

Analysis of the Situation of the Ethnic Return Migrants in Korea—Take Korean Chinese as an Example

Dai Dingfang¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes the situation of Korean Chinese ethnic return migrants in Korea, focusing on their experience of stigma. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores the factors contributing to this stigma and its impact on Korean Chinese identity.

The research identifies factors influencing Korean Chinese in Korea, including internal issues, their disadvantaged status, and public attitudes towards migrants. Unjust experiences in Korea weaken their original transnational ethnic identity, but due to ongoing cultural and blood ties, this identity persists to some extent.

This research contributes to the literature on ethnic return migration, shedding light on the under-studied experiences of Korean Chinese returnees. The findings hold relevance for policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the need for support and resources to aid their integration and successful reintegration into their home countries.

Keywords: *Korean Chinese, Ethnic Returns, Migrants, Stigma, Ethnic Ties.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on diaspora phenomena, with Gmelch (1980) categorizing returned diaspora into two types: first-generation migration return and ethnic return migration. Unlike the former, ethnic return migration pertains to younger generations of early immigrants who return to their ancestral homeland after extended periods abroad. This study specifically examines ethnic return migrants from China to Korea.

The Korean Chinese ethnic group, distinct from those originating in China, comprises individuals who migrated from the Korean peninsula a century ago. Notably, most recent Korean migrants come from South Korea, with only a minority from North Korea due to stringent restrictions (Tsuda, 2019). As of 2019, China hosted an estimated 2.5 million Korean Chinese, ranking second after the United States in terms of ethnic Korean populations outside the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). According to Tsuda (2019), South Korea, despite not having a large immigrant population, faces significant impacts from ethnic return migrants. Presently, approximately 776,000 ethnic return migrants reside in South Korea, constituting 39% of the immigrant population and 1.5% of the nation's total population.

As the global political landscape evolved, including the easing of the Cold War and domestic economic development in South Korea during the 1980s, South Korea adopted more open migration policies, particularly towards ethnic Koreans in the Soviet Union and China (Harvey, 1989). Before the significant influx of Korean Chinese into South

¹ Phd candidate, Ewha Womans University, Korea, 974249507@qq.com

Korea, the majority of South Koreans held positive views of these ethnic Koreans from China. According to Tsuda (2011), many South Koreans believed that these ethnic Koreans in China had preserved old Korean traditional culture, which had been lost due to rapid industrialization. Additionally, some Koreans hoped that these Korean Chinese might contribute to national unification. While not all South Koreans shared these positive views, the prevailing sentiment at the time was generally favorable. However, as the 1990s saw a substantial influx of Korean Chinese into South Korea, attitudes towards them began to change. An example of this shift can be observed in the term used to refer to Korean Chinese in South Korea—Chosŏnjok, which later acquired a negative connotation. As noted by Tsuda (2011), Chosŏnjok are often perceived as unreliable, having a weak work ethic, and lacking emotional attachment to Korea. This discrimination has also adversely impacted the living and working conditions of Korean Chinese migrants. According to Kwon (2016), since the 1980s, there has been a significant immigration movement to South Korea from northeastern China, where most ethnic Koreans reside. Unlike Korean Americans or Korean Japanese, these Korean Chinese migrants are more likely to encounter discrimination and often find themselves in "3D" positions, which are dirty, dangerous, and demanding jobs (Yoo, 2007).

1.2. The significance of the study

In recent years, extensive research has focused on the phenomenon of returned diaspora. However, the majority of this research has been conducted within the context of Western countries, such as studies on Jewish and returned ethnic German migrants (Rock and Wolff, 2002). There has been a noticeable dearth of research on other ethnic return migrant groups. This study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on ethnic return migrants within an Asian context. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. Future research can build upon this Asian context by incorporating a cross-cultural perspective, comparing the experiences of ethnic return migrants in various countries.

1.3. Research questions and arguments

This study seeks to address two key questions: 1. Why doesn't the ethnic connection between Korean Chinese and Koreans lead to an improvement in their status in their ancestral homeland? 2. How does the Korean experience influence the identity identification of Korean Chinese? Our research employs a qualitative approach and reveals that several factors, both direct and indirect, impact the position of Chinese Koreans in Korea. These factors include issues within the Korean Chinese community, their marginalized status in Korea, and public attitudes towards migrants. Additionally, the unjust experiences faced by Korean Chinese in Korea have contributed to a weakening of their original transnational ethnic identity as transnational ethnic groups become more pronounced. However, due to enduring blood and cultural ties, this type of transnational ethnic identity is unlikely to entirely disappear.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The overall situation of the Korean Chinese in Korea

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, a large number of Korean Chinese have gone to South Korea for work. In general, the movement of Korean Chinese to South Korea can be divided into three stages. The first stage is population movement for the purpose of visiting relatives. The second stage is population movement for the purpose of working. At the third stage, with the increased policy support to foreign workers from Korean government, the population movements was gradually becoming legalized.

