Identity Change of Korean Chinese in Transnational Mobility: A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract- ***The transnational migration of Korean Chinese has experienced sustained growth over the past three decades fol-lowing China's implementation of the "Reform and Opening-up Policy." As Korean Chinese began migrating to South Korea, their patterns of mobility and living conditions underwent significant transformations, leading to the dis-ruption and reconstruction of their sense of belonging, value systems, and identity constructs. This study employs a longitudinal research design, utilizing two waves of in-depth interviews conducted over a decade (2004 and 2014), to examine the evolution of ethnic and national identities among Korean Chinese and to identify the underlying factors driving these changes. The findings reveal a complex trajectory of identity transformation: during the late 1990s, there was a noticeable weakening of ethnic identity as Koreans alongside a strengthening of national identity as Chinese. In the first half of the 21st century, despite the emergence of increasingly open and pluralistic identity formations characterized by the interplay and tension between ethnic and national identities, Korean Chinese predominantly maintain their identification as Chinese nationals. This study contributes to the understanding of the dynamic in-terplay between ethnic affiliation and national identity in the context of transnational migration, offering insights into the complex identity negotiation processes of diasporic communities.***

Indexed Terms- ***Korean Chinese; Transnational Mobility; Identity Change***

I. INTRODUCTION

The transnational population flow of Korean Chinese (ethnic Koreans in China) has undergone significant expansion over the past three decades, particularly following China's "Reform and Opening-up Policy" initiated in 1978. This policy not only transformed China's economic landscape but also facilitated greater mobility for its citizens, including the Korean Chinese community. The formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992 marked a pivotal moment, accelerating the transnational flow of Korean Chinese to South Korea. According to the 7th National Census of China in 2020, there are approximately 1,702,479 Korean Chinese in China, with around 700,000 residing in South Korea—more than 40% of the total Korean Chinese population in China [1]. This substantial migration has been driven by the pursuit of better economic opportunities, higher wages, and improved living standards in South Korea, which is perceived as a more developed and prosperous society compared to the rural areas of northeastern China where many Korean Chinese originally resided.

While this transnational mobility has contributed to the economic prosperity of the Korean Chinese community, it has also introduced a range of challenges related to social integration, cultural adaptation, and identity formation. Korean Chinese immigrants in South Korea often face difficulties in adapting to their new environment due to their relatively short residency and a weak sense of belonging to South Korean society [2]. Despite sharing ethnic ties with South Koreans, Korean Chinese are frequently perceived as "foreigners" due to differences in language, cultural practices, and social norms. These disparities create a significant

gap between Korean Chinese and South Koreans, complicating their integration and leading to confusion in their sense of ethnic identity [3]. For instance, while Korean Chinese may speak Korean, dialectal differences and cultural nuances often highlight their outsider status, reinforcing social exclusion and marginalization.

The impact of this migration is not limited to the individuals and families involved; it also has broader implications for both China and South Korea. In China, the outmigration of Korean Chinese has led to the depopulation of ethnic Korean villages, particularly in the northeastern provinces of Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning. These regions, once vibrant with ethnic Korean culture, are now facing demographic decline and ageing populations, which pose challenges to local economies and cultural preservation [4]. This demographic shift not only undermines the cultural and economic vitality of these regions but also raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of these communities. In South Korea, the influx of Korean Chinese has contributed to the diversification of the labor market, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and services. However, it has also sparked debates about immigration policies, social cohesion, and the rights of ethnic minorities within South Korean society.

