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(TRANS-)NATIONAL IDENTITY AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE KOREAN CHINESE COMMUNITY IN CHINA

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Society

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Zusammenfassung

Anhand von Beobachtungen und halbstrukturierten Interviews mit Studierenden der koreanischen Minderheit in China beschreibt dieses Papier die Ausprägungen von deren nationaler und transnationaler Identität über ihre erlebten Erfahrungen in China. Ihre nationale Identität weist auf die chinesische Dimension ihres Zugehörigkeitsgefühls hin, während sich der transnationale Aspekt ihrer Identität sich in Gebrauch und Wertschätzung sowohl der chinesischen als auch der koreanischen Kultur widerspiegelt. Die begrenzte Anzahl von Gesprächspartnern erlaubt keine generelle Aussage über die gesamte Gemeinschaft, erlaubt aber ein genaueres Verständnis des Sozialisierungsprozesses, den sie durchlaufen, und liefert Hinweise auf zukünftige Identitätstrends innerhalb der koreanischen Minderheit in China.

Abstract

By drawing from observation and semi-structured interviews with Korean Chinese university students, this research describes the articulation by Korean Chinese students of their national and transnational identity through their lived experiences in China. Their national identity indicates the Chinese dimension of their identity, whereas the transnationalism of their identity is reflected in their use and appreciation of both Chinese and Korean culture. The limited number of interlocutors cannot represent the whole Korean Chinese community, but nevertheless Korean Chinese university students provide a deep understanding of the socialization process that they are undergoing and highlight the future trends of identity within the Korean Chinese community.

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(Trans-)national Identity and Lived Experiences of the Korean Chinese Community in China

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1. Introduction

By drawing from observation and semi-structured interviews with Korean Chinese university students, this research describes the articulation by Korean Chinese students of their national and transnational identity through their lived experiences in China. Their national identity indicates the Chinese dimension of their identity, whereas the transnationalism of their identity is reflected in their use and appreciation of Chinese and Korean culture. The findings demonstrate that Korean Chinese national identity is rationalized by Chinese national narratives and that the Korean Chinese identity simultaneously supports the construction of national narratives. Additionally, their interactions with “the other” in daily life and a consideration of the differences and similarities between Korean and Chinese culture reveal that the national and transnational identities of the Korean Chinese students concerned are not contradictory. Instead, these identities are inextricably interwoven in a manner that adds to the community’s agency in breaking through the limitations of ethno-nationalism. The limited number of interlocutors cannot represent the whole Korean Chinese community, but, nevertheless, Korean Chinese university students provide a deep understanding of the socialization process that they are undergoing and highlight the future trends of identity within the Korean Chinese community.

2. Border Crossing and Identity

China is a multi-ethnic country with a population of over 1.3 billion, 91.51% of which are Han Chinese, while 8.49% are made up of ethnic minorities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Although ethnic minorities account for no more than 9% of China’s total population, the ethnic autonomous regions cover more than two thirds of the whole country (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011; The State Council, 1999). Among the 55 ethnic minorities, Koreans rank as the 14th largest ethnic minority in China (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The history of the Korean Chinese community (Chinese: *Chaoxianzu*; Korean: *Chosŏnjok*)¹ as a border-crossing ethnic group that migrated from the Korean peninsula to Manchuria can be traced back to the mid-19th century (Chaoxianzu jianshi bianxiezhu, 2009: 6). The formation of Korean Chinese identity is a dynamic process which is strongly influenced by the chronological transition of different historical periods in both China and South Korea.

¹ Korean Chinese are called *Chaoxianzu* (朝鲜族) in Chinese and *Chosŏnjok* in Korean. They are sometimes called *Chaozu* (朝族) for short in China.

Historically, Manchuria was a region that covered three present-day northeastern Chinese provinces: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. The Manchus, who established the Qing Dynasty in 1636², believed that Manchuria was their sacred homeland and prohibited the Han Chinese or Koreans from entering into the region. However, the tight border control did not stop Koreans from seasonally migrating to Manchuria to cultivate the fertile region. In the middle and late 19th century, the Korean peninsula suffered from political and social turmoil in addition to natural disasters. This led to the first exodus of Koreans, particularly from the northern parts of the peninsula to Manchuria. The migration swelled after the prohibition policy was lifted in the 1880s. Before the downfall of the Qing dynasty, various military powers were stationed in Manchuria and intended to wield their dominion over the Koreans. Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 resulted in a dramatic increase in migration to Manchuria by impoverished peasants and anti-Japan nationalists. It is estimated that over 459,400 Koreans were in Manchuria by 1920 (Chaoxianzu jianshi bianxiezu, 2009: 25). During its last ten years, the Qing dynasty allowed Koreans to naturalize only if they obeyed Qing's customs, while the Japanese authorities claimed that Japanese nationals, including Koreans, were not allowed to forfeit their citizenship (Park, 2005: 51–52; Sun, 2009: 289–291; Lee, 2001: 358). Moreover, the newly established Republic of China stressed that taking up Chinese citizenship was a prerequisite for land ownership and mandated that naturalized citizens must have revoke their other citizenship. Thus, Korean migrants were caught up in the middle of paradoxical citizenship policies that were devised by different regimes and were thus legally ambiguous (Piao, 1990). In 1932, Japan created a puppet state called Manchukuo and pushed Koreans to the forefront of its "osmotic expansion" into Manchuria (Park, 2005: 63; Lee, 2001: 360). However, no definitive nationality law could be referred to the Koreans during the short-lived Manchukuo era. Both Chinese and Japanese authorities claimed governance over the Koreans in Manchuria, and legal cases surrounding Korean migrants continued to generated conflict between the two authorities and among the Korean and Chinese communities. After the surrender of Japan in 1945, approximately one million of the over two million Koreans in Manchuria returned to Korea (Kim, 2010: 203). Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of Koreans that remained in Manchuria and those who returned to the Korean peninsula, the statistics left no doubt that millions of Koreans were

