

Home Found Me in the Feed: Constructing Ethnic Identity and Imagined Communities through Social Media by Internally Mobile Korean-Chinese Youth

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Abstract. Research on digital media and migration has focused mainly on transnational migration and diaspora. Less is known about ethnic minority youth who move within one country. This qualitative case study draws on semi-structured interviews with four Korean-Chinese students who left the places where they grew up to attend university. It examines ethnic identity, hometown belonging, and everyday social media use. The interviews were analysed thematically. Participants rarely chose or shared content for explicitly ethnic reasons. For most, being Korean-Chinese remained in the background of everyday life, becoming more noticeable only in particular social situations or encounters with familiar languages, songs, and cultural symbols online. Participants nevertheless differed in ethnic salience, regional or hometown attachment, Korean-language use, and responses to familiar online content. Posts from existing contacts and local content encountered during ordinary browsing helped maintain connections with home, although these connections were not always understood in ethnic terms. In some cases, familiar local content led participants to imagine others who might recognise the same places or experiences. The study introduces the term "hometown-based imagined community" to describe this occasional sense of connection. By distinguishing hometown belonging from ethnic identification, it extends digital migration research beyond transnational diaspora and shows how internal educational mobility makes different forms of belonging relevant for different individuals. The findings suggest that support programmes and institutional policies should not assume that shared ethnicity automatically produces community, but should offer flexible, place-sensitive opportunities for mobile students to connect through everyday experiences.

Keywords: Internal migration in China, Korean-Chinese diaspora, Social media practices, Ethnic identity, Imagined community

1. Introduction

Moving away does not end people's contact with home. Digital media may allow migrants to maintain various forms of connection with places, relationships, and cultural contexts associated with home [1, 2]. For ethnic minority students, however, such content does not carry the same meaning in every situation. Lai [3] and Lai and Cai [4] show that its relationship with cultural

identification varies with what users do online and the people they communicate with. Seeing mainstream cultural content may therefore have a different significance from interacting directly with someone outside one's ethnic community.

Much of the research linking digital media with migration has developed around international movement and diaspora [1]. Mobility within China raises a related but different set of questions. Lu and Guo [5] found that moving for education could affect how minority students understood their ethnicity. Ye [6] also shows how mobile Uyghur students used digital resources while adapting to new educational settings. In another context, Xiong and Zhu [7] describe how internal migrants maintained hometown relationships through WeChat. These studies are mainly concerned with adaptation or communication through existing networks. They tell us less about moments when culturally familiar content appears during routine browsing without being deliberately sought.

Korean-Chinese youth provide a useful case because they grow up across different cultural settings. Korean-language institutions are more visible in Yanbian than in cities where Korean-Chinese residents are dispersed [8, 9]. Zhao et al. [10] likewise found varied patterns of ethnic and national identification among Korean-Chinese adolescents. These differences mean that the effects of moving cannot be assumed in advance. Familiar online content may be understood through ethnicity, but it may also be tied more closely to the places where users grew up.

This exploratory study draws on semi-structured interviews with four Korean-Chinese university students who grew up in Yanji or Changchun and moved elsewhere for university. It examines how they encountered culturally and locally familiar content on Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu.

Familiar content sometimes made participants more aware of their ethnic background, but it also reminded them of the places where they grew up. In one account, familiar content also prompted an imagined connection with people whom the participant assumed would understand the same local references, even without direct interaction. Drawing on Anderson [11], the study calls this a "hometown-based imagined community". The term describes a form of belonging based on an imagined connection with others who share similar local experiences. This connection could overlap with ethnic identity, but it was not defined by ethnic identity.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media practices and the situational salience of ethnic identity

Digital media have become part of how people experience mobility. They allow individuals to stay in contact with cultural backgrounds and places of origin after moving elsewhere. Leurs and Smets [1] argue that media practices are woven into mobility rather than added to it afterwards. Yet ethnicity does not guide all forms of media use in the same way. It may be important in one online setting but remain in the background in another. This makes it necessary to ask when ethnicity matters to users and how it becomes relevant through particular media practices.

