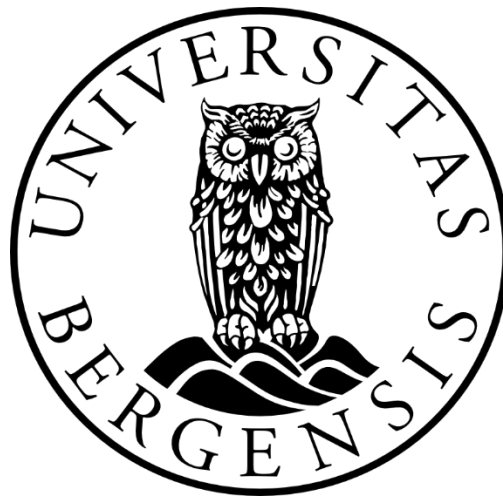


# **Hiding among “normals”**

**A study on the depreciation of North Korean refugees in South Korea**

**Master's thesis in Development Geography**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The number of North Korean refugees in South Korea has now reached 30 000 – a number that continues to increase every year. Despite efforts to effectively integrate these displaced brothers and sisters through a custom-fit resettlement program, many studies show that refugees often struggle with this transition. The challenges of adapting to an unforgivingly cold and competitive society comes unexpected to most, leading to feelings of disillusionment and depression among the North Korean refugee population in South Korea.

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges North Korean refugees are likely to face when resettling in South Korea, focusing on their socio-economic disadvantages and susceptibility to social prejudice. This was done by arranging two separate field trips to Seoul, South Korea, which included meeting and conducting interviews with North Korean informants. As such, this study is based on empirical evidence and data from published research material and official statistics, seen in relation with qualitative data collected by the author through ethnographic research methods.

This paper suggests that the disadvantaged position of North Korean refugees in South Korea's competitive society leaves them at risk of becoming socio-economically marginalized among their southern kin. It also finds that they tend to be stigmatized, which is demonstrated by their widespread application of stigma management, owing to historical and socio-political factors, as well as a general feeling of indifference and lack of awareness among South Koreans regarding the troubled situation of North Korean refugees. Consequently, this paper argues that the stigmatization of North Korean refugees, along with their socio-economical disadvantages, has resulted in their cultural disqualification from an overbearing and indifferent South Korean society.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CSAT	College Scholastic Ability Test
DMZ	Korean Demilitarized Zone
DPKR	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KINU	Korea Institute for National Unification
KNPA	Korean National Police Agency
KPA	Korean People's Army
MOU	Ministry of Unification
MPS	Ministry of People's Security
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NIS	National Intelligence Service
NKDB	Database Center for North Korean Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
ROK	Republic of Korea
SSD	State Security Department of North Korea
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNTCOK	United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPK	Workers' Party of Korea

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The contentious political relationship between The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and The Republic of Korea (ROK), more commonly referred to as North and South Korea respectively, continues to be a major topic in media and international relations studies. Nevertheless, in spite of their geo-political polarization, North and South Korea are still comprised of a Korean people who share a common ancestral heritage, cultural history, and language, spanning over a thousand years back. During the mid-1990s, however, North Korea’s command economy broke down and the people experienced severe food shortages due to an unprecedented famine in the country. This resulted in a large exodus of refugees, thousands of whom found their way to South Korea every year. Suddenly, a new issue had emerged: how was the South Korean government going to effectively resettle the increasing number of these displaced people – brothers and sisters who were once members of South Korea’s political archenemy?

The unique socio-political context surrounding North Korean refugees had South Korea design a custom-fit integration program for them – one that many still consider economically generous and well-adapted for the particular needs of refugees. Yet, despite all of this, later years have shown rising concerns as many North Korean refugees in fact struggle to keep up with their South Korean kin in what can easily be regarded as one of the world’s most competitive societies. Expected to quickly assimilate and disconnect from their past, North Korean refugees in South Korea are put at a competitive disadvantage and exposed to social prejudice. Their disillusionment has even manifested itself in sporadic cases of refugees deciding to “re-defect” back to North Korea.

Consequently, an increasing amount of research has been carried out in the last few years, illuminating the disadvantaged position of the North Korean refugee community in South Korea. Finding themselves depreciated in the competitive South Korean society, North Korean refugees are thus encouraged to hide their backgrounds and pose as members of the mainstream society – the privileged “normals”, using Goffman’s terminology – as a means to elevate their social status and bypass stigmatization.

## **1.1 Research questions**

In this paper, my aim is to explore the challenges North Korean refugees are likely to face when resettling in South Korea, focusing on their socio-economic disadvantages and susceptibility to social prejudice. My research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the reasons for, and implications of, North Korean refugees' socio-economic disadvantaged position in South Korea?
- 2) How do North Korean refugees in South Korea experience social prejudice, and how does this affect their daily lives?

To analyze these questions in a theoretical context, I will first apply Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of "cultural" and "social" capital. In this way, I will argue that the disadvantaged position of North Korean refugees in South Korea's competitive society leaves them at risk of becoming socio-economically marginalized among their southern kin – a group which is considerably more privileged than North Koreans.

Second, by applying Goffman's theorization on social identity and stigma, I intend to explore social stigma and demonstrate various forms of stigma management among North Korean refugees. Here, I will argue that North Korean refugees in South Korea much resemble that of a stigmatized minority group, which, together with their socio-economical disadvantages, has resulted in their cultural disqualification from an overbearing and indifferent South Korean society.

## **1.2 Migrants, refugees, or defectors?**

North Korean refugees have been labeled and relabeled many times since the Cold War era. Prior to the great famine of the mid-1990s, North Koreans who fled to South Korea were significantly fewer compared to present day numbers, typically five to ten per year (Lankov, 2006:108). They were for the most part from the Pyongyang elite – skilled workers coming from privileged social groups (diplomacy, business, or the army), since they were more likely to have the means and resources to escape the country. As such, these people often brought valuable intelligence, which the South Korean government in turn rewarded handsomely (Bidet, 2009; Lankov, 2006). Names such as "brave North Korean defector" and "deserted



North Korean brethren” were frequently used to refer to the very few North Koreans that managed to escape to the South.

However, toward the end of the 1990s, as the number of North Korean refugees arriving in South Korea starting growing considerably, government officials and researchers saw a need to “redefine” these newcomers. This is because they realized that the reasons for, and the methods of, migration have changed, thus calling for the application of new names used to refer to people coming from North Korea so South Korea. Therefore, in 1997, *Bukhan Yital Jumin* (북한이탈주민), meaning “defecting North Korean residents”, became the official term when referring to North Korean refugees, commonly shortened to *Talbukja* (탈북자), meaning “North Korean defectors”. However, both of these terms are based on the Chinese character for escape/defection, *Yital* (이탈), which connotes “traitor” or “reactionary” in Korean. This categorization led to complaints voiced by people in the North Korean refugee community, eventually pressuring the South Korean government to change the official term. As a result, the term *Saetomin* (새터민), meaning “new settlers”, was adopted by the government in 2005, and subsequently employed in official discourse (Bell, 2013a; Suh, 2002).

Yet, despite the popularity of this new term in media and academia, it only took a few years before North Korean community again voiced their dissatisfaction. Feeling they were being lumped in the same category as the growing number of migrant workers from South-East Asia, they distanced themselves from the Saetomin label. This objection pointed to South Korea’s official statement that all North Koreans are South Korean citizens, possessing a shared ethnicity, culture, and language. In other words, North Koreans are not immigrants, but rather unfortunate brothers and sisters who have simply found themselves on the wrong side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel at the wrong time (Bell, 2015a).

The reason behind this statement is that the South Korean government regards itself as “the sole legitimate authority across the entire Korean peninsula, with the Communist government in Pyongyang being merely a self-proclaimed regime” (Lankov, 2006:114). After all, South Korea still operates its “Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces” – a government body with appointed governors responsible for the administration of the five North Korean provinces.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the repudiation of North Korea as a legitimate state is even bound to the constitution of the Republic of Korea, which clearly states: “The territory of the

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<sup>1</sup> The roles of these governors are, however, largely ceremonial and symbolic, as they have no real power in these provinces whose territory is under the effective jurisdiction of North Korea. Their practical functions therefore relate mostly to the support of refugees living in South Korea (Gale and Jun, 2014).

Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands” (R.O.K. Const. art. III). Interestingly, the constitution simultaneously recognizes the peninsular division: “The Republic of Korea shall seek unification and shall formulate and carry out a policy of peaceful unification based on the principles of freedom and democracy” (R.O.K. Const. art. III).

Thus, all inhabitants of North Korea can technically be considered South Korean citizens. This is an important caveat to acknowledge, because it legitimizes South Korea’s assimilation of North Korean refugees and initially led to the establishment of the previously mentioned Hanawon resettlement center that aims to “re-educate” them and facilitate their integration (read: assimilation) into South Korean society. Or as the South Korean Ministry of Unification, a government body responsible for all issues pertaining to inter-Korean relations and unification, state in their 2016 White Paper on Korean Unification:

The ROK government recognizes North Korean defectors as dislocated people who also suffer due to national division. It has unfailingly accommodated all those who, by their own free will, have sought its protection and support. Upon their arrival in South Korea, the government grants them with a variety of basic benefits to help them enjoy the freedoms and human rights of South Korean society (Ministry of Unification, 2016:184).

Lankov (2006), however, argues that South Korea’s current policy of dealing with refugees is necessarily hypocritical. Although the South Korean government continues to maintain its political fiction of “one Korea”, most South Koreans prefer the prospect of unification to happen gradually, or not at all. Thus, in order to avoid provoking an uncontrolled collapse within North Korea and worsen political relations, mass defection is actually quietly discouraged by the South Korean government (Lankov, 2006:125-126). This is for example seen in the reluctance of South Korean officials overseas to help individual refugees, forcing North Koreans to rely on an underground network of brokers to arrange transportation to South Korea. And if North Koreans unintentionally wind up in South Korea<sup>2</sup>, they are usually repatriated back to North Korea, unless they express an explicit wish to stay.

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<sup>2</sup> A recent case of this happened in December 2016, when eight North Korean fishermen were rescued in South Korean waters after having been stranded at sea for several months. They all allegedly expressed a wish to return home, and were subsequently handed over to North Korean authorities across the eastern maritime border after a few days, when North Korea finally responded to the news (M. J. Kim 2016).

When referring to North Korean refugees today, the term “defectors” in English (“Talbukja” in Korean) is still used frequently in media, politics, and academia. A defector can be defined as “a person who has abandoned their country or cause in favor of an opposing one” (Oxford University Press, 2017). In other words, a defector is someone who abandons their country mainly for political reasons. North Koreans who fit the category of “defectors” today do exit, but they tend to be few in number and usually consist of high ranking officials in Pyongyang or diplomats working abroad. These are socio-economically better off and more likely to escape the clutches of the Kim regime due to political motives, as opposed to the relatively poorer population of North Koreans living in the periphery. An example of this is the recent defection of Tae Yong Ho, a former diplomat at the North Korean embassy in London, who allegedly stated he was “sick and tired of the Kim Jong-un regime, yearned for a liberal and democratic country and was worried about his children’s future” (Harding, 2016).

However, throughout this paper, I will consistently use term “refugees” when referring to North Koreans who flee their home country without intentions of returning. The reason for this is threefold – the details of which will be explained in more detail in **Chapter 4**: (1) the large majority fit the 1951 UN Refugee Convention’s category of *refugee sur place*; (2) their motives for migration are for the most part no longer ideological, thus rendering the popular term “defector” obsolete; and (3) referring to them as “migrants” would undermine the significant hardships North Koreans risk facing during transition, and could imply an endorsement of China’s controversial approach of repatriating refugees. I would, however, like to point out that I differentiate these refugees from the frequent border-crossers between North Korea and China who *willingly* work without legal papers in China or make a living on underground trade and black market activity.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 South Korea’s competitive society

South Korea, one of the “Four Asian Tigers”, today boasts one of the world’s strongest market economies, ranking 11<sup>th</sup> in the world by nominal GDP in 2015 with a steady GDP growth rate of ~3% (International Money Fund, 2016). It is also one of the top-performing

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, it’s not always easy to distinguish between (illegal) economic migrants and actual refugees, as their characteristics can sometimes overlap. A well-rounded smuggler may for example work in the underground trade business for the sake of collecting money and preparing for an eventual escape to South Korea at a later time, whereas a legitimate refugee may be forced into illegitimate work out of pure necessity – trapped and hindered from going anywhere.

OECD countries in reading literacy, mathematics, and sciences, and has one of the world's highest-educated labor forces among OECD countries (OECD, 2017).

However, South Korea's impressive economic and academic performance has also fostered a culture of intense competitiveness, a fact I was constantly reminded of during my fieldwork. It is not unusual for South Korean students to spend most of their day at school or doing homework, a large number also attending cram schools called *Hagwon* (학원) in the afternoons and weekends. The last year at high school is particularly nerve-wrecking for students, as they spend every day and available hour preparing for the infamous university entrance exam, the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) – the result of which determines a student's future in terms of academic and professional opportunities.

To illustrate the importance and magnitude of this exam, imagine planes being grounded so the noise does not disturb students and police escorts helping students arrive on time – this happens in Seoul annually at the day of the exam. A close friend of mine told me about her daily high school routine through three years, explaining that she would normally wake up at 5AM every morning, go to school and take classes until late afternoon, before coming home to eat dinner and continue doing homework until midnight. Every Saturday she would attend cram school, and Sundays she would normally do leftover homework. After taking her CSAT, she ranked among South Korea's top 1% students, and managed to get admitted to the country's most prestigious university, Seoul National University, as a result of her relentless studying and academic performances.

South Korea's competitiveness does not only relate to academic performance pressure, it is also connected with professional, social, and private achievements, as well as an extreme obsession with appearance, topping the list of plastic surgeries per capita in the world (Baer, 2015). Unfortunately, this has contributed to a large prevalence of depressive disorders among the general population, with suicides accounting for 8% of all deaths in the country (World Life Expectancy, 2014). This correlates with a suicide rate of 29 deaths per 100 000 population, twice that of the average among OECD countries (OECD, 2016), a testimony to the sheer amount of stress and high expectations exerted by the competitive pressure of South Korea's society.

Having mixed the traditional Confucian philosophy of socio-political hierarchy and filial piety with capitalist values of individualism and opportunism, South Korean society continues to favor people who manage to acquire high social status. This has become ever so more apparent in later years, with political scandals surrounding South Korea's powerful elite rolling by one after another, most of which are related to cases of power abuse, corruption,

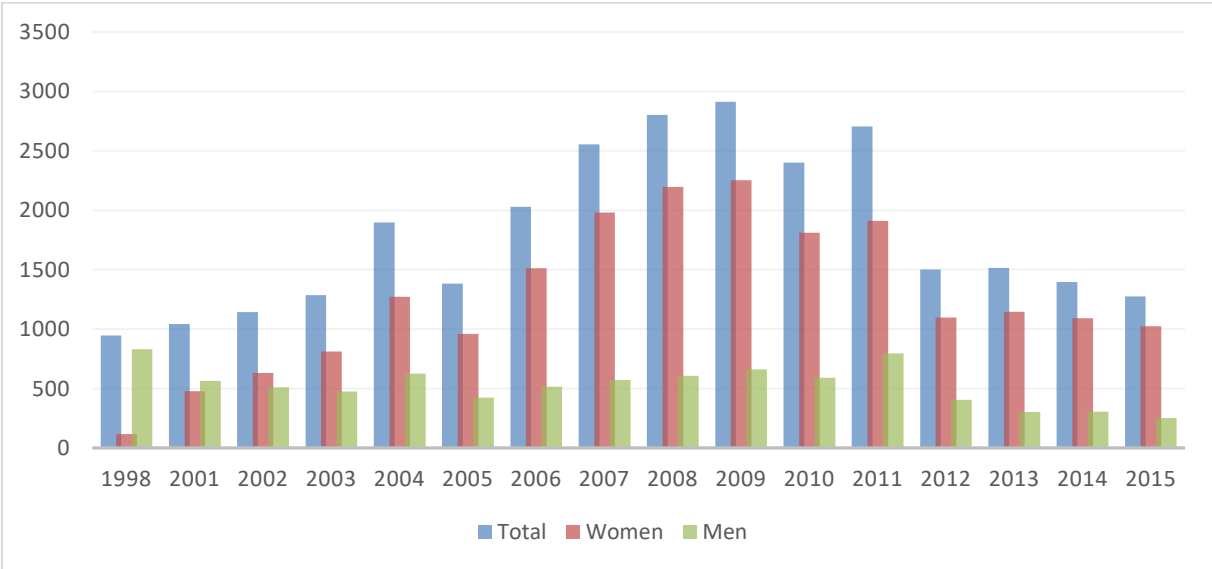
and nepotism. The injustices felt by South Koreans are, according to Koo (2015) reflected in the existence of two felt realities: one available only to those from the right backgrounds and another that is experienced by everyone else. The gap between these two realities has led to the coinage of the popular term “Hell Joseon” among young South Koreans, comparing their country with a decadent version of its earlier Joseon dynasty – “an infernal feudal kingdom stuck in the nineteenth century” (Koo, 2015).

Thus, although South Korea by most measures is a prosperous and highly developed country, its highly competitive society has led to high stress levels and an immense performance pressure, creating a gap between those who “make it” and those who don’t. Not surprisingly, this puts North Korean refugees at a particular disadvantage – the topic of which I will elaborate more on in **Chapter 5** in accordance with my research questions.

**1.4 Resettlement in South Korea**

As of January 2017, just over 30 000 North Koreans have successfully found their way to South Korea (See **Figure 1** for an annual representation). One should note, however, that this figure represents the *number of entries* to South Korea and does not equate a present-day census. In other words, those who have moved to third countries or have since passed away are not accounted for here, so the actual number of North Koreans living in South Korea is probably somewhat lower.

**Figure 1:** Number of North Korean refugees entering South Korea, 1998 to 2015



Source: Ministry of Unification (2017)

Nevertheless, by looking at the figure above, we can deduct two significant trends regarding the North Korean refugee population in South Korea: (1) the number of refugee arrivals has gradually been decreasing since 2011; and (2) women constitute the majority of the refugee population. The negative growth rate of this refugee population and its significantly skewed gender composition will be discussed in more detail in **Chapter 4** on refugee demographics and motives for migration.

Upon arrival in South Korea, refugees are granted a variety of basic benefits to facilitate their resettlement. However, before allowed South Korean citizenship, they must go through a joint interrogation by certain government agencies, including the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA). In this way, they're screened for any potential security threats and get their background checked to verify if their claim of being North Korean is genuine.

After interrogation, refugees are transferred to the custody of Hanawon – a government operated resettlement center that houses and educates the refugees for 12 weeks. Here they get social orientation and vocational training, as well as access to a primary care institution for medical assistance and psychological counseling. This is aimed to help refugees regain their emotional stability and overcome cultural shock, while at the same time motivating them to become socially and economically independent (Ministry of Unification, 2016). In practice, refugees are expected to take a wide selection of courses, ranging from lectures about Korean history, human rights and the mechanics of democracy and capitalism, to practical classes such as learning how to use an ATM, drive cars, buy clothes, and speak the standard South Korean (Seoul) dialect<sup>4</sup> (Demick, 2009). Moreover, during their stay at Hanawon, all refugees are assisted with registering as residents of South Korea, finally providing them with full rights and duties as South Korean citizens (Ministry of Unification, 2016).

