Borderlands are places where different social, political, and economic systems come into contact with one another. Borders may act as barriers, hindering interaction, but they may also act as bridges facilitating contact between different cultures and traditions. Borderlands are diverse in nature; some borders can be extremely porous whereas others are guarded with great vigilance. In this issue of News from Northeast Asia, we examine the borderlands of Northeast Asia.

The meeting of asymmetrical systems that take place in the borderlands gives rise to great economic opportunities, as well as hybrid regional cultures. This fact is well illustrated by Li Yinhe of Yanbian University in “Hun Chun: An International Cross Border Economic Region”.

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Notes
Tusushima is located closer to the Korean peninsula than Japan; it is less than 50 km away from the Korean island of Geoje. From the Kankoku Lookout in Waniura, at the northern end of Tusushima, the landmarks of Busan, South Korea’s second largest city, can be seen on clear days and even its fireworks at night. Since the beginning of history, the island has been a geopolitical mirror of Korea and Japan; its people have survived by negotiating the politics between the two. Indeed, the reason that the people of Tusushima are described as ‘cunning in a number of historical and literary documents may be due to their strategies for survival.

Over 90% of Tusushima consists of mountains and a coastline mirroring that which is almost no flatland for agriculture. Residents can only make a living with fishery and hunting. This has resulted in an economic dependence on Korea, its closest neighbor yet a foreign country. Tusushima’s particular relationship with the Korean Peninsula and the rest of the islands of the Japanese Archipelago is illustrated in the earliest historical account of the island, which appears in the Biographies of the Wuhuan, Xianbei and Dongyi in the ‘Book of Wei’ of the Records of the Three Kingdoms. The passage mentioning Tusushima describes the navigation route from Korea to Japan: Daifeng Commandery – Geumgwan Gaya – Tusushima Province – present-day Aki Island – present-day Kyushu. It demonstrates that Tusushima was a key point in maritime travels to Japan from ancient times. The passage also mentions Tusushima’s farmlands and the underdeveloped nature of its traffic routes.

After the middle ages, Tusushima became a base for Japanese raiders and the powerful So clan was able to monopolize trade rights with Joseon by controlling the raiders. The system of governance by So clan endured through the invasion of Joseon in 1952 and up to the Meiji Restoration. The So clan established Japanese settlements at three Joseon ports for trade and diplomatic purposes, and it was due to such economic and diplomatic concessions acquired from making use of its geopolitical position that Tusushima could survive and the So clan’s governance could be continued. Tusushima’s prosperity depended on peace between Korea and Japan; and therefore the island endeavored to avoid war even before the 1952 invasion. Upon unifying Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi sent word to Tusushima to request the King of Joseon for his surrender. Joseon obviously declined. Even when Joseon eventually sent a diplomatic envoy (Joseon Tongginsa) to Japan, it was under the condition that Tusushima was to give up the leader of Japanese raiders. However, when peace negotiations fell apart and the invasion of 1592 commenced, Tusushima became an informant of Toyotomi, guided the Japanese troops, and even participated in battles.

After the end of the war, Tusushima acted as mediator for conciliatory diplomatic relations between the Tokugawa Edo Bakufu and the Joseon Dynasty. When the Joseon Dynasty demanded a statement of apology for the invasion and the Bakufu refused, Tusushima forgave an apology and succeeded in dispatching a mission for reconciliations. Once diplomatic relations were recovered, Tusushima was able to maintain its trade concession once again and even re-established a Japanese settlement in Busan. It was through such trickery and diplomatic aptitude that Tusushima was able to successfully act as an intermediary between Korea and Japan.

Shuri Castle as a symbol of peace in East Asia
Keun-Sik Jung

On 31 October 1959, Okinawa’s Shuri Castle was completely destroyed by fire. The soul of the Ryukyu Kingdom, which had carefully been restored for 30 years starting in 1929, burned down entirely. For Koreans, this tragic event brought back memories of the 2008 fire that destroyed the wooden structure of Namadamun (Soongrye Gate), the southern gate of the Joseon capital. Just as Korean history had unfolded under the watchful gaze of Namadamun, Shuri Castle had stood witness to the fates of Ryukyu and its hybrid people. This piece was written in order to commemorate Shuri Castle, a symbol of peace in East Asia.

Shuri Castle became the seat of power of a unified Ryukyu Kingdom with the founding of the Shō Dynasty. The tablet that read ‘A Country of Good Proprieties’ (守禮之邦) which adorned Shurimon (the southern gate) and the tablet featuring the inscription ‘Land of Chinese Mountains’ (일'Djum), a gift from Emperor Kangxi of Qing Dynasty that hung in the main hall of Shuri Castle, symbolized the kingdom’s status as a tributary state of China. In the early 17th century, the Ryukyu Kingdom was invaded by the Satsuma domain of Japan, which subsequently controlled the kingdom to profit from entrepôt trade with China. Nevertheless, the fact that the Ryukyu Kingdom signed a trade treaty with the United States in 1879 demonstrates how it had remained an independent kingdom.

The Ryukyu Kingdom’s misfortunes began with the Meiji Restoration. In 1872, the King of Ryukyu became the king of a mere ‘domain’. In 1879, the domain was abolished, Ryukyu became Okinawa Prefecture, and the king was degraded to a noble and forced to relocate to Tokyo. The latter process is known as the ‘Ryukyu Disposition’, but Professor Namihira Tsuneo of Ryukyu University, who has studied this period in detail, argues that as this term reflects only Japan’s position, the more objective term ‘Ryukyu Annexation’ should be used, in the way that Joseon is regarded to have been formally ‘annexed’ by Japan.

