

THE TUMEN TRIANGLE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

SOURCING THE CHINESE-NORTH KOREAN BORDER

AKS Special Edition

January 2015



ABOUT SINO-NK

Founded in December 2011 by a group of young academics committed to the study of Northeast Asia, Sino-NK focuses on the borderland world that lies somewhere between Pyongyang and Beijing. Using multiple languages and an array of disciplinary methodologies, Sino-NK provides a steady stream of China-DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea/North Korea) documentation and analysis covering the culture, history, economies and foreign relations of these complex states.

Work published on Sino-NK has been cited in such standard journalistic outlets as *The Economist*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *Wall Street Journal*, and our analysts have been featured in a range of other publications. Ultimately, Sino-NK seeks to function as a bridge between the ubiquitous North Korea media discourse and a more specialized world, that of the academic and think tank debates that swirl around the DPRK and its immense neighbor.

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Assistant Editor

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Director of Research

ROBERT WINSTANLEY-CHESTERS

Outreach Coordinator

SHERRI TER MOLEN

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SINO-NK PUBLICATIONS

TTP Documentation Project

ISSUE 1

April 2013

ISSUE 2

January 2014

Publications by Sino-NK under Research Grant AKS-2013-R-11

Journals

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney, “How Authoritarian Regimes Maintain Domain Consensus: North Korea’s Information Strategies in the Kim Jong-un Era,” *Review of Korean Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2: 145-178.

Adam Cathcart, “In the Shadow of Jang Song-Taek: Pyongyang’s Evolving SEZ Strategy with the Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa Islands,” KEI Academic Paper Series, June 19, 2014.

Media

Adam Cathcart and Steven Denney, “Bullet Trains and Wood-Burning Trucks,” *Daily NK*, April 28, 2014.

Christopher Green, “Smile, You’re on North Korean TV,” *Groove Magazine*, June 12, 2014.

At SinoNK.com

Adam Cathcart, "Lexicon of Conspiracy: Jang Sung-taek's Chinese Execution Document," *Sino-NK*, January 2, 2014.

Adam Cathcart, "Justifying Hereditary Succession in North Korea," *Sino-NK*, March 9, 2014.

Christopher Green, "Economic Development on the KCNA Track," *Sino-NK*, November 26, 2013.

Christopher Green, "Public-Private Partners: Rethinking North Korean 'Command Criminality,'" *Sino-NK*, May 2, 2014.

Christopher Green and Steven Denney, "National Identity and Historical Legacy: Ahn Jung-geun in the Grand Narrative," *Sino-NK*, June 6, 2014.

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney, "Kim Jong-un and the Songun Retrenchment: A Quintessential Equation," *Sino-NK*, November 30, 2013.

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney, "The Value of Pro Forma Ideology: Kim Jong-un as Songun Exponent," *Sino-NK*, December 8, 2013.

Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney, "Kim Jong-un within Songun Legacy Politics," *Sino-NK*, December 20, 2013.

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Introduction

Welcome to this special edition of The Tumen Triangle Documentation Project.*

The bilateral relationship between North Korea and China has become part of the everyday discourse in international politics. In fact, this burgeoning trend was one of the major reasons why Sino-NK was founded way back in the long winter of 2011. But what of the meandering border region between the two?

Following on from a descriptive piece about this very borderland twenty-five years ago that appeared in Issue 2,[†] Adam Cathcart, Christopher Green, and Steven Denney went back to the area in the spring of 2014 to find out what has changed. Armed with a generous grant from the Academy of Korean Studies, their visit revealed that some major shifts have taken place in the area over the last two decades, but equally importantly, it showed the complicated nature of the ways in which China and North Korea continue to interact.

Based on their findings from the field, over a period of eight subsequent months the Sino-NK research team published a peer-reviewed article with the *Review of Korean Studies*, a KEI Academic Paper on the subject of North Korea's Special Economic Zones, an op-ed with the online news periodical *Daily NK*, and a great many Sino-NK essays. They tell me there is plenty more to come.

In the meantime, this special edition of The Tumen Triangle Documentation Project has a simpler goal: to offer readers an annotated digital archive of images from the trip, a permanent record of China's Three Northeastern Provinces as they were in early 2014 plus a handful of valuable glimpses into North Korea. So as we enter the year of the sheep, enjoy these insights into a different world.

