

On This Topic



## DMZ Beyond Inter-Korean Borderlands: *Productive Contradiction from the Perspective of Critical DMZ Studies*

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The year 2023 marks the 70th anniversary of the Armistice Agreement in the Korean War (1950–1953). Diverse commemoration events are planned worldwide to celebrate this anniversary, such as those organized by South Korea's Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs and veterans' foundations across the United States, Great Britain, and the Commonwealth (KOREA.net 2023; Royal British Legion 2023; Korean War Veterans Memorial Foundation 2023). Despite the festive mood, the two Koreas remain technically at war. In the unended inter-Korean conflict, the inter-Korean border area, often called the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), has served as a witness to Cold War power struggles for 70 years, and has remained as the oldest continuous symbol of the Cold War.

The DMZ has been understood as a political, military, and ideological border manifesting the power struggles and tensions not only between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), but also between the United States, Russia (formerly

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the Soviet Union), Japan, and China. However, considering the multi-layered and multi-faced stories accumulated in the DMZ, this special issue project on the DMZ beyond inter-Korean borderlands is an attempt to widen our understanding of the meanings and roles of the DMZ to reflect its status as a cultural, social, and meta border, drawing a perspective from Critical DMZ Studies. Critical DMZ Studies, as I term it, pays particular attention to the DMZ's contradictory nature, such as in the juxtaposition of human and non-human activities and political and non-political practices. Locating the DMZ's inherent contradictions as the main force that generates the DMZ's stories, values, and meanings, this special issue aims to understand how its contradictory characteristics productively contribute to the formation of the reimagined and recreated DMZ.

### **Contradictory Forces in the DMZ**

The DMZ, despite routine security patrols and regular artillery training making it the “scariest place on earth,” is a locus for diverse human and non-human activities (E. Kim 2022, 10). Because military operations have excluded civilian intervention, the border area is what has been called an “accidental sanctuary” for wildlife and endangered species (Matthiessen 1996). Man-made artifacts also increasingly benefit from the unexpected preservation and protection the inter-Korean border provides, with projects launched to attract cultural heritage tourism to the zone. More recently, there have been numerous art exhibitions and installations in the DMZ that share the theme of peace, contradicting the image of war that the very location has long represented.

Contradictory ideas and practices comprise the true historical dynamics of the inter-Korean borderland. In its inception, Korean division and the resultant inter-Korean border marked both the nation's liberation from and further subjugation to foreign powers. During the Korean War and the Cold War, the North and South Korean regimes, while calling for national reunification as their supreme political goal, fortified the DMZ and perpetuated the system of division. Claims regarding the DMZ's natural

intactness are only half correct, given that economic necessities have deforested the northern side and expanded civilian residency in the southern (Brady 2008, 597). The persistence of Korean division even after the end of the Cold War, which was the original *raison d'être* of the internal border, further testifies to the continued contradiction the inter-Korean borderland has long manifested.

Today, the advent of the post-Cold War (or neo-Cold War) era and the subsequent rethinking of national borders has intensified the exogenous and endogenous contradictions of the Korean borderland. As border studies scholars rightly point out, ongoing globalization is demanding a change in our paradigm of the idea of border, from a delimitation of a fixed boundary for a territorial entity like a nation-state, to a concept that is ever being made and remade, always already in a process of “bordering, re-bordering, and de-bordering” (Kloosterman et al. 2018, 66). In Korea, the increasingly visible participation of marginalized social groups, including local residents and domestic and international civil societies, complicates the network of actors that challenge and maintain the division system. The recent experience of the global pandemic and ongoing climate change demonstrate that the need for border closures and transborder cooperation are two sides of the same coin. In this sense, the border can be seen as an active social and anthropological process to reproduce contradictions, and the DMZ can be reexamined to better understand which contradictions are generated and are engaged in meaning-makings.

