Over the past twenty years or so, illegal migration across the China-North Korean border has almost always meant North Koreans fleeing to China. A generation earlier, however, the movement was usually in the other direction: ethnic Koreans from China migrating to North Korea to escape poverty, social dislocation, and ethnic discrimination. Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia analyze this earlier migration, focusing on the period from the outbreak of the Korean War to the early 1960s, based on extensive research in Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives as well as numerous Chinese-language secondary sources. This story, virtually unknown to the English-reading public, offers a new and fascinating perspective on the complicated and sometimes fraught relationship between China and North Korea, as well as China’s nationality policy in other border areas and the current problems of Sino-Korean relations.

Shen is the premier scholar of Cold War history in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with a particular interest in China-North Korea relations and the Korean War. These are still very sensitive subjects in today’s China, and Shen’s meticulous work in Chinese and Russian sources has often challenged Beijing’s official narratives about Chinese foreign relations in the early Cold War period. In collaboration with U.S.-based historian Yafeng Xia, Shen has recently published a number of articles on Chinese foreign relations in the 1950s and 1960s, making especially good use of the partially opened archives of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CMFA). The article under review digs deeply into the CMFA records of the 1950s and 1960s, offering a new perspective on the Chinese perspective on cross-border migration.


places PRC policy toward China’s Korean minority in the context of Beijing’s foreign and nationalities policy and the history of ethnic Koreans in China, which long predated the People’s Republic.

Shen and Xia trace Korean migration to China to the 1880s, when foreign pressure and domestic weakening led the Qing government to open up the Northeast region – formerly restricted to the ruling Manchu people (hence the Western term ‘Manchuria’) – to settlement by Han Chinese from China ‘proper’ and Koreans from across the Yalu and Tumen rivers in Korea. For several decades, the legal status of Koreans in Northeast China was ambiguous, and most did not take Chinese citizenship during the Qing and Republican periods. After Japan colonized Korea in 1910, and especially after the pro-Japanese state of Manchukuo was carved out of Northeast China in 1932, the number of Korean immigrants greatly expanded. In 1910, there were some 109,000 Koreans in Northeast China; by the time Japan surrendered in August 1945, there were more than two million. The highest concentration of ethnic Koreans in China, roughly 635,000 in all, resided in the region on the Chinese side of the Tumen River known as Yanbian. This area today is the Yanbian Korean Nationality Autonomous Prefecture of Jilin Province, established as such in 1955.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took a flexible approach to the legal status of Korean residents immediately after the end of World War II, and the majority of Koreans supported the Communists in the civil war, helping to consolidate CCP rule in the Northeast – a critical front for defeating the Nationalists and establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Even after the Democratic People’s of Korea (DPRK) and PRC were established in 1948 and 1949, respectively, Koreans went back and forth across the Sino-Korean border with little regulation, and many ethnic Koreans from China joined the Korean People’s Army of North Korea. By 1950, however, the Northeast Bureau of the CCP tried to establish the legal status of ethnic Koreans, and in 1953 the CCP Central Committee affirmed that Koreans who had resided in China before the PRC was declared on 1 October 1949 could be Chinese citizens if they wished. Thus the status of “Chinese citizens of Korean nationality” was established, among the first Chinese minority nationalities to be recognized. Although Shen and Xia only mention it in passing, North Korea granted similar minority rights to ethnic Chinese in the DPRK (141). The fate of North Korea’s Chinese minority, in what became an aggressively ethno-nationalist DPRK, remains something of a mystery.

Both China and North Korea tried to consolidate their borders – legally and geographically – in the 1950s and early 1960s. But illegal border crossing was a serious problem, at least for China. In the late 1950s, economic conditions in North Korea were relatively good, and thousands of ethnic Koreans migrated illegally from China, Beijing’s protests notwithstanding. The movement was greatly accelerated by the disastrous economic consequences of the Great Leap Forward policy of 1958; according to CMFA documents cited by Shen and Xia, over 29,000 Koreans crossed illegally from Liaoning and Jilin Provinces between January 1961 to March 1962; by May 1962 that number had risen to 55,000 (150-51). In addition to economic hardship, ethnic discrimination and lack of sensitivity to Korean culture and customs motivated ethnic Koreans to leave the PRC (151). At first, the DPRK welcomed these migrants as help to alleviate North Korea’s perennial labor shortage (North Korea was also bringing tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans from Japan at the time),

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but the Pyongyang government grew concerned about large numbers of unskilled, unsettled newcomers from China. In 1962, the North Korean foreign ministry chastised China for failing to police its Northeast border, and China took steps to discourage illegal emigration; by the latter part of that year, the “mass exodus of Korean residents” had been staunched (156).

Presumably due to the lack of accessible PRC sources after the end of 1965, Shen and Xiao unfortunately do not cover the next big wave of Korean migration, during the early Cultural Revolution period (1966-1969). These years represent the nadir of PRC-DPRK relations, when armed clashes even erupted across the border. Ethnic Koreans, like other Chinese minorities, suffered disproportionately from the political extremism and xenophobia of the Cultural Revolution. Many fled across the border to North Korea, possibly even more than fled the Great Leap Forward famine. One can hope that someday scholars will have access to the records of the late 1960s, but given the political realities of the PRC, that day is not likely to come soon. In the meantime, Shen and Xia have shed valuable light on the history of one of the most critical and opaque relationships in East Asia.


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