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# Mobility–ethnicity nexus in the China–North Korea borderland of Yanbian: Migration infrastructure and multi-directional flows

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## Abstract

Chinese nationals who are classified as belonging to the Korean ethnic minority have become increasingly mobile since the 1980s in the China–North Korea borderland. Korean ethnicity plays a significant role in facilitating migration. This article unpacks the mobility–ethnicity nexus through the theoretical lens of ‘migration infrastructure’. To investigate how the borderland residents became mobile subjects as well as the processes intertwined with Korean ethnicity, the ensemble of technologies, institutions, and actors through which migration is reproduced and mediated are examined. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnographic study focusing on a rural community, this research analyses the multi-directional flows between the village, urban regions in China, and the two Koreas. Included are discussions on the changing state policies and regulations, diplomatic relationships between China and the two Koreas, growing migrant networks, brokers, family members, humanitarian organizations and other intermediaries that jointly organize and mediate mobilities, and the processes that are usually linked to evoking and redefining ‘Korean’ as an ethnic category. Ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure enables villagers to move, but throughout the move they are continuously perceived as ethnically Korean. *Mobility-sustained ethnicity* calls for research to look at how ethnic categories gradually become relevant in everyday life, and ultimately institutionalized as people move between places.

## Keywords

multi-sited ethnography, transnational migration in Asia, internal migration in China, *chaoxianzu*, *Chosŏnjok*, Korean diaspora

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Reflecting on two decades of literature on the Korean Chinese (朝鲜族) migration in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, the borderland between China, North Korea, and Russia, this is a good time to examine what type of 'migration infrastructure' makes the mobility of Korean Chinese possible and how the continuous flows have been sustained. Infrastructural perspectives shift the focus from migrants themselves to the other actors, such as NGOs, states, brokers, and family members who remain behind to facilitate migration.<sup>1</sup>

Previous research on Korean Chinese migration identifies complex, multi-directional movements facilitated by ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> As one of the 55 officially classified ethnic minorities in China, Korean Chinese have participated in large-scale migration to South Korea since the 1990s. This migration has been examined from multiple angles, including issues related to ethnic identification and the influence on both sending and receiving societies. For instance, their living and working conditions in South Korea, the impact of large influxes on the local society, and the visa policy changes affecting this population group have been extensively studied.<sup>3</sup> Inclusive immigration policies and social welfare schemes indicate that Korean Chinese are recognized as compatriots in China, but in South Korea where they are regarded as migrant workers, they experience marginalization and discrimination in their everyday life. In some cases, this has reinforced their Chinese identity.<sup>4</sup> Their national and ethnic identities and sense of belonging are often questioned in both countries.<sup>5</sup> Their precarious migrant status in South Korea sometimes forces immigrants to leave and return to Yanbian. Sometimes the shrinking income gap between the two countries and the unfavourable exchange rate brings emigrants back to the rapidly developing Yanbian.<sup>6</sup> However, many returning migrants also have difficulty with the rising cost of living in Yanbian, which pushes these once-migrant workers to search for new ways to go back to South Korea, making them circulatory migrants.<sup>7</sup>

Korean Chinese are part of the massive internal migration in China, a phenomenon which has caused the establishment of ethnic settlements in urban China where South Korean firms congregate, and Korean Chinese have been increasingly gaining political, social and economic influence in non-Korean autonomous areas.<sup>8</sup> Among Korean Chinese migrants are international migrants who move to South Korea as a first step to move on to other countries.<sup>9</sup> In a few reported cases, Korean Chinese have claimed to be North Korean defectors and they have sought asylum in European countries.<sup>10</sup>

In this study, I re-examine the Korean Chinese mobility–ethnicity nexus from a migration infrastructure perspective. I explore the ethnic infrastructural processes that turn Korean Chinese into a mobile population. Instead of researching aggregate patterns of migration in the receiving countries, I seek to identify how different flows are generated by the internal dynamics of ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure and the practices of multiple actors, which create and mobilize ethnic networks.<sup>11</sup>

The primary field site for the study is a rural community in Yanbian, a village that is about 10 km from the China–North Korea border. Almost everyone I encountered in Brookside (a pseudonym) had been a migrant worker before. Traditionally agricultural societies are usually associated with a sedentary lifestyle rather than high mobility. The rural community of Brookside was selected because of its four-decade history of multi-directional movements facilitated by its residents' Korean ethnicity. Beginning in the 1980s, villagers left their footprints in different places across Yanbian

Prefecture, in many major Chinese cities with Korean firms across the country, and on the Korean Peninsula. Some returned to Brookside to retire after working abroad for years or even decades. Others returned to become entrepreneurs or to pursue a political career.

