

Mobile Borders of the Korean Peninsula in (a) Regional Perspective

BRIT XI 9 September 2011- 10:45 - 12:45 Sixth Panel Session

Session 43 (SALLE 1110)

Session 43 discussed the mobility of borders on the Korean Peninsula. This Session was one of (only) a few forums where the border issues in East Asia were investigated. Our panel intended to pay close attention to border issues from both sides of the Korean divide and to provide as many detailed examples as possible for participants who might not be familiar with cases from outside Europe.

Originally, the session had been planned to have 3 speakers, two Korean scholars and one Japanese, but another panelist, Alexandra Novosseloff (France) was incorporated into the panel – I was informed of this amendment only one hour before the session started. Our session thus ultimately comprised of four speakers; all have substantial experience of studying Korean cases.

Although clashing with several interesting sessions (as most big conferences), it was a relatively well-attended session with nearly 20 people in the audience. The attendance of many non-Asian scholars was encouraging for us and enabled discussion of these East Asian cases from a global and comparative perspective.

The first speaker, Dr Takashi Kimura, focused upon the Zainichi Korean people living in Japan. Dr Kimura discussed the way in which the Zainichi have struggled to prove themselves as not being North Korean spies from the 1950s to the present time. His examination predominantly featured detailed case studies of several Zainichi individuals and provided us with valuable examples in considering the ‘invisible psychological border’ in South Korean political and social practices, and how this has affected the Zainichi community over recent decades.

The second speaker, Dr Hyein Han, shed light on the Korean people on/of Sakhalin. Between the two World Wars, many Koreans were brought to Sakhalin and many are still living there with their families. Dr Han’s paper discussed the nuanced and oscillating identities of these Korean people while they are searching for their imagined ‘homeland’.

While the first two papers examined the mobility of borders through the experiences of Korean people living outside their national territory, the third speaker, Dr Ihkpyo Hong, investigated economic cooperation between North Korea and China. He took the north-eastern region of China and the port cities in North Korea as his case studies. As economic cooperation between China and North Korea intensifies, the

northern border of the Korean peninsula becomes more and more flexible, whereas the border between two Korea has remained in stasis for several decades. Dr Hong presented a fresh perspective to us in considering the complex border issues and problems on the Korean peninsula.

The final speaker was Alexandra Novosseloff, who has long been working on international security and peace construction in cooperation with several UN organizations. Her approach was immensely intriguing: to compare the Korean case with that of the border between the Greek and Turkish areas on Cyprus, with reference to similarities and differences between the two cases. In so doing, she emphasized that political elites play an important role in the reconciliation process, but she also underscored the destruction of the mental border (or “the wall” in her words) among the population as crucial in overcoming the visible and physical border.

A Q&A session and discussion followed the four presentations. There were some questions asking about the historical backgrounds of the Zainichi and Sakhalin Koreans. Dr Novosseloff also explained in more detail the similarities and usefulness of comparison between the Korean and Cypriot cases.

The session encompassed topics as wide-ranging as the Zainichi community, Koreans in Sakhalin, economic cooperation between North Korea and China, and a comparative study of Korea. Nevertheless, all four papers discussed extensively how the border issues on/of the Korean peninsula -- whether visible or invisible and whether mental or physical-- can be interpreted, and how they have implications for contemporary political, social and economic practices. Many issues, of course, remain to be discussed, but these will certainly be one of the focal points at the next BRIT conference, scheduled to be held jointly in Japan and Korea.

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