Given the growing scale and complexity of this transnational migration, it is crucial to examine the evolving identities of Korean Chinese in South Korea and the factors that influence their integration into South Korean society. The transnational mobility trajectory of Korean Chinese over the past 30 years has been marked by volatility and complexity, leading to increasingly diversified identities among this population. However, despite the growing body of research on transnational migration, few studies have specifically focused on the identity issues of Korean Chinese in South Korea. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring whether and how the national and ethnic identities of Korean Chinese have changed over time in the context of transnational mobility. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: Have the national and ethnic identities of Korean Chinese in transnational mobility changed over time? If so, what factors influence these changes in identity?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of transnational migration, particularly in the context of ethnic Koreans navigating between their Chinese upbringing and their Korean heritage. The findings of this research will not only shed light on the experiences of Korean Chinese immigrants but also provide valuable insights for policymakers and community leaders in both China and South Korea. Understanding the factors that shape the identities of Korean Chinese in transnational mobility is essential for developing inclusive policies that promote social cohesion, cultural preservation, and economic stability in both sending and receiving countries. Ultimately, this study seeks to highlight the broader implications of transnational migration for individuals, communities, and nations in an increasingly interconnected world.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a longitudinal qualitative research design, utilizing two rounds of in-depth interviews conducted over a decade (2004 and 2014) to examine the stage-specific characteristics of identity transformation among Korean Chinese residing in South Korea and the associated influencing factors. The research sample comprised 17 Korean Chinese individuals residing in South Korea, strategically selected based on key demographic and migration-related variables, including age, gender, visa type, occupation, and duration of residence in South Korea. The initial sample composition in 2004 included: 2 naturalized Korean citizens (marriage immigrants), 10 D-3 industrial trainee visa holders, 2 international students, 1 undocumented immigrant, and 2 family visitors. Regarding legal status, 11 participants maintained valid visa status, while 6 were undocumented residents (comprising 3 overstayed industrial trainees, 2 overstayed family visitors, and 1 stowaway).

By the time of the second interview wave in 2014, significant changes in legal status and visa classifications were observed among participants: 3 had obtained Korean citizenship (1 through marriage and 2 through other naturalization processes), 6 held H-2 (visitor-employment) visas, 3 possessed F-4

(overseas Korean) visas, 2 maintained F-2 (resident) visas, and 3 participants had returned to China (including 2 former international students and 1 marriage immigrant who renounced Korean citizenship). Notably, all remaining participants in South Korea held valid visas, with the exception of 3 individuals who had repatriated to China.

The research methodology followed rigorous qualitative research protocols. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent from participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The data analysis process employed a systematic grounded theory approach, incorporating open coding, axial coding, and selective coding techniques, complemented by memoing and concept mapping for thematic analysis. Through comparative analysis of participants' national and ethnic identity constructs at two temporal points, this study aims to identify patterns of identity transformation and elucidate the underlying factors influencing these changes.

This longitudinal approach enables the examination of identity dynamics across different stages of migration and settlement, providing valuable insights into the complex interplay between legal status, socio-cultural adaptation, and identity formation among transnational migrants. The decade-long interval between data collection points offers a unique opportunity to observe both short-term adjustments and long-term transformations in identity construction processes within the Korean Chinese diaspora in South Korea.

III. RESULTS

3.1. The Dilution of Ethnic Identity as Korean and Strengthening of National Identity as Chinese (1990s – early 2000s)

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea in 1992, South Korea emerged as the primary destination for Korean Chinese seeking rapid economic advancement. The strong appeal of South Korea to Korean Chinese can be attributed to shared ethnic heritage and linguistic commonality. Despite nearly half a century of separation and living under different political systems, most Korean Chinese maintain a dual identity, embracing both their Korean ethnic roots and Chinese national identity. This dual identity fueled the migration wave following China's "Reform and Opening-up Policy," as thousands of Korean Chinese, filled with aspirations for their ancestral homeland, embarked on journeys to work in South Korea. However, these high expectations were often met with harsh realities that significantly altered their perceptions.

