20, 1941 when he was twenty-four (Richards & Richards, 2003). I often recited this poem during my adolescent years without having much knowledge about the poet, the historical circumstances of the time, or the geographical characteristics of his home in Manchukuo. Sadness, guilt, love, and all other kinds of complicated emotions simmering in the poem must have attracted my teenage sensitivities.

However, I have to say, it is only after I paid a visit to his hometown that I became aware of the origin of Yun’s sentiments inherent in his poems. He was singing the sorrow of Koreans living in Manchuria who were forced to leave their homes due to starvation or colonization. In an unfamiliar land,



*A classroom at Daesung Middle School where Yun Dong-Ju studied. (Author's Photo)*



they were harassed by the Japanese colonialists. Koreans were pushed to construct rice paddies as they struggled to survive and make ends meet. In Longjing, I could see the stars Yun Dong-Ju saw and feel the sharp wind that stirred his hair on a dark wintery night. I stood there for a while with my two feet standing against the ground of the Manchu plain just as Yun Dong-Ju did almost eighty years ago.

## Tumen and North Korea

Tumen is a small border city located right across the Namyang Workers' District of North Hamgyong Province in North Korea. The first site that I visited was the Tumen Border Bridge, which lies over the Tumen River. Originally built by the Japanese in



*Former Office of the Consulate General of Japan in Longjin where Korean Independence activists were arrested and tortured. (Author's Photo)*



*Renmin Street in Changchun. (Author's Photo)*



*A view from Ilsongjung in Longjing where Korean Independence activists used to gather. (Author's Photo)*





*A market area in Yanji selling Korean food. (Author's Photo)*

These North Koreans live under the fear of being sent back to North Korea where they would be detained in horrific prison camps, said to be rife with torture, sexual violence, forced labor, and other inhumane treatment. Because North Koreans have no rights or legal status in China, they cannot find jobs, which lead them to scrape by on the margins of Chinese society.

1941, the length of this bridge is 515 meters long and it connects to North Korea within a few minutes of walking.

It was strange to see the land of North Korea so close by. I remember all kinds of anti-communist education throughout my school age years and beyond while living in South Korea. I wondered if I would see any North Korean soldiers or civilians. There were a number of neat apartment buildings on the other side of the river but the whole area seemed to be deserted. I was not able to see anyone walking or standing along the river bank of the North Korean side.

I stopped at a shop next to the Tumen Border Bridge just to check out souvenirs that I might be interested in bringing back to the United States with me. The shop was filled with all kinds of





*Ethnic Korean Children's Choir in Yanji. (Author's Photo)*

items. What drew my attention, among others, were those that are from North Korea including the political badges, money, flags, household utensils, paintings, and antiques. However, there were almost no tourists in the shop.

I asked about the conditions in North Korea to the shop keepers and asked whether they had been to North Korea. But they all walked away from me as soon as I began asking questions. They seemed to be very reluctant to discuss anything related to North Korea. Later,

I was informed that there are many government agents in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and its surrounding areas including those from North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, and possibly from the United States. Some of these agents are even contract workers paid by one of the governments to collect information. The shopkeepers might have been suspicious of my identity as a person who spoke both Korean and English. They might have decided to not answer my questions for their own safety.

Before leaving Tumen, I went up to a Buddhist temple called Huayansi situated on the top of Riguang Mountain. I was told that the temple was built by the cooperative work between China and South Korea. The monks of the temple greeted me with warm smiles and told me that the colors of the temple buildings were done by Korean painters. Indeed, the colors and patterns used on each of the roof columns, roof tiles, and walls were the exact same ones that I used to see in South Korea. The late afternoon sun shone above the rooftop of a temple building while I was standing right in front of the main hall. What should I ask of the Buddha today here in Tumen right at the North Korean border? Should my prayers be for peace and harmony among us? The calm smile of the Buddha flowed into my imagination.

## Leaving Yanji

On June 19, 2017, I departed from Yanji International Airport at 10:00 in the morning. My time in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and Changchun was filled with wonderful experiences to learn about the lives of ethnic Koreans both in the past and in contemporary China. In Yanji and its surrounding regions, the agonies



*Shopping arcade in Yanji. Signs are written in Korean and Chinese. (Author's Photo)*



# There is much need to study the risk and resilience of North Korean people in China to find ways of ensuring their safety, rights, and well-being.

of the Korean people trying to make Manchukuo their new home left a deep impression on me. At the same time, I got to appreciate their resilience in cultivating the barren land of the Manchurian plain into fertile fields. Moreover, my visit to the Yanbian area was an opportunity for me to develop new research agendas. In addition to Koreans in Manchukuo during the early twentieth century under Japanese occupation, I saw the newer challenges associated with the lives of ethnic Korean people in contemporary China.

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Yanji City. (Author's Photo)