The role of ethnicity varies across existing studies. Hatef [12] examines Roma activists and community organisers who used Facebook groups to negotiate identity and create spaces of belonging. Ethnicity was already central to their participation because these online spaces were connected to their community involvement. Martins et al. [13] present a different picture. Their study found mixed evidence as to whether Latino adolescents chose television programmes mainly based on ethnicity. Participants were often more interested in the characters or storylines, although Spanish-language programmes could still meet certain cultural needs. Television viewing is not the same as social media use, but the comparison shows that ethnic identification does not have a fixed influence on media choices.

One useful distinction concerns the kind of media practice involved. Someone who joins an ethnic community group makes a more deliberate connection between media use and ethnic identification. Browsing a personalised feed does not necessarily begin with the same intention. Lai [3] also finds that the relationship between social media use and cultural identification depends on what users are doing and who they are communicating with. During ordinary browsing, culturally familiar content may become meaningful even if ethnicity was not part of the user's original reason for opening the platform. In this case, ethnicity emerges through the interpretation of the content rather than directing the media choice from the beginning.

Much existing research treats media use as a broad category. This approach can hide differences between organised participation and the less deliberate practices that make up everyday platform use. It then becomes difficult to tell whether ethnicity shaped a user's media choice from the outset or became relevant only after users encountered culturally familiar content. Research therefore needs to distinguish more carefully between these two situations.

2.2. Imagined communities and mediated connections to place

Anderson [11] used the concept of imagined communities to explain how people can feel part of a wider collective without knowing most of its members. Media make this possible by circulating stories and symbols that people learn to recognise as shared. Anderson was mainly concerned with national consciousness, so the concept does not fully account for belonging organised around smaller places. It also says relatively little about differences among people who are placed within the same community. Yuval-Davis [14] addresses this problem by separating a person's social position from their emotional sense of belonging. Being identified with the same ethnic or regional group does not mean that everyone feels attached to it in the same way.

The concept has since been used to study populations living across national borders. Georgiou [15] describes how diasporic media connect everyday life in different locations. Christiansen [16] focuses on a viral Twitter event through which Mexican immigrants and their descendants discussed and performed "Mexicanness". In both studies, people respond to media that can be recognised by others within a broader group. The collective connection is visible in their participation. These cases are useful, but they offer less guidance for understanding experiences that remain personal or are not expressed through public interaction.

This distinction becomes important on social media because users do not all see the same material. What appears in a feed depends partly on previous activity and the way platforms rank content [17]. A video of a familiar street or a local dish might remind someone of home. On its own, this is better understood as memory or place attachment than as evidence of an imagined community. A collective element appears when the user associates that content with people who are assumed to recognise it in a similar way. This might happen through comments, but it may also remain an unspoken impression about who would understand the experience. The media encounter then links a personal memory of place with an imagined group.

Xiong and Zhu [7] show that digital platforms can support hometown relationships among internal migrants in China. Their work brings imagined belonging closer to the scale of the hometown, although interpersonal communication remains central to their analysis. Social media feeds may create a different form of connection because place-related content can appear without direct communication between users. It remains unclear under what circumstances users move from a personal response to place-related content towards an imagined connection with others. Ethnic belonging and attachment to a hometown may intersect at this point, but they should not be treated

as the same thing. This raises an important theoretical question about how people move from remembering a place to imagining a relationship with others connected to it.

2.3. Internal mobility and the heterogeneity of Korean-Chinese youth

The Korean-Chinese, also known as Chaoxianzu, have historically been concentrated in Northeast China. Chinese citizenship has developed alongside a sense of Korean ancestry, while cross-border cultural and economic contact has added another dimension to this position [8, 9]. Community institutions and Korean-language education have also contributed to distinct cultural environments. Access to these environments, however, varies considerably. A young person growing up in Yanbian may encounter Korean language and community life differently from someone raised in a city where Korean-Chinese residents are more dispersed. Understandings of Korean-Chinese identity may therefore differ according to place of upbringing, family language practices and everyday cultural exposure.

