

“Strangers among kindred family”

A study of stigma, identity and consumption among North Korean defectors in South Korea



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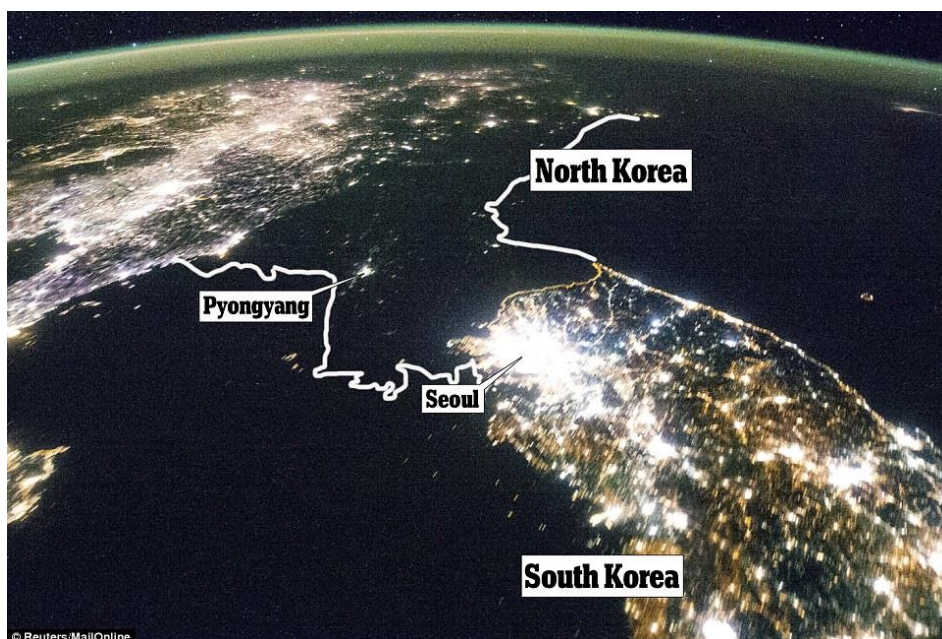
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is based on six months fieldwork from January to June 2014 in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. I got the opportunity to go back to South Korea in August 2015 where I met with some of my informants again. Although I did my fieldwork in South Korea, my informants were refugees from North Korea. As the last divided country in the world it was the basis of a very intriguing fieldwork. I spent my days with North Korean refugees living an urban life among the local population in Seoul.

It was during my exchange year in Bangkok, Thailand in 2012 that my interest for North Korea arose. I bought the award winning book “Nothing to Envy” by journalist Barbara Demick (2009) at a secondhand bookshop at the tropical island of Koh Phi Phi. In the book, Demick explains how North Koreans are told they have nothing to envy and that North Korea is the best country in the world. This statement can be juxtaposed with satellite images of an almost blackened North Korea surrounded by vast amounts of lights that illuminates neighboring countries of China, South Korea and Japan. That book was my motivation to learn more about refugees in general. What I had learned through media was little about the North Korean people and their situation. I wanted to try to understand their experience of being a refugee, and a citizen of South Korea. I shall discuss Demick’s book further in the paragraph “Previous research on the topic” below.



(Duell, 2014)

RESEARCH QUESTION

In this master thesis I want to explore the challenges North Korean defectors face being integrated into South Korean society. How do North Korean defectors overcome the obstacles of resettling in a new country, and at the same time deal with identity, establish networks and overcome possible stigmas? This thesis focuses on the everyday life of North Korean refugees living in urban areas in South Korea. I wanted to research identity and the social self, trying to capture this by looking at consumption and possible stigmas in the society. A central question is whether the new modern society, where the individual has fewer permanent attachments and more choices than ever before, leads to a greater understanding and depth of knowledge for the individual, or whether it leads to confusion and rootlessness.

In January 1997 the South Korean government enacted special laws, “Law for the Protection of and assistance to North Korean defectors”, concerning the increasing number of defectors from North Korea (Sohn, 2013, 112). South Korea has a very strict policy towards accepting refugees in general. In 2015, only 94 refugees out of 2900 applicants seeking asylum status were granted (Park Katrin 2015). But towards North Korean refugees South Korea is very accepting. According to article 3 of the South Korean constitution, all Koreans, including those who reside in the North, are South Korean citizens. In this sense defectors are not regarded as migrants, but as refugees from a nationalist or humanitarian point of view (Sohn, 2013, 112). South Korea does not recognize North Korea as a state, but simply considers it self-proclaimed and illegitimate. Although defectors are considered by law citizens of South Korea there is an on-going effort to turn them into South Korean “cultural citizens”, which has to be “obtained through the cultural practices that define cultural belonging” (Chung, 2008, 4).

Defectors will probably never be able to fully erase their “North Koreanness”, but I was interested in which steps they take to try to become modern citizens of Seoul, or if indeed this was something they wanted. Difficulties dealing with identity and belonging arise as they now are South Korean citizens on paper, but North Koreans by birth. According to sociologist Hae Yeon Choo, “North Korean settlers are expected to get rid of their ethnic markers and transform themselves into modern citizen-subjects of South Korea” (2006, 576). I want to see how modernity becomes a powerful ethnic marker separating North Koreans from South Koreans. Modernity can be thought of as the historical development from traditional societies,

to industrialization and capitalism, arriving at the current modern states characterized by globalization (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). People's living conditions, life paths and experiences change as a consequence of this development. Identity formation is no longer so easily available because:

Globalization, the decline of the welfare state, increasing social mobility, greater flexibility in employment, insecurity in personal relationships—all these developments are contributing to a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty (Buckingham, 2008, 1).

The International Crisis Group (ICG)¹ writes: “South Korea is prosperous and generous, with a committed government and civil society, and yet refugees from the North almost all fail to integrate or thrive” (2011, i).

DEFECTOR OR REFUGEE?

There are now over 26,000 North Korean defectors residing in South Korea. In 2013, 1,516 North Korean refugees came to South Korea, bringing the cumulative total to 26,124 by the end of December 2013 (Ministry of Unification, n.d. a). For varying reasons these people chose to flee North Korea, known as The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to The Republic of Korea (ROK), South Korea. Although this seems like a small number compared to the 24.5 million inhabitants residing in North Korea (Ministry of Unification n.d. b), fleeing North Korea is a testament to how the North Korean society and the Kim regime's policies work. This limited sample size of North Koreans living in South Korea today is an indication of the future to come. Defectors come from a country:

1

“The International Crisis Group is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict. The International Crisis Group is now generally recognized as the world's leading independent, non-partisan, source of analysis and advice to governments, and intergovernmental bodies like the United Nations, European Union and World Bank, on the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict” (ICG n.d.).

where an all-powerful bureaucracy makes almost all decisions about their lives; there is almost no choice in education, employment or even food. New arrivals describe a bewildering rush of modernity, consumption and choice that rapidly overwhelms them (ICG 2011, i).

These border crossers are called “defectors”. The word defector is a politically loaded term that may not be descriptive of the group of people escaping North Korea. A “‘defector’ is a person who does not return to his or her country for political reasons” (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 218). The word defector means someone who is politically disloyal to their country of origin. The very act of leaving North Korea without state permission is a political crime by law (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 218; Human Rights Watch n.d.). Only a handful of the most loyal citizens, usually the elite, are allowed to legally travel to another country. Fleeing their homeland is an extreme and dangerous step, but maybe not as dangerous as voicing complaint about the regime. Those who choose to speak against the state are perceived to show insufficient respect towards the state, leadership and the Korean Workers’ Party (Human Rights Watch n.d.). The citizens of North Korea are prisoners trapped inside the country and North Korea: “defies an international agreement it has pledged to uphold. The 1966 agreement says, ‘Everyone shall be free to leave any country, including his own.’” (Harden, 2012, 172-173).

The difference between a “defector” and a “refugee” is that a defector is a person who abandons his or her country or cause in favor for an opposing one, while a refugee is according to the 1951 United Nations Convention:

someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR 2010).

