

A Study on North Koreans in China: Labor Migration in Perspective*

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The purpose of this study is to analyze the movement of North Koreans to China since the 1980s. To achieve this, the study analyzed the macro-socioeconomic conditions of labor migration between the two countries, including China's labor market conditions, the transnational market between China and North Korea, and the market integration characteristics of North Koreans labor. The findings of the study are as follows: First, the labor shortage in Northeast China, resulting from the country's unbalanced economic development, was an important factor in the introduction of North Korean labor. Second, formal and informal markets have developed along the China-North Korea borderlands, and the socioeconomic connections that constitute these markets have had a significant impact on North Korean migration to China. Third, the North Korean labor force can be divided into three categories: formal laborer, quasi-formal laborer, and informal laborer.

Keywords: *Northeast China, North Korea, labor migration, labor shortage, transnational market*

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Introduction

In the 1980s, relations between China and North Korea improved and human and material exchanges resumed. In the 1990s, North Korea experienced an economic crisis, and this led to many crossing the border into China, where the economy was booming. In the 2000s, North Korean laborers of various skills were integrated into China's border region. In the global labor market China served as a source of labor, but in some areas of the country, laborers from neighboring countries were starting to arrive. According to the International Organization for Migration, in the late 2010s there were approximately one million international migrants in China.¹

As North Korean society remains relatively unknown to the world, North Korean migration to China has not received much academic attention. This is even the case in China itself, where the political relationship between China and North Korea complicates academic studies of North Korean migrants by Chinese researchers. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to say that South Korea is the only place where interest in North Korea is widespread. Here the regime is still perceived as "special" to South Korea, both as a target for unification and as an object of coexistence.

Among North Koreans who have migrated to China, defectors are a subject of significant interest. Studies primarily focus on the human rights abuses faced by defectors, including their hardships, suppressed freedoms, and physical suffering. These studies criticize China's stance that considers defectors as illegal economic immigrants, and they argue or appeal to the Chinese government to recognize them as refugees. The goal is to ensure that these defectors, along with their children, are relocated in a humanitarian manner to the destination of their choice, particularly South Korea. In particular, these studies suggest that defectors should never be deported or repatriated to North Korea due to the dangers they would face there. Consequently, the study of defectors is closely tied to human rights issues within the international community and nationality issues in South Korea (Lee 2009; Cho 2016; Lee et al. 2012; Gwak 2005; Lim 2001; Seong and Yoon 1999; Kim 2009; Jung 2012; Park 2005; Chung 2006; Yoon 2021; Kim S-W 2012; Kim S-A 2012; Yoon 1998; Lim and Choi 2001; Lee K-H 2012; Byun 2018; Lee 2010; Chung 2003; Kwan 2017; Charny 2004; Lee K-C 2012). However, defectors in these studies are more frequently the subjects of activism

¹ "China," International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/countries/china>.

by religious and civic organizations rather than the subjects of academic research. In an effort to raise awareness of the gravity of the issue, the media coverage of defectors has been exaggerated, and the emotional aspect of appealing to patriotism or national sentiment has been heavily emphasized (Yoon 2000).

The second topic of interest is North Korean laborers in China. Studies focus on which organizations (authorities) in North Korea systematically recruit and send workers abroad, the size of the labor force, amount of foreign currency they earn, and the sectors in which they work. The underlying premise of these studies is that North Korea's strategy of sending laborers abroad is a means to generate income to support the regime, given the severely underdeveloped domestic economy. Researchers, from this perspective, concentrate on the extent to which the human rights of these laborers are violated and how UN sanctions impact North Korea's ability to send its labor force abroad (Jhe 2018; Lee et al 2012; Lee and Kevin 2020; Choi Y-Y 2017; Lee 2016; Choi S-M 2017; Yun 2020; Lee, Lee, and Kim 2019; BOKITA 2014; Lee and Ouellette 2018; Choi 2021, 2016). In this way, the study of the labor force sent abroad can be viewed more as an exploration of real-world international politics and international relations to evaluate the sustainability of the North Korean regime rather than as an academic study of labor migration.

The third topic that studies are focusing on is the determinants of North Korean migration to China. While existing studies on defectors and workers focus relatively more on factors that push North Koreans out of the country, these studies also delve into the Chinese factors that attract them into China. These studies highlight factors such as the economic disparity between China and North Korea, rising labor costs in the Chinese market, the increasing demand for North Korean workers, and ethnic connections between China and North Korea (Kim 2017; Kim 1994; Park et al 2011; Kim et al 2008; Lee 2017; Kang 2013, 2016, 2019). This relational approach provides important insights into why North Koreans migrate to China. However, these studies have limitations; they do not account for the regional characteristics of post-socialist China's development. In other words, they treat labor markets (or levels of economic development) in Northeast China and other regions of the country as the same market. Additionally, they do not offer sufficient explanations for the labor market conditions in the northeastern region of China that North Koreans enter. In particular, there is no specific explanation as to why nearly all North Koreans are integrated into the labor market on the Chinese side of the China-North Korea borderlands. Therefore, while these

studies acknowledge Chinese pull factors in the migration of North Koreans, they remain insufficient from the perspective of labor migration studies.

With this in mind, this study attempts to interpret North Korean migration to China through the lens of (international) labor migration, utilizing the author's fieldwork and experience,² along with existing literature. Classical theories such as world systems theory (Wallerstein 1974), neoclassical macroeconomic theory (Levis 1954; Ranis and Fei 1961), and dual labor market theory (Piore 1979)³ explain the movement of labor with different objectives and methods, but share common socioeconomic conditions as a premise for migration. The first premise is that when a labor force migrates to an economically developed region, this destination requires a continuous supply of labor for its own economic development. The reason for this need is twofold:⁴ there is a labor shortage in the destination region, and the characteristics of its economic development make it challenging to obtain low-cost labor for specific industries. Consequently, the demand for labor in one region (or country) creates conditions that attract laborers from other regions. The second premise is that the active movement between at least two regions necessitates the existence of socioeconomic markets (networks) where people, information, resources, goods, and money are exchanged over time. The movement of people creates these markets, and the activation of these markets facilitates the movements of people. Beyond visible physical borders, the invisible hand of markets is the decisive condition for the movement of labor.

The first reason for studying North Koreans in China through the lens of labor migration is that in the context of China's (especially Northeast China's) relationship with North Korea, it can reveal the economic contributions North Koreans are making to China's (local) economic development. This can contribute to a logical and realistic justification for demanding socioeconomic citizenship (contributory rights) for North Koreans in China.

² I have had a long-standing interest in the North Korea-China-Russia border region and have conducted fieldwork and research in this area. These experiences were not necessarily driven by a specific research project but rather by years of living on the ground in the region.