Using an infrastructural approach, this study examines the mobility flows of Brookside residents to bring new insights into understanding the connections between mobility and ethnicity: how do Korean ethnic networks within the migration infrastructure organize, reproduce, and shape the mobility patterns, processes, and experiences of Brookside residents?; and how do the migration infrastructural processes reshape Korean ethnicity?

## **Theoretical framework: Migration infrastructure and ethnic framework**

To unfold the processes of Korean Chinese rural residents through which they become mobile subjects, this study uses the analytical lens of migration infrastructure – ‘the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility’.<sup>12</sup> While migration patterns can be diverse, unstable, fragmented and short-lived, ‘infrastructure retains a particular stability and coherence’.<sup>13</sup> The mobility of Brookside residents from Yanbian to other places is partly conditioned by the infrastructure, including human actors such as migrants’ family members remaining in Yanbian, border control officials in China, destination countries, immigration policymakers, NGO staff, and religious group members, as well as non-human factors and actors such as travel documents, cross-border regulations, migration laws, governing bodies, and organizational structures.

From an analytical perspective, Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist summarize five dimensions which describe various configurations within the migration infrastructure that enable, channel, mediate, and manage (im)mobility: (1) the commercial infrastructure comprising recruitment intermediaries (e.g. brokers) or migration industry; (2) the regulatory infrastructure involving the state apparatus and procedures for documentation, licencing, training and other purposes; (3) the technological infrastructure encompassing communication and transport; (4) the humanitarian infrastructure consisting of NGOs and international organizations; and (5) the social infrastructure deriving from migrant networks.<sup>14</sup> Examining migration through these lenses enables us to describe the changing empirical reality and to offer a framework to analyse the mobility from and to Brookside as a multitude of activities, practices, and technologies within specific contexts. Rather than interrogating state policies, the labour market, or migrant social networks, an infrastructural perspective focuses on how these five dimensions collide with and contradict each other. While the migration infrastructure in Brookside may not reflect every dimension, nor represent every infrastructural affordance in the community fully, the five dimensions are a starting point to investigate available infrastructures that make Brookside residents mobile.

Ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure is the analytical framework used to highlight Korean ethnicity as an important mediator in Korean Chinese migration. Ethnic networks have been widely reported as the most useful variable which enable Korean

Chinese to bypass state regulation.<sup>15</sup> These networks reduce the costs of acquiring information, facilitate adjustment in the host countries, assist in employment opportunities, and support immigrants' upward mobility in the host society.<sup>16</sup> This study examines the migration infrastructure, how it enables and sustains migration from and to the rural borderland.

Adopting a constructivist position to define ethnicity, the analytical differentiation between ethnic groups and ethnic categories becomes evident.<sup>17</sup> Research questions assume Korean as an ethnic category and ask how people living in the rural borderland and related organizations use Korean ethnicity in migration processes and how ethnic Korean is classified to channel and organize migration processes; and how the category of ethnic Koreans become institutionalized in various contexts and what the consequences are.<sup>18</sup> A constructivist approach leads to questions about how, why, and under what circumstances is the ethnic Korean identity used to articulate affinities and affiliations, as well as to form connections that enable mobility. Instead of treating ethnic networks as substantial entities, seeing the ethnic Korean category as one of the infrastructural affordances helps to focus on the processual characteristics of migrant networks and recognizes that ethnic networks are constructed, contingent, and fluctuating.

