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North Koreans in South Korea and Beyond: Transnational Migration and Contested Nationhood

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Abstract

This article examines the differentiated identities of North Koreans in South Korea and beyond in terms of transnational migration and contested nationhood. In the post-Cold War era, North Koreans in South Korea have been marginalised as a social minority, and comprise a subaltern group within South Korea, despite having South Korean citizenship. As a result, many North Korean refugees, including those who have already gained South Korean citizenship, have migrated to Western countries for a better life in terms of wealth and welfare. As active agents, they have pursued strategic lives in the host countries' multicultural societies and Korean communities. Through complex transnational migration to South Korea and elsewhere, North Koreans have reformulated nationhood by contesting the idea of a "homogeneous nation" of Korea. This article focuses on how North Koreans have shaped their own Koreanness in the multicultural societies of the United States and the United Kingdom as well as in the hierarchical nationhood of South Korea. By doing so, it offers an alternative framework for looking at the multifarious identities of North Korean refugees globally.

Keywords: *North Korean refugees; transnational migration; nationhood; identities; Koreanness.*

Introduction

This article explores the contested nationhood of the North Korean diaspora in South Korea and beyond. Since the mid-1990s, the food crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has resulted in a remarkable increase in the migration of North Korean refugees[2] to the People's Republic of China (PRC), other neighbouring Asian countries, and thereafter to the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Western states. Although they arrive in the ROK after risking their lives – for example, by running the risk of repatriation from the PRC and detention in other Asian transit countries – they have then experienced the marginalised status that stems from the gap between legal and social citizenship in the ROK. This subaltern position of North Korean settlers in the ROK's politics of hierarchal nationhood has led to North Koreans' search for better socio-economic status in Western countries. In particular, the socio-economic marginalisation that transnational migrants experienced in their previous place of residence is cited as a trigger for their onward migration (Ahrens, Kelly & Liempt 2016). North Koreans' experiences in South Korea underscore the significance of ongoing transnational migration for individuals on the margins of society (Bell

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[2] In this article, I use the term *refugee* because it conveys a more neutral sense of North Koreans' status and meets the definition of *refugees sur place*, suggested by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Cohen 2012: 42). The UNHCR claims that North Koreans, including those staying in China and other Asian countries, should be considered *refugees sur place* because they face the threat of persecution upon returning to North Korea, despite leaving the country in search of food.

2014). In fact, one in three North Koreans heads to Western destinations such as the UK, Germany, Canada, the US, and Australia (*Hankyoreh* 23 January 2012). Many North Korean asylum seekers are pursuing independent lives in Western host countries, while others have maintained an unstable status as stateless migrants or illegal aliens.

Historically, Koreans have tended to believe that they have always been a homogeneous nation. This belief is represented by the ROK government's policy of nationhood and citizenship based on ethnicity. South Korea regards the DPRK as part of the ROK, as reflected in Article 3 of its constitution, which stipulates that "the territory of the ROK shall consist of the Korean peninsula and adjacent islands." Based on this stipulation, all North Koreans who enter the ROK receive South Korean citizenship. However, the increase in the movement of North Korean refugees into South Korea and the resulting socio-economic burdens have led the ROK to question its ethnically oriented politics of nationhood. Since the beginning of the 21st century, North Koreans' status has shifted from "welcomed political defectors" to "unfavourable economic dependents." Despite a humanitarian rhetoric regarding North Korean human rights, the ROK has enforced a selective policy to limit the entry of North Korean refugees and reduce economic assistance to North Korean settlers in the South (Kang 2011, 2013; Lee 2002). This policy change has been an obstacle to North Korean settlers' adjustment and has prompted some North Koreans in the South, as well as many North Koreans in other Asian countries, to seek asylum in developed Western countries. North Koreans wanting to migrate to other countries have struggled to secure options for legal asylum, as many of them have tried to adjust in the host societies and Korean communities. North Koreans' nationhood has been contested over the course of migration and diaspora as they struggle with their subaltern position in the ROK and form new identities in Western countries.

In this article, I focus on the differentiated identity formation of North Koreans in South Korea and Western states. After briefly explaining the theoretical background, I explore the stateless status of North Korean refugees in China and Asian transit countries. Then, I examine the hierarchical nationhood of North Korean settlers in South Korea, and investigate North Korean refugees' reformulated nationhood in Western countries, centring on the US and the UK.

Migration, Citizenship, and Nationhood

With the erosion of its post-Cold War political and economic interests, South Korea's governance of North Korean refugees has strengthened its extensive disciplinary control of the conduct of each and every member of the North Korean minority (Kang 2011). The ROK has shifted from a political, humanitarian approach to refugee issues to an economically rational policy (Ministry of Unification 2018a). This policy change has influenced the way in which North Koreans in South Korea and elsewhere have imagined their national identity as part of a "homogeneous nation."