The first major challenge faced by Korean Chinese migrants was systemic oppression and discrimination in both daily life and the workplace. Predominantly employed in labor-intensive industries and service sectors, Korean Chinese workers were typically confined to what is known as "3D" jobs—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning. Their working conditions were strenuous, with daily hours far exceeding the standard eight-hour workday, and wages falling significantly below the average living standards of South Koreans. Moreover, their precarious legal status—often as undocumented workers, job hoppers, or holders of non-employment visas—left them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers, including instances of withheld wages. The combination of unstable employment, excessive working hours, substandard living conditions, hazardous work environments, and inadequate compensation placed immense physical and psychological strain on Korean Chinese laborers. These experiences led Korean Chinese workers to realize that, aside from a marginal linguistic advantage over other foreign workers, they were predominantly viewed by South Koreans as outsiders and socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals relegated to the lowest rungs of society. This pervasive discrimination and marginalization starkly contrasted with their initial expectations of ethnic solidarity and significantly diminished their sense of Korean ethnic identity. The disillusionment with their ancestral homeland not only altered their self-perception but also reshaped their understanding of identity within the context of transnational migration.

Before arriving in South Korea, I had high expectations; after all, it is the same ethnic nation and same language, but after arriving in South Korea, I realized that it is not the paradise I imagined. The most unbearable thing was the

stigmatization on China and Korean Chinese. I was a college graduate and a teacher. The boss, who only had high school degree, had the audacity to ask in front of us if you had TV when you were in China? How is the food in China? What's even more infuriating is that they treat Korean staff with respect, but when they treat Korean Chinese staff, they just call them "dog" and "pig". There was no end to the insults. There were times when I really want to punch him in the face, but when I thought of my family in China, I could only hold my tongue. (Interviewee: ZD; Date: May 8, 2004; Place: Garibongdong)

The second significant challenge faced by Korean Chinese in South Korea is the issue of political non-compatriot treatment. The ancestors of Korean Chinese migrated to Northeast China in the late 19th century, driven by either economic necessity or participation in the anti-Japanese movement, and they share the same ethnic roots as South Koreans. It would be reasonable to expect that Korean Chinese, returning to their "ancestral homeland" after a century, would be treated as equals by South Korean society. However, a series of discriminatory policies implemented by the South Korean government have left Korean Chinese feeling marginalized and excluded. Not only do they face economic oppression, but they are also denied the same political rights and fair treatment afforded to South Korean nationals. Furthermore, there is a stark contrast in the treatment of Korean Chinese compared to their ethnic Korean counterparts from the United States, Japan, and other developed countries, despite their shared heritage. This differentiation is particularly evident in the South Korean government's 1999 Overseas Koreans Act. In the aftermath of the economic crisis of the 1990s, South Korea sought to attract overseas Koreans to invest in the country and stimulate economic growth. The Overseas Koreans Act was designed to grant overseas Koreans privileges akin to dual citizenship, such as extended visa stays and easier access to employment. However, the Act explicitly excluded ethnic Koreans from China and the former Soviet Union, citing the rationale that these groups had migrated abroad before the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 and had never held South Korean nationality. This exclusion was a profound blow to Korean Chinese, who had long identified with their Korean heritage. It was not until 2004, following protests by Korean human rights organizations and advocacy groups, that the Act was amended to include ethnic Koreans from China and the former Soviet Union. However, the initial exclusion and the prolonged struggle for inclusion underscored the South Korean government's perception of Korean Chinese as mere foreign laborers rather than as ethnic compatriots. The Overseas Koreans Act incident served as a stark reminder to Korean Chinese that, despite their shared ethnicity, they were viewed primarily as economic assets rather than as members of the broader Korean diaspora. This realization further eroded their sense of belonging and reinforced their identity as outsiders in what they had once considered their ancestral homeland. The political marginalization experienced by Korean Chinese highlights the complex interplay between ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship in the context of transnational migration. It also underscores the challenges faced by diasporic communities in navigating their identities and seeking recognition in their ancestral lands.