³ See also the neoclassical microeconomic theory (Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969) and the new economics of migration (Stark and Bloom 1985; Stark and Levhari 1982).

⁴ This study primarily focuses on economic and social variables to explain the phenomenon of labor (population) migration. While cultural factors might also play a role in migration, they are not the central focus of this study. Indeed, migration connections—such as friendships, acquaintances, and family ties—constitute significant cultural factors influencing population migration. The relationship between these cultural factors and labor force mobility will be investigated in future research.

The second reason is to provide characteristics of population movements between a country with a rigid socialist ideology and one governed by post-socialist pragmatism.

To achieve the research objectives outlined above, this study will address the following questions in sequence. First, what are the Chinese factors that prompt North Koreans to migrate to China? Second, what common conditions have China and North Korea established for the international migration of North Koreans? Third, what type of North Korean labor is in China?

China's (Unbalanced) Development and Labor Shortage in the Northeast

As in other parts of China, the Northeast experienced a vigorous push for economic liberalization (or marketization). However, as economic reforms continued, the region lost the economic power it had during the planned economy era and gradually declined. One of the most significant indicators of this decline is the outflow of the labor force (population).

Since the early years of the country's reform and opening up, population outflows were clearly evident. From 1981 to 1985, Jilin and Heilongjiang Provinces had an inflow of about 103,000 people and an outflow of about 202,000 people, meaning that the outflow was twice as high as the inflow. In the fourth population census of 1990, these two provinces had population migration rates of -1.01‰ and -1.43‰, respectively, indicating outflows exceeding inflows. Liaoning Province's outflow and inflow were similar, with the influx mainly coming from Jilin and Heilongjiang. Since 2000, the outflow has been even more pronounced. According to the sixth population census, published in 2010, the three provinces that make up Northeast China lost 1.8 million people. Between 2015 and 2019, the region lost 1.8 million residents, which is especially remarkable considering that this period followed China's revised population policy in 2015. In other words, the two-child policy has not resolved the issue of population decline in the Northeast. In 2019, Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning Provinces had fertility rates of 5.73‰, 6.05‰, and 6.45‰ respectively, ranking last in China and significantly below the national average of 10.48‰. The seventh population census, results for which were released in 2021, revealed that the population of the three Northeast provinces had decreased by 10.1 million people compared to a decade earlier (Xu 2021).

TABLE 1
REGIONAL GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE KOREAN CHINESE POPULATION
(KEY REGIONS IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH)

Province/City	2010	2020	Gap
Jilin	1,040,167	940,165	-100,002
Heilongjiang	327,806	270,123	-57,683
Liaoning	239,537	229,158	-10,379
Inner Mongolia	18,464	18,216	-248
Beijing	37,380	32,984	-4,394
Tianjin	18,247	16,257	-1,990
Shanghai	22,257	25,404	+3,147
Shandong	61,556	62,737	+1,181
Jiangsu	9,525	17,129	+7,604
Zhejiang	6,496	12,525	+6,029
Fujian	2,157	2,963	+806
Guangdong	17,615	30,666	+13,051

Source: Park (2023).

What about the situation along the borderlands, which has witnessed a significant influx of North Koreans? A lack of access to data from local governments in this border region makes it difficult to calculate the specific size of the outflow. However, considering that this region has a substantial Korean Chinese (*Chaoxianzu* in Chinese, *Joseonjok* in Korean) population, this study aims to estimate the local labor force through the changes in the Korean Chinese population. The number of Korean Chinese residents, primarily in the three Northeast provinces, increased from 1.1 million in 1953 to 1.9 million in 1990, and then gradually declined to 1.7 million in 2020. The factors contributing to this population decline included low fertility rates and, more importantly, active migration. According to the 2010 and 2020 censuses, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, and the neighboring Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region all observed a decline in their Korean Chinese populations. Even Beijing and Tianjin experienced decreases. Domestically speaking, the most significant increase was observed in the southeastern coastal region, encompassing economically advanced cities and provinces

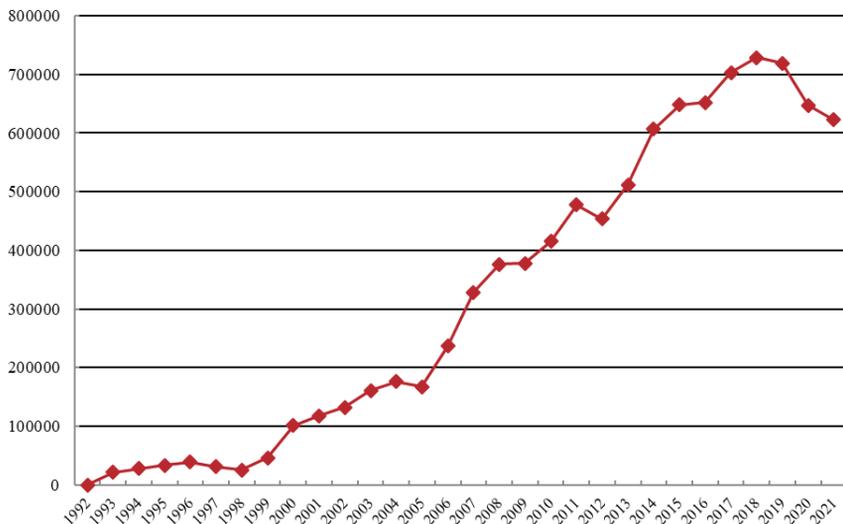


FIG. 1.—KOREAN CHINESE POPULATION IN SOUTH KOREA

Sources: Ministry of Justice Korea Immigration Service.

such as Shanghai, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong (see Table 1).

On the other hand, more Korean Chinese have migrated abroad than within China. South Korea is the most popular destination for transnational migration by Korean Chinese (Piao 2017; Park 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the size of the Korean Chinese population in South Korea. Starting from around 400 in 1992, the number of Korean Chinese has steadily increased over the past 30 years, reaching around 730,000 in 2019. While some have returned to China, mainly the elderly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this number is gradually decreasing. As mentioned earlier, the China-North Korea borderlands are predominantly inhabited by Korean Chinese, and given that about 45% of the total Korean Chinese population resides in South Korea, there is a serious population outflow and labor shortage in the border area. China's reform and opening up have triggered a reverse flow of capital and labor, with China importing capital from South Korea and sending workers there (Park 2022a, 2022b).

