

CHINESE, KOREAN, OR WHAT? :
IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS AMONG CHOSŬNJOK
(KOREAN CHINESE) MIGRANT BRIDES IN SOUTH KOREA

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three questions: (1) how have Chosŭnjok migrant brides in Korea experienced their identity transformations? ; (2) why have the majority of them reinforced ‘Chinese’ identity in Korea? ; and (3) what is the genuine meaning of their feeling ‘Chinese’ in Korea? In answering these questions, this research is based on in-depth interviews with twenty-two Chosŭnjok migrant brides in Korea.

The identities of Chosŭnjok migrant brides in Korea can be categorized into six different types (‘Korean’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Korean Chinese’, ‘neither Korean nor Chinese’, flexible/situational identity and cosmopolitan identity). The majority of them, however, have reinforced ‘Chinese’ identity. Their identity transformation experiences are dependent on: (1) their backgrounds in China; (2) living experiences in Korea; (3) future plans (e.g. in which country to settle down); and (4) different perspectives towards their being Chosŭnjok.

Their reinforcing ‘Chinese’ identity in Korea is resulted by their negative experiences in Korea (economic marginalization, socio-cultural alienation and discriminative legal policies), as well as the centripetal force of China (nostalgia towards China, family network in China, surging power of China in global community, its assimilation policy towards Chosŭnjok, and newly revived *Zhonghua* nationalism).

Their ‘Chinese’ identity, no matter how defensive and strong it might be, cannot be exactly same as the ‘Chinese’ identity of *Han-Chinese*. It is because Chosŭnjok are ethnically, politically, emotionally and culturally different from *Han-Chinese*. Thus, on the basis of the constructivist theory of identity formations, and the distinctiveness of Chosŭnjok migrant brides in Korea, I have the following hypotheses on the meaning of their ‘Chinese’ identity: (1) it is a reactionary identity with which they express their disappointment towards their co-ethnics in Korea; (2) it is a dual identity

which includes their being 'Korean' regardless of their emphasis on 'Chineseness'; and (3) it is a flexible identity which can change depending on situation and needs.

INTRODUCTION

This research examines three questions: (1) How have Chosŏnjok migrant brides in Korea experienced their identity transformations after migrating to Korea?; (2) Why have the majority of them reinforced 'Chinese' identity in Korea?; and (3) What is the genuine meaning of their feeling 'Chinese' in Korea?

Identity transformations of Chosŏnjok migrant brides have not been investigated much so far. Even where there are, most of them are largely descriptive and do not provide much analytical explanations. Furthermore, in the numerous studies on migrant brides, the voices of Chosŏnjok migrant brides are largely neglected.

This thesis will closely follow the data from the in-depth interviews which were held in 2008. I tried to create an atmosphere so that interviewees could freely talk about their life stories. Throughout the interviews, I paid special attention when interviewees revealed their identities, as well as the reasons of identity transformations. By doing so, this research hoped to represent the real feelings of Chosŏnjok migrant brides, who are usually underprivileged in Korea.

I have conducted in-depth interviews from the beginning of January to the end of March 2008 in Korea. I have sampled my interviewees from different categories of birth place, origin in the Korean Peninsula, socio-economic status, age, educational level, and marital status (first marriage holder or second). Interviews were conducted in diverse settings based upon the comfort level of each individual. In most cases, interviews were held in the restaurants or cafe near their residence or work. Each interview lasted at least three hours. Some of the interviewees were met more than once. The second and further interviews were usually held in their home.

Interview questions aim: (1) to identify their backgrounds in China as well as their motivations for migrating to Korea; (2) to find out their living experiences in Korea as ethnic return migrant brides; (3) to explore their perceptions towards the sense of 'home', 'identity', and citizenship; and (4) to investigate their future movement and settlement plans. With the interview method, I could get a representative of the identity transformations of Chosŏnjok migrant brides, as well as the indication of meaning and interpretations that they give to their lives.

