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Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands

Edited by Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer,
and Alessandro Rippa

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Evaded states

Security and control in the Sino–North Korean border region

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Introduction

The Chinese–Korean border county of Changbai comprises part of the easternmost frontier of the People’s Republic of China, and of Jilin province. Changbai means ‘ever-white,’ a nod to Chanbaishan (‘ever-white mountain’), the symbolically loaded and active volcanic peak a few rural hours’ drive to the north and east from the county centre. Here, the waters of the Yalu River are cold and narrow, and North Korea is a stone’s throw, or a lusty shout, away. While there are certain spiritual energies shared with the Koreans across the river, on its northern bank the Chinese do not appear to acknowledge that the Koreans have different names for the mountain (Paektu) and the river (Amnok) than do the Chinese. Such overlapping linguistic maps can play to the advantage of local tourism officials in Changbai, who would prefer the county to be known best as a launching-point for expensive junkets by South Korean tourists up to Changbaishan (Mount Paektu). But Changbai’s placement on the mental map of most external observers is decidedly more dark, due to its twin city across the river – Hyesan, a city known best for its export of methamphetamines, illegal border crossers, and rogue North Korean border guards.

Hyesan is on the physical periphery of Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Ryanggang province. But in the North Korean context, Hyesan is more powerful than its geography might indicate: it is the political, cultural, and economic centre of Ryanggang province (Kim Jong-il 1968). It is therefore the focal point of state security, trade relations, and is a hub of Korean People’s Army (KPA) activity. There may not be a great deal of trust in Chinese comrades across the Yalu River, and there is certainly official encouragement from Pyongyang to inculcate perceptions of the danger posed by China as a source of ideological and cultural contamination of North Korean youth (Korean Central News Agency 2017).

More measurably, there may also be a dearth of food for the KPA and border guards around the city. On 18 September 2015, reports emerged of a Chinese smuggler or individual shot at from across the border by a KPA guard (Green 2015a). The next summer, North Korean soldiers were said to have physically crossed the border into Changbai to maraud for food (Kim Kwang-tae and Choi Kyong-ae 2016). And again, reports in spring 2017 asserted the same (Yonhap 2017). There is no visible border wall between the two states, and the river is the effective

boundary, so the ability of North Korean soldiers to vault into Chinese territory and cause distress to locals there is clear and present. However, such events are never covered in North Korea's state media, and only occasionally confirmed in China. Kim Jong-un, North Korea's otherwise ubiquitous leader, has never visited the city.

This chapter seeks to illustrate the centrality of evasion to life and work in the border region. For refugees and temporary economic migrants from North Korea, the modes of evasion are well-known. Border guards are to be avoided or bribed, as are the Changbai Public Security Bureau (PSB) and border guards (*bianfang*) on the other side. The respective states also engage in acts of evasion, by avoiding the key issues in their respective media discourses about the border, allowing bribes and smuggling through the net, and in allowing ostensibly illegal currency trading and market activities to flourish in a kind of grey zone (Roitman 2005).

Bad information and difficult research terrain

In crossing from Hyesan to Changbai, border guards themselves evade two states – the DPRK that fails to feed them, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) that seeks to hunt them down. A second evasion therefore takes place, with respect to the clear rendering of this and other incidents in what is a very difficult information environment. In other words, the truth is elusive, too.

The broad junction of PRC Changbai county with the sprawling urban acreage of Hyesan city on the DPRK side is fertile ground for rumours. Official sources of information for this section of the border are few and far between. On the PRC side, the Changbai Public Security Bureau (PSB) has a website and a microblogging account. But, as in the case of its counterpart in the PRC Korean Autonomous Prefecture in Yanbian, this information tends to skew towards the propagandistic depiction of community relations building (Shu 2016). The same is true for the limited official accounts available of Chinese People's Liberation Army activity in the border region (Yao et al. 2017). On the North Korean side, most of the information released about the DPRK side of the border has to do with new or refurbished monuments to the country's ubiquitously evoked leaders, or the building of new houses in once-flooded areas. Only in rare cases are dangers from the Chinese side of the border implied or denounced (Cathcart and Gleason 2013).