In fact, China did not completely neglect the economic development of its northeastern region. The Chinese government has taken several steps to revitalize the area. First, it opened its borders with North Korea and Russia in

the 1980s, similar to designating an opening window in the country's southeast.⁵ The representative open areas on the China-North Korea border are Yanbian and Dandong. Historically, Dandong has been an important port city for trade between China and North Korea, now accounting for over 70% of Chinese-North Korean economic exchanges. Hunchun, located in Yanbian, is an area that the Chinese government has opened up. In the 1990s, China designated Hunchun as a special economic zone and initiated a development project with neighboring countries. A notable project is the Tumen River Area Development Program, launched under the leadership of the UN Development Programme, involving five participating countries: China, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and Mongolia. The project aimed to develop a large triangular area of Yanbian-Vladivostok-Chongjin and a small triangular area comprising Hunchun-Posyet-Rajin. Although the project did not achieve its initial goals and was later renamed the Great Tumen Initiative, it continued to promote international development cooperation and provide the necessary institutional framework for various economic exchanges between China and North Korea (Park 2019b, 2022c).

On the other hand, the Chinese government also promoted its own active development project. As mentioned earlier, Northeast China was a region with a high concentration of state-owned heavy industries. The reform of these enterprises faced more difficulties than expected, and the region was losing its economic development momentum. In response, in the mid-2000s, the Chinese government launched the Revitalization of Northeast Old Industrial Base Plan (*dongbeilaogongyejidizhenxingjihua*), a comprehensive economic and social development project. In 2009, the Chinese government also initiated the Changchun-Jilin-Tumen (Yanbian) Development Project. North Korea expressed significant interest in this project, to the extent that when leader Kim Jong-Il traveled to China to meet Hu Jintao in 2011, he chose the route via Tumen to Changchun instead of the traditional Dandong-Shinuiju route. As part of this development, China constructed more high-speed railways and highways along its borderlands with North Korea, and manufacturing enterprises catering to China's domestic and foreign markets invested in these areas. While the investment was not as large as in southern China, it was nevertheless the type of investment essential for sustained economic development that garnered national attention (Park 2019a, 2019b).

However, mega-development projects have not fundamentally solved the

⁵ While Dalian serves as a successful model of reform and opening up in Northeast China, this study focuses on the China-North Korea border region.

issue of labor outflow. Instead, they have contributed to the expansion of the socioeconomic connections between China and North Korea by increasing the level of marketization of the border region. The marketization of the border areas has had the unintended consequence of establishing the institutional conditions required for the movement of North Korean labor into China. Post-socialist China has relegated the northeastern region to a domestic economic periphery within the country, especially in comparison to the more economically developed southeastern region. This periphery has also become one of the regions supplying laborer to the South Korea within the global capitalist system and the international division of labor. The northeast, facing a labor shortage, had to attract laborers from elsewhere to fuel its economic development. This economic need naturally turned its attention to the relatively underdeveloped North Korea. So what does the process of marketization of in China-North Korea borderlands entail, and what conditions has it created for North Koreans to migrate to China?

Opening of China-North Korea Border Area and Transnational Market

Since the mid-to-late 1970s, there has been an increase in direct exchanges between Beijing and Pyongyang, as well as exchanges in nearly every field along the China-North Korea borderlands (Park 2022c).

It is not an exaggeration to say that the first people-to-people exchanges between China and North Korea began with Korean Chinese who had relatives in North Korea. As will be discussed later, China and North Korea issued passes to people living in the borderlands, allowing them to visit relatives, which made it easier for them to visit each other's border areas. Consequently, thanks to this policy, Korean Chinese began engaging in cross-border business. For instance, a Korean Chinese resident in Longjing would purchase light industrial products (including snacks, candy, towels, socks, batteries, razors, and other necessities) and then travel to North Korea to sell them in Hoeryong. Groups of these Korean Chinese businessmen emerged around this border city's railway station, attracting not only the local residents but also people from other parts of North Korea who wanted to buy these products. The locals referred to this market as the "Hong Kong market." In a country with a planned economy, the concept of a "free market" operated by foreigners must have been a novelty. At the time, Helong had a special bus service running from the downtown terminal to the border. In Musan, on the

other side of the Tumen River from Helong, a “Hong Kong market” also emerged, centered around the bus terminal. After selling their goods, Korean Chinese people would buy dried fish and other seafood from local market and return to China to sell them in the Chinese market (Park 2022c). Korean Chinese in Dandong, as well as the overseas Chinese in North Korea (*chaoxianhuaqiao* in Chinese, *bukhanhwagyo* in Korean), engaged in similar types of cross-border trade with the people in Sinuiju (Kang 2013, 2016). Thus, prior to the large-scale trade between China and North Korea, an important aspect of the marketization of the China-North Korea borderlands was achieved through the cross-border businesses of Korean Chinese. This form of marketization created a range of social and economic conditions that later allowed North Koreans to move to China. One North Korean woman, whose life will be discussed in more detail later, came to China in the 1990s to visit relatives after being invited to China by a Korean Chinese relative who had visited her home for business purpose in the 1980s.

From the mid-to-late 1980s, formal trade between China and North Korea also began in earnest. North Korea’s exports to China remained steady in the 1990s but increased dramatically after 2000. Starting at \$37 million in 2000, exports grew to more than \$2.9 billion in 2013. This volume has been

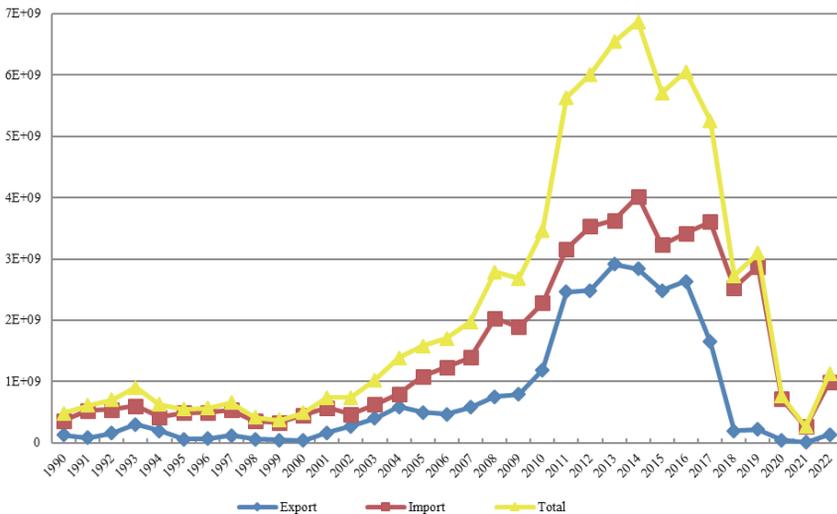


FIG. 2.—TRADE BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA (UNIT: USD)

Sources: 1990–2000 data are from Hong (2006, p. 199), 2001–2020 from North Korea in the *World/trade*, 2021–2022 from Choi and Choi (2023).