The third significant challenge faced by Korean Chinese in South Korea is cultural heterogeneity. As a cross-border ethnic group originating from the Korean Peninsula, Korean Chinese are often drawn to South Korea due to shared linguistic and cultural ties, with language serving as their primary employment advantage. However, the Korean spoken by Korean Chinese and the standard Korean used in South Korea exhibit notable differences in tone, vocabulary, and pronunciation. These linguistic variations, particularly the distinct accent of Korean Chinese, have unfortunately been stigmatized as markers of backwardness and lack of sophistication, leading to social prejudice and discrimination. Beyond linguistic differences, Korean Chinese also contend with negative portrayals in South Korean media and popular culture. Films such as Yellow Sea and New World often depict Korean Chinese characters as stowaways, criminals, or even murderers, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that deviate significantly from the reality of the Korean Chinese community. These media representations, whether intentional or unintentional, contribute to public misconceptions and reinforce deeply ingrained

biases. As a result, Korean Chinese are frequently subjected to negative stereotyping, which further marginalizes them within South Korean society. This cultural heterogeneity, compounded by linguistic stigmatization and media-driven stereotypes, exacerbates the challenges Korean Chinese face in integrating into South Korean society. It not only undermines their sense of belonging but also highlights the complex dynamics of identity and perception in transnational migration contexts. The dissonance between their ethnic heritage and the cultural realities they encounter in South Korea underscores the need for greater cultural understanding and inclusive representation to bridge these divides.

In their lived experiences and social environment in South Korea, Korean Chinese have encountered not a sense of "ethnic identity" but rather a process of "ethnic differentiation." As they navigate their lives in South Korea, they increasingly perceive themselves as the "other" in relation to South Koreans, a realization that emerges from their marginalization within what they once considered their ancestral homeland. This sense of "otherness" not only deepens their feelings of alienation from South Korea but also inadvertently reinforces their identification with their Chinese nationality. Several studies on Korean Chinese have highlighted this transformative process, noting that their identity undergoes a dynamic evolution as a result of their labor migration to South Korea. Initially driven by a desire for ethnic connection and belonging, Korean Chinese gradually experience a weakening of their ethnic identity as they face discrimination and exclusion. Over time, this process leads to a strengthening of their national identity as Chinese, as they come to recognize the stark contrast between their expectations of ethnic solidarity and the reality of their marginalization [2,5]. This shift underscores the complex interplay between ethnic and national identities, shaped by the socio-political and cultural realities of their transnational experiences. In essence, the journey of Korean Chinese in South Korea reflects a profound reconfiguration of identity, moving from an initial aspiration for ethnic unity to a heightened awareness of their national belonging as Chinese. This transformation highlights the resilience of identity in the face of social exclusion and the enduring influence of lived experiences on self-perception and belonging.

3.2. Divergence of Identity of Korean Chinese in South Korea (early 21st century to present)

As Korean Chinese in South Korea continue to adapt to evolving modes of mobility and shifting living environments, their community is undergoing significant transformations in social structures, while their sense of belonging, values, and identities are constantly disrupted and reshaped. In contrast to the 1990s and early 2000s, when the ethnic identity of Korean Chinese as "Korean" was diminishing and their national identity as "Chinese" was being reinforced, the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century witnessed the emergence of more complex and multifaceted identities among Korean Chinese. This shift was partly driven by South Korea's improving policy environment toward Korean Chinese, which created new opportunities and challenges for identity formation. During this period, the interplay between ethnic identity as Korean and national identity as Chinese became increasingly intricate, marked by both interconnection and tension. At the same time, their identities began to exhibit more open and pluralistic characteristics, reflecting the diverse experiences and aspirations of the Korean Chinese community. This pluralism has, to some extent, posed challenges to traditional notions of national identity construction, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in transnational contexts. Drawing on research data, the following analysis outlines the key characteristics of identity transformation among Korean Chinese over the span of a decade. These changes reflect not only the evolving socio-political landscape in South Korea but also the resilience and adaptability of the Korean Chinese community as they navigate the complexities of belonging and identity in a rapidly changing world.

3.2.1. Those who have joined South Korean citizenship

National identity constitutes a critical dimension of individual and collective identity. It generally refers to a group's sense of belonging and allegiance to the nation-state in which they reside, encompassing both emotional attachments to the country and rational considerations of shared interests. A key marker of

national identity is citizenship, which formalizes an individual's legal and political ties to a nation [6]. For Korean Chinese, their national identity—particularly their recognition of nationality—has undergone significant transformations over time, influenced by shifting social, economic, and political factors during their prolonged residence in South Korea. According to statistics from South Korea's Department of Justice, the number of Korean Chinese acquiring South Korean nationality has steadily increased, exceeding 3,000 individuals annually. By 2020, this figure had risen to 6,000, reflecting a growing trend of naturalization. However, the motivations behind this decision vary widely among individuals, leading to distinct types of naturalization.