Dr. James (Jim) E. Hoare, Executive Editor

January 8, 2015

* This research was made possible thanks to Academy of Korean Studies Grant (AKS-2013-R-11), which supports Sino-NK's ongoing project to document the cultural and political strategies used by the DPRK government.

† In Issue 2 of the Tumen Triangle Documentation Project, we erroneously spoke in a caption on p.7 and again on p.22 about a "well that gives its name to Yanji." The well is in Longjing, not Yanji, and does indeed give its name to that town. Thank you to an astute reader for pointing out the mistake.

Shenyang: April 4

Having sent half a million servicemen and women into the Korean mire in defense of the fledgling People's Republic of China, it is surely no surprise that Shenyang, as the gateway to Manchuria and the borderland beyond, would play home to a noteworthy monument to the Chinese People's Volunteer Army at the Shenyang Korean War Martyrs Memorial Park. As one ought certainly to expect of a war waged on such ambiguous ethical and political terms, Northeast China, with Shenyang at its financial and military epicenter, is on the frontline of a Korean War that persists on the rhetorical battlefield.

It is essential to carve out and maintain a space for the Korean War in the Chinese imaginary, a space in early PRC history around which New Man was able to coalesce. Today's youth may be more interested in money than ideological fervor; in K-Pop than in Kim Jong-un, as it were, but in the way students are led around this extensive memorial (and the less popular Soviet variant next door) by war veterans, in the way the young people deliver speeches on the nature of the war and China's heroic role in its culmination; one can readily divine the importance placed upon achieving that goal. It is interesting to note that guide books to the region from the 1990s barely mention the Korean War at all.

But the Chinese children seemed disinterested. Chinese children are children, one might indeed say, and as a result the marching was lackadaisical, fists went un-pumped, speeches were delivered with minimal ambition; nevertheless, the state's intent to memorialize the Korean War, with all the challenges that such an undertaking inevitably brings, is clear here.



Statue of Mao, Shenyang. The largest statue of the Communist leader in China. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



Primary school children pay their respects to fallen Chinese Volunteers and thus they "remember." Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

One pertinent lesson, then: for China to abandon North Korea would actually require much more to be abandoned than Western observers tend to appreciate. That the War to Resist America and Aid Korea was launched on the initiative of Kim Il-sung is certainly no secret to anyone in China, and that does create problems of perception. Nevertheless, it was Mao Zedong who made the fateful case for an immense communal sacrifice from a people just emerging from the tumultuous founding of a state, and so that sacrifice had to be made, and memorialized. Shenyang only makes it clear that more sacrifices, psychological rather than physical, are still being made, and that same war is still being fought... in Manchurian classrooms.



Tombs of fallen comrades in the War to Oppose America and Aid Korea, AKA: the Korean War. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



Entrance to the Shenyang Korean War Martyrs Memorial Park. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Tonghua, Ji'an & Manpo: April 8

Kim Jong-il launched his 2010 Manchurian odyssey at midnight on August 26, crossing the border at Manpo and passing through Ji'an without stopping en route for Jilin. Sino-NK arrived at the border juncture in Ji'an from the other direction, taking the slow train from Shenyang to Tonghua, a third-tier industrial city of about 2.4 million, followed by a mercifully brief but mercilessly bumpy bus ride.

Though Tonghua is well behind Shenyang in terms of development and suffered some major industrial riots a few years ago, the city is aglow at night, causing one taxi driver to explain that it is a popular destination for North Korean "tourists" in pursuit of consumer goods. Tourism, particularly from North Korea, is clearly not the true driver of the city's thrusting development and ubiquitous neon lighting, but one thing is certainly clear: someone is making money here. The city has a new airport and ambitions to move beyond its old role as a petrochemical hub.

If Tonghua is industrial and industrious, the space between Tonghua and the small, scenic city of Ji'an is rather more timeless in terms of development; it is sufficiently mountainous that it takes nearly six hours by train, though only two by bus. This is not yet--and may not be for some time--the land of high-speed train connections.

