

Xiao Ma

South Korean Migrants in China: An Ethnography of Education, Desire, and Temporariness

Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2024. 190 pages. Hardcover, €104.00. ISBN 9789463726252.

While there is significant literature on the Korean diaspora, most of this research focuses on historic migrations and subsequent generations of Koreans raised abroad. These earlier migrations stemmed from historical circumstances driven by economic hardships, domestic turmoil, or forced migrations. Fewer studies have looked at the more recent, twenty-first-century phenomenon of comparatively well-off Korean families and individuals who go abroad for novel economic reasons (i.e., Koreans who move abroad to live as expatriates working for Korean conglomerates) or those who move abroad as a protest against South Korea's sociocultural or work norms (i.e., Koreans who go on working holidays and stay abroad to avoid Korea's harsh work culture). Xiao Ma's ethnography *South Korean Migrants in China: An Ethnography of Education, Desire, and Temporariness* offers an important look into the lives of Koreans who move to China and how they and their children navigate education systems in China and South Korea. The book situates these Korean expatriates within the context of twenty-first-century China's internationalization (the internationalization of education in particular) and investigates various aspects related to their educational experiences and aspirations.

Chapter 1 sets the conceptual and ethnographic context of the work. Ma adopts "in between" as an analytical framework to understand the positionality of these Korean education migrants, ultimately suggesting that this offers a "more flexible" alternative than others to make sense of this mobility (14). The chapter also explains the concept of education migration relative to Koreans who go abroad to study and uses the concept of "educational desire" (16) to frame the actions of the ethnography's interlocutors. Ma also situates Korean education migrants in the broader context of China's internationalization (18–22). The chapter ends with an extensive explanation of Ma's "multi-scalar" ethnographic approach (25–31).

Chapter 2 explains the historical context of Korean migration to China starting from the 1990s and discusses the emergence of "Koreatowns" around Beijing. Ma gives considerable attention to the development of the Wangjing area of Beijing and the factors that drove Koreans in (and out) of this area in the early 2000s. Later in the chapter, Ma explains some of the economic challenges Koreans encountered in the late 2010s, which drove them to leave this area. The chapter ends with a conceptual discussion of ethnic incorporation, ethnic networks, and ethnic categorizations of expatriate Koreans relative to Korean Chinese, among others.

In chapter 3, Ma discusses various types of education institutions in China. The chapter discusses internationalization of Chinese schools and Chinese higher education. Most pertinent to the topics of Koreans expatriates in China are sections on overseas Korean

schools in China (84–89) and a discussion about Korea’s “education exodus” (89–92). In doing so, Ma explains the factors shaping these different educational institutions and how some Korean interlocutors conceptualized them.

Chapter 4 is arguably the most interesting chapter in the book. It is also one of the most ethnographically dense. The chapter looks at the diverse ideologies and practices of Korean parents in China and relates these back to Koreans’ “obsession” with English education. Ma presents vignettes from several Korean mothers who take different approaches to their children’s education. In doing so, Ma suggests that most of these desires reveal the “cosmopolitan outlook” of Korean parents—an outlook grounded both domestically and internationally (120). The chapter also includes a Bordieuan discussion of how social status and schooling practices manifest in the form of Korean parents’ educational aspirations for their children.

Chapter 5 focuses on Korean high school students abroad who try to enter universities in South Korea—a “desirable homecoming” as Ma describes it. The chapter contains a lot of very interesting factual information about this process and how Koreans students pursue this pragmatically. Here, Ma touches on various pertinent issues for education migrants, such as parents’ perceived importance of alumni networks at elite universities, the extent to which applicants pursue extracurricular education to prepare for entrance exams, and what tensions arise during the application process.

Chapter 6 then explores Korean students who try to enter elite Chinese institutions after attending Chinese high schools. This is another ethnographically dense chapter that explains how these Korean students are given special admissions treatment that is generally unavailable to Chinese students, and how Korean students themselves conceptualize their desires to enter these universities. Interestingly, the chapter explores how these students pursue Chinese higher education because of their personal interests and desires to not engage with the traditional tertiary education institutions. This is also the chapter of the book that casts the greatest light into the social and educational structures in South Korea that may propel Korean students to remain in China and pursue education in the country.

The final chapter concludes the book with a summary of its main arguments: Koreans in China exist as people “in between” both countries, the ambivalent nature of the temporality of South Koreans in China, “educational desire” as a driving force behind these pursuits, and Chinese internationalization as a “process involving a variety of [contradictory] stakeholders.”

South Korean Migrants in China offers an interesting look at a recent and still underexplored topic. The ethnographic data in the later chapters is especially interesting, and Ma has done a good job of discussing this topic from multiple emic and etic perspectives. In doing so, Ma also does a fine job of explaining some important contextual aspects of this phenomenon and offers concise history lessons on some crucial topics presented in the book (such as international and Korean schools in China and the emergence of Beijing’s twenty-first-century Koreatown, among others). The breadth of topics the book touches on is a major strength, as other researchers on this topic can likely find something pertinent to their research area in this book. This book is thus a crucial source of information on South Koreans in China, and it will likely remain so in the immediate future.

Nevertheless, there are some issues with the book. First, the conceptual approach seemed rather unfocused and broad. I initially thought the concepts introduced in

chapter 1 would be the conceptual and analytical focus of the book, but then more concepts were introduced in the subsequent chapters. These new theories related back to the original concepts to varying degrees; some were relevant, while others seemed to be just namedropped with little relevance to the theories discussed in the first chapter. This gave the book more the feeling of a dissertation rather than a manuscript (a point further exacerbated by the abstracts at the start of each chapter). It seems that only the theme of being “in between” resonates throughout the book, and even this could have been further unpacked conceptually. Second, the book could use more ethnography. It isn’t until chapter 4 that any substantial ethnographic data is introduced. This is unfortunate, because in the eighty-plus interviews Ma conducted, I am sure there would have been more interesting insights to be gained and discussed.

Lastly, from a Korea studies perspective, I would have liked to have seen more discussion about domestic push factors compelling these diverse educational ideologies and practices. While the book focuses extensively on the Chinese receiving side of this migration, a more substantive discussion on the push factors that compel expatriation, individual internationalization, English education, and social status *within* contemporary South Korea would have been immensely beneficial. Ma also notes that she conducted fieldwork in South Korea, but some of the most crucial aspects of the sending nation fail to come through in the book. The fact that South Korea is an unapologetically status-centered society (of which expatriation and internationalization are closely connected) is not unpacked in sufficient detail. Relatedly, more focus back on South Korea’s higher education system would have been insightful and helpful to readers unfamiliar with contemporary South Korea; the brief references to these issues in chapter 6 are somewhat informative, but more attention should have been given here. Closely connected to Koreans’ obsession with social status is university education—being admitted to SKY (Seoul National University, Korea University, or Yonsei University) or an elite art or science university is a direct status symbol in Korean society. More discussion of this status-centered educational phenomenon would have been interesting. Additionally, the reason why English itself is a symbol of elite cosmopolitanism in Korea is also not really unpacked. This is why, from the point of Korea studies, this book is only of nominal interest; it is much better placed within the context of transnational studies and migration studies.

These issues notwithstanding, *South Korean Migrants in China* provides one of the most comprehensive studies to date of the phenomenon of South Korean expatriates in China. Ma’s work touches upon many different facets of this migration phenomenon, and anyone who is interested in this topic will likely find this book helpful in some way.

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