What is then left to fill the gap are single-source stories in the South Korean press about North Korean border jumpers who cause chaos in China. Typically, if these have merit, they are corroborated by the Chinese media eventually. In some cases, different media outlets pronounce the same story as having happened over one month apart and purport to 'exclusive' content, meaning that it was a rumour that spread but a key detail (the date of the incident) was wrongly altered (Duowei News 2016). These, however, are small informational errors compared to the pure speculation and single-source stories that are never corroborated or, more often, never returned to at all (*Asahi Shimbun* 2016). It is also very difficult to know, in the absence of interrogation reports or more detailed reporting on this issue in Chinese, precisely why the guards are coming across from North Korea. If it is for food, does this then hold that the entirety of the KPA is lacking in rations and low in morale, as asserted by some (Stanton 2016)? It is very difficult to confirm these stories.

Defectors have been a vital source of information in recent years in describing conditions in the border region. By far the best one for grappling with the issues of interconnected border aspects is Hyeonseo Lee, who after growing up in Hyesan spent nearly seven years in China and criss-crossed the border multiple times. Although it is rarely framed as such, Lee's memoir

is particularly useful as a study of Hyesan's history and function within the border region. She relays tales told by her grandmother, who had studied in Japan, of the early months of the Korean War, when the family had to hide their family's Workers' Party of Korea party cards in fears of being executed by the American soldiers arriving on the Yalu River (Lee 2015: 7). Her family had connections thereafter in China, and her description of the city is worth quoting at length:

When I was growing up Hyesan was an exciting place to be. Not because it was lively – nowhere in the country was noted for its theatre scene, restaurants or fashionable subcultures. The city's appeal lay in its proximity to the narrow Yalu River, Korea's ancient border with China. In a closed country like North Korea, Hyesan seemed like a city at the edge of the world. To the citizens who lived there it was a portal through which all manner of marvelous foreign-made goods – legal, illegal, and highly illegal – entered the country. This made it a thriving hub of trade and smuggling, which brought many benefits and advantages to the locals, not least of which were opportunities to form lucrative partnerships with Chinese merchants on the other side of the river, and make hard currency. At times it could seem like a semi-lawless place where the government's iron rule was not so strong. This was because almost everyone, from the municipal Party chief to the lowliest border guard, wanted a share of the riches. Occasionally, however, there were crackdowns ordered by Pyongyang, and they could be brutal. People from Hyesan were therefore more business-minded and often better off than people elsewhere in North Korea. The grown-ups would tell me we were fortunate to live there.

(Lee 2015: 11f.)

In most defector memoirs, the border is a new zone of activity that mainly exists as an area to be passed through as quickly as possible. But for Lee it is a more centred place. Different defectors have different motivations and degrees of agency with respect to their existence in the region and their purpose of crossing. Unlike some high-profile defectors like Shin Dong-hyuk, Hyeonseo Lee's narrative has not been challenged or altered (Pilling 2013; Eichhorn 2015; Harden 2015). Acknowledging that falsehoods play directly into the production of North Korea counterpropaganda, Lee has clearly stated that defectors need to be more consistent with their life testimonies. Fortunately, the discourse on North Korea seems ready for a more *Alltagsgeschichte* approach to the border region, particularly the recognition of insights gathered from slower observation. In so doing, the role played by border guards is no doubt important, but so too is that of women. Lee's accounts of Hyesan and elements of her life story accordingly dovetail with some of the best new scholarship on female North Korean defectors being published (Kim Mikyung 2013; Song 2013; Choi 2014; Kim Sung Kyung 2016).