But time waits for very little in China, and just days after leaving Ji'an we received news that sounded a lot like progress: another new cross-border connection would soon be opening up. As Xinhua put it on April 13, "Another Chinese city opens train travel to Pyongyang."



The bright city lights of Tonghua. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



A joint venture restaurant in Ji'an. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

According to the piece, filed in Changchun, a “group of 32 Chinese tourists on Sunday took a train from Ji’an City in northeast China’s Jilin Province for a five-day trip to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).” The opening of the train route makes Ji’an just the second city after Dandong in Liaoning Province to run a passenger service to North Korea, it added.

It went on to cite one Liu Jun, deputy manager of Ji’an International Travel Agency, as noting with no lack of optimism that the train from Ji’an will put tourists within reach of Pyongyang, Kaesong, and even that most tantalizing of borderland spaces, the truce village at Panmunjom. “Holders of Chinese ID cards and passports can apply for the 2,980 yuan, or \$480, visit in Ji’an,” it elaborated. “The trip is organized every four days.”



Steven Denney finds out more about the Chinese view of Koguryo history from a well-informed Korean-Chinese guide. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

All very well and good of course, but our own trip down to the border reinforced how tenuous the transportation connections still are in this neighborhood; Ji’an is a bit of a cul-de-sac. Sino-NK supposes that linking it, even if only sporadically, to North Korea might allow for something larger to develop;

in the Xinhua piece, Zang Wanghong, named as director of the Ji’an Tourist Board, indicated the possibility of this, saying that day trips to Manpo would open on May 1. Sino-NK is reserving judgment.



A Koguryo-era tomb in Ji’an. Korean historians would much rather such tombs be on Korean territory. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Such tours would more than explain the dedication of the North Korean authorities to the aesthetic revival of Manpo. New buildings here, new roofing on old buildings there: the city has been spruced up considerably since Kim Jong-un came to power. But then, the redevelopment of Manpo has also become a plank in the legitimating narrative of Kim Jong-un’s rule, so perhaps we ought not to be surprised. An extended section of a recent KCTV documentary broadcast on December 17, 2014 in commemoration of the 3rd anniversary of the death of Kim Jong-il reflected this, explicating at length on the revival of the city, albeit without reference to the (as yet absent, it appears) revival of the cement works that represents the area’s only major industrial facility.

In Ji’an proper, the game revolves around ancient history and the Chinese absorption, preservation, and interpretation of Koguryo relics. The Koguryo Museum in the city is in some ways the new ground zero in the history wars, a site of friction between China and Korea irrespective of the Korea in ques-

tion. As Sino-NK was the only guest at the museum that afternoon, security consisted of a single guard following us through the sensitive parts of the museum (everything, it seemed, but the final third) to ensure that we did not take photographs. Cameras had to be left at the entrance, unusually for a Chinese museum.

An AFP reporter, one of the only foreign correspondents to visit in 2013, was escorted out of town for apparently violating the rules of the museum. Our visit was, thankfully, far less dramatic.



The Koguryo Museum, where the AFP reporter was expelled for taking photos inside. Photo: Steven Denney/Sino-NK



Manpo, DPRK, opposite Ji'an, on the banks of the Yalu. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese volunteers crossed this river, frozen at the time, during the first year of the Korean War. The sacrifices made by many Chinese soldiers in Korea forged a relationship, bound by blood, between China and North Korea. Photo: Steven Denney/Sino-NK

Harbin: April 10

Just like Kim Jong-il on August 29, 2010, Sino-NK dropped by Harbin on a daytrip. Unlike Kim, however, our target was the Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall at the city's grand old railway station, which had opened just a few short months before our arrival.

At this location in 1909, Ahn, a Korean independence activist and pan-Asianist, assassinated Ito Hirobumi, the first prime minister of Japan and resident-general of Korea. The exhibition, a small and largely unadorned room no bigger than a moderately sized lecture hall, contains photographs of Ahn, illustrative replicas of the assassination, and short descriptions about Ahn's life and his intellectual development presented in chronological order. Not surprisingly, there are no Japanese captions. Photo captions and biographical descriptions are in Chinese and Korean only.



