Learning Democracy and Exerting Cultural Citizenship: Korean Chinese Migrant Workers’ view of Korean democracy

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ABSTRACT
The 350,000-strong Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok) migrant workers have brought visible changes in their ethnic communities in China and in their ethnic homeland, Korea. While there have been some studies on the economic and social aspects of their life in South Korea, not much have been done on their learning and perceptions of Korean political culture. Coming from China, where one-party rule and socialist ideology are the norms, Chosŏnjok migrant workers tend to be amazed at South Korea’s political culture, especially during election times.

This paper analyses the various political opinions and political learning of Chosŏnjok migrant workers in South Korea. In particular, it addresses: (1) the main issues for Chosŏnjok in regard to the election; (2) their perception of South Korea’s democracy; and their notions of the national communities of both Korea and China. For this, I conducted a participation-observation of a group of Chosŏnjok migrant workers and their families during the presidential election both in Korea and China through the month of December 2007 before and after the actual election. The Presidential Election of South Korea, which was held on December 19, 2007, attracted much attention from Chosŏnjok migrant workers in Korea (and their families in China) as their immigration status in South Korea would be influenced by the election.

My observation shows a few salient points in their discussions of the election: (1) South Korean style democracy is dangerous, and Chinese-style one-party rule is a more efficient form of government; (2) the majority of Chosŏnjok workers supported Lee Myung-bak, believing he would improve the South Korean economy, which then would be beneficial for Chosŏnjok in general; (3) a smaller number of people supported Chung Dong-young because of their belief that Chung would improve the relationship between the two Koreas regardless of their knowledge that an improved inter-Korean relationship would cause job loss for Chosŏnjok migrant workers. By discussing such issues rather vocally among themselves, the Chosŏnjok migrant workers were in fact exerting their ‘cultural’ citizenship to the national community of Koreans in which they do not have legal citizenship.

1 INTRODUCTION
The 350,000-strong Korean Chinese (Chosŏnjok) migrant workers in South Korea have made great impacts in their ethnic community in China as well as in South Korea, their ethnic homeland. International migration promotes cultural learning and changes, and both groups themselves, sending societies and receiving societies, intended or not intended, are influenced by it. This is particularly true for Korean Chinese ethnic migrants in South Korea, and their migration activities brought serious changes both in their ethnic
communities in China and in South Korean society. It is widely known that the Korean Chinese communities in China haven been greatly changed after the substantial number of Korean Chinese migrated to South Korea and other countries as migrant workers (Kwon 2005; Choi 2001; Hŏ 2001b). Recently, the impacts of international migrations have been studied intensively with new perspectives of globalization and transnationalism (Apadurai 1996, Hall 1995).

While there have been some studies on the economic and social aspects of their life in South Korea, not much have been studied on their cultural and political consciousness and adaptations. In particular, very few people have paid attention to the political perspectives of the Korean Chinese migrant workers on the politics and political culture of South Korea. Coming from China, where one-party rule and socialism are the norms and dominant ideology, Chosŏnjok migrant workers tend to experience a cultural shock at South Korea’s democracy and somewhat boisterous political scenery. Such shocks of Korean Chinese tend to be heightened especially during election times in South Korea.

Studying Chosonjok’s experiences of democracy in South Korea has many implications. First of all, this will shed light on Chinese perspective on Korean style democracy. Considering the importance of China in global stage, understanding Chinese perspective on democracy will help us understand China’s future politics. Secondly, we will gain better understandings on the ethnic affinities and ethnic nationalism among Korean Chinese, for whom Korea is their ‘motherland’ while china is their ‘fatherland’ (Kim Gang-il, Hŏ 2001b). The identity questions of Korean Chinese has been politically contended among the Chinese government, Korean government, Korean society and Chosonjok themselves (Song 2006). Especially, the conflict between China’s Zhonghua nationalism and Korea’s ethnic nationalism (or long-distance nationalism) has been a hot political and historic issue (Song 2006).

Considering the importance of the Korean Chinese and their political consciousness, this paper analyses the various political opinions and political learning of Chosonjok migrant workers in South Korea. In particular, the paper addresses the following questions: (1) the main issues for Chosonjok in regard to the election; (2) their perception of South Korea’s democracy; and their notions of the national communities of both Korea and China.

For this, I conducted a participation-observation of a group of Chosonjok migrant workers and their families during the presidential election both in Korea and China through the month of December 2007 before and after the actual election. The Presidential Election of South Korea, which was held on December 19, 2007, attracted much attention from Chosŏnjok migrant workers in Korea (and their families in China) as their immigration status in South Korea would be influenced by the election.