Previous investigations on nationhood have debated the importance of ethnicity in terms of what comprises national identity. These studies have analysed Korea's politics of nationhood and citizenship in great depth through an ethno-cultural framework. However, in Korea's case, the politics of nationhood consolidating an ethnic nation have not functioned as a unifying force of reunification; rather, such politics have intensified inter-Korean conflict over the last half century (Shin, Freda & Yi 1999). North Korean settlers in South Korea have also experienced marginalised conditions as a social minority, despite having obtained legal ROK citizenship. North Koreans' citizenship status has been challenged beyond formal and legal issues, and this has negatively

affected the nationhood of ethnic migrants (Yoon 2001). A study by Seol and Skrentny (2009) on the nationhood of ethnic migrants in Korea explores the hierarchical structure of nationhood arising from Korean-Chinese immigration to their country of origin. Paradoxically, more ethnically defined countries such as Korea have a more hierarchical structure of nationhood when incorporating returning ethnic migrants into the state. The citizenship of ethnic migrants is socially contested, and their nationhood is questioned against this background. The nationhood of overseas North Koreans who have tried to gain legal asylum or citizenship status is also an important issue. The point is how North Koreans have imagined their nationhood and how their identities have been reformulated over the course of their migration and diaspora.

Early on, Marshall (1950) explored the modern welfare state, which achieved a degree of integration by compensating for class inequality. However, the politics of citizenship and nationhood is incongruous with class interest, and the process of citizen/nation making is contingent on social and economic change (Turner 2001). For this reason, it is helpful to view the politics of citizen/nation making as a complex identity politics, rather than evaluate it within a static framework of status or rights (Delanty 2000; Ong 1996). In particular, studies on migrant citizenship have shifted focus from formal and legal to substantive citizenship (Glenn 2002). Conceptualising nationhood by embracing the socio-economic dimensions of citizenship beyond the legal boundaries is useful when analysing the nationhood of North Koreans as a social minority in the ROK, as well as those who migrate to other Western countries. Diaspora studies also reveal the differentiated nationhood of political refugees and ethnic minorities as influenced by socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of diaspora studies have paid attention to the regional context, including political or ethnic conflicts and diasporas originating from conflict areas (Féron & Lefort 2019). However, in the global North Korean diaspora, their status is changed from political refugees to economic migrants as they are assigned a subaltern position in the ROK or are considered to be border-crossing people seeking wealth and welfare in other countries. Furthermore, new settlements in the host countries' multicultural societies have enabled North Koreans to have more opportunities for wealth and welfare and to create their independent or particular identities (Bell 2014).

Kymlicka (2001) emphasises that contemporary immigrants are multicultural agents who are capable of integrating into national societies. However, this may vary when a subaltern group's nationhood is contested by transnational migration and socio-economic circumstances. In this regard, Ong (1996: 737) views nationhood and citizenship as a cultural process of subjectification in the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being made by power relations in domestic and international settings. The social process of citizen/nation making is an identity politics influenced by various power relations, and thus immigrants' subjectification reveals various types of identities, going beyond the one-sided viewpoint of simple marginalisation or victimhood. Here, the crucial point is that North Koreans' nationhood should be understood by asking, "Whose imagined community?" (Chatterjee 1993), since their nationhood is reshaped through their differentiated experiences of transnational migration. In this vein, North Korean diaspora can be understood as a social product of identity formation that members of a diaspora experience with members in the host societies (Vertovec 2009: 137). Most of the North Korean diaspora demonstrates complex migration and the social process of a scattered people's fragmented nationhood, what Bhabha (1990) refers to as "DissemiNation."

Until now, the majority of scholarship on North Koreans has not fully addressed how the subjective experiences of North Korean refugees are shaped. North Korean refugees might be understood as outsiders, marginalised in the host societies, but uncritically applying the victimhood

narrative for interpreting their lives overlooks their role as active agents who consciously and strategically try to overcome the obstacles that they face in new settlements (Schiller & Fouron 2001). In this article, I offer an alternative framework for looking at the multifarious identities of global refugees or migrants in spite of their fragile existence. Through transnational migration, North Koreans have contested the politics of citizenship and nationhood by constructing their own version of Koreanness in South Korea and elsewhere. With this in mind, this article examines how North Koreans' nationhood in the ROK and beyond has been differentiated.

Method

The data presented in this article derives from in-depth interviews with 15 North Koreans living in South Korea (plus three in China, five in the US, and three in the UK)[3] and 10 South Korean representatives involved in the resettlement of North Koreans, as well as online and offline newspaper articles. A total of 36 in-depth interviews stem from my research in South Korea, the US, and China. I employed a snowball sampling due to difficulty in gaining access to North Koreans. I also used a semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interview method.

First, I met a total of 26 North Koreans in various ways. I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 North Koreans in Seoul, South Korea, in 2015. In addition, I interviewed five North Koreans in Chicago and Los Angeles in 2009 and spoke with three North Koreans during a short visit to China in 2009. I was also able to interview during their brief visit to South Korea in 2016 and 2018, three North Koreans who had obtained refugee status in the UK. The second group of interviewees (South Korean representatives) were individuals involved in governmental agencies and civil, educational, and religious organisations that worked with North Koreans. I met and interviewed various groups of people, including governmental officials, social workers, civic organisation activists, teachers, and pastors. For security reasons, when North Koreans were unwilling to reveal any or part of their information, I ensured interview subjects' anonymity to encourage them to speak freely and frankly. Finally, I used testimonies of overseas North Koreans in online and offline newspapers for analysis.