Adam, walking into the Ahn Jung-geun memorial exhibition at Harbin. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



Ahn Jung-geun, the Korean independence fighter who killed Ito Hirobumi. Photo: Steven Denney/Sino-NK

Halfway through the exhibition, visitors are encouraged to look out through a large glass window onto the platform where Ahn fatally shot Ito, in addition to wounding several other high-ranking officials; a few inconspicuous markings indicate from where the shots were fired and where they found their intended targets. The exhibition culminates with a quote from Ahn, reportedly uttered shortly before his execution, reflecting his Pan-Asianist vision for the region.

In guest books set-aside at the end, visitors are invited to leave a message before exiting. Many are in Korean, reading “Long live Korean independence!” and indicating a keen awareness of Korea’s

contested national sovereignty. Other messages thank Ahn for fighting in the name of the Korean nation, referring to him as “patriotic martyr,” “brother,” “teacher,” or “hero.”

From a Koreanist-Sinologist perspective, the memorial is interesting and capable of uniting the disparate forces of Korean nationalism. However, the absence of Japanese stands out. Is there a similar absence at the prison in Lushun, the place of Ahn’s execution, where Japanese tourists tend to visit in larger numbers? Regardless, the ideological affinity between Ahn, Sun Yat Sen, and Liang Quichao is clear and comprehensible; the turn of the 20th century coincided with the rise of a generation of visionary East Asian nationalists, lauded from Beijing to Pyongyang and across the 38th parallel to Seoul.



Harbin Beer is symbolic of the city’s colorful past. Founded by a German of Polish origin in 1900, the brewery was intended to sate the thirst of Russians then working on the region’s railways. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



The Harbin Flood Control Memorial Tower on the banks of the Songhua River, which flooded badly in 1957. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

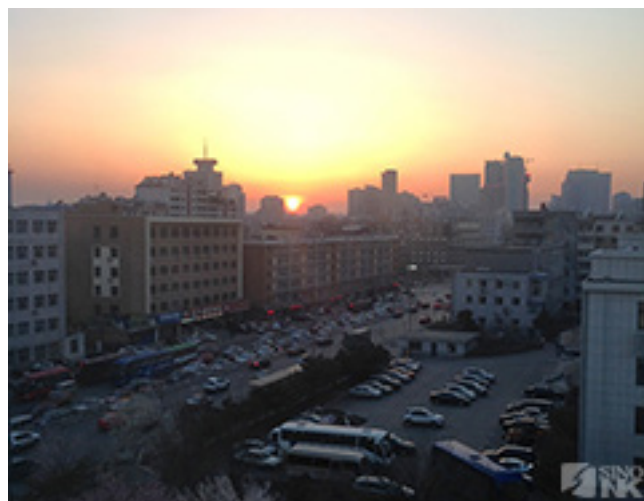
Changchun: April 11

Kim Jong-il and his extensive entourage swept into Changchun on the morning of August 27, 2010. The location was a compromise decision: Kim did not plan to visit Beijing, and thus his meeting with then-CCP General-Secretary Hu Jintao required some alternate arrangement. It is beyond our ken to divine why the two sides should have settled on Changchun, with its 7 million inhabitants and, until 1932, the capital of the Japanese imperial state of Manchukuo. What was Kim seeking to get out of it?

According to press reports, he stayed at the South Lake Hotel in the center of the city, and visited both Jilin Agricultural University and the nearby Agricultural Expo Garden in the southeast. While the name is certainly a misnomer, for this so-called agricultural university teaches much more than just agriculture, one is still left wondering why Kim was not whisked off to a car factory. After all, Changchun is no overpopulated relic of the Japanese Empire; it is home to FAW Corp., and as such is by far the closest of China's four epicenters of car manufacturing to the Sino-DPRK borderland. Does North Korea not desire better domestically built cars than the Pyeonghwa Motors Corp. product that dominates the market today?

Our trip to Changchun yielded no answer to this particular question, but it did provide an interesting and informative juxtaposition to Shenyang, where much is big and new and many older buildings are being torn down to make room for modern construction. The same cannot be said in this city, a fascinating architectural gem where many of the original

imperial buildings remain. Navigating the city one feels a little less of the speed of the bulldozer and the wrecking ball that is ubiquitous in other parts of China. Taxi drivers are excellent guides to the city, quick to locate an old administrative building or Manchukuo-era museum.



