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## **ETHNIC SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF KOREAN CHINESE IN JUNE HEE KWON'S BORDERLAND DREAMS**

**Key words:** Korean Chinese, Yanbian, ethnic minority, Korean dream.

Korean Chinese predominantly inhabit the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, the region that borders Russia and North Korea. With a population of approximately 1.7 million, or 0.12% of the entire demographic fabric of the People's Republic of China, this ethnic group exemplifies successful social integration within the broader Chinese socio-political matrix. They are often considered a role model for other ethnic minorities in China, demonstrating effective assimilation strategies while preserving distinct cultural identities.

In her work *Borderland Dreams: The Transnational Lives of Korean Chinese Workers*, June Hee Kwon examines the ethnic survival tactics employed by the Korean Chinese community of Yanbian over several decades. These tactics are characterized as adaptive strategies designed to navigate the intricate socio-economic and political terrains that span China and South Korea. Key among these strategies are social and labor mobility, strategic migration, which has allowed them to become a bridge between China and the Korean Peninsula, facilitating cultural and economic exchanges. Furthermore, Kwon highlights the significance of transnational networks and cultural adaptation, as well as the community's robust engagement with the higher education sector and the regional economy. In her analysis, the author conceptualizes the Korean Chinese community as "a transnational border-crossing ethnicity living on the ethnic borderland" or "a transnational ethnic working class." This characterization underscores their unique position as a group that navigates the complexities of identity and survival at the intersection of national boundaries.

Initially, the movement of the Korean Chinese community was largely driven by the pursuit of the "Korean dream," which entailed leveraging economic opportunities tied to South Korea. Kwon's description of the Korean Chinese community's reliance on economic opportunities from South Korea as "drinking the Korean water" provides a vivid metaphor that

captures their dependence on South Korea for economic sustenance. This metaphor effectively highlights how integral these transnational economic ties are for the community's survival, especially within the shifting landscape of post-socialist China. They find themselves in a cycle of "resting and waiting" in China for the next working trip to the south.

As regional and global dynamics have evolved, the Korean Chinese community has found itself adapting to the shifting realities brought about by China's own ascendancy. Kwon notes a significant shift in perception within the Korean Chinese community following the global financial crisis of 2008. This period marked a change in how migration to South Korea for work was viewed – no longer seen as an opportunity but rather as a last resort, often perceived as a response to failed attempts to achieve success in China itself. The author characterizes this time as the "post – Korean dream era," capturing the community's recalibration of expectations and aspirations. The notion of the "Chinese dream" came to represent these new possibilities, reflecting a pivot towards capitalizing on the emerging opportunities within the changing economic landscape of China itself.

Korean Chinese position themselves strategically, either aligning more closely with South Korean or with Chinese identities depending on the context. As the author noted: "The slight distinction tends to mark Korean Chinese as not fully South Korean." This flexibility allows them to access resources and social networks in both countries, helping them maintain social and economic stability. The dual identity of the Korean Chinese not only sustains their livelihoods but also strengthens their communities both in China and South Korea. By navigating between these two identities, they leverage the advantages provided by each, maximizing their opportunities and enhancing community resilience. Additionally, the author remarks on their educational and social status, describing the Korean Chinese as "the most highly educated and 'civilized' ethnic minority in the country."

Kwon's analysis reveals that while Korean Chinese often perform "Koreaness" to appeal to South Korean employers or social groups by emphasizing their ethnic ties, this strategy is double-edged. The concept of "similarity-with-a-difference of ethnicized bodies" that Kwon mentions captures the nuanced discrimination and disrespect they face in South Korea. At the same time, they must adapt to and comply with the expectations and cultural norms of Han Chinese society when living in Yanbian. This dual adaptation is crucial for their acceptance and survival in both cultural spheres.

The process of Sinicization and other forms of ethnic suppression, aimed at building a unified "Chinese nation," is evident in Yanbian, just as it is across China, particularly impacting small religious communities. In Yanbian, these communities are predominantly Protestant, with a smaller

number being Catholic. The implementation of Mandarin instruction and Chinese patriotic education is vigorously promoted, yet this community still retains a considerable degree of cultural autonomy. Notably, they are allowed sufficient freedom to travel to South Korea, which helps them maintain their cultural identity. Furthermore, Yanbian's strategic location, bordering both North Korea and Russia, has not resulted in the severe resilience or riots seen in other regions. Nor has it led to an extreme level of surveillance, which is noteworthy given the sensitive nature of border areas. Xi Jinping has only made one visit to Yanbian during his leadership, specifically in 2015. It could be indicative of the region's stability and the lack of significant unrest or issues that require particular attention. This also suggests that Yanbian, despite its strategic location and ethnic diversity, is seen as well-integrated within the national framework.

Korean Chinese constitute only about 35% of the total population of Yanbian since 2000, leading to a lesser degree of interaction with the Han Chinese and the broader Chinese society. As a result, they often gravitate towards Korean social circles, creating and participating in community groups such as hiking clubs, writers' workshops, and bowling teams. Kwon's observation of these activities underscores how the Korean Chinese community maintains its distinct cultural identity and social coherence by fostering strong intra-community relations, even while navigating the broader societal dynamics of their bi-national existence.

This book chronicles the lifecycle of the Korean dream, tracing its phases of inception, maturation, decline, demise, and subsequent renewal through the narratives of real individuals. It explores the concept of the "afterlife of the Korean dream," a time when the community's goals and survival tactics have expanded beyond their original focus on South Korea. This diversification is evident in the community's migration patterns, which now extend to major global cities such as Tokyo, New York City, Los Angeles, London, and Sydney. The author's insights reveal how the Korean Chinese have adapted to new economic environments by broadening their life strategies and reducing risks. Additionally, the younger generation is shifting its professional pursuits, transitioning from labor-intensive jobs to roles in academia, law, consultancy, and other sectors both within and outside China and South Korea. This evolution is reshaping the common stereotypes and experiences associated with the Korean Chinese today.

Kwon's analysis deftly illustrates the dynamic and evolving identities and economic approaches of the Korean Chinese, set against the broader context of global migration patterns and shifting socio-economic landscapes. Yanbian, as a hub of transnational interaction and transformation, continues to evolve, redefining both the region and its people. This area offers new

opportunities and poses fresh challenges for the Korean Chinese as they navigate the intricacies of their evolving borderland dreams.

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## **НОВІ ПРОДУКТИВНІ СИЛИ ЕПОХИ СІ ЯК ОСНОВА ДЛЯ ЕКОНОМІЧНОЇ МОДЕРНІЗАЦІЇ ТА ІННОВАЦІЙ**

**Ключові слова:** економічний розвиток, інновації, Китай, нові продуктивні сили, нова епоха Сі.

У вересні 2023 року голова КНР Сі Цзіньпін вперше представив нову теоретичну концепцію «продуктивних сил нової якості» (нові продуктивні сили) для модернізації китайської економіки та наголосив на інноваційній, високотехнологічній і високоефективній продуктивності, що виходить за межі традиційних моделей еконо-