2 There are three distinctive viewpoints regarding the starting year of the Great Qing (大清): 1616, 1636, and 1644 (Li, 1995). In 1616, the Jurchen chieftain Nurgaci (努尔哈赤) declared himself Khan (King) and founded the Later Jin Dynasty (后金). He is referred to as the founder of the Qing dynasty in some studies (Crossley, 1987: 764). The heir to Nurgaci, Hong Taiji (皇太极)—the second khan of the Later Jin dynasty (后金)—changed his dynasty name to the Great Qing (大清) in 1636. Hong Taiji launched large-scale attacks into Ming territory. During his reign, he reorganized the Eight Banners (八旗) and centralized authority, while his reforms created vital premise for the construction and consolidation of Qing dynasty (Li, 2003). Moreover, Hong Taiji invented the term Manchu and declared that all his subjects should henceforth be called Manchus (Rigger, 1995: 187). In 1644, the Manchu troops finally conquered Beijing, the capital of the Ming Dynasty. According to Zheng (1981: 8), the period of Qing Dynasty could be defined differently from the perspectives of dynastic history, general history, and social development. To be consistent in this context, where the Manchus is the subject, the year of 1636 is selected in this paper.

involved in the border crossings, either out of active choice or as a passive response to the prevailing situation.

The border crossing and displacement experiences generated collective memories that facilitated the formation of “Korean Chinese” as a cohesive ethnicity. It is worth noting that the Korean Chinese community substantially contributed to paddy rice cultivation in Manchuria that benefits China even today. Moreover, many ethnic Koreans in China collaborated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and actively participated in the Chinese Civil War (Goma, 2006: 870). The participation of Koreans in the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War is also significant to understanding the formation of Korean Chinese identity. In 1952, the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region (hereafter Yanbian) was established, and it was changed to an ethnic autonomous prefecture in 1955. The first population census in China showed that 1,120,405 Koreans resided in China in 1953 (National Bureau of Statistics, 1954). The establishment of this ethnic autonomous prefecture helped the Korean Chinese to maintain their culture, ethnic language, and identity. However, their subsequent time in the New China was far from plain sailing. During the Anti-rightist Movement (1957–1959), the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the border crossing history and ethnic background of the Korean Chinese rendered them suspicious, particularly with respect to their loyalty to China. Consequently, many of them fled to North Korea (Park, 2017: 86; Kwon, 1997: 13; Min, 1992: 14). After the Cultural Revolution and during the Cold War, the border crossing by the Korean Chinese came to a halt, and this did not change until China opened itself to the outside world and the end of the Cold War era. The Korean Chinese are not natives of China. However, their border crossing history that has links with Manchuria, their contribution to northeastern China, and their participation in the war in cooperation with the communist party, shape the uniqueness of their ethnicity. The transformation of their identity from Korean migrants into an ethnic minority of China reflected a process which encompassed various historical events and the emergence of a collective identity. The hardship they experienced during wartime, their status as victims of colonialization, and their recognition by the government evoked their resonance with Chinese nationhood.

In 1992, the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea opened up the new era of transnational migration. In the late 1980s, the Korean Chinese began to visit their South Korean relatives. While they developed a nostalgic affiliation to their ancestral homeland before their return to South Korea, South Koreans also harbored feelings of sympathy for their long-lost brothers in China. However, this nostalgia and sympathy soon waned due to the harsh reality. Many Korean Chinese individuals brought herbal medicine from China and sold them in Korea. Some seized this as a new opportunity and made a good fortune but some committed crimes. In the job market, South Korean