The definition of “defector” is not well suited for North Koreans who choose to escape North Korea for reasons other than political ones. Most North Koreans do not leave the country because they are politically dissatisfied, but for economic reasons. As I have learned through my informants, most of them look back nostalgically to North Korea, and many would love to move back as soon as the economic and human rights situation is improved. Some of them are keeping alive memories of better days, clinging to the hope of returning to their homeland, family and friends. My informants however could not see that unification would be realized in the nearest future. There is even a small number of North Korean defectors who are “re-

defecting” back to North Korea. This is a very interesting phenomenon, but unfortunately I do not have the room or information to discuss it further². Even if refugees have the capacity to “return,” they will find the place changed, themselves changed and, possibly, even those left behind changed.

The majority of those who escaped during the 1990s and 2000s were driven by hunger and destitution, looking for resources and food. They fled in order to improve their lives and some for bare survival. In migration studies there is the use of “push” and “pull” to understand why people migrate. There is something that “pushes” people from their homes, and something that “pulls” them to their new home. One of the factors may be economic migration, not having enough money, land, or food to eat. Others leave because they are not satisfied with their human rights, not being free to practice religion or freedom of speech. Some leave because of political migration, such as war and have to flee their homes for fear of being killed or imprisoned. Even though there are good reasons to leave, there are always good reasons to stay as well. The “pull” factors can include freedom to practice human rights, availability of work and a better quality of life.

Defectors were until 1997 called “gwisun” in South Korea, meaning “someone who had surrendered after seeing the light”. Later, it changed to “talbukja”, “those who have fled the North”, and then to “saetomin”, “people of a new land”/ “new settler” which is the official name used by the South Korean government. (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 219). I will be using the terms defector and refugee interchangeably throughout this paper in absence of better terms. I choose to use the term defector because it is the most frequently used term to describe North Korean border-crossers in an international context.

2

This is a very interesting phenomenon since these people have invested and sacrificed a lot leaving North Korea in the first place, so why are they defecting back? There is nobody except those who re-defect that know the reasons behind it, but there are many that speculate. Some think that it is because of either threats of harming, imprisoning or killing their families they left behind in North Korea. Others think it is because despite the South Korean government efforts, defectors cannot adapt to this new society and realize how far behind they are so they lose their motivation to stay (Herman, 2013; Spezza 2012; Hosaniak 2011).

STATISTICS ON NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS IN SOUTH KOREA

North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Year/ Classifi cation	~'98	~'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	합계 Total
Male	831	565	510	474	626	424	515	573	608	662	591	795	404	369	8,049
Female	116	478	632	811	1,272	960	1,513	1,981	2,195	2,252	1,811	1,911	1,098	1,145	18,668
Total	947	1,043	1,142	1,285	1,898	1,384	2,028	2,554	2,803	2,914	2,402	2,706	1,502	1,514	26,717

(Ministry of Unification, n.d. a)

Before the Korean War (1950-53), people from both nation states defected to the opposing one. Generally more people defected from the North. In earlier decades, defectors were celebrated as national heroes (“*yongsa*”) in South Korea, as it was military personnel or the Pyongyang elite³ who defected. They also had valuable information, higher education and better social skills, and thus they could adapt more easily to the South Korean society. These national heroes were presented in press conferences and used as internal propaganda during which they praised South Korea and criticized North Korea (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 220). With only a few “heroes” arriving in South Korea each year, they were no financial burden on the government. The South Korean government actively encouraged defection and showered successful defectors with monetary and non-monetary gifts.

By the early 2000s’ there were under a thousand defectors in total, but by the end of 2013 the total number was over 26,000, and is quickly approaching 30,000. After the floods and famine in the middle of the 1990s, the end of the Soviet Union’s subsidies, and Kim Jong-Il’s death in 1994, North Koreans began fleeing the country looking for food and resources.

3

“The elite population is defined as the several thousand top party, government and party officials living in Pyongyang” (Oh and Hassig, 2000, 37).

The demographics of the defectors have changed drastically. The number of defectors is growing, and people from all walks of life are defecting. Whereas in the past almost all were single adult males, women began to outnumber men in 2002, and this is still the case in 2014, with about 70% being female defectors (Ministry of Unification, n.d. a). The large number of women among defectors is mostly due to the societal structure in North Korea. In North Korea the man is the head of the family and is most likely to have state-assigned jobs to which they have to report (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 222). Women can move more freely, so it is easier for them to escape. In previous decades it was people with resources who defected North Korea, but now it is under- or unemployed workers, the unskilled, the uneducated, the farmers, housewives and “kochebi”⁴, not the Pyongyang elite that is defecting.

Annually there is an average of between 1,500-2,000 defectors arriving in South Korea. As the majority of defectors come from the three northernmost districts in North Korea it coincides with easier accessibility to border areas, politically the least “reliable” parts, poverty and their natural environment (Harden, 2012, 152). This will be explained in more detail in chapter three. As the number of incoming defectors is growing, and their political usefulness is diminishing, the attitudes towards defectors are changing. Defectors bring with them virtually no capital or material goods, and many have to start their lives from scratch. Now defectors are sometimes looked down upon as South Korean government freeloaders.

There are a few success stories, “but the heroes of almost all the “success stories” of North Korean defectors hail from the former elite, suggesting a close correlation between a person's position before defection and subsequent chances of success in the South” (Lankov, 2006, 12). I will be explaining in chapter three, how *songbun*⁵ affects a person’s adaptability in South Korea. North Korean defectors are granted certain benefits that other migrants do

4

Kochebi are usually orphaned children, either by parents who had passed away or were themselves out looking for food. They roam the streets looking for food and shelter. The term arose during the Great Famine, when kochebi started to appear on the streets *en masse*. There are still kochebi in North Korea. Sadly kochebis are most likely to never leave the country, and those who manage to do so tell tales of repatriation (Demick, 2010).

5

Songbun is the stratified socio-political class system according to which all North Koreans are ranked (Collins 2012).

not, to help them adapt to the South Korean society more easily (Choo 2006). Although it is a very generous government support system, “over the last decade this structure has undergone remarkable changes, the most important of which is a steady decline in generosity” (Lankov, 2006, 9).

The South Korean Ministry of Unification (MoU) has gone from a policy explicitly aimed at encouraging defection, to a policy of quietly discouraging it (Lankov, 2006). During the years of the “Sunshine Policy” during Kim Dae-Jung government (1998-2003) the official South Korean political attitude towards defectors changed. Seoul moved towards a policy of discouraging defection to keep a peaceful engagement with the North. The “Sunshine Policy” was a series of efforts to reconcile with North Korea. This culminated in reunions of the separated families of the Korean War and a summit talk with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il. For these efforts, Kim Dae-Jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

Not much is known about North Korea, and North Korean authorities have succeeded for many years to keep their border tightly shut for both people and information. We are now learning more about North Korea, mostly information coming from journalists, defectors, former diplomats and travelers. The study of North Korea is no longer unexplored territory, and over the past years there has been a significant increase of books published about North Korea (Armstrong 2011).

Most of the literature has been on the Kim regime and leadership, and has more of a political science feel to it. But still the volume of other works has produced a platform for analyses and observations, beyond what the mass media portrays (Armstrong 2011). Little has been written about the people of North Korea or about defectors, until recently. Even though restrictions prohibit foreigners to access North Korea, the large community of defectors living outside of North Korea offers an invaluable insight and knowledge for understanding life in North Korea.

Fieldwork and other first-hand research is mostly impossible for outsiders to do. There is not much academic work done, meaning work done by intellectuals and professional academics grounded in evidence-based work and research (Armstrong 2011). One of the more academically oriented books is by Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh (2000; 2009). They have written extensively on North Korea and also about the history of Korea. Works in anthropology are scarce, but there are a few anthropologists in the field of North Korea and

defectors. The first anthropologist I found was Dr. Chung Byung-ho. He has a few publications about the topic on defectors living in South Korea. His work mostly deals with identity problems and he also has an article written about North Korean refugee children in China.

Other anthropologists are Sonia Ryang and Sandra Fahy. Ryang's research encompasses diverse topics including diaspora, identity, the cultural logic of nation-states, ideology, and Marxism, among others. Ryang is ethnic Korean, but grew up in Japan. Her research is mostly about North Koreans living in Japan (Ryang 2012). Fahy looks more generally at the refugee flow in the region. Her own fieldwork is concerning refugees in both Seoul and Tokyo (Fahy 2011). Topics she is engaged in are famine, government irresponsibility, refugees and internally displaced persons.