The first stage of Korean Chinese migration involved population movement primarily for visiting relatives. This phase can be understood in the context of changing international relations: First is Cold War Thaw: Prior to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, they were caught in the Cold War standoff. As the global Cold War tensions began to ease, the divide between socialist and capitalist camps dissolved, opening doors for engagement between China and South Korea. Second is Reform and Opening Up in China: China's implementation of the reform and opening up policy further improved relations with South Korea. During this initial stage, Korean Chinese sought to reunite with their relatives in South Korea. They used South Korean radio broadcasts to locate their relatives and received invitation letters with "entry consent forms" from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea, allowing them to travel to South Korea via third-party regions like Hong Kong. These visits typically lasted no longer than three months. While initially focused on family reunions, this simple method of visiting relatives fostered the exchange of Chinese and Korean products. Some Korean Chinese recognized the business potential and engaged in buying and selling to profit from the differences in products between the two countries. For instance, they brought Chinese souvenirs to sell in South Korea and purchased Korean products to resell in China. Chinese medicine was one of the items Korean Chinese sold in Korea. However, as the Korean Chinese population in South Korea increased, more individuals turned to reselling Chinese herbal medicine. The lack of supervision led to the proliferation of counterfeit medicines, significantly eroding the credibility of Chinese herbal medicines and attracting criticism towards the Korean Chinese community (Tsuda, 2011).

The second stage: population movement for the purpose of working. According to Yin (2016), after the 1980s, as South Korea's economy continued to develop rapidly, some occupations in South Korea experienced a labor shortage. In the beginning, except for a few professional and technical posts in South Korea, foreign nationals, especially manual workers could hardly get employed in South Korea. However, the Korean Chinese tried to go to South Korea through various channels to engage in manual labor in the form of illegal migrant workers. From 1991- 1993, because the Korean government decided to open up the labor market to protect the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises, the industrial trainee system was developed. Therefore, Korean Chinese workers began coming to South Korea as trainees one after another. However, only when the Korean Chinese entered the factory did they discover that it was not actually an industrial trainee system, but a place in need of cheap labor, and the labor rights of these foreign workers were not protected by the Korea Labor Standards Law. Under this situation, a lot of Korean Chinese chose to leave these factories and illegally living in Korea to earn a better wage.

In the 1990s, South Korea experienced a significant industrial shift. Manufacturing declined while the service sector, particularly the tertiary industry, expanded rapidly. The tertiary industry's share of GDP rose from 46.4% in 1990 to 63.6% in 2003, while manufacturing employment dropped from 5.16 million in 1991 to 4.21 million in 2003. Concurrently, the number of tertiary sector employees grew from 9.06 million to 14.08 million, mainly driven by rising demand for low-wage female workers in labor-intensive urban services like restaurants, hotels, housework, and the sex industry (Li, 2004). These labor-intensive service jobs are often associated with the "3D" industries, characterized by low wages and long hours. With the tertiary industry's expansion and a shortage of local workers, immigrant female labor became vital. However, this also led to an increase in illegal workers. South Korea responded with strict migrant worker management from 1992 to 2000 (Cui, 2019). Due to these regulations, Korean Chinese individuals sought alternative paths to work in South Korea. Some Korean Chinese women entered South Korea through "disguised marriages," brokered international unions, which later led to criticism of the Korean Chinese community by South Koreans.

The third stage: the legalized population flow provided by the policy. In order to alleviate the problem of illegal staying in South Korea, since the 21st century, the South Korean government has gradually introduced relevant policies to alleviate the status quo. According to Cui (2019), taking 2007 as the time cut-off point, the implementation of the "Visiting Employment System" not only freed Korean Chinese workers from illegal staying in South Korea, but also curbed the phenomenon of high fees charged by intermediary agencies and legalized the working status of Korean Chinese. However, in 2009, the South Korean government controlled the "Visiting Employment Policy". The reason was that the large influx of Korean Chinese and other labor not only impacted the domestic labor market, but also could not alleviate certain labor shortages. Therefore, the number of people of the same ethnicity from developing countries introduced under the "Visiting Employment System" has been reduced.