2 Observing Chosonjok Migrants’ View of South Korean Politics

The participation-observation was carried out at the Seoul Chosŏnjok Church, where Chosonjok migrant workers gather together especially in winter days when there is less work in construction sector, in which majority of Korean Chinese migrants are involved. In China the participation-observation was conducted in Yanji City, Jilin Province, which is the centre of Chosonjok minority of China. I visited many public places such as market places, bath houses, and tea houses where I chatted with them in a relaxed environment.

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1 Korean Chinese intellectuals have explained the position of Korean Chinese both for their natal homeland, China, and ethnic homeland, Korea. For example, Ch'ong Pan-ryong ( ), Kim Gang-il ( ), Hŏ Myōng-chŏl (2001a), …
Sometimes the Korean Chinese gathered at the Chosonjok Church exchanged heated debates among themselves, which was not strange at all as they were talking about political issues. In fact, the entire Korean society was in a political mood through the months of November and December regarding the presidential election. It was same in Yanbian, China as most of Korean Chinese watch South Korean TV on daily basis and they naturally were well informed with the daily political issues of South Korea.

No doubt, the election was the most popular issues in their daily conversation. Especially at the Chosonjok Church the Korean Chinese who gathered there would argue amongst themselves sometimes on their preferred candidates, and in so doing, their discussions would reveal many things including their views on South Korean democracy, its policy toward China and Chosŏnjok migrant workers, Korea-China relations, and the inter-Korean relations between South and North Korea – the issues that I intended to observe. Like their South Korean counterparts, the Chosŏnjok migrant workers were divided mainly between the two major candidates: Lee Myung-bak (Grand National Party) and Chung Dong-young (United New Democratic Party).

Fine sunny day in front of the Chosonjok Church there are always several Korean Chinese gathering together exchanging information and chatting. It was the first week of November 2007 when I visited the Chosŏnjok Church in Yonggungpo, Seoul. The second level hall of the church, with an old style steam heating system and minimal light, functions as a convenient gathering place of many Chosonjok men and women when they have less work to do as daily workers especially in winter days. Most of the men and women gathered there work at construction sites, many of which are closed in winter. About twenty Chosonjok men and women were chatting sitting or standing in the hall where there are a few sofas and a vending machine that sells hot drinks. They normally get together with their friends and relatives or people from same hometowns, and they would exchange job, housing, and other information among them. On the same level are also an employment centre run by the Church volunteers, and a small travel agency that deals with air tickets and immigration services. For people who do not have any work, this is a good place to spend time while meeting their friends and relatives.

As the presidential election was only a few weeks away, politics was the main topic of their chatting when I visited them in early November. While many of them do not have voting right if they are illegal migrant workers, some of them have voting right as they hold Korean citizenship. Normally, they are not interested in politics except for Korean government’ policy toward overseas Koreans, particularly Korean Chinese. As there are so many Korean Chinese who want to work in South Korea, Korea’s entry visa regulations were big concerns among Korean Chinese in China and in Korea. Korean government recently changed its policy and it gave some privileges to Korean Chinese and other ethnic Koreans from the former Soviet Union in March 2007 with the launch of the Visitor Employment System. This new system allowed tens of thousands Korean Chinese and Soviet Koreans each year to visit and work in Korea for 3 years. With these changes in the Korean government policy toward overseas Koreans especially those from China and the former Soviet Union, Korean Chinese interests in the presidential election in November 2007 were high. In addition, as the Korean economy showed sluggishness, which resulted in decrease of employment opportunities in Korea, they had keen interest in who will be the next president of Korea.

I joined them and conducted participation-observation. People were casual in their attitude and freely exchanged stories and jokes among themselves. There were about 8 people around and later more people joined the group. They mix Korean and Chinese in
their daily conversation. Some speak Kyongsang Province dialect (a man from Jilin Province spoke Korean with strong Kyongsang accent). I felt that they talked very fast. Most of them are in their 50s-70s, and younger people were not seen frequently. Probably younger ones are working while older ones have less work. In addition, younger people may have jobs in China while older ones without pension choose to come to South Korea to work and make money.

My being an overseas Korean, not being a South Korean to whom many of them feel distance, helped me to approach them easily. Through my field work in three consecutive years at the church and in Yanbian, some of them knew who I am, and they would accept me in their conversation. This made them feel free in speaking their candid feelings and opinions, which might not have been easy if I were someone living in South Korea.