## **Review of Critical DMZ Studies**

Identifying and exploring contradictions inherent in the inter-Korean border has been the main focus of what I would call Critical DMZ studies, as briefly noted before. Critical DMZ Studies challenges the view of the inter-Korean borderlands as a byproduct of global conflict and security regimes, and diversifies the focus of studies of the DMZ by exploring how inherent contradiction is the central driving force shaping and reshaping the working and the meaning of the inter-Korean borderland. In Critical DMZ

Studies, interdisciplinary approaches are more appropriate for investigating the multi-dimensional characteristics of the DMZ that stem from its contradictory nature. Among a wide range of existing literature, five pieces of DMZ literature are of particular relevance to the themes of this special issue's papers.

Lisa M. Brady, for instance, narrates how failed diplomacy over the DMZ has reaped unanticipated environmental success. On the one hand, her work inherits the idea of the DMZ as a natural reserve uncontaminated by human destruction. On the other hand, she raises the critical question of whether the DMZ as an area protected from human intervention isn't in fact the product of environmentalist intervention. Brady's question aptly addresses the situation of the DMZ, where loudspeakers from each side have until recently advertised the superiority of either the capitalist or communist system in a way that disrupts the peace of nature (Brady 2008, 589). In other words, the human inaction that is said to have sustained the pristine ecology of the Korean borderland is partly a construct of human actions. Therefore, her work identifies the significant role played by the 1994 proposal for a "Korean Peace Bioreserves System" in the inter-Korean borderland in creating a natural environmental reserve in the DMZ (Brady 2008, 587). She emphasizes that the proposal received wide acceptance by popular mass media, from "*Science and Environment* to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*" (Brady 2008, 588). Similarly, her more recent work has examined the intervention of scientific reports in reimagining the DMZ not as a "war zone" but as a "scientific landscape" (Brady 2020, 189).

Eleanor Kim also discusses the dialectics between natural resilience and human intervention based on her own fieldwork and documentary research. Her research makes a departure from the uncritical acceptance of the "accidental sanctuary" thesis by arguing that the promotion of nature has ironically maintained the symbolization of the DMZ as a space for peace, while it is in fact a place where the armed presence has long been normalized (E. Kim 2022, 9–10). Her main point is that this unproblematic coexistence of war and peace is an idea and practice that constitutes the "real contradiction" of the DMZ (E. Kim 2022, 12). Alternatively, Kim suggests the concept of biological peace, or "making peace with nature" (E. Kim

2022, 19). Unlike the idea of peace politics as coexistent with the “thanatopolitical logics of modern military power,” her conception of biological peace allows human technical intervention only to the point where it flows with natural movement by “centering nonhuman nature” (E. Kim 2022, 12, 19). Her research supports this idea with rich examples, like the ornithologist technique of bird-banding that enables the tracking of the transnational and transcontinental flyways of migratory birds stopping in the Korean borderlands (E. Kim 2022, 116). In this, Eleanor Kim’s account not only shows that the “accidental sanctuary” is not without human intervention, but also points to a non-violent way of thinking of peace with the DMZ.

How the emphasis on ecology by recent political discourse gave rise to a politically neutral notion of DMZ eco-tourism is examined in the work of Dong-Yeon Koh. Citing French anthropologist Marc Augé’s notion of “non-place,” Koh points out that the government-initiated promotion of DMZ tourism adopts the logic of casual international travel and guides nonchalant visitors to standardized recreational activities to arouse instant satisfaction at the expense of a historically and geographically specific experience of the inter-Korean border area (Koh 2019, 661–663). As a counterexample, Koh discusses the art installations of the 2015 Real DMZ Project, especially those held in the Cheorwon district. According to Koh, the art projects disclose not only the embedded historicities of the borderland that experienced colonization, national division, and war, but also reveal that the civilians and local residents were not secondary but central actors in the making and unmaking of such histories. Furthermore, Koh endorses the design and purpose of Minouk Lim’s *Monument 300: Chasing Watermarks*, an experimental art project that assigned participants the impossible task of finding the material evidence for the rumor that 300 people were massacred and their bodies abandoned in the colonial-era water towers in Cheorwon during the Korean War. She explains how this helps rediscover the “placeness” of this DMZ town by directing people’s experience to its history and geography in a non-linear way (Koh 2019, 672–679). By juxtaposing the government’s tourism campaign and the artists’ geographical intervention in her discussion, Koh visualizes how the DMZ harbors the formation of a new

historical contradiction in which forgetfulness and remembrance are put in critical exchange.