declining since 2017, when the United Nations imposed sanctions on North Korea. North Korea's imports from China have shown slight fluctuations from the \$360 million recorded in 1990, but have steadily increased since 2000. In 2000, imports were valued at \$450 million, and in 2014, they exceeded \$4 billion. Imports have also declined as a result of sanctions (Figure 2). The level of economic development between China and North

TABLE 2
TRADE ZONES BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

Chinese Province	Trade Zone		North Korean Province	River
	China	North Korea		
Jilin	(Yanbian Hunchun) Quanhe Shatuozi	Rajin Saebyol	North Hamgyong	Tumen/ Duman
	Yanbian Tumen	Namyang		
	(Yanbian Longjing) Kaishantun Sanhe	Sambong Hoerong		
	(Yanbian Helong) Nanping Guchengli	Musan Samjang		
	Changbai	Hyesan	Ryanggang	Yalu/ Amnok
	(Baishan) Linjiang	Chunggang	Chagang	
	(Ji'an) Laohushao Ji'an	Wiwon Manpo		
Liaoning	(Dandong) Dandong Yabagou Changdianhekou Taipingwankou Danzhimatou Dataizi	Sinuiju Sakchu Sakchu Sakchu Sinuiju Sindo	North Pyongan	

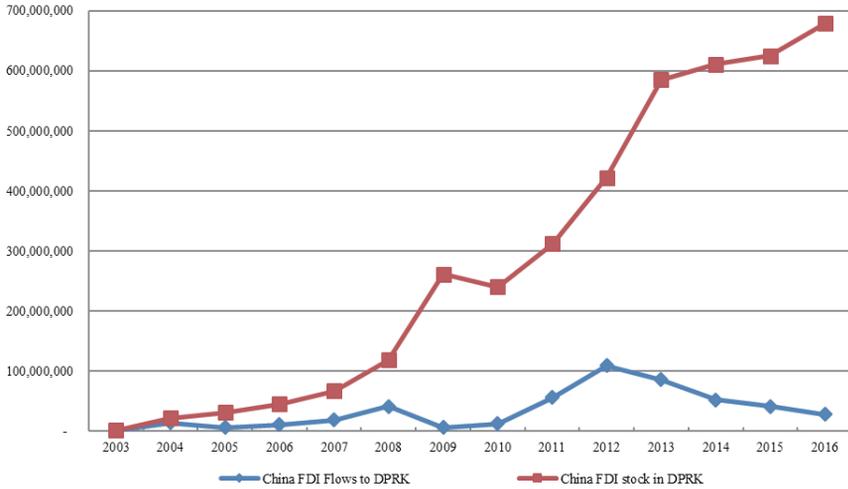


FIG. 3.—CHINA'S DIRECT INVESTMENT IN NORTH KOREA

Sources: North Korea in the World/Chinese FDI.

Korea began to diverge in the 1980s, and North Korea imported various industrial products from China to overcome for the collapse of its own industrial system.⁶

Trade between China and North Korea is primarily conducted through more than a dozen trade zones, including railroads, roads, and ports (Table 2). Since the 1950s, China and North Korea have reaffirmed their trade zones and have continued to use them. In China, the main trade zones, such as Yanbian, Changbai, Baishan, Ji'an, and Dandong are all areas with a large Korean Chinese population.

When China and North Korea were actively trading, Chinese capital was also investing in North Korea. China's annual direct investment in North Korea started to increase in the early 2000s, reaching \$41 million in 2008, and then further increasing to \$109 million in 2012. Regarding the flow of foreign direct investment, we can observe that the FDI stock increased from 2003 to 2016, as shown in Figure 3.⁷

China-North Korea trade through Korean Chinese people, the influx of Chinese goods into North Korea, and Chinese direct investment have had a decisive impact on the marketization of North Korea's border regions, as they

⁶ For more on North Korea's socioeconomic relations with China before 1990s, see Jeong (2008).

⁷ For more on Chinese companies' FDI in North Korea, see Lim (2005).

overlap with North Korea's economic difficulties. As North Korea's economic situation gradually deteriorated and food ration distributions became nominal, the informal sector emerged in major northern cities such as Sinuiju, Hyesan, Musan, Heoryong, and Chongjin as a social response to these problems.⁸ In the 1980s, a type of farmers market emerged where farmers from the outskirts of cities brought their produce to the city to sell. These farmers markets allowed for the exchange of goods using money as a medium of exchange, compensating for the limitations of the country's formal economy. The informal economy also included the unemployed population of the city, formal sector workers who were struggling to make ends meet because their salaries had not increased, and homemakers (Choi and Koo 2003). The informal economy continued to expand in the 1990s. This informal market began to synchronize in terms of types of goods and prices, creating a semi-formal economy that had a significant impact on the daily lives of urban residents (Choi and Koo 2005).

From the mid-1990s onward, the markets that emerged in these cities in the northeastern reaches of the country transitioned from being solely connected to markets in China to becoming interconnected within North Korea as well; the commodities traded in these markets and their prices started to become linked. This interconnection was facilitated by people traveling back and forth between markets. This was, perhaps, one of the unexpected consequences of the economic hardship and famine in North Korea during the 1990s. The dysfunction of the state sector had reached a point where it could hardly address the most critical civilian problems, particularly people's livelihoods. One way to overcome this problem was to grant mobility to people, which had at one time been strictly controlled. In these northern areas, North Koreans purchased goods from merchants in both China and North Korea or from relatives in China, and then traveled to different parts of North Korea to resell them. They also searched for North Korean goods that they could sell. Even besides these merchants or vendors, many more people traveled to other parts of the country to purchase necessities for their livelihood. The increased domestic mobility and closer economic ties with China enabled urban markets in northern North Korea to be connected nationally and internationally, as the author has observed in fieldwork. As the urban market expanded, professionals, party cadres, and others entered the sector (Kim 2013; Kim 1997).

The structural limitations of North Korea's planned economy, intertwined

⁸ This is not to say that markets have not emerged in the interior of North Korea.

with existing economic ties between North Korea and China, has led to the emergence of a transnational market in the two nations' borderlands that connects Chinese and North Koreans in various ways. Urban-to-rural migration, urban-to-urban migration, and rural-to-rural migration became more common. During these movements, some people were naturally drawn to areas on the other side of the Tumen and Yalu Rivers.

North Korean Formal Laborer

The first type of laborer examined here is the North Korean formal laborer. The sending of North Korean formal laborer abroad is a controlled and planned program by the relevant authority. North Korea has exported workers to neighboring countries such as China, Russia, and Mongolia, as well as to the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Europe. Overseas, North Korean workers have been employed in construction, forestry, sewing, catering, and IT industries. Among these countries, China is the largest recipient of North Korean laborers, estimated to account for between 37% and 63% of the total (Lee, Oh, and Yim 2017, pp. 20-21; Lee, Lee, and Kim 2019).