Questions asked to the interviewees include: (1) what are the main issues for Chosonjok in the election?; (2) how do they perceive a democratic election?; (3) how they participate in national community through participating in the election?; (4) how do they feel about their fatherland, China in regard to the election?

3 Korean Style Democracy: Perceptions of Korean Chinese

Democracy, while still relatively young in its tradition, is firmly established in South Korea especially after the mid-1990s. Koreans saw opposite parties taking turn in power peacefully already more than two decades, which is a clear indication of democratic polity. Meanwhile, politics is always very much dynamic in South Korea with its diversified and conflicting interests of people, and once Norma Field, a well-known Japanese Studies academic, once stated that Korean is the “only country where politics is still alive” (Field 1994). For most foreigners Korean politics must look really vibrant, exciting, and exotic. This is particularly true for the Korean Chinese migrants who came from China where democratic politics is not a norm, but politics is very much suppressed under the strong one-party policy of the People’s Republic of China.

In China their political education is very much the products of official education of Chinese government. Before they come to Korea, their perspective of Korea is very much determined by satellite TV programs they watch on daily basis. They also hear from their Chosonjok family members and relatives who are in Korea. They are well connected with their family members and relatives in Korea through international phone calls and e-mails.

Once in Korea they are exposed to TV, newspapers, talks with Koreans. They normally go through a cultural shock in their initial visits of Korea. They experience that Koreans are culturally advanced, cold, interests-oriented, and generally law-abiding. They also learn about their rights as migrant workers and as Korean ‘nationals’. This is learned partly through the Employment Training Program conducted by the Hanguk Illyok Kwalli Kongdan, which teaches them both national pride and the notions of human/labour rights.

Indeed, most of my Korean Chinese interviewees showed conservative attitude toward politics in general. They normally perceive that politics is not something that they can make input, which is similar to ‘subject’ political culture (Almond & Verba 1980). Their conservative view on individuals’ political freedom and their cultural orientation toward social stability and unity made them feel uneasy about the often ‘wild’ looking political behaviours of Koreans and their political organisations. Many of my interviewees, while expressing their excitement at seeing the presidential election campaigns in November 2007, expressed their fear of the possible disintegration of South
Korean society due to the heated political debates and conflicts revealed during the political campaign.

There has been three presidential elections that Korean Chinese migrant workers saw since the late 1990s: the 1997 election in which Kim Dae Jung was elected; the 2002 election when Roh Mu-hyun was elected; and the 2007 election. Those who had not seen any previous elections in South Korea expressed their serious worries if the heated conflicts of interests might destroy South Korean society. They tend to view South Korean politics and democracy a danger for the nation as well as for international migrant workers like themselves.

Their conservatism also led them to be concerned more about economic issues over political issues. The general economic situation of South Korean in 2007 was not that good and economy was the strong focus of the presidential election. Lee Myung-bak, the candidate of the Grand National Party, who would be elected as the President in the election, was highly popular among Korean Chinese and my interviewees said that this was because of their concerns on the economy of South Korea. One of my interviewees stated:

Whom do I support among the presidential candidates? Of course, I support Lee Myung-bak. Lee is the one that will revive Korean economy, and this will benefit us, Chosonjok workers who need more jobs in Korea. Lee has achieved a lot in his life, and he is the only one who can lead Korea.

Such economy-oriented political perspective was visible among Korean Chinese. In fact, such a view is prevalent in China. This is well reflected in the attitude of people toward Park Chung-Hee, South Korea’s president who ruled the country between 1961 and 1978. Everyone of my Korean Chinese interviewees were well aware of the former President Park and they acknowledged Park’s contribution to the rapid economic development of South Korea through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Such a view is popular in China regardless of the fact that in South Korea Park is considered as a dubious character by many people. A Korean Chinese scholar at the Yanbian University, Kim Kwang-hui, says that he was shocked at the polarized opinions of South Koreans on the former president of the nation (Kim 2008).

Some say that China is a big country and such an election (as in South Korea) will be dangerous for the country. Some say that there is already democracy in China – referring to local elections? Chinese government’s role of having achieved such a high level economic development beyond people’s expectation. Others say that China needs democratic elections to be “advanced” as Korea.

Mostly tend distinguish China and Korea, believing that China is different from a small country like South Korea, and it cannot be same as Korea. Mr. Hong: “China is a big country with so much diverse peoples and forces. If there was an election in China such as the one in Korea, China would see a civil war.”