As refugees complete of the Hanawon program, they are given subsidized apartments to live in. The housing location is usually based on refugees' preferences and in consideration with family members who entered South Korea earlier, but might also be determined by lottery, depending on regional availability (Ministry of Unification, 2016). From this time on, refugees are entitled five years of residence support services, such as monthly subsidies,

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<sup>4</sup> North Korean refugees are encouraged, although not obliged, by resettlement professionals to act and talk like South Koreans in daily life. This is meant to facilitate their transition to South Korean society and help them expand their social networks more effectively. The implications of this integration approach and the importance of social networks will be discussed in more detail later.

medical care, education support through preferential admission and tuition assistance, as well as employment support and personal protection (Ministry of Unification, 2016).

After getting settled in their new homes, refugees also gain access to a range of organizations that offer various forms of resettlement assistance and social support. These include, among others, regional adaptation centers, also known as Hana centers, that provide refugees with additional training and personal follow up-service concerning their employment, education, healthcare, and livelihood, as well as NGOs and religious organizations that provide a range of customized services, such as consultation, educational, and socialization programs (Ministry of Unification, 2016).

## **1.5 Previous research on this topic and available material**

North Korea remains a country for the most part shrouded in mystery, due to its secrecy and extreme isolationist policies. Despite attempts from state agencies, NGOs, and researchers to illuminate what goes on behind the borders of this closed country, one is often led to rely on the testimonies of refugees for information. Furthermore, particularly in terms of media coverage, much information about North Korea is filtered through South Korea. Considering the contentious relationship between these two countries, it's therefore important to account for the possibility of information being characterized by a certain degree of bias. Thus, in the absence of solid facts, a large amount of reports from North Korea are inevitably based on unsubstantiated claims and rumors. Lankov (2016) compares this black hole of information with the parable of the "blind men and an elephant", as the limited information available tend to make analysts give excessive generalizations of life in North Korea.

Nevertheless, the amount of literature on North Korea – in particular research articles related to refugees – has gradually increased over the last years. To mention a few notable examples, Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, and Andrei Lankov are all well-known scholars who have contributed significantly in this field. As I availed myself to mostly Anglophone literature, this necessarily limits the number of relevant sources. There are, however, a large number of Korean scholars who have published research material related to my research topic as well, whose work on resettlement issues among North Korean refugees have been of great help in this study.

Furthermore, the work of international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), have also contributed a lot with research on North Korea and refugees. As for South

Korean institutions, we have the Ministry of Unification (MOU) and the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). They work mostly with research related to current affairs in North Korea and unification policies, but also make public some information and statistics related to the North Korean refugee population in South Korea. This has proved very useful for describing resettlement policies and providing detailed statistics, although much of the data collected by these government agencies tend to be kept confidential and are unfortunately not readily accessible.



## 2 METHODOLOGY

My geographical area of study was Seoul, South Korea, where I conducted fieldwork from 2015-2017. The purpose of this study was gain deeper insight into the challenges North Korean refugees are likely to face when resettling in South Korea, focusing on their socio-economic disadvantages and susceptibility to social prejudice. As such, this study is based on empirical evidence and data from published research material and official statistics, seen in relation with qualitative data collected by the author through ethnographic research methods. These research methods revolved mainly around conducting a series of unstructured interviews with North Korean refugees, as well as participant observation. I also carried out one semi-structured interview with a representative from an NGO working closely with issues related to North Korean refugees. Toward the end, my time in the field had amounted to approximately 1 year, 6 months of which were spent on intensive language training. In this chapter I will introduce my field site and informants, explain how I carried out my field work, and discuss some contextual considerations and methodological limitations.

### 2.1 Field site introduction

Korea is a peninsula in North-East Asia (see **Figure 2** below) with a total land area of approximately 220 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly the size of South Norway. The peninsula is surrounded by seas to the east, west, and south, with neighboring Japan located right across the ocean. To the northwest, the Yalu river separates Korea from China, and to the northeast, the Tumen river separates Korea from China and Russia.

**Figure 2:** Map of the Korean Peninsula



Source: National Geographic (2013)

My field site was Seoul, South Korea’s capital and largest metropolis. It is located only a few kilometers away from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) which separates the country from its neighbor to the north – North Korea. The population of Seoul itself is estimated at around 10 million people, whereas its capital area is the second largest metropolitan in the world, boasting a population of over 25 million people – half of all the residents in the country (World Population Review, 2016).

Today, Seoul is considered one of the world’s leading global cities and a technological pioneer on the global market, hosting the headquarters of several international tech-companies and major conglomerates, such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai. Seoul is also South Korea’s educational hub, being featuring the country’s most prestigious universities, including Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea university. Furthermore, it is the home of South Korea’s major broadcasting and music production companies, whose proliferation of popular culture through the creation of dramas and pop-music has become increasingly

globally popular – a phenomenon so big it's widely recognized as Hallyu (한류), or “the Korean Wave”.

As I mentioned earlier, about 30 000 refugees live in South Korea, most of whom have settled in Seoul. The magnitude of Seoul's prosperity, modernity, and cultural popularity makes it a very attractive city for opportunistic North Korean refugees to settle down in after their 12-week training program at Hanawon. Of course, having close access to the many resettlement assistance programs offered by various institutions and organizations in Seoul is also an important factor. Considering this, choosing Seoul as my field site came quite natural; not only because it would provide me with the best chances of finding North Korean informants, but also because I would have more opportunities to meet with related organizations and individuals with refugee connections – gatekeepers that could facilitate my fieldwork significantly by helping me connect with potential informants.

## **2.2 Starting my fieldwork**

Although English is taught as a second language in South Korea, one should not expect to be able to have a fluent conversation in English with the average South Korean, much less North Korean refugees. I therefore decided to spend my 3 first months in the field studying Korean, for the purpose of cultural immersion and appearing more approachable to potential gatekeepers and informants. During this time, I began to familiarize myself more with the city and culture, and over the next few months I worked on expanding my social network while looking for ways to gain entry to the refugee community.

Finding informants proved to be the hardest part of my fieldwork, however, because of the elusive nature of North Korean refugees and their socio-political situation in South Korea. First of all, they often prefer to keep a low public profile, and are to varying degrees sheltered by government and civil agencies to protect their personal information and whereabouts. Despite having successfully fled North Korea and being granted South Korean citizenship, there is a legitimate fear of North Korean agents abducting and even killing refugees as retribution for their “betrayal” (defection). Furthermore, many refugees still have family members left back home in North Korea who are at risk of persecution should it be found that they have family members who have fled to South Korea. Consequently, it's not uncommon for refugees to change their names or cover their faces in photos to avoid unnecessary exposure. In other words, the sheltering and public invisibility of a large portion of North

Korean refugees is not only a matter of privacy, but also that of personal security, making the majority of them very hard to approach without the help of specific gatekeepers.

Nevertheless, I started by sending out e-mails to over ten NGOs working with North Korean refugees, asking for interview opportunities. By doing this, I hoped to gain some valuable information on how best approach the refugee community in Seoul in a professional manner, and perhaps be tipped off in the direction of potential informants. Two of the NGOs responded, but I was only able to set up a meeting with one of them – an NGO which goes under the acronym NKDB.<sup>5</sup> Here I met with one of the directors, Hyoseon Shin, and was able to discuss questions related to South Korea's resettlement programs and integration challenges of North Korean refugees.

As for connecting with the North Korean refugee community, however, it wasn't before I was introduced to an unofficial contact through a friend of mine that I was able to meet my first informants. This gatekeeper gave me the contact information of two nuns, both of whom represent a catholic organization that is well-known in the North Korean refugee community. Not only does this organization provide vital resettlement assistance to refugees, it also takes part in an underground network in China that helps North Koreans safely escape to South Korea. With the help of a South Korean friend, I contacted these two nuns in the hopes of setting up a group interview with the refugees they were sheltering and educating. Only one of the nuns responded positively to this, and together with my friend we were subsequently allowed to come visit one of the apartments run by their catholic organization. The apartment housed 8 refugees in total, all young girls between 15 and 25 who had recently arrived South Korea within the past 1-2 years. This became my first meeting with North Korean refugees, and was also the time where I met *Jenny*, who was to become the first among my main informants at a later occasion.

### **2.3 Introduction of my informants**

In addition to the girls I met during my group interview, I connected with 6 North Korean refugees that agreed to participate as individual informants for my research project. The majority of field data collected and used in this paper is based on in-depth interviews with these 6 informants. Although I met with other North Koreans as well during my time in South

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<sup>5</sup> NKDB (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights) is an NGO established in South Korea in 2003. They do research and host seminars related the state of human rights in North Korea and the public's perception and discrimination of North Korean refugees. They also offer various forms of resettlement assistance to North Korean refugees, such as social support and education.

Korea, the circumstances did not allow me to connect with them as informants for my research project. Therefore, I have not included any potential data from them in this paper, as it would go against ethical guidelines for the collection and use of research data and would raise questions regarding its validity.

As of the time I first met my informants, they had lived in South Korea for a period between 1 to 15 years. They all lived in the city center of Seoul, either in subsidized or self-acquired apartments, alone or together with their family. Jenny and her “sisters” were a notable exception, however, living in a spacious high-rise apartment provided by the catholic organization that sheltered and educated them. Among my 6 main informants, three of them were full-time students, two worked part-time jobs, and one had a full-time job. Two of my informants were married with South Korean spouses, whereas the rest were unmarried. Although I managed to connect with an equal number of individual male and female informants, their age distribution was not very wide, as they were all in their 20s and 30s. The gender and age distribution becomes even more skewed when I include the girls from my group interview, but nevertheless coincides with the general demographics of the refugee population, which I will return to in **Chapter 4**.

Below is a short summary of all my North Korean informants, listed in chronological order by age. They represent the field data I collected during two separate visits to Seoul, South Korea, from 2015-2017. Considering the sensitivity of my research topic and the risk of unintended repercussions should the identities of my informants be known, I have decided to give them English pseudonyms instead of using their real names.

**Informants from group interview:**

- N/A                      8 girls, 15-25 years old                      arrived in South Korea 2013-2014

**Main informants:**

- *Sarah*                      woman, early 20s                      arrived in South Korea 2006
- *Jenny*                      woman, early 20s                      arrived in South Korea 2014
- *Brandon*                      man, mid-20s                      arrived in South Korea 2008
- *Gary*                      man, late 20s                      arrived in South Korea 2006
- *Daniel*                      man, early 30s                      arrived in South Korea 2012
- *Hannah*                      woman, mid-30s                      arrived in South Korea 2001

## 2.4 Methodological procedure

A large part of my fieldwork was focused on connecting with the North Korean refugee community in Seoul, looking for potential informants who would share stories about their new lives after the transition from North to South Korea. Of particular interest for this study were questions related to their experiences and feelings regarding their resettlement and adaptation to the South Korean society. Upon meeting my informants, I explained that any participation in this study was completely voluntary and that no sensitive or personal information would be disclosed to third parties. If there at any point was uncertainty about the sensitivity or private nature of information shared by my informants, I would make sure to ask for their permission before presenting it here in this paper. Since most of my informants did not speak English, I gained the help of South Korean friends as interpreters during the initial stages of my fieldwork. After a while, my Korean language proficiency gradually increased, which made me able to both arrange meetups and carry out interviews without any additional help.

My methodological approach in the field revolved mainly around using ethnographic research methods. First of all, this involved conducting unstructured interviews with my informants, where questions generally are not prearranged. These usually took place at coffee shops around Seoul, which are in abundance and generally recognized as the most common places for meetups. Corbin and Morse (2003) explain that unstructured (interactive) interviews are “shared experiences in which researchers and interviewees come together to create a context of conversational intimacy in which participants feel comfortable telling their story” (Corbin and Morse, 2003:338). In this way, it becomes easier for the interviewer to build better rapport with the interviewee, as it resembles more that of a friendly conversation in safe and relaxed environment. Furthermore, due to the unstructured nature of the interview, participants are left more in control of the pacing of the interview and the disclosure of information (Corbin and Morse, 2003). This provides more opportunities for them to share personal experiences and can lead to the discovery of new and important information, which the researcher might not have considered prior to the interview.

These were the main reasons I chose to use unstructured interviews, as opposed to semi- or fully structured interviews, for data collection with my informants. Considering the difficulty of finding North Korean informants and the sensitivity of my topic, I was hoping to appear more approachable and trustworthy, leaving my informants mostly in control of the information they shared. As such, I also refrained from recording conversations and rarely

took notes during interviews and meetups with my informants. This is because I wanted to appear less intrusive and maintain a relaxed and informal atmosphere during our conversations, letting it flow more naturally. Instead, I would write notes shortly after our meetings were finished and I returned back home, while our conversations were still fresh in memory. The only exception was my semi-structured interview with NKDB, where I had prepared several topics to discuss and ask about and continuously took notes during the interview. As I had no intentions of conducting a second interview with this NGO, I had a limited amount of time and a long list of topics to inquire about. This made it more important for me to keep a certain degree of structure and take notes during the process of the interview.

Second, participant observation was a central part of my field research as well. Musante (2014) explains participant observation as “a way to collect data in natural settings by ethnographers who observe and take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied” (Musante, 2014:239). During my fieldwork, I would often partake in the social and cultural life together with informants after our initial meetings, such as commuting, dining, going to coffee shops, and other leisure activities. There were also informants I would meet regularly for tutoring purposes, which allowed me to enter into personal social relations with them and gradually build trust and rapport. By using this observational research method, I found myself able to not only collect and interpret further data, but also verify and compare data gathered from other sources, such as previous interviews or relevant research material from existing literature.

Briefly summed up, I applied ethnographic research methods that were meant to be as nonintrusive as possible, with particular consideration to the socio-political situation of North Korean refugees in South Korea. My aim was to maintain a relaxed atmosphere during interviews and meetups, allowing for a more natural conversation flow in a hope to build a stronger rapport with my informants. By doing so, I hoped to gain deeper access to the North Korean refugee community through the use of a “snowball” sampling method. This involves connecting with new informants through a process of chain referrals, and is particularly applicable when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue and finding study participants requires a certain degree of inside knowledge (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). However, I found that my informants tended to separate themselves from other North Koreans and were more interested in connecting with South Koreans and foreigners. In this way, they seemed more occupied with expanding their own social networks, as opposed to providing me with further referrals to their inner circles. Consequently, I became more proactive in my search for

informants, and wound up connecting with all my main informants separately without any benefits of chain-referrals.

## 2.5 Positionality

When doing qualitative research, being aware of power relations between researchers and informants is important, due to its influence on how knowledge is interpreted and represented, raising questions regarding the objectivity and validity of research data. The idea is that a researcher's knowledge is always partial, because his positionality<sup>6</sup>, as well as location in time and space, influences how the world is viewed and interpreted (Mullings, 1999:337). In other words, knowledge cannot claim to be universal, since it is situated in a complex set of social locations of producers and audiences (Mullings, 1999; Rose, 1997).

Therefore, in order to make the interpretation of information more transparent, reflexivity has become a central tool in this process, allowing for the analyzation of the landscape of power within which much of the research is conducted (Mullings, 1999). According to Rose (1997), the process of reflexivity consists of two interconnected practices, aiming to look both "inward" to the identity of the researcher, and "outward" to one's relation to the research. Specifically, this means combining critical introspection with an explicit disclosure of the circumstances surrounding the data collection and analyses. A central part in this process is therefore to be aware of and make clear one's positionality in the field, increasing the transparency of collected research data and its interpretation.

Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2013) explain how a researcher's positionality in the field not only affects the interpretation of data, but also access to and interaction with informants. In classical migration research, this typically depends on one's status (position) as either an "insider" or "outsider". In this sense, "insider" researchers refer to those who are migrants or descendants of migrants and do research on their own immigrant group, and "outsider" researchers being those who belong to the majority population and do research on specific immigrant groups. However, Carling, Erdal and Ezzati (2013) argue that many researchers fit neither of these two categories, instead occupying so-called "third positions" that go beyond the archetypical insider/outsider divide. In their paper, they identify five such positions, albeit reminding us they are simplified representations and not mutually exclusive. These positions

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<sup>6</sup> "Positionality" in this context refers to the occupation or adoption of a particular position/status (along with its corresponding perspective) in relation to others, shaped by one's unique mix of ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, class, and other identifiers (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2013; Mullings, 1999).



include that of the “explicit third party”, “honorary insider”, “insider by proxy”, “hybrid insider-outsider”, and “apparent insider”.

Of particular interest for this study, is the former position of “explicit third party”, which seemed to largely reflect my own situation when doing fieldwork in South Korea. This position refers to a researcher who is neither part of the migrant group, nor of the majority population, implying a sharp dissociation from both the insider and outsider groups (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2013). Finding North Korean informants was a central part of my fieldwork, but also proved very challenging. I initially experienced challenges with gaining access to informants and establishing relationships of mutual trust. After all, not only was I a foreign student from a third country, possessing limited knowledge of the culture and language of North Koreans, but also a young man without affiliation to any familiar institution or agency. These factors all gave obvious rise to speculations regarding my integrity and intentions.

Furthermore, one needs to consider the fact that North Korean refugees in South Korea are initially sheltered by government and civil agencies, tend to keep a low public profile<sup>7</sup>, and blend in very well with the general population. This not only made me reliant on certain gatekeepers to find informants, but also demanded a particular attention to the potential sensitivity of topics related to my research questions. Personal information is not likely to be readily disclosed by North Korean refugees, and the chances they have experienced various traumatic events during their time in North Korea or transit countries are large, which made it exceedingly important for me to clarify my intentions and research topic to my informants.

There were, however, positive aspects with my apparent position as an “explicit third party” as well. First of all, although I did not represent any familiar institution or agency, being an independent researcher allowed me more freedom in the field. I could therefore choose which methodological procedures to use, depending on what I found most suitable and rewarding in each given context. This also included the presentation of research questions, which in my case were linked to integration issues of North Korean refugees in South Korea. Fortunately, such issues were something all my informants could relate to and had an easier time discussing, as opposed to for example reciting stories from hardships or traumatic events in North Korea and China – the likes of which mainstream media often publishes, due to popular demand among readers hungering for sensationalist stories.

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<sup>7</sup> This tendency, however, is gradually changing these days, with an increasing number of refugees appearing on TV shows and using social media to promote awareness regarding their lives in North Korea compared with South Korea.

Second, one has to consider the fact that a central part of this study revolves around the discrimination and alienation of North Korean refugees by members of the majority population. As such, my obvious disassociation with South Koreans, due to my foreign appearance and demeanor, seemed to work in my favor during conversations with informants. This was an observation I quickly took notice of, as my informants suddenly talked much more openly about their experiences with discrimination and opinions regarding South Koreans after I stopped bringing South Korean interpreters to interviews.

Third, as a foreign student coming from Norway, a highly-developed part of the world, I bring a unique skillset and social network that can be considered exotic and attractive to many – South Koreans and North Koreans alike. This proved very advantageous for building rapport with my informants, who often showed huge interest in my background, knowledge, skills, and social network. In this way, informants I met regularly would gradually open up over time, providing a well of information through consecutive informal conversations and field observations.

