



Individual Advanced Research

Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Title of research proposal:

From Fluid Borderland to Divided Spaces: Transformation of the Russian-Korean Borderland, 1860-1937

Topic of research:

This dissertation examines the political, economic, and social changes in the Russian Far East that led to the consolidation of a modern national boundary between Russia and Korea from 1860 to 1937.

Russia gained a territorial border with Chosôn Korea in 1860 through the Treaty of Peking. Effective border controls, which reinforced the demarcation of the two nations (and empires) and peoples, however, were established only after 1937 when the entire population of Koreans living in the Russian Far East was forcibly removed from the border zone and replaced by regiments of Russian soldiers. Prior to this dramatic “nationalizing” of the border area, a relatively fluid borderland had existed. The Korean-Russian borderland, a narrow strip of land extending from Hamgyông Province in northern Korea to the Russian Maritime Province (Primore), was a place in which multiple peoples, identities, ideas, and economies comingled. My dissertation investigates the transformation of this borderland, from a fluid place to divided spaces of nationalized borders, and explores how the patchwork of overlapping local identities and

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local perceptions about territory evolved into distinct national ones – “Korean” and “Russian.”

Relevance and contribution to field:

The dissertation will shed light on transnational changes occurring in the Russian Far East and northeast Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. The Korean-Russian borderland, in particular, represented the nexus of geopolitics in the region and the stage for the activities of two emerging imperial powers, the Soviet Union and Japan.

The project will specifically address the political and economic factors that brought about the cross-border migration of Koreans to and from the Russian Far East. The literature dealing with the border region and migration in this time period is sparse and politically charged, and existing works tend to focus on historical circumstances in either Korea and Russia, but rarely both. Russian scholars tend to view the history of the Russian Far East solely as a conquer-and-colonize project of the Tsarist state and ignore the factors in Korea which pushed Koreans to migrate northward in the first place; Korean historians primarily study the activities of Korean nationalist elites operating in the areas, overlooking local conditions in Russia. I will focus on cross-border ties – labor contractors who recruited workers, colonization programs, diplomatic relations.

The dissertation also investigates how local, national, and imperial identities evolved. This question proved crucial in the borderland, where peoples from emerging states and empires came into contact with one another. Through various policies, the Tsarist government attempted to transform the Koreans into “Russians,” while the Soviet state, along with Korean nationalist intellectuals, endeavored to reinforce the “Korean” national identity of ethnic Koreans in Russia. The inclusion of Korean and Russian (Soviet) perspectives in my dissertation redresses the bias of one-sided nationalist historiographies.

The proposed study on the borderland between Russia and Korea at the turn of the twentieth century holds significance for the political situation in the region today. There are parallel concerns about the migration of foreigners, primarily Asians, across the border and about the impact on the local economy and resources in Russia. Preserving national interests and identities resides at the forefront of political agendas in the Russian Far East, while the region attempts to engage in economic and political cooperation with its neighbors. Militarization on one or both sides of the border (North Korea, Soviet Union), complicates the balance between national and international priorities today as much as it did in the early 1900s.

Research methodology and research sites:

The dissertation research is divided into two stages: first, archival research in Russia to gather primarily Russian-language materials on the Russian Far East; and second, research in South Korea and the United States to gather Korean-language materials on the Korean side of the border. The IREX grant allowed to complete the first stage.

I spent most of my time working in two archives in Vladivostok – the Russian State Historical Archive of the Far East (RGIA DV) and the State Archive of Primorskiï krai (GAPK). In RGIA DV, I collected pre-1917 government reports and correspondence

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with the border guard and other officials on Korean migration to Russia, policies towards migrants, general concerns about colonizing the Far East, border conflicts among Manchus, Russians, and Koreans. I also gathered figures on trade, agriculture, and population changes in the region.

In GAPK, I worked with Soviet-period documents from the cell and soviet levels in Korean-populated regions near the border (Pos'et) to gain a sense of how Soviet policies were being implemented at the local level. Many of the documents were written in Korean language. I also gathered figures on agriculture, population changes, border crossings, and worked with local newspapers (pre-1917) to understand public opinion on migration and political and economic developments in the region.

In the library of the Institute of History, Ethnography, and Archaeology (Far Eastern branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences), I collected travelogues on Russia and Korea, ethnographic studies of Koreans and other Asians, and contemporary works on the economic colonization of the Russian Far East.

During a brief research trip to Khabarovsk, I worked in the State and Party archives of Khabarovsk Krai (GAKhK), gathering materials on Korean nationalist activities in Russia in the 1920s.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions:

Based on archival research, I have found that the border between Russia and Korea during the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods was more open than I had previously thought. After official trade relations between the two countries were established in 1888, thousands of Koreans traveled to the Russian Far East by sea and land as seasonal laborers and returned to Korea after completing their work or settled in Russia. Cattle and foodstuffs were exported from Korea to Russia.