employers preferred Korean Chinese workers over other foreign migrant laborers due to their Korean language proficiency. However, the Korean Chinese workers were primarily employed in unskilled occupation, being assigned jobs that were dirty, demanding, and dangerous. The illegalities that were committed by some of the Korean Chinese and their status as unskilled laborers have stigmatized their image in South Korea (Song, 2009: 291–292; Fang, 2013: 100–101). There were no co-ethnic outsiders in Korean society before the Korean Chinese returned to South Korea, and this made the public realize that the nation and the state are not necessarily identical. Though wages in South Korea are much higher than in China, Korean Chinese workers found themselves economically and socially marginalized. The more difficult challenges for the Korean Chinese in South Korea included the prejudice and discrimination they experienced from Korean natives. Thus, the Korean Chinese began reflecting on their identity and their relationship with their two different homelands—South Korea as their ancestral homeland and China as their natal homeland—and this reinforced their sense of belonging to China (Choi, 2016: 254–255; Kang, 2008: 115; Song, 2014: 441; Song and Takeshi, 2016: 102). The return of Korean Chinese to South Korea was facilitated by macro-economic and socio-political conditions that have prevailed in China and South Korea over the last few decades. During this time the Korean Chinese community has forged and sustained various social, economic, and political connections between China and South Korea, and transnationalism permeates almost every aspect of their lives.

Korean Chinese identity has a rich history, and various choices during each period of historical transition contributed to the formation of their hybrid identity over the time. This hybridity is better conceived of as a process than a description (Hutnyk, 2010: 60). Historically, they were not passive spectators, but cultivated their power of negotiation. The agency of Korean Chinese in navigating and weighing the different elements of their identity is therefore worthy of note and exploration.

3. A Note on Terminology

Since the 19th century, Koreans in China have been called different names, such as *Hanguoren* (韩国人, Korean people), *Chaoxianren* (朝鲜人, Chosŏn People), *Dongbei Chaoxianren* (东北朝鲜人, Northeastern Chosŏn people), *Hanqiao* (韩侨, Overseas Koreans), and others. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Yanbian Ethnic Korean Prefecture, *Chaoxianzu* (朝鲜族) became the official title for the Korean Chinese community in China. *Chaoxian* (朝鲜) refers to both the Chosŏn dynasty and Korean peninsula, while *zu* (族) means ethnic group. In the beginning, the term “ethnic nationality” was used to refer to the ethnic minority within China. However, the term

“nationality” in English also has legal implications, denoting the citizenship of a country, and not necessarily a membership of an ethnic group (Mackerras, 2003: 9–10). Due to the associations of nation and nationality with territorial and political sovereignty, the 56 *minzu* (民族) of China are today recognized as ethnic groups instead of nationalities to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding (Xu, 2009: 57). In the late 1990s, the State Nationality Affairs Commission was renamed the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (Ma, 2016: 206). In 2020, it was renamed again as the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (国家民族事务委员会). Meanwhile, the 56 ethnic groups comprise one Chinese nation which is called *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族) in Chinese. The concept *Zhonghua minzu* is a combination of two different concepts, *Zhonghua* and *minzu*. *Zhonghua* fuses two notions, “middle kingdom” (*Zhongguo* 中国) and “brilliant xia” (*huaxia* 华夏). Fei Xiaotong (1988: 167, as cited in Ma, 2012: 9) argued that the Chinese nation is one unity made up of diversity. At the upper level, it refers to the united Chinese nation. At the lower level, it encompasses a huge range of ethnic groups. *Zhonghua*, whose meaning is not expressed in territorial or political terms, allows for wide-range interpretations of the Chinese nation. The emergence and popularization of this term was also beneficial for policymakers, as the notion accorded them a certain amount of flexibility (Barabantseva, 2011: 38). In this way the Korean Chinese community simultaneously remained conscious of their ethnic origins and identified to a considerable extent as members of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*). Chinese national narratives also convinced individuals that the nation’s 56 ethnic groups are emotionally, territorially, and historically connected with one another.

4. A Literature Review on Korean Chinese Identity

There exists an extensive body of literature on the nature of Korean Chinese identity. In this section I will review a number of previous studies on Korean Chinese identity according to the different contexts in which this identity has been positioned. To start with, from a historical perspective, the border crossing experience cannot be neglected when examining the formation of Korean Chinese identity. Some scholars (Seo, 2006: 142 as cited in Xu, 2020: 94) have stated that the crux of the Korean identity is collective memory and cultural resonance. Heo (2011: 317) stated that collective memories and the nostalgia for the homeland serve as a solid foundation for preserving Korean Chinese ethnic identity, while Lee (2001) underlined that the historical links between Korean Chinese and Manchuria make them a distinct ethnic minority. Xu (2020) argued that, compared to political identification with the modern nation state, culture and kinship have a greater influence in shaping the Korean Chinese identity, and this is largely due to historical reasons. How historical events forged the distinct Korean Chinese identity was thus explored. For instance, Korean Chinese identity transformed from a clear

ethnic/national Korean identity when they first migrated to Manchuria into a hybrid identity over the course of anti-Japanese colonialism and the formation of New China (Song and Takeshi, 2016: 98). Kang (2012: 98) also wrote that, although the Korean-ness of South Koreans and the Korean Chinese stems from the same historical homeland, their identities have been fundamentally reconstructed due to social transformations.