China’s growth and governance became my interests while visiting Harbin and Yanji this time. People whom I talked to about the possibility of China’s becoming politically instable (as South Korea was in the 1980s) all told me that they were confident that China will remain in stability. People here are very hard-working and they strongly want to improve their life. For them a good government is the one that guarantees public security and promotes market economy, while providing basic economic security to those who have been loyal to the regime (farmers especially).
For example, Mrs. Hŏ and Mr. Hong say that they are happy with what’s going on in China today. They receive more than 4,500 yuan each month (as pension), which is far higher than average income of ordinary Chinese in northeast. They own three houses (apartments) with life-time pension and insurance. Mr. Hong retired in 2001 at the age of 49, which is hard to believe, from the Yanbian Broadcasting Company, where he worked for more than twenty years. Even now, after several years of his retirement, his company still pays him some bonuses occasionally.

Among Korean Chinese some 80% support Lee Myung-bak, and they are middle-class, officials. We believe South Korea should do well, and this will be good for us as well. China’s experiences of Mao (ideologue, politician) versus Deng Xiaoping (practical politician and reformer) have shown us what kind of leader is better than the other. Therefore, we believe that Lee Yi would be better for Korea.

Chung supporters are lee than 10% among Korean Chinese and they are mostly illegal traders, famers, and those who want to make money with illegal means.

Post-election discussions (in Seoul and Yanbian)

Even after the election, Chosonjok families in Yanji continue following the election and Korean politics while watching Korean satellite TV. The family I was staying at talked frequently about the election and the new president at dinner table. I have heard a few times people talking about the election a few days after the election at cafes and tearooms (including the International Hotel Lobby in Yanji City).

4 ETHNIC VS. POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Often Korean Chinese whom I observed revealed their dual identities both as a Korean (ethnic Korean) and a Chinese (the citizen of the people’s republic of China). Korean Chinese tend to cherish China’s foreign policy interests in general. For example, they fear of the presence of the US troops in Korea, and tend to believe that the US was trying to check China’s rapid economic development and its rise in global sphere. Therefore, Korea’s close relationship with the US is a general concern for them.

“Are you Chinese or Koreans?” At this question, people had a big debate among themselves. Mr. Lee and others loudly criticised those who obtained Korean nationality as “betrayers” of the fatherland (China). He said: “You’re betrayers! You’re same as those Koreans who tried to be subservient to Americans.” Some others said that South Korea is a minion of the US and Chinese government will not tolerate Americans to enhance their position in South Korea. “I read from a newspaper that Chinese government spokesperson firmly declared that China would not let Americans to increase their presence on the Korean peninsula. This is good.”

Meanwhile, there were also other Chosonjok who shouted that they should not be too negative about Korea. “Don’t talk too negatively about Koreans!” shouted the man.

Those who recovered their Korean nationality were jokingly criticised by others as “betrayers” of China. This was probably due to jealousy. Those who recovered their nationality claimed that Chosonjok should not criticise Korea too harshly as they are all able to make money in Korea.

There are always many Korean Chinese standing outside of the Seoul Chosonjok Church. They mix Korean with Chinese in daily conversation. Some speaks Kyongsang-do dialect (as their ancestors came from Kyongsang Province). They are different from the Yanbian Chosonjok, whom I am familiar with.
Some of them have recovered Korean citizenship. One naturalized Korean Chinese stated that though he obtained South Korean citizenship through naturalization, he is still a ‘Chinese’ instead of being a ‘Korean’.

In the case of the Chinese in New Zealand, the new migrants tend to support ethnic Chinese politicians who show their firm loyalty toward PRC China (New Zealand Herald May 9, 2008 http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz-election-2008/news/article.cfm?c_id=1501799&objectid=10536584&pnum=0). However, many of them showed unsettled attitude toward their true identity. One of my interviewees says:

Being a Chosonjok is not that good at all. We cannot trust anyone (either Chinese or Korean?) In China our life is limited as we don’t know Chinese, the great majority’s language. In South Korea we are called ‘Chungguknom.” We are same as Koreans. However, I don’t want to be called “Hangugin” and I’m not a Hangugin. We don’t have a clear concept what we are (if we are Koreans or Chinese). Identity questions could be too political and I don’t want to get involved in such political questions. [Fieldwork Notes]

If we don’t want to return to China? That’s because it’s very difficult to find jobs there. Even when we don’t work here in Korea, still the weather, language, and freedom and so on… these are better here than in China. Of course, there is discrimination in China. However, being discriminated here in Korea makes us more frustrated. 70% of Koreans are good while 30% are bad (as anywhere). There are some 300,000 to 400,000 Chosonjok here in South Korea. Two thirds of them live OK, making and saving good money, but the rest (one third) fail. They come here through various routes: nationality recovery, marriage, business, relative visits and os no. Among the 2 million strong Chosonjok in China some 500,000 live overseas including SK, Japan, and the US. In 2008 there will be 26,000 new comers here in South Korea.

