Live to Dream: *Ethnic Korean-Chinese Workers through the Birth, Rise, and Demise of the Korean Wind*

Borderland Dreams: The Transnational Lives of Korean Chinese Workers. By June Hee Kwon. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023. 241 pages. ISBN: 9781478025337.

Nora Hui-Jung KIM

Borderland Dreams brings fresh insight into the lives of ethnic Korean-Chinese migrant workers as they navigate complex migration regimes and ever-changing macroeconomic landscapes. June Hee Kwon weaves through their multifaceted experiences, using the concept of "winds of migration." This concept illuminates migration as a *collective* phenomenon rather than a purely individual one. It also serves as a reminder of the *temporal* nature of labor migration; as the wind direction changes, so too does the direction of migration. However, Kwon does not portray ethnic Korean-Chinese migrant workers merely as passive objects blown by these winds. Rather, the workers in *Borderland Dreams* not only survive and adapt to the unpredictable currents of migration; they also continue to dream. Kwon conceptualizes Yanbian, the author's primary fieldwork site, as an "ethnic borderland," where diverse groups, including Han Chinese, ethnic Korean Chinese, and North and South Koreans, negotiate their aspirations, or what Kwon refers to as borderland dreams. The book provides an ethnographically rich account of how various borderland dreams are negotiated between those who leave to live and those who wait to leave. *Borderland Dreams* will serve as an excellent resource for undergraduate and graduate courses on

Nora Hui-Jung KIM is professor of sociology in the Department of History, American Studies, and Sociology, University of Mary Washington. E-mail: hkim4@umw.edu.

international migration, remittance, transnational labor, and contemporary Asia.

Borderland Dreams consists of three parts, in addition to an Introduction and Conclusion. In the Introduction, Kwon takes readers through the history of Yanbian, from its establishment as an autonomous prefecture for ethnic Koreans in China following the Chinese Revolution of 1949, to the initial influences of market forces as China liberalized its economic policies in the early 1980s, and finally to a migration-dominated borderland marked by the rise of the Korean Wind in the early 1990s.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts that chronologically follow the birth, rise, and demise of the Korean Wind and the corresponding Korean Dream. Part I, "The Rising Korean Dream," examines the impact of the Korean Wind, paying particular attention to the contested nature of who qualifies as *Korean*. The initial Korean Wind was limited to kinship-based migration, yet many ethnic Korean Chinese in Yanbian lack the necessary kinship ties with anyone in South Korea because their ancestral roots are largely in the northern parts of the Korean peninsula. As a result, many resorted to becoming illegal migrants in South Korea, living on the brink of deportation. This *illegality* rendered the ethnic Korean-Chinese migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation, as they found themselves in an (un)welcoming homeland.

South Korea's Overseas Korean Act, which initially restricted the definition of overseas Koreans to those with kinship ties in South Korea, was revised and a new H-2 visa was introduced in 2005. This visa is available to any overseas ethnic Korean, regardless of whether they can prove their kinship ties to a South Korean citizen. To be eligible for the H-2 visa, undocumented workers must return to China for a year and then come back to South Korea with work authorization for three years, which can be renewed for another two years. Thus, the transition from kinship-based to ethnicity-based migration has created a one-three-two rhythm for Korean-Chinese migrant workers. Part II, "Dreams in Flux," examines this new rhythm of migration among those who leave and those who wait. Part II is the jewel of this book, providing insights into aspects that have rarely been

covered by other scholars. The one-three-two rhythm renders time spent in South Korea almost solely "working time" or "sleeping time." In contrast, Korean-Chinese migrants view Yanbian as a place of rest and waiting. But it is also a site of "too much time," "too much spending," and "too much life." Kwon notes how the migrant workers do not see Yanbian as their "home," but a place where they merely wait and cannot work. Chapter 4 delves into what it means to *properly* wait. In a migration-dominated ethnic borderland like Yanbian, Kwon insightfully argues that waiting becomes "a form of unwaged affective work" (p. 104), essential for sustaining productive wage labor.

In Part III, "Dreaming Anew," Kwon revisits Yanbian after more than a decade of the Korean Wind. Photos taken by the author vividly illustrate the effects of the Korean Wind: downtown areas filled with newly built skyscrapers, bright neon signs for restaurants and massage parlors, and, in a starkly contrasting image, empty rice-farming border towns after ethnic Korean farmers have migrated to the city and South Korea. Indeed, Yanbian has transformed into a South Korean money-dependent, pleasure-centered consumption hub. In this hub, new types of borderland dreams are being negotiated, where Korean Chinese dream of being served and Han Chinese workers pursue opportunities to make money as service providers.

With her longue-durée approach, Kwon notes that by the 2010s, the Korean Dream is starting to fade while the Chinese Dream is on the rise. The direction of the migration winds is changing, and now "non-mobility" (staying put in Yanbian) has become a marker of "economic affluence and social stability" (p. 153). The emerging Chinese Dream has also diversified the flow of ethnic Korean Chinese to South Korea, not just as migrant workers but as businesspersons and tourists. For this new type of Korean Chinese, South Korea represents a site of pleasure and consumption, while Yanbian is a place of work and profit-making. Ethnic Korean Chinese and Han Chinese continue to negotiate borderland dreams, albeit with winds of migration that have reversed direction. It is disheartening to read how some Korean-Chinese migrant workers regret going to South Korea in the context of the post-Korean Wind. They find themselves trapped in a circuit of

transnational migration as a cheap labor source, lacking the necessary social and economic capital to take advantage of the rising Chinese Wind. *Borderland Dreams* serves as a poignant reminder of how the benefits of macro social and economic changes are unevenly distributed.

While Kwon conducted follow-up research in Yanbian and South Korea several times throughout the 2010s, she acknowledges the need for more in-depth research on the evolving dreams of both regions. A particularly fascinating point—one I wished were explored more fully in the book or in any follow-up project—was the emerging normative binary of *dagong* (manual workers) and *laoban* (entrepreneurs). Becoming entrepreneurs seems to have become a social imperative among ethnic Korean Chinese in Yanbian. Becoming *laoban* signifies breaking the cycle of transitional migration as laborers and finally settling down in Yanbian, now a place of work and profit-making. I found myself wondering whether we are witnessing an ensuing *spirit of capitalism*, or an ethnic Korean Chinese refusal to be alienated and exploited, or something entirely different. What are the historical, social, and economic conditions that foster the dream of *becoming laoban*, rather than other types of dreams? And how do these aspirations differ for ethnic Koreans compared to Han Chinese? It would be wonderful if Kwon or other scholars could follow up on these questions, especially focusing on the new generation of Korean Chinese.

Borderland Dreams takes readers on a journey over three decades, during which the Korean Dream, as Kwon describes it, "has been going through its own life cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death—and also rebirth" (p. 180). Kwon's longue-durée analysis is ethnographically rich and analytically insightful. *Borderland Dreams* was a long time in the making. For readers, the wait was long, but it was certainly worth it.