Among the most intellectually combative of the new approaches comes from Eunyung Choi, whose work attempts to reshape the discursive terrain around North Korean female border crossers, recognizing that the Sino–North Korean frontier is a highly charged geopolitical space. Choi somewhat controversially argues that international human rights organizations have overemphasized 'the irresponsible and brutal policies of North Korea and China' to the detriment of understanding 'the broader conditions that shape trafficking of North Korean women and the women's own migration experiences' (Choi 2014: 272). Data collected by human rights organizations, she implies, is primarily gathered in order to be used as a cudgel against North Korea and China; the women thus become the means to an end – critique of North Korea or the elimination of that state altogether. Drawing from a body of interviews with North Korean migrant women conducted in Yanbian between 2003 and 2007, Choi moves to recover a sense of agency with respect to North Korean migrant women. Reading Agustin (2006), Choi

critiques along the way Western ‘moral panic about prostitution...and the avoidance of uncomfortable truths about the willingness of many women to be trafficked’ (Choi 2014: 273). Like the York University sociologist Hyun Ok Park (2014), Choi recognizes that the crossing of the Tumen River into China is not simply traumatic due to the danger of evading North Korean state penalty, but because these women

move from a relatively closed socialist system in a totalitarian regime to a global capitalist economy where they are subject to the influence and interests of powerful state and non-state organizations, most notably, the United States, China, and South Korea, and the United Nations.

(Choi 2014: 274)

Does such a depiction overread the Chinese border as somehow immediately representing the forces of hegemonic global capitalism? Perhaps. But even if Hyeonseo Lee’s memoir implicitly critiques this notion, the book also coheres to Choi’s other interviewees in the sense that there is much more at work in the border region than a binary of pure trafficking against the will of the migrant. Choi’s final argument that international human rights spotlighting of the North Korean refugee issue is actually harmful to the cause of the refugees themselves by causing crackdowns, however, is both impossible to prove and indicative of the frustration felt on the limitations of the knowable in the border region.

While the legal status of North Korean border crossers is murky, the experiences of women who cross borders point to multiple and hybrid identities. Hyeonseo Lee explicitly evokes this notion by putting down roots in China, and using no fewer than seven pseudonyms. Scholar Jiyoung Song describes the progression of many such women from ‘Confucian communist mothers’ to ‘Trafficked wives’ to ‘Smuggled refugees’ to ‘Unsettled settlers’ as they cross new national frontiers (Song 2013: 160).

The new scholarship dwells on multiple and hybrid identities, both of North Korean women and North Korean migrants irrespective of gender, yet virtually none of these ideas penetrates into Chinese academic discourse or state media publications. Official academic discourse in China on female North Koreans without travel or work visas is not particularly pliant. Apart from the occasional irregular reference to a possible refugee crisis if North Korea collapses, Chinese officials tend to insist that refugees are economic migrants, pure and simple. In Chinese state media, the names given to North Koreans living illegally in China are therefore few; the defectors tend to be identified as *tuobeizhe*, ‘those who have escaped from the North.’ Some potential changes to these views and the policies that underpin them were hinted at in 2010 and 2012, such as the publication of US journalist Barbara Demick’s prize winning book *Nothing to Envy* (2010) in Chinese, and some other semi-empathetic accounts of North Koreans roaming toward Southeast Asia in search of a visa to Seoul (Hwang 2010; Qi and Li 2012). Likewise, Hyeonseo Lee was allowed to speak critically of the North Korean regime in March 2016 in a small Beijing bookshop. Given the levels of sensitivity and control around these issues in China, such actions are surprising, but they have not and do not appear capable of bringing a new policy line into fruition.

If the Chinese official view of border illegalities is somewhat rigid, the North Korean state view presents two dominant themes. The first dwells on iconic depictions of Kimist family glory, reminding observers that the DPRK state founder Kim Il-song frequently crossed the frontier in search of national salvation and socialist revolution. The second theme presents the frontier as a great danger to average North Koreans, and a site of potential terrorism carried out against North Korean society and the statues of their leaders. After huge floods in September 2016, North Korean state media promised to remake its side of the flooded Tumen River valley into a

'socialist fairyland,' showing night after night of television coverage of similar work sites with the Korean People's Army fixing smashed infrastructure. Moving around in North Korea is still largely illegal without a special permit, meaning that these floods brought many thousands of citizens into contact with others facing similar pressures in the border region (United Nations General Assembly 2014: 7).