Several international aid organizations have written about North Korea. Joanna Hosaniak is the senior program officer with the Seoul-based NGO, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR). NKHR is one of the oldest NGOs in South Korea devoted to North Korea issues. Hosaniak has published about defectors in South Korea based on her work at NKHR. Another North Korean expert is historian Andrei Lankov. He was born in Russia and during his education at Leningrad University he attended Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang in 1985. He is the author of the book *"The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia"* (2013).

A Commission of Inquiry (COI) established by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) published a report in February 2014. This report, chaired by former Australian judge Michael Kirby, is about the human rights violations North Korea commits. The UN Commission was refused entry to North Korea to conduct the inquiry, but that did not stop them from obtaining testimonies from defectors living outside the DPRK. The report concluded that the North Korean government has committed systematic human right abuses at a scale "without parallel in the contemporary world", including extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions, and other sexual violence (Human Rights Watch n.d.). The Human Rights Watch as well as The International Crisis Group post annual reports on the conditions inside North Korea. The South Korean Ministry of Unification posts frequently about the situation of defectors in South Korea with statistics, and about the general situation in the inter-Korean relationship.

In the last decade defector biographies has reached the bookshelves. These books have given people an insight into their lives lived in North Korea as well as how they are coping living outside of the DPRK. One of the best English books based on refugee testimony is

journalist Barbara Demick's "*Nothing to Envy*" (2009), mentioned in my introduction. Demick interviewed North Korean defectors who escaped to South Korea. She interviewed six people from the same area in North Korea, Chongjin in North Hamgyong province. She is not making generalizations about the whole of North Korea, but carefully depicts lives lived in a particular area, giving the reader a feeling for the society. Although it is written by a journalist, it has an anthropological touch to it as she is interested in the lives of ordinary people in a society. Other defector influential biographies are "*Aquariums of Pyongyang: 10 years in the North Korean Gulag*" by Kang Chol-hwan and Pierre Rigoulot, "*Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*" (2012) by Blaine Harden and Shin Dong-hyuk and "*A Thousand Miles to Freedom: My Escape from North Korea*" (2015) by Eunsun Kim and Sebastien Faletti. "*Escape from Camp 14*" became a movie in 2012 called "Camp 14: Total Control Zone". Mr. Shin was a main witness to the United Nations "Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea". However, there are controversies as Shin Dong-hyuk has admitted on two separate occasions to have changed key parts of his story⁶ (Fifield 2015).

MY INFORMANTS AS REPRESENTATIVES FOR THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE

I followed a handful of defectors in their everyday lives to get an insight into their challenges as citizens of South Korea. My wish is to tell about their common interests and ideas, while at the same time show their individuality, uniqueness, individual choice and patterns of action. All my informants lived in urban areas of Seoul, South Korea. Before coming to South Korea, they stayed in China or other countries for periods ranging from less than one month to several years. At the time of the study, the participants had lived in South Korea from four to eight years.

Most of my informants live in the outer districts of Seoul, mostly near Incheon. Some of them live centered around the Hana centers which are an extension of Hanawon⁷. My

6

Several defectors are now speaking up, because of the controversy with Shin Dong-hyuk (Hyeon-seo Lee, 2015). Although he did not speak the whole truth, there is no denying that he has been subject to torture.

7

Hanawon is the resettlement center all North Korean defectors have to stay for three months for re-education. Hanawon will be described in more detail in chapter three.

closest informant lived 30 minutes away by subway. Some of them stayed in the apartments provided by the South Korean government, while others had moved to apartment complexes on their own. At the end of my fieldwork I had seven informants. Although I did not have many informants I had both sexes, young and middle aged, but all over the age of 18 years old. I had more female informants than male, which coincides with the statistics. I only had one married informant, and she was married to a South Korean. All other informants were single. They lived either alone, with a sibling, a single parent or both parents.

Short facts about informants:

“Sulli”, woman early forties, from North Hamgyong in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2006.

“Nana”, woman early thirties, from North Hamgyong in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2008.

“Krystal”, woman late thirties, from Pyongyang in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2007.

“Dana”, woman mid-twenties, from North Hamgyong in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2010.

“Victoria, woman mid-twenties, from South Hamgyong in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2010.

“Harry”, man mid-twenties, from North Hamgyong in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2009.

“Park”, man mid-twenties, from Pyongyang in North Korea, arrived in South Korea in 2007.

CHAPTERS TO COME

This thesis consists of six chapters including the introduction and conclusion chapter.

In chapter two I will present my method chosen for this fieldwork. Along with methodological perspectives and challenges, there will be a description of the fieldwork location Seoul and the history of South Korea.

Chapter three will consist of ethnography. There will be a description of local arenas for defectors, as well as a historical, political and societal context from North Korea. The songbun system will be introduced, and I hope to show how songbun affects defectors in their adaptation process after arrival in South Korea. To understand defectors better I will also

explain the escape routes preferred out of North Korea, and then out of China. An account of Hanawon and the support system the South Korean provide for defectors will be at the end of the chapter.

Theoretical aspects will be introduced in chapter four along with a discussion of South Korean “Koreanness”, Korean nationalism, identity and stigma. I will discuss the aspects and life worlds perceived as important and meaningful to them. It is about people who have left their familiar life worlds for then to recreate and build new ones. How do they present the North Korean history, their own choices and actions, themselves and their history? How to interpret the events and situations that arise in the face of the South Korean society?

Chapter five will be a short discussion about modernity and consumption among defectors in trying to shed their “North Koreanness”. As North Koreans could barely be recognized as consumers in their homeland, arriving in the capitalist South has its challenges. Chapter six summarizes and concludes the main points raised in this thesis.

CHAPTER II

History, method and introduction to the field

This chapter begins with an introduction to the historical background of Korea, explaining how Korea became divided during the Korean War and the history of South Korea as an independent nation-state. After the historical introduction I move towards discussing my fieldwork in Seoul, and how doing fieldwork in an urban city had its challenges.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



(World Atlas n.d.)

The Korean Peninsula was one until 1948. Before the division it was a predominantly homogenous ethnic population, proud of its unique language and rich culture. The Korean people were under 500 years of feudal kingdom and from 1910-1945 under colonial rule by

the Imperial Japanese (Collins, 2012, 8-9). Japanese imperial rule was brutal, and the Korean people suffered, and still there are ill-feelings between the two countries.

The division of Korea was a result of war. When World War II came to an end, and the Allies defeated the Japanese, the Korean peninsula was assigned to the Allies. Following a United Nations arrangement, The Soviet Union was to administer the north while the United States to be in charge of the south. The Soviet Union and the United States were unable to agree upon joining Korea as one, and in 1948 this led to the establishment of two separate governments. Neither government recognizes the other and both consider themselves as the legitimate government of all of Korea.

In the South, Syngman Rhee was elected and the Republic of Korea was established on August 15th 1948, taking over the control from the US military. However, in the north, the Soviet Union refused to hold free elections. A communist state, The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was formed with Kim Il-sung as the leader on September 9th 1948 (Collins, 2012, 8-9). The conflict escalated into open warfare when North Korean forces, supported by the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea on the 25th of June 1950 (The War Memorial of Korea n.d.). Taken by surprise, without military strength, Seoul was taken by North Korean forces after only three days, and South Korean forces was forced back to the city of Busan after just two months (The War Memorial of Korea n.d.). In September 1950 the United Nations counter attacked by flying in at Incheon, and cut off the North Korean forces. With the power of the UN and US forces, North Korean military was forced all the way back to the border with China at the Yalu River. A South Korean victory was imminent. At this point, in October 1950, Chinese forces crosses the Yalu River and entered the war. The fighting ended on 27th of July 1953, when an armistice was signed at the 38th parallel (The War Memorial of Korea n.d.). An armistice agreement is not a peace treaty, so technically North and South Korea are still at war.