## Methodology

The research presented here is based on a 14-month multi-sited ethnographic study conducted mainly in Brookside between 2015 and 2018.<sup>19</sup> Participant observation of villagers' life was conducted during different seasons. Most of the villagers' ethnic minority status in China is Korean and the lingua franca is Korean. According to government records, nearly 200 households are registered in Brookside, but more than 75 per cent no longer live in the village. Data were collected on about 40 households in Brookside and with families that settled down elsewhere in China or South Korea. I participated in many of their daily life activities, attended festivals, documented daily conversations, and conducted semi-structured interviews. I travelled with villagers to South Korea when they visited their families and interviewed villagers who settled there. I lived in Brookside's homes in South Korea to conduct participant observation of their migrant life, documented their perceptions of Brookside, and the changing environment in Yanbian.

## Infrastructural migration processes facilitated by ethnicity and changes to Korean ethnicity

The following sections present the processes which enable rural Yanbian residents to become mobile subjects and the infrastructural processes facilitating these movements. First, I begin with ethnographic accounts of the ways that ethnicity facilitated and generated multi-directional flows over four decades. Second, I discuss constitutive relationships of different flows and temporary immobility to illustrate the kind of infrastructure that mediates both mobility and immobility, both of which are outcomes of the migration infrastructure. Third, I present analyses of how Korean ethnicity

serves as part of the infrastructure in different directional movements, and how the migration processes are intertwined in maintaining and transforming the classification of ethnic Koreans.

#### *Four major ethnicity-mediated infrastructural flows*

Traditionally, Brookside is an agricultural community, but the villagers have not been entirely bound to the land. Mobility has been the norm rather than the exception for some villagers even before migration became commonplace. During the highly regulated era of the collective economy, the village production team had allowed villagers to travel between villages and counties. For instance, Dong-Jun used to be one of the drivers in the production team and he began running a successful charter bus service during the period of the household contract responsibility system. Later he started a coal mining business and moved to several locations within Yanbian in search of good sources of coal. Another case involved a resident living in another village who walked to a neighbouring village and was caught by North Korean border patrols. When asked why he crossed the border without documents, he said, 'There are no cinemas in my village, but I wanted to watch a movie. There is a cinema in the neighbouring village, so I went there to watch a movie.' While I was unable to verify his account, I did hear similar narratives from multiple residents during my stay, which reveal that administrative zones and borders are not always clearly demarcated in everyday life. The two stories illustrate the mobility of villagers, albeit small in scope and scale. The scale and scope of movement from Brookside increased only when the migration infrastructure developed.

The more recent flows of residents illustrate that migration infrastructure allows for greater mobility. The first significant flow was internal migration in China. Historically, movement has been heavily regulated, but circumstances changed notably over the last decades. Shifting from collectivization and centralization of agricultural production, the household contract responsibility system created a surplus labour force, which in most rural areas accounted for 30–50 per cent of the nationwide rural labour force in 1985. This generated a large domestic migration flow from the farmlands to the industrialized areas.<sup>20</sup> In the wake of the nationwide rural system reform, Brooksidians were able to seek off-farm employment, but language remained a barrier because many lacked proficiency in Mandarin Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

In the same decade, China and South Korea gradually established closer diplomatic relationships, which led to a subsequent boom of South Korean companies in China. Many Korean-style restaurants sprung up near these companies and provided unique opportunities to Brooksidians since owners often favoured hiring Korean Chinese because of their proficiency in Korean and familiarity with Korean cuisine. For instance, Chan-Ri's relative worked at a Korean-style restaurant in Qingdao and introduced her to the restaurant owner. They helped with transportation and accommodation. After arriving in Qingdao, Chan-Ri became part of an extensive Korean restaurant network, which facilitated subsequent movements across the country from Shandong to Guangdong in the following years.

When state management of peasants changed, Brooksidians were able to leave their farms. They became increasingly mobile and were recruited by South Korean firms

and the related service industry operating in China. The state loosened internal migration regulation, and labour migration opportunities in different parts of the country became increasingly interwoven with a growing recruitment network built on a shared ethnicity. The ethnic network formed part of a growing migration infrastructure, which enabled and facilitated Chan-Ri and others to move from Brookside.