“Chosonjok are generally honest, but South Koreans are largely dishonest.” The man said that Chosonjok are generally honest while Koreans are dishonest. Another man nearby said that he views differently, saying that he views Koreans more positively. (He is a naturalised Chosonjok.)

South Korean government policy toward Chosonjok: duality – civil organisations and news media may say that Korean Chinese are the same nationals, but the legal status of Korean Chinese does not allow them to be treated equal with other overseas Koreans (wage, legal status, popular perceptions). Considering the popular public opinion, the South Korean government needs to accept Chosonjok, but in reality Chosonjok are the hot potatoes for the South Korean government. South Korean government is not “big” enough to accept all the Chosonjok people, and it also should consider the relationship with the Chinese government.

There are legal contradictions and South Korean government has discriminated against Korean Chinese while it has treated Korean Americans and Korean Japanese more favourably in terms of issuing entry visas and offering various aids including cultural supports.

While in general (big principle) South Korea considers Korean Chinese as the people of the same root and Korean Chinese consider Korea as the homeland of their grandfathers. Small principle – collective life in China – South Koreans tend to disregard the small principle: not understanding the different cultural background of Korean Chinese. South Koreans are not able to understand Chosonjok’s sense of being Chinese citizens. Chosonjok are different from Korean Japanese in terms of their participation in building the new China, which makes them to feel they are the “heroes” of the new China.
South Koreans, not being able to understand all these, they tend to emphasize the blood, history, and territories, which should not be the main problems at this stage. Korean government makes things more complicated and difficult for Korean Chinese between South Korea and China.

South Korean policy – reduces the space of Korean Chinese (nationalistic policy, irredentism, Baekdusan question, Koguryo question and so on) make the position of Korean Chinese even more difficult. Chinese government has many layers of Overseas Chinese departments (Central Government, Province, City, Village…), and lower level governments receive supports from the central government. Therefore, China’s Overseas Chinese policy is powerful and efficient. On the contrary, Korean government does not have any special office that deals with overseas Koreans matters, and the OKF (Overseas Koreans Foundation) does not have much direct power within the government in directing such a policy.

Chinese government does not fear of SK’s policy toward Chosonjok and the Chosonsojok themselves due to their small minority status and small number (xx per cent). However, the Chinese government is sensitive about the Chosonjok and SK government policy toward them.

**Mr. Kim’s opinion on SK government policy**

After President Kim Dae Jung’s inauguration, SK government tried to allow dual citizenship status to all Chosonjok. As the number of Chosonjok is rather small in China, basically the Chinese government does not fear the power of Chosonjok. Nonetheless, the Chinese government pays serious attention to this issue. One evidence is that the Yanbian Airport is still an air force airfield not a civilian airfield. South Korean government caused the historical conflicts between Chinese government and South Korean government (the Northeast Project).

While I have run a travel agency in Yanbian for South Korean tourists, I felt that the two governments’ policies toward Chosonjok have limitations. The two governments did not have much formal discussions but they only conflicted. Worse is the SK government’s contradictory policies. Chinese government tries to include all the overseas Chinese into its arms, but it does not understand the special status of Korean Chinese.

The dualistic policies of the SK government: (1) apparently, SK government’s policy toward Korean Chinese seems to have improved. Now, it allows Korean Chinese to enter and work in SK more freely. It also brought the Chosonjok issues to a light from darkness. However, most of Korean Chinese tend to believe that SK government policy is worse than before. Why?

1. The fees involved in making Foreigners’ Registration (KRW40,000)
2. Educational fees (3-day education programme) KRW107,000
3. Once they found a job, the employer and the worker should appear to the Entry/Exit Office, which is rather burdensome both for the worker and the employer. This should be done each time when new jobs are chosen.
4. If violated, the fine is KRW1 million. If violated again, enforced exit occurs.
5. As a result, there always are many Chosonjok who pay their fines at the Entry/Exit Office of Mokdong → this makes Chosonjok believe that South Korean government is making money from Chosonjok. The SK government seems to loosen its control of Chosonjok but in fact it has tightened its control over Chosonjok.
Chosonjok’s opinion about the policies of the SK government and Chinese government

Chosonjok tend to think that they have become farther away from the Peking government. Not because Chosonjok hate the Chinese government, but it is because the SK government made the position of Chosonjok rather complicated and uncomfortable in China. Still 60-70% of Chosonjok think that they are “Chinese.”