After the war both sides built barriers to stop each other from crossing the border. Now a four kilometer wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is the most militarized border in the entire world, divides the country. After the Korean War, the North and South developed into two separate governments. South Korea is a democratic republic with a free market capitalist economy, while North Korea has a centralized command planning economy and describes itself as a socialist republic. The division of the nation and the aftermath of the Korean War left both states in ruins, and both states began building the country from bottom.

SOUTH KOREA

South Korea is located at the peninsula of East Asia bordering North Korea in the north, Yellow Sea to the west and Sea of Japan to the east. The population of South Korea is about 50 million (World Population Review, 2014). It is important to understand the development of the South Korean society to understand the confusion North Korean defectors are experiencing when they arrive in South Korea.

After the Korean War education became one of the pillars of South Korea in which they invested a lot. This dedication to education became the driving force for South Korea's economic turnaround. South Korea went through an extensive economic, social and political transformation in a few decades. In the 1960s South Korea developed from being one of the poorest countries in Asia, comparable with some of the poorest countries in Africa, to becoming one of the world's wealthiest nations (Forbes, 2014). South Korea has become the only nation among the various countries that gained independence after WWII to evolve from an aid recipient country to an aid donor.

Along with educating the population, grassroot efforts such as the "New Community Movement" based on the Korean traditional communalism helped the country forward (Han, 2004, 70). Community members were helping the villages participate in industrialization and the development process through joint efforts. Ordinary people were building the country from the ground up. In Korea, like in many Confucian societies, people have a strong sense of collectivism, ascribing great value to sacrificing individual desires for the "greater good" of the group. Confucian principles include age and gender based hierarchy as well as individual submission to the family.

South Korea's political history is marked by alternating periods of autocratic and democratic rule. Currently Park Geun-hye is in office as the first female president in South Korean history. South Korea is also proud of the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon and President of the World Bank, Dr. Kim Jim-yong. South Korea has gone through an amazingly rapid and successful technological transformation. Development in high-tech, computer industry, education, culture and overall economy has been substantial. Through expanding international trade and an export based economy, South Korea has demonstrated to the world its rich cultural heritage as well as modern technology.

Education is seen as crucial in South Korea, and the competition to get into the most prestigious universities is extremely stiff. It is common with private lessons at academies after school, and work pressures are enormous, particularly for secondary school students. In South

Korea, every student is obligated to take the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) in order to apply for university. The CSAT result determines the life trajectory of the individual, as well as his or her family. There is hard competition for entering a top university. The most prestigious universities are called S.K.Y, an acronym for Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University. Admission to one of the three is believed to secure one's career and social status.

When South Korea joined the ranks of developed countries some decades ago, the suicide rate increased. South Koreans are under enormous pressure to succeed at work, school and in relationships, and to care for their families, fueling an abysmal suicide rate that is the highest in the OECD group of developed countries (OECD 2012). In the South Korean society psychological illness is seen as a taboo, and anyone suffering from it is considered weak, brewing a strong societal resistance against treatment (Hosaniak 2011). Both young, middle-aged and old see suicide as an escape from the stresses of modern life (OECD 2012).

Big global corporations such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG and Kia have made South Korean products and technology international household names. The technological progress made fertile ground for the cultural revolution South Korea is experiencing now. The South Korean wave called "Hallyu", the South Korean music industry, TV dramas and movies as well as the cosmetic industry, are taking the world by storm. In 2012 almost everyone was listening to Psy's "Gangnam Style". Even the most reclusive state, North Korea, seems to be caught in the wave, its citizens watching South Korean dramas and buying South Korean products (Lee Young-jong 2014).

In Seoul, and South Korea more generally, one may easily get the impression that people are obsessed with appearance and "beauty". Commercial posters adorn the subway, streets and media, where keeping up with the latest fashion and cosmetic duds is viewed as important. Somewhat different from Western ideals of beauty, South Korea almost has a single template for what is considered beautiful. Because of this cosmetic surgery is prevalent. In Gangnam, one of the most affluent areas of Seoul, several streets are dedicated to plastic surgery clinics.

Although South Korea is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, alongside there are many traditional aspects. Korean traditional society places significant weight on paternal family ties, purity of blood, and ethnicity. Confucian ideology is still strong, where personal ties, credentials and social networks are essential in everyday life.

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST IN LIMINALITY

To become a “real” anthropologist is has been thought of as necessary and essential to go through the “ritual” of doing fieldwork, and participant observation:

In the Boasian tradition, becoming a cultural anthropologist requires successfully "passing" a ritual sequence of research experiences as a precondition of professional status and role (Johnson 1984 quoted in Robben and Sluka, 2007, 77).

The anthropologist’s role during the fieldwork is to put himself or herself into how the local experience and interpret their lives. According to Bronislaw Malinowski, often referred to as the father of anthropological fieldwork, we have “to grasp the native's’ point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski, 1961, 25). The goal is to understand the natives on their own terms, but with thorough reflection on conditions and restrictions surrounding the actual opportunity for a researcher to see "the natives' point of view ". This is done through participating in, and by becoming a part of human social life. The anthropological project is to describe, explain and interpret what you find.

At the same time, the anthropologist also needs to keep a distance; to take a step back and analyze situations from the outside (Olwig and Hastrup, 1997, 1-13). To create an emotional distance to the people you are studying has been described as important in order to achieve objectivity (Cerwonka, 2007, 33). In that one uses oneself as a tool it is not always easy to create a distance, and all the easier to get involved. A researcher, often unconsciously, selects what to observe, how to record observations and how to interpret observations based on personal reference points and experiences.

Doing ethnographic research, you could say the researcher is in a liminal state. The researcher is “separated from his own culture yet not incorporated into the host culture” (Johnson 1984, in Robben and Sluka, 2007, 76). We are at the same time participating in the culture and observing the culture. The researcher must consider the self in relation to others and his or her positioning in the culture being studied.

In many cases, greater participation in the group being studied can lead to increased access to cultural information and greater in-group understanding of experiences within the culture. However, increased participation also blurs the role of the researcher in data collection and analysis. Often a researcher that engages in fieldwork as a "participant" or

"participant-observer" occupies a liminal state where he or she is a part of the culture, but also separated from the culture as a researcher. This liminal state of being betwixt and between is emotional and uncomfortable as the researcher uses self-reflexivity to interpret field observations and interviews.

URBAN FIELDWORK: SEOUL, MY FIELDSITE

In traditional anthropology one would research a smaller community and undiscovered parts of the world. According to Kathinka Frøystad "urban anthropologists will never get an overview of all the inhabitants and their tasks, no matter how many years they are in the field⁸" (2003, 45-46, my translation). Frøystad argues that because of this, the anthropologist will narrow down the field location instead, either by investigating a certain theme, network, or geography.

My field had some methodological limitations in the form of many impressions and lots of information, a sense of a messy and chaotic city where I constantly strove to define and go out and "grab the field." To do fieldwork in a city can be confusing and it can be difficult to know where to start to get in touch with someone who will be your future informants. Because I was after a specific group of people, it took about one month to get my first informant. Seoul is where most defectors live so it was natural to choose the field site, although an urban metropolis offers its challenges. Most North Korean refugees want to stay in Seoul, because in North Korea, the capital Pyongyang is only for the elite. All the big Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the Ministry of Unification are also based in Seoul.

Seoul is a city full of diversity and contrasts with an East-meets-West feeling. High rises and flashing neon signs surround traditional old temples, houses and statues, making it a contrast between new and old. There is a strong American influence, because American troops have been stationed in the country since 1957 due to the threat of North Korea. This megacity of almost 10 million people is highly densely populated, with almost twice the population density as New York City (World Population Review, 2014). There are always lots of cars and

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"byantropologer vil aldri få oversikt over alle innbyggerne og deres gjøremål om de er aldri så mange år på feltarbeid" (Frøystad, 2003, 45-46).

people in the streets. There is a “bballi bballi”⁹ (hurry hurry) mentality, and things have to get done in a quick manner. Businessmen dressed in suits, old grandmothers and school children all push and hurry to get to their next destination.

