



Alyssa M. Park. *Sovereignty Experiments: Korean Migrants and the Building of Borders in Northeast Asia, 1860-1945.* Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute Series. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Illustrations, maps, tables. 306 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-3836-4.

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Borderlands and cross-border activities keep attracting historians who are interested in the (trans)formation of empires, nation-states, and ethnicities. In the last three years in English-language academia, several newly published books focus on the northeast corner of the Eurasian continent, a “bordered land” where influences of multiple empires and modern states (China, Russia, Japan, and Korea) overlapped in early modern and modern periods.[1] Alyssa M. Park’s *Sovereignty Experiments* is the newest addition to this rather suddenly emerged trend. One of the most distinguished countenances of this novel study is that it focuses on a crucial yet understudied community: Korean migrants to the Russian Far East in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Until the 1930s, Koreans composed one of the largest ethnic minorities in Russia’s newly claimed maritime frontier. The Russian Far East possessed the second largest overseas Korean enclave in the world, next only to the adjacent “Kando” region in southeast Manchuria of China. In twentieth-century East Asia, Korean migrants were the most salient “diaspora” group. By 1944, at least 12 percent of the Korean population voluntarily or forcefully resettled in China, Russia, Japan, the United States, and other places (p. 13). Some scholars be-

lieve the percentage could be as high as 20 percent.[2] A great portion of the migrants returned after World War II, creating an unparalleled historical impact to their home country, a country remaining politically, economically, and socially divided up to today.[3] The origin of such remarkable population mobility could be traced back to the 1860s when thousands of Korean peasants from a northern province took refuge in Russia. Yet in 1936, all Koreans in the Russian Far East (more than 170,000) were cohesively relocated to central Asia via the Trans-Siberian railway. Thousands were killed in the process. Their traces over the past seven decades were wiped out almost overnight. As Park points out, the Koreans composed nearly a quarter of the ethnic minority victims in the Soviet Union from 1935 to 1938 (p. 244). Why, then, has such a dramatic and intriguing history been largely ignored, at least in English-language academia? Rest aside, histories of Russia and Korea have been categorized as two rather parallel fields. Russian/European studies treats the Far East as a marginal “frozen frontier” while Korean/Asian studies rarely considers the Russian part of the Asian continent (North Asia) as a subject within its realm. As a consequence, with the exception of only a handful of experts on international relations or diplo-

matic history, few historians have created an in-depth account of the history of Koreans in the maritime region, whose pioneer role had long been overlooked intentionally or unintentionally. It is under this backdrop that *Sovereignty Experiments* provides us an extremely valuable lens to peep into an important community living in a once contested borderland.

The geographic focus of the book is what Park calls “the Tumen valley,” a multilateral frontier along the Tumen River and encompassed by China, Korea, and Russia. In 1860, Qing China was forced to yield the territory east of the Ussuri River all the way to the Tumen River mouth to Russia. The Russian expansion to East Asia fundamentally changed the geopolitical structure of the Tumen valley, which had long been a buffer between Qing and Chosŏn Korea. Soon, all three countries encountered a political and social conundrum: Korean peasants in Hamgyŏng, a marginal and poor province adjoining both Manchuria of China and the maritime region of Russia, crossed the Tumen River border and took refuge on foreign soils. In the next several decades, the three countries (and later, Japan) competed and negotiated with each other to redefine the state border and subjecthood of Korean migrants, to establish modern “sovereignty” in this remote frontier.

Park defines sovereignty as “an institution that was forged through conflicts and negotiations over the boundaries of territory and political community” (p. 3). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the notion of sovereignty as an exclusive right to possess abstractly defined land and people was gradually imposed in East Asia through colonialism. Modern international law transformed the old hierarchical tributary order into a new system composed of “equal” sovereignty states. The Korean migrants, however, presented a dilemma in the eyes of the new norm. First, before the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894, Chosŏn followed Confucian ideology and regarded itself as an inferior state (politically but not neces-

sarily culturally) to Qing China. Hence, it excused itself from forming an independent, European-style diplomatic tie with Russia. Second, under the same ideology, a distinct Korean subjecthood was not defined by state boundary or passport but was demonstrated in language, customs, social statutes, physical appearance (hairstyles and clothes), and rituals. Hence, the Korean government rejected efforts of both Qing China and Russia to register the migrants as respectively Qing and Russian subjects, even raising a territorial claim against the Qing. Moreover, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Korea was first deprived of its diplomatic power and then became a Japanese colony. Japan’s claim that all Koreans, no matter where they lived, were under Japanese jurisdiction further confused the national identity of the overseas Koreans. During the geopolitical competition, all involved countries bargained to control this mobile population, which was neither entirely “us” nor entirely “other.” The Koreans themselves, on the other hand, were “active participants in this process” (p. 111). They skillfully manipulated different states’ regulations for their best interest. Therefore, exclusive sovereignty building in the Tumen valley—the core issue of which was how to manage the Korean settlers—consisted of various parallel and intersecting “experiments.”