North Koreans in Asian Countries: A Stateless, Border-Crossing People

Since the 1990s, the DPRK's economic collapse has caused numerous North Koreans to seek refuge in the PRC and beyond. Illegal communities of North Korean refugees have created serious political and diplomatic problems in East Asia. The PRC has struggled to deal with North Korean refugees involved in serious social problems such as human trafficking for the sex industry. Furthermore, despite being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol, the PRC has not allowed the UNHCR to access North Koreans in China and investigate their human rights situations. Since the PRC government views North Koreans as illegal economic migrants, it has forcibly repatriated them to the DPRK based on the 1986 bilateral border protocol and the 1998 agreement on the repatriation of illegal North Korean migrants. In response, the North Korean government has harshly punished North Koreans who have been apprehended in the PRC and returned to the DPRK. Article 62 in the DPRK's Penal Code, revised in 2009, stipulates North Korean defection as a felony of "treachery against the fatherland." Those caught trying to go to the ROK can face over five years of forced labour in prison camps or even execution. In an extreme example, the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea documented eight eyewitness

[3] I employed small samples due to difficulty in obtaining access to North Koreans in the US and the UK. In spite of this methodological limitation, my study will help analyse North Korean refugees' differentiated lives and identities qualitatively.

accounts of forced abortions or infanticide affecting female deportees who returned pregnant from China (Charny 2004: 90).

Therefore, the UNHCR has claimed that North Koreans seeking asylum should be viewed as *refugees sur place*, people who become refugees as a result of fleeing their country or circumstances arising after they have left. Human Rights Watch reported that on 29 June 2017, 38 North Korean refugees in China were at risk of imminent return to North Korea. Among a group of eight who were detained in March 2017 were two women who escaped after being sold to Chinese men, and two women with serious health problems (Human Rights Watch 2017). Moreover, a 2010 survey by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea estimated that 20,000 to 30,000 children were born to women from the DPRK living in China (Korea Institute for National Unification 2013: 461). The children born from marriages between North Korean women and Chinese men are not considered Chinese and are not given citizenship, since the marriages are illegal under Chinese law. A young North Korean interviewee residing in China had a friend who was born from a marriage between a Korean-Chinese man and a North Korean woman. He recalled his friend's miserable situation; the friend lived without access to formal schooling and healthcare. He did not have a passport to travel to other countries and when he was sick, he was not able to go to a clinic. The number of such stateless North Korean children is almost as high as the number of North Koreans living in South Korea.

The statelessness of North Koreans lasts over the course of their defection in Asian countries beyond China. In general, Asian countries have not treated border-crossing North Koreans as legal refugees, except for five cases in Cambodia from 1995-1996, and four cases in Thailand in 1999 (UNHCR 2017). However, unlike the PRC, they usually do not repatriate North Koreans to the DPRK, instead deporting them as illegal trespassers or immigrants, and discharging them to South Korea or other countries.[4] For example, 468 North Koreans in Vietnam were airlifted to South Korea in the single largest mass deportation in July 2004. Following the airlift, the Vietnamese government simultaneously tightened border controls and deported the safe house operators who helped the North Koreans defect. In addition, Mongolia and Thailand do not accept North Koreans as legal refugees, but detain them for settlement processing by the ROK embassy or work quietly with non-governmental organisations to find other asylum-seeking options for them. It is well known that North Korean refugees, after crossing secretly into China, travel to China's southeastern provinces and from there to Laos and Thailand. Their hope is to get transferred to the South Korean embassy in Bangkok. Only 46 North Koreans arrived in Thailand for defection in 2004, but this number continued to rise and totalled around 2,500 in 2010 (*Chosun Ilbo* 7 May 2011). Thailand has processed about 2,000 North Koreans coming from China every year since then (Yonhap News 2016).

The Hierarchical Nationhood of North Koreans in the ROK

The South Korean constitution stipulates that the territory of the ROK consists of the Korean peninsula and adjacent islands. This indicates the ROK's constitutional intention of an ethnically centred national identity that would reunify the South with the northern part of the Korean peninsula and embrace North Korean people as brothers and sisters of the "one blood" Korean nation. On 20 December 1948, the ROK National Assembly enacted the Nationality Law, embodying the principle

[4] However, North Koreans have sometimes been repatriated. For instance, the Laos government detained nine young North Koreans and handed them over to North Korean authorities in May 2013 (Mullen 2013).

of *jus sanguinis* (The Republic of Korea 1948). The law was partly amended several times; however, the amendments did not affect the main features, which remained intact until the late 1990s. However, the 1997 revision to the Nationality Law and the resulting Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans, passed in 1998, indicated the ROK's changed political and economic interests. The Overseas Koreans Act was a by-product of the changed political and economic situations in diplomatic relations, international migration, and globalisation. The ROK government adopted an inclusive citizenship policy on ethnic Koreans holding Western citizenship, but adopted an exclusionary policy for those holding citizenship from ex-socialist countries (Choe 2006: 106–107). Through this hierarchical mechanism of nationhood, Korean-Americans were placed just below South Korean citizens, but above those with Korean-Chinese citizenship (Seol & Skrentny 2009: 157).