One prominent category is the "root-seeking" type. This group primarily consists of first-generation Korean Chinese whose ancestral roots trace back to the southern regions of the Korean Peninsula. Despite the passage of nearly a century since their ancestors migrated to China, these individuals retain a profound emotional connection to their ancestral homeland. Their desire to return to their roots and reconnect with their heritage drives their decision to naturalize as South Korean citizens. For instance, Mr. Park, whose family originates from Gimhae in Gyeongsangnam-do, South Korea, exemplifies this deep-seated attachment. He expressed a heartfelt longing to reclaim his ancestral identity and reestablish ties with his homeland, underscoring the enduring power of cultural and historical bonds in shaping national identity.

I immigrated to Antu, China with my parents in 1939, when I was a little over 10 years old. Most of my relatives were in South Korea, and even my name is on the family tree of my Korean relatives. Although I have been away from my hometown for so many years, I can't forget the mountains and rivers, plants and trees in my hometown, and the scenes of fishing, hide-and-seek, and other fun I had with my childhood friends. Although my hometown in South Korea has changed a lot over the years, and it has become very strange and unfamiliar to my relatives, I still moved my father's ashes to my hometown in South Korea according to his will, and my family has settled down here as well. After all, it is my hometown ... (interviewee: PRF; Date: December 2014; Location: Daerim-dong, Yeongdeungpo-gu)

The second category is the marriage-driven type. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, the South Korean government implemented systems such as the industrial trainee program and the employment permit system to recruit foreign workers. However, due to cumbersome application procedures, prolonged waiting periods, limited quotas, and exploitation by human smugglers, South Korea remained an inaccessible destination for many Korean Chinese. In this context, the "fake marriage, real work" model emerged as a practical shortcut for achieving the "Korean dream," leading to the naturalization of marriage immigrants. Unlike the root-seeking type, whose motivations are deeply rooted in cultural and historical ties, the marriage-driven type is primarily motivated by utilitarian considerations, such as economic opportunities and improved living conditions. Consequently, their sense of identity is more complex and less singular than that of the root-seeking type. These individuals often experience significant confusion and contradictions in their identity formation, as their initial motivations for migration and naturalization are pragmatic rather than rooted in a deep emotional or cultural connection to South Korea. This duality—balancing their original identity as Chinese nationals with their new status as naturalized South Koreans—creates a layered and often conflicted sense of belonging, reflecting the broader challenges of navigating transnational identities in pursuit of economic and social mobility.

I came to South Korea in 1999 through an international marriage and divorced my Korean husband after three years. Now my nationality is Korean. The purpose of obtaining Korean citizenship at that time was that I could earn money in South Korea without worrying about myself, and so that I could invite my relatives in China. At that time, it was very difficult to get to South Korea, so after I got Korean citizenship, I invited my mom and sister, and then my brother-in-law and uncle. Without a citizenship, how could I invite so many people...Although I am legally a Korean national, I have never seen myself as a Korean, and South

Koreans have never seen me as their Korean national… (Interviewee: KJ; Date: May 2004; Location: Ansan City, Gyeonggi-do)