Fine line of legality

Is the border a lawless area, or one in which states have the upper hand? A common assumption tends to be that the state is total. Indeed, the strong focus on border security by both China and North Korea suggests that this is where a state attempts to enforce its legal authority through control over cross-border movement. There remain strong incentives for both North Koreans and Chinese to simply treat the other as if it does not exist, or to focus on controlling movement of goods and people across the rivers dividing the countries. The bilateral border between China and North Korea also has an internal component (for instance, checks at county level) within the DPRK provinces of North Hamgyong and Ryanggang in particular.

On the North Korean side, the *Gukka Anjeon Bowiebu* (State Security Department/SSD) plays an important role in border security. Within the interlocking layers of North Korean bureaucracy, it should be noted that not every action of the SSD is *ipso facto* a destruction of human rights or prosecutable by the International Criminal Court. Even undercover reporting from inside North Korea acknowledges some of the efforts of the department including cracking down on crimes such as rape, human smuggling, prostitution, and other illicit activities (Cathcart 2012; Greitens 2014: 100–103). The North Korean state was heavily involved in drug trafficking from 1999 to 2005, but state security institutions cracked down on them thereafter (Wang and Blancke 2014; Hastings 2015: 162, 175).¹

The occasional SSD dispatch of groups of investigators into China to hunt down defectors, efforts in which the Chinese state cooperates, appear to be an attempt on the part of both states to enforce the legal prerogative of the state over border crossing. As Denkowski illustrates, the SSD also 'performs a customs function' and 'oversees border guards by civilian and military personnel, who perform customs duties with the main target of detecting spies' (Denkowski 2014: 12f). The SSD does not have steady contact with Chinese customs on the other side of the border, and 'only officers [are] authorized to cross the border to Chinese checkpoints' (Denkowski 2014: 12f). Circumstantial evidence exists that the SSD cooperated with Chinese comrades in cases involving foreign missionaries of mutual interest like Kenneth Bae and the Garratt family in Dandong (Blancke and Rosenke 2011), but there are also indications that North Korean officials distrust their Chinese counterparts deeply.

On the Chinese side of the frontier, technology is increasing in use, including more cameras along the frontier. Border guards on the North Korean side may not have ammunition (at least according to locals on the Chinese side), but on the Chinese side they are well-armed. Chinese security officials can operate with greater swiftness and confidence in part because of their technological advantages up and down the border. Infrastructure along the frontier is truly dilapidated on much of the North Korean side, making an efficient provision of border guards and rapid movement of troops very difficult indeed. Some efforts have been made in the recent past to improve this problem by Kim Jong-un (Denkowski 2015: 354). Although most of the railroad lines on the Yalu and Tumen rivers escaped bombing by the Americans in the Korean War, they are still largely moving on foundations originally put down by the Japanese in the 1920s and 1930s, and are falling apart. Efforts were underway to establish a Hyesan–Samjiyeon highway to much regime fanfare in 2015 and 2016 (Chosun Central Television broadcast, 2016),

but these appear to have been cut short or the resources redirected to emergency flood relief in early September 2016.

Denkowski notes there are 'three lines of border control' on the North Korean border with China. Behind the standard border guards, fences and bunkers and occasional dog patrols, there are police foot patrols, and the third line is borderland villages of 'unarmed and politically trusted civilians' who both patrol and report upward. Interviews with former SSD agents (including border guards of company commander rank, a former counterintelligence officer, and a member of the political bureau who also supervised police) provide some of the most detailed data available in English. These interviews confirm that the SSD has more power than the local police; coordination with local agencies is therefore hierarchical and the local stations 'aid and abet the SSD's formal social control' (Denkowski 2014: 11). Although they presented deeply flawed accounts, the memoirs by two US-based reporters who were arrested for crossing the frozen Tumen River in 2009 seem to confirm as much, in that the manner of their processing confirms the layered approach (Cathcart and Gleason 2012).