In general, the ethnic and cultural identity of the Korean Chinese community has been well-maintained in China (Gao, 2010: 218; Kwon, 1997: 13). As for the influence of minority policy on the Korean Chinese, some scholars (Min, 1992: 9; Heo, 2011) have stated that the supportive minority policy, ethnic autonomous territorial base, and the unique migration background facilitate the successful maintenance of their ethnic identity in China. Due to their specific historic background and relatively short settlement in China as an ethnic minority, the Korean Chinese have not been fully assimilated into Chinese or Han culture. However, they have absorbed Chinese-ness into their culture to some extent (Kim, 2003: 102). Nevertheless, their concern regarding further or total assimilation into Han culture and their subsequent marginalization in Chinese society was also mentioned in Kim's study (2010: 113). Furthermore, with the improvement of population mobility and the urbanization of China since the 1980s, an increasing number of Korean Chinese individuals left Yanbian and migrated to either the capital metropolitan area or the eastern coastal regions of China. Worries regarding the dissolution of the Korean Chinese community and uncertainty surrounding the preservation of ethnic Korean identity were also noted (Kim, 2003; Kim and Kim, 2005; Kang, 2012). Although it is suggested that the experiences of Korean Chinese in China have largely politicized their dual national identity (Kang, 2008: 115), the culturally formulated Korean-ness and the politically represented Chinese-ness are not necessarily antagonistic with one another. As was exemplified in a survey conducted by Choi (2011: 26–27), regarding to the question "Which of the identity do you prefer, Chinese national or ethnic Korean?", 34.6% of the Korean Chinese informants chose Korean Chinese, 30.8% opted for Chinese national, and 23.1% thought that being Chinese and Korean Chinese were similar. Thus, among the given options, no specific identity is distinctly prioritized over the other.

Since the 1990s, the continuous migration of Korean Chinese to South Korea has shifted scholars' analytical gaze from the Korean Chinese and their identity in China to their migration experience in South Korea. Previous studies uncovered how the Korean Chinese reconfirmed their national identity as Chinese citizens only after they encountered discrimination and misunderstanding in South Korea (Lee, 2005: 120; Song, 2014). The Korean-ness of co-ethnic Koreans was hierarchically evaluated by the supposed horizontal nationhood—South Korea—on the basis of various economic and geopolitical factors (Seol and Skrentny, 2009). Korean Chinese have gradually shifted their ethnic values to become

more China-centered and have interwoven their fate with the fortune of the Chinese nation (Heo, 2011: 313). Moreover, Koreans from China are differentiated from those who never left South Korea, because Korean society understands the Korean ethnic identity and national issues to derive from the domain of Korean peninsula (Lee, 2005: 135–136). Only South Koreans can fully express the authenticity of Korean-ness, and thus the Korean Chinese are considered to be Chinese because they are not South Korean. However, procuring South Korean citizenship cannot guarantee that they will be considered to be Korean either (Park, 2009: 231). In order to survive in South Korean society, the Korean-ness and Chinese-ness of their identity may be either hidden or performed situationally. Korean Chinese can culturally identify with both Chinese and Korean culture but never be able to fully belong to either. They confirmed their Chinese-ness through their lived experience in China and reconfirmed it through their lived experience in Korea (Choi, 2014: 98). Korean ethnic identity has also greatly varied across generations. Korean Chinese students perceive South Korea rationally and objectively compared with the elder generation. They anticipate mutual understanding and reconciliation between China and South Korea (Choi, 2006: 8–9). For the younger generation, their national identity is Chinese, while their ethnic identity is Korean Chinese (Kang, 2012: 113).

Going beyond China and South Korea, some scholars (Kwon, 2013; Choi, 2016; Shin, 2016; Lee and Lee, 2015) have described Korean Chinese identity by reference to a third country, within a broader transnational context of global migration. Korean Chinese identity has also grown from a local to a regional level and is heading towards a global status, insofar as the Korean Chinese are becoming “East Asian Chosŏnjok,” “global Chosŏnjok,” “East Asian,” and “global citizens” with a cosmopolitan outlook (Choi, 2016: 260; Kwon, 2013: 56; Lee and Lee, 2015: 37).

In addition to heeding some scholars’ concerns over the dissolution of the Korean Chinese community and the weakening of Korean Chinese identity and their reflections on the reconstruction of Korean Chinese identity through encounters with “the other,” we may also note their assertions regarding the role of migration history in shaping Korean Chinese identity. Korean Chinese are not merely passively involved into the Chinese national narratives but are also actively weaving their personal and collective memories into the national narratives. Further, I embrace the notion that Korean Chinese identity should not be taken for granted as an ascribed identity but should be considered ethnic capital that can be situationally shaped, constrained, and accumulated by both the state and its ethnic members (Kim, 2019). A Korean Chinese individual is a member of both the Chinese nation and the Korean ethnic group. Their culture is neither purely Korean nor Chinese but an amalgamation of both (Heo, 2011: 319). The cultural formation of the Korean Chinese community entailed the combination of cultural influences from the Korean peninsula (ethnic identity) and from China (national identity) (Hong, 2010:

188). By being able to navigate through the commonalities and differences between Korean-ness and Chinese-ness, Korean Chinese have largely added to their agency in transcending the limitations of ethno-nationalism and creating their unique ethnic community and identity (Rui, 2009).