Chosonjok tend to think that SK government is not trustworthy. 30% of Chosonjok think that Korea is their ancestral homeland and they feel sad to SK government, which does not allow them free entries of Chosonjok and discriminate them.

We want to ask the SK government how much efforts have they put to embrace Chosonjok? It does not even have a separate government office that deals with Chosonjok or overseas Koreans. Most Chosonjok today think that SK government policy towards Chosonjok is not better than in the past (regardless of the recent changes of regulations regarding the entry visas to Chosonjok and Koreans from the CIS).

It’s wished that the South Korean government should deal with Chosonjok problems more rationally. The SK government invested KRW10,000,000,000 to the Koguryo Foundation (currently the Northeast Foundation). However, we should not view SK government only negatively. Chosonjok exist because there is the Korean Peninsula.

When Chosonjok workers return to China, they might reconsider their being ‘Chinese’, says an interviewee. “They will change their perceptions of Korea and Chinas again. Due to their habits of life in SK they will feel uncomfortable and unhappy about the environment, services, and life there. That’s why many of them come back to Korea again, not simply for money, but for a better environment. This has nothing to do with their ethnic identity or political opinion and so on. In fact, national identity and so on are simply the plays of political elites of the two countries. Anyway, Chosonjok have a dual identity, and they can live in both countries. The Koguryo problem that SK caused is a problem for Chosonjok in China. The relationship between Chosonjok and China cannot but become sensitive if such an issue comes up as a problem. I have written couple of articles about the issues and they are available on internet. Nonetheless, we Chosonjok will disappear when there is no Korean peninsula. We should not just see the negative aspects of our relationship with South Korea.”

[Korean-Chosonjok relationship is improving] Some Chosonjok people say that the relationship between Chosonjok and Koreans used be worse, but now it is better. In the past it was much worse. Chosonjok learned both bad things and good things from Koreans. There are both good and bad things for us in our relationship with Koreans.

[Discrimination in China] There is not much discrimination in China, but, as a minority, it is hard for Chosonjok to grow in China.

[Koreans are culturally high] Koreans tend to be more cultured than Chinese. In Beijing if you ask someone the road, they would not tell you. (Or, they even misguide you by giving you a wrong direction). Koreans are so kind in telling you the way. Once I was bitten by a snake in Korea, and I was treated very well by other Koreans and hospital workers, with which I could save my finger (and life). They even did not charge any money for the treatment (through the free clinic led by Rev. Kim Hae-song). With this thankful experience, I wanted to go to Taean (where there was a serious oil spill recently) to repay my debt to Koreans.
[Discrimination in China] Yes, we Koreans are discriminated in China. One recent example is the football incident in which the Yanbian Football Team was unfavourably refereed. Ethnic minorities are discriminated and disregarded in China. China never allows ethnic minorities to move up (in social ladder). One of my customers from Seoran City, Jilin Province told me once: 

He returned from Korea and arrived at the Changchun Airport and he was told by a Han Chinese man shouting him: “You go back to Yanbian!” That Han Chinese probably did not know that Yanbian is a part of China? He eventually moved to Yanbian even though he had planned to live in Changchun. Those bastard Han Chinese!! (Chungguk saekkidul!!) Now, the man, who is a dentist, only deals with Korean Chinese in Yanbian. Some Han Chinese tend to believe that we Chosonjok are the spies of South Korea, and they often shout at us to go back to Korea. Why Han Chinese do this? It’s because they’re jealous to what we’ve achieved and our status (as Koreans who have connections to Korea). In Beijing, which I visit frequently, I did not have such an experience.

Han Chinese tend to judge people from their appearance. To deal with them, one needs to dominate them from the beginning by killing their chi (ki) from the beginning.

{Another person told me that in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture Koreans are not allowed to take certain professions including pilot and diplomatist. This is due not Chinese government’s distrust of ethnic Koreans, which is different from the case in the Soviet Union where many Koryo saram became pilots.}

[Future in China?] Now the basis of our life shifted to Korea from China. I don’t have any intention to move to a third country even though I want to visit many other countries. I will invest in China if I make money in Korea. It will be better that way as there will not be much difference between China and Korea in economic environment. My relatives ask us to come back to China (for a business), but we will wait until we save enough fund for capital. If we return to China, we may do interior business in the areas where South Koreans are residing. Koreans tend not to trust Chinese for that kind of work and I believe we will do well in that business. In any case, first of all, we need some capital for such a business plan.