Infrastructure is very well established in South Korea. Buses, the subway or KTX are very clean, convenient and cheap to use. One card, T-money card, can be used to pay for all buses, subways, taxis and even items in convenience stores. In terms of technological infrastructure, South Korea is ahead of Norway by far. Seoul has one of the fastest Internet in the world, and PC cafes are everywhere making it easy for users to relax with a game or do business in a spare moment. Many stores, restaurants and cafes are open until morning, and some are even open 24/7. New malls and shops are constantly under construction. The shops in the city center are flooded with western goods, as well as with local South Korean brands. Often I was surprised by the selection range that could surpass what I find in Norway. In most grocery stores there were more shelf space for choice in meat, imported beers, wines and fruits. A common perception is that everything that comes from the West is good and has high quality, especially goods from Western Europe and the USA. Although the Korean peninsula has only been divided for six decades, the development of South Korea compared to North Korea is extreme.

ORGANIZING MY FIELDWORK

North Koreans and South Koreans are of the same ethnicity, and therefore appearance-wise they look the same. Being a specific group of people that blends in with the host country, it is harder to differentiate who is from the North and South just by visual cues. As North Koreans have become a rather marginalized and stigmatized group in Seoul, I thought by seeking out specific places where they reside and roam about would bring me into contact with a bigger group of defectors. I spent my first month getting to know Seoul, learning more Korean and waiting for replies to my e-mails. I wanted to use a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) as a starting base. I was in contact with a NGO before I left for my fieldwork, and felt very optimistic about them helping me in my fieldwork. Their goal is to improve the situation of

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defectors in South Korea. This specific NGO offers educational programs and activities for defectors; especially interesting is the English tutoring and activity program. They have a rich base of defectors, making the NGO a rather big organization for North Korean defectors. Sadly, when I met with the NGO they were not enthusiastic anymore. But they helped me get my first informant, who also became my main informant, “Sulli” and her family. I also thought about visiting Hanawon, but for security reasons, only clarified persons were allowed inside. To be an aspiring social anthropologist was not enough to get me through the gate, which I find understandable.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In my choice of topic there were obvious ethical concerns, as North Korean defectors have sensitive information they may not want to disclose. When I met with my potential informants I wanted to present the purpose of the research and also get consent from the informants. The refugees accepted that I spent time with them, and it was very important to me that they would understand my intentions, and that no one would feel cheated. I explained as best I could why I was in South Korea, who I was and what I studied in order to avoid misunderstandings. I tried to be as clear as possible that I was a student, not a journalist or affiliated with aid organizations. I told them that participation was voluntary, and that they were allowed to withdraw at any time during the research process. At times I was still unsure whether the refugees had understood. The concept of participant observation was something my informants did not understand completely even when I explained it many times.

Whenever they said they were going shopping, to the grocery store or on other “trivial” trips somewhere they did not think I would like to go, I immediately asked if I could join them.

I planned to gather material through participant observation supplemented with interviews (Bernard 1994a; Bernard 1994b). I have also availed myself of semi-structured interviews, where I have wanted more information on various topics. During the first half of my fieldwork in Seoul I met my informants either at their home or at local cafés. Because I was doing fieldwork in an urban setting it was difficult to follow my informants everywhere, and I had to set up appointments to see them. Naturally because of that I ended up with a lot of unstructured interviews (Bernard 1994b), “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998) and having conversations about what interested them. I had to use the time I got with them well. I got to use the “go-along” method (Kusenbach 2003), getting an understanding of their spatial

practices and environmental perceptions. I followed my informants in their daily chores, such as when they had errands to shop and markets with neighbors and family. Through many everyday conversations I got an insight into different problems and challenges everyday has to offer. I participated in social and cultural life in the capital by going to cafés, restaurants, church, a road trip, and other excursions and leisure activities.

I wanted to use the method of “snowball” sampling to get a better understanding of the refugees’ daily lives in Seoul, and of whom their networks consisted of. The “snowballing” method is often used in anthropological field research and is “particularly applicable when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study” (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, 141). But I found out that the informants I had decided to separate themselves from other defectors and wanted either South Korean friends or international friends. I discovered this after I had persistently tried to get in contact with other potential informants, but my already current informants were not interested in it. Actually they were more interested in my network as a person who had recently moved to South Korea and how I managed to get friends.

Hence, I became more proactive and started seeking out other arenas where defectors might be found. I started to follow the newsletters of all the big North Korean related NGOs, and found out that many of them arranged events where defectors would come and speak. These events were aimed at an English speaking or understanding audience, so more often than not the defector spoke English. Considering their background, their English was very good. And what separated them out from other defectors was that they wanted to talk about their stories. In hindsight this was both positive and negative. The defectors were usually young, around 20-30 years old. After the events ended I went up to the defector asking if there was a chance I could meet with them at a later opportunity. Most of them were happy to hear about my project and wanted to join. So by attending events about human rights in North Korea I got informants. At the end of my fieldwork I had seven informants and got the opportunity to meet with Shin Dong-hyuk¹⁰ and Kang Chol-hwan¹¹.

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Introduced in the “Introduction” regarding the book “Escape from Camp 14”.

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Whose story we learn of in the book “Aquariums of Pyongyang”.

I rarely sat with my notebook when I was in the field. The times I had the book in front of me, the conversations were very unnatural and I felt that it affected how they behaved. However, I had a small glossary to learn Korean which came in handy for noting some keywords. I did not use a tape recorder because it might have been a hindrance in having a natural conversation. During my interview with “Namnam Buknyeo”, a marriage-matching agency was the only time I used structured interview and an interpreter. I got their consent to use a tape recorder to record our interview. In other cases, citations from my informants are not necessarily a one hundred percent accurate reproduction of what my informants said. Since I did not use a tape recorder, or have written down more than small notes during our meetings, it is not certain that all statements are verbatim. I nevertheless believe that the citations are approximately accurate and bring forward what my informants have said. All field notes were written shortly after the actual meeting, with everything still fresh in memory.

As an observer from the outside, one may interpret any event, large or small in a different way than what the locals do, sometimes jumping to wrong conclusions. A measure to hinder this to some extent is to use thick description, describing the happenings in detail. There are many ways one may misinterpret what one sees in the field by not having sufficient knowledge about what one observes. Clifford Geertz in “*Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture*” (1973) suggests that writing thick descriptions as outsiders may hinder confusions and wrong understandings, especially when a third part reads the descriptions. Writing detailed descriptions may increase the chance to give a fair description of what one observes, diminishing the possibility for misinterpretations of the happenings. The data and analyses I present are the aspects of my empirical data which I perceive as relevant, and where I have had a sense of regularity in what I have observed. Simultaneously my thesis is based on my personal understanding and subjective interpretation of interaction, statements and events that took place.

To keep in contact with my informants I refrained from using Facebook. None of my informants are “friends” with me on Facebook. I instead used Kakaotalk to keep in contact with my informants. Kakaotalk is a free application for smartphones with free texting and free call features when connected to internet. In addition, users can share information from photos, videos, URL links and more to stay connected. Kakaotalk is the leading communication tool in South Korea at the moment (Kakaotalk n.d.). At Kakaotalk others cannot see who you are talking with or any information about who is on your friend list, keeping the anonymity of my

informants. It is very common in Korea for people to ask for your Kakaotalk ID rather than your Facebook name.

Following the anthropological code of ethics I did my best to anonymize my informants from our first meeting. In this thesis I have obscured the identity of my informants to protect them, as well as keeping the confidentiality of the collected material. All my informants were anonymized using pseudo names from the start, and I tried to give them “Western” names. The names were chosen at random.

LANGUAGE

Before I left for my fieldwork I tried to learn Korean, Hangul, the national language of both South and North Korea. Hangul is a comprehensive language system, considered to have one of the most scientific writing systems in the world. Korean is generally considered to be one of the most difficult languages to learn and become fluent in. However, learning the basics is relatively easy, particularly in comparison with other Asian languages. I had previously learned to speak Thai, but discovered that Korean was much easier to learn. The Korean writing system is alphabetic and can be learned quickly. Unlike Thai and Chinese, Korean has no tones and few pronunciation variations. The dialect spoken in and around Seoul is considered standard Korean (Savada and Shaw 1990a).