Sunset over the old colonial city: Changchun. Photo: Steven Denney/Sino-NK

Of course, this place is the source of contentious developmental origins. Following the establishment of the Japan-controlled puppet state, Manchukuo, Changchun was designated the capital and renamed Xinjing (lit. "new capital"). And it is here, in Manchukuo, where a contentious colonial connection exists. The puppet state of Manchukuo was where Kishi Nobusuke, a highly talented bureaucrat and eventual Primer Minister of postwar Japan, cut his teeth as an industrial planner. It is also where Park Chung-hee, the well-known developmental dictator of South Korea and father of the current South Korean president (Park Geun-hye), earned his stripes as an officer in the (imperial) Kwangtung Army. This colonial connection and the relatively friendly ties maintained between Park and Kishi in the postwar

period are enough for propagandists in North Korea (and a vocal clique of South Korean liberals) to conclude that modern South Korea was born of impure taint. The true, pure nation, North Korea historiography would have us believe, is that which was founded by a true resistance fighter (not a dreaded “collaborator”): Kim Il-sung. While Changchun is some way from the Manchurian hinterlands where Kim Il-sung fought, the “imperial connection” reminds one of the great historical and national significance of Northeast China.



Much of Northeast China is this: hinterlands. Photo: Steven Denney/Sino-NK

Yanji: April 12



The Yanji train station: a hub for travellers of the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Who wins in the battle for the hearts and minds of diaspora Koreans? In the United States and elsewhere, the battle is almost non-existent, but Northeast China is a different story. Traditionally from and loyal to North Korea, there is now the option for the “Chosonjok” to live and work in South Korea under a liberal visa regime, and many do so. It is difficult to justify loyalty to one’s roots in such a situation, where opportunity knocks so loudly on the wrong side of the tracks.

According to both the owner of Cafe Bene in Yanji and a policeman on the train from Yanji to Jilin, this demographic is more affluent than the local Han population for precisely this reason: almost every Chosonjok family has a family link to South Korea, and the business done in this way is key to their wealth. Questions over the impact of this reality on Han-Chosonjok relations remain diffuse.

The vision of traditionalism fostered by the North Korean restaurants in Shenyang, with their hanbok and musical interludes, is clearly not very appealing. What then of the South Korean version of tradition? It is brash, colorful, well lit, and entertaining in a self-consciously modern, consumerist

way. If appeal to a mass audience is the metric, then the victor is clear, and North Korea will have to find a new way to define itself, to see if it sells.



Advertisement for “Seoul City Mall,” supposedly coming soon to Shenyang. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Of course, one may conclude that it doesn’t matter if it sells, as long as it is “correct” and appropriately “respectful.” Being part of a diaspora is about more than just economic strength, after all. It is about the imaginary of one’s home, and pursuit of that which best justifies its, and your, existence, not to mention your absence from it. On this metric (viz.

“purity”), the conclusion is less than obvious.

But perhaps for the youngest generation of Chosunjok and their Chinese boyfriends or girlfriends who hang out on Friday nights at stylish clubs that would not be out of place a stone’s throw from Hong-ik University in Seoul, this question is moot. More choices and cheaper prices win out over attempts at preserving the traditional, Confucian, and Korean past that one finds in Yanji’s parks. It seems that Milton Friedman would be better received in this wealthy border city than the youthful guerrilla fighter Kim Il-sung.



Adam turns a violin into a cello to play along with the talented North Korean staff at a joint venture restaurant. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Yanji, while modern and clean, is not all that Korean (save for the coffee shops). Property is much cheaper, and there is a great deal more neon lighting. But is Yanji the hub of an exciting development that will turn the city from the end of the line into the “road to somewhere?” Or will it all end in nothing, another failed attempt to transform the national periphery. A protracted discussion with a Chosunjok real estate agent revealed that housing is cheap, but nothing short of peace between North Korea and the United States or North-South reunification is likely

to create the conditions under which business could truly boom. Until then, Yanji is destined to remain a peripheral city with an interesting vibe; potential unrealized.