The third category is the utilitarian type. As the economic influence of Korean Chinese in South Korea continues to grow, an increasing number of them are choosing to settle and develop in South Korea over the long term. However, they often encounter various practical challenges, such as difficulties in starting businesses, purchasing property, traveling abroad, enrolling their children in schools, accessing social security benefits, or even applying for credit cards. These obstacles hinder their ability to fully integrate into mainstream South Korean society. Nevertheless, as their economic power expands and their perspectives broaden, some Korean Chinese are no longer confined to a single identity or location. Instead, they leverage their social resources to actively engage with South Korean society. This shift is particularly evident in their growing interest in political rights and participation. Some Korean Chinese have begun to actively involve themselves in political activities, demonstrating a heightened sense of civic engagement. For instance, during the 20th National Assembly proportional representation election in 2016, 13 naturalized Korean Chinese candidates ran for office (7 affiliated with the ruling New Politics Alliance for Democracy and 6 with the opposition Justice Party). Although none of them secured a seat, their motivations varied—ranging from accumulating political capital to advocating for the interests of the Korean Chinese community. This political activism signifies a broader transformation within the Korean Chinese community, marking a transition from marginalization to mainstream engagement, and from a closed, insular mindset to one that seeks dialogue and integration with South Korean society. One interviewee's remarks aptly capture this phenomenon, highlighting how Korean Chinese are increasingly striving to bridge the gap between their community and the broader South Korean mainstream. This shift reflects not only their growing economic and social influence but also their desire to assert their presence and contribute to the political and cultural fabric of South Korea.

When I was interviewed in 2004, I said that I would never join South Korean citizenship because I hated the bullying and discrimination of South Korean at that time. But I never thought that after 10 years, I would be able to get South Korean citizenship. After years of hard work, I opened a travel agency in South Korea. Without South Korean citizenship, my business, my property, my children's education, and my family's survival are subject to a lot of constraints. Besides, without South Korean citizenship, I can't plead for the interests of Korean Chinese in South Korea and have no political voice at all. My goal is to continue to grow my business and at the same time earn a city councilor or a congressman to make the South Korean government and South Koreans change their attitude towards Korean Chinese and introduce more policies that are beneficial to Korean Chinese... Of course, I'm also very conflicted and torn mentally. People often ask me if I am Chinese or Korean. Because I took South Korean citizenship, I should be a Korean in terms of legal status. But who, including myself, can see me as a Korean? I think I am still, at least my heart is still Chinese, or Korean Chinese… (Interviewee: ZD; Time: July 2014; Location: Daelim-dong)

Defining the identity of naturalized Koreans, particularly their national identity, is a complex endeavor. Nationality, as a legal concept, delineates the rights and obligations of citizens within a nation-state. However, identity extends far beyond legal status, encompassing ethnic, social, occupational, and psychological dimensions. For naturalized Korean Chinese, these layers of identity are often intertwined and fluid, shaped by their motivations for naturalization and their ongoing ties to both China and South Korea. With the exception of a small number of first-generation naturalized Koreans driven by a deep-rooted desire to reconnect with their ancestral homeland, the motivations of marriage-driven and utilitarian naturalized individuals are predominantly instrumental. Their cultural core remains closely tied to China, even as they acquire South Korean citizenship. This duality is evident in the experiences of the interviewees. For instance, one of the two marriage-driven naturalized immigrants interviewed in 2004 has since renounced her South Korean nationality, while one of the two non-marriage-driven naturalized immigrants has retained

his Chinese nationality through irregular means, effectively holding dual citizenship. This fluidity in legal status reflects a broader uncertainty about their future. Many naturalized Korean Chinese find themselves navigating between China and South Korea, weighing the benefits and drawbacks of citizenship in both countries. They also grapple with questions of acceptance and belonging in both societies, highlighting the profound confusion and entanglement they experience. This tension underscores the challenges of reconciling multiple identities and the instrumental nature of their naturalization, which often prioritizes practical advantages over a deep sense of national allegiance. Ultimately, the identity of naturalized Korean Chinese is characterized by its hybridity and adaptability, shaped by the interplay of legal, cultural, and emotional factors. Their experiences reveal the complexities of transnational identity formation, where the pursuit of economic and social mobility often coexists with a lingering attachment to their cultural and national origins.