These different childhood environments produce heterogeneity before educational mobility takes place. Zhao et al. [10] identified several patterns of ethnic and national identification among Korean-Chinese adolescents in Northeast China. Although their findings belong to a particular sample and cannot be applied directly to university students who have moved elsewhere, they demonstrate that Korean-Chinese youth do not begin from a uniform position. Young people may already have different relationships with ethnicity, nationality, language, and place before leaving home.

Internal mobility operates on these heterogeneous starting points. Studies of minority students in China suggest that relocation can change when particular aspects of identity become noticeable. Lu and Guo [5], for example, found that Zhuang students who moved from an autonomous region to an eastern coastal city negotiated their ethnicity in response to a new institutional and social environment. Their findings cannot simply be extended to Korean-Chinese students because the histories and social positions of the two groups differ. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates how educational mobility may make previously ordinary aspects of a minority background more visible. Among Korean-Chinese youth, relocation may similarly change the circumstances in which language, ethnicity, or hometown belonging becomes salient, without necessarily strengthening or weakening ethnic identification in a consistent direction.

Existing media research offers only a partial account of this process. Lee and Lee [18] found differences in the media repertoires and diasporic identification of Korean-Chinese residents in Shanghai and Tokyo, while Park et al. [19] examined relationships among transnational leisure, Chaoxianzu contact, identity conflict, and well-being. Much of this scholarship concentrates on cross-border mobility or connections with South Korea. It tells us less about young Korean-Chinese people who move between regions of China and continue to use Chinese social media platforms in everyday life. Examining internal educational mobility can therefore show how pre-existing differences in upbringing shape the meanings that young people attach to ethnic and place-related content after relocation.

2.4. Research questions

The literature leaves open questions about when ethnicity matters in social media use and how connections to a hometown may involve an imagined relationship with other people. These questions are especially relevant to Korean-Chinese youth who have moved away from their hometown communities. This study draws on semi-structured interviews with Korean-Chinese university students studying in other Chinese cities. The interviews are analysed thematically, with

attention to how participants describe and make sense of their everyday social media experiences. The study addresses the following questions.

RQ1: What role, if any, does ethnic identity play in participants' everyday social media practices?

RQ2: How do participants understand the role of everyday social media use in their connections to their hometowns and to people they associate with those places?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context and participants

This study focuses on Korean-Chinese young people who moved elsewhere in China to attend university. Their relocation placed them in settings that differed from those in which they had grown up. The study considers how they understood their ethnic background and their connections to familiar places within this changed context.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because their experiences were relevant to the research questions [20]. They were eligible if they self-identified as Korean-Chinese, had grown up in a Korean-Chinese family or community in Northeast China, attended university outside the place where they grew up, and used social media at least several times per week. Recruitment took place through WeChat Moments and referrals from classmates. Six people were contacted. One was unable to participate because of time constraints. Five entered the interview process, but one interview was not included in the final dataset because several responses remained incomplete, and the participant did not reply to follow-up questions. The final sample comprised four students aged between 19 and 24 who were attending universities in Beijing, Changchun, or Harbin. Three had grown up in Yanji and one in Changchun. Pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

The small sample reflects the exploratory nature of the research. It is not intended to represent Korean-Chinese youth as a whole. Instead, the study examines how these four students understood the relationship between social media and belonging while living away from the places where they grew up. Recruitment through WeChat Moments and classmates' referrals also introduced convenience and network bias: participants who were accessible, willing to discuss identity, and connected to similar educational networks may be overrepresented.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Place of Upbringing	Current City	Main Platforms
Jun	Male	24	Yanji, Jilin	Beijing	Douyin, WeChat
Xuan	Male	22	Yanji, Jilin	Harbin	Douyin, WeChat
Rui	Female	19	Yanji, Jilin	Changchun	Douyin, Xiaohongshu
Yu	Female	19	Changchun, Jilin	Harbin	Xiaohongshu

3.2. Research design

The study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how social media practices intersect with identity and belonging among Korean-Chinese university students who moved elsewhere to attend university [21, 22]. The case is defined by the participants' shared experience of internal educational mobility, rather than by a single place of origin or destination. This approach places social media use within their wider experiences of relocation and everyday life.