When I arrived in Seoul I signed up at YBM, Korea’s largest language school, which I attended during February and March. Trying to learn Korean was a great advantage in more ways than I had envisioned. Refugees were more positive to me initially, and they enjoyed when I could greet them in their own language. It was thus easier to connect with people, and it also created great curiosity. An additional benefit was that I had an excuse to be able to sit with a notebook where I could jot down words and other key elements without too many questions. I was never so good in Korean that I could understand the whole conversation, but I could pick up what the conversation was about, and it was thus easier to ask follow-up questions. I also learned how to differentiate between the Seoulite accent and the North Korean accent.

I considered in the beginning of the fieldwork to use an interpreter, but realized that I managed well without one. Because of the situation of defectors I felt that bringing in another person, most likely a South Korean, would make the potential relationship difficult as they would have to get to “know” two persons. Also having an interpreter could cause problems as

there would be a person functioning as an intermediary between my informants and I. Information may be adhered or subtracted by the interpreter.

Gerald Berreman experienced the difficulties an assistant or interpreter may have during the fieldwork. Berreman were doing fieldwork in North India and had hired a Brahmin assistant. This led to him having many high-caste informants, while lower-caste people kept reticent, primarily “because one of us was a Brahmin and we were closely identified with the powerful high-caste villagers” (Berreman, 1963, 144). After a while the Brahmin assistant became ill, and Berreman had to hire another. This time he hired a Muslim, “a ritually polluted individual”, leading them to get informants of lower-caste (Berreman, 1963, 146). While the Brahmin assistant had to keep his status as a person of higher-class during all times, and wanted to give Berreman a good perception of India, the Muslim assistant had no such obligations.

I tried to find informants who could speak and understand English. This went very well with the informants I had met at North Korea related events. But with “Sulli” whom I had met through the NGO it was difficult at times. When we talked about difficult subjects, “Sulli” had a hard time to express herself fully in English so we relied on Google Translate or Naver¹² translate to help us. Naver Translate also gave suggestions as how to use the word in a sentence so Sulli would scroll down until she found the one fitting for what she wanted to express. Likewise, when I said a word that she did not understand completely I would translate it using one of the translators on our smartphones and she would have a better understanding. The problem of translation has been problematized in anthropology by Clifford Geertz (1974) and Roger Keesing (1985). Axel Borchgrevink (2003: 106) points out that there are many challenges associated with translations since language is not just words, but are wrapped together with cultural ideas and social interaction. I see it as an advantage that I was present and could thus also do my best to understand the situation. John Christian Knudsen says that:

“As researchers, as well as other professionals, we have to try to reduce the danger of misinterpreting, or misreading, other people’s talk in our quest for cultural, or diagnostically,

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Naver is one of the most popular search portals in South Korea.

exotica (Keesing 1989). We should keep in mind the point made by Devereux (1967: xix) that the data of behavioral science are always threefold:

1. The behavior of the subject.
2. The “disturbances” produced by the existence and observational activities of the observer.
3. The behavior of the observer: his anxieties, his defense maneuvers, his research strategies, his “decisions” (= his attribution of a meaning to his observations)” (Knudsen, 1990, 122-123).

Not speaking Korean fluently sometimes worked to my benefit, making my informants explain words, expressions and hidden meaning for me to understand. There is an extensive use of honorifics between speaker and audience to differentiate seniority, superiority and inferiority. The proper use of words and polite language is a subtle matter in which my informants tried their best to teach me. Hierarchical nuances are hard for an outsider to grasp. But because they use honorifics it is easier to tell when you become close with someone in the way they address you such as dropping the formal speech.

MY ROLE IN THE FIELD

It was in the beginning difficult to determine what role I should have among the refugees. I was afraid that my background as a young foreign woman would affect how my informants would establish relationships with me. There are the obvious aesthetic differences that made it impossible for me to disappear in the crowd. Caucasian foreigners in South Korea are thought of as either American military soldiers or English teachers working at the after school institutions, “hagwon”. I wanted to come off as a friend and a person they could confide in. In fact a few of them said they related to me because I was “*alone in a new country without any friends*” and also since I could not speak Korean fluently they said that I was “lost” just like how they initially were. They took pride in helping me with my Korean homework, and were intrigued that I as a foreigner was interested in North Korea, and the North Korean people. They saw that I wanted to learn about them, their language, eat their food and learn more about their culture. Sometimes they asked where and with whom I spent my days when I was not with them.

TRUST

As non-Korean, I felt they could vent more easily to me about their difficulties. I thought about the possible apprehensiveness defectors might feel if a South Korean was to hear their complaints, if there were any. I feel that especially immigrants are expected to pledge allegiance to the nation they live in, and not the "homeland." Dana, a young defector in her early twenties, said to me during the time of the Sewol accident¹³, that the South Korean government was too slow to react and help. She finished off by saying "*The North Korean government would have reacted faster.*" As this were a sensitive subject in South Korea at the time, and still is, if a South Korean heard how Dana felt, that person would maybe feel hurt.

On my second meeting with Sulli she gave me the codes to their apartment complex and their front door. Almost every house in South Korea has the technology that you only need to press a four digit digital code to get inside your entrance door. They do not use keys. This code works as a key, and giving it to what was practically a stranger after meeting with her twice shows how trusting she was. This way, when I wanted to go into their home whenever I felt convenient, it was possible. When I first arrived in Seoul I stayed with my close friend for one week before moving into my own apartment, and I did not get her code to her apartment.

One day, Sulli, her husband, Jenny, Halmoni, and I were having dinner to celebrate Sulli's husband's birthday. Sulli had bought Coca-Cola and had pizza delivered. After a few glasses of Coca-Cola she gives a loud burp. I did not think too much of it at the time, until she told me the following day that her husband scolded her for doing so in front of me. She wanted to know if I was offended by her doing so, which I was not. She said she had brushed it off because "*We are very good friends*".

Approaching the end of my fieldwork, my female informants knowing I was soon to leave, suddenly took up the habit of linking arms with me when we were out. Holding hands and linking arms is a sign of affection. It is common to see both women and men showing

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The Sewol accident in April 2014 happened when the Sewol ferry going from Seoul to Jeju island capsized, trapping almost all the passengers inside. The tragedy was that it was mostly secondary school students on their way on a fieldtrip who were trapped inside. 304 of 476 people died, and it spurred huge criticism of how the South Korean government responded, along with criticism of media coverage, and the actions of the captain of the ferry.

public displays of affection towards their same sex friends. But, public display of affection towards the opposite sex and between couples is very rare in a still conservative country.

CAFÉS AS FIELDSITE

In this thesis I wish to point to examples of how life can manifest itself in South Korea for my informants and friends. The empirical data are largely from informal conversations centered around everyday activities, conversations around the kitchen table and cafés. Cafés became an important “place” for my fieldwork. Most of my informants wanted to meet there, which meant that it became an arena for interaction. I would mostly meet my informants at a quiet café over a cup of hot or cold beverage. My informants lived for the most part either alone, with one or both parents or siblings. They hardly invited me to their apartments, except Sulli who always invited me to visit her at home.

They wanted to meet at cafés or restaurants, like they would usually interact with a friend. One thing that you notice about the streets of Seoul is that cafés are incredibly popular. Multiple cafés reside on the same streets, and often times, they are several stories tall. The most amazing part is they always seem busy.

Koreans like to gather together and tend to say ‘Do you want to have a cup tea or coffee?’ when they want to have a talk with somebody” (Interviewee 8). So whenever they meet their friends or colleagues, they usually do so at cafés (Jang, 2012, 15).

When I met with my informants I would send them a Kakaotalk message asking where they wanted to meet, and they would send me the location and name of the café through Kakaotalk. Coffee culture in South Korea has exploded during the last decade. After the establishment of Starbucks in 1999 it became the drink of the masses:

However, according to Seoul Cyber Enterprise Exhibition website, there were approximately 800 cafés in Korea’s capital city Seoul in 2004. By 2011, there were 12,381 cafés in Korea; this is 54% increase in the number compared to the number of cafés in the previous year (Jang, 2012, 1).