It is very difficult to determine the exact number of North Korean workers in China due to the facts that the Chinese (and the North Korean) government does not release official data, studies have focused on different cases and regions, and the timing of the research is different. Consequently, we can only estimate the size of the labor force based on the number of North Koreans who have officially visited China. In 1998, only about 62,000 North Koreans made official visits to China. This number increased to about 126,000 in 2005. After a slight decline, the number increased from 2011. In 2013, the total number of visitors reached about 210,000, and in 2017, it increased to about 230,000. Among North Koreans who officially entered China from 2006 to 2015, men overwhelmingly outnumbered women. This suggests that North Korea may have exported more male laborers than female laborers (see Figure 4). What, then, can we say about the size of the North Korean labor force?

In 2012, North Korea signed an agreement to supply 20,000 laborers each to Dandong, Tumen, and Hunchun (BOKITA 2014). As of 2016, there were an estimated 12,000 North Korean laborers employed in Dandong, 6,000 laborers employed by 20 Chinese manufacturing enterprises operating in the North Korean Industrial Park in Tumen, and 5,000 laborers employed

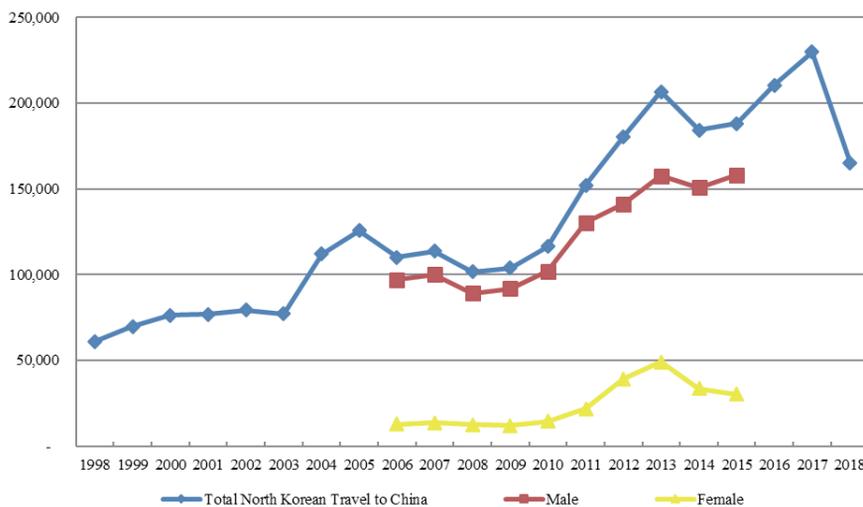


FIG. 4.—TOTAL NORTH KOREAN TRAVEL TO CHINA

Sources: North Korea in the World/travel.

by 35 Chinese enterprises in Hunchun. The number of North Korean workers employed on the Chinese side of the China-North Korea border was estimated to be more than 50% of the total number of North Koreans workers in China (Lee, Lee and Kim 2019, pp. 445). The Sejong Institute predicted in 2016 that the number of North Korean workers in China was at least 70,000-80,000 and would soon exceed 100,000 (Lee, Oh, and Yim 2017). According to another study, the number of North Korean workers in Dandong was around 30,000 as of August 2016, and in Yanbian, 12 companies in the High Technology Development Zone applied for 1,380 North Korean IT technicians, hired 200 in January 2015 and another 312 in January 2016. Hunchun hired about 3,000 North Korean laborers in March 2016, and there were already about 20,000 North Koreans working in Tumen. The North Korean Industrial Park in Tumen attracted 2,680 North Koreans in June 2015 and about 40,000 in August 2016 (Lee 2016). When I asked businessmen who employed North Korean workers in China, they estimated that the total number of North Korean workers in China was about 100,000. Given that this was in 2017, we can assume that workers officially sent by North Korea represented at least half of all North Koreans visiting China. The local boss also said that 70%-80% of the officially sent workers are in manufacturing, construction, and service industries.

According to a 2014 survey by the Beijing office of the Korea International

Trade Association, the labor cost per North Korean worker in China in 2012 was about \$170 per month, of which 40%-50% was taken by the North Korean authorities in the form of social security payments. In Dandong and Tumen, there are estimated to be 10,000-20,000 North Korean workers in the software development industry, recognized as technicians, and earning a relatively high wage of \$300 per month. North Korean workers were also employed in the hospitality industry (restaurants), where they were paid around 2,000 yuan a month for serving and 4,000 yuan for singing or dancing (BOKITA 2014). According to a contract between a Chinese company and a North Korean worker (company) obtained in 2015 by Kang Ju-Won, an anthropologist who has been conducting fieldwork in Dandong for more than a decade, the monthly living allowance for North Korean managers was 2,400 yuan and 1,600 yuan for workers, in addition to 350 yuan per month for room and board (Kang 2015). A report published in 2017 by the Korea Institute for National Unification published contracts between Chinese and North Korean companies. The contracts stated that North Korean workers were paid 1,800 to 2,000 yuan per month, while managers were paid 3,500 yuan. North Korean workers worked eight hours a day (Lee, Oh, and Yim 2017, pp. 20-34). While it is not possible to accurately calculate the difference in wages between North Korean and Chinese workers by industry, it is believed that the former makes about 80% of the latter in manufacturing (Kang 2015).

North Korean workers are recruited and sent by government-controlled brokers. Chinese companies in need of North Korean labor could request North Korean workers through Chinese middlemen with North Korean business connections. These Chinese middlemen would then connect with North Korean companies, usually trading companies, who would in turn report to the local trade-related government departments or authorities. Finally, the state (central government or central party) must be notified and their approval obtained. Once approved, provincial-level trade authorities recruit North Korean workers. After the workers are recruited, the North Korean middleman applies to the Chinese company through the Chinese middleman for the North Korean workers' visas, work permits, work residence permits, and other work-related immigration documents. These documents are obtained by the Chinese company through an agency, and they are then shared with the North Korean company. The North Korean company sends the North Korean workers to the Chinese company and delegates management authority over them. North Korean laborers sent through this formal process are official workers, governed and protected by

the Exit and Entry Administration Law of China and the Rules for the Administration of Employment of Foreigners in China (Lee, Lee, and Kim 2019, pp. 447-448). Contracts between North Korean and Chinese companies are usually for three years. Chinese companies prefer to hire North Korean workers aged 18 to 25, with a maximum age of 45. They also favor those with at least six months of work experience in related industries. North Korean workers enter China after being escorted by North Korean companies to the North Korean side of the border (Lee, Oh, and Yim 2017, pp. 30-34).