The study considers how participants understood ethnic identity and hometown belonging after relocation, as well as the role that different social media practices played in these experiences. Anderson's concept of imagined community [11] informed the interpretation of place-based belonging, while a situational understanding of identity directed attention to when and how ethnicity became salient. These concepts guided the subsequent interpretation of the findings but were not used as predetermined coding categories.

3.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the same broad topics to be discussed with each participant while leaving room for individual experiences [23]. Participants were first asked about moving to attend university and their everyday social media use. The interviews then explored how they understood ethnicity and hometown belonging. They were also invited to recall encounters with familiar content and discuss their relationships with the places where they had grown up.

The interviews took place online through Tencent Meeting in 2026 and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Before each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and made clear that participation was voluntary. All participants gave informed consent and consented to audio recording. Identifying details were removed during transcription.

The researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews in Chinese. The four transcripts included in the final dataset contained approximately 13,000 Chinese characters and were coded in their original language. Quotations selected for the article were later translated into English and checked against the Chinese transcripts to preserve the participants' intended meanings.

3.4. Data analysis

The four transcripts were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke [24], with NVivo 15 used to organise the material. Coding began inductively so that the initial codes remained close to participants' accounts. Identity negotiation and imagined community were introduced later to help interpret the patterns that emerged, following an approach that combines inductive and theory-informed analysis [25].

Each transcript was read several times before coding. The early codes recorded how participants spoke about relocation and social media, with particular attention to moments when familiar content made ethnicity salient or evoked memories of place. The analysis also noted whether participants had searched for the content or encountered it during routine browsing. Codes were compared across the four accounts without removing differences between participants.

Two themes became central during this process. One concerned the situational reactivation of ethnic identity, while the other concerned mediated hometown belonging. Participants' different places of upbringing were considered when interpreting these themes, as similar content did not necessarily carry the same meaning in each account. The findings include representative excerpts to show how the interpretation was grounded in the interview data.

4. Results

Ethnic identity and hometown belonging were related in participants' accounts, but they were not experienced in the same way. In some situations, ethnicity became more noticeable. Participants

spoke about home when discussing local life and personal relationships. Food and family practices appeared in these accounts as well.

4.1. Social media encounters and the situational salience of ethnic identity

Familiar cultural content was sometimes sought out, though it also appeared during ordinary browsing. Such encounters could draw attention to ethnicity. For most participants, however, it remained a minor part of their online lives.

4.1.1. The situational salience of ethnic identity in everyday life

Ethnic identity was not equally noticeable in participants' daily lives. It usually remained in the background for Jun, Xuan and Yu. Rui became more conscious of her ethnic identity after moving from Yanji to Changchun.

Jun rarely mentioned his ethnicity online. He explained, "I basically never deliberately mention my minority identity, but I do not intentionally hide it either. Most of what I post on WeChat is about everyday life, which has little to do with whether I am an ethnic minority." His posts focused on daily experiences, and ethnicity was usually left unmentioned.

Xuan regarded ethnicity as an ordinary part of his identity. "If I had to choose, I would say it is something I don't need to think about," he said. "Being from a different ethnic group has not really changed anything. If I had not told people that I was Korean-Chinese, I don't think they would have noticed." Ethnicity had little bearing on how he interacted with others at university.

Family was the main setting in which Yu became aware of her ethnicity. She explained, "It comes from my family. My parents and my whole family are Korean-Chinese. In theory, my ethnic characteristics should be quite strong, but I am basically the same as Han people now." She added that "the genes are still there and can be awakened at any time." Even so, ethnicity rarely stood out in her daily life.