3.2.2. As permanent residents in South Korea

The majority of Korean Chinese in South Korea express a willingness to remain in the country for the long term, driven by several compelling factors. These include South Korea's ongoing labor shortages, the significant income disparity between South Korea and China, and the country's relatively advanced infrastructure, livable environment, and welfare benefits. These advantages make South Korea an attractive destination for Korean Chinese seeking economic stability and improved quality of life. However, despite their long-term residence, most Korean Chinese do not aspire to fully integrate into the mainstream of South Korean society. They perceive an insurmountable gap between themselves and native South Koreans, regardless of their geographic proximity or shared ethnic heritage. This reluctance to fully assimilate stems from a strong desire to retain their identities as both "Chinese" and "Korean Chinese." Many view China as their ultimate homeland and final destination, embodying the sentiment of "living in the reality of South Korea while envisioning a future in China." This dual perspective reflects their pragmatic approach to balancing immediate economic opportunities with long-term cultural and national belonging. Unable to fully reconcile these dual aspirations, many Korean Chinese choose to maintain their Chinese citizenship while securing long-term permanent residency in South Korea.

According to a 2016 report by the International Organization for Migration on the status of Korean Chinese in South Korea, 72,567 Korean Chinese had obtained permanent residence permits by that year. This statistic underscores the prevalence of this dual-status strategy, allowing them to benefit from South Korea's economic opportunities while preserving their ties to China. This approach highlights the complex interplay between economic pragmatism and cultural identity, as Korean Chinese navigate their transnational lives with a foot in both worlds. Their experiences reveal the challenges and compromises inherent in maintaining dual identities and aspirations in an increasingly globalized world.

In fact, with my current situation, I can totally join South Korean citizenship, but I am only getting a permanent residence permit now. Because China's economy continues to grow, maybe in the next few years the United States will not be able to compete with China, let alone South Korea. I want my children to grow up and live in China. Besides, you must be careful about changing your nationality. Nationality is a matter of one's future. It is not a simple matter that can be changed easily. Without money, social connections, even if I join South Korean nationality now, I can't integrate into the mainstream South Korean society…but at least for now, I still want to live in South Korea. Here, it's easy to earn money, and the transportation, medical care, service attitude, cultural life and so on are all better than in China. Later on, when I get old and my children want to go back to China, I will follow them. (Interviewee: PCD; Date: July, 2014; Location: Sinji-dong)

Through interviews, it becomes evident that while interviewee PCD repeatedly emphasized their Chinese identity, there are underlying influences of economic utility that subtly shape their awareness of identity. Despite their explicit assertion of being Chinese, traces of a subconscious retention of their ethnic identity as Korean can be observed. This duality reflects the complex interplay between

pragmatic considerations—such as economic opportunities—and the enduring cultural and ethnic ties to their Korean heritage. These factors collectively contribute to a nuanced and layered sense of identity, where explicit declarations of national belonging coexist with implicit ethnic affiliations.

3.2.3. Willing to be a Chinese national

Despite the growing tendency of Korean Chinese to settle in South Korea, and despite some variations in their identity dynamics, the vast majority still predominantly identify as Chinese. For most Korean Chinese, the primary motivation for migrating to South Korea is economic—viewing South Korea as a temporary residence to achieve their goal of financial prosperity. They endure challenging working conditions with the aim of earning money quickly, ultimately aspiring to return to China and reintegrate into Chinese society, bringing wealth and dignity to their families. To maintain their distinct identity and cultural ties, they establish social networks through kinship, hometown connections, and academic relationships, forming insular communities that remain largely separate from mainstream South Korean society. This separation reinforces their status as "inassimilable" and "other" within South Korea. Among the different social classes of Korean Chinese in South Korea, the farming class exhibits the strongest desire to return to China. For these individuals, the land they own in their hometowns and China's agricultural and rural policies provide a profound sense of belonging and security. This connection to their rural roots and the tangible assets they retain in China further solidify their identity as Chinese and their intention to eventually return home. Their experiences highlight the enduring influence of economic motivations and cultural ties in shaping the transnational identities of Korean Chinese, even as they navigate life in South Korea.