Since the 1990s, North Korean labor exports to China have steadily increased, but this trend hit a roadblock in 2016. Following North Korea's fifth nuclear test in 2016, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) immediately adopted Resolution 2321, which imposed conditions on people-to-people exchanges and travel, including requiring UN member nations to reduce the number of people in their representative missions to North Korea (UN Security Council 2016). The following year, North Korea launched an ICBM, which led to the adoption of Resolution 2371. Noting that North Korea uses people working abroad to fund its nuclear program, the resolution called for UN member nations to freeze the number of work authorizations issued to North Koreans at pre-resolution levels and to not accept any new North Korean workers (UN Security Council 2017a). In 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test, which resulted in the UNSC passing Resolution 2375. This resolution prohibits member nations from issuing work authorizations to North Koreans, but it does not prohibit member nations from employing North Koreans at levels that would not be inconsistent with past sanctions resolutions and the denuclearization of North Korea (UN Security Council 2017b). Subsequently, after North Korea launched another ICBM, the UNSC passed Resolution 2397, requiring member nations to repatriate North Korean laborers working in their countries and North Korean personnel managing and monitoring them within 24 months (UN Security Council 2017c). Figure 4 shows that in 2017 about 230,000 North Koreans visited China, but in 2018 that number dropped to about 165,000.⁹

⁹ The influx of formal laborers into China has been ongoing since 2018. During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, formal workers exhibited considerable flexibility in integrating into the Chinese labor market, with some returning to North Korea. However, data limitations in this area hinder precise specifics. Additionally, as mentioned above, the data regarding North Korea's labor force, used in this chapter, varies due to different researchers, research institutions, time period, and the regions. Despite these variations, my study indicates that these formal laborers entered China's labor market in response to shortages in specific parts of the country and the market dynamics between North Korea and China. I believe that this data is sufficient to explain this phenomenon.

North Korean Quasi-Formal Laborer

The second type of laborer examined here is the quasi-formal laborer. Between China and North Korea, there is a system of one-month passes for residents of the borderlands, as well as visas based on specific functions (tourism, study, training, or performance) to visit China. It is relatively common for North Koreans to use short-term passes to enter the Chinese labor market. They are called quasi-formal laborers because although their entry into China is legal, they are not integrating into the labor market by signing formal employment contracts. Instead, they are informally integrated into the formal sector or even the informal market to provide labor. Most of them return to their home countries at the end of their stay, so they cannot be considered illegal immigrants.

Since the early 1950s, China and its neighbors have used a system of short-term passes to facilitate the movement of people and goods. At the time, China and North Korea did not have precisely defined borders, and although there was a system of passes between the two countries, people move back and forth relatively freely. In 1962, China and North Korea signed a border treaty, and in 1964, the public security authorities of both countries signed the Protocol between the PRC Ministry of Public Security and the DPRK Social Safety Ministry on Mutual Cooperation in Maintaining National Security and Social Order in Border Areas to institutionalize various issues related to border crossings. In 1965, a follow-up agreement established trade zones between two countries. However, China then went through the Cultural Revolution, and the relationship between China and North Korea deteriorated, leading to the cessation of various channels of communication between the two countries. During this period, more Korean Chinese living in border areas crossed into North Korea due to violence from the far left in China than North Koreans migrated to China (Park 2019b; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2012).

While China declared reform and opening up, it made various efforts to improve relations with North Korea. One specific way it did so was by updating the existing protocol between the public security authorities of the two sides in 1986. Previously, both countries issued passes to relatives, but they institutionalized the scope of issuing passes by requiring an additional invitation letter if the visitor is not a close relative. Although it appeared to regulate cross-border movement more than in the past by expanding the scope of the invitation, it did not fundamentally affect movement because

invitations proved very easy to create on the ground in China and North Korea. Instead, it was more positive in terms of normalizing and institutionalizing migration. It was this institutionalization that led to the very active exchange of humans and materials mentioned in the second section.

If the 1980s and early 1990s were dominated by visits from Chinese residents to North Korea, the mid-to-late 1990s saw the rise of North Korean visits to China. The direct cause of these visits was the economic crisis, also known as the Arduous March. To effectively manage these people, the public security authorities of two countries updated the existing protocol again in 1998.¹⁰

North Koreans who had relatives in China would write to them, hoping that they would arrange an invitation letter. Once they received the invitation, they were issued a short-term pass and could visit China for a month. One North Korean woman I met in Longjing in 1998 had traveled to China from Heoryong on a visiting relative pass. She wrote to her relative in Longjing asking for an invitation, and the relative in China sent the invitation documents to North Korea. Thanks to these documents, she entered China in June 1998. The day after her arrival, she began looking for her relatives. They actively provided her with financial support. What is interesting here is that during this one month, the North Korean woman did not just hang around. With the help of her relatives, she found a work locally as a day laborer. She washed dishes and cleaned in restaurants, picked fruit in orchards, and did whatever she could in factories. She visited China once and spent no money of her own for a month, living with relatives, receiving 2,000 yuan in pocket money from them and earning 1,000 yuan from her own work. North Koreans who visit China on a short-term pass are not allowed to sign formal employment contracts there. However, this type of day laborer is actually not a bad thing from the point of view of the labor shortage in Chinese communities. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain figures on the number of the North Koreans who entered China on a short-term stay. However, given that there are about one million Korean Chinese in the border region, and that there are more than a dozen trade zones between China and North Korea, it is reasonable to assume that the number of North Korean quasi-formal laborers who were integrated into

¹⁰ North Korea's economic difficulties have complicated the situation in the border region. First, there was the increase in North Korean defectors, which will be discussed in the next section. Second, North Koreans along the border have been using gunpowder and weapons to fish in the Yalu and Tumen Rivers. Third, North Korean bodies showing signs of starvation have been floating down the rivers and washing up on the Chinese side. These issues are covered in the protocol.

China's border labor market is not small.¹¹ As quasi-formal laborers integrated into the Chinese labor market, North Koreans are no strangers to the two countries.

Quasi-formal laborers have also been identified among North Korean workers sent to China (formal workers) since the mid-2010s. In many cases, Chinese companies that used to trade with North Korea have shifted towards professionally importing North Korean labor. This is partly due to the decline in North Korea-related trade following UN sanctions and partly due to the increasing demand for North Korean labor from Chinese companies. Labor brokers in China have been involved in recruiting laborers from North Korea and placing them with Chinese companies. In this process, North Korean laborers are said to have sent to China on short-term visitor or tourist visas, which are recognized between the two countries (Lee, Lee, and Kim 2019, pp. 447-448). Critics argue that China and North Korea are circumventing UN sanctions on North Korea by sending short-term visitors (i.e., quasi-formal workers) to China rather than workers with formal labor force citizenship status. In 2019, an organization of monitoring human rights in North Korea estimated that there were still 80,000 North Korean laborers working in China, with as many as 60,000 in Jilin and Liaoning provinces (25,000-30,000 in Jilin alone) (Shin 2019). The Chinese government was required to repatriate North Korean workers in China by the end of 2019 to comply with UN sanctions against North Korea. However, critics say that only those who were subject to sanctions based on their residency status were sent back to North Korea. The number of North Korean workers dropped by about a third by the end of 2019, with an estimated 50,000 to 80,000. Nevertheless, since the beginning of 2020, an increasing number of former North Korean workers have returned to China with official passports or study visas to work (KBS 2020).¹²

In 2020, many countries began to close their borders because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The consensus among researchers who have studied the region is that North Korean workers who stayed in China during the early stage of the pandemic remained economically active. In the past, extending their stay on a short-term visa was relatively difficult, but in the wake of the pandemic, the relevant authorities granted extensions. The North Korean workers at factories were employed in the production of medical supplies such as protective clothing and masks (Kang 2021, pp. 205-254).