Relocation changed Rui's experience. She recalled, "It became stronger. In Yanji, being Korean-Chinese was a very ordinary thing. After coming to Changchun, I found that I was the only Korean-Chinese student in my class, or even in my year. When classmates were curious about Korean-Chinese people or admired that I could speak Korean, I consciously realised that I was Korean-Chinese." Attention from classmates made her ethnicity more visible than it had been in Yanji.

4.1.2. Cultural symbols as occasions for memory and identification

Participants did not respond to cultural symbols in the same way. Earlier experiences often shaped what caught their attention and why it mattered.

Rui encountered a Korean folk song while browsing Douyin. She recalled, "I was scrolling through Douyin when it recommended a livestream of a singer performing a traditional Korean-Chinese folk song. The singer happened to be my former vocal teacher, and she was singing Doraji Taryeong. I had only heard older relatives sing it when I was a child, and I did not think it sounded good then because I preferred pop music. After leaving home and hearing it again, I found it beautiful and missed home. I could feel the power and appeal of the culture."

Rui had not searched for traditional music or Korean-Chinese cultural content. The song appeared during ordinary browsing, but the person performing it was part of her earlier life in Yanji. It reminded her of her former teacher and older relatives. Something she had paid little attention to

during childhood carried more weight after she moved away. The encounter briefly made her cultural background more noticeable.

Xuan understood the traditional sangmo dance through a different experience. He explained, "I often saw this dance during festivals. I tried it myself once, but after only a few turns I felt dizzy and my neck hurt. The hat was also very heavy. I realised that it was really difficult and admired the performers." Having tried the dance, Xuan knew how much physical effort it required. His response centred on the performers' skill. He did not describe the dance mainly as a reminder of home.

4.1.3. Language, familiarity, and everyday practice

Jun continued to use Korean when communicating with relatives and friends from home on WeChat. He explained, "Sometimes I post on WeChat in Korean. The audience is mostly relatives and friends from home, although classmates elsewhere may occasionally see it and like it. Using the language naturally makes me feel close and at ease." Korean remained part of a familiar way of communicating after he left Yanji.

When asked whether this helped him retain his ethnic identity, Jun gave a more practical answer. "You could say that, but sometimes it is simply more convenient for me to express myself in Korean." Using Korean felt familiar to Jun, and it was sometimes simply more convenient. Using it was not necessarily a conscious expression of ethnicity.

Yu associated Korean mainly with older family members. She said, "I don't feel much. My parents are Korean-Chinese, but they do not speak much Korean. The older people in my family do, especially my grandmother's generation. They often mix Korean and Chinese when they talk." Korean played little part in Yu's own social media use.

4.2. Everyday social media practices and mediated hometown belonging

Participants often spoke about home through local information and people they knew. Food and family practices also appeared in their accounts of home. Ethnicity was sometimes part of how participants from Yanji described home, but it was not always their main point of reference.

4.2.1. Place-based belonging beyond ethnic identification

Yu did not associate home with any one city. Having lived in different parts of Northeast China, her sense of home extended across the region. She explained, "I don't have a strong sense that one city equals home. For me, the Northeast as a whole feels more like home. When I see videos about the Northeast, I feel a sense of identification." She did not need to recognise a particular city in the videos. Regional references were enough for her to identify with the content. She described this attachment in regional rather than ethnic terms.

Content about Jun's current life in Beijing usually mattered more to him than posts about Yanbian. He followed Yanbian bloggers and local tourism accounts, though this material was less useful in daily life. As he put it, "Right now, city-related content attracts me more because it is more useful for most of my life. Ethnic and hometown content feels familiar and sometimes moves me, but the feeling is usually fleeting." His current city shaped what he found useful online. Yanbian still felt familiar, even when it did not hold his attention for long.