## **2.6 Selection problem and trust**

Doing fieldwork in a wide urban environment like Seoul introduced some obvious challenges in terms of scale. Considering the sheer size of my field site, there were bound to be many unexplored parts I never got to visit and potential informants I never got to meet. This is important to consider, as the North Korean refugees I never got to meet may have different experiences and opinions compared with those who participated in my study. Thus, although my 6 main informants led separate lives and had no familiar relations with each other, they still do not constitute a random sample with respect to the relatively large refugee population of 30 000 in South Korea. It's also relevant to mention that out of 9 provinces in North Korea, they all came from the same one (North Hamgyong)<sup>8</sup>. This selection problem could introduce some degree of bias in collected data due to a certain focus on particular areas and informants. Of course, challenges related to bias would always exist in this context, since the focus of this paper is on people who are part of a refugee (minority) community – people who are bound to have clear perceptions and opinions of their own relative situation with the general population.

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<sup>8</sup> This overrepresentation, however, correlates somewhat with statistics regarding pre-migration origins of North Korean refugees in South Korea – most of whom reportedly come from North Hamgyong province.

Earlier, I touched upon how my positionality affected both access to and interaction with informants. However, considering the challenges of connecting with the North Korean refugee community in South Korea, as well as the relatively small sample size of informants in this study, it also becomes pertinent to ask questions regarding the motivations of my informants for participating in this study. Perhaps they are fascinated with the opportunity of having their voices heard publicly through the researcher, leading them to intentionally exaggerate stories for publicity's sake. Basic altruism could of course also be a possibility, if they feel their contribution to the study will result in something worthwhile on a larger scale. Or maybe they're simply interested in befriending the researcher for the value of social networking, in which case they may feel less obliged to share any personal information of value to the researcher. Either way, the positionality of informants and their motivations for participating in the study should be taken into consideration, as these factors can affect the amount of information they choose to share, along with its reliability and validity.

As for this study, all my informants participated of their own free will, and were upon first meeting given relevant details of my background and explained the purposes of my research. By getting to know me and my intentions better, my aim was to appear trustworthy and make informants feel relaxed and comfortable during initial interviews. Furthermore, by assuring them that any personal information that could reveal their identities would be censored out, and that the focus of my research was on integration issues in South Korea, I also hoped that informants would feel inclined to be as honest and outgoing as possible.

In my experience, this became easier after rapport and trust had been established over time, and informants felt more like fellow friends rather than study participants. In fact, even though I usually met with informants at public places, I found them surprisingly outgoing, considering how many North Korean refugees tend to be somewhat conscious regarding information control – particularly around South Koreans. Most of my informants would openly talk about their backgrounds and experiences as North Koreans for anyone nearby to hear, Jenny perhaps being a slight exception, as she showed a bit more caution and would sometimes lower her voice when revealing personal information about herself.

In this sense, the almost unconditional sharing of information was very rewarding, proving the value of building rapport and trust with informants when doing qualitative research. However, there are some ethical issues involved as well when assuming the stance of “interviewer as friend”, as opposed to an impersonal professional, since the researcher crosses conversational trust boundaries with informants, which in turn may entice participants into providing information that they might later regret (Corbin and Morse, 2003:338).

This is something I experienced a few times as well, as my informants sometimes provided information of very sensitive nature, whereupon they would ask me whether I would use this for my study. Naturally, my answer would be “no”, not only because the sensitive information provided was more often than not simply irrelevant in regard to the research topic, but also because I wanted to maintain good trust-relations with informants and stay within a healthy proximity of ethical guidelines for doing qualitative research. Sometimes, however, informants would not ask these questions, even though I myself reacted to the information provided, leading me to confirm whether I was allowed to use it or not. This usually happened when informants rendered harrowing stories from their lives in North Korea or China, but also when they illustrated the many challenges of resettling in South Korea.

## **2.7 Crossing language boundaries**

As I mentioned earlier, language barriers were an ever-present issue during my field work, and only two of my informants spoke English at a conversational level. I therefore initially gained the help of South Korean friends for translation purposes on three separate occasions, before I eventually arranged meetups and carried out interviews with non-English speakers myself, as my Korean language proficiency gradually increased. However, although working with interpreters allows you to overcome language barriers and can prove helpful for accessing certain networks, it also introduces challenges in terms of reliability and validity of the data procured.

First, when an interpreter performs a translation, they translate not only the literal meaning of the words used by informants, but also how they relate conceptually in the given context (Squires, 2009). This is often necessary in order to improve accuracy of the translation, since the conceptual meaning of words are just as important as their literal meaning.

Second, one has to account for the inevitable loss of information during translation, due to the summarizing of information through consecutive interpreting, as opposed to simultaneous interpretation. This is often a calculated risk, however, since researchers might want to keep the (inevitable) obtrusiveness of their interpreters in front of informants at a minimum level, in order to keep the conversation at hand flowing more naturally.

Third, depending on the background and motives of the interpreter, there is also a chance he or she might hold a certain bias or personal agenda (positionality) in regard to the

research topic or informants. This can result in deliberate inaccurate translations or mishandling of appropriate social constitutions, limiting not only the amount of data procured, but also its reliability and validity.

As such, we see that differences in culture, language, and other contextual factors make it important to consider not only the qualifications of interpreters in terms of both language comprehension and cultural experience, but also their positionality in relation to the researcher and informants, in order to improve the reliability and validity of collected data.

During my fieldwork, gaining the help of South Korean friends as interpreters proved very valuable in terms of breaking language barriers, both of whom were fluent in English well informed about my research purposes. However, although they rendered seemingly good illustrations of the informants' stories and feelings, one has to consider their position as apparent "outsiders" in this context, since my interpreters were both of South Korean origin. As such, when enquiring about integration challenges and discrimination, this could incentivize informants to hold back potentially valuable information or hide their real opinions to avoid sparking any awkward situations.

Similar limitations were, after all, experienced during my fieldwork, as my informants tended to be more open about their experiences with discrimination and opinions regarding South Koreans after I stopped bringing South Korean interpreters to interviews. Furthermore, in addition to problems of obtrusiveness when bringing interpreters, I also felt that the consecutive interpreting more often than not happened too infrequently. This not only resulted in a large amount of information lost due to long summaries, but also left me on the sideline of the conversation, which meant that building personal rapport with informants became much harder.

Considering all the challenges of bringing interpreters to interviews, and wanting to become more independent in my fieldwork, I therefore decided to work further on my Korean language skills. Whereas my Korean proficiency during my first visit to Seoul was only at an elementary level, I gradually worked my way up to a conversational level during my second visit. As expected, this proved very beneficial for me, since I no longer had to rely on finding English-speaking informants or bringing a translator for interviews and meetups. It also allowed me to access hitherto new social networks and explore a much larger part of my field, making it significantly easier to connect with new informants (including English-speaking ones) and create closer bonds.

As I mentioned earlier, two of my informants spoke conversational English, which made crossing language boundaries easier in terms of clarifying word meanings and

conceptual context. But in the end, Korean was the language I applied during my most of my interviews and meetups. Of course, the evident limitations of my Korean proficiency necessarily introduce some challenges in terms of data validity. Thus, in order to best minimize these limitations, I would therefore always have a dictionary at hand, and make sure to ask confirming questions in cases where I found information to be unclear, so as not to jump to conclusions.

Consequently, most of the data presented from informants in this paper are translations based on summaries from their stories and feelings, rather than direct quotes (with a few exceptions), in addition to findings from observational methods. I also chose to supplement my study with material from literature reviews and official statistics in addition to my own data. By doing so, I get to compare and verify my own findings with that of other sources, allowing for a more holistic research approach.

### **3 HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT**

As a unified country since late 7<sup>th</sup> century, Korea's border area has remained more or less the same, until its division after World War II. Geographically speaking, one could argue that this division is a result of Korea's vulnerable location between great imperial powers, making it susceptible to their geopolitical interests in the country during late 19<sup>th</sup> and early mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. But it's also important to note the influence foreign imperial powers exerted on Korea, especially USA, when trying to mediate the conflict during World War II and the Korean War. In this chapter, I will go through the main historical factors leading up to this division, before giving a brief outline of Korean peninsula's post-war development. Finally, I will illustrate North Korea's traditional socio-political system, explain how the economic situation has changed over the last years, and discuss the implications of this transformation.

#### **3.1 Colonization of Korea**

Following the Japanese invasions and a subsequent invasion by the Manchus in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, Korea led a strict isolationist policy of excluding foreigners for which it became known as the "Hermit Kingdom" by outsiders. However, Korea's isolation ended with the age of imperialism when major powers such as the United States, Japan and several European countries sent warships to forcibly open the country to trade (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 2014:2). Of particular importance was the Ganghwa Island incident in 1875, when Japan sent a gunboat to survey coastal waters around the island without Korean permission. This move aggravated the Koreans as the area had been subject to violent confrontations between Korean forces and foreign forces not long before. The Korean forts opened fire as the gunboat approached, but the superior firepower of the Japanese soon overwhelmed the forts whereupon the Japanese sent a landing force that quickly subdued the Korean garrison. In the aftermath of this incident, the Koreans were forced to apologize and consequently signed the unequal Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876. This treaty made Korean ports open up to foreign trade and gave the Japanese extraterritorial rights, thus making Korea increasingly vulnerable to Japanese influence (Seth, 2010:198-199).

However, for Japan to fulfill their ambitions in Korea they saw a need to disrupt the close relations between China and Korea. As a result of fierce competition with the Chinese over control of Korea, the first Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1894. After less than a year,

the Chinese sued for peace, whereby Japan took Korea away from China's sphere of influence. In 1902, the Japanese empire entered into an alliance with Britain, recognizing each other's special interests in China and Korea. However, the Russians also had interests in expanding their territory and influence in Korea, seeking their own warm-water port on the Pacific Ocean for their navy and maritime trade. Russian forces started entering Korea, immediately sparking a conflict with Japan. Propositions were made in an attempt to divide the country into a Russian and Japanese sphere, but with little luck. As further negotiations failed, yet another war for the control of Korea broke out in 1904. The Russians suffered numerous defeats and the Russo-Japanese War ended the following year with Russia having to sign the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth (Seth, 2010:214-215).

Consequently, Japan further consolidated its power in Manchuria by making Korea signing the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty of 1905. Although Korea had been under Japanese control for several years already, this treaty essentially served as an initial step in Japan's absorption of Korea. Japan finally annexed Korea in 1910, effectively ending its long-standing independence and marking the start of a 35 year long colonial period for Korea under Japanese rule (Seth, 2010:215).

### **3.2 Toward a divided Korea**

As Japan became increasingly involved in World War II, realizing its potential threat, Allied leaders met in 1943 at the Cairo Conference to discuss Japanese expansionism. They agreed to strip Japan of its colonies, Korea being one of these, stating that "in due course, Korea shall become free and independent" (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 2014:3; Seth 2010:257). Following the 1945 Yalta Conference, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed a US-Soviet-Chinese trusteeship over Korea, the Soviet Union agreed to join its allies in the Pacific War. Beyond this, no further agreements were made among the wartime allies regarding the postwar future of Korea, which eventually were to have dire consequences for the unfortunate peninsula.

On August 8, two days after the United States dropped their first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and immediately began an offensive along Japan's northern frontier in Sakhalin, Manchuria and Korea. At this point the United States suddenly realized that Russian occupation of Korea would have important military implications for the future of Japan and East Asia. As the Soviet forces made their way south in Korea, the closest American forces were stationed in Okinawa, several weeks away from reaching Korea. The US government feared the Soviets would occupy the whole peninsula



before long and urgently appointed two young officers on the night of August 10-11 to draw up a line for the occupation of Korea by Soviet and American forces. Working under pressure and on extremely short notice, they drew forth a map from the National Geographic magazine for reference. After a short while, the officers decided upon the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel as the division line since this would split the country roughly in half and leave the capital, Seoul, on the southern side under American control (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 2014:3).

As such, the division line was seemingly completely arbitrary and did not correspond to any geographical, cultural, or historical division of the country. Korea had been a unified country since the seventh century; no Korean had ever proposed a division of their land and no experts on Korea were consulted before drawing the line. Yet, to the surprise of many, the Soviets almost immediately accepted this line and their forces stopped their southward advance at the parallel, even though they were in a position to occupy all of the country (Seth, 2010:258).

When the occupation line had been settled and the Japanese lost control of Korea, a four-power trusteeship over Korea started, where the United States, the USSR, China, and Britain would discuss postwar settlement and facilitate the creation of a new independent government in Korea over the next four to five years. But because of the political disparity and opposing interests between the Soviet controlled North and the US controlled South, the two sides were unable to reach any agreement toward unification of Korea. As negotiations were left in limbo, the United Nations created a UN Temporary Committee on Korea (UNTCOK) to move the country toward independence. However, the Soviet Union did not recognize the authority of this committee, and so the UN-sponsored elections were mainly held in 'accessible' areas in the South (Seth, 2010:266).

On August 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was proclaimed as Korea's only lawful government. The US-backed Korean nationalist and anti-communist Syngman Rhee was elected as the country's first president at the age of 73. Authorities in the North followed suit by holding their own elections, declaring the People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as Korea's supreme government on September 9, 1948. The Soviet Union supported the 33-year old Korean guerilla commander and communist Kim Il Sung to head the regime in the North. As such, what started off as two temporary zones of occupation turned into two antagonistic Korean regimes, based on diametrically opposed principles and sponsors, an outcome the world would soon experience the consequences of a few years later (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 2013:4).

On June 25, 1950, Kim Il Sung set in motion a series of unprecedented events that would change the course of Korean history. With Soviet and Chinese backing, Kim Il Sung gave the final order for North Korea's KPA forces to invade South Korea in an effort to reunify the Korean peninsula under the communist banner. In a move that took the whole world by surprise, they quickly captured Seoul and continued to roll southward as the South's ROK forces were constantly pushed back. But the retreating ROK forces didn't collapse as fast as the North Koreans had expected, giving the UN Security Council time to establish a unified military command under the United States to assist South Korea. As the UN forces finally landed in Korea, the combined effort with ROK forces helped push back the invaders (Seth, 2010:272-273).

Unfortunately, the war didn't end at this point. Now that the dream of reunification seemed so close, South Korea saw an opportunity to strike back, and so continued their pursuit of the KPA troops across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. For the purpose of establishing a unified government, UN forces shortly followed, capturing Pyongyang and other major cities on their way. However, China was little interested in having the presence of western powers on its border, and sent troops to intervene just as Korea appeared to be reunified under UN forces. Forced to retreat back south, ROK and UN forces once again lost Seoul, but managed to recapture it as the Chinese troops lost their momentum. Having pushed the Communist troops back to roughly around the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the war reached a stalemate and both sides seemed willing to negotiate for truce (Seth, 2010:273-275). The war, however, would continue for another two excruciating years, before finally ending with an armistice agreement on July 27, 1953.

### **3.3 Post-war development**

After the Korean War, both North and South were left devastated and in ruins. Incentives to quickly rebuild their countries in an attempt to outdo each other were high, and so the competition for ideological superiority and race toward economic prosperity was set in motion. South Korea initially struggled to recover from the war, and was by outside observers seen as overcrowded and economically inferior to the more industrial and developed North. Under the Rhee regime, the country was heavily reliant US foreign aid to ward off hunger and economic collapse. In addition, the South was riddled with official corruption and political instability, further exacerbating its slow recovery from the war (Seth, 2010:312).

However, after a military-led government assumed power with a coup in early 1960s, South Korea underwent an unparalleled economic transformation. Rapid industrialization through an emphasis on labor-intensive manufactured exports pulled the country out of poverty and made it one of the world's fastest growing economies all the way until the late 1990s – a transformation South Koreans call the “miracle on the Han river”, referring to the river that flows through the heart of Seoul (Seth, 2010:319). This spectacular economic transformation subsequently gave birth to what is today essentially one of the world's leading countries in terms of technological advancement, nominal GDP, and education.

North Korea, on the other hand, went on a noticeably different path after its disputes with South Korea. Following the Korean War, North Korea, like its southern neighbor, was also dependent on foreign aid from its allies, but had at the time the advantage of possessing 80 percent of Korea's industry, 90 percent of its electric power as well as 75 percent of its mines. Therefore, much of the initial recovery was a matter of rebuilding the existing structures, following a rigid pattern of mass mobilization and collectivization to achieve its rapid economic growth. This gave North Korea a head start and allowed them to recover comparatively well from the Korean War. The goal was to become economically autonomous and ready the country for a continued war, developing a heavy industry that could support a strong military, rather than focusing on consumer goods and open trade. In this manner, Kim Il Sung led North Korea along an authoritative path of development much like that of the Soviet Union under Stalin, constructing a completely centralized government with no scope for private industry or agriculture (Seth 2010:285-286).

However, despite North Korea's initial post-war recovery and economic growth for the first decades, it didn't take long before things took a turn for the worse. Following an economic slowdown in the 1980s, North Korea experienced an economic breakdown in the 1990s due to the dissolution of the Communist bloc, heavily affecting its trade balance. Additionally, in the mid-1990s the country was struck with heavy flooding, further exacerbating the economic crisis by damaging crops and infrastructure. As a result, a devastating famine broke out, killing between 900,000 and 2.4 million North Koreans due to starvation or hunger-related illnesses in the following years (Noland, Robinson, and Wang, 2001). This difficult time became known as the “arduous march” (고난의 행군) – a metaphor implemented by state propaganda to appeal to citizens' sense of unity and resilience in those dire times. Nevertheless, despite these attempts to downplay the regime's responsibility through propaganda, conditions were so terrible in most parts of the country that the famine

challenged the regime's ability to consolidate its power through the ideology of national collectivization and self-sufficiency.

Although economic conditions have somewhat improved in North Korea the last couple of decades, the fact that thousands of North Koreans flee across the Chinese border every year serves as a constant reminder of the country's mismanagement of internal affairs. In the following section, I will introduce some of North Korea's most defining social structures and institutions, which is of huge importance in understanding the central government's internal management and influence on the North Korean people.

### **3.4 North Korea: authoritarianism and social stratification**

North Korea with its 25 million people, half the population of South Korea, constitutes roughly 55 percent of the total land area of the Korean peninsula. A reflection of the peninsula's old nickname of the "Hermit Kingdom", North Korea today continues to maintain a strict isolationist policy where even internal mobility is carefully monitored and regulated. Leaving the country without state permission is considered "treason" – a political crime which is brutally enforced through measures such as interrogation, torture, imprisonment in political prison camps or public execution (Um et al., 2015; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014).

Whereas sometimes referred to as "the only unreformed Stalinist-style command economy left in existence" (French, 2014), this is in reality a somewhat misleading description of the North Korea we see today. On the outside North Korea definitely tries to keep up the appearance of such, but the last two decades have shown signs of the command economy and its public distribution system degrading, as North Koreans increasingly take part in informal market activities (Lankov, 2011). Nevertheless, North Korea continues to function as an authoritative one-party republic under the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), with Kim Jong-Un as current chairman and supreme leader.