¹¹ For more on the socioeconomic links between China and North Korea, see Kim (2008) and Cho (2008).

¹² In this case, the visa might not necessarily be for just one month.

North Korean Informal Laborer

As mentioned above, North Korea experienced severe economic hardship throughout the 1990s, leading to a peak in the number of North Koreans smuggled into China. Based on my fieldwork, I would categorize North Korean clandestine migration and smuggling into the following types.

First, in the mid-to-late 1990s, when North Korea's food shortage was at its worst, border soldiers or villagers (mostly men) would cross the river in the middle of the night and enter Chinese villages to steal, rob, and take food or other necessities back to North Korea. These individuals would not stay in China for long periods of time and would return as soon as they had fulfilled their purpose. Others would barter with Korean Chinese villagers along the border. These cases fall into the first category: those who illegally smuggle in food during times of economic hardship or travel back and forth to China for economic purpose. The second type is the smuggled short-term resident. They are smuggled into China and live and work for one to three months, mainly as agricultural laborers. They usually sneak back to North Korea after their work is done. The third type comprises smuggled long-term resident. This type includes individuals who do not return to North Korea from the first two types and those who smuggled themselves into China from the beginning with the intention of staying for the long term. These individuals were initially located in rural villages along the border and then moved to rural areas in the interior, far from the border, where they worked and lived. The fourth type is those who enter China legally and do not return to North Korea, but remain in China illegally. These are usually people who went to China on short-term visas. These individuals were unlikely to reside illegally in China or defect, as information about both their family in North Korea and that in China that sponsored them would be reported to the authorities in both countries. The fifth type is organized defection. As early as the mid-to-late 1990s, South Korean religious organizations conducted missionary activities in China, especially in Yanbian, and many of them were responsible for assisting defectors and sending them to South Korea. This organized defection can be divided into two main categories. First is that in which religious organizations send defectors to South Korea for "purely humanitarian purposes" and with a concern for North Korean human rights.¹³ The other category involves defectors who settle in South Korea and

¹³ In fact, these religious organizations were predominantly composed of individuals with anti-

provide money earned in the South and settlement money received from the South Korean government to these religious organizations operating in China or to local brokers in China who help their relatives or family members defect. Since 2000, cell phones from China had been illegally used within North Korea's border areas, and money sent from South Korea has flowed into North Korea through Chinese brokers. The close transnational connectivity of information and capital has allowed this organized defection to flourish.¹⁴ This is why the number of North Korean defectors living in China or entering South Korea via China has been steadily increasing since 2000 (through 2011) (see Figure 5). The Chinese authorities considered these activities by religious groups to be illegal and have taken very serious responses to them.

A survey conducted by the South Korean NGO Good Friends in 2005 estimated that there were approximately 50,000 defectors in rural area of the Chinese borderlands. In 2006, this organization surveyed predominately Han Chinese rural areas in the three provinces that make up Northeast China and the suburbs of large cities such as Shenyang, Dalian, and Qingdao, and estimated that there were about 100,000 defectors and 50,000 children born to defectors.¹⁵ The International Crisis Group also estimated the number of defectors at around 100,000. Since 2008, the number of defectors has dropped significantly, with estimates ranging from 20,000 to 40,000 (KINU 2011, pp. 382-383; Yoon 1997).¹⁶ In the early 2010s, surveys conducted by some independent social organizations estimated that at the peak of the defections, there were about 300,000 to 400,000 defectors living in China, with about three-quarters of them being women. The Wall Street Journal, using data from Chinese public security agencies and government sources in Yanbian, has estimated that about 400,000 illegal North Korean immigrants have entered China since 1983, and several international human rights organizations have also estimated that there were about 300,000 to 400,000 North Koreans on Chinese soil (Xiao 2013).

The majority of clandestine North Korean migrants come from the

North Korean regime or anti-communist ideologies.

¹⁴ Defectors are more likely to be smuggled into South Asian countries or Mongolia than to travel directly from China to South Korea.

¹⁵ Accurately estimating the size of this informal labor force is impossible. The data from Good Friends is also an estimation. The numbers mentioned here aim to provide an indication of the scale of North Korean defectors rather than precise figures.

¹⁶ In 1997, South Korea enacted the North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act, which provides financial and material support for their entry and resettlement in South Korea.

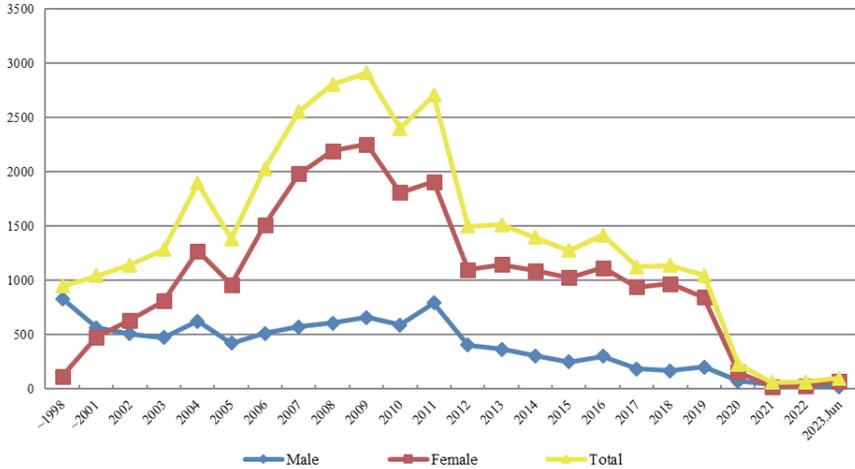


FIG. 5.—NUMBER OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS ENTERING SOUTH KOREA

Sources: Ministry of Unification.