2.2. The causes that push the migration return for Korean Chinese

Ravenstein (1876) introduced the "push-pull theory" to explain population migration, highlighting the roles of push and pull factors. Push factors represent the repulsive forces that discourage staying in one's current location, while pull factors denote the attractions of moving to a new place (Fu, 2007). The large-scale migration of Korean Chinese to South Korea has been often explained through the lens of this theory. For instance, Li (2007) points out that push factors for Korean Chinese include economic activity in China after the reform and opening up, as well as an increase in laid-off workers after enterprise transformations. On the other hand, pull factors stem from South Korea's labor demands and rapid economic and social development, offering higher incomes than China. Other scholars argue that the allure of South Korea's demand for foreign labor and higher wages, coupled with a sense of "homeland" and connections with compatriots, has fueled the surge of Korean Chinese migration to South Korea (Li, 2012). Additionally, some researchers view this migration as a result of the evolving political and economic relations between China and South Korea (Harvey, 1989). While the push-pull theory provides valuable insights into the migration phenomenon, some scholars caution against overemphasizing these factors at the expense of considering the subjectivity and agency of the parties involved in the migration process (Li, 2017).

3. The Factors that Cause Stigma Among Korean Chinese Migrants in Korea

Compared with the stigmatization phenomenon that exists between different ethnic groups, why does the stigmatization phenomenon occur as ethnic groups with the same origin? This is the question that this section is trying to deal with. In this section, based on the existing literature, we are going to adopt the qualitative approach to analyze the factors that cause stigma among Korean Chinese migrants in Korea, and further find out why the ethnic ties between Korean Chinese and the Koreans do not help in improving their position in their country of ancestral origin?

3.1. The problems exist within the Korean Chinese themselves

lack of legal awareness, large number of illegal migrants

In the 1980s, with the initial wave of Korean Chinese migrants to South Korea, many sought to profit from reselling Chinese herbal medicine, as noted by Tsuda (2011). However, a lack of supervision led to rampant resale of counterfeit medicines. This situation greatly undermined the credibility of Chinese herbal medicines and drew substantial criticism toward the Korean Chinese community.

Subsequently, when the Korean government introduced the "industrial trainee system," a significant number of Korean Chinese workers, after some time, chose to leave and seek better wages or opportunities elsewhere. According to Li (2007), between 1994 and 2002,

the escape rate of Chinese trainees in the Korean industrial trainee system was remarkably high, reaching 28.2%.

Furthermore, as a response to tightened employment policies implemented by the Korean government from 1992 to 2002, some Korean Chinese women resorted to "fake marriages" to gain entry to South Korea for work purposes, as highlighted by Cui (2019). This practice further contributed to negative perceptions of Korean Chinese among the local Korean population.

low education attainment

According to the data collected by Fang (2009) on the employment situation of the Korean Chinese in Korea, the study shows that judging from the educational background of the participants, those with junior high school and below education background accounted for 42.7%, those with a high school degree accounted for 47.8%, and as to the people, who had more advanced degree were less than 10%. According to Tekeli and Günsoy (2013), there is a close link between education and crime rate. To be specific, with the decreasing of education level, there is a trend of increasing of crime rate. Although, things have changed a little better, in the past, Dalindong, which is one of the Korean Chinese settlements in Korea, often seen as one of the most dangerous places that need high security watch due to constant fights either among Korean Chinese themselves or among Korean Chinese and the local Koreans.

3.2. The marginal status of the Korean Chinese

The marginalized status of Korean Chinese is evident in the South Korean government's Law on Compatriots Abroad, enacted in 1999, which notably excluded Korean Chinese and Russians from its provisions. The term "compatriots" in this context primarily referred to ethnic Koreans from developed countries like Japan and the United States.

Originally introduced during an economic crisis, the Law on Compatriots Abroad aimed to attract Korean capital from developed nations. Although an amendment was made in 2004, it was not until 2008 that Korean Chinese were conditionally granted "visa for compatriots abroad."

In practice, Korean Chinese largely filled labor gaps in specific South Korean industries. Despite being considered "compatriots," they occupied one of the most marginalized positions among such groups. Research by Yoo (2007) confirms that compared to Korean Americans or Korean Japanese, ethnic return migrants from China were more likely to face discrimination and were often found in "3D" positions—dirty, dangerous, and demanding jobs.

3.3. The attitudes that public hold towards migration

In 2006, South Korea declared itself a multicultural society, implementing immigration policies and government-led initiatives to address social challenges. However, this declaration didn't lead to a widespread sense of multi-ethnic coexistence among the general population.