Xuan kept up with life in Yanji mainly through people he already knew on WeChat. Posts from former classmates and older acquaintances allowed him to learn about local events and notice changes around the city. He explained, "Even though I am not at home, I can still find out in real

time when something important happens there. It gives me a little sense of participation." Regular updates from existing contacts gave him an ongoing awareness of local life.

Douyin functioned differently. Local content appeared unexpectedly and gave Xuan "a little sense of surprise." These encounters were brief and lacked the continuity of the updates he received from people he knew. Across the two platforms, Yanji remained part of Xuan's everyday media use. His connection through WeChat relied on familiar contacts, whereas Douyin brought local material into otherwise unrelated browsing.

4.2.2. Everyday practices and memories of home

A post about Yanbian food reminded Rui of dishes that were difficult to find after leaving home. She recalled, "Before the last holiday, I saw a post titled 'What I'll Eat When I Go Home', followed by pictures of traditional foods. It made me miss the food from home because it is difficult to find authentic flavours after leaving." Beef soup, lamb skewers, and beer hotpot were among the dishes she mentioned. "I just had to put up with it and complain to my family and friends on WeChat," she explained.

Posts by other people from Yanji could also feel familiar. Rui mentioned seeing people from her hometown share their outfits online. "When I see other people from my hometown sharing their outfits, I feel a slight sense of resonance," she said. She recognised a local style in someone else's everyday life. The feeling was not strong, but it extended beyond a private memory of home.

Korean-Chinese practices played a limited role in Yu's daily life. She said, "By my generation, the main habit left is drinking seaweed soup on birthdays, but this year at university, I completely forgot about it." The birthday custom had been part of family life, although it played little part in her routine at university. She associated other practices mainly with her mother's and grandmother's generations.

Yu expressed regret only after a follow-up question. When asked how she felt about these practices becoming less common, she replied, "Now that you mention it, I suddenly feel a little regretful." She had not initially presented this change as an ongoing concern. The follow-up question prompted her to reflect on the issue.

A shared place of origin was not enough for Yu to feel connected to other people. She had not joined hometown groups because, as she explained, "Even if they are from my hometown, I do not know them, so I see no need to join." An unfamiliar person from the same place remained a stranger to her.

Rui's account most closely reflected the notion of a hometown-based imagined community. The outfit posts allowed her to recognise part of her own local experience in someone else's life. Yu's account sets a limit on this interpretation because a common hometown did not create the same connection for her.

5. Discussion

The findings show that ethnicity was not a constant reason for using social media. It became noticeable in particular encounters, while hometown belonging was often expressed in local rather than ethnic terms. In one account, familiar local content also prompted a brief sense of connection with people who might share the same experience. This distinction underpins the idea of a hometown-based imagined community.

5.1. How ethnicity enters everyday social media practices

Participants rarely chose or shared content because it was ethnic. Ethnicity became more visible when a new setting or an unexpected post drew attention to a background that had previously felt ordinary. Rui's move from Yanji to Changchun is the clearest example: classmates' questions made her more conscious of being Korean-Chinese.

Rui's response to Doraji Taryeong and Xuan's response to the sangmo dance also show that cultural symbols do not carry one fixed meaning. Rui linked the song to her former teacher and to memories of Yanji, whereas Xuan focused on the performers' skill because he had tried the dance himself. The meaning came from each participant's experience, not from the content alone.

Language worked in a similar way. Jun used Korean with relatives and friends from home, but he also described it as convenient. Korean could maintain familiarity without every use becoming a deliberate expression of ethnic identity.

This pattern lies between earlier accounts of purposeful ethnic participation and studies in which ethnicity has only a limited influence on media choice [12, 13]. It also supports Lai's argument that cultural identification depends on what users do and whom they communicate with [3]. Here, ethnicity often became relevant after a media encounter had begun.

5.2. Developing the concept of a hometown-based imagined community

Anderson's imagined community was developed mainly at the level of the nation [11], while digital diaspora research often concerns international migration [15]. These interviews suggest that imagined belonging may also form around a hometown or region during internal mobility.