However, the SSD's work and torture of illegal border crossers leads to crimes against humanity and the agency itself may be involved in large-scale drug smuggling. In his interviews with former security officials now resident in South Korea, Denkowski notes that such individuals maintain a 'fear of re-victimization and re-traumatization.' His interviews with a former SSD-Colonel indicates the bureaucracy has 'a culture of total surveillance, even within the agency directed towards each comrade by each comrade' (Denkowski 2014: 8f.).

In spite of the problems with North Korean KPA crossing the frontier illegally and dangerously as discussed earlier, there has been an increase in counter-espionage surveillance in China. At the same time, crackdowns on 'espionage' in the border region should raise questions about their implications for researchers. In November 2015, a Chinese newspaper affiliated with the People's Liberation Army reported that a 'foreign spy' who turned out to be Japanese had been arrested in the border regions of Jilin and North Korea – not for taking photos of North Korea, but for observing and photographing People's Liberation Army border outposts. The incident occurred in Changbai County, not so far from Hyesan; a local farmer reported some 'suspicious and stealthy (*guigui suisui*)' behaviour and called local border police, who took the foreigner into custody, checked his camera, and then confirmed his arrest. The report notes that 'in recent years, foreign espionage organizations activities in the border region have been absolutely rampant.' The article then called for more public understanding of the need for struggle, aid in catching spies, and vigilance of Party organizations (China Defence Daily 2015). How this activity was supposed to accord with the concurrent push for increased tourism and eco-tourism in the Mt. Paektu area was not described. Fieldwork in the region is difficult but can ameliorate some problems, although Chinese watching for spies and the notion that North Korean border guards might shoot anyone who takes their photograph also makes for a dismaying environment. Individuals like the Japanese activist Ishimaru Jiro can still go regularly to collect testimonials from contacts inside North Korea. Likewise, Christian missionaries who may be involved with refugees are surely known to the PRC immigration authorities and security officials in Yanbian, but they are generally allowed to continue to travel to Yanbian and survey the border region.

Technology cannot prevent problems with drug production and distribution purely on the Chinese side of the border; not every drug addiction or movement in Dandong or Yanbian can be laid at the feet of a North Korean partner. Accordingly, anti-drug campaigns in north-eastern border areas of China never call out the Kim regime as the source of the problem, but rather cultural decadence (Zoccatelli 2014). Nevertheless, both sides know that most North Korean drug trafficking across the frontier is done by boat (Denkowski 2014: 13). On the Chinese side of the border, the state makes efforts to shut this down, with occasional success (Greitens

2014: 23). However, announcing increase of patrols without announcing increased hauls of contraband should indicate that this activity is often futile (Liaoning Daily 2016).

Despite border security technologies in place, the 'fine line of legality' is frequently crossed. The reasons for the contravention of laws are multiple: such 'crossings' happen because border surveillance technology is not up-to-date, as a result of involvement of security guards in drug smuggling, because individuals move through the void of effective bilateral cross-border communication, because regulations around foreign espionage and even simple tourism continue to change, and due to violation of human rights. The line between legality and illegality needs to be further parsed out with respect to how the state interacts with the population on both sides of the border, and in particular on the North Korean side of the border. If lines of legality are trespassed by the ambiguities of border crossing, manifested in technologies and failures of security, so too can they be with respect to circulation of currency and illicit drugs. We therefore need to look again at the state itself – to what extent is the North Korean state a criminal actor along the frontier, complicitly or actively supporting drug-smuggling operations?

Part of the answer to this question depends on how one frames the North Korean state more generally. One means of doing so is to place at its centre the 'illicit economy' (Habib 2011). As the University of Sydney political scientist Justin Hastings notes, North Korea has an economy 'where the lines between formal and informal trade, and between licit and illicit, are blurred' (Hastings 2015: 166). The border region is indeed full of 'hybrid traders,' defined by Hastings as 'actual [DPRK] state officials who use their position to go into business for themselves.' Again, the line between state and private, and legal and illegal, is very hard to tease out here. This is why Kim Jong-un's general caution about spreading 'corruption' in North Korean officials needs to be defined contextually (Human Rights Watch 2015; Kim Jong-un 2016). Kim cannot really openly admit that officials are heavily involved in trade activity in part because they had been told after the Arduous March of the late 1990s to fend for themselves (Hastings 2015: 171).