North Korea's social system, which organizes the lives of all people from "the cradle to the grave" (Ko et al., 2004:69), is engrained in the ideological concept of *Juche* (주체). Developed by Kim Il Sung and his political advisors in the 1950s and 60s, the philosophical principal of Juche theory is rooted in self-reliance and an extreme sense of nationalism. Juche permeates every aspect of North Korean life and is the overarching creed of the country. It can be understood as a "state of mind" among North Koreans (Scobell, 2009), rallying all

nationals to work together for the ultimate goal of building a full-fledged self-sustainable state (French, 2014:46-47).

Furthermore, Confucianism and its philosophy of socio-political hierarchy and filial piety has for a long time shaped core values and traditions across the Korean peninsula. In North Korea, Confucianism is used as a binding force for society, integrated throughout Juche theory in order to emphasize a cultural propensity to put the group first and individual needs second. In this way, Juche reinforces a sense of belonging and collectivism that maintains social order and effectively keeps the Kim personality cult alive (French, 2014:58-59). Moreover, it has helped lay the foundation for North Korea's comprehensive classification system, the *Songbun* (성분) system.

Songbun is an institutionalized system of socio-political classification and ascribed status. It classifies individuals based on their political, social, and economic background, which in turn determines an individual's priority in terms of general life privileges and opportunities. Robert Collins (2012) has written an extensive article on the Songbun system, which goes into detail on the characteristics and implications of the system in North Korea. Originally established to isolate and/or eliminate perceived internal political threats, the Songbun system identifies, assesses, categorizes, and politically stratifies each North Korean resident as a political asset or liability to the regime. Collins explains that there are two types of Songbun: *Chulsin Songbun* (출신성분), or ancestral Songbun, which refers to the socio-economic background of one's family and relatives; and *Sahoe Songbun* (사회성분), or societal Songbun, which refers to one's individual socio-political and economic behavior and performance (Collins, 2012:6).

In practice, the Songbun system turned the preexisting class system on its head when it was put into effect. Those who held highest positions in pre-communist Korea, such as rich farmers, landowners, and merchants, became completely stripped of power, whereas the working class and those who were part of the socialist revolution and anti-Japanese resistance forces became the new elite. All of a sudden assigned a disadvantaged Songbun by the new Kim regime, North Korea's capitalists and those with affiliations to South Korea found themselves on the bottom of the social hierarchy. Even to this day, their descendants still make up the lowest social strata in North Korea, as the ancestral Songbun follows a family for three generations. On the other hand, descendants of the new elite that followed the socialist revolution now reap the full benefit of the privileges that follow their ancestral Songbun. In this way, each and every North Korean citizen is assigned a heredity-based class and socio-

political rank over which the individual exercises next to no control but which determines all aspects of his or her life (Collins, 2012:1-2).

The classification system is made up of three main classes – the ‘core class’ (핵심계층), the ‘wavering class’ (동요계층), and the ‘hostile class’ (적대계층). The core class consist of the most loyal members of the regime and usually tend to serve in high positions that sustain and protect the Kim regime. Members of this class constitute around 25% of the population, of whom approximately half have the privilege of being members of the WPK. This means they have access to the best employment and education opportunities, housing, medical treatment, and food benefits (Collins, 2012:6-7; Hassig and Oh, 2009:168). Pyongyang, the beating heart of North Korea’s central government, is almost exclusively populated by loyalists, with about 99% of all residents being members of the Korean Workers’ Party, candidate members of the WPK, or dependents of the WPK members (Collins, 2012:82).

The wavering class, constituting about 55% of the population, is reserved for average North Koreans whose loyalty is deemed questionable, but can serve the regime well though adequate political and economic performance. Finally, the lowest status is attributed to the hostile class, making up the remaining 20% of the population. Member of the hostile class are suspected of silently opposing socialism and the Kim regime, prejudged as being disloyal and regarded as possible subversive elements (Collins, 2012:7).

Although most members of the hostile class pose no immediate threat to the regime, if disloyal cadres were allowed to rise to positions of authority, they might then pose a danger to Kim (Hassig and Oh, 2009:173). Thus, to be on the safe side, families and individuals of lower classes are strategically relocated far away from the political center of Pyongyang where the upper classes reside. The rugged and cold provinces in the north-east, where living conditions are tougher and political influence very limited, are known to host a large portion of North Korea’s ill-favored citizens. Here, they are assigned menial labor tasks, such as working on agricultural communes and in the factories and mines (Collins, 2012; Hassig and Oh, 2009; Lankov, 2006).

Whereas one’s Songbun is not completely static and can be altered, it is very difficult to improve one’s Songbun due to its anchor in ancestry, and may require a lifetime of devotion to the Kim family regime, the party, and their teachings. Furthermore, resembling that of a caste system (Collins, 2012; Hassig and Oh, 2009), Songbun follows you in marriage. This means that upper class individuals are encouraged to marry people of equal standing, so that they and their children will not be will be negatively affected by the

association. Thus, considering the difficulty of improving one's Songbun, it is far more common to see it maintained at a constant level. If very unfortunate, however, North Koreans may see their Songbun decrease, for example if they or close family members are accused of committing a political or criminal offense (Collins, 2012).

The regime keeps detailed documents on every citizen's personal conduct, background and Songbun status. This is done through Songbun investigations led by the Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of People's Security (MPS), State Security Department (SSD) and KPA Military Security Department. An extensive network of national police, the state's secret police, and the military's security apparatus keep the citizens in North Korea under constant surveillance, especially those in higher positions (Collins, 2012:17). Yet, is it not only the visible elements of the coercive apparatus that carries out surveillance; at the local level, there are also neighborhood committees called *Inminban* (인민반), where residents are encouraged to report any observation of aberrant criminal, social, or political behavior in their communities. Thus, the climate of terror and constant surveillance stretches all the way into people's own homes and their private lives, as they live in fear of being informed on by everyday colleagues and friends (Hassig and Oh, 2009; Scobell, 2009).

Slander or action against the Kim regime is particularly taboo, and will not only cause one's own Songbun level to fall to rock bottom, but so will that of one's family members. Through the practice of *Yeonjwaje* (연좌제), meaning "guilt by association", any individual crime may lead to the arrest and punishment of immediate family, relatives, or even close friends of the transgressor (Collins, 2012:7). In the worst cases, incarcerated individuals risk being deported without trial to prison camps, having to serve their sentences in a *Kwanliso* (관리소), *Kyohwaso* (교화소), or other similar detention facilities, depending on the crimes they are accused of (Hawk, 2012). Based on their literal translation, these prison camps are casually referred to as "management center" and "re-education camp" respectively, demonstrating how the Kim regime intentionally uses ambiguous terms to sugarcoat atrocities in the country. In reality, they more resemble the Gulags of the Soviet Union, as Hawk (2012) further elaborates:

[*Kwanliso* are] political penal labor colonies, where North Koreans suspected of wrongdoing and wrong-thinking, along with up to three generations of family members are summarily deported without trial to disappear into fenced-in and heavily

guarded mountainous areas where they are subjected to forced labor in mines, logging, state farming and factory work, for mostly life-time duration (Hawk, 2012:9).

[*Kyohwaso* are] penitentiaries or camps, where persons deemed to have committed felony level criminal and political offenses are sent for fixed-term forced labor often under very strict regime and brutal condition (Hawk, 2012:9).

Although the authorities in North Korea deny the existence of such camps, testimonies of former guards, inmates, and neighbors, in addition to satellite imagery, prove that the camp system continues to be in operation. Korea Institute for National Unification (2016:400) estimated in 2013 between 80,000 and 120,000 political prisoners to be imprisoned in various political prison camps around North Korea. However, there might be additional, so far undetected secret detention facilities not yet accounted for, where political prisoners are detained in conditions similar to those of the known political prison camps (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014).

We see, then, that North Koreans today are ingrained in a highly authoritative society that encourages – or rather, fosters – blind obedience to the regime. Along with state terror, pervasive state surveillance, and state-controlled socio-economic resource allocation, *Songbun* is one of the major political tools used by the Kim regime to control society (Collins, 2012:87). This sort of authoritative intimidation reinforces a sense of self-censorship among North Koreans and effectively deters any thoughts of disobedience (French, 2014). By socially stratifying the population, it systematically predetermines citizens' entitlements, responsibilities, and opportunities, thus affecting educational and employment opportunities, as well as the quality of and access to public housing, health care and food rations. Moreover, in addition to its socio-political discrimination, *Songbun* also stratifies the population on a geographical level; the lowest classes reside in the peripheral areas of North Korea, and the least fortunate ones risk being banished to remote areas or interned in political prison camps if as much as suspected of being different or disloyal (Hassig and Oh, 2009).

### **3.5 Jangmadang and a new generation**

Yet, despite the institutionalized social stratification in North Korea, things started to change after the “arduous march” of the late 1990s. Before this period, men and women alike would attend their government-assigned work stations around North Korea, and the public



distribution system would provide families with provisional food, clothing, and basic appliances, depending on their Songbun status. However, when the North Korean economy collapsed, so did the public distribution system. Traditionally, North Korea is a highly patriarchal society, where men are seen as the head of the household and main provider for their families. If they're not already their 10 years of mandatory military service, they are expected by authorities to attend their government-assigned workplaces – even when there is no work to be done. Married women, on the other hand, can officially be recognized as full-time housewives, thus excusing their absence from daily work life (Lankov, 2011). As such, when the women were left by the government to their own resources without a job and no source of income, they gained both the time and freedom to find other ways of providing for their family from home. Out of hunger and desperation, these “mothers of invention” (Demick, 2009) started gathering and trading whatever they had, reinventing the concept of a free-market economy which eventually culminated in the emergence of informal markets.

In North Korea, these informal markets are known as *Jangmadang* (장마당), meaning “market grounds”. They are also referred to as “black markets”, since there is no official control or regulation of its commodities. Similar to a farmer’s market, but not limited to agricultural products, they function as platforms for North Korean residents to buy and sell subsistence farming, handicrafts, and sometimes smuggled goods from China and other countries, such as DVDs, cellphones, cosmetics, and medicine (Choe, 2015; Lankov, 2011). Jangmadangs have become the source of livelihood for many North Koreans, as the vast majority engage in these markets on a regular basis, with the average household getting more than 70% of their income through unofficial channels (Haggard and Noland, 2011; Kim, 2010).

The growth in the number of Jangmadang has been a phenomenon for several years, despite the fact that any private market activity is technically deemed illegal under the regime’s doctrine. Nevertheless, despite some crackdown attempts on Jangmadang activity in earlier years, the government now intentionally ignores its existence (Choe, 2015). Instead, Jangmadang merchants have to pay market stall fees or bribe local officials in order to stay in business (Kang, 2015). Furthermore, by letting markets taking care of the public economic sector, it frees up resources that the Kim regime can use on its continued development of nuclear and missile programs. In this sense, H. J. Kim (2016) argues it’s therefore hard to see the informal markets in North Korea being closed down by the government, since they have become such an integral part of everyday life and a positive force for the economy overall.

The prevalence of this informal economy has in many ways transformed the lives of ordinary people in North Korea. By engaging in private market activities, North Koreans have gained opportunities for self-advancement and become more independent from the government, completely undermining the authoritative Songbun system. Jenny told me she didn't realize her Songbun status before well in her teens; a relic of the past, it seemed like, the way she described how insignificant Songbun had become in her hometown. Although the traditional rank structure of North Korean society still remains, social status has become increasingly achievement-based and decreasingly group-based, with an increasing emphasis on materialistic values such as home ownership and wealth (Lee, 2014). Moreover, as women dominate most of this private market economy, at least on the lower levels (Lankov, 2011), they have become the main breadwinners in their households, thus increasing their influence and challenging traditional gender roles in North Korea.

The people who grew up in this transformed North Korea are often referred to as the "Jangmadang Generation". They were mainly born in the 1980s and 1990s and partook in the newfound market economy from an early age. Yeon-mi Park, a renowned human rights activist from North Korea, identifies three characteristics of this generation: (1) lack of devotion to the Kim regime; (2) relatively wide access to outside media and information; and (3) an individualistic and capitalistic mindset (Park, 2014) – characteristics that seemed to prove true for all of my informants, after hearing their descriptions of daily life in North Korea. In this way, Lee (2015) argues that the Jangmadang Generation symbolizes "the core of a society of passive resistance", as they are more concerned with themselves instead of the Kim regime's political doctrine, and far better informed about their relative deprivation than their predecessors.

## **4 THE NORTH KOREAN REFUGEE**

The North Korean regime adheres to strict isolationist principles, making it extremely difficult (and dangerous) for its citizens to leave. Just a few thousand North Koreans have ever been allowed to legally emigrate or travel to another country. Diplomats, contract workers and foreign-currency-earning business agents are the only ones eligible for international passports, and obtaining a travel permit to China involves months of waiting and the payment of fees that are beyond the resources of most North Koreans (Hassig and Oh, 2009:183). This leaves paperless nationals who plan to leave the country with no other option than illegal migration, of which the viable exit routes are few. In the previous chapter, we saw how the great famine that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s marked the start of a new era in which people had less faith in the regime and greater incentives to seek new opportunities elsewhere. In this chapter, I will explain the most common migration routes chosen by North Koreans, before giving some insight into their demographical characteristics and main motivations for migration.

### **4.1 Escaping North Korea**

The demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas stretches 250 kilometers along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, all the way from the West to East Seas. Despite the irony of its name, the DMZ is the most heavily militarized border in the world, protected by rows of electrical fences, dotted with land mines, and constantly surveyed by armed patrols. It shouldn't come as any surprise, then, that any attempt at crossing this border from either side is essentially suicidal (Ko et al., 2004; Lankov, 2006). Escape by sea is likewise very dangerous and rarely attempted. Thus, the easiest way to escape North Korea is by crossing the Yalu or Tumen river that constitute the northern borders with China and Russia. The safest and most common route among refugees is crossing the Tumen river to the northeast into the Chinese Jilin province, as it is comparatively narrow and shallow, and can be forded during summer and crossed on ice during winter (Hassig and Oh, 2009:190). Nevertheless, traversing these rivers can be quite dangerous if done haphazardly, and although the North Korean border police can be bribed to look the other way, fatal shootings of illegal border crossers is sadly not uncommon as told by surviving refugees and shown by pictures of lifeless bodies along the river banks.

Thousands of North Koreans make their way to China every year, yet most border crossers are essentially black market traders who spend only a few days or weeks there before bribing border guards again and returning home. Subsequently, there are those who live an underground existence as unregistered aliens among the two million ethnic Koreans who are legal residents of the Chinese border provinces, also known as the *Joseonjok* (조선족) people, and finally there are those working their way to a third country (Hassig and Oh, 2009:184). It is this last group of people, the dislocated North Koreans seeking permanent settlement elsewhere, that I have focused on in this paper. Whereas some of these refugees settle down in western countries such as USA, Canada and UK, the bulk of them seek out the promised land of South Korea as their final destination, drawn in by compassionate settlement policies and the prospect of being reunited with their Korean kin in the south.

## **4.2 Persecution in China**

Despite the dangers and hardships of illegally crossing into China, surviving on the other side of the border without being caught is equally critical. Chinese authorities have come under severe dissension from the international community due to their controversial rationale of North Korean border crossers as “illegal economic migrants” as opposed to legitimate refugees. Chinese officials who find North Koreans without adequate papers are forced to repatriate them – an act that goes in accordance with a bilateral treaty between the two countries (Brush, 2010). As mentioned earlier, these individuals are considered traitors by the North Korean regime, and are consequently likely to face severe punishment upon repatriation, such as forced labor, torture, imprisonment and in some cases death (Cohen, 2010).

Consequently, these refugees become very secretive, forced to stay hidden or constantly move around without any settled address to conceal their actual identities. This makes predicting their total number is very difficult, which is reflected by sources reporting varying numbers ranging from 20 000 to as high as 400 000 (Chang, 2013). However, the high end of this range likely represents an inflated number at earlier stages of the mass migration during the 1990s famine. Furthermore, these numbers presumably include the frequent border crossers mentioned earlier, so lower end estimates are probably more accurate (Hassig and Oh, 2009; Lankov, 2006; Lee, 2006).

With Chinese officials and North Korean agents constantly on the lookout for “illegal migrants” and “traitors of the Kim regime”, North Korean refugees’ vigorous efforts trying to avoid detection are severely burdened. In a report from The United Nations Commission of Inquiry, it is estimated that in the course of two decades, China has forcefully repatriated tens of thousands of refugees, almost all of whom have been subjected to inhumane acts (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). This puts China in an awkward position, since they concurrently are bound by international laws that consider the same refugees as people in need of international refugee protection, such as the 1951 UN Refugee Convention that China acceded to in 1982 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1992; Noland et al., 2006).

As defined in this convention, most of the North Korean border-crossers fit the category of *refugee sur place*, meaning they become refugees by default due to the threat of persecution upon return. The 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol defines a *refugee* as a person who:

[...] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Article 1A (2)).

Furthermore, the convention states in its *non-refoulement* paragraph that:

No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (Article 33 (1)).

Thus, we see that China’s ambiguous categorization of them as “illegal economic migrants” highly questionable, since they as a party to the convention are liable to provide protection to the escaped individuals.

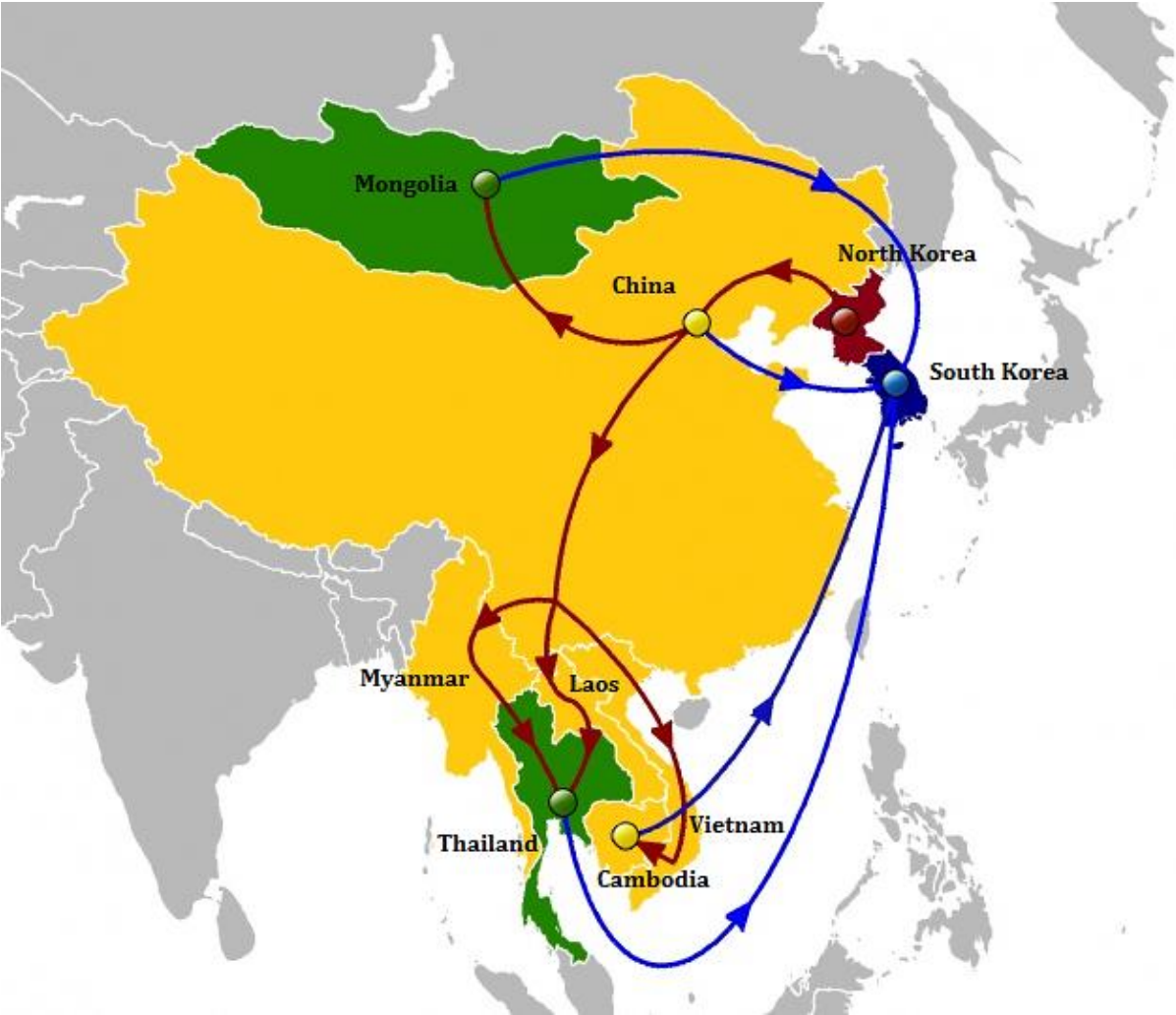
Nevertheless, despite criticisms made by human rights agencies and the international community, China continues to repatriate refugees caught by law enforcement officers

(Chang, 2013). Unable to seek protection in China, staying behind indicates a legitimate risk for refugees, prompting North Koreans to use China as a transitional stay prior to on-migration toward their ultimate destination rather than live there permanently. It is not uncommon for North Korean refugees to spend several years residing in the Chinese border region, biding their time acquiring local knowledge and connections to make a successful escape possible (Chang, Haggard & Noland, 2006; Lankov, 2006).