Jang Jung-hee in “*Korean Café Culture: What Korean Cafés Mean to Koreans*” (2012) stresses that cafes are social places. Like China and Japan, Korea is strongly relationship-based. Individuals like doing activities with others. Because most young adults in South Korea live with their families until they get married, cafés are a good place to sit and talk on a date without their parents around. The restriction on independent living arrangements being too expensive, these cafés are spaces where the younger generation felt comfortable.

A set of contributing factors includes speedy modernization, population density, sensitivity to trends, couple culture, emphasis on entertainment, and cultural notions – for example, collectivism and Confucianism (Jang, 2012, 12).

Going to cafés has become a habit, and it is common to visit one before or after a meal. These establishments with their affordable price range and selection appeal to the younger generation as they exert an image of consumption. In South Korea, eating and drinking is considered a social event:

People go to cafés to interact with others. In the U.S., a lot of people visit cafés alone and tend to use laptops or mobile phones even when they are with someone. However, in Korea, it is a little strange to see people stay at a café alone (Jang, 2012, 12).

To be able to enjoy such “leisure consumption” participants need to have the means for it. I wished the refugees would get something in return for spending time with me. In return for their time I sometimes bought sweets and bakery goods as a thank you, and I would offer to pay for their drinks.

ETHICAL PROBLEMS DURING THE FIELDWORK

When I met with Sulli and her family we decided that our relationship would be a reciprocal one, where I taught English to Jenny, Sulli’s teenage daughter, and afterwards Sulli would help me with my thesis. English proficiency is very important in South Korea, and many pay for

private tutoring after school. It was a reciprocal deal that would benefit both parts, without any financial cost. Whenever I would go to Sulli's house I would get something to drink, fruits and snacks. Fruit in South Korea is very expensive so I was very thankful.

The French social scientist Marcel Mauss in "The Gift" (2002), discusses how the gift creates reciprocal social obligations and ties within a group. The gift could also establish peaceful and friendly relations with outsiders. A gift creates an expectation of one form or another for reciprocity - sooner or later. And I had two episodes with "Sulli" concerning offerings of gifts.

The kimchi cabbage head

At my second meeting with Sulli I made a mistake. It was around 7PM, and Sulli asked me what I like to eat for breakfast since I was a "waykokin"¹⁴, a foreigner. I told her that I preferred cereal with milk. She then asked if I liked kimchi¹⁵. Which I said I do like. She immediately went to her kitchen and into her kimchi refrigerator¹⁶. She packs a whole kimchi cabbage head in a Tupperware box and suggests I take it home and eat it the next day for breakfast with rice. Sadly I do not take the hint to leave with my kimchi, and I suggested we eat it together now. Knowing how eating food is considered a social interaction between people in South Korea, I felt we would get a better connection if we had a meal together.

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외국인

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Kimchi is fermented cabbage, or other vegetables along with a variety of seasoning, and it is Korea's staple food. It is considered spicy or sour. It is eaten with every meal, either as a side dish or as one of the main components in a main dish. However, kimchi is always on the table.

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Many Koreans have their own kimchi refrigerator since kimchi may contaminate other foods with its smell. The fridge is designed specifically to store kimchi, controlling the temperature and the fermentation process.

People are brought into the same community by sharing the eating act, writes Lupton (1996, 25). By taking in the food's qualities a person will be included in a culinary system and thus one also becomes a member of a social group. Food as such helps to highlight differences between cultures and helps to strengthen a group's identity (Lupton, 1996, 25).

However, since it was our second meeting I did not know that the whole family eats together when Jenny and Sulli's husband comes home from private tutoring and work at around nine o'clock. Sulli accepts my request to eat together, and makes fried fresh mackerel and vegetable soup for me. Jenny arrives home at 8PM and to her surprise we are eating. I ask her if she is hungry too, and she says no, but will be in about one hour. Around 9PM when we are finished eating and talking, Sulli's husband comes home and it is my first time meeting him. I realize my mistake and try to escape the situation. He went to change to more comfortable clothes and asks me if I had eaten. I say my goodbye as Sulli again prepares food for her family.

The New Balance shoes

After going to their apartment three times a week for two months, there was an episode. Sulli was on her smartphone and browsing an online store. After seeing me for a while she knew which colors I liked to wear - I wore a bright pink wool coat and matching scarf. She asked me which shoe size I was, and I told her size 36, but afterwards became curious about what she was doing. Korea has their own sizing system so she asked again which size in Korean sizes. I now realized that she was buying shoes for me online. I asked her and she said she was buying me a gift and showed me a pair of pink New Balance shoes¹⁷. When I told her I did not want or needed them she was taken aback. Did I not want this generous present from her? She told me *"I am grateful for you teaching "Jenny" and being our friend."*

Mauss describes how "To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality" (Mauss, 2002, 17). A gift is not only a gift. The whole purpose of exchanging gifts is to create a community. It is not just an impersonal exchange of objects, it is a way to establish and

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They were retailing for 130000 won, about 130\$ or 900 NOK.

maintain connections between people. Because giving and receiving gifts is an act loaded with social meaning, to refuse to give or refuse to receive is also meaningful. The gift involves three forms of commitment: to give, to receive, and to provide a return gift. More than the actual exchange of goods or services over time the gift is also a statement about the relationship between the giver and receiver. It creates, confirms and symbolizes mutual social dependence and is socially integrative (Mauss, 2002). Although Sulli did not want to buy them for me online, she sent me a Kakaotalk message a month later asking me to meet her at Gasan Digital Complex, a big shopping area. She did not want to take no for an answer and wanted me to pick some shoes for myself, on her treat. Although we did not buy anything, we became closer over the issue.

LAUGHTER OUT OF PLACE

Something that struck me when I was talking to my informants was their ability to always laugh, make jokes and smile when we were talking about North Korea and also their challenges in South Korea. At our first meeting Sulli was walking me back to the subway station, and at that time she asked me if I wanted to know why she escaped North Korea. She was joking and laughing about how in North Korea you would get killed if you talked too much, and then shows with body language what she means. She moves her mouth excessively without any sound coming out and at the same time horizontally drags her thumb with her fist clenched over her throat. She gives a small laugh after.

In Donna M. Goldstein's monograph "*Laughter out of place*" (2003) she helps us to understand that joking and laughter is part of a frustration towards the political and economic desperation among residents of the shantytown. Goldstein's material is about women in the favelas in a Rio shantytown in Brazil. It is about absurdist and black humor that people generate amid daily conditions of humiliation, anger, and despair.

Despite the fact that I was caught up in a community where life was all too clearly very hard, everywhere I turned I seemed to hear laughter. I gradually came to realize, first in my gut, later in my head, that there was much more behind the humor than I first realized. This humor was a kind of running commentary about the political and economic structures that made up the context within the people of Rio's shantytowns made their lives- an indirect dialogue, sometimes critical, often ambivalent, always (at least partially) hidden, about the contradictions of poverty in the midst of late capitalism (Goldstein, 2003, 2).

Her monograph tells us how her informants would laugh at something that to Goldstein seemed sad and incomprehensible. After a while she began to see the social patterns to this “laughter out of place”, and how it was used as a mechanism, like a shield to cope with their own situation. The use of humor had a purpose. As for my own informants it was often Sulli who would laugh and joke when she talked about stories that were hard for her to tell. Late in the fieldwork I was invited to Sulli’s house for dinner. While she was chopping up vegetables she suddenly says that she saw “*many bad things in Bukhan*”¹⁸ (North Korea). She told me about the public executions in her hometown that she had seen when she was younger. She was standing with her back towards me. I was seated at the dining table (which they only use when I am at the house). I could not see her face, but I could hear her clearly. Her voice was clear as she was talking about how small children down to five years old were present. And then she laughs. It was very hard for me not to show my emotions, and we became silent for a minute. The use of humor should not be understood to mean that death or terrible situations are less devastating, but that it is used as Goldstein explained, as a mechanism to cope with the situation: “The meanings embedded in humor are often elusive, hard to grasp, fugitive” (Goldstein, 2003, 3).