The second and largest flow of migrants is to South Korea. The development of regulatory and technological infrastructures in the 1980s and 1990s facilitated the growth of social and commercial infrastructures. While some Brooksidiers had relatives in South Korea, communications did not exist throughout the Cold War era. The establishment of a diplomatic relationship between China and South Korea restored communications between people searching for long-separated relatives in the two countries; family visas allowed family reunions and opened a path between Brookside and South Korea. Invitation letters from South Korean citizens were key in facilitating this newly opened path, but not all Brooksidiers had relatives in South Korea or managed to restore contact.

Chan-Ri's and Dong-Jun's accounts show how ethnic networks and recruitment intermediaries helped them to obtain invitation letters. Chan-Ri's father told her that he had two brothers who decided to return to South Korea in the 1940s and he never heard from them again. When South Korean radio programmes started helping South Koreans and Korean Chinese to find long-separated family members in the 1980s, she wrote to these programmes and listened to the broadcasts attentively. Not long after, she gave up finding her uncles and was recruited to work in Korean restaurants in Shandong and Guangdong. She worked hard and saved money during the time that commercial infrastructures connecting Korean Chinese with South Korean citizens with the same family names grew, which allowed distant relatives to obtain visas. Chan-Ri was approached by a broker from Brookside who sold her an invitation letter, which enabled her to obtain the first visa to enter South Korea.

Dong-Jun's coal mining business eventually failed because of a fatal accident of an employee. He wanted to leave Yanbian but did not find a way until his second daughter married a South Korean citizen:

I received a call from a friend who was living in the city. He said that there were two South Korean men travelling in China and they wanted to find *Chosŏnjok* wives. My second daughter was single, so I brought her to my friend's home. They met there and chatted, and they found each other suitable. They got married in China soon after and then moved to South Korea. My wife and I applied for a family visa to attend her wedding in South Korea. The visa allowed one to stay for three months. We stayed until the visa expired. Then we didn't know how to apply for an extension. We worked illegally in South Korea for 11 years afterwards.

Social and commercial infrastructures play an important role in obtaining the invitation letters from South Korean citizens, which enable people such as Chan-Ri and Dong-Jun to obtain a visa to go to South Korea. However, working there without a legal permit places Brooksidiers in a vulnerable position. When Chan-Ri arrived in South Korea, she was strictly managed by the broker's business partners and forced to work long hours in a restaurant in Daerim-Dong, Seoul's Chinatown. Her family in

China later negotiated a deal and paid the broker, and she was finally on her own. In the following years, she located the descendants of her father's brothers and worked in a local factory in a newly built industrial city. When we met in South Korea in 2018, she had already been working there for more than 15 years and had obtained a permanent resident card. Although migration has become more regulated, and technological, commercial, and social infrastructures more available, the cost of migration to South Korea is still high. Since their migrant status remains precarious, only a few Brooksidiers are able to move to South Korea.

The flow to South Korea became significant with the relaxation of the regulatory infrastructure, which opened legal and convenient paths to work in South Korea when the regulations requiring family ties were lifted in the 2000s. Humanitarian and social infrastructures were important in facilitating these regulatory changes. In addition, Korean Chinese migrant networks spread throughout the country, NGOs and churches provided shelter and legal support, and migrants fought for legal work permits and resident status.<sup>22</sup> South Korea's labour shortage also contributed to its government recognizing Korean Chinese as overseas Koreans in the first decade of the new millennium as part of the family visa scheme. This kinship/ethnicity-based visa enables Korean Chinese to engage in most employment activities. The application process has been simplified, and Brooksidiers only have to provide their Chinese citizen identity cards, on which their ethnic category (Korean) is stated. Proof of relatives in South Korea or an invitation letter is no longer required. In 2009, Hei-Ran obtained this type of visa after her husband had passed away and she moved to South Korea. She decided to leave Brookside and the sad memories behind. She was over 60 years old and was exempted from submitting proof of proficiency in Korean and from obtaining a clearance of criminal records certificate for her F-4 visa application. She took a direct flight from Yanji to Seoul without a concrete plan. When she arrived, she started going through local newspapers and soon found a farming job, which she held for eight years.