5. Data and Methodology

The data for this paper was collected through observation and semi-structured interviews. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with Korean Chinese university students in Yanji and Beijing, China, in July 2016 and January 2020. Four interviewees' narratives are analyzed in this paper. To preserve their privacy, all participants are referred to using pseudonyms. In addition, interviewees were provided with consent forms which explained the purpose of the interview. All the interviewed students have good Korean and Chinese language skills. They were allowed to use either *Chaoxianyu*³ or Chinese based on their preference, and all the cited narratives were translated into English. I contacted the student union of the university and used snowball sampling to recruit more interviewees. Each interview took approximately 30–90 minutes and the questions addressed their identification with the Korean Chinese community and the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) in daily life, their understanding of their national and transnational identity, and the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean culture.

6. Findings

6.1 Weaving the Personal and Collective Experiences into National Narratives

A national narrative involves extensive elements. While there are no consistent criteria to say what constitutes a national narrative, it may include national myths, values, cultures, religions, and so on, through which national membership is shaped. National narratives tell “concrete stories about dramatic events in the recent history or distant past of a nation” (Auerbach, 2010: 101) and these stories are embraced by the people of the nation. National narratives are powerful and necessary tools

³ The ethnic language of Korean Chinese is called *Chaoxianyu* (朝鲜语) or abbreviated as *Chaoyu* (朝语) in Chinese. It is generally acknowledged that there are three dialects in *Chaoxianyu*: *Hamgyŏngdo*, *Kyŏngsangdo*, and *P'yŏngando*. *Hamgyŏngdo* dialect is mainly used by the Korean Chinese living in Yanbian and the Mudanjiang area of Heilongjiang Province. *P'yŏngando* dialect is primarily used by the Korean Chinese in the middle and the east of Liaoning Province, and the southern Jilin Province. *Kyŏngsangdo* dialect is used mostly by the Korean Chinese in the northwestern and southwestern Heilongjiang Province, and some areas of Liaoning Province (Shen Huishu, 2012: 12). In view of the differences in accent and vocabulary between *Chaoxianyu* and the Korean language used by South Koreans, *Chaoxianyu* is adopted when referring to the Korean Chinese ethnic language in this paper.

that connect the nation's past, present and future while shaping national identity (Vasu, Chin and Law, 2014: 1).

As an ethnic minority, the identification of the Korean Chinese community with the Chinese nation is not unilateral but mutual (Liu, 2001). Koreans in China have long been portrayed as a "model minority," because they have been successful in maintaining ethnic education while simultaneously popularizing Mandarin. They were thus exemplified as a successful model due to their educational accomplishments (Gao, 2009: 17; Ma, 1953: 70). The Korean Chinese have maintained the highest college enrollment rate and the lowest level of illiteracy compared to other ethnicities with a population of over one million (Ma, 2003: 176–177). Their sense of belonging is influenced by the positive discourse regarding their contributions toward the improvement of agricultural productivity, achievements in education, and maintenance of ethnic culture and language. The seeds of their sense of belonging to both the Korean Chinese community and the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) were sown as far back as their childhood, both at home and in school. The curriculum taught in ethnic Korean schools is the same as that of Han Chinese schools but is delivered in *Chaoxianyu*. There is no specific Korean Chinese curriculum, except for the *Chaoxianyu* language course. However, all the interviewed students know their migration history extremely well. One of the students reported: "We do not have a separate Korean Chinese history class, but the elders and teachers always tell us about the history of Korean Chinese."⁴

As for Korean Chinese individuals, their expression of Chinese-ness is largely territorially based and emotionally bound to the Chinese nation through their participation in national celebrations. One of my interviewees, Okhyun, is a university student who majored in Korean traditional dance. She participated in a dance performance during the 2016 Spring Festival Gala that was aired on China Central Television. She noted: "The rehearsal hall was filled with dancers in traditional ethnic costume who were waiting for their turn. It was like a group picture for all ethnic groups. I am proud of being *Chaoxianzu* and I feel thrilled to perform at a national stage, especially during the spring festival, which is the most important festival for the Chinese."⁵ It is typical to have performances by ethnic minorities at national festivals or celebrations, and the overall representation of ethnic groups suggests a harmonious picture of a united nation. Additionally, it allows the members of these ethnic groups, particularly minority groups, to feel involved in the national celebration.

⁴ Interview with Seunghwa, July 2016 in Yanbian.