northern provinces of North Hamgyong, Ryanggang, Chagang, and North Pyongan. Of course, there are also people from Hwanghae Province and Pyongyang. Among them, male defectors often work in construction, forestry, animal husbandry, and beekeeping in mountainous and rural areas. Since they do not have shelter in China, they have been integrated into sectors that are experiencing labor shortages in the region, often living in accommodation provided by local Korean Chinese. Some men have also joined local gangs and served as muscle. Women, whether they defected voluntarily or were forced to defect as a result of being trafficked from the border areas, have faced worse conditions than men. Some of them have been forced to marry, have children, and live with local rural elders, disabled people, or people suffering from alcoholism or mental illness.¹⁷ Instead of being housed by local men, they became part of the local rural population reproduction system and functioned as domestic laborers. Most of these women worked in rural or urban service industries. Some women became sex workers, working as hostesses in local brothels or in the sex trade. From my experiences in the field, the China-North Korea borderlands are populated by Korean Chinese, many of whom don't speak Chinese very well, so these defectors have been able to claim they are Korean Chinese or at least get by

¹⁷ The citizenship of children born to Chinese men and North Korean women is indeed a crucial issue. Most of the regions recognize these children as Chinese.

without speaking Chinese.¹⁸ While the gender ratio of defectors in China is not precisely known, it can be inferred from the gender ratio mentioned above, along with the ratio of those who entered South Korea, that women are overwhelmingly represented (see Figure 5). If this composition consistently reflects the gender ratio of defectors living in China, we can interpret the informal labor force that left North Korea as more female than male. This is the opposite of what we saw earlier, where men outnumbered women in the formal labor force.¹⁹

Conclusion

This study analyzed North Korean migration to China from the perspective of the macro-socioeconomic conditions shaping labor migration. The findings of this study are as follows.

First, the labor shortage in Northeast China, resulting from the country's unbalanced economic development, was an important factor in the introduction of North Korean labor. Since the late 1970s, China has pursued a series of reforms focused on economic liberalization. Domestic and foreign capital has been invested to the southeastern coastal areas and large cities, which were intensively and strategically developed by the Chinese government. The northeast region, once known as the country's "eldest son," lost its prestige in the planned economy era. The labor force in the region rapidly shifted to economic centers, causing a decline in the absolute population of Northeast China. Consequently, certain regions and industries in the region experienced labor shortages. At the national level, the Chinese government initiated or participated in various national and international development projects aimed at revitalizing this former heavy industrial base. However, these mega-development projects have not fundamentally solved the problem of regional economic development and labor outflow. Instead, since China's integration into the global market, Northeast China has turned into a region that provides labor to both the domestic and international labor markets. As a result, China's border regions have experienced chronic outmigration and labor shortages since the 1990s, which have played a decisive role in attracting and utilizing labor from outside the country for sustained economic

¹⁸ For an examination of defectors' economic activities at the most micro level of society, see Good Friends' "North Korea Today" news, which has been tracking and researching this area for years.

¹⁹ For more on the issue of gender in defectors, see Han (2007), CHRNK (2009), and Lee (2010).

development. Although the economy of the northeastern region lags behind that of the southeast, it has a significant advantage when compared to its neighbor, North Korea. The demand for local labor naturally attracted labor from the economically underdeveloped North Korea.

Second, formal and informal transnational markets have developed along the China-North Korea borderlands, and the socioeconomic connections that constitute these markets have had a significant impact on North Korean migration to China. Since the 1980s, China and North Korea have established active economic exchanges. Goods from China and North Korea flow into each other's markets through more than a dozen trade zones. North Korea imports more than it exports to China, indicating a relatively weak commodity economy. Additionally, Chinese capital has steadily entered North Korea, albeit on a small scale. In this way, China and North Korea have been connected through formal economic relations, creating a kind of formal transnational market in the borderlands as a concrete manifestation of this socioeconomic relationship. Simultaneously, an informal transnational market has also emerged along the China-North Korea borderlands. This informal market became active as North Korea's economic difficulties increased. While China transformed its economic structure into a (socialist) market economy and achieved rapid economic development, North Korea faced severe economic challenges stemming from the accumulation of inherent economic problems. These issues played a determining role in the emergence of the informal (or non-state) sector. Chinese residents living in the border areas crossed into North Korea and began engaging in cross-border trade, effectively creating a form of free market. At the same time, as North Korea's economic situation worsened, the informal sector, organized by North Koreans, expanded. These formal and informal sectors became interconnected on a transnational level, providing North Koreans with the opportunity to access specific segments of the Chinese labor market through various networks and routes.

Third, the North Korean labor force can be categorized into three groups: formal, quasi-formal, and informal. Formal laborers are those recruited and sent to China by the relevant authorities in North Korea. They were officially employed by Chinese companies and receive laborer citizenship status. Chinese companies in need of North Korean laborers bring them in through companies doing business in North Korea or through intermediaries. North Korean formal workers are part of the official economic relationship between Northeast China and North Korea. They were mainly engaged in the manufacturing sector, primarily in industrial parks along the border, but also

in the construction, forestry, and service sectors. Statistically, there are more men in the formal labor force, and this workforce is predominantly blue-collar, with some technicians. Next, quasi-formal laborers from North Korea are laborers who have entered China officially but do not function as formal workers or have been incorporated into the informal sector. There are two types of quasi-formal workers. The first are those who entered as formal laborers but whose residence status has changed for various political and economic reasons. These workers still provide labor in certain industries based on their original roles when they were sent. The second type includes those who enter China on various short-term visas and become integrated into the local labor market within the time limit of their visa, providing labor and receiving remuneration. They do not have formal worker's status but function as *de facto* workers in areas where local labor is needed. Finally, informal laborers are those who have entered the country illegally or have been smuggled in. Many of them are subsistence migrants, also known as defectors, escapees, refugees, and so on. They lack recognized immigration status in China and face political and human rights challenges if they are repatriated. Some of them have entered South Korea through third countries, while others remain in China today. They are integrated into local labor markets, providing labor in demanding sectors. North Koreans have been integrated into various areas of China, contributing to local socioeconomic development. Specifically, one aspect of their contribution is their participation in solving the problems created by China's unbalanced development.

Labor migration between China, a pragmatic system with a socialist market economy, and North Korea, which still predominantly operates a planned economy, is divided into three categories: planned labor migration, driven by the government or its agents and governed by labor market principles; migration entirely driven by the labor market in both countries and condoned by the state; and migration guided by market principles but lacking state-provided protection and guarantees, essentially occurring "outside" the state. All these types of migration were observed during the surge of Chinese labor entering South Korea in the 1990s-2000s. However, with time, migration shifted towards a common trait: being propelled by market forces while the state ensures a certain level of security. Naturally, these distinctions cannot be generalized from merely one or two countries. Understanding labor migration between China and North Korea requires broader and more comprehensive exploration through future comparative studies that encompass diverse regions and countries.

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