Equally ambiguous is the state of currency on the frontier, where North Korean struggles against foreign currency seem to come and go in cycles. In a series of 2014 interviews, North Korean defectors told Christopher Green how their own foreign currency usage in North Korea had been a rational response to government currency revaluations in 2002 and 2009 (Green 2016). The Chinese Renminbi (RMB) has indeed become 'the people's money' in the border region (Greitens 2014: 97f). Chinese currency is used to price goods in private markets up and down the Tumen River valley. The norm of what some call 'yuanization' in northern Korea is not entirely a new phenomenon, though. In Hyesan, RMB were openly circulating in Ryanggang province as far back as the 1980s (Green 2016: 418, 423). Likewise, Hyesan's relatively advanced market activity in the 1980s is also noted by memoirs from two young female defectors born in that city, although they do not confirm RMB use at that time (Lee 2015: 14; Haggard 2016).

Kim Jong-un may have inherited a situation wherein Chinese currency circulates throughout his country, but the state has still taken efforts to stem it. Foreign exchange was reportedly added to the list of crimes punishable by death in North Korea in 2012 (United Nations General Assembly 2014: 2). While capital punishment may sound severe, the DPRK itself does not shy away from admitting to holding public executions, adding that such events are warranted for cases 'where a criminal committed brutal crimes and the victim or his/her family requested to confirm the execution' (United Nations General Assembly 2014: 4f). It is unclear, though, if anyone has in fact been put to death for trading in foreign currencies. Confusingly, these are the only currencies in which foreign tourists visiting North Korea are allowed to use (apart from the model Kwangbok Department Store), all in state-sanctioned locations where traders have clear licence to do so.

Human movement and hybrid identities

The Renminbi might be officially disdained in North Korea, but their capture is also a sovereign goal of the state, and officially sanctioned North Korean delegations continue to be sent abroad to obtain foreign currency. Probably tens of thousands of North Korean women have been sent to China for this purpose, living in contexts which are severely confined from the Chinese point of view, but quite liberal from the North Korean point of view (Green 2015b). In the case of North Korean restaurant workers in China, there are ample opportunities for structured and usually electronically monitored meetings with foreigners, since the clientele tend to be South Korean, Chinese, and a mix of other curious foreigners paying usually in RMB (Greitens 2014: 55).

Reportage about these enterprises is a relatively abundant genre – they exist in Hunchun, there are several in Yanbian, and they are also in Harbin, Mudanjiang, Ji'an, Dandong, Shenyang, and Changchun. However, they are relatively dynamic, close, and move easily, and quantitative data about them are almost impossible to get. The South Korean government tendency to group these activities under the rubric of North Korea's international export of 'slave labour' has tended to avoid discussing the visible function that such enterprises serve specific to the Sino-Korean border region or Northeast China (Yoon and Lee 2015). Nor are the restaurant workers linked in even sketchy ways to the drug business, which appears to be occurring along wholly separate tracks. Only in the realm of espionage are the restaurants linked to the more nefarious proclivities of the North Korean state, although again, investigations are few (Jakarta Post 2017). Likewise, if foreign-bound North Koreans are acting as 'drug mules' in other contexts (Greitens 2014: 18), it seems odd that the restaurant workers are never interpreted in quite the same way.

If we place the border at the centre of the relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing, the business activities by North Koreans in Northeast China might be better understood. Hastings urges us to better understand the relationship between the centre and the periphery (particularly the north-eastern periphery) in North Korea (Hastings 2015: 170). The individuals sent across the border have been through deep ideological training and are generally considered reliable. The funds they remit are useful for keeping living standards high in Pyongyang. And they are a tangible reminder to Chinese comrades that North Koreans are not simply problematic illegals, but stakeholders in China's economic order, if only in a small way. It is notable that in the dozen or more years that the guest worker programme has run in the restaurant sector, defections, and problems have been rare – and even a huge problem for the North Koreans with the group defection of a dozen young women from a restaurant in Ningbo, near Shanghai, in April 2016 did not devolve into public recriminations between China and North Korea. Instead, the North Korean state media has continued to call upon the United Nations and the Red Cross (at times using CNN reporter Will Ripley to amplify their messages) to return the women and insist that they were abducted by the South Korean intelligence services.