⁵ Interview with Okhyun, July 2016 in Beijing.

The hometown of Korean Chinese in China—Yanbian—is also known as the “hometown of education”. Akin to other ethnic minorities, the Korean Chinese community enjoys some preferential policies, such as university quotas. In order to increase their success rates in higher education, ethnic minorities are given the options to take the university entrance examinations either in their own language (*Min kao Min*)⁶ or in Mandarin Chinese (*Min kao Han*)⁷, in which case additional credits may be given to the examinees. Most of my interviewees entered university through *Min kao Han* exams. Having benefited from some of the ethnic policies, many said that they sought to repay society and that they felt a sense of responsibility to facilitate the development of the Korean Chinese community. The Korean-Chinese Students’ Center (KSC) is a student organization established in 2000 that aims to unite Korean Chinese university students by promoting information exchange and communication. It has organized an activity called “hometown visit” for 15 years. Every year, some Korean Chinese university students from Beijing are selected to visit a few Korean ethnic schools in the three northeastern provinces of China. They share their study experiences with the Korean Chinese high school students in those regions. The organizers of this activity claimed that they wished that the sense of responsibility could be passed on to younger Korean Chinese generations. Additionally, they hoped that their activity will not be limited to only Korean Chinese students, because they want to cooperate with other ethnic groups as well.⁸ Being able to think open-mindedly enabled the students to embrace more possibilities. The Korean Chinese community is well regarded by mainstream Chinese society for what are perceived to be their positive Korean contributes. These include, for example, being intermediators in Sino-Korean relationships and the potential unification of the Korean peninsula (Lankov, 2007: 6; Park, 2017: 170).

In the beginning of the 1990s, thousands of Korean Chinese migrated to Korea out of economic incentives to realize their Korean dream. Many of my interviewees belonged to transnational families. Their parents work in South Korea while they were taken care of by their grandparents in China. Although the remittances received from their parents have largely improved their living quality in China, few interviewees would chase the Korean dream again at the cost of separating from their family. To be completely involved in China’s developmentalism agenda, Korean Chinese students connected their aspirations for the future closely with that of China. With the recent economic

⁶ *Min kao min* (民考民) literally means ethnic minorities who take exams in their own ethnic languages.

⁷ *Min kao han* (民考汉) literally means ethnic minorities who take exams in Mandarin Chinese. In the college entrance examinations, ethnic minority students can choose to take exams in Chinese, while extra credits or other preferential policies may apply depending on the regions where the examinees are registered.

⁸ Interview with Hyunil, January 2020 in Beijing.

development of China, many of them have cultivated their Chinese Dream⁹, which reflects a more consolidated national identity among the younger generation. A quote titled “Yanbian Dream” from the Yanbian Museum said: “The future and the fate of Yanbian are inextricably linked with the country’s destiny and future. Only if the country develops can Yanbian achieve greater progress... we seek to constantly contribute to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” As already noted, Chinese national narratives rationalize Korean Chinese membership and are supported by them. The students thus demonstrate their identification with the Chinese nation through ethnic pride, responsibilities, and aspirations for the future.

6.2 Navigating between Chinese-ness and Korean-ness

It is generally acknowledged that there are 31 trans-border ethnic groups in China (Bai and Yang, 2010: 4, as cited in Ma, 2016: 200). Many of the trans-border ethnic groups had lost contact with their co-ethnics abroad. China’s economic reform in the late 1970s and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992 facilitated the population mobility of Korean Chinese both domestically and transnationally. When the Yanbian Ethnic Korean Prefecture was first established in 1952, the Korean Chinese community constituted 62.01% of the total population, yet their proportion decreased to 36.57% in 2010 (Piao, 2014: 160–161). A significant number of Korean Chinese had thus moved to either the capital metropolitan region or the eastern coastal cities of China. The mobility of the Korean Chinese has also resulted in increased intercultural interactions, in which commonalities and differences are navigated between them and other groups. How to balance between Chinese-ness and Korean-ness has been a part of their daily life.

Culturally speaking, in addition to collective memories, ethnic language plays a vital role in one’s ethnic identification (Choi, 2011: 26; Kwon, 1997: 13; Sun, 2016: 67). The language choice and proficiency of Korean Chinese students are brought to the fore in their articulation of Korean-ness and Chinese-ness. For example, Hyunil is currently a university student in Beijing. He was raised in Jilin city within Jilin Province. Hyunil’s grandmother has been taking care of him since he was an infant. His parents, like many Korean Chinese parents, have been working far away from him for years. Despite not growing up in a Korean Chinese neighborhood, Hyunil believed that he had skillfully mastered both *Chaoxianyu*

⁹ Chinese dream, *Zhongguo meng* (中国梦) in Chinese. It is a term elaborated in March of 2013 by Xi Jinping at the closing ceremony of the First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress. Chinese Dream means the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese dream is the dream of the people. It includes better education for the people, stable employment, higher incomes, social security, better medical and health care, housing condition improvement and better environment, et al. (China Daily, Background: Connotations of Chinese Dream, accessed on May 10, 2020, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014npcandcppcc/2014-03/05/content_17324203.htm).