For me, returning to China and living there is not a serious problem. After all, that’s the country where I was born and lived most of my life. I’m confident that I will do well there as well. Some Chosonjok say that they cannot live in China after they are so accustomed to the life in Korea, but I think they’re just weird. Of course, we need to adjust to China’s political and social environment where we don’t have any political freedom. In China we cannot say what we think and want.

“Though we are Chinese citizens, we wish that our motherland (Korea) will become a prosperous and advanced country. That’s why we’re interested in Korean politics.”

Some say that a good relationship between SK and NK will be beneficial for Chosonjok in general. While others (younger ones) say that it will hurt Chosonjok community in China (as South Korean businessmen and tourists will go to NK and Chosonjok community will be neglected). For this reason they don’t support a candidate like Chung Dong-young who are pro-NK. At this an older man came out and scolded the younger ones, saying “our nation is more important than our immediate interests. Even if we Chosonjok may lose because of the improved SK-NK relations, we should support an improved relationship between NK and SK.” The younger ones, however, did not look persuaded.
Mr. Park (43, Yanji) says that he felt very proud of his being Chinese when he watched the TV program on the daily use of Chinese goods in Korea, Japan, and US. Though he claims that he was one of the first Korean Chinese who knew and contact South Koreans, and he knows so many Koreans as friends and business partners, he really felt proud of being a Chinese with the TV program (South Korean).

Many believe that Communist Party and one-party system the best – efficiency and defects are less than multi-party system. Democracy, demonstrations, and political conflicts could be dangerous and less efficient. Diversity within one party is better than multi-party system.

I felt proud to be a Chinese when I watched a recent Korean TV program which tested people’s life without products made in China. The program tested if people could survive without products made in China in three countries: Korea, Japan and US. People simply could not survive without Chinese products in these countries. This shows the power of China and China’s status in global economy (Field notes).

5 ETHNIC HOMELAND OR NATAL HOMELAND?: KOREAN CHINESE ON THE SOUTH KOREAN POLICY TOWARD OVERSEAS KOREANS

The South Korean government just had launched the Visitor Employment Scheme in March 2007 after the problematic Industrial Trainee System as well as the controversial Act on the Legal Status of Overseas Koreans (1999). This new system allowed tens of thousand Korean Chinese and Soviet Koreans to enter to Korea for work up to three years within five years of term. The new scheme also allowed those who do not have any relatives in Korea to work in Korea, which was welcomed by Korean Chinese.

They also criticised South Koreans’ discriminating Chosonjok against Koreans Americans. “Koreans call Korean Americans as “topngp’o” while they call us “Chungguk kyop’o. This is not fair. If we have any crime (Choe), it’s that we have no money while those Korean Americans have money. Look, those who went to America went there to make money while we Korean Chinese went to China to fight Japanese. We fought Japan, but today South Koreans discriminate us and do not treat us fairly! Look China. China accepts huachao who had left China more than 100 years ago.”

“I had a fight with a policeman while drinking at a bar. I protested him why we need a permit to return to our homeland. I asked him: ‘do you need a permit to visit your own homeland?’ “Even if I have a Korean nationality, I would still think I’m a Chinese. The only reason I want Korean nationality is to work in this country for a long term with legal protection. This is not to live in this country permanently.”

Korean Chinese migrant workers tend to have very negative opinions toward Korean society. One says that Korean society is ‘corrupt.’

The Korean society is corrupt. Especially the elite are wrong in this country. In China, when a section of the society faces hardship, the entire country tries to help the sector (or region). But, in Korea it’s not the case. {Here, another man intervened and added that Koreans also try to help their own people when there are needs.} Koreans tend to talk very well. In China when someone only speaks and talks well, he/she is not treated well. In my own case, when my South Korean relative was asked by an official at the entry port if he could be responsible for my staying in Korea, he refused to endorse me.

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2 This Act was declared unconstitutional due to its discriminating Korean Chinese and Soviet Koreans while it gives privileges to ethnic Koreans from wealthy western countries including the US, western Europe and Japan.
[Training programs for Chosonjok: content of education program conducted by South Koreans] Employment Priority System – MOUs with 14 different countries have been signed so far by Korean government. A three-days training program (20 hours total) by the Ministry of Labour – in the case of non-foreigners, training program includes Korean language class. It also includes the ‘Spirit Education’ (Chongshin kyouyuk) – differences between the socialist and capitalist work ethic and so on

This includes Korean history, emphasis on the hard work, economic development of South Korea. The educational training programme also includes: the laws and regulations regarding labour and employment; the rights of migrant workers; and security measures at work. Interesting thing is that ‘disciplinary training’ is included in the training programme. Chongshin kyouyuk (spiritual education) – this includes socialist society vs. capitalist society – which is translated “ppalli vs. chonchonhi” (quickly vs. slowly) – workers must be hard-working and sincere.