A 2008 report by the Swiss Institute of International Management and Development found that South Korea had the lowest openness to foreign cultures among 55 surveyed countries. By 2009, the situation had barely improved, with South Korea still ranking second from the bottom among 57 surveyed countries. These non-open attitudes towards immigrant groups may contribute to the challenges faced by Korean Chinese in South Korea.

4. The Identity Identification of Korean Chinese

4.1. The difference between expectation and reality

Since the Korean government promulgated the Law on Compatriots Abroad, Korean Chinese have enjoyed many preferential policies for working in South Korea. This policy has also made many Chinese Korean workers very grateful to the South Korean government, because working in South Korea has indeed improved their economic income.

Despite the policies in place, the ethnic ties between Korean Chinese and Koreans have not translated into an improved position for Korean Chinese in their ancestral homeland. Consequently, many Korean Chinese have experienced discrimination in various forms in South Korea. Yu and Cui (2012) note that before their arrival in South Korea, Korean Chinese valued their identity as "compatriots abroad" and had optimistic expectations for their future in South Korea. Consequently, the unequal treatment they faced upon arrival had a profound impact, causing inner struggles and damaging their self-esteem. To provide some context, in 2000, the universal compulsory education rate for Korean Chinese in China stood at 85%, increasing to over 90% by 2010. Moreover, the employment structure of Korean Chinese in China revealed a higher proportion of mental workers compared to the national average. This suggests that, traditionally, Korean Chinese did not generally encourage manual labor. Therefore, discrimination against Korean Chinese workers in South Korea not only affected their livelihood but also dealt a blow to their self-esteem.

Korean Chinese and South Korean nationals theoretically belong to the same ethnic group with shared language and cultural ties. However, prolonged separation has led to notable differences in thinking, behavior, and habits. South Korea's early embrace of Western culture, seen in the incorporation of English loanwords into Korean, contrasts with Korean Chinese, who have integrated elements of Han culture through interactions with the Han nationality. This has resulted in both similarities and distinctions between the two cultures. Furthermore, political differences are significant factors shaping ethnic cultural identities. Political boundaries reinforce these identities and maintain their distinctiveness. Such boundaries underscore the practical significance of transnational ethnic identity, highlighting that, despite their shared origin, Korean Chinese and South Koreans have differences.

4.2. Continuous ethnic ties

Despite some differences resulting from independent development, it's important to acknowledge the cultural similarities between the Korean ethnic group in China and South Korea. For instance, both Korean Chinese in China and South Koreans share traditions like clan sacrifices, use the same surname system, and have similar national costumes. As Kim (2007) points out, among the elements constituting a nation, the disappearance of national cultural psychology takes longer than the fading of national language and certain customs. National self-identity and sentiments based on national history and origin identity require more time to evolve. Therefore, even though Korean Chinese may have mixed feelings toward their ancestral homeland, their ethnic identity is likely to persist for a considerable time.

5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendation

The significant influx of Korean Chinese to work in South Korea presents an excellent opportunity to study cross-border ethnic groups. Cross-border ethnic groups are those of the same ethnicity distributed across multiple countries due to factors like national separation or self-migration. They often reside near each other in border areas, maintain cultural identities, and engage in communication and interaction. While Korean Chinese

and Koreans are commonly seen as part of the same ethnic group, their values, culture, and psychology can differ due to their location in countries with distinct social systems. The culture of each group is deeply intertwined with factors like geography, history, society, humanities, politics, and laws unique to their respective locations. Consequently, political identity plays a significant role in shaping individual identity.

In the process of transnational interaction, due to various injustices and exclusions, the original transnational ethnic identity of Korean Chinese has weakened with the deepening of transnational ethnic groups. However, because of the continuous blood and cultural ties, this kind of transnational ethnic identity will not completely disappear.

With the advent of the era of globalization, the population flow around the world has increased, and the exchanges, collisions, and fusions between various cultures are in progress. For South Korea, which has entered a multicultural country, representing diversity has become even more important. Here are some policy recommendations that can be taken to meet the need. First, carry out multicultural education and cultivate the concept of respect for differences. Multicultural education can achieve the purpose of mutual recognition and respect for other ethnic groups. At the same time, multicultural education not only promotes understanding and communication between different cultures, but also promotes social tolerance and is conducive to building a harmonious atmosphere. Second, recognize the legal social status of foreign groups, respect cultural differences, and advocate harmony but at the same time preserving each culture's diversity. Third, improve the multicultural policy and legal system. Facing other foreign cultures with an open and tolerant attitude, learning from other countries' successful cases in handling multi-ethnic relations, and strengthening multicultural propaganda, advocating mutual understanding and mutual respect for immigrant cultures, and establishing a not distorted image of foreign population.

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