Following the Manchurian invasion, Japan pursued a strategy of assimilation of the colonies into subjects of the emperor. In order to strengthen the role of the internal colonies as key components of the empire; on the other hand, it also carried out a policy designating important historical monuments as places of cultural heritage in order to elevate the pride of its colonial residents. It was in this wider context that Shuri Castle was designated as a national treasure, just as the Japanese Government General of colonial Korea had designated Namadamun as Korean Treasure No. 1. However, the hills of Shuri Castle were taken over by the headquarters of the 6th Division of Japanese troops to prepare for the Pacific War. The aftermath was terrible. In May 1945, as the American campaign to capture Okinawa was carried out, the Japanese headquarters and Shuri Castle were completely damaged by bombardment from warships. The monument of cultural heritage containing Ryukyu’s soul had disappeared completely.

During the American occupation, the government of Ryukyu was established and Ryukyu University was built on the ruins of Shuri Castle. As a result of the Cold War in East Asia, the American presence became permanent. The US military base in Okinawa proved its value through the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Along with the other military bases deeply embedded in East Asia, it allowed the US to operate as a living power in the region.

The government restored Shuri Castle in 1958 but the restoration of the main hall took more time. Ryukyu at this time did not yet exist as a nation, and so was not granted full sovereignty of Japan had been recognized. It was in 1972, during the ‘return of Okinawa to Ryukyu’, that the island became Okinawa Prefecture once again. After Ryukyu University was moved in 1979, Okinawa Prefecture and the Japanese government made plans to rebuild Shuri Castle. The actual restoration began in 1989, and the construction of the main hall, south hall and north hall buildings was completed in 1992. The castle became a park open to visitors. In 2017, it was visited by 2.8 million people.
Hun Chun is situated in the borderlands of China, North Korea, and Russia. This fortuitous geographic location has allowed the region to become an international logistics hub for Northeast Asia. The Tumen River Development Program, proposed by Jilin Province in 1990, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that followed in 1991, laid down the building blocks for the region’s development. The end of the Cold War in East Asia led to improved international relations in the region, and brought about the possibility of multilateral, rather than bilateral, economic cooperation. Globalization has led to an increase in the frequency of cultural exchange. As a result of this, Hun Chun has become an extremely hybrid place in a short period of time.

The Border Economic Cooperation Zone in Hun Chun is a national border economic cooperation zone that was approved by the state council in September 1992, with a planned area of 21.77 square kilometers. In April 2000 and February 2001, the state council approved respectively the establishment of the Hun Chun Export Processing Zone and the Hun Chun Russia-China Trade Zone within the cooperation zone, implementing a ‘three areas in one’ management mode. In April 2012, the state council approved the establishment of China’s Tumen River Region (Hun Chun) International Cooperation Model Zone, which ushered in the historical opportunity for leapfrog development.

The Hun Chun Export Processing Zone is one of the first 15 export-processing zones in China, with a planned area of 2.4 square kilometers. With the continuous adjustment of national industrial policies and increasing requirements for the transformation and upgrading of export processing trade, export processing zones experienced rapid development. They feature a characteristic industrial pattern of woodwork processing and seafood processing, supplemented by cross-border e-commerce and bonded logistics. At present, the planned area has been expanded to 0.888 square kilometers, and the area consists of ‘seven connections and one level’. The Hun Chun China-Russia Trade Zone covers an area of 9.6 hectares. It was put into trial operation in December 2001, and officially put into operation in June 2005. It is the only border trade functional zone open to Russia in Jilin Province, meeting the need for the development of border trade.

At present, there are 808 registered enterprises in the Border Economic Cooperation Zone, including 41 foreign-funded enterprises from eight countries and regions including Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the United States, Hong Kong. It has successively introduced a number of well-known enterprises both at home and abroad, and has come to develop a characteristic industrial system. In the Cooperation Zone, the non-ferrous metal industry is gradually maturing, while the aquaculture processing industry is rapidly developing, and the textile and garment industry continues to grow. The development of new and high technology industries has accelerated and the tertiary industry has emerged. These developments taking place in the Cooperation Zone have meant that Hun Chun has come to experience the full force of globalization. An increase in the cross-border flow of goods has been accompanied by the flow of information, capital, services, and people. The result of this has been the emergence of a fluidity and hybridity in the region. This is best observed in its cityscape, an example of which is the system of signage used in Hun Chun. Following the guidelines of the Hun Chun government, all of the signs in the city are in three languages: Chinese, Korean, and Russian. The ‘three language landscape’ of Hun Chun demonstrates how the region’s fluid and hybrid nature has brought about unique regional cultural characteristics.

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Notes

1 Matsuno, S. 2001. International Cross Border Economic Regions in East Asia, Greater Tumen Region (GTR) and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), Ritsumeikan International Affairs 10, 91-108.

The Region

Shuri Castle was used to project the image of Ryukyu’s past, as a place of coexistence and peace. This tied in with Okinawa’s strong tradition of peace movements that had taken root around the US military base. Amidst the attempt to relocate Kadena air base to Henoko and the resistance that emerged, many peace activists in Okinawa further called for the removal of US bases to Guam. However, the geopolitical atmosphere of the region changed in 2010 with the sinking of the Cheonan warship in the West Sea of Korea, and calls for US military base transfers from Okinawa fell silent. In the 30 years since its restoration, Shuri Castle stood as a beacon of peace in East Asia. Its presence acted as a reminder that these islands, which have played such a crucial role in US strategies in East Asia, were once a peaceful and prosperous place of trade. It is therefore hoped that Shuri Castle will be soon be restored so that it may once again project our aspirations for peace in East Asia.

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Photos

Naha Okinawa Japan Shuri-Castle. Photo by CEphoto, Uwe Aranas. Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy Uwe Aranas on Wikipedia.

The ‘three language landscape’ of Hun Chun. Photo by the author.

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