On the Chinese side, care is taken not to allow public comment or opprobrium about these facilities. North Korean women in the border region tend to be depicted in PRC state media as happy singers or stylish border guards, never sex workers or human trafficking victims. While bribes were almost certainly involved in their selection from Pyongyang, the state-sanctioned presence of North Korean female workers in China is thus not a victory for perceptions of North Korean marketization (Yoon and Lee 2015: 72–75). They tend to have two to three year contracts, the state takes somewhere between 70 and 90 per cent of their earnings, and they are generally given one afternoon per week to go to a local market with their entire unit. Their legality, however, is an indicator of limited human movement across the frontier – but their ability to

acculturate, settle in China, and ultimately act as a *transfronterizo* is proscribed by the state (Martinez 2009: 91). The Sino–North Korean borderland, then, contains elements of interpenetration and cultural hybridity, both legally sanctioned and illegal.

Probably the thorniest and least clear analytical question around the frontier zone has to do with identity, even as such analysis promises a corrective to the omissions of state-driven discourse. Do North Koreans who border cross into China without the permission of either state take on a hybrid identity thereby? What about North Koreans who arrive in China without planning to transit to South Korea? Making things yet more layered are ethnic Koreans in China, some small number of whom have entered into ‘defector cram schools’ where they can pose as North Korean defectors so as to get more generous asylum provision in countries like the UK. There has been a great deal of writing around the issue of national identity in the border region, without much consensus even on what aspects of identity construction or nationality need to serve as the centre of the debate. Part of the basic problem comes back to issues stemming from the divided politics of the Korean peninsula: South Korea claims all North Koreans as citizens of the Republic of Korea (ROK) – but cannot assert these claims over North Koreans in China, for fear of rupturing bilateral relations altogether or prompting yet more accusations from North Korea of ‘abductions’ of people who are in fact trying desperately to flee to Seoul. North Korean refugees must therefore flee to a third country – typically in Southeast Asia – in order to contact ROK officials who can conduct them on to Seoul and the Hanawon (defector halfway houses). From the official standpoint of the ROK state, then, there is no purpose to be served in theorizing a transnational identity – much less a sinified Korean identity – for North Korean refugees seeking to escape permanently, vaulting out of Pyongyang’s legal orbit; they are seen instead as potential citizens of the true Korean republic and its capitol in Seoul. The numbers of refugees who made it successfully to South Korea has been brought steadily down (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Conclusion

Approaching the border region with a ‘state vs. anti-state’ or ‘resisters vs. the state’ paradigm is both helpful and limiting. New research indicates how the North Korean state has itself absorbed certain aspects of marketization, to the extent of participating in illegal drug trafficking, and in exporting its largely female labour force into Chinese border areas and cities to gain hard currency. In such an environment where money is a primary incentive, the process of illegal border crossing out of North Korea inevitably results in evading state controls by bribing of border guards, no matter how strong their political training may be. The process of border crossing brings with it changes in identity for North Korean refugees, some of whom become semi-permanent exiles in the legal netherworld of China, others of whom are able to defect to South Korea in the end. But even these acts of apparent resistance are often loaded with unexpected elements: nostalgia for North Korea, a desire to engage in multiple re-crossings of the border, and even ‘willingness to be trafficked,’ as Eunseung Choi (2014) has argued. Full re-defection is also a possibility, and although such instances are still extremely rare, the North Korean state creates relatively persuasive narratives around those who do.