### **4.3 The way ahead**

In order to seek refuge outside of China, North Koreans generally have few options, as Hassig and Oh (2009) further elaborates: They can purchase counterfeit identity papers and a forged passport can subsequently arrange transportation out of the country, however this is usually more expensive than most refugees can hope to afford. Second, they can try to rush through the gates or climb over the walls of foreign diplomatic compounds, seeking their protection, and hoping they can negotiate safe passage out of the country. This is not always a viable option, though, considering the tight security around such compounds and the reluctance of some to help as they don't wish to risk diplomatic repercussions with China and North Korea, in particular South Korean embassies (Chung, 2013). Another option is heading overland to Mongolia, whose government tries to maintain good relations with South Korea and consequently does not repatriate refugees to North Korea. However, as only one main rail line goes into Mongolia from China and is closely watched by Chinese police, refugees are forced to navigate across the vast open plains of the Gobi Desert – a task not to be taken lightly. Consequently, most refugees wind up taking the longest, yet most reliable, route to South Korea through Southeast Asia (See **Figure 3** below).

**Figure 3:** North Korean refugee escape routes



Source: Stock photo retrieved from Wikipedia (2007). Made by author based on descriptions from the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (2015b). Yellow countries represent risk of repatriation to North Korea, whereas green countries are considered safe.

Assisted by various escape-brokers, some working in conjunction with human rights organizations, small groups of typically five to ten refugees are guided through an underground railway that employs trains, buses, and cars to cover the long distance across China to the southern border. From there on, the journey continues south through the neighboring countries of either Myanmar, Laos, or Vietnam. However, these countries officially try to maintain good relations with North Korea and are therefore usually used as transit countries. Whereas Cambodia in some cases has been used as an intermediary destination on the way to South Korea, most brokers and refugees prefer Thailand, which officially honors North Koreans’ refugee status. Upon entering the country, refugees give themselves up to the police, whereupon they have to pay a fine and spend up to a month in jail

while authorities arrange for an exit visa and permits them to travel to South Korea (Hassig and Oh, 2009:192-193).

#### 4.4 Refugee demographics

The latest refugees arriving in the South represent a much more diverse population than earlier, their background characteristics having changed greatly in regard to geography, social origins, age, and sex (Bidet, 2009), strongly contrasting the previously mentioned trends associated with the political defectors of the Cold War era. In terms of geography (see **Figure 4** below), the brunt of refugees come from the northern provinces bordering China, whereas comparatively few come from the capital of Pyongyang.

**Figure 4:** Administrative map of North Korea



Source: Stock photo retrieved from Wikipedia (2016). Made by author based on data from Google Maps (2017).



The province of North Hamgyong stands out in particular, as it in the pre-1990 period produced a mere 7% of all refugees, before rising to a remarkable 66% percent in the period 1999-2003 (Lankov, 2006). This overrepresentation of refugees from the northern provinces is not only due to their close proximity with the Chinese border; these are the rural provinces farthest away from Pyongyang's political reach that were hit the hardest by the famine and food shortages of the 1990s (Chang, Haggard & Noland, 2006; Noland and Haggard, 2011). Even among my informants, all 6 reportedly came from North Hamgyong province, reflecting the same overrepresentation.

In terms of social origins, the large majority of refugees now seem to belong to the lower classes in North Korea, as opposed to the Cold War defectors coming from privileged social classes (Bidet, 2009). According to Lankov, who builds on the classification by the Ministry of Unification, well below 10% of all refugees who arrive in South Korea belong to the North Korean elite or even to educated middle classes, the majority of whom are manual workers, unemployed housewives and school students (Lankov, 2006:111).

This can have a two-fold explanation: First of all, Lankov points to the geographical nature of most migrants coming from the northern provinces, in particular North Hamgyong – a province known for its little political influence where the politically “less reliable” social groups are settled. Secondly, Lankov argues that the inevitable risks taken and efforts needed to sustain the ordeal of successfully escaping North Korea and getting by in China, comes far less naturally for an educated middle class North Korean from Pyongyang, as opposed to an impoverished lower class North Korean driven to China for economic reasons (Lankov, 2006).

Haggard and Noland (2011) also note similar tendencies in social origins, who, building on a 2008 refugee survey, could report that the bulk of their respondents originally belonged to the “wavering class” (62%), with 11% reporting they belonged to the “hostile class” and 14% reporting that they did not know. Nevertheless, as the remaining ~14% reported being part of the “core class”, this could suggest that even privileged political status does not necessarily provide benefits adequate to deter migration (Haggard and Noland, 2011:26). These statistics seemed to reflect the background of my informants as well, none of my informants came from particularly privileged classes, citing relatively modest and hardworking lives in their hometowns.

In terms of age and sex, Bidet (2009) writes that the population of refugees living in the South now has grown more diverse due to the arrival of more families. However, Bell (2013a) notes that few of these cases can be seen as complete parent-children families, and

that most refugees arrive in broken families or, in many cases still, alone. Nevertheless, we see that a large portion of North Korean refugees in South Korea are of young age, as almost 40% of refugees are children and young adults aged 10-29, and about 31% are aged 30-39 (S. U. Kim, 2013; Sung and Go, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a significantly skewed gender composition among the North Korean refugee population in South Korea, as female migrants constitute over 70% of the refugees (See **Figure 1** for a more detailed overview). This is likely due to women having easier mobility in North Korea, while men are required to partake in the organizational structure of North Korea (S. U. Kim, 2013), either by serving several years in the military or by attending their government-assigned workplaces. However, it also reflects the vulnerability of North Korean women to human rights violations, who are seen as potential “commodities” of high demand in China, as I touched upon earlier, thus making it easier to find escape-brokers willing to take the risk of smuggling them out of North Korea.

#### **4.5 Changing motivations for migration**

During the great famine of the mid-1990s, China served as the main absorption point for the thousands of North Korean refugees that came looking for the most basic of human needs in order to survive. However, as North Korea finally weathered the famine after several years of reliance on foreign aid, the number of refugees seemed to decline. Whereas South Korea didn't feel any effect of this before 2009, North Korea noticed a decline in refugees leaving the country already in 2004. It was therefore argued that this decline might be a result of motivations for migration having changed, as “North Koreans move out of the country not merely to escape from starvation but also to enhance their overall chances of survival, reflected in the increasing number of family-unit defections” (Ko et al., 2004:68).

These days, economic reasons seem to be the dominating motive for North Koreans leaving their country – particularly in the case of those still residing in China (Haggard and Noland 2011, 29-32). My informants all reported lack of food and the prospect of economic opportunities as their main motives for leaving North Korea. Both Gary and Daniel had experienced severe hunger themselves during their days in North Korea, leading them to escape to China out of pure necessity, before eventually putting their eyes on the prosperous South Korea. Sarah, although having witnessed several people in her neighborhood wither away due to food shortages, told me she initially escaped North Korea together with her mother in order to find work in China, with no ambitions of going to South Korea until later.

S. U. Kim (2013) argue that while women tend to cite economic reasons, men are more likely to cite political and ideological reasons for their escape. This can be due to the increased mobility and economic empowerment of women through continuous Jangmadang activity, whereas men are more closely attached to the traditional government institutions as explained earlier. I was, however, unable to verify this among my informants, since all my male informants escaped North Korea at young ages and had never done military service or experienced being assigned to government work stations.

Nevertheless, in order to get a better overview of refugees' migration motivations, we can apply the concepts of "push" and "pull" factors – the former which represents factors that "push" people away from their homes, while the latter represents factors that "pull" people to new homes. Researchers often point to a number of interconnected push-pull factors to explain the most important causes of migration. In the case of North Korean refugees, a combination of push and pull factors are generally mentioned, among them hunger, loss of status, frustration over lack of opportunities, political persecution, and a wish to live in similar conditions to North Koreans living outside of the country (Haggard and Noland, 2011:29-32).

In his article, Lankov (2015) explained the recent decline in refugees as a result of the push factor of destitution having changed. North Korea's economy is actually doing better these days, showing faint signs of a market economy in development, fueled by the emergence of black markets and illegal trade. This has led to border guards asking for substantially bigger bribes for letting refugees and escape brokers through, thereby excluding much of the poorer border population. Additionally, China has invested heavily in more fences and border surveillance, effectively decreasing the amount of "illegal economic migrants" entering the country. Lastly, the public presentation of South Korean society in media has shifted, with the attention now being directed to how North Koreans who left for South Korea have to struggle at the bottom of the social ladder, poor and discriminated against. This is further amplified by the arrival of returning refugees to North Korea, also known as "double defectors", who on national television are depicted as "people whose ideological vigilance was weak, leaving them susceptible to the siren calls of Southern propaganda" (Lankov, 2015).

As for the pull factor of migration, it still remains a widespread idea among Northerners that South Korea is better off economically and a land of opportunities, much thanks to the interaction with smugglers and their South Korean contraband, as well as the increased use of cellphones. As mentioned earlier, the majority of refugees that arrive in the south are seldom driven by political motives, unlike their counterparts from the Cold War

days. Most of them are low-skilled laborers, their primary motives being the transition out of mere subsistence and the pursuit of better livelihoods and opportunities (H. R. Kim, 2013). And although China has taken the political stance of referring to North Korean refugees as economic migrants, it still remains that these refugees hide in valid fear of persecution, likely having to face severe punishment if caught and forcibly returned to North Korea (Cohen, 2012).

Building on the changing dynamics of this migration, it would seem pull factors have come to play an increasingly important role over the years. As Sino-Korean interaction increased with the influx of refugees in China, outside information through various channels such as black markets and returning North Koreans who have crossed the border earlier has become more available to people back home (Lee, 2006). Tales of South Korea's and China's economic progress have quickly spread among the people, and by watching smuggled movies and TV shows portraying the comparatively extravagant lifestyle of South Koreans, North Koreans gain a partial impression of life in South Korea.

Unlike the "absolute deprivation" North Koreans endured during the food shortages and economic hardships in earlier years, the increased access to outside information has made the gap in living standards compared to other countries, especially South Korea, more tangible. This has culminated in a sense of "relative deprivation" among North Koreans, effectively encouraging more people to leave their country. Incentivized to follow their family members already settled in South Korea, a pattern of "chain-defection" has emerged, where refugees are assisted on their escape through remittances and underground contacts, hoping to be reunited once again (Ko et al., 2004; Lankov, 2006).

Nevertheless, although seeing a tendency of chain-defection, not all refugees necessarily want their left behind family members to follow them to South Korea. Sarah told me she still had older sisters left in North Korea, and would together with her mother regularly contact them and send remittance money through a broker in China. This broker was a trustworthy North Korean who would cross the border by bribing guards and give the money directly to their family members, taking a 40 percent cut himself. However, Sarah pointed out that her sisters were all married women with kids who had made a life of their own in North Korea, having no immediate intentions of risking their future by trying to escape the country.

As such, the remittances from Sarah and her mother were actually not sent with the intention to facilitate further chain-migration, helping their North Korean family members set up a possible escape out of the country. Instead, the money was sent out of pure good-will, as

basic economic assistance to help the poorer part of their immediate family. This suggests that despite getting inside information about the prosperous life in South Korea, thus enhancing feelings of the relative deprivation, these pull factors can still be neutralized by local factors of familiarity, such as ancestral roots and marriage, which contribute to a sense of belonging and complacency.

## 5 DEPRECIATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Compared with other foreign immigrants, one would believe that North Koreans, inheriting the comparative advantages of sharing cultural traditions, ethnicity, and language with southerners, have an upper hand when adjusting to South Korean society. However, despite these inherent advantages, and a range of both government and non-government assistance programs available to North Korean refugees, many of them profess difficulties with this undertaking. In this chapter, I will outline some of the most common transitional issues and competitive disadvantages of North Korean refugees in South Korea.

Analyzing this in a theoretical context, I approach my first research question: *what are the reasons for, and implications of, North Korean refugees' socio-economic disadvantaged position in South Korea?* By applying Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of "cultural" and "social" capital, I will argue that North Korean refugees' disadvantaged position in South Korea's competitive society leaves them at risk of becoming socio-economically marginalized among their southern kin – a group which is considerably more privileged than North Koreans.

### 5.1 Critique against the resettlement program

Despite South Korea's efforts to effectively integrate North Korean refugees, its resettlement program keeps getting criticized by scholars, NGOs, and refugees alike. This is perhaps best reflected by results from a 2012 survey, where 80% of refugee respondents reported they felt dissatisfied with the settlement system, particularly concerning the pressure to assimilate, housing, medical care, and employment (Bell, 2013b; Son, 2012). Although being entitled "settlement money", a monthly stipend, and earmarked scholarships, the financial support provided by the government is often seen as insufficient by refugees, putting additional stress on them during their resettlement period.

Jenny, for example, came to South Korea with the help from her mother and found out about the economic hardships of refugees shortly after her arrival. Upon hearing from her friends that the amount of the basic settlement benefit is initially provided based on the size of a household, Jenny learned that she would be in a better financial position if she received

individual benefits.<sup>9</sup> She therefore called her mother and discussed how they should proceed; whereas Jenny wanted to catch up on studies and enter a university in Seoul, her mother lived in Busan with a newly married South Korean spouse. Respecting her daughter's ambitions in Seoul and realizing the potential economic benefits of being a refugee without family in South Korea, they decided to intentionally lie to government officials. By saying she did not recognize her mother as her guardian and wanted to take care of herself and study in Seoul, Jenny was consequently granted full individual settlement benefits. As a result, she is now officially without family in South Korea, however she still keeps in touch with her mother on a regular basis.

The settlement program has also been criticized for running an assimilation approach of North Korean refugees, attacking the foundations of their identity as they are forced to undergo re-education and encouraged to discard their emotional and actual ties to the past (Bell, 2013b). Furthermore, most government-led assistance programs only last for five years before leaving refugees to their own resources. Sung and Go argue this assistance scheme is insufficient and too short-term, forcing unrealistically high expectations on the refugees. This in turn “perversely shifts the blame for the refugees’ failure to adapt from the South Korean government and society to the refugees themselves, who are seen as incapable of taking advantage of generous assistance provided” (Sung and Go, 2014:12). I will go into more detail on these issues and discuss their implications in **Chapter 6**.

Naturally, the South Korean government is fully aware of the North Korean resettlement situation, having exclusive access to a large amount of empirical data related to refugees, subsequently changing and adding resettlement policies as they see fit. However, this data is rarely released to the public, with official statistics related to resettlement issues of refugees usually being hard to come by. The increasing number of institutions and NGOs working in coordination with the government, conducting research on the precarious situation of North Korean refugees and offering resettlement assistance, therefore play an important role in South Korea. Providing a wide range of services free of charge, such as social support and education, they effectively make up for some of the shortcomings of the government's public resettlement program.

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<sup>9</sup> Refugees are normally housed together with family members they arrived with, or who are already settled in South Korea. As the amount of basic settlement benefit is based on the size of a household, this means that the resettlement money is handed out collectively to each family. When divided up among the family members, the sum of this money is, according to Jenny, less than those who live alone and receive individual resettlement benefits. This is likely done to account for the relatively higher living expenses of refugees living by themselves.

## 5.2 Disillusioned lives and depression

Many North Koreans, especially among the Jangmadang Generation, familiarize themselves with South Korea through smuggled dramas and music videos. Both Jenny and Sarah explained how they would repeatedly watch South Korean dramas smuggled from China on USB sticks. Sarah would often lock herself in her room, close all curtains and put a blanket over herself and the TV while watching in secrecy. Her friends were no exception either, and sometimes they would gather and watch together, knowing perfectly well the consequences should they get caught.

However, as North Koreans indulge themselves watching the lives of rich, stylish, and successful South Koreans on the TV screen, they are prone to developing biased and inflated expectations of life in South Korea. According to Hyeoseon Shin from NKDB, such expectations can have adverse effects on initial adaptation, as they are not adequately prepared for the culture clash that awaits them in the south. Jenny and Sarah, on the other hand, both noted mainly positive effects, since they become more enlightened about their own relative situation. They argued the culture clash they felt upon arrival in South Korea would have been significantly worse had they not experienced such exposure beforehand.

Indications of the level to which North Korean refugees struggle coping with their disillusioned lives in the South are manifest most poignantly by the recent phenomena of “return migration” (Bell, 2013b). A quick online search for “double defectors” will give you several articles on refugees who have given up on their lives in South Korea and consequently attempt to return to North Korea. It is, however, by official law illegal for regular South Korean citizens (refugees alike) to enter North Korea, so the only way this is possible is by, once again, crossing the Chinese border, returning the way they originally escaped. The Kim regime, in turn, uses these returnees to feed its political propaganda scheme, running stories on national television about the suffering of poor, naïve refugees in the South, accusing South Korea for abducting and forcibly interning North Koreans against their will (Lankov, 2015; Shim, 2015a).

Exactly how many refugees have fled back to North Korea seems to be disputed. Although several hundred refugees who arrived in South Korea are apparently unaccounted for, the Ministry of Unification has put the official number of double defectors to 13, three of whom ended up returning to South Korea again (McCurry, 2014). When I asked Sarah about her thoughts on these double defectors, I was surprised to hear that she called them “dumb” for trying to go back to the deceiving Kim regime. She contended that North Koreans need to



make the best of what they get in South Korea, since going back will only lead to certain death or imprisonment. She did, however, admit to understanding the motivation for going back, as many refugees have been abruptly separated from their families back in North Korea, herself included.