6 INTER-KOREAN RELATIONSHIP AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP

Inter-Korean Relationships

Most of Korean Chinese also showed high interests in the inter-Korean relations in the election. Most of them wanted that South Korea would pursue the engagement policy with the North, a continuation of ‘Sunshine Policy.’ In this regard, they supported Chung Dong-Young, the candidate from the Uri Party.

However, the Korean Chinese also showed divisions among themselves on this issue. Some claimed that South Korea should help North while others claim that South Korea should take over the north.

They would loudly debate about who should be the next president of South Korea (as the presidential election will be held on Dec. 19). There were two groups: those who support Chung Dong-young with the expectation that he would bring the two Koreas closer. Meanwhile, some people argued that the two Korea’s coming closer to each other would rob Chosonjok community of their current role as cheap labour for South Korea (this is so as North Koreans would replace Chosonjok). Most people seemed to agree with this. Then, however, some say that even if Chosonjok’s loss of jobs in South Korea might be the result of the closer relationship between the two Koreas, they till want to see Korea’s unification. Some took a more realistic role and they did not want to see the two Koreas coming closer if that should cause loss of jobs for Chosonjok.

Post-election many Chosonjok are worried about the possible tightening of money transferring and other measures including labour market protection. In China elite do not like to see two Koreas unified. Image of the “President” in China and Korea – different (China more conservative). Minority status of CSJ – China’s appeasement policy, alienated, not interested in Chinese politics; more interested in Korean politics.

Between the Severed Motherlands

Many of them raised their voice, urging that South Korea should continue engagement policy toward North Korea.

Here people were divided politically. The Lee Myung-bak supporters mostly were concerned about the economic situation in South Korea as this will impact their employment prospects in South Korea. Chung Dong-young supporters, however minor they might be, were more concerned about the future of Korea, their ethnic homeland. Even Lee Myung-bak supporters, however, showed great concerns about this issue, and
they worried if Lee Myung-bak might devastate the inter-Korean relationship, which has been so far progressive under the last two governments.

It is in this regard that Korean Chinese feel their being ‘Korean’ and exert their ‘ethnic’ citizenship.

Cultural Citizenship
Recent academic discussions dealt with the relationship between citizenship and globalization. In particular, scholars have observed the changes of the citizenship concepts with the increasing level of transnationality and the relative decline in the influence of nation-states (Appadurai 1996, Ong 1999). The focus of citizenship has changed and diversified. While the legal citizenship has been important, other kinds of citizenship, i.e., cultural citizenship or ethnic citizenships have emerged. This paper deals with the question of the cultural citizenship in regard to the Korean Chinese ethnic return migrants in Korea and those stay in China.

7 CONCLUSION
My observation shows a few salient points in their discussions of the election: (1) South Korean style democracy is dangerous, and Chinese-style one-party rule is a more efficient form of government; (2) the majority of Chosŏnjok workers supported Lee Myung-bak, believing he would improve the South Korean economy, which then would be beneficial for Chosŏnjok in general; (3) a smaller number of people supported Chung Dong-young because of their belief that Chung would improve the relationship between the two Koreas regardless of their knowledge that an improved inter-Korean relationship might cause job loss for Chosŏnjok migrant workers. By discussing such issues rather vocally among themselves, the Chosŏnjok migrant workers were in fact exerting their ‘cultural’ citizenship to the national community of Koreans in which many of them do not have legal citizenship.

They showed great interests in Korean politics, identifying their own interests that might be affected by the election. Many saw the election as a dangerous act that might endanger national security (election as a divisive force). They distinguish China (fatherland) and Korea (motherland) and believe that each country has a different system and needs.

Is democracy the only possible alternative? China’s political thought can bring an alternative in human history (as the French rationalists, enlightenmentalists admired China as a polity that does not need a grand religion such as Christianity – Confucian model. Koreas should not think they are superior to Chinese in terms of democracy – Korean democracy does not look ideal and it has revealed so much problems recently and in the past. Western discourse of human rights – has universal appeal but one needs to consider the practicality that the Chinese situation requires.

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