Also discussing DMZ tourism, the study by Sang-Hyun Chi, et al. places its analytical focal point on tourist observatories in the border area. For the authors, the DMZ observatories materialize the contradiction that constructs the borderland's politics of vision: that is, as a medium of propaganda, certain DMZ places permit access to common visitors, while its entire landscape is hidden from public view, but some visitors' responses, including publishing DMZ pictures that should not be publicized, represent not just the internalization of the ideology but also the transcendence and even the violation of the state authority (Chi et al. 2018, 618). In addition, their research finds that the exchanges between various levels of state agencies are not those of direction and conformity but of conflict and contention, and in this regard, the interactions among civilian actors are not very different (Chi et al. 2018, 612). In their final analysis, the authors show that the landscape of the DMZ is not an ideological product but a dialogic process between the state, nature, historical remnants, and the spectators, out of which comes a new active subjectivity (Chi et al. 2018, 617). In this sense, what they call a Cold War landscape is also not merely a window on to the war and military confrontation of the previous decades, but a living history where past legacies and diverse actors participate in the making of the political present.

Finally, Jaewoong Kim's study examines how the possibility of border-crossing shaped the peculiar conditions of the border region, focusing on the case of Inje county in Gangwon (or Kangwon) province. Unlike previous works on the formation of the North Korean state's ideological and material control over its populace in its early years, Kim's study identifies the particularities of the borderland where the state has made extra input for enhanced surveillance and control. The main contradiction of the Korean borderland in its formative years that Kim reveals is the dynamics of transborder "human, material, and informational" exchanges, which had to be limited from the perspective of the state's dominance (J. Kim 2007, 127). Furthermore, according to Kim, the North Korean state's effort to reinforce the surveillance force floundered as a result of workforce shortages linked to

border patrol conscription (J. Kim 2007, 150). By singling out the distinct formation of state control in the initial establishment of the North Korean borderland, Kim's study indicates that the borderland's inherent contradiction, which became visible once its presence became anachronistic in the post-Cold War era, was perhaps already present from the time of Korean division.

### **Current Contributions**

The idea of the DMZ as a border of productive contradiction is also the shared theme of the four contributions to the present special issue. Developed from papers presented at two border studies conferences in 2022 (Annual Conference of Association for Borderlands Studies [ABS] and the 4th Reconciliation and Coexistence in Contact Zones [RCCZ] International Conference) and independently published in Korean, these contributions examine the contradictory formation and transformation of the DMZ from the perspectives of geopolitical history, environmental studies, art history, and heritage studies. While taking different disciplinary approaches, together they form an interdisciplinary approach to the question of the accumulation of meanings in and of the inter-Korean borderland. This is not a peaceful concatenation of coherent significations but the imposition of mutually contradictory meanings onto each other, which the metaphor of "palimpsest" aptly captures (Park, this issue, 100; Lee and Viejo-Rose, this issue, 52). By extension, the contributors' studies of the Korean borderland raise the question of whether the DMZ can continue to accommodate the accumulation of contradictions in and of itself. Given it is one of the oldest vestiges of the Cold War global division whose existential justification is long overdue, this special issue, asking whether the Korean DMZ as the construct of contradictions is at a crossroads, is a timely one.

Specifically, Myung Ho Hyun's paper traces the origin of Korea's imposition of the idea of abstract and homogenous territory on its borderland back to the country's post-liberation period. To this end, his paper discusses North Korea's 1946 boundary adjustment of Gangwon

province on the eastern coast of the inter-Korean border. Existing studies disclose how the emerging North Korean state incorporated its remote province's territory through a series of centralizing reform policies such as land redistribution. They also reveal that living close to the inter-Korean border, the local residents of this remote province could express their dissatisfaction with state policies by crossing the line. In contrast, Hyun's study addresses the question of the territorialization of Gangwon province from two alternative perspectives: that is, it was born out of North Korean domestic factional rivalry and was part of the process of the communist world building its East Asian boundary. At the same time, it argues the center's imposition of the idea of an internally homogeneous and externally comparable province came short of extinguishing the social differences and economic unevenness across the province that local practices debunked. Eventually, the paper demonstrates one original contributing factor of the inter-Korean borderland contradiction in this juxtaposition of the controlling ideal and the uncontrollable reality.