Until the early 1990s, the South Korean government welcomed a small number of North Korean refugees as "freedom fighters" as a form of ideological propaganda, along with the rhetoric of "one Korea." For example, the Special Compensation Act for North Korean Defecting Soldiers, promulgated in September 1978, described North Korean refugees as "national heroes" who resisted the communist regime, stipulating that they would receive large sums of money and in-kind benefits such as housing, cars, and access to education (General Affairs Department 1978: 11–12; Kang 2013: 11). However, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has grown remarkably since the mid-1990s. The number of North Koreans before 1999 was only 947, but the total number who entered the ROK between 1999 and 2017 was 29,858 (Ministry of Unification 2018b). As of March 2018, this figure totalled 31,530.

Under pressure from tremendous North Korean migration, the ROK's early welcome shifted to a policy of selective and disciplinary control.[5] The changed policy sought to limit North Korean entry and reduce socio-economic support for these individuals due to the high economic cost of the increasing number of refugees and the erosion of the state's Cold War political and humanitarian policies (Lankov 2006). Consequently, North Koreans' status in the South changed from that of political defectors to a social minority dependent on the ROK's livelihood programme. Since 2005, a typical refugee has received about KRW 7 million (about $7,000) for resettlement, as well as a state-leased apartment worth the equivalent of KRW 13 million (Ministry of Unification 2018a: 151). However, most North Korean settlers are unskilled and not able to easily adapt to the South Korean labour market. Most North Korean women, comprising over two-thirds of the total number of settlers, are released from Hanawon (the Settlement Support Centre for North Korean Refugees) into the general population, where they are usually employed in "3D" (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs or lured into the sex industry (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2012).

Unsurprisingly, the ROK has reacted to North Koreans' struggle to adjust in the South by shifting the manner in which it governs them. Through the Act on Protection and Resettlement Assistance for North Korean Defectors (which was passed in 1997 and remained in effect with several revisions), the South Korean government has tried to reduce the economic burden and re-educate North Koreans for their resettlement in the South (Kang 2011: 203). In 1999, the ROK government founded Hanawon to re-educate North Koreans in accordance with the 1997 Act. As

[5] North Koreans entering the ROK are required to undergo a security investigation while they receive economic, welfare and educational assistance from the ROK government. They must be examined by the National Intelligence Service Agency for one month in case they might be North Korean spies; afterward, they receive special assistance in an adjustment programme at the Settlement Support Centre for North Korean Refugees (also known as Hanawon). After completing Hanawon's formal education for resettlement, they are assigned to police officers, who supervise them for a residence protection period of two-three years.

an instructor at Hanawon explained, the Centre's establishment was a turning point, given that "the state cares for refugees directly and systematically with the cooperation of civil society." In addition, the ROK government has tried to guarantee a long-term source of income through social adjustment counselling and vocational training programmes so that North Koreans could become economically independent.

Nonetheless, North Koreans have been marginalised as a burdensome social minority in South Korean society. According to a survey on South Koreans' feelings toward other immigrants and North Korean settlers, the average favourability of North Korean settlers did not differ greatly from that of other immigrants (Kim 2014: 104). Similarly, according to another survey on South Koreans' awareness of social discrimination, which was conducted by the Korean Women's Development Institute, South Koreans discriminated in similar ways against Southeast Asian labourers, Korean-Chinese, and North Korean settlers (Park et al. 2004: 118). This reflects the South Korean hierarchical view of North Koreans as similar to other immigrant groups. In encounters with South Koreans, North Koreans have confronted a range of negative stereotypes and feelings of discrimination and hostility (Koh & Baek 2002: 218). Accordingly, many North Korean interviewees regretted that North Korean status is not substantially different from that of Korean-Chinese. They said they would not reveal their North Korean identity because doing so made it difficult to find a job or socialise with South Koreans. A female settler had hidden her identity by lying to others often. She said, "Whenever I disclosed it in the past, I felt that South Koreans stayed away from me or avoided socialising with me. Whenever I experienced such things, I thought I would rather be Korean-Chinese than a North Korean refugee" (Kang 2011: 220). As seen in this testimony, North Koreans view themselves as an "inferior other." North Korean interviewees also believed that the Hanawon programme highlights the differences between the South and North, and the South's superiority in terms of ideology, economy, human rights and social welfare. These political and educational mechanisms diffuse various ethnic markers and perpetuate social discrimination, interpolating the inferior DPRK's nationhood into the everyday lives of North Korean settlers (Choo 2006).