Additionally, this research is also based on the secondary sources such as literature review and analyses of government documents (statistical data and policy). Previous studies which are conducted by authors of different countries, opinions and interests are used in this thesis. The official websites (i.e. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade) of China and Korea were used to get the latest and authentic information.

Furthermore, literary works (novels, essays, journals) and media works (news, movies, and dramas) are also used to understand the public discourse in Korea about Chosŏnjok migrant brides.

I. PREVIOUS STUDIES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I have learned about the previous studies on the following topics: (1) ethnic return migrations; (2) Chosŏnjok and their ethnic return migration; (3) identities of ethnic return migrants; (4) Chosŏnjok migrant brides in Korea; (5) China's *Zhonghua* nationalism and Korea's ethno-nationalism. Theoretical framework of this research is different theories on identities and identity formations.

II. HOW CHOSŎNJOK MIGRANT BRIDE'S IDENTITIES WERE TRANSFORMED IN KOREA?

I categorized their post-migration identities into 6 types ('Korean', 'Chinese', 'Korean Chinese', 'neither Korean nor Chinese', flexible identity, and cosmopolitan identity). The majority of them, however, revealed that their 'Chinese' identity was reinforced in Korea.

Their identity transformation experiences in Korea are dependent on (1) their backgrounds in China (birthplace, educational level, socio-economic status, and marital status); (2) living experiences in Korea (socio-economic status, relationship with husband, existence of child, legal status, and acculturation level to Korean society); (3) future plans; and (4) evaluation towards their ethnic group.

Among the twenty two interviewees, nineteen are from *Jilin* Province, and their origin is the Northern part of the Korean Peninsula. For the other three (two from *Heilongjiang* Province, and one from *Liaoning* Province), their origin is the Southern part of the Peninsula. The ages of interviewees vary from 29 to 55, with the majority (16) in their 30s and 40s. As to their educational level, four have BA degree, three have middle school diploma, while the majority (16) are high school graduates. Their occupations in China also vary greatly, from governmental official and journalist to self-employed and farmers. As to their marriage routes, only seven consult the matchmaking agencies, while the majority (15) met their husbands by themselves, or through their relatives or friends. Half of the interviewees are digamists, and all of them have child with their previous husband. Four interviewees are disguised brides, and all of them are digamists. Sixteen interviewees migrated to Korea for marriage purpose. For the other six interviewees, their initial migration purpose is to earn money.

In Korea, eleven interviewees are irregular 3D workers while only four interviewees do office work. Their marriage satisfaction degree varies from 30% to

90%. Two interviewees who are disguised brides did not mark their husband as they do not have actual marriage life. Their length of stay in Korea and marriage varies from twelve years to one year, and eleven years to one year respectively. Ten interviewees have child/children with their Korean husband, and none remarried have child with their Korean husband. As to their legal status, nine interviewees have acquired Korean citizenship. All the twelve interviewees, with one exception, who have not acquired Korean citizenship want Korean citizenship very much.

Generally, interviewees from Liaoning and Heilongjiang Province tend to have more 'Korean' identity than those from Jilin Province. This is probably because Chosŏnjok in the first two provinces were originally from the South Korean Peninsula, while Chosŏnjok in Jilin Province originated from the North Peninsula. The higher educational level and socio-economic status they have, the more inclusive identities ('Korean Chinese') they have. First marriage holders tend to have more 'Korean' identity than digamists, especially those have children from their ex-husbands in China. None of the disguised brides identify themselves as 'Korean'. Interviewees with satisfactory life in Korea have more 'Korean' identity. Korean citizenship does not seem to play a decisive role in determining their identities. However, for those who identify themselves as 'Korean', Korean citizenship definitely plays an important role. Interviewees who plan to educate their children in China or return to China in their old ages show more attachment to China. Interviewees with positive view towards their being Chosŏnjok tend to have more 'Korean Chinese' identity, or cosmopolitan identity. They are proud of themselves as a generation of opportunities who have synthesized both Chinese and Korean culture. Thus they strive to make the best use of their backgrounds. On the other hand, interviewees with pessimistic view on being Chosŏnjok, tend to identify themselves 'neither Chinese nor Korean'.