A hometown-based imagined community refers here to a brief sense that other people connected to the same place might understand a familiar local experience. It does not require direct interaction or stable membership. Hometown is therefore treated as a lived environment rather than a fixed administrative boundary; Yu's attachment to Northeast China shows that it may extend beyond one city.

WeChat and Douyin kept Yanji present for Xuan in different ways. WeChat provided continuous updates through people he already knew. Douyin introduced local content unexpectedly during routine browsing. The first relied on existing ties; the second created incidental encounters. Both supported hometown connection, but neither automatically produced an imagined community. Not every memory of home belongs in this category. Missing a familiar food or song may remain a private experience unless it also brings to mind other people who might recognise the same local reference.

Rui's outfit example comes closest to the concept because she recognised a local style in another person's everyday life. Yu's refusal to join hometown groups sets a useful limit: a shared origin did not make strangers feel like a community. In this small sample, an imagined-community element was more evident when participants thought that someone else might recognise the same experience. This is a tentative pattern, not a necessary condition.

Changing the scale from nation to hometown does not replace Anderson's theory. It draws attention to quieter connections that may arise during routine browsing. Yuval-Davis's distinction between social position and emotional belonging helps explain why people in the same ethnic category did not feel the same attachment [14]. The finding also differs from more public forms of identity performance [16] and complements research on hometown ties maintained through WeChat [7].

Universities and community organisations should therefore avoid assuming that shared ethnicity will create community. Informal, voluntary activities built around everyday local experiences may offer a more flexible point of connection than ethnic or hometown groups alone.

5.3. Internal mobility and heterogeneous forms of Korean-Chinese belonging

The four participants differed in ethnic salience, city-based or regional attachment, Korean-language use, and responses to familiar online content. These differences existed before relocation and remained visible afterwards. Korean-language institutions and community life vary across Northeast China [8, 9], and earlier research also shows diverse patterns of identification among Korean-Chinese youth [10].

Rui became more conscious of ethnicity after moving. Yu described home through the Northeast region and associated Korean mainly with older relatives. Jun used Korean within existing relationships without consistently treating it as ethnic expression. Xuan maintained hometown ties through WeChat and encountered Yanji unexpectedly on Douyin. Internal mobility therefore made different aspects of identity relevant for different participants.

This variation is consistent with research showing that educational mobility can affect minority students' understandings of ethnicity [5], but the change did not move in one direction. Ethnicity became more noticeable for one participant, while regional belonging, linguistic convenience, or practical interest mattered more for others. Because only one participant grew up in Changchun, the study cannot support a direct comparison between cities. The findings should therefore be read as four situated accounts rather than a general description of Korean-Chinese youth.

6. Conclusion

Among these four students, ethnicity rarely guided everyday social media use. It usually stayed in the background and became noticeable in particular social settings or media encounters. Familiar songs, languages, and cultural practices did not mean the same thing to everyone; their significance depended on personal history, place of upbringing, and the context in which they appeared.

Hometown belonging was also not always ethnic. Participants connected with a city or region through people they knew, local information, food, and ordinary scenes. A hometown-based imagined community may emerge when familiar content also brings to mind others who might understand the same experience. The interviews provide stronger evidence of mediated hometown belonging than of a stable community, so the concept should be treated as a possible and often brief form of connection. By separating hometown belonging from ethnic identification, the study extends digital migration research beyond transnational diaspora and shows how internal mobility can reshape the meanings attached to familiar online content.

The study is limited by its four-person sample, recruitment through nearby educational networks, and reliance on retrospective interviews. All participants were university students, making the findings highly context-specific. Their feeds and recommendation processes were not observed directly. Future research could include young people with different educational and mobility experiences and use media diaries or digital ethnography. For student support and policy, the main implication is simple: ethnic categories should not be treated as ready-made communities. Voluntary initiatives that allow for different place attachments and language practices may better reflect how belonging is actually experienced.

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