

The Borderlands of Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

Borderlands are places where different social, political, and economic systems come into contact with one another. Borders may act as barriers, hindering interaction, but they may also act as bridges facilitating contact between different cultures and traditions. Borderlands are diverse in nature; some borders can be extremely porous whereas others are guarded with great vigilance. In this issue of *News from Northeast Asia*, we examine the borderlands of Northeast Asia.

The way in which even the hardest of borders can be a node of cross sections rather than a place of severance is examined by Hyunjoong Jung of Seoul National University in "Porous Borders and a Negotiated Sense of Place: Re-imagining Kaeseong Industrial Complex as the Borderlands".

In "Tsushima, an Island of Hybridity", Todoroki Hisroshi of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University explores how the people

of Tsushima Island have negotiated a borderland existence from ancient times. The borderlands of Okinawa, located around its American bases, are remnants of war.

However, Keun-Sik Jung of Seoul National University reminds us, in "Shuri Castle as a Symbol of Peace in East Asia", of a different, more peaceful, type of borderland identity that had been present in the islands during the era of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

The meeting of asymmetrical systems that takes place in the borderlands results in great economic opportunities, as well as hybrid regional cultures. This fact is well illustrated by Li Yinhe of Yanbian University in "Hun Chun: An International Cross Border Economic Region".

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Porous borders and a negotiated sense of place. Re-imagining Kaeseong Industrial Complex as the borderlands

Hyunjoong Jung

'Borderlands' is the fuzzy area where different powers compete; a place of multiple oppressions and violence. As implied by the Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa,¹ a border is a porous area rather than a clearly fixed line; it becomes a node of cross sections rather than a place of severance. The hardest border, if any in the real world, would be the national boundary between the two Koreas. The DMZ, the most intensively armed zone in the world, symbolizes the clash between the two most powerful ideologies of the modern world. It has come to be regarded as an almost sacrosanct place where two irreconcilable nations maintain a distance from each other.

Such an infusible boundary, laden with power and hostility, is nevertheless sometimes dissolved. One momentous event was the construction of the Kaeseong Industrial Complex, located just 1.5 km north of the DMZ's Northern Limit Line and 60km from Seoul. Until its suspension in 2016, 125 companies based at the complex were hiring 55,000 Northern Korean workers on an annual basis, and the cumulative gross product had reached 1,506,490,000 dollars. In order to operate the complex, both governments constructed a road and railroad within their territories, which were later connected. South Korean corporations (such as the Korea Electric Power Corporation, Korea Telecom, Korea Land Corporation, and Hyundai Asan) provided infrastructure, including power, communication, and all facilities for the industrial complex, while North Korea transferred the right to use land (66.1 km² for 50 years). Both governments cooperated in making new laws and rules for this area, which had become open to common governance for the first time since the separation of the two Koreas. The Kaeseong Industrial Complex Foundation, the administrative organization established by South Korea, ran almost 300 shuttle buses covering 5 routes to carry 55,000 North Korean workers every day. The buses were all manufactured by Hyundai, provided by the South Korean government and firms of the complex, yet driven by North Korean drivers.

The intermingled co-operation of Kaeseong Industrial Complex by North and South Korea generated numerous 'contact zones' for both parties: spaces where geographically and historically separated groups or individuals come into contact with one another.² They are places where borders may facilitate connections rather than act as barriers. Many scholars have explored Kaeseong Industrial Complex from the perspective of contact zones, where the mental landscape of the people of the North and the South come to be integrated through daily interactions.³ It is a place of 'Choco Pie-zation', a metaphor that symbolizes the cultural translation and capitalization of North Korean tastes through the circulation of Choco Pies, the South Korea daily snack that was a favorite among North Korean workers, provided by South Korean firms. In addition to Choco Pies, innumerable goods and ideas came to be circulated among the people in the complex, and eventually beyond its walls. They spread to the city of Gaeseong (Kaeseong), changing the fashion of women, the building materials of individual houses, and dietary habits (such as caffeine addiction, thanks to South Korean instant coffee mixes, another favorite snack provided daily within the complex).

These examples illuminate merely the surface of bigger and deeper transformations that occurred. The changes that emerged in Kaeseong Industrial Complex demonstrate how the borderlands may operate within and beyond its territory. This may also bring about changes to our thoughts and imaginations of the faces and minds of North Koreans and vice versa. Cracks were created in the world's hardest boundary through the building of infrastructure and the flow of materials; it was made porous through roads, communication, and the migration of people between the borders, as well as through transculturation. The boundary was also made porous by North Korean workers commuting on South Korean shuttle buses, which traveled around vast areas of the city of Kaeseong and three other adjacent provinces.

As Doreen Massey claimed in her essay of global sense of place, the identity of place is never inwardly created or discovered but negotiated through social relations outside the place.⁴ Kaeseong Industrial Complex as a borderland shows how a tiny piece of land may act as a bridge towards bigger social transformations by making cracks in the borders from the bottom up. This case demonstrates the need to change our

geographical imagination of the borderlands, from margins to node of interactions where new social relations and experiments emerge.

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Notes

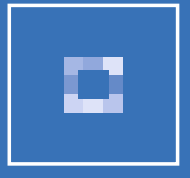
- 1 "to survive the Borderlands/you must live sin fronteras/be a crossroads", Anzaldúa, G. 1999 (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, p.217.
- 2 Pratt, M.L. 1992. *Imperial Writing and Transculturalism*. Routledge; Carter, P. 1992. 'Making contact: history and performance', in Carter, P. (ed.) *Living in a New Country: History, Travelling and Language*. London: Faber and Faber.
- 3 Lee Y.W., et al. 2016. *Connecting Divided Minds: the Contact Zone of North and South Korea*. Seoul: Sahoi Pyeongron; Paek, Y. 2019. 'Spatial Features of the Gaesong Industrial Complex as a Contact Zone', *Cultural and Historical Geography* 21(2):76-93.
- 4 Massey, D. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press.



Railway yard of Panmun Station at the Kaeseong Industrial Complex. Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy Christian Latze on Wikipedia.

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