At the geopolitical level, both sides in the Sino–North Korean bilateral relationship seek to avoid airing of difficult cross-border issues, and research on security cooperation in the border region is therefore nascent. Missionaries, intelligence operatives, foreign journalists, and scholars working on either or both sides of the border therefore tend to be operate under a kind of ambiguous shadow. Whereas the Chinese side of the border has tended to be regarded as by far the easiest in which to undertake research, developments indicate that such openness is far from

guaranteed. The new counter-espionage campaigns, and the tendency to clamp down on border travel at times of ostensible crisis such as occurred in April 2017, do not presage some kind of golden age for scholars engaged in borderland studies along the Tumen and Yalu River valleys.

If fieldwork is rendered difficult, theory can sometimes fill the gap. Yet if we return to cross-border activities in Hyesan, it is difficult to find behaviours that fall fully inside the theoretical ambit. For instance, a family member of Hyeonseon Lee's in the border city of Hyesan was approached by a man who knew they had ties in China. He wanted to smuggle out a particularly sensitive commodity into China: the bones of an American GI from the Korean War, for which he had heard that dealers with contacts in the USA would pay handsomely. Lee uses the anecdote to emphasize the randomness of opportunity and the entrepreneurial nature of people in Hyesan. But the anecdote indicates more than that. For North Korean citizens, there could be few things more patriotic than marshalling evidence of their nation's triumph over American imperialism; ostensibly, political credit could be obtained by providing the bones to a local revolutionary museum within the hegemony of the state's Korean War narrative. At the same time, the state has to be circumvented for material gain to accrue; no Workers' Party of Korea official is going to sanction the export of these bones. Ultimately the request was turned down, in favour of a more reliable commodity of opium, in whose practices and marketing Lee's uncle is fluent (Lee 2015: 59). The state appears and disappears in Lee's life.

Evasion is not always about hiding to avoid detection, but instead about blurred boundaries and state complicity so that there is nothing determinate to detect. The North Korean state's ambivalent approach to foreign currency as well as drug trafficking indicates as much. The contradictions and difficulties in using oral testimonies and memoir literature must be forded through, as on both sides of the Sino-North Korean frontier, the states themselves use the deliberate withholding of information as part of state control. In this environment, legal and illegal border crossers can provide a corrective to state narratives, even as individuals mirror state tactics and withhold, adapt, and reshape stories for their own survival.

Ultimately, the limited transnational cooperation engaged in by the states on both sides of the border is not put to particularly positive ends, and hybrid identity in cities as physically close as Hyesan and Changbai is more or less an idea rather than a reality. North Korea is jealous of the labour and the loyalty of its citizens, whereas China frames the region as often in patriarchal and ethnopolitical terms as in economic and security terms. Legal trade is very difficult to set up under these circumstances, and grey areas seem prone to predominate in spite of national assertions on both sides that the border is fully under control and can be rationally engaged economically. In spite of the state investment in border technology and security services, the border will continue to be the site of illegal traffic. But it will also remain an imaginative terrain for those for whom the ineluctable spread of North Korean state criminality is the key concern.

Note

- 1 Hastings (2015: 163) entertains a paradox: 'A country that is one of the most isolated in the world survives in part...by engaging in international commerce, and hence being tied into the global [narcotics] economy.'

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In Asia, where authoritarian-developmental states have proliferated, statehood and social control are heavily contested in borderland spaces. As a result, in the post-Cold War world, borders have not only redefined Asian incomes and mobilities, they have also rekindled neighbouring relations and raised questions about citizenship and security.

The contributors to the *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* highlight some of these processes taking place at the fringe of the state. Offering an array of comparative perspectives of Asian borders and borderlands in the global context, this handbook is divided into thematic sections, including:

- Livelihoods, commodities, and mobilities
- Physical land use and agrarian transformations
- Borders and boundaries of the state and the notion of statelessness
- Re-conceptualizing trade and the economy in the borderlands
- The existence and influence of humanitarians, religions, and NGOs
- The militarization of borderlands

Causing us to rethink and fundamentally question some of the categories of state, nation, and the economy, this is an important resource for students and scholars of Asian Studies, Border Studies, Social and Cultural Studies, and Anthropology.

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Cover image: China-Nepal border pillar in Mustang (photo by Cath Murch)

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