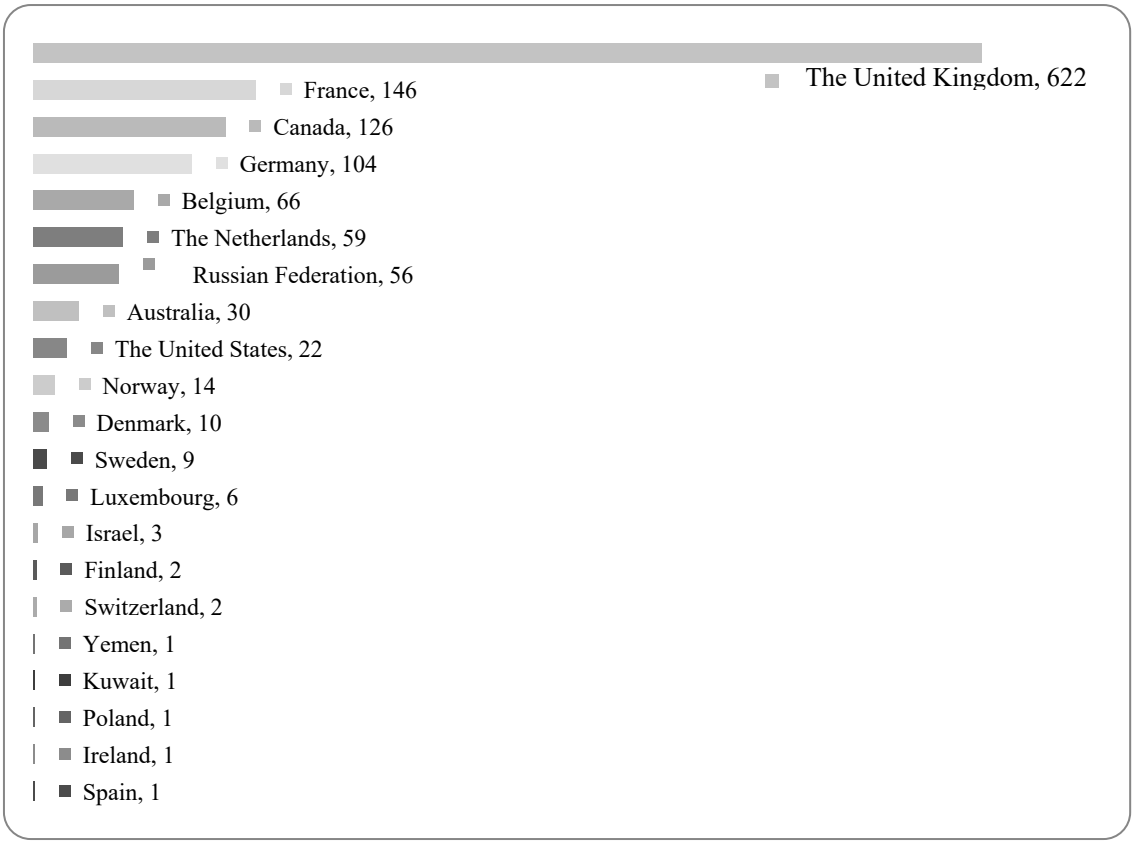
Because of this situation, over 10% of the North Koreans who have received South Korean citizenship, support from the resettlement fund, and other special benefits have subsequently re-immigrated to Western states (Oh 2011). Furthermore, the South Korean government has experienced a growing population of North Koreans who have left the ROK and who are subsequently deported back to South Korea because they have applied for refugee status in other countries without disclosing their ROK citizenship status. As a result, the government has tried to punish fraudulent defection by North Koreans by rejecting their re-entry after deportation or nullifying the economic assistance provided to them. By 2016, the government rescinded economic assistance to 53 North Koreans who attempted to fraudulently defect to other countries (National Assembly 2016). South Koreans have also been shocked to learn that a total of 16 North Korean settlers in the South have returned to the DPRK for unknown reasons.[6] Officials from the ROK's Ministry of Unification estimate that more North Koreans may have returned to the DPRK, both voluntarily and involuntarily, than previously thought. Thus, many South Koreans are raising questions regarding the ROK's politics of nationhood toward North Koreans.

[6] This is exemplified by the case of North Korean settler Ji-hyeon Lim. After arriving in South Korea in 2014, she was among scores of young female North Korean settlers who tried to build a career on cable TV talk or reality shows. However, she resurfaced in North Korea, tearfully recalling a terrible life in the South. She said that she returned to "the bosom of the fatherland" in an interview uploaded to a North Korean government-run propaganda website in June 2017 (*New York Times* 18 July 2017).

North Koreans Going beyond South Korea: A Scattered People and Contested Nationhood

Today, North Korean defections have changed to economic migration for social welfare (Park et al. 2011: 52). In particular, the final destination of overseas North Koreans is shifting slightly away from the ROK to Western countries. In 2011, 1,194 out of 3,570 North Koreans selected Western countries as their final destination (*Hankyoreh* 23 January 2012). According to the European Alliance for Human Rights in North Korea, around 1,400 North Korean refugees were in European countries in 2014. These countries, specifically those in Western Europe, are becoming an alternative place for North Koreans to resettle. Resettling outside the borders of the nation-state to overcome structural and social obstacles and improve their lives reflects a "de-territorialised" North Korean migration (Bell 2014: 111).