Hyun Kyung Lee and Dacia Viejo-Rose's paper investigates the material legacies of the Cold War focusing on the DMZ tour routes in Paju, a South Korean border city on the west coast of the Korean peninsula. It adopts the idea of the "heritage-scape," that is, "the imagined landscapes in a community, composed of selected sites that related to particular collective memories" (Viejo-Rose 2011, 12). The distinctiveness of their approach lies in that instead of separate analyses of each heritage element, using the concept of heritage-scape enables them to consider the border landscape as a whole. Also, Lee and Viejo-Rose's paper pays particular attention to the spatiotemporal transformation of the Paju-area heritage-scape in relation to the changing domestic and international political atmosphere, reflected in their articulation of four phases: i) establishing a political theatre (1954–1979), ii) security tour and separated families (1980–1997), iii) security and peace tour (1998–2008), and iv) security, peace, ecology, and cultural tour (2009–present). If these plural phases are one salient feature of Paju DMZ tour routes, then the same kind of accumulation of historical meanings can also be found in their multiple categorizations of the material elements of the DMZ heritage-scape: namely, "artwork, monument (for commemorating



an historical event)/memorial (for mourning) (highlighting one or the other), diplomatic infrastructure, education facility, entertainment/leisure facility, military facility, transportation infrastructure, museum, park (outdoor exhibition), propaganda village, tourism facility (e.g., shop, visitor center), war materiel/war remains” (Lee and Viejo-Rose, this issue, 53). In sum, the authors conclude the Paju DMZ heritage-scape reflects not only fluctuating ideological and political messages as a meta-border at the national and international level, but also changing cultural, economic, and psychological narratives as a soft border at the local and individual level.

A further investigation of a remnant of past Korean conflict is carried out in Eunyoung Park’s work on the Workers’ Party Headquarters, Cheorwon, an example of socialist realism in architecture that was originally built by North Korea in the post-liberation period, destroyed during the Korean War, and subsequently became part of South Korean territory. In exploring the structure’s multifaceted significance as a site of memory, Park’s study conceptualizes the building as a natural and artificial ruin, embodying a space imbued with diverse memories that have layered upon each other, forming a palimpsest-like structure. It also traces how Cold War architecture became intertwined with collective memories associated with anticommunism, and thereby contributed to establishing the national identity upheld by South Korea’s military governments. At the same time, Park’s study also finds a more positive process associated with the building, in which intervening subjects, visitors, and local residents resurface oppressed memories, integrate them with present experiences, and generate new meanings. Park designates these new meanings “cultural memories” that will be carried forward into the future. In the end, this mimetic metamorphosis is a testimony to how the monument as a historical agent engages in the working of dualities in modern Korea, such as “south/north, center/periphery, prosperity/collapse, and presence/absence” (Park, this issue, 94).

Lastly, the study by Hyun-Ah Choi, Bernhard Seliger, and Woo-Kyun Lee reconsiders human disturbances to nature and wildlife in the inter-Korean borderland with a focus on the Han River Estuary. Previously, human intervention has been generally considered detrimental to the preservation of the ecology and biodiversity of the DMZ. The widespread

notion that the DMZ's ecology has been preserved not by human efforts but due to the lack of them has reinforced the negative perception of the human presence within the DMZ. Choi, Seliger, and Lee's work demonstrates that the story of human intervention in the DMZ environment is more complex. On the one hand, the ways in which human actions and activities disturb the ecological process are diverse, from the construction of bridges and highways and the digging of waterways to the mundane economic activities of farmers and fishermen and the occasional visits of tourists. On the other hand, to the degree tourism can raise awareness of the importance of environmental conservation, the same human disturbance can become a positive factor in DMZ natural conservation efforts. Moreover, as the DMZ is a transborder territorial entity, its preservation must take the form of inter-Korean cooperation. An intervention in this sense, such as the German Hanns Seidel Foundation's cooperation with the North Korean government and other international environmental organizations, is a necessary human intervention for the ecological restoration and conservation of the inter-Korean borderland.

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