The most striking cross-border activity was the back-and-forth migration of Koreans to and from Russia. Though I was unable to find correspondence written by the Koreans themselves, based on other materials, I can assume that social networks played a large role in causing and sustaining the migration. The vast majority of the population of Pos'et, the southernmost part of the Maritime Province bordering on Korea, comprised Koreans. Most came from the same provinces in northern Korea, Hamgyông and Pyôngan. In Pos'et, the Koreans governed through semi-autonomous courts and village heads; an infrastructure was in place to receive new migrants / immigrants.

Movement across the border occurred at the same time as border controls were being formed. Though several border guard stations existed, most Koreans found ways to circumvent these and easily entered Russia through Manchuria. This movement continued through the Soviet period, most likely until collectivization in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

I also found that deeply rooted insecurities in Russian official circles concerning Russia's geopolitical position in northeast Asia shaped much of the discourse and policies concerning migration to the Maritime Province. Russia was a newcomer to this region and its territories in the Far East were sparsely settled or inhabited by Koreans, Manchus, and Chinese. Concerns about its position only increased after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, when Japan made Korea its protectorate and gained a territorial boundary with Russia.

Though talk about fears of the “flood of Asians” into the Russian Far East influenced policy to stem migration, however, other policies encouraged laborers and farmers to work on Russian territory and to assimilate them to Russia. The need for workers in agriculture, gold mines, fishing, and other industries seemed to override official paranoia towards foreigners and “spies.” It appears the paranoia reached a climax during the mid-1930s and led to the deportation of the Koreans from the Russian Far East to Central Asia, far from the border zone.

I had hoped to find more materials on conflicts among various ethnic groups, mainly Korean, Chinese, and Russians in order to help prove my thesis concerning the formation of identities – that though official cultural policies helped transform the Koreans into “true Russians” or “Koreans,” their identities were also nationalized through encounters (including disputes, legal negotiations, neighborly exchanges) with other ethnic groups. It seems that the Tsarist state played a role in minimizing conflicts by establishing procedures for allotting land to non-Russians and actively helped resolve conflicts that did arise between Koreans and roving bands of Manchus (“red beards”). It also appears that disputes that arose in areas heavily populated by Koreans were resolved by the Korean courts and village heads themselves. The inaccessibility of these archival documents at the present time, however, prevent me from further investigating this hypothesis. Rather than focusing on how identities played out at the local level, I will make extensive use of travel accounts and ethnographic studies to investigate how Korean identity was viewed by both Russian officials, scholars, and Korean nationalist émigrés in the Russian Far East.

I also found scattered documents on diplomatic correspondence among Russia, Korea, and Japan that will shed light on the changing legal status of Korean migrants in the Russian Far East. The Japanese and Russian governments sparred over the citizenship of Koreans and respectively labeled them Japanese imperial subjects and Tsarist subjects (citizens of the Soviet Union later), while Koreans firmly maintained that they were Korean. Pursuing a more systematic study of these documents (located in St. Petersburg and Moscow) will help provide further insight into the identity question.

All *fondy* (document collections) with information regarding the Pos’et border region are inaccessible to researchers. I had intended to do a micro-study of this very region, but was limited to using higher-level administrative documents because of the situation in the archives.

Suggestions for future research:

Future research on the border region should include historical developments in northeast Manchuria (Kanto), which shared boundaries with Korea and Russia. Extensive trade in timber, grain, and other raw materials was conducted between Manchuria and Russia; and Han Chinese were migrating northward into Manchuria and Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition, Koreans seemed to move among northern Korea, Manchuria, and Russia, settling in one place and moving to another with relative ease. It should be noted that there was a significant difference in the type of migration between Koreans and Chinese who came to Russia. Most Koreans settled for the long term, primarily in Pos’et, whereas Chinese sojourned. This patterns seemed to have continued through the Soviet period.

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Recommendations for the US policy community:

The imposition of border controls by governments for the sole purpose of reinforcing an ideological boundary is likely to be counterproductive for both sides. This is as true for the present situation at the U.S.-Mexico border as it is for boundaries between “Europe” and “Asia,” and Russia, China, and Korea in the early 1900s and today. According to historical precedents, slogans and language that play upon fear of infiltration by foreigners (ideological, legal) have often led to heightened sensitivities and policies that are detrimental to the local and regional economies on both sides of the border. Trade and economies are conducted and created across borders and often depend on transnational links – labor, capital, and familial networks. The U.S. policy community may also wish to address the strengthening of border controls regarding illegal human trafficking, which is prevalent across the Russia-China border.