Interviewees with 'Korean' identity try to assimilate themselves into Korean society. Interviewees with 'Korean Chinese' identity are proud of their being Chosŏnjok firmly believing themselves as a generation of great opportunities, and seek ways to articulate the different dimensions of their identities in their own terms. Interviewees with flexible identity have more than one identity and practicing code-switching according to situations and needs. Interviewees with 'neither Korean nor Chinese' identity are indifferent to the nation or ethnic group. Their strong regret at 'neither Chinese nor Korean' is impersonated on their ambivalent notion of 'home' as well as their negative experiences in both China and Korea. Transnational identity is mainly constructed by the transnational living experiences of interviewees. It enables the interviewees to feel competent, confident and comfortable in different cultures.

III. WHY THE MAJORITY REINFORCED THEIR 'CHINESE' IDENTITY?

Twelve interviewees identify themselves as 'Chinese' without any hesitation. Before their migration to Korea, they had a dual identity as ethnic Korean and Chinese citizen. However, negative experiences in Korea (economic marginalization, socio-cultural alienation and discrimination) forced them to change their initially positive images towards Korea, and to reconsider their 'Korean' identity.

Chosŏnjok migrant brides are frequently offered unskilled, low status immigrant jobs which are shunned by the majority populace. Thus, due to their hard work, they often have suffered financial difficulties in Korea. Shared descent and bloodline does not improve their ethnic reception by the homeland populace nor does it produce the expected benefits. Chosŏnjok were rarely welcomed as compatriots due their 'sinicized' culture. As they came to Korea with an expectation that they are 'Koreans', they feel great dismay or even betrayal when their previous idealized images of Korea are seriously disrupted in reality. Miserable experiences in Korea lead to the great disappointment and opposition of Chosŏnjok against Koreans, and force them to struggle against the discriminative treatments they receive from their co-ethnics.

Their reinforcing 'Chinese' identity, on the other hand, is caused by the centripetal force of China. Chosŏnjok migrant brides have strong emotional link with China as 'home', and visit China frequently to reunite families who stay in China. Some of them plan to return to China to enjoy a high-quality life after retirement. The surging power of China in the global world has helped them to have national pride and loyalty towards China. Strength of the Chinese economy and huge potential of Chinese market are calling young Chosŏnjok migrant brides to return to China in search of more career development opportunities.

Additionally, China's efficient assimilation policy towards its ethnic minorities has an effect on Chosŏnjok feeling 'Chinese'. Chosŏnjok were taught to be a member of *Zhonghua* nation. Undoubtedly, *Zhonghua* nationalism has functioned as a centripetal force for Chosŏnjok migrants overseas, (in this case, in Korea), to cultivate strong patriotic sentiments to China.

IV. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THEIR 'CHINESE' IDENTITY?

Their 'Chinese' identity, no matter how defensive and strong it might be, cannot be exactly same as the 'Chinese' identity feel by *Han-Chinese*. It is because Chosŏnjok are ethnically, culturally, politically, and emotionally different from *Han-Chinese*. In terms of ethnicity, they are genuine Korean. Culturally, they have a mixed Korean Chinese culture. Politically, due to their marrying Korean, many of them have

already acquired Korean citizenship. Emotionally, as they have formed new family in Korea, they have strong emotional attachment towards Korea.

On the basis of the constructivist theory of identity formations, the history of Chosŏnjok identity formations, and the distinctiveness of Chosŏnjok migrant brides in Korea, I have the following hypotheses on their 'Chinese' identity: (1) it is a reactionary or counter identity which was caused by their negative experiences in Korea, and with which they express their strong disappointment towards their co-ethnics in Korea; (2) it is a dual identity which includes their being 'Korean' regardless of their emphasis on 'Chineseness'; and (3) it is a flexible identity which can change depending on situation and needs.