In addition to the sudden culture shock and the longing for family members left behind, North Korean refugees are more prone to inhibiting mental disorders, as opposed to the general population, as a consequence of forced migration and traumatic events experienced before resettlement (Um et al., 2015). Many refugees have reported being forced to watch public executions in North Korea, experienced family and close friends die of starvation or experienced physical abuse. Speaking with my informants, it seemed obvious that many of them had grown up in a hostile and strenuous environment. Most talked about the daily struggle to get food, and several had heard about or even witnessed friends and family die due to starvation and public executions. Jenny also told me how “everyone” in her neighborhood would use drugs smuggled from China and drink alcohol (which is very expensive in comparison with regular food in North Korea) to lighten their daily struggles and mitigate traumatic experiences. According to herself, Jenny was among the few exceptions, as she was one of the many drug dealers in her hometown.

However, living under cover in China and trying to escape to a third country was often cited as the hardest struggle among my informants.<sup>10</sup> Women, in particular, who constitute the majority of the refugee population, are at a larger risk of experiencing traumatic events as they are an easy target for Chinese and North Korean exploiters. Chang (2013) points out the high prevalence of trafficking of women, either by marriage-brokers for the purpose of selling them to middle-aged Chinese men seeking wives, or by pimps who employ them in the sex industry. Whereas some are trapped into victimization through kidnapping and deception, desperation drives others to provide for themselves or their family, for example by voluntarily entering arranged marriages with Chinese men or prostituting themselves (Kim et al., 2009; Ko et al., 2004). Under these circumstances, refugees are often forced to confront isolation, hostility, violence, and racism in their new locations, and many suffer from major psychiatric disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their ordeals (Chang, 2013:23).

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<sup>10</sup> The period prior to the 2008 China Olympics was particularly difficult, as the Chinese government stepped up their efforts to “clean the country of North Koreans”, using Sarah’s own words, issuing mass deportation of their so-called “illegal economic immigrants”.

Lastly, the prevalence of depressive disorders among North Korean refugees has been reported to be twice the rate of their South Korean counterparts (Kim et al., 2011). Depressive symptoms are often associated with years lived in South Korea, resulting from post-migration factors. These issues include loneliness from being socially excluded, guilt associated with refugees leaving their family behind and a sense of helplessness, the heavy burden of individual responsibility, as well as the competitive pressure of South Korean society (Min, 2008; Um et al., 2015). The combination of past traumatic experiences and post-migration factors feeding depression has not only led many North Korean refugees to voice their wishes to return back home; suicide rates have also risen to alarmingly high levels. Although the annual figure tends to fluctuate greatly due to the relatively small sample number of refugees, it has surpassed South Korea's notoriously high suicide rate of 8% more than once, with 2015 being a particularly grim year showing rates up to 15% (Evans, 2015).

### **5.3 Competitive disadvantages**

In addition to the prevalence of mental trauma and depression among North Korean refugees, statistics show that they are at a disadvantage academically and employment-wise as well, which are crucial socio-economic factors for the successful integration of new settlers. This is in part due to aforementioned post-migration factors, but can also be explained in terms of pre- and mid-migration factors, such as the lack of a competitive education and valuable professional skills.

First of all, one has to recognize the importance of English in South Korea. Although Koreans on both sides of the divide share the same general language, South Koreans have since the division integrated a significant amount of English words in their vernacular. In a 2001 poll, as many as 45% of North Korean refugees stated they were initially "largely" or "completely" unable to understand South Korean speech, whereas only 24% said they had understood the locals perfectly well (Lankov, 2006:122). Apart from noticeable differences in pronunciation and sometimes word meaning, what separates the two dialects the most is the wide use of English loanwords in the South Korean vernacular.

This was an oft-cited issue among my informants. Brandon illustrated his first experience with South Korea quite well, explaining how he thought himself no different from any other foreigner when he landed at Seoul Airport with its big flashing signs in English. He was among several refugees who at first are overwhelmed by the amount of English words and expressions commonly used in South Korea. Unexpectedly, refugees encounter a

language barrier which leads to confusion and embarrassing moments with their southern peers. Moreover, it can also limit education and job opportunities, since English is often required as a second language in educational settings and seen as a valuable qualification at the workplace. The importance of English is further reflected by the increasing number of NGOs who have made volunteer-based English tuition for North Korean refugees their main objective in order to facilitate their adjustment to the South Korean society.

Second, compared with the intense competitive education system of South Korea, North Korea offers relatively substandard education, focusing more on ideological indoctrination as opposed to education through autonomous learning (Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016). Of course, substandard education is still better than no education, but not all students in North Korea find the time or motivation to study. Making a living is hard enough as it is, and oftentimes young children have to help their families get by in any way they can, as told by my informants. Sarah, for example, explained how she would often be sent to the Jangmadang by her older sisters since she was no older than 7 to sell goods; apparently, her young and innocent face attracted more customers at the market than her sisters.

It's also important to note that refugees are deprived of standardized education during their transit period through third countries before arriving in South Korea, the time which can vary from a few months to several years. Jenny told me how she would work at her father's farm in China for about a year before coming to South Korea, during which time she did not attend school. She did, however, master the Chinese language quite well during this time, since her father was Chinese and helped her with home schooling.

For young refugee students, the lack of sufficient education means that most are inevitably placed in lower grades with students younger than them, since the educational gap makes it difficult to keep up in age-appropriate classes (Sung and Go, 2014). Furthermore, in order to catch up with studies, many also have to take extra classes on the side, for example at private academies, or through private tutoring and home-schooling. This was also the case of Jenny, Brandon, and Gary, who were the only students among my informants; they all studied at private academies and had at some point joined NGO-arranged classes and received private tutoring. Additionally, the girls from my group interview all received home schooling by a teacher who would come visit twice a week, all in coordination with the catholic organization that sheltered them.

Nevertheless, the educational gap combined with initial language difficulties makes it harder for refugees to fit in among their competitive southern peers at school. This has

translated into relatively high dropout (discontinuation) rates, especially among high school students, more than doubling those of South Koreans. In the years 2012-2014, the combined dropout rate among South Korean elementary, middle, and high school students amounted to 1%, whereas North Korean refugees in the same levels averaged 3.1%<sup>11</sup> (Korean Educational Development Institute, 2016; Korean Educational Development Institute & Ministry of Education, 2015).

Gary, in particular, mentioned how his first year at high school was very difficult. Although he found himself lagging behind in general education and struggled keeping up with his classes, he refrained from revealing that he was from North Korea, because he was afraid of being looked down upon. This made him very shy, so he struggled making friends at school. However, during his second year he became more open to his struggles and admitted coming from North Korea. As a result, his classmates became more understanding of his situation and he surprisingly felt his student-life improved a lot.

Sarah, on the other hand, had quite the opposite experience. Like a fearless young teenager, she openly admitted her background as a North Korean as soon as she made new friends at school. However, this led to more uncomfortable situations than she expected, oftentimes finding herself being made fun of. She therefore decided to keep her background a secret when she finally enrolled into high school, only revealing it to her closest friends. These days, however, no longer being a student, Sarah seems to have reverted to her old self again, and is actively promoting awareness about the situation of North Korean refugees like herself by using social media and appearing on TV-shows every now and then.

The re-adjustment problems among refugee students at lower levels of education also extend to higher education. Despite benefiting from preferential admission, refugees enrolled at universities or colleges seem to have the hardest time successfully adapting to the competitive South Korean school environment. Although official statistics on the dropout rates among refugee university students are not available, a survey done in 2013 showed that about 6% of respondents had reported quitting or being expelled, 18% had applied for a leave of absence and 14% were currently in the middle of a leave of absence. Adding this up, as many as 38% of the refugees had at some point discontinued their studies, the most recited reasons being “study English before returning to class” (33%), “keep up with the costs of living” (29%), and “unable to keep up with class content” (12%) (Shin et al., 2016). This is a

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<sup>11</sup> The dropout rate among refugees, however, has for the past few years gradually decreased, from 3.3% in 2012 to 2.1% in 2016. This might show some signs of improvement in terms of education-related integration policies.

significant amount considering the average South Korean discontinuation rate is a mere 4% (Korean Educational Development Institute & Ministry of Education, 2015).

Brandon, who was still completing his undergraduate degree, confessed that it took a while before he finally got used to his university life, explaining that juggling part time jobs while at the same time dealing with heavy workloads from his university almost had him drop out at one point. Jenny expressed her concerns about starting her freshman year at university, as she had heard about the difficulties of keeping up with studies from other refugees. Although Jenny was incredibly street-smart and quick-witted, it's important to note that she had received very little basic education in North Korea due to skipping classes for work. This meant she had to spend every day, sunrise until midnight, catching up on studies. However, her worries were not only related to the academic level; most freshmen in South Korea start at the age of 19-20, whereas she would already be 24 when she started. Thus, being older, yet lagging behind in academic progress compared to others of her age, she was also afraid she wouldn't be taken seriously and have a hard time fitting in, due to being a senior in terms of age, yet a junior in terms of academic year.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the challenges experienced by young North Korean refugees in schools also follow them to the workplace. According to survey from 2013-2014, among the economically active population of North Korean refugees in South Korea, 12.2% of respondents reported being unemployed in 2013, down to 6.9% in 2014, whereas the general population had a comparatively low unemployment rate of 3.4% this period<sup>13</sup> (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2015a).

Hyeoseon Shin from NKDB noted under our interview how important finding work in South Korea is for socio-economic integration, but that North Korean refugees often struggle with this, many of whom lack the education and competitive skills of South Koreans. (Recent arrivals of) men are at a particular disadvantage, since they were more or less handed government-assigned jobs in North Korea – jobs that do not promote the essential skills and qualifications required by the South Korean job market. Women, on the other hand, are apparently more likely to succeed finding jobs, according to Shin. This can be related to their

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<sup>12</sup> In South Korea, as well as North Korea, one's age is of notable importance in daily life and is among the first details asked when meeting a new person. This is because it determines how people should address (using specific honorifics) and treat each other in a social setting, creating a social hierarchy greatly favoring those who are older (the seniors). Thus, if there is a mismatch between one's age and one's expected achievements (whether academic, professional, or personal), it can lead to awkward encounters between people, opening up for public ridicule and loss of respect among one's peers.

<sup>13</sup> Although unemployment rate among refugees was two times that of the general population in 2014, this gap seems to have been decreasing for the past few years, with the Ministry of Unification admittedly reporting a record low unemployment rate among refugees of 4.8% in 2015 (Shim, 2015b).

experience with running businesses at North Korea's black markets, making them more creative, independent, and competition-oriented – qualifications that are important to succeed in South Korea's competitive society.

Even with the benefits of a full degree from North Korea, refugees may struggle competing at the South Korean job market. A South Korean friend told me about a North Korean classmate of his that had almost completed his degree in medicine at the Pyongyang University before finally deciding to come to South Korea. However, he was forced to retake his whole degree (6 years) upon entering medicine studies in South Korea. Coming from North Korea, his higher education was de-facto undervalued and deemed insufficient compared with the South Korean equivalent.

Apart from government initiatives, such as offering employers to pay half the salary of refugees should they employ them (Ministry of Unification, 2016), the only way for refugees to have a competitive chance seems to be years of dedication to a competitive South Korean education. Of course, this is not always a viable option for middle-aged and older refugees, although there exist designated academies for North Koreans of all ages, offering counselling, vocational training, and educational courses to refugees of all ages in an effort to help them with employment.

Overall, the depreciation of North Korean refugees' education and professional skills means that they are less likely to take up professional, skilled, or administrative jobs, and more likely to find employment in unskilled jobs that are relatively low-paying (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2015a). This has also created an average income disparity between refugees and the general population, raising concerns that North Korean refugees might become part of a "permanent underclass" in South Korea if left in the shadow for too long (Fackler, 2012; Lankov, 2006).

#### **5.4 Cultural capital and depreciation**

In order explain the competitive disadvantages of South Korea's population of North Korea refugees in a more theoretical context, we can apply Bourdieu's theorization of *cultural capital* and *social capital*. This allows us to see how North and South Koreans differ in the mobilization and access to such capital, and its relevance in terms of successful integration into a new society. Over time, all people acquire different forms of cultural and social capital. In a broad sense, cultural capital refers to contextual knowledge, skills, and education,

whereas social capital is the possession of durable networks, created through relationships of mutual recognition (Bourdieu, 1986).

To elaborate on the concept of cultural capital a bit further, Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between three forms which cultural capital exists in: (1) the *embodied* state, referring to cultural acquisition through personal investment of time, for example the development of values, behavior, and language; (2) the *objectified* state, meaning cultural goods such as clothes and food; and finally, (3) the *institutionalized* state, which is most often related to academic and professional qualifications.

Building on these different forms of cultural capital, we can relate them to the situation of North Korean refugees in South Korea. First of all, the embodied cultural capital of refugees can be said to deviate from South Korean standards in terms of language, values, and social behavior. North Koreans are, after all, products of their environment, having grown up with a distinctive set of attitudes and values that shape their identity; “they perceive South Korean politics, economy, society, and culture through their own preconceptions and basic values from North Korea” (O, 2011:158). Combined with inflated expectations of what life in South Korea is, this creates a sense of discrepancy for refugees, as their North Korean values and personal expectations don’t comply with the values and reality of South Korean society. Not only can this result in a culture clash and adaptation difficulties, it can also produce stereotypes and exacerbate discrimination by the host population, which I will discuss in more detail in **Chapter 6**.

As for objectified cultural capital, smuggling across the Chinese border and the sale of South Korean electronics and media on the private markets has made North Koreans able to connect with South Korean culture to a certain degree. As Hannah told me, locally produced goods are losing their traditional value, whereas the acquirement of (illegally) imported goods are seen as status symbols of wealth and power. Nevertheless, the technological gap between the two countries in terms of what is available and accessible for the general population is still big (Lankov, 2006), resembling two countries belonging in completely different eras – a discrepancy frequently noted by my informants.

This often causes many awkward situations for refugees and can potentially limit their work opportunities, as they are unfamiliar with the relatively modern and high-tech way of life in South Korea. Brandon explained the feeling as going through a time machine and being thrown 30 years forward in time. Sarah said I should try to imagine how South Koreans lived not long after the Korean war. That, she explained, would be the equivalent of day to day life

her old hometown; even the “technological wonder” of hot tap water was completely foreign to her before her first visit to the toilet in South Korea.

Lastly, refugees’ possession of institutionalized cultural capital (or lack thereof) has a huge impact on their integration in South Korea. Educational standards in North Korea are, as mentioned earlier, highly questionable, emphasizing political indoctrination over autonomous learning. Many refugees have also been deprived of basic education in North Korea, as well as during transit to South Korea. Additionally, most of the North Korean refugees come from the poorer provinces bordering China, where educational and employment opportunities are comparatively limited because of the Songbun system, as opposed to the more privileged citizens of Pyongyang. Because South Korea puts a high emphasis on educational accomplishments, refugees are generally at a disadvantage compared to the general population.

Also of importance are the differences in work ethics, habits, and skills – the standards of which refugees are often unable to compete equally with South Koreans in (O, 2011). As such, refugees are prone to experiencing cultural conflict in workplaces in the form of language barriers and difficulties in interpersonal communication (Sung and Go, 2014). Han (2012) mentions that South Korean coworkers’ can display prejudiced and negative attitudes toward North Korean refugees, which frequently causes ill-feeling. This further exacerbates psychological stress and depression among refugees, leading to lower work performance and higher absence rates. South Korean employers are thus left with negative impressions on refugees’ dependability as competitive workers in comparison with regular South Korean candidates (O, 2011).

This discrimination has according to Bidet (2009) resulted in the exclusion of North Korean refugees from regular jobs, who are more likely to be restricted to a secondary labor market with unstable employment and questionable working conditions. When I asked Daniel if there was any work-life discrimination of North Koreans in South Korea, he immediately responded “yes”. He maintained that employers would rarely hire a North Korean over a South Korean, forcing most North Koreans to hide their backgrounds and lie in order to have a chance – a difficult task, due to their comparatively weak education and non-competitive working experience.

Even when refugees find a job, problems adjusting to the different working culture can prove difficult, due to diverging values and norms. An example of this is South Koreans’ indirect way of speaking, which was mentioned more than once by my informants. Due to its clash with traditional North Korean values, this tendency is often regarded as “hypocritical”



by North Koreans<sup>14</sup> (Sung and Go, 2014). Consequently, many refugees find themselves juggling several part-time jobs in order to get by, according to Daniel, as full-time jobs are much harder to come by.

## **5.5 Social capital and network exclusion**

Social capital is acquired and maintained through preferential treatment and cooperation between people, the central idea being that benefits and resources for individuals depend on their mobilization through these social relations (Bidet, 2009). It therefore differs from other forms of capital in that:

Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage (Portes, 2000:48).

In this way, social capital is a matter of trust, norms, and networks (Bidet, 2009:166). Although distinguishable from each other, social capital is interconnected with cultural capital in many ways. First of all, the latter can act as a requirement for accessing certain social networks and the resources that are attached to them, meaning converting cultural capital to social capital. Likewise, social networks and groups function to reproduce particular forms of cultural capital, given that they already engage with the same norms, values, and behaviors – that is, embodied cultural capital (Cederberg, 2015:44).

But their interconnectedness is not only determined through their reproduction of one another. As Ciderberg further notes, the two are also related through the fact that the absence of one form of capital may imply a greater reliance on other kinds of resources or forms of capital. This means that limited access to or lack of cultural capital may result in a need to acquire social capital, thus forcing people to rely on social resources in order to gain employment and other opportunities (Ciderberg, 2015:44-45). The reliance on social resources for these purposes is particularly reminiscent of South Korea, where, according to

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah explained that she and her classmates would have to attend mutual- and self- criticism sessions every Saturday at school, where they would openly talk about their own and comment others' wrongdoings. These sessions, which go back several generations according to Sarah, cultivate a sense of straight-forwardness and honesty among North Koreans – values that are deeply embedded in North Korean society.

Yee, “there is a strong tendency for [...] people to use regional, school, and family ties as a means of doing business, getting information, and making important decisions” (Yee, 2000:325). As such, the mobilization of social capital can be vital to understanding integration of North Korean refugees, as it has the ability to decide access to both employment and socializing opportunities (Bell, 2013a; Bidet, 2009).

To explain this a bit further, we have to take a closer look at the nature and power of social networks in South Korea. Yee discusses the two main forms of social networks that exist among South Koreans: *Yeon-gyeol* (연결) and *Yeonjul* (연줄). Whereas *Yeon-gyeol* is a more general term referring to open networks between people, *Yeonjul*, on the other hand, refers to particularistic relations (closed networks) maintained by kin, school, or regional ties. Yee explains that the strength of *Yeonjul* ties characterizes South Korean society with their ability to transcend institutionalized rules and formal prescriptions (Yee, 2000:326). However, since *Yeonjul* is based upon close and personal trust relationships, it can also become a barrier to those who don’t share the link. As such, the exclusive nature of *Yeonjul* can be particularly challenging for recent arrivals of North Korean refugees, who often need to start from the beginning establishing social networks in South Korea while coming to grips with their new surroundings.