Along with developing regulatory, social, technological, and humanitarian dimensions of migration infrastructure, Brooksidiers find it unprecedentedly simple to move to South Korea, particularly for those over 60 years of age. However, there are additional requirements placed on younger Brooksidiers in their application for the F-4 visa for the first time, such as proof of Korean proficiency and a national technical qualification certificate. Numerous group chats on instant messaging apps such as WeChat and Kakao Talk provide information about job opportunities. Most Brooksidiers no longer have to hire a broker, which significantly reduces the cost and they can switch jobs more easily without having to engage one.

Two exceptions involving commercial intermediaries were observed during the fieldwork carried out, which underline their ongoing importance. Like Dong-Jun and his wife, Brooksidiers overstaying their visas in South Korea are blacklisted by the immigration department. After returning to Brookside, Dong-Jun's visa application was rejected three times in spite of his South Korean son-in-law's invitations. Over time the services of visa agents have emerged as a means to help solve these issues. These visa agents post advertisements for their services, an example of which reads: 'Korean Chinese who violated the law in South Korea and can't obtain a new visa can change their names and



hairstyle for a new application.’ The services offered by commercial intermediaries bypass some restrictions.

Another type of commercial intermediary common in Korean Chinese communities in South Korea is illustrated in the following account. Song Yun’s husband is an F-4 visa holder working in a local company, which granted her an F-1 visa for two years without a work permit. However, she still manages to get a job in local restaurants through her cousin. The first time I met her in 2017, she showed me the restaurants she had worked in, and she wanted to expand her network to include more restaurants to work more shifts and negotiate a better hourly rate. The second time I visited her in 2018, her F-1 visa was due to expire in less than one year and her focus had shifted to obtaining an F-4 visa. On a Sunday, we visited a reputable school that prepares immigrants for national technical qualification exams. While more than 100 types of skills meet the requirements of an F-4 visa application, this school specializes in providing training for four occupations in the printing, laundry, mushroom farming, and bread baking sectors. When Yun visited the centre, a group of students were watching videos showing mushroom farming techniques. She inquired about tuition and for suggestions on exams most suitable for her. Toward the end of my visit, she was busy preparing for the language proficiency test, but had not yet decided which skill she wanted to learn.

The third infrastructural flow is between Brookside and North Korea. According to oral accounts, Brooksidiers travelled between Yanbian and North Korea from the 1980s until the early 2010s. Since the 1980s, a regulatory change has enabled people to visit their relatives on the other side. Brooksidiers used this opportunity to conduct trading. Ji-Hun, a male Brooksider in his sixties said:

I went to North Korea frequently in the 1990s. I went to Pyongyang by bus, and I slept on the bus for days. My friends and I went together, and we bought things back and sold them in China. I also went to Rajin frequently a couple of years ago. They had good stuff before, but not anymore, so I stopped bringing back things.

Hei-Ran recalled that in the 1980s, her mother used to be a petty trader: ‘We had better cloth, shoes, and some other stuff so she brought those things to North Korea and sold them there. She also bought seafood such as pollack to sell here.’ Unlike Hei-Ran, Ye-Jun who was in her fifties thought that North Korea used to be a leader in fashion. Her relatives from the other side visited her family in the 1980s and they brought her the first pair of high heels. At that time, North Korean shoes were considered fashionable in Yanbian, and high heels were rare at the local markets. There were also Brooksidiers who frequented casinos in North Korea because gambling is illegal in mainland China.

These accounts show that when Chinese and North Korean citizens are allowed to obtain travel permits to visit their relatives, people move across the border of the two countries and utilize these visits for other purposes. Both the regulatory and social intermediaries enable the flow between Brookside and North Korea. People on both sides of the border speak the same language, and many of them also have family ties, which help them develop a trading network across the border.

The fourth flow is the return migration to Brookside. The Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture government worked on attracting emigrants to return in recent years to tackle numerous problems created by outmigration. These problems include the shrinking and ageing population, lagging regional economic development, and national security in the frontier region adjacent to two other countries. The ethnic minority population dropped from 62 per cent in 1952 to less than one-third of the population in 2010.<sup>23</sup> If this trend continues, the ethnic autonomous prefecture in Yanbian that was established in 1952 might eventually cease to exist.