It is a reactionary identity as it is developed by Chosŏnjok migrant brides who have negative living experiences in Korea to express their anger and resentment towards their co-ethnics in Korea. If they would lead satisfactory lives in Korea, they may develop 'Korean' identity, or, at least, maintain positive feelings towards Korea as they did in China. However, being frustrated by unexpected discrimination and alienation against them in Korea, Chosŏnjok migrant brides have developed very negative feelings, sometimes hostility, towards Koreans. They strengthen 'Chinese' identity not because they wholeheartedly feel they are 'Chinese', but because they want to distinguish themselves with Koreans who treat them as inferior outsiders.

It is a dual identity as it includes their being 'Korean' regardless of their emphasis on 'Chinese' identity. Their feeling 'Chinese' does not mean that their being 'Korean' is totally denied or diminished. In retrospect on the historical changes in their identity from the period of Japanese colonial invasion through the present, Chosŏnjok have maintained a dual identity. Their dual identity is resulted by: (1) their status as an ethnic minority whose ethnic homeland just lies near by; (2) the competing influence of China's and Korea's nationalism. Between the two ideological forces, Chosŏnjok are not dominated by them, but have developed a dual identity, which enables them to fully utilize the opportunities and capital they have.

It is a flexible/situational identity as it changes dependent on needs and situation. Flexible identities blended both Chinese and Korean culture through which they strive to make the best use of their backgrounds. Flexibility of their identities is largely associated with their transnational living experiences between China and Korea. Situational identity of Chosŏnjok is one reason causing the Koreans' alienation against them.

CONCLUSION

Before their marriage migration to Korea, most the Chosŏnjok migrant brides had dual identity as ethnic Korean and Chinese citizen. Their migration to Korea is

substantially determined by their strong attachments and nostalgic feelings towards Korea, their economically prosperous ethnic homeland.

However, in response to the great changes in their lives in Korea, most of them tend to reconstruct their identities. Their identities in Korea can be categorized into six different types: 'Korean', 'Chinese', 'Korean Chinese', 'neither Korean nor Chinese', flexible identity and cosmopolitan identity. The majority of them, however, experienced their 'Chinese' identity reinforced in Korea.

Generally, interviewees from Liaoning and Heilongjiang Province tend to have more 'Korean' identity than those from Jilin Province. This is probably because Chosŏnjok in the first two provinces were originally from the South Korean Peninsula, while Chosŏnjok in Jilin Province originated from the North Peninsula. The higher educational level and socio-economic status they have, the more inclusive identities ('Korean Chinese') they have. First marriage holders tend to have more 'Korean' identity than digamists, especially those have children from their ex-husbands in China. None of the disguised brides identify themselves as 'Korean'. Interviewees with satisfactory life in Korea have more 'Korean' identity. Korean citizenship does not seem to play a decisive role in determining their identities. However, for those who identify themselves as 'Korean', Korean citizenship definitely plays an important role. Interviewees who plan to educate their children in China or return to China in their old ages show more attachment to China. Interviewees with positive view towards their being Chosŏnjok tend to have more 'Korean Chinese' identity, or cosmopolitan identity. They are proud of themselves as a generation of opportunities who have synthesized both Chinese and Korean culture. Thus they strive to make the best use of their backgrounds. On the other hand, interviewees with pessimistic view on being Chosŏnjok, tend to identify themselves 'neither Chinese nor Korean'.

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which includes their being 'Korean' regardless of their emphasis on 'Chineseness'; and (3) it is a flexible identity which can change depending on situation and needs.

This research will expand the general knowledge of ethnic return migrations and identity transformations of ethnic return migrants in their ethnic homeland by observing the case of Chosŏnjok migrant brides in Korea, and comparing their cases with other types of migrants in Korea (Chosŏnjok migrant workers, Chosŏnjok female married migrants, and non-Korean descent migrant brides). It also helps us to understand the effect of Korea's and China's nationalism and policies towards Chosŏnjok in terms of their identities and ethnic return migration. More importantly, it provides us with insights to the contending theories of identity formation and the ethno-national belonging of Chosŏnjok between pulling ideological forces of China and Korea.

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