and Chinese, until he attended university in Beijing. His bilingual skills brought him part-time job opportunities while made him aware of his lack of proficiency in both languages:

“I was very good at debating in high school, so I joined the university’s debating team. My limited Mandarin vocabulary and deficiency in fluency while debating made me realize that I cannot compete with my Han Chinese peers. However, when a Korean Chinese senior recommended me to a part-time Korean interpretation job, I realized that my Korean language was not as good as that of Korean students studying in Beijing.” (Hyunil, Jan 05, 2020)

The bilingual competence of Korean Chinese students has constituted cultural capital that has enabled to access more job opportunities. However, many interviewees expressed their regret that they were unable to master both languages proficiently. According to them, the most comfortable language is a mix of *Chaoxianyu* and Chinese. Their lack of proficiency in Chinese can occasionally generate a sense of alienation. For instance, an interviewee noted: “I sometimes do not get the punchline, and thus wonder why my roommates are laughing when we watch entertainment programs together. They are speaking the type of Chinese I do not understand. If I am in a taxi with my Korean Chinese friends and we speak *Chaoxianyu*, the taxi driver always asks if we are Koreans.”¹⁰

Most of the students I interviewed spoke excellent *Chaoxianyu*. However, over the last few decades, there has been a rapid decrease in the number of Korean ethnic schools and a sharp increase in the enrolment of Korean Chinese children in Chinese schools. The Korean language is thus becoming a domestic language, and more young Korean Chinese individuals are beginning to lack ethnic language skills (Choi, 2016: 249–251). Ethnic language has been an important marker of ethnic identity but not necessarily the only one. Students’ narratives suggest that cultural differences are often perceived in subtle interactions. It is a commonly known fact the Chinese nation is comprised of 56 ethnic groups. However, ethnic minorities know quite a lot about the Han Chinese, while the Han Chinese are relatively uninformed about the ethnic minorities. For instance, by investigating how ethnic minorities have been portrayed in secondary-level history textbooks in the 1990s and 2000s in China, Yan and Vickers (2019) found that Han-centric narratives dominate the main discourse of the examined textbooks. Knowledge of ethnic minorities is underrepresented in elementary textbooks (Chu, 2015: 474–475). Moreover, ethnic minorities are often considered to be exotic, colorful, and foreign (Chu, 2015: 477; Chu, 2018: 145; Gladney, 1994: 93). In the case of the Korean Chinese community, the first two Chinese characters of *Chaoxianzu* (朝鲜族) share a similar name with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (朝鲜民主主义共和国), which is usually called *Bei Chaoxian* (the North Korea,

¹⁰ Interview with Meiling, January 2020 in Beijing.

北朝鮮) in Chinese, and almost all interviewees recalled their experiences of being asked if they are from North Korea. This common experience reflects an asymmetric understanding between the Han majority and ethnic minority that may induce a sense of alienation among the Korean Chinese students. In a similar vein, all the Korean Chinese student interviewees have both Korean and Chinese versions of their names. Due to their cultural background, the characters selected for their names may quite differ from those for Han Chinese names, and this could be intensified due to their relatively uncommon family names. For example, Hyunil recounted one such experience in class: “It was a big *Maogai* class [an introduction to Mao Zedong’s thought and the theoretical system of Chinese socialism] which had many unacquainted students. The professor was taking attendance, and he singled out my name and sternly asked if I am Chinese. I felt very embarrassed.” (Hyunil, Jan 05, 2020)

It is important to note here that the interviewees did not feel discriminated against expressly, but they psychologically distanced themselves from the majority by having received unwanted attention due to their ethnicity. For an ethnic identity to take hold, the individuals need to be cognizant of the qualities that distinguish them from their surroundings. In other words, in addition to their surroundings perceiving the Korean Chinese as culturally distinct, the Korean Chinese themselves become acutely aware of their Korean cultural distinctiveness. Recounting her freshman year in university, a female student stated: “I hung out a lot with my new friends in my freshman year and many of them were Han Chinese. One day my sister said to me, ‘you have not been acting like a *Chaoxianzu* lately’” (Meiling, Jan 05, 2020). Here, it was either the friendship network or the way of spending leisure time that made Meiling look different from her sister. Another interviewee shared a similar point of view: “It is good to have communication with Han Chinese, but we should avoid being fully assimilated.” (Hyunil, Jan 05, 2020). Some of the interviewed students intuitively understood “the selves” and “the others” in thinking who we are (and who we are not) and who they are (and who they are not). This process of comparing and differentiating, to some extent, helps to confirm one’s ethnic identity. According to the results of a survey conducted in a village in Jilin Province (Lee, 2000: 100, as cited in Yoo, 2002: 9), the Korean Chinese community confirmed their ethnic identity through the discrepancies between them and the Han Chinese with respect to binary comparisons, such as neat versus messy, cultivated versus ignorant, and diligent versus lazy. This does not mean that the Korean Chinese are complacent and inflexible. Scholars (Chŏn, 1994: 201–213 as cited in Yoo, 2002: 82) have also pointed out that the Korean Chinese introspect, pay more attention to practical values, learn to be perseverant and organized, and try to establish mutual trust.