The impact of outmigration on rural communities such as Brookside is particularly significant as shown by the rapidly shrinking population.<sup>24</sup> Two main infrastructural changes motivate some Brooksidiers to move back to the village – the policies on the ‘construction of new socialist countryside’ and ‘returning to hometown and starting entrepreneurship’. Part of the construction policy in Yanbian involves the demolition of dilapidated houses and building new communities in the largely deserted settlements. Brooksidiers, who had left but whose hukou are still tied to the village, have to return in person to apply for the subsidies. This regulatory initiative has prompted several Brooksidiers to leave South Korea and to retire in Brookside.

The other policy includes a series of measures to encourage emigrants – particularly those from South Korea – to return to Yanbian to start businesses; the prefecture government encourages migrants to use their experiences and networks gained in South Korea to start businesses in Yanbian.<sup>25</sup> Some younger Brooksidiers return for these opportunities to be entrepreneurs. These younger returnees also run for village government office. Since there are very few younger Brooksidiers in the village, almost every one of them holds an official position. In these positions, a few aspire to advance in regional government and become recruitment intermediaries to facilitate the return of other Brooksidiers. Dong-Sun, the village mayor, went to South Korea in his early twenties and worked there for more than 15 years. He recently returned to Brookside and began several agricultural projects, namely black fungus cultivation and blueberry farming, which include developing the village economy and offering ‘ethnic minority specialities’. He is also active in other village affairs. After being elected village mayor in 2016, he pursued his business ideas, hoping to recruit overseas Brooksidiers to revive the village economy. Other returnees support his ideas, but the village government still lack the workers to realize Dong-Sun’s grand plan. He has talked to overseas Brooksidiers and has travelled to South Korea to persuade them: ‘In South Korea, they are working hard for other people, but if they come back, they can become entrepreneurs.’ However, he is not able to create a significant return migration flow. Counter-narratives circulating among the Brooksidiers’ network in South Korea lead to doubts and distrust of the village government. Rumours include accounts of return villagers who had formed a dubious shared-interest group that hinder opportunities for other entrepreneurs to thrive. Skeptical Brooksidiers believe that the preferential policies and subsidies usually benefit only ‘a handful of smart individuals and that they face an unfair situation’.

### *Constitutive relationships of flows and infrastructural immobility*

I have shown aspects of an ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure that facilitated and shaped mobilities of Brooksidiers over the last four decades, in addition to the collision

and contradictions of different dimensions that led to changes in volume and direction of migration flows. Past inter-relationships between different flows facilitated future movements. This finding strongly suggests conceptualizing Korean Chinese migration as a web of circulation rather than as a one-directional movement.

For many Brooksidiers, being a part of the internal migration flow makes future migration to South Korea possible. Earlier migration infrastructure facilitated migration to the surrounding cities of Yanji, Shenyang, and Changchun, as well as the large coastal cities of Shenzhen, Xiamen, Qingdao, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Some Brooksidiers (e.g. Chan-Ri and Dong-Jun) accumulate financial capital by using commercial intermediaries that expand their social networks to move abroad. Similarly, the past mobility of a family member sometimes influences the mobility of other family members in the future. Ji-Hun, who engaged in the China–North Korea border trade, used his earnings to buy apartments for his children, enabling them to settle down in South Korea. The children work in white collar jobs rather than in jobs involving hard labour, which is the migration experience of most Brooksidiers. For Ji-Hun, South Korea’s social welfare is the reason for sending his children there. Recognizing that life is much more predictable in South Korea, he explained, ‘My children won’t make it here.’ When I was in South Korea, I visited one of his children and grandson. They had all obtained citizenship.

Ji-Hun’s family story illustrates the complexity of the migration process across multiple generations. While Ji-Hun thought his children’s personality to be unsuitable for his business and that they were unlikely to replicate his business model, he finds that the infrastructures have changed over the years, enabling cross-border trading. As cross-border trading becomes more legal and formal, petty traders without sufficient capital are excluded but the increased regulation also reduces profits. Prior to the regulations, Brooksidiers had no problems applying for visit permits to seek business opportunities and they enjoyed more flexibility. By comparison, new regulations drawn up by multiple institutions from both countries for the Rason Special Economic Zone to facilitate cross-border trading have changed prospects for Brookside traders.<sup>26</sup> Although the technological infrastructure has developed alongside regulation and increased the number of buses that bring people from Yanji to Rason, this formal channel is less profitable, and the flow of Brookside traders has come to a halt.