Figure 1. Number of North Korean refugees worldwide in 2014



UNHCR 2017

As shown in Figure 1, statistics from the UNHCR indicate that in 2014, 1,282 North Koreans were admitted into or resided as legal refugees in 21 countries.[7] More North Koreans have sought

[7] UNHCR statistics do not include legal citizens, illegal aliens, or those with permanent resident status. In addition, the number of refugees indicates those who maintain refugee status as well as those admitted as refugees each year.

to migrate to Western countries such as the US, the UK, France,[8] Canada,[9] Germany,[10] and Australia.[11] This global migration or diaspora of North Koreans can mostly be attributed to economic reasons because the targeted nations provide better housing and social welfare programmes than those offered in South Korea. In addition, North Korean transnational migration, especially to major Western countries, is related to the host countries' multicultural policies, which provide opportunities instead of social discrimination and the relative deprivation experienced in South Korea; Western multiculturalism attempts to integrate refugees or subaltern groups into the host countries' societies. North Koreans have chosen Western countries because they believe they can survive better in them by strategically constructing their own version of Koreanness as a multicultural group (Watson 2015: 547).

In the global migration of North Koreans, the US has been a favourite final destination, although the country has been very strict in granting legal asylum. The US has the largest refugee resettlement programme in the world, but on average, the number of North Koreans granted asylum has been lower than that of major European countries. The US has been reluctant to admit a vast number of refugees, despite advocating for North Korean human rights in its political agenda, because North Koreans could receive the protection of the ROK (Kang 2013: 14). In 2004, the US passed the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA). However, the US has considered granting North Koreans refugee status only in limited cases, following strict selection procedures. As such, it admitted approximately 170 North Korean refugees from 2006 to 2014 (The Bush Institute 2014). In addition, an estimated 200 North Koreans entered illegally, generally settling in the ethnic Korean communities of Los Angeles or elsewhere (The Guardian 2016).

Figure 2 shows the number of North Koreans who were granted or maintained legal refugee status in the US each year. Although this number increased after the NKHRA, it still did not exceed 30 yearly. However, in spite of their limited chance of achieving the "American dream," many North Koreans still consider the US to be their final destination. A North Korean refugee who obtained US citizenship and worked at a grocery store in a suburb of Chicago believed that all North Koreans migrate to Western countries, especially the US, for economic reasons. He said, "North Koreans know money, and they want a better life. … Sometimes, they define themselves as North Koreans for selfish purposes. This isn't different from the situation of South Korean migrants who make money in foreign countries." He also emphasised that North Koreans face prejudice in South Korea. He claimed, "South Koreans don't like us because we come from North Korea. But Americans don't treat us in the same way." As seen in this testimony, North Koreans' transnational migration is due to their hope for wealth and welfare, accelerated by their experiences of socio-

[8] Although France granted many North Koreans refugee status, it did not accept any North Koreans as legal refugees from 2015 to 2016 because of fraudulent defection (UNHCR 2017).

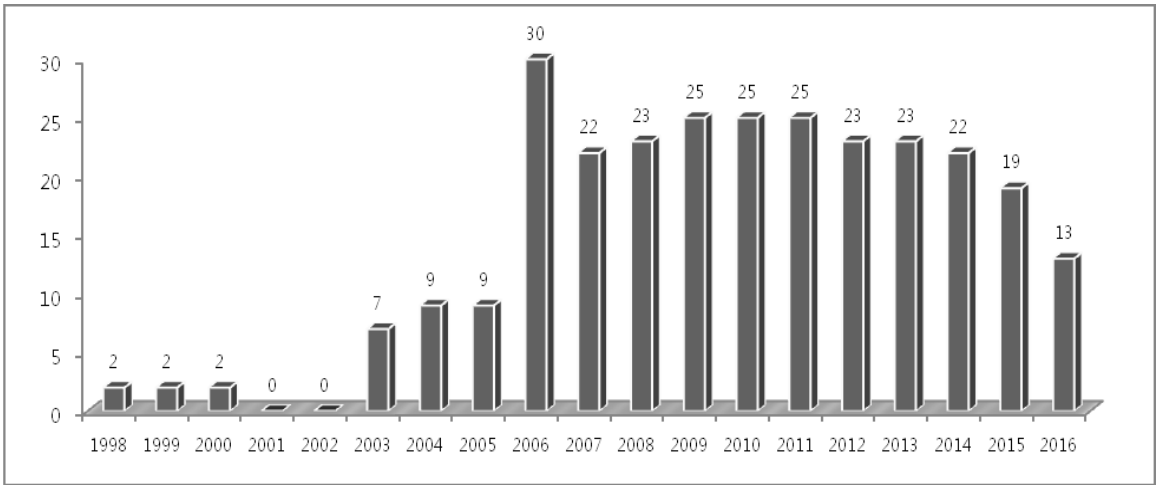
[9] The number of North Korean asylum seekers in Canada has increased since 2010. In 2016, 485 North Koreans obtained or maintained refugee status, the second highest number after the UK (UNHCR 2017). However, the Canadian government has enforced a selective policy of admitting North Koreans. For instance, 68 were deported to South Korea by the Canada Border Services Agency in 2014 because of fraudulent defection or unsatisfactory evidence for political defection (Coote 2015).