There seems to be a discrepancy between the previously held ethnic self-consciousness of the Korean Chinese community and the identity that is ascribed to them by the host society. Questions like “if

there is a football match between China and South Korea, which team will you support?" are far from strange to the interviewees. The interviewees' response is quite rational and calm. They are aware that their response will be interpreted as a political position rather than a reflection of their sporting preferences. This dialogue illustrates a stereotypical and often dramatized mindset which magnifies the differences between China and Korea. Such discursive positioning underscores the point that identity construction may be far from a neutral or benign process. It is invariably colored by emotions, moral judgments, approbations, and political or economic interests (Ybema et al., 2009). However, the students claimed to be able to cope with tricky questions due to the resilience and flexibility that they have acquired from their transcultural experiences. "In the end, we are all Chinese", one student concluded¹¹.

Besides the differences between Korean Chinese and Han Chinese or other ethnic groups, there are also differences within the Korean Chinese community itself in China. For example, Korean Chinese individuals still identify with their respective dialect group and are linguistically diverse. Hyunil said: "My grandparents originally came from Gyeongsang-do. I went to visit Busan in Korea and found that I have exactly the same accent." Similarly, another female student (Meiling) who came from Yanbian responded: "When Korean Chinese individuals arrive from regions outside Yanbian, we sometimes cannot tell if they are Koreans or Korean Chinese." The Korean Chinese community thus cannot be considered homogenous. One of the most representative groups is the *Yanbian Chaoxianzu*. The Korean Chinese students from Yanbian demonstrated a particularly strong sense of ethnic pride through their expression of their culture. Hyunil commented that "Korean Chinese from Yanji city have always received a superior ethnic education and have enjoyed a denser ethnic cultural environment. In addition to language, the Korean Chinese from Yanbian region have also preserved the traditional etiquette better than those from other regions in China." Therefore, differences exist not just between Chinese and Korean culture but also within the Korean Chinese community.

Note that the confirmation of Korean Chinese identity is not a blind pursuit of alterity. The similarities between Korean and Chinese culture are concomitant with the differences. Although the Chinese nation cannot be equated to the Han Chinese, the cultural attributes of the Han Chinese are an indispensable part of the Chinese nation. Confucian teachings strongly influence both the Korean minority and the Han majority (Kim, 2010: 107; Min, 1992: 5 & 13). Among the Confucian teachings, filial piety is an integral part of both Korean Chinese identity and Han Chinese identity (Li, 2015).

¹¹ Interview with Hyunil, January 2020 in Beijing.

Therefore, Korean Chinese identity emerges through the articulation of the similarities and differences between the self and the others. Continuously embracing the differences and searching for similarities enables the students to maintain a delicate balance between Korean-ness and Chinese-ness.

7. Conclusion

Korean Chinese identity has been a long-standing subject of scholarly enquiry. In this study, the articulation of Korean Chinese national identity is mainly reflected through its involvement in Chinese national narratives. The embodiment of Korean Chinese transnational identity lies in its navigation of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean culture. Previous studies have mainly focused on the Korean-ness of the Korean Chinese community and how it is evaluated in different contexts, while considering the Chinese-ness of their identity to be a national assignment. This study has elucidated the Korean Chinese engagement both individually and collectively in Chinese national narratives, including its past, present, and future. In addition, while it was customary to interrogate how the Han majority or the Chinese nation played a significant role in shaping ethnic minorities in China, the agency of these minorities was overlooked. This study reveals that Korean attributes facilitate the establishment of a strong internal sense of ethnic identity and fit harmoniously with the China's agenda of national developmentalism.

The experiences of Korean Chinese illustrate that transnationalism intensifies one's national identity. In the process of border crossing, the Korean Chinese exhibit two trends, of which one tends towards transnationalism, and the other towards greater nationalism. The case of the Korean Chinese falls somewhere between local/global and national/transnational contexts, and allows us to weigh the key concepts against each other and explore how they are interconnected. Studies on the Korean Chinese community have foregrounded the notion of hyphenated identities in which Chinese-ness and Korean-ness are constantly negotiated in an ongoing process, as the youth attempt both to position themselves within and to break through the limits of established social categories.

Unlike previous generations, the contemporary younger generation of Korean Chinese is part of an imagined community of global youth, whose attributes include mutable conceptions of identity and belonging. Additionally, they are expected to manage different aspirations and social contexts. In resisting being pinned down to any one category, Korean Chinese students are keeping their ties and options open.

8. References

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