The Rason Special Economic Zone illustrates that mediators in the migration infrastructure can both facilitate and disrupt mobility, which leads to my next finding – that migration infrastructure mediates immobility. Crossing the China–North Korea border has become regulated in the past two decades. In 2017, I observed the installation of cameras in the village and frequent patrols near the border, both of which stopped illegal crossing from North Korea. The General Station of Immigration Inspection sent every Brookside household information on border regulations, the consequences of illegal crossing or sheltering North Koreans, and encouraged villagers to report any suspicious strangers or activities. Local media reported incidents of borderland residents being robbed and injured by North Koreans. One Brooksider I interviewed recalled a friend who was stopped by border patrols many times because they suspected him to be North Korean. He was relatively short, slim with dark skin, which fits the stereotype of male North Koreans growing up during the famine in the 1990s.

The impact of regulatory changes demonstrates that the migration infrastructure can both facilitate as well as constrain mobility. The different flows indicate that mobility and immobility are intertwined.<sup>27</sup> Various dimensions of the migration infrastructure that mobilize Brooksidiers are sometimes 'different logics of actions' colliding with and contradicting one another, which produce new modes of mobility.<sup>28</sup> The interplay of these dimensions not only generates different directions and volumes of flows over time, but it also mediates the decrease of certain flows and even a possible end. Since the 2000s, the visa regulation in South Korea has become friendlier toward Korean Chinese, making job stability and financial rewards more promising.

Changes in volume or directions of one of the flows may cause other flows to decrease or disappear, ending mobility from certain areas. Shifting migration networks discourage people from trading across the China–North Korea border today and redirect the flow to South Korea. Another example of migration infrastructure-mediated immobility is Chan-Ri's husband Min-Jun, who had planned to go abroad before Chan-Ri went to Shandong. He found a broker who promised him a job in Singapore. The family used their savings to pay the broker, but the broker disappeared. After losing all their savings, neither Chan-Ri nor Min-Jun was able to move, and they experienced involuntary immobility.<sup>29</sup> Dong-Jun was blacklisted and his visa application to South Korea was rejected three times. Song Yun experienced another case of temporary immobility. Although she was applying for the F-4 visa, South Korea was not her destination. She had been considering migration to Singapore and other countries for potential job opportunities and became temporarily immobile in South Korea while in the process of deciding on the next move. Commercial intermediaries and regulatory authority were constraints on Min-Jun's and Dong-Jun's movement. Each of these cases illustrates that temporary immobility is sometimes part of the migration process.

### *Mobility-sustained Korean ethnicity*

Societal transformation since the 1980s has resulted in the increasing mobility of Brooksidiers, with migration becoming the norm for many. Intersecting ethnic networks and cross-border regulations provide more means for mobility: visiting relatives in North and South Korea, working in Chinese cities with South Korean companies, and ethnic minority preferential policies which motivate migrants to return to Yanbian. When Brooksidiers make use of their Korean ethnicity and mobilize ethnic networks to move, the classification (Korean Chinese) becomes significant in their migrant life, and they (re)create and maintain their membership in the Korean ethnic category. States, brokers, and humanitarian organizations are among the intermediaries in the migration infrastructure, which also contribute to defining and redefining Korean ethnicity to facilitate migration.

As peasants speaking only Korean and living in the periphery of the country, Brooksidiers faced difficulty in the early period of internal migration in China. They encountered language barriers and mobility regulations similar to those surrounding international migration: they moved away from ethnic minority regions where Korean is the lingua franca to other places in the country dominated by Mandarin Chinese speakers. But the neighbourhoods that developed around South Korean companies in

Shandong and Guangdong demanded Korean-speaking labour, which facilitated the ethnic network-mediated migration infrastructure in the migration from Brookside to urban areas in China. Similarly, this preference for South Korea compatriots may have contributed to the state regulations favouring Korean Chinese workers. The significance of Korean ethnicity in everyday life is reinforced by the migration between Brookside and the Korean Peninsula.