[10] UNHCR statistics reveal that about 200 North Koreans were granted or maintained refugee status in Germany each year from 2002 through 2016 (UNHCR 2017). While Germany has accepted many North Korean refugees compared to other European countries, this number has slightly decreased each year. According to Radio Free Asia, 455 North Koreans applied for asylum from 1995 to 2005, of which the German government granted 232 requests and declined 163 (Radio Free Asia 2006).

[11] Australia, infamous for its anti-immigrant policy on "people of colour," has seen a growing number of North Korean refugees, even though the number it receives is smaller than that of Western European states. Australia has admitted about 20 North Koreans as legal refugees every year since 1996 (UNHCR 2017). Similar to other countries, it has faced problems pertaining to fraudulent North Korean refugees. In 2012, the Australian government detected 70 North Koreans who had dual (South and North Korean) citizenship (Yonhap News 2012).

economic discrimination in South Korea. Another North Korean refugee became an American citizen in 2013 and founded an organisation to spread the message of human rights for North Koreans in the US. She stated, "North Koreans have a right to live a better life. Being South or North Korean doesn't matter anymore." For her, "Korean" identity is meaningful only when it helps her life in a certain way. Thus, the issue of national identity is secondary to socio-economic reality, even though ethnic nationhood still influences her ties with other North and South Koreans.

Figure 2. Number of North Korean refugees in the US



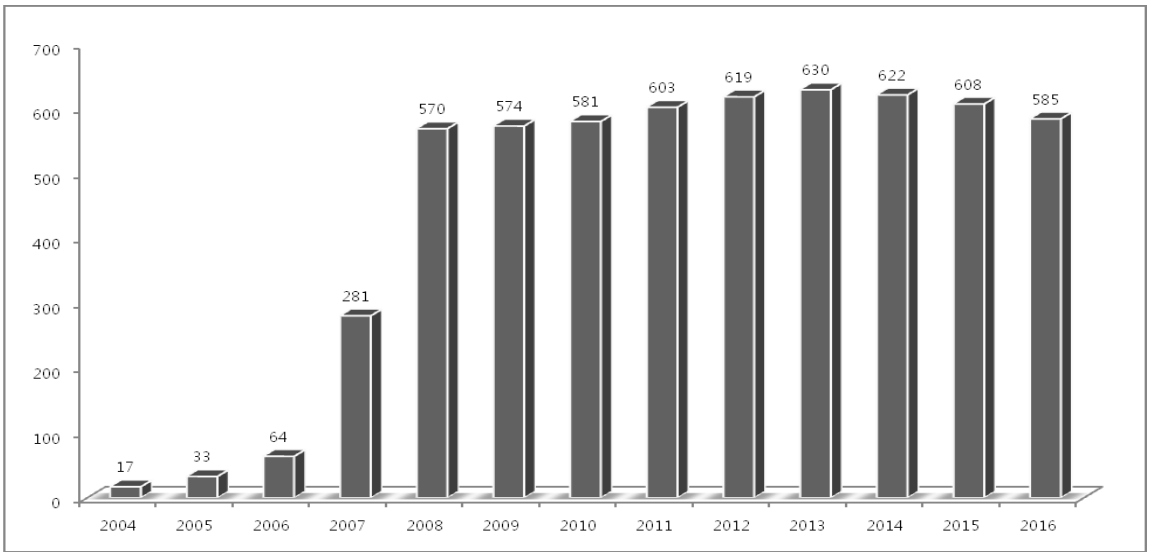
UNHCR 2017

In addition to the economic reason, North Koreans in the US consider the opportunities in this country's multicultural society as the biggest benefit of their resettlement. An interviewee who re-migrated to the US argued, "Americans don't care about my origin of North Korea. Both South and North Koreans are discriminated against here. And all immigrants are almost equally treated. Paradoxically, North Korean refugees benefit from this discrimination." This testimony indicates that the US' multicultural society provides opportunities for North Koreans that compensate for the relative deprivation experienced in South Korea. He regretted that he had had many difficulties in getting along even though he had had no language barrier in South Korea. Like other interviewees, he believed that the US offers North Koreans the opportunities for social equality as well as economic wealth regardless of their ethnic background. In this way, the US has been an alternative place of resettlement for North Koreans who want to live new lives going beyond South Korea (Park et al. 2011: 148-149).

However, Western countries, including the US, have been troubled by how to handle North Korean refugees who have dual (North and South Korean) citizenship. Therefore, they have enforced a selective policy of granting North Koreans political asylum. This aggravates North Koreans' unstable status and creates more illegal aliens in Western countries. When a country regulates its migration more tightly, the migrant networks shift to other destinations. For instance, when the number of North Korean asylum seekers in Canada was reduced in 2013, the number subsequently increased in Germany (The Conversation 2018). As a result of tighter restrictions, more North Koreans have headed to countries such as the UK. The UK is now considered the most preferred country for North Korean asylum seekers to resettle in due to its inclusive immigration

policy and well-established social welfare programmes. The UK has accepted more North Koreans as legal refugees than any other Western nation.