Coffee shops are invaluable as places of writing, relaxation, and planning whilst conducting field work. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK



It takes a keen eye to spot the few mentions of Kim Il-sung on the walls of the grand new Yanbian Museum, testament to the scale of his role in the guerrilla war to liberate Korea. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Tumen & Namyang: April 13



The Tumen-Namyang border region at the Tumen River. Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

Liminal borderland spaces fail to characterize the borderland between China and North Korea satisfactorily. Of course the space is liminal, physically in terms of occupying the two sides of the Sino-North Korean border and in a metaphysical sense. But liminality doesn't speak well to the differences observed along this extended frontier.

Comparatively speaking, Manpo is alive while Namyang is resolutely rural and cut off; it is not at all clear whether the latter would develop greatly even if North Korea were to throw open the doors, which one policeman on the train from Yanji to Jilin insisted it already has, in a manner of speaking. Hundreds of kilometers to the west, Manpo would dive headfirst into modernity: it faces a much more commercially aware space across the Yalu, which has always been the more thrusting of the rivers that constitute this borderland. Tumen is nice, but one doesn't get the impression of breakneck improvement. Ji'an is small but bubbling, and not all that far from Tonghua, or even Shenyang; where Sino-NK began, and to which all roads in Manchuria surely

run.

While our trip to the Tumen border space was, then, a pleasant one--there is a lovely park a stone's throw from the Tumen-Namyang bridge and the Tuman River itself--the only real "take away" from our border trip here is that rivers serve as very real borders between two sovereign entities, and that sovereignty and borders do matter a whole hell of a lot; peering from a peak that overlooks the cities of Tumen and Namyang makes this all very clear. Those born in Tumen will find opportunity for social mobility (albeit probably not in Tumen), while those unlucky enough to be born in (or exiled to) Namyang will find more limited opportunities to move up the social ladder. Unless, of course, they are ready to cross the Tumen and start that adventure. Opportunity lies not in the North, but in the South.



Christopher at the Tumen River. Photo: Adam Cathcart/Sino-NK

Jilin: April 15



Kim Il-sung in guerrilla garb at Yuwen Middle School.
Photo: Adam Cathcart/Sino-NK

On the Day of the Sun (April 15), as the North Korean side refers to the birth date of Kim Il-sung, the main means of celebrating is to gather early on in the morning at Yuwen Middle School, where Kim spent a few years studying before here found himself jailed for engaging in subversive activities.

The event at Yuwen Middle School is not large, and clearly does not demand the presence of all the North Koreans allegedly living legally in the region. A rough estimate would be that around 1,000 people attended the ceremony, which takes place in a small walled courtyard.

There are vows of loyalty, a band plays martial music such as the Song of Kim Il-sung, and people take photos with, or under, the modest statue of Kim, in youthfully revolutionary pose, that has been erected in the courtyard. All the business of educating China's empowered youth, of course, goes on in the much newer, much bigger, much better school buildings that dwarf the original complex.

People dress well, and pin badges are on show. Small asides from all this formality, however, reveal a certain ambivalence: nobody rushes to shop

outsiders taking photos to the authorities; some of the younger people go out of their way to disguise their pin badges (pinning it to a coat pocket at waist height; pinning it to a handkerchief inside a breast pocket; or doing up coats to cover it). As we know, the most important North Koreans in the region are safe in their ideological clothing and do not need to go to these kinds of tedious event, and so it must surely be mostly mid-ranking cadres keen to be in China and determined to stay there. Nobody spoke to our group and, mindful of their security, we did not approach anyone.

North Korea takes its links to Jilin Province very seriously. The point is proved by a half hour-long KCTV documentary film shown on April 4 about Gilim [Jilin] Prison, where a young middle schooler called Kim Il-sung was incarcerated for six months. Showing, without fear one notes, modern Jilin where the prison once stood, the film has its cars, its Samsung sign, and the bustle and hubbub of a modern city, but the narration is a lament to the horrors of a place that, it is clear, North Korea seeks to portray as the wellspring of its painful legitimization.



Jilin plays home to many legal North Korean workers.
Photo: Destination Pyongyang/Sino-NK