Nonetheless, Korean ethnicity is considered an ethnic minority status in China. The prefectural government ties financial incentives to ethnic minority status and tailors preferential policies to ethnic minority Koreans. Korean ethnicity in Yanbian functions as an advantage in the regulation of housing subsidies. Although policies do not specify the ethnicity of homeowners, in practice households registered as Koreans are prioritized. Brookside features newer, stable housing compared to villages populated by Han Chinese. The contrasting housing accommodation is quite obvious in the neighbouring village Valley (pseudonym): two newly built ethnic Korean settlements are clean, and the houses are new and identical; whereas the existing Han settlement contains a mixture of different housing types and designs, including ramshackle houses.

These findings show the significance of Korean ethnic networks in the migration infrastructure that facilitates migration to the ethnic homeland, internal migration in China, and return migration to Yanbian. Being Korean is associated with different practices mediating different flows, suggesting the presence of two categories of Koreans: overseas co-ethnics from South Korea and North Korea and the Korean ethnic minority in China. In the migration processes, the state, brokers, and migrants treat Korean ethnicity 'according to different agendas and with asymmetrical resources and power at their disposal'.<sup>30</sup> In this context, Korean ethnicity is a facilitator of mobility because it is embedded in the migration infrastructure, which both maintains and transforms ethnic identity.

## Conclusion

The migration trajectory of many Brooksidiers is full of twists and turns. While people move to different places, opportunities or crises sometimes force them to move back and forth. As Dong-Jun explained after the fatal accident in his coal business, he felt he had to go: 'I am doomed here. It's time to leave.' Forming in-law ties with South Korean citizens afforded him an opportunity to migrate to South Korea. Two decades later, he was attracted back because of the rural housing subsidies available to ethnic minority Koreans in Yanbian. Such experiences provide insights into rural residents becoming mobile subjects by resorting to the ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure in response to rapid societal transformations.


While decisions to move are often perceived as motivated by individual aspiration, mobility and movements are also mediated and constrained by changing migration infrastructure.<sup>31</sup> What makes people leave and return to Brookside is closely related to national policies, geopolitical changes, emerging migration intermediaries, economic and social environments, state (ir)regulations, and other actors. Over time, these factors and actors both coordinate and collide, which generates different directional flows and volumes of migrants. The changes in the migration infrastructure of the village generated different mobility trajectories in the last 40 years. These flows

mediate each other and various infrastructures occasionally mediate temporary immobility.

By using an analytical lens that focuses on regulatory, commercial, social, technological, and humanitarian dimensions that condition and mediate mobility, we re-examine the Korean Chinese mobility–ethnicity nexus. The ethnicity-mediated migration infrastructure not only turns Brooksidiers into mobile subjects, but also subjects people to processes of ethnicization. As part of the migration infrastructure, the Korean ethnicity category is defined, refined, shaped, and reshaped in the migration processes. When ethnicity becomes significant in migrants' everyday life, it affects the understanding, interpretation, and the performance of Korean-Chinese ethnicity. Ethnicity defines mobility, and vice versa, mobility redefines ethnicity.

Many Brooksidiers are still on the move today, including those working in South Korea. Some are hoping to move further to places such as the United States, Europe, Japan, and Singapore. In these hopes, they share a 'would-be-migrants' mentality – a constant status of 'preparing to go abroad' in Northeast China.<sup>32</sup> The reconceptualization of the migrant flow from the rural Chinese borderland offers important policy implications for borderland governance. To comprehend the issues underlying the shrinking and ageing population in Yanbian, future studies must investigate outmigration from Chinese rural communities in northeast China as an infrastructural process.<sup>33</sup> Policymakers should shift their attention from the identity issues of cross-border ethnic minorities to more fundamental problems. Beyond identity confusion or dichotomous national and ethnic sentiment, outmigration is often the consequence of life's hardships, scarce resources, and emerging opportunities.

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## Notes

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