According to Bell (2013a), the difficulties experienced by many North Korean refugees in acclimatizing to South Korean society and developing networks for emotional and instrumental benefits has many refugees choosing primarily to associate with others from North Korea. Although family and ethnic-based social networks have been observed to facilitate the advancement of immigrants in their society (Bidet, 2009), in the case of North Korean refugees, Bell (2013a) raises concerns that the continued affiliation within such exclusive social networks might lead to the formation of a North Korean enclave community, which can prove detrimental to successful integration in South Korea.

This was not the case of my informants, however, as they all admitted to prefer socializing with South Koreans or foreigners rather than other North Koreans.<sup>15</sup> Jenny and Brandon seemed particularly motivated by seeing other North Koreans like themselves succeed in South Korea, realizing the value of widening their social network to allow for more socio-economic opportunities. Daniel, however, noted that seeing other North Koreans succeed might also have adverse effects, inducing feelings of envy and loss of self-confidence

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, this observation does not necessarily bring much inductive weight, since my informants probably wouldn’t have agreed to meet with me (an outsider) in the first place if they felt otherwise.

among struggling refugees. In this sense, the competitive environment in South Korea creates not only a split between South and North Koreans; the North Korean refugee community is also split between those who succeed and those who struggle adapting to the socio-economic expectations of South Korean society. It is likely this last group of neglected refugees that Bell (2013a) is referring to when professing his concerns about the formation of a North Korean enclave community. Nevertheless, Bidet (2009) seems to verify my initial findings, contending that North Koreans do not seem to have intense relations with their own ethnic group. He is of the opinion that many refugees, in their willingness to escape and forget what reminds them about their country, are likely to refrain from socializing with others like them (Bidet, 2009:167).

Regardless, whether trying to associate more with their own kin or not, refugees seem to be at a disadvantage due to the nature of social relations in South Korea. Yee (2000) writes about a tendency of “homophily” in South Korean networks, referring to the homogenous association with the lines of sex, age, and region. This amounts to a pattern of primary solidarity, where interpersonal relations revolve around persons with similar background with regard to education, geographical origin, or kinship (Bidet, 2009; Yee, 2000). North Korean refugees are therefore de-facto excluded from this form of solidarity, as they are unable to enter the numerous and powerful South Korean networks based upon university and high school background, regional origin, and family ties – the exceptions being younger refugees who have had the opportunity to study in South Korea (as with the case of all my informants) or kept strong family ties with South Korean family members (Bidet, 2009:168). This strong in-group orientation in South Korean social networks can work against socio-economic integration of North Korean refugees, since they don’t have the same comparative advantages as South Koreans in terms of access to and mobilization of social capital.

## **5.6 Socio-economic marginalization**

To sum up, we see that North Korean refugees in South Korea face a range of integration challenges that are unique to their socio-political situation, as I have focused on their academic, professional, economic, and social disadvantages compared with the general population. The mobilization of cultural and social capital can prove vital in terms of facilitating one’s integration in a new country. This seems particularly evident in the case of North Korean refugees, as they experience a significant transition from the low-tech, collectivistic, and authoritative North to the high-tech, individualistic, and democratic South.

Unfortunately, most North Koreans struggle living up to the academic standards and professional qualifications required by modern society, finding their cultural capital depreciated and being excluded from influential social networks. Although North Korean refugees' socio-economic opportunities from the mobilization of cultural and social capital to some degree vary individually, we have seen that North Koreans share many characteristics due to their similar preconditions. In this way, they are put at a competitive disadvantage in South Korea, leaving them at risk of becoming socio-economically marginalized among their southern kin – a group which is considerably more privileged, possessing high-value cultural and social capital by default, and having more knowledge of and experience with how to best access and make use of such capital in the local (South Korean) context.

In his book on migration and minorities, Grønhaug (1979) explains how members of a minority group become disadvantaged in society because their culture and inherent social qualifications are not acknowledged – a state which he refers to as being “culturally disqualified”. Considering how North Korean refugees' cultural and social capital is deemed either irrelevant or insufficient by the competitive standards of South Korea, it seems appropriate to relate the situation of these refugees to that of being culturally disqualified. However, this cultural disqualification comes not only due to the lack of competitive skills and personal resources (cultural and social capital). Ultimately, it is the stigmatization of North Korean refugees as a distinct people that exacerbates their disqualification from society, which I will return to later in the upcoming chapter.

## 6 IDENTITY AND STIGMA

Traditionally, Koreans have prized ethnical homogeneity and shown a degree of xenophobia toward foreigners (Han, 2012; Kim, 2014). This sort of ethnic nationalism needs to be understood in its historical context, having been fueled by envy and hatred against past colonial powers, in particular Japan. Yet, having become a rather diverse country with the continuous inflow of migrant workers along with foreign students and businesspeople, South Korea can hardly be considered an ethnically homogenous country any longer (Sung and Go, 2014). Han (2012), thus, argues that South Korean society today is a multicultural society without any history of multiculturalism. Although Koreans on both side of the divide share the same ethnicity and cultural traditions, the historical division that happened 70 years ago, and continued hostilities on the peninsula, has created palpable resentment among most South Koreans toward North Korea. Unfortunately, this also leaves the North Korean people susceptible to such resentment – idealistic and hopeful refugees not necessarily being any exception. In this chapter, I will discuss the social prejudice surrounding North Korean refugees and the implications of their imputed social categories.

As I analyze this in a theoretical context, I will approach my second research question: *how do North Korean refugees in South Korea experience social prejudice, and how does this affect their daily lives?* By applying Goffman’s theorization on social identity and stigma, I intend to explore social stigma and demonstrate various forms of stigma management among North Korean refugees. Consequently, I will argue that North Korean refugees in South Korea much resemble that of a stigmatized and socio-economically disadvantaged minority group, finding themselves culturally disqualified from an overbearing and indifferent South Korean society.

### 6.1 Social prejudice

Among a population of 51 million people, there are approximately 1.4 million foreign workers and students in South Korea today (Korean Statistical Information Service, 2017). Compared to these figures, the numbering 30 000 North Korean refugees who have been granted citizenship in South Korea seem relatively insignificant. Nevertheless, as Bidet points out:

Given the generous support system initially set up by the South Korean government toward defectors, and given the strong ideological bipolarization of the Korean peninsula, such an influx poses a delicate and potentially explosive challenge for South Korean public spending (Bidet, 2009:156).

In this way, the exclusive government support provided to North Korean refugees has been known to induce envy and dissatisfaction among some South Koreans, feeling unfairly treated in comparison with North Korean refugees who are backed by a seemingly generous taxpayer funded welfare system they themselves don't have access to (O, 2011).

Along with the perceptions that North Koreans have comparative advantages in terms of adapting to South Korean society, these factors have created high social expectations of refugees among South Koreans. Despite their extraordinary experience of hardship both in the course of escaping from North Korea and during transit through third countries, refugees are expected to quickly integrate into the South Korean society and detach themselves from government support (Sung and Go, 2014). As Daniel so neatly illustrated, South Korea's expectations of refugees seem to be anchored in a mentality relating to the proverb: "when in Rome, do as the Romans do". Interestingly, I heard one of my South Korean friends cite the exact same line when explaining her stance toward the resettlement of North Korean refugees, subsequently asking me: "wouldn't South Koreans be required to do the same in North Korea if the roles were reversed?".

As for my own observations regarding attitudes toward refugees among South Koreans, I didn't come across anyone harboring particularly ill feelings toward North Korean refugees. However, I was often met with remarks signifying a feeling of indifference and lack of knowledge on the situation of refugees living in South Korea. Most South Koreans that I approached seemed surprised to see a foreigner in their country doing research on North Korean refugees. In fact, a lot of the time I was met with "why?" questions, as soon as I told them about my research, implying that I could spend my time doing something more worthwhile in South Korea.

Most South Koreans I talked with had never *intentionally* interacted with North Koreans before<sup>16</sup>, which seemed to contribute to a certain feeling of indifference toward refugees. On the other hand, those who had experienced such encounters or had North Korean

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<sup>16</sup> There is, however, a large possibility they have met and interacted with North Koreans unknowingly at some point, since refugees tend to make efforts to blend in and act like South Koreans. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

friends, even, were much more likely to express positive attitudes toward them. Nevertheless, in terms of what we know about the disadvantaged situation of refugees in South Korea through official statistics and extensive research, the level of ignorance among South Koreans was high. This may reflect a general lack of awareness on this topic, although NGOs, media, and scholars continue to promote awareness through public conferences, rallies, news articles, and research.

In 2013, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies did a poll regarding public attitudes among South Koreans toward North Korean refugees – the results of which seem to reflect my own observations. When public attitude was compared with immigrant groups from USA, China and Japan, the favorability rating of North Korean refugees was only slightly more positive than those from USA, followed by China a bit further down the line, and lastly Japan. In terms of age, older generations were the ones least likely to have any positive opinion of North Korean refugees (52.6%), whereas the younger generation were most likely to have positive sentiment toward them (65.6%) (Kim, 2014). And as Kim further remarks, while the proportion of “don’t know” answers was relatively high (up to 19%), it is still surprising to see how the South Korean youth seems to be the most welcoming toward refugees, despite their distant memory and weak ethnic identity of belonging to one, extended Korea. Specifically, the younger generation tends to feel more disconnected with North Korea as a country, but have an easier time sympathizing with its people (Kim et al., 2015). This generational difference is likely due to the 70 years of division between the two Koreas. The younger generation of South Koreans no longer consider North Koreans as part of the same nation, and are more inclined to consider the prospect of future unification an economic liability.

Thus, having to deal with a host population that lacks interest in and knowledge about North Korean refugees, in addition to overcoming the high social expectations of South Korean society, North Korean refugees have become susceptible to popular stereotypes. Examples include statements such as being “heavy drinkers, prone to crime, shirking work and relying on state handouts” (ICG, 2011). Lankov (2006) also mentions similar stereotypes, referring to an article from 2004 by the daily *Dong-A Ilbo*, which published a list of alleged misperceptions about refugees in an effort to promote awareness about the derogatory stereotypes of North Korean refugees. This list included statements such as:

“The financial assistance to the defectors is too large”; “My tax money is spent on the defectors”; “Defectors do not pay taxes themselves”; “Defectors are largely involved

in criminal activities”; “There are spies among the defectors”; “Only useless people defect from the North”; “What do we get by accepting defectors?” (Lankov, 2006:125).

Nevertheless, it’s important to note that in addition to the stereotypes surrounding North Koreans, they themselves are also likely to harbor prejudiced ideas about South Koreans. One of the first things pointed out to me by my informants was the coldness of South Korean society. As Gary said: “In North Korea, everyone knows their neighbor. Here, everyone thinks only about themselves”. In North Korea, neighborhoods function as tight-knit communities, where people help each other and share meals in both good and bad times. In South Korea, however, this community mentality has died out over time, particularly in the bigger cities. Sarah said that “South Koreans don’t know how to be grateful”, referring to the relative affluence of South Koreans, most of whom have never experienced real hunger or hard labor before. Jenny also said that “North Koreans are more honest than South Koreans”, referring to South Koreans’ relatively indirect way of talking, which I mentioned earlier. She felt that South Koreans tended to use “white lies” a lot in order to avoid uncomfortable situations, making it hard to read their actual intentions. North Koreans, on the other hand, were according to Jenny much more straight-forward and honest about their feelings.

## **6.2 Virtual and actual social identity**

Although I have argued for the use of “refugee” in this paper, it’s important to note that all of the various terms used to describe displaced North Koreans are social categories used to define a group of people. Whether one is more accurate than the other depends on the context; governments and human rights organizations are for example more likely to consider North Koreans’ political status or motives for migration for the purposes of categorization, resulting in terms like “refugees”, “defectors”, and “migrants” being used interchangeably.

Along with the different terms used to describe North Korean refugees that I mentioned in **Chapter 1**, it’s important to remember that these categorizations can inhibit some adverse connotations, creating disputes between the categorized and the categorizers. According to Goffman (1963), this discrepancy, when known about or apparent, spoils the social identity of the categorized. To elaborate on this further, I will build on Goffman’s theorization of social stigma and identity.



Social stigma can broadly be understood as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963:9). It involves a form of disapproval of, or discontent with, a person or a group on socially characteristic grounds that distinguish them from other members of society (Schaefer, 2012). According to Goffman’s theory, social stigma arises in the gap between *virtual social identity* and *actual social identity*. “Virtual social identity” can be understood as the ascribed identity, a characterization based on certain assumptions we are led to have regarding the individual or group in question, whereas “actual social identity” constitutes the category and attributes an individual or group could in fact be proved to possess. This gap then manifests itself as an attribute, behavior, or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way, causing an individual to be mentally classified by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one (Goffman, 1963:11-12).

The different categorizations of North Korean refugees, their social categories, all have certain connotations, or meanings, attached to them in order to make sense to people. In other words, we produce associations in the meeting with new categories and ascribe them a set of expected attributes or characteristics, or, using Goffman’s term, impute a “virtual social identity” to the category in question. As such, any type of categorization imposes a certain amount of discretion on the categorizer, since it can grow into stereotypes if done haphazardly. For example, although I have argued for the use of the term “refugee” in this paper, many people might associate this term with someone who is helpless and an economic burden, or argue that it has some sort of expiration date to it (is a North Korean who has lived in South Korea half his/her life just as much a refugee as a recent arrival?). However, based on their current socio-political situation and dominant motives for migration, I nevertheless believe “refugee” to be the most appropriate among international terms to refer to North Koreans who have found their way to South Korea.

While the use of social categories naturally depends on the purpose of categorization, I found that my informants were likely to use a wider range of social categories than people outside the North Korean community. As it was, my informants would themselves often use the Korean term *Talbukja*<sup>17</sup> (탈북자), meaning “North Korean defectors”, when referring to their socio-political status as a nationality group in South Korea. I also heard the term *Minjok* (민족) being used in some cases, which in this context refers to a “nation people”, emphasizing their unity as a people with distinct roots and values.

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<sup>17</sup> This is the most common term used in South Korea to distinguish between the people of North Korea and those who have fled to South Korea.

However, when informants talked about other North Koreans casually in a non-political context, they were more likely to simply refer to them as exactly that – “North Koreans”, paying no regard to their own socio-political categorization. Daniel mentioned he had also heard the term *Ggamagwi* (까마귀), meaning “black crows”, being used among North Koreans to distinguish themselves from South Koreans. When I inquired about its symbolic meaning, however, Daniel said he didn’t know, and I was unable to verify its usage among my other informants. Apart from Sarah, who confessed to a sort of dual-identity, proudly calling herself South Korean, while at the same time publicizing her background as a North Korean, all of my informants maintained their North Korean identity with (hidden)<sup>18</sup> pride – pointing to their hometown, ancestry, and distinctive mindset as their main identifiers.

We see then, that there exist a range of different categorizations to describe North Koreans in South Korea; some are used by the South Korean community (often along with the North Korean community), others by the international community, and some are used exclusively within the North Korean community. No matter which social category we use to define North Koreans in South Korea, there will likely always be certain associations following the term. Thus, being aware of the different social categories and the connotations attached to them is important, since it allows us to see the status and identity of refugees from several perspectives, which can help clarify common misconceptions we might have of them.

Still, the apparent lack of knowledge (and interest) about North Korean refugees among the South Korean population is an issue, since it’s detrimental to social inclusion – an essential part in improving refugees’ integration to South Korean society (Um et al., 2015). Realizing this, scholars and NGOs have raised concerns, urging for the education of South Koreans to become accepting hosts and media to create public awareness. A notable example of such attempts, is the Korean TV show “Now on My Way to Meet You” (이제 만나러 갑니다), which aired its first episode in 2011. This TV show features North Korean refugees on a weekly basis, mingling serious discussion with both comedy sketches and talent performances. Its aim is to promote awareness and mediate prejudices and misunderstandings between South Koreans and North Koreans. In this way, it serves as an important counterbalance to mainstream media’s generally unfavorable portrayal of North Korea; instead of focusing on stories on the Kim regime’s aggressive war rhetoric, the show highlights positive aspects and strengths of North Korean refugees.

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<sup>18</sup> A result of stigma management, which will be discussed in more detail in upcoming sub-chapters.

When I spoke with Daniel about this show, however, he seemed a bit more skeptical, saying it can also provoke envy and distrust among refugees who are struggling to get by, since it tends to feature those who are the most outgoing and successful. He also mentioned it can make refugees get carried away with their stories for publicity purposes, resulting in exaggerations and sometimes intentional falsifications.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, promoting public awareness and encouraging interpersonal relationships with refugees is an important step in rectifying possible misconceptions we might have about them. By connecting North and South Koreans, refugees are provided with opportunities to highlight their “actual social identity”, as opposed to their ascribed “virtual social identity”, helping bridge the gap Goffman argues is the root cause of stigmatization.

### **6.3 Discredibility and stigma management**

Bridging the cultural and social gaps between North and South Koreans is, however, a task easier said than done. As explained earlier, South Korea’s resettlement policies have been criticized for their approach of assimilating refugees and shaping them into South Korean citizens, encouraging social conformity rather than diversity. In other words, North Korean refugees are expected to blend in and abide by the socio-cultural norms of South Korean society, behaving and talking like their southern peers, despite their inherent cultural differences. This has resulted in a particular kind of stigma management among refugees, which I now will apply Goffman’s theoretical concepts to analyze.

Building on the concepts of social identity, Goffman differentiates between what he calls the “discredited” and the “discreditable”. He explains that an individual whose discrepancy in actual social identity and the virtual one is already known about, or immediately evident upon interaction, can be called a “discredited person”, whereas a person whose differentness is not immediately apparent or known about beforehand might be called a “discreditable person” (Goffman, 1963:86).

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<sup>19</sup> I was for example told about a North Korean refugee who on the show told stories about her life growing up in Pyongyang, whereas she in reality came from North Hamgyong province. It was therefore highly unlikely she knew anything at all about life in Pyongyang from first-hand experiences. Human rights activists Dong-hyuk Shin and Yeon-mi Park, both North Korean refugees, are also known to have reported inconsistent or false stories – stories that the global media were quick to share. Whether their reasons for this were publicity, public pressure, fuzzy memories, or omission due to painful memories, remains another topic and will not be discussed here. What we do know, however, is that North Korea still lingers on as a country ridden with human rights atrocities and food insecurity (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2014). Moreover, the negative portrayal of a few well-known North Korean refugees in media is not very constructive in terms of social bridging, leaving the North Korean refugee population as a whole susceptible to further stigmatization.

Using these terms in the context of North Korean refugees, the majority of them are at risk of starting off as discredited individuals upon arrival in South Korea, due to their relatively apparent discrepancies in behavior and speech when compared with South Koreans. Specifically, what they share in ethnicity they deviate from in demeanor. However, this discrepancy is slowly grinded away through the re-education at Hanawon, where they are encouraged to discard their past ties and gradually immerse into South Korean society. In this way, North Korean refugees go from being discredited to discreditable individuals, as their differentness compared with South Koreans becomes near indiscernible.