I'm not interested in Korean citizenship at all. Why join the Korean nationality? Even if you do, you're still at the bottom of the social ladder. I came to South Korea to earn money to send my children to a good university. Besides, I'm a farmer, so I'm not worried about my future. I have land and a house at home (hometown in China), and how good the current rural policy is, so I'll put up with it here, earn a few years, and then go home to spend my old age (Interviewee: KZD; Date: August 2014; Location: Daerim-dong).

The younger generation of Korean Chinese studying and working in South Korea also demonstrates a strong inclination to return to their home country, China. Unlike their grandparents' generation, which was driven by a deep-rooted connection to the Korean Peninsula, these younger individuals grew up in post-reform China and have benefited from higher levels of education and exposure to global opportunities. They are more attuned to the vast potential and future development of China's rapidly growing economy and society, and they aspire to contribute to and thrive on this larger stage rather than following the path of their predecessors. Their decision to return or remain connected to China highlights the evolving dynamics of identity and belonging among transnational communities, as well as the growing appeal of China's economic and cultural landscape for its diaspora.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the transnational mobility of Korean Chinese and the change of their identities, yielding several key findings:

First, the transnational mobility of Korean Chinese and the evolution of their identities must be understood holistically and dynamically. Identity, whether at the individual or group level, is not static; ethnic and national identities are not fixed essences but are continually shaped and reshaped over time. In the context of globalization and increased mobility, the ethnic identity of international migrants is in a constant state of negotiation, selection, and reconfiguration. As a transnational ethnic group, Korean Chinese experience diversified identity shifts due to the complexity of their dual belonging and real-life circumstances. They strategically leverage their multiple identities, flexibly switching between them to maximize benefits depending on situational needs. The interplay between ethnic identity and national identity plays a pivotal role in shaping their sense of self. When conflicts arise between these identities, or when ethnic identity is prioritized over national identity, it can pose challenges to the security of border regions, social stability, and

national unity. Therefore, it is essential to respect the "delicate situation" of diasporic communities like Korean Chinese, who strive to preserve their cultural heritage while navigating economic, social, and political barriers to integrate into host societies. The Chinese government should not only monitor the diversification of Korean Chinese identities in South Korea but also promote policies that foster "harmony in diversity" and peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups within the nation.

Second, the identity of Korean Chinese has been significantly influenced by social structures, including the competition and distribution of political and economic resources, as well as instrumentalist motivations, though primordialist ties also play a role. Their identities are characterized by multiplicity and adaptability, evolving in response to changing circumstances. For most Korean Chinese in South Korea, economic factors are the primary drivers of their transnational mobility and the construction of their national and ethnic identities. While many view South Korea as a temporary destination, the substantial wage gap between China and South Korea, coupled with South Korea's favorable public policies, infrastructure, and socio-cultural environment, often leads them to extend their stay beyond initial plans. This prolonged residence, in turn, influences their identity transformation.

Third, national strength and policy environments are critical in shaping the national identity of ethnic minorities. The long-term residence of over 700,000 Korean Chinese in South Korea, spanning various classes and age groups, is largely attributable to South Korea's improving policy environment and the significant income disparity between the two countries. As a transnational ethnic group residing in China's northeastern border region—an area of strategic importance in diplomacy, politics, economy, culture, and military affairs—the Korean Chinese community's national identity is of paramount importance to China's border security, social harmony, and national unity. In the era of globalization, economic factors have become the dominant force in shaping the national identity of border ethnic groups. Therefore, the Chinese government should prioritize improving livelihoods in ethnic regions by advancing employment, housing, education, healthcare, science, technology, and cultural initiatives. Encouraging migrant populations to return to their hometowns to start businesses can enhance their well-being, sense of belonging, and pride, thereby strengthening their national identity and fostering cross-border cohesion.

This study acknowledges certain limitations. The research participants primarily represent a relatively homogenous social class, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other segments of the Korean Chinese population in South Korea. Korean Chinese in South Korea encompass diverse groups, including entrepreneurs, scholars, professionals, and labor migrants, each with distinct experiences that shape their identities differently. Future research should include participants from a broader range of social classes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic identity shifts among Korean Chinese in South Korea. This approach would offer deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of identity formation in transnational contexts.

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