Figure 3. Number of North Korean refugees in the UK



UNHCR 2017

As shown in Figure 3, 622 North Koreans obtained or maintained legal refugee status in the UK in 2014. However, since 2011, UK authorities have enforced a strict policy of rejecting the applications of those who attempted to migrate without experiencing political discrimination or persecution (UK Border Agency 2012: 20). This is related to an increase in the number of North Koreans in South Korea who flee to a third country. These North Korean refugees numbered about 700 among approximately 1,000 North Koreans who applied for or were granted refugee status in the UK from 2004 to 2010 (VOA 2010). Of these 700 North Koreans about 200 returned to South Korea, while about 500 resided illegally in the UK and other European countries.

Nevertheless, the UK has accepted the highest number of North Korean refugees, enabling them to resettle and form their own ethnic communities in the country. For example, the largest North Korean community has formed in New Malden, southwest London, where approximately 600 North Koreans are believed to reside (USA Today 2016). This is comparable to Los Angeles' Korea town where a large number of North Koreans reside, illegally in most cases. *The Times* provides an image of the integrated community of South and North Koreans in the UK: South and North Korean women played the *gayageum* (traditional Korean zither with 12 strings) together during the anniversary party of the Korean Nationality Residents Association in New Malden on 23 January 2016 (*The Times* 12 February 2016). In this report, J. Park, who gained asylum in the UK in 2008 after her second successful escape from North Korea, said, "I found happiness for the first time in my life."

In addition, the city government of New Malden established the Centre for North Korean Refugees to improve the livelihoods of a growing number of them in 2018. A refugee interviewee migrated to New Malden in 2010 for her children's education as well as economic reasons. She received an English education in the Centre and said, "The Centre is the only one, and North

Koreans benefit from it for social and educational purposes." Refugee interviewee M. Kim who worked in a grocery store owned by a South Korean, also stated, "Now North Koreans have a quick mind. They know quite well where the best place for them is. It is the very New Malden." He explained that New Malden has various advantages for North Koreans; it is a multicultural society that accepts many minority groups; there is a big ethnic Korean community to give them jobs during their early resettlement; and they can survive by cooperating or competing with South Koreans in the Korean community.

Furthermore, even though many North Koreans in New Malden have survived on menial jobs as waiters, factory workers, or grocery store assistants in establishments owned by some of about 5,000 South Koreans, they have been granted socio-economic benefits from the local government. Thus, their economic status is not substantially lower than ordinary South Koreans who have resettled without such benefits in the UK. This has influenced North Korean national identity in that they are pursuing an independent community to create a better socio-economic environment. Kim argued, "I don't feel small in the presence of South Koreans anymore." He valued his own Koreanness as a result of recovery from discrimination he faced in South Korea. He had an ambivalent mind toward South Koreans, still having a weakened identity of *hanminjok* (Korean nation) but hoping to live a better life than South Koreans.

However, another interviewee talked about North Koreans' socio-cultural inferiority that still remains in the New Malden Korean community. She argued, "Those who have established businesses tend to think of Korean identity positively, and more accurately, they don't care about it. It's just fine if they are rich. But it is not for the rest like me." She always felt a subtle gap between North Koreanness and South Koreanness. She said, "It is true that many North Koreans set up an economic base in New Malden, but there are still many people who can't do so. Also, North Koreans feel culturally inferior in the Korean community." In fact, due to a sense of socio-cultural inferiority in relation to established South Korean migrant communities, North Koreans feel that they belong more to the UK than to the country's Korean community (Watson 2015: 556). Therefore, North Koreans in New Malden experience a gap in economic achievement and cultural inferiority while they strategically construct their own version of Koreanness as a multicultural group. Nonetheless, all interviewees believed that they had accomplished an important goal for their independent lives in new settlements. In this way, North Korean immigrants are forming their own Koreanness by cooperating or competing with South Koreans in New Malden's multicultural society.

Conclusion

This article explored the transnational migration and contested nationhood of North Koreans in South Korea and beyond. North Koreans' transnational migration through asylum seeking, re-migration, illegal entry, deportation, or illegal status has caused the national identity of "one Korea" to come into question. After crossing the Tumen River, North Korean refugees experience stateless status and various human rights violations in China and subsequent Asian transit countries. In addition, those who enter the ROK struggle with the hierarchical nationhood that stems from the difference between legal and substantive social citizenship in South Korea. This has weakened North Koreans' national identity of "one Korea" and accelerated their onward migration beyond South Korea. Many North Koreans have pursued a "Western dream" to live a better life abroad even though they have had difficulty in securing asylum in Western countries.

This article aimed to offer an alternative viewpoint of the multifarious identities of North Korean refugees in spite of their fragile existence. In particular, North Korean refugees living in Western nations such as the US and the UK have contested the national identity of Korea by constructing their own version of Koreanness through benefiting from the socio-economic opportunities offered in the host countries' multicultural societies. The testimonies presented in this study indicate that North Koreans' transnational migration has transformed their sense of Korean nationhood, especially in Western countries. Going beyond a myth of "one Korea," North Koreans are pursuing their independent lives as strategic actors who cooperate or compete with South Koreans in the host societies. Through the global diaspora, North Koreans' nationhood has been reshaped along with their everyday lives.

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