This management of (perceived) stigma allows refugees to go unnoticed among what Goffman refers to as “normals” (Goffman, 1963:15), namely those who do not possess the particular stigma in question. The difference between discredited and discreditable individuals is important to note, because it allows for a more in-depth analysis of stigma management when interacting with normals. Whereas a discredited person is likely to deal with various forms of “tension control” during social contact with normals, a discreditable person is likely to deal with “information control” in order to avoid awkward encounters or shift the focus away from the discreditable attributes in question. As for the latter example of the discreditable person, this type of management of undisclosed discrediting information about self is what Goffman refers to as “passing” (Goffman, 1963:58).

Passing in public is naturally dependable upon the visibility of an individual’s stigma, as well as the social information, that is, his identifiable characteristics, which he carries. Where tacitness is not enough to avoid disclosure of potentially discrediting information, symbols conveying social information might be applied instead, such as stigma symbols (e.g. dialects) and prestige symbols (e.g. brand clothing) (Goffman, 1963:60). In the case of North Korean refugees, their inherent advantage of sharing ethnicity and base language with South Koreans allow them to pass relatively easily, unless they give up some clues to their actual identity, accidentally or intentionally, or are directly confronted with it. Information control is therefore a very common type of stigma management applied by refugees in order to avoid disclosure of potentially discrediting attributes. Not only do they tend to withhold personal information about themselves when interacting with normals, they also apply what Goffman calls “disidentifiers”, effectively hiding their actual identities.

Disidentifiers are signs used to break up an otherwise coherent picture of themselves, although in a positive direction desired by the actor, thereby casting doubts on the validity of their allotted virtual social identity (Goffman, 1963:60). Any disidentifier used by North Korean refugees naturally aims to make them blend in as much as possible among South

Koreans. This is not only due to the encouragement (and training) from resettlement professionals working with refugees; it is also a result of South Korea's competitive society, which sets the same expectations for refugees as the general population. In other words, complying with South Korean standards is beneficial in every aspect related to socio-economic success for North Korean refugees.

The most common disidentifier is their adoption of the South Korean standard "Seoul dialect", which they learn in one of the many Hanawon classes they are required to take. By applying this disidentifier, refugees discard their potentially discreditable North Korean dialect in favor of the more empowering South Korean one, allowing themselves to pass as any ordinary Southerner. It also reduces the potential for misunderstandings, since few South Koreans are particularly familiar with the North Korean dialect. Using my informants as examples, almost all of them would use the standard Seoul dialect in daily life, unless they were talking with other North Koreans in private or over the phone. Hannah was the only exception, saying she was tired of feeling the pressure to hide her North Korean origins, and would therefore often deliberately use her natural North Korean dialect among South Koreans. This was her way of showing resistance toward South Korea's assimilation approach that aims to "turn North Koreans into South Koreans", using Hannah's own words.

Other disidentifiers are for example found in North Korean refugees' consumption of beauty and material products, applying prestige symbols which help project an image of themselves as modern South Koreans, such as hair and make-up style, fashionable clothes, and new electronic appliances. In terms of consumption, nothing seemed to set my informants apart from the average South Korean, all of whom seemed well-versed within the South Korean consumer culture. This might be explained by considering the growth of the informal economy in North Korea, where the prevalence of Jangmadang activity has given rise to an individualistic and capitalistic mindset among many North Koreans, particularly the younger generation. When I asked Sarah about the role of Jangmadang in terms of facilitating the resettlement of refugees, she argued that it played a major role; she was just one of many North Koreans who had familiarized themselves with the value of money and trade secrets, and learned how to become independent before coming to South Korea.

Nevertheless, despite these perceived advantages, it should be noted that all of my informants experienced initial difficulties adjusting to South Korea's comparatively advanced market economy. This is also reported by Sohn (2013), who did an in-depth study on young North Korean refugees' adaptation to South Korea's consumer society, writing that most of

her participants found themselves lost among the massive variety of new and unfamiliar products and deceptive advertisements:

The participants also suffered from the lack of knowledge about money transactions, credit, and financial systems. Most of them did not have an appropriate understanding of the value of the Korean currency and lacked consumer competence to manage money. They did not know what would be reasonable prices for specific goods and overspent, especially when they first arrived in South Korea (Sohn, 2013:120-121).

The extent to which North Koreans refugees wish to keep their backgrounds hidden, of course, varies from person to person. However, the majority of them seem to manage their stigma at a daily basis through passing and information control (apart from those who intentionally admit their stigma)<sup>20</sup>, a practice which is taught as soon as they enter Hanawon. Looking at the examples mentioned above, we see that it often takes some time for North Korean refugees to learn how to pass successfully.

Goffman explains that in cases where attempts at passing fails or become too difficult, another possibility is to present the signs of the stigmatized failings as signs of another attribute, one that is less significantly a stigma. In this way, a person whose lack of experience with a seemingly familiar device or cultural norms might pass his apparent ignorance in a style of conduct similar to one who is indifferent or simply too tired to try, thereby choosing “the lesser of two evils” (Goffman, 1963:117). This is often seen with North Korean refugees who in the beginning of their resettlement process struggle adapting to South Korea’s high-tech consumer society; not knowing how to use modern technical devices or spending money in an irregular way can be quite revealing sometimes.

I particularly remember one story that Sarah told me, regarding her first experience with a public western-style toilet – the design of which completely baffled her.<sup>21</sup> Not realizing she was supposed to flip down the toilet ring and sit down, she instead climbed on top of it and squatted down as she normally would in North Korea and China. As Sarah was struggling to keep her balance, a cleaning lady outside heard the unusual racket coming from the bathroom and came in to check on her. Knocking on the bathroom door and looking underneath, she immediately recognized the problem and asked the distressed lady inside

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<sup>20</sup> I will go into more detail on this group in the following section on tension control and covering.

<sup>21</sup> North Korea and China generally use squatting toilets, whereas western-style toilets are quite commonplace in South Korea, particularly in Seoul.

(Sarah) to sit down like regular people do. Sarah, realizing her awkward mistake, subsequently climbed down from the toilet, and excused herself by answering in Chinese to avoid further embarrassment.

Other cases of North Korean refugees using various means to lead attention away from their stigmatized failings include those who struggle adopting the Seoul dialect. In these situations, if their somewhat unusual accent is brought up during a conversation, they are likely to try to pass as South Koreans who come from the countryside far from Seoul. Furthermore, refugees have also been known to cite general medical reasons to excuse cases of absence at the work place, as mentioned earlier, when in fact they might be struggling psychologically and competitively, due to mental trauma, stress, and high performance pressure.

#### **6.4 Tension control and covering**

Goffman explains that if a discredited person is ready to admit possession of a stigma, for example when it is known about or immediately apparent, he may nonetheless make effort to conceal it somewhat through the act of “covering” – an act of reducing the “visibility” of the stigma, making it less “obtrusive” and easier to disattend (Goffman, 1963:125).

My informants would always use the Seoul dialect around me, whether being in the presence of South Koreans or not. Sarah told me the reason for this was mainly due to her having lived in South Korea for almost 10 years, so the Seoul dialect came more naturally to her. Even when talking with her best friend (another North Korean girl who had lived in Seoul for about the same amount of time), they would both speak with a spotless Seoul dialect. Jenny, on the other hand, told me the reason she refrained from using her natural North Korean dialect during our meetings was simply to make herself accurately understood. This can, however, also be regarded as an act of “covering”, which Goffman explains aims to reduce tension and make it easier for a discredited individual and observing people to withdraw covert attention from the stigma, thus facilitating the social interaction at hand for all actors involved (Goffman, 1963:126).

The fact that all my informants used their adopted Seoul dialect often made me forget I was talking with refugees from another country, their overall demeanor being more or less indistinguishable from that of South Koreans. However, although sharing ethnicity with South Koreans and having the ability to hide their North Korean identity through information management, some discrepancies may remain constant due to their physical nature and

obtrusiveness. For example, in terms of height, taller men and women are idealized in South Korean popular culture. This rarely favors North Koreans, who tend to have smaller physical builds than the average South Korean, many of whom have experienced severe food shortage first-hand and grown up in a resource-deprived and arduous environment (Sung and Go, 2014).

During my group interview with the North Korean girls, I noticed early on that many were significantly shorter compared with South Korean girls their age. One girl stood out in particular; standing just shy of 1.50 meters tall, she showed me her small, yet incredibly muscular, hands – a testimony of her tough upbringing, being used to doing tasks requiring heavy labor from an early age on. She then explained how she would get looked down upon in North Korea due to her short stature, without having the means to hide her apparent discrepancy. In South Korea, however, she could at least wear shoes with high heels or use sole implants in order to compensate for her relatively short height.

Similarly, I remember one of my regular meetings with Jenny where I saw her walking into the coffee shop where I was waiting – all of a sudden wearing a snapback cap. Hiding under the cap were no less than 30 acne patches stuck to her face; Jenny had recently been at a clinic for aesthetic mole removal and laser treatment. She explained to me how North Koreans tend to get more moles than South Koreans because they often have to work outside in the sun, but don't have any decent skin creams to use. This troubled her, as she was about to start her university studies as a freshman soon, and didn't want to stick out too much among her South Korean classmates. In this way, Jenny's self-consciousness about her own appearance had led her to pay a substantial amount of money for a facial beauty procedure as a way to cover her "differentness".

These girls are among several North Koreans who are at greater risk of stigmatization due to the obtrusiveness of their (perceived) discrepancies. Consequently, no matter how well they deal with stigma management as discreditable individuals through information control, they may also have to deal with the stigma management of the discredited individual through tension control. This tension control can be done by covering, as the girls I just mentioned did, restricting the way in which a known-about attribute obtrudes itself into the center of attention.

Another instance of covering can be found in cases where an individual's birth name can be subject to scrutiny. It is not uncommon for North Korean refugees to take on additional names (aliases) in public life and on social media. These names can be both South Korean and English, and are used both for the purpose of blending in and for privacy reasons, effectively



covering their personal identity. Many of my informants used such aliases regularly, although most introduced themselves with their real names when we first met.

Finally, it should also be noted that “withdrawal” can also be seen as a mode of covering. This is because a discredited or discreditable individual may attempt to steer away from situations he feels uncomfortable or unsure with, thereby protecting his privacy and containing his stigma within a controllable setting. This sort of withdrawal is very common among North Korean refugees, making the majority of their population in South Korea very hard to approach for outsiders, as I explained earlier in **Chapter 2**.

## **6.5 Stigmatization and cultural disqualification**

To conclude, we see that the social prejudice North Korean refugees experience is bound in not only historical and political factors, but also in South Korea’s approach of socio-cultural assimilation, combined with a lack of awareness and interest in the North Korean refugee situation among the general population. In this way, refugees’ own social identity has become repressed, widening the gap between their *actual* and *virtual* social identity, creating room for a social stigma to grow. Moreover, in order to live up to the expectations of South Korean society, they are encouraged to hide their stigma instead of confronting it. This has resulted in a widespread use of stigma management; first encouraged and taught by resettlement professionals, various forms of stigma management are soon adjusted and perfected by North Koreans themselves to suit their individual needs and situations. Thus, considering their susceptibility to social prejudice and daily use of stigma management strategies, I find that North Korean refugees much resemble that of a stigmatized minority group in South Korea.

In the previous chapter, I touched upon how members of a minority group become “culturally disqualified” from society when their culture and inherent social qualifications are not acknowledged. As opposed to disqualification based on one’s distinct cultural and social capital, which to some degree can be individually regulated, disqualification based on social stigma is for the most part outside of one’s control. South Korea’s community of North Korean refugees is no different, whose depreciation ultimately stems from their possession of an unfavorable social stigma. As a stigmatized and socio-economically disadvantaged minority group, they find themselves culturally disqualified from an overbearing and indifferent South Korean society, ultimately leading refugees to spend a lot of time on stigma management as a means to elevate their social status and even out their competitive unfavourability.

## 7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to explore the transitional challenges North Korean refugees experience in South Korea, as they are assimilated into an unexpectedly alien society – tackling issues of both socio-economic depreciation and stigmatization. In this manner, I focused attention mainly on the following questions:

- 1) What are the reasons for, and implications of, North Korean refugees' socio-economic disadvantaged position in South Korea?
- 2) How do North Korean refugees in South Korea experience social prejudice, and how does this affect their daily lives?

In order to answer these questions, I arranged two separate field trips to Seoul, South Korea, which included meeting and conducting interviews with North Korean informants. Here, I was told stories of their lives in North Korea and experiences with resettling in South Korea. This included motivations for escaping North Korea, the sudden meeting with South Korea's integration policies and its high expectations, difficulties with language, struggles with obtaining a competitive education and finding jobs, and dealing with stigmatization. I also combined my study with empirical evidence through literature review. As such, this paper is based on data from published research material and official statistics, seen in relation with qualitative data collected by the author through ethnographic research methods.

### 7.1 Summary

**Chapter 1** served as an introduction to the research topic of this paper and provided some contextual background related to North Korean refugees in South Korea. I explained the many categorizations of North Koreans who have left their country for various reasons, and presented arguments for the use of the term “refugees”, instead of “defectors” or “migrants”. Subsequently, I described the competitiveness of South Korean society and its implications, looking at issues of performance pressure and depression. Finally, I gave a brief outline of North Korean refugees in South Korea and its public resettlement program, before discussing some limitations of doing research on topics related to North Korea and its refugee population.

In **Chapter 2**, I introduced my field site and informants, before describing how I carried out my field work. After explaining my methodological approach, which was based on mainly ethnographic research methods, I discussed relevant contextual considerations and possible limitations, such as the challenges of doing fieldwork in a large urban environment and connecting with North Korean informants. Furthermore, I discussed how positionalities of the author, study participants, and third party interpreters affect not only the production and interpretation of data, but also access to informants, and the reliability and validity of collected data.

**Chapter 3** provided a historical and contextual background of North Korea, where I explained its traditional socio-political system, how the economic situation has changed over the last years, and discussed the implications of this transformation. Here, we saw how the collapse of the central distribution system following “the great famine” of the mid-1990s led people to find new ways of sustaining themselves. Women, in particular, was on the forefront of this economic transition, as they led the development of informal markets (Jangmadang) around the country. This created what is often called the “Jangmadang Generation”, referring to the younger generation who grew up in the wake of North Korea’s economic collapse. Due to their exposure to underground capitalism and increased access to outside information through smuggled goods, they tend to be more individualistic and opportunistic, showing little or no devotion to the Kim regime’s political doctrine.

In **Chapter 4**, my aim was to draw a general outline of present-day refugees from North Korea, focusing on their contextual situation as refugees prior to arrival in South Korea. First, I explained the most common migration routes chosen by North Koreans, along with their challenges and dangers. Afterwards, I provided some insight into their demographical characteristics and main motivations for migration. In this way, we were able to identify some general trends of North Korean refugees in terms of geographical origin and socio-economic status. Furthermore, we could clarify that most North Koreans are in fact motivated by economic and opportunistic reasons to escape their home country, augmented by an increasing feeling of relative deprivation.

**Chapter 5** gave an illustration of the transitional challenges North Korean refugees often face when resettling in South Korea, focusing on competitive disadvantages relative to the general population. By discussing this in relation to the acquirement and mobilization of cultural and social capital, we saw how South Koreans are in a comparatively privileged socio-economic situation, as they not only possess high-value cultural and social capital by

default, but also have more knowledge of and experience with how to best access and make use of such capital in the local context.

Finally, in **Chapter 6**, I discussed the social prejudice surrounding North Korean refugees and the implications of their imputed social categories. Here, I found that they are likely subject to stigmatization, owing to historical and socio-political factors, as well as a general feeling of indifference and lack of awareness among South Koreans regarding the troubled situation of North Korean refugees. This was further demonstrated by an analysis of their widespread use of stigma management, which is first taught and encouraged by resettlement professionals, before being adjusted and perfected by North Koreans themselves to suit their individual needs and situations.

## **7.2 Conclusion**

North Korean refugees in South Korea represent members of a minority population who find themselves in a rather precarious situation. Around 20 years ago, the unique contextual setting surrounding the sudden arrival of an increasing number of North Korean refugees led South Korea to quickly develop a custom-fit integration program to accommodate them. With respect to historical and socio-political factors, this public integration program has experienced quite a few bumps on the road; after all, the Korean peninsula is still characterized by its geo-political and ideological polarization after 70 years of division.

Although South Korea's integration approach is considered well-adapted and generous by many, in particular South Koreans, this paper has shown that North Korean refugees experience several unforeseen challenges when resettling in the "promised land of the South". The unexpected reality of South Korean society comes as a shock to many refugees, experiencing initial problems with language and struggling with the sudden burden of responsibility. Furthermore, by looking at statistics related to depression, school dropouts, and unemployment among North Korean refugees, we gain a clearer picture of how they are at a competitive disadvantage compared with the majority population in South Korea.

The reasons for their socio-economic disadvantaged position can be explained by using Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of cultural and social capital. As demonstrated in **Chapter 5**, not only do North Korean refugees find their cultural capital and social capital depreciated, they also have a much harder time accessing and mobilizing such capital compared with South Koreans – a group which is considerably more privileged, possessing high-value cultural and social capital by default, and having more knowledge of and

experience with how to best access and make use of such capital in the local (South Korean) context.

Furthermore, in addition to their depreciation of cultural and social capital, North Korean refugees are also susceptible to social prejudice in South Korea. As explained in **Chapter 6**, South Koreans generally show both lack of awareness and interest in the North Korean refugee situation. South Korea, although having become a multicultural society, still lacks the history of multiculturalism. As such, South Korean society is characterized by its appraisal of homogeneity, which is bound in a strong sense of nationalism. North Koreans, although sharing ethnicity with South Koreans, are not exempt from this exclusivist mindset, which puts the South Korean government in an awkward position, since it is bound to maintain its political fiction of “one Korea”. This is further reflected by its custom-fit integration policy, which, resembling more that of an assimilation approach, aims to shape North Korea refugees into South Korean citizens, promoting social conformity rather than encouraging diversity.

Thus, the social prejudice North Korean refugees experience is bound in not only historical and political factors, but also in South Korea’s approach of socio-cultural assimilation. Combined with a lack of awareness and interest in the North Korean refugee situation among the general population, North Korean refugees are expected to abide by the socio-cultural norms and values of South Korean society, essentially letting go of their past ties and becoming more like South Koreans. In this way, refugees’ own social identity has become repressed, widening the gap between their *actual* and *virtual* social identity. This gap has allowed room for a social stigma to grow, which is further demonstrated by the widespread use of stigma management among refugees.

To sum up, this paper finds that North Korean refugees in South Korea much resemble that of a socio-economically disadvantaged and stigmatized minority group, hindering their effective resettlement process and creating serious challenges for policy makers. Considering how North Korean refugees’ cultural and social capital is deemed either irrelevant or insufficient, they seem to be in a situation where they are culturally disqualified, finding their culture and inherent social qualifications depreciated by the competitive standards of South Korean society. However, this cultural disqualification comes not only due to the lack of competitive skills and personal resources (cultural and social capital); ultimately, it is the stigmatization of North Korean refugees as a distinct people that exacerbates their disqualification from society. As opposed to disqualification based on one’s distinct cultural and social capital, which to some degree can be individually regulated, disqualification based

on social stigma is for the most part outside of one's control. Consequently, depreciated North Korean refugees employ a wide array of stigma management techniques, as a means to elevate their social status and even out their competitive unfavourability – openly hiding among the privileged “normals” of South Korea.

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