This complex history unfolds in two parts. Part 1 (chapters 1 to 4) introduces, on international and national levels, a diplomatic history that covers the conflicts and solutions regarding the migrant issue in the Tumen valley. Chapter 1 provides historical background to the illegal border-crossing activities in the Qing-Chosŏn borderland. Recognizing both the Yalu (in Korean Amnok) and Tumen (in Korean Tuman) Rivers as their “natural geographical boundary,” the two countries nevertheless deliberately emptied the border area as a buffered “forbidden zone” (p. 39). However, driven by hunger or profit, the borders were repeatedly violated during the Qing period. This phenomenon took a dramatic turn when Russians came in the 1860s. Chapter 2 discusses the trilateral negotiation

regarding the mobile Koreans from the 1860s to the 1880s. During this period, Korean peasants were pushed by natural disasters and poverty to the Russian Far East via Manchuria, causing great tensions in the multilateral frontier. The Korean government requested to repatriate its people, but the number was so large that the local Russian officials could not accomplish this task. Instead, Russia attempted to solidify the frontier by incorporating the Korean migrants into Russian subjecthood. The Qing, on its side, tried to mediate the negotiation. The effort was unsuccessful due to discrepancies between conventional legal practices (what the author calls “plural jurisdiction”) and the new institution of international treaty. With the Koreans traveling back and forth across the borders, a new concept of subjecthood emerged, in which the Korean state no longer saw the migrants outside Korea as traitors but rather as a resource of the nation. In other words, when Russia decided to harden the geographical border as a division of the peoples, Korea aimed to soften it.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the way the Tumen borders (between China and Korea and between Korea and Russia) were challenged, negotiated, and redefined from the 1880s to the 1920s. Facing colonial pressures, Qing China opened the entire Manchuria to economic development step by step. The new policy turned the resource-rich Tumen valley to a contested borderland and a disputed territory. As the author shows, the Qing-Chosŏn border dispute was a direct outcome of the Korean migrants. Both countries fought for the previously less inhabited buffer in order to control the population flow across the Tumen. They tested many sovereignty-building methods in this frontier: household registration, bureaucratic building, international law, and even war. On the Russian side, the borders were further strengthened by the system of passport and visa (called *bilet*). Russian authorities clarified an “alien versus subject” division to distinguish “civilized Russian” from “barbaric non-Russian.” With Korea becoming a Japanese colony in 1910, Koreans living in China and

Russia were trapped in the geopolitical game. Japan claimed that all Koreans were Japanese subjects and denied that they could be naturalized as foreign citizens at their own will. Under this backdrop, whether to include Koreans to be “one of us” presented a highly sensitive and difficult problem regarding the sovereignty of Manchuria and the maritime. Meanwhile, many Koreans proactively participated in the identity-making process. They either urged the state to legitimize their new nationality (as either Chinese or Russian) or took advantage of the legal loopholes and strategically maintained an ambiguous or fluid status.

Part 2 (chapters 5 to 7) adopts an ethnographic perspective and concentrates on the Russian part of the borderland, investigating the social-state interactions on the local level. Chapter 5 describes the history of early immigrants in the Ussuri district of the maritime. The forces that shaped the exploration of this region combined state-oriented migration programs, environment, geography, and cross-border social networks. From the 1860s to the 1930s, state-sponsored Russian peasants, sojourning Chinese laborers, and spontaneous Korean peasants set up their respective communities in this borderland, boosting the frontier economy. Koreans who tended to resettle permanently later became the largest ethnic minority in the region. Along with this population influx came a unique Korean way of life, cultural habits, legal practice, and style of self-governance. As shown in chapter 6, although Russian authorities often despised the “backwardness” of oriental customs, they had to compromise and rely on local societies to effectively implement Russian rule. An ultimate goal of Russia’s sovereignty building in the Far East was to turn Koreans into ideal “Russian” subjects. Being a Russian meant speaking the Russian language, attending an Orthodox Church, and adapting to a Russian way of life accordingly. Chapter 7 tells the story about the state’s endeavor to “Russify” Koreans and the Koreans’ response to the policy. Despite that many Korean people did adopt Russian teaching and culture, they refused to see the two

identities (Korean and Russian) as mutually exclusive; instead, they constantly switched between the two, picking whatever was most useful in different circumstances. The book ends with an epilogue, which introduces the Korean experiences in the Soviet period. The Bolsheviks took over the Far East in 1922 and continued the previous regime's sovereignty building. Although for a short time Koreans enjoyed some political recognition and economic fortune due to the Soviet's multiethnic policy and collectivization, they were never free from the state's security suspicion due to their colonial ties with Japan. The socialist experiments in the frontier eventually took a sharp turn in 1937 when Korea became "the first instance of a deportation of an entire ethnic group by the Soviet regime" (p. 243).

Overall, *Sovereignty Experiments* provides a fascinating narrative about modern state making in a transnational and multiethnic frontier. Extensive Korean and Russian sources portray descriptive and vivid images about a transborder community. A major regret, however, is that the book does not employ Chinese and Japanese sources. This is a weakness since a large portion of it deals with the sovereignty competitions in Manchuria between China, Korea, and Japan. That said, the book is still one of the pioneer studies of the subject and a must read for students who are interested in the historical connection between East Asia and Russia. Scholars in the fields of the borderlands, empires, nation-states, migration, and diaspora studies would also find it a highly engaging reference.

Notes

[1]. These works include but are not exclusive to: Victor Zatsnepine, *Beyond the Amur: Frontier Encounters between China and Russia, 1850-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Seonmin Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland: Territorial Boundaries and Political Relations between Qing China and Choson Korea, 1636-1912* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Jonathan Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places,*

and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); Nianshen Song, *Making Borders in Modern East Asia: The Tumen River Demarcation, 1881-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Loretta Kim, *Ethnic Chrysalis: China's Orochen People and the Legacy of Qing Borderland Administration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[2]. Andre Schmid, "Historicizing North Korea: State Socialism, Population Mobility, and Cold War Historiography," *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (2018): 439-62.

[3]. Numerous political leaders in both North Korea and South Korea were returned migrants or were born overseas, such as Kim Il-sung, Kim Jung-il, Syngman Rhee, Pak Chŏng-hŭi, Chŏn Tu-hwan, and Yi Myŏngbak, just to name a few.

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