John Christian Knudsen in his work with refugees in Vietnam, Norway and The United States explains that sometimes focusing on humorous episodes and not on the daily suffering was helpful for the refugees he studied. His informants would laugh at experiences in a “de-personalized manner” focusing on the humor (Knudsen, 1990, 130-131). When I asked my informants if they experienced any culture shock arriving in South Korea, they all had stories they wanted to share. When I talked to Victoria she told me about how when she arrived in South Korea it was her first experience with a Western sit-down toilet. She had only used squat toilets previously. She explained how during her interrogation with the South Korean Intelligence Service she had to use the bathroom. She climbed up the toilet to use it as a squatting toilet. One of the police officers outside waiting for her heard all the noise and asked her what she was doing. They “masked” their daily suffering and struggles in “humorous” stories.

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She used the South Korean name for North Korea; “Bukhan”, not the North Korean name; “Choson”.

It is important for me to point out that these are stories told to me by my informants. The events from North Korea and on their journey to South Korea I did not see with my own eyes. But I believe their stories to be true. There is no way to verify the stories because I cannot go back in time, and also I could not raise questions about their credibility because to do so would signal that I do not believe their stories.

CHAPTER III

Historical context and the journey from North to South

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context and background. It is about the history of North Korea, the *songbun* class system of North Korea and how defectors escape from North Korea. There are many routes a defector can take from North Korea, to China and then to South Korea. It is important to create an image of what the refugees have escaped from, and at which situation they have arrived.

UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

The two Koreas have shared a common language, ethnicity, history, and culture until the past 70 years. The partitioning of a single Korean nation into two opposing nation-states in 1948 led to the construction of nationalism in each “with the other state and its people serving as a mirror image” (Choo 2006, 581). North Korea prides itself with being a predominantly homogenous ethnic population with a unique language and culture which has not been “polluted” by foreigners, which they say South Korea has been and currently is. Indeed, North Korean propaganda officially states that people in the DPRK are “as pure as the water they drink,” while in the South people are “polluted” in every way, “decaying from where the American sewage has seeped in” (Myers, 2010, 155). The two Koreas on each side of the DMZ have diverged so much that the people are now strangers to each other. The economies of the two Koreas are a bipolar difference which is the result of their different political systems. During the first decades after the Korean War however, North Korea experienced great economic growth and its overall situation was better than that of its neighbor to the south. But this progress was short-lived. While South Korea is thriving in a capitalist economy, North Korea is struggling with a socialist economy.

A nation’s development is commonly described in terms of movement (some might say “progress”) along such dimensions as tradition versus modernity, agrarian versus industrial society, monarchic versus democratic parliamentary governance, closed versus open borders, and colonialism versus independence. North Korea has failed to develop along many of these lines (Oh and Hassig, 2000, 1).

North Korea’s history starts with Kim Il Sung, “The Great Leader”, being appointed premier in 1948. North Korea is a mountainous country which share borders with China, Russia and

South Korea via the DMZ. It is a country of 25 million people (Ministry of Unification n.d. b). Kim Il Sung introduced a planned and centralized control over the economy and politics, and the “songbun” stratified social class system. Songbun will be explained in more detail in the following section. Adhering to communist ideology, North Korea values manual labor, free healthcare and free education. Healthcare is supposedly available for everyone, but those living in Pyongyang have the opportunity to go to better equipped hospitals than those residing outside of the capital. There are eleven years of compulsory schooling - controlled by the state. The curriculum includes both academic and political themes. According to the constitution people have freedom of religion, but in practice it is not true.

The North Korean people have been woefully deprived of the opportunity to advance socially and politically. When the Choson dynasty collapsed, Japan immediately took control over Korea, instituting its own autocratic regime. When the Japanese left, Kim Il Sung imported Stalinism. The North Korean people were never challenged to think for themselves (Oh and Hassig, 2000, 9).

Kim Il Sung introduced a Stalinist socialist rule with emphasis on the “Juche” ideology. The Juche ideology of Kim Il Sung is the idealization of being self-sufficient, and the society must take priority over the individual. Economic inequality should be combated. North Korea has since its inception received international assistance, largely financial help from China and the Soviet Union. But after the Cold War and Soviet dissolution in 1991, the country has been dependent on international humanitarian aid, mainly from South Korea and the United States. One could claim North Korea’s motto of self-sufficiency is ironic as they have received international assistance since the beginning of its existence.

North Korea has a one-party political system (Human Rights Watch n.d.). The Korean Worker’s Party (hereby KWP) is the dominant political party in North Korea. About 99% of those living in Pyongyang are members of the Party (Collins, 2012, 69). Attaining party membership is seen as a big step to personal and family success. There are elections every five years, with unanimous support to the KWP with 99% percent of the votes (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 196).

SONGBUN - NORTH KOREAS STRATIFIED CLASS SYSTEM

Songbun is the stratified socio-political class system according to which all North Koreans are ranked¹⁹. Songbun, which can be translated to mean “ingredients” or “material”, is one of the Kim regime’s prime social control tools (Collins, 2012, 6; Park Sookel J. 2012). As North Korea is a totalitarian²⁰ regime, one of the few left in the world, it uses different tools to keep oppressing and controlling its population. Songbun was established in 1957 by Kim Il-sung (Harden, 2012, 42-43). It can be compared superficially to the Indian caste system and the South African Apartheid system. The songbun system can be compared to the Indian caste system in that from birth there is a classification based on perceived loyalty of your parents to the regime, while caste is based on the perceived purity of your family. The caste system is based on a binary opposition of pure and impure according to Louis Dumont (Rio and Smedal (2008). In this hierarchy the pure is given superiority over the impure, and the two must be kept separate. Songbun divides the population according to the actions, occupation and status of their patrilineal relatives during the Japanese colonial period and Korean War. Songbun status derives from the father's, or grandfather’s background. There is thus classification by birth, which seems peculiar for a communist country that supposedly values egalitarianism. The report “*Marked for life: Songbun*” by Robert Collins (2012) describes songbun as a system of discrimination by the state and categorizes citizens according to ancestral and social standings. Songbun is based on a persons perceived loyalty to the regime. It justifies the elimination of political opponents:

It is one of the major political tools (along with state terror, pervasive state surveillance, and state-controlled socio-economic resource allocation), by which the Kim regime controls society. The discrimination created by songbun ensures politically-directed denial of the right

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There are two types of songbun: “chulsin songbun,” or songbun based on origins, which refers to the socio-economic background of one’s family, including that of one’s parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins; and “sahoe songbun,” or societal songbun, which refers to one’s individual socio-political and economic behavior and performance (Collins, 2012).

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“A totalitarian regime in this context may be defined as a government where every aspect of human life is controlled and ordered by the state to further the political objectives of the ruling elite.” (Collins, 2012, foreword 7)

to make many of the decisions other countries assume to be a matter of individual prerogative - one's occupation, spouse, housing, education, and medical treatment (Collins, 2012, 87).

The reason why I want to give a clear explanation of songbun, is that this classification system has repercussions for those who decide to defect North Korea. People are disadvantaged through no fault of their own. Because most defectors arriving in South Korea over the last decade come from a low social stratum were denied university education or a chance in another job than their paternal side of the family, adapting to South Korean society is harder for them than for those from upper songbun class. At the end of this chapter I will highlight two life stories from my informants, demonstrating how songbun has affected their life in South Korea.

Songbun divides the population into three main classes, with 51 subcategories. People are ranked based on their conceived trustworthiness and political loyalty to the Kim family and the North Korean state:

The institution of songbun means that each and every North Korean citizen is assigned a heredity-based class and socio-political rank over which the individual exercises no control but which determines all aspects of his or her life. Under this classification system, all citizens become part of one of three designated classes - the "core" or loyal class, the "wavering" class, or the "hostile" class (Collins, 2012, 1).

Songbun segregates the population geographically. In this way it can be compared to the South African Apartheid system, which was a system where the state enforced through legislation that the majority of the population to be racially segregated according to ethnicity. The core class in North Korea has the opportunity to live in and around the capital Pyongyang. The wavering class is settled outside the capital, while the hostile class lives in the outskirts of the country, in brutal natural environments. Those who oppose the regime might risk being sentenced to live in concentration camps, known as *kwan-li-so*, under horrific conditions (Human Rights Watch n.d.). People of the core class are considered elite or budding elite. The people in the "core" (haeksim) class are KWP members, loyalist to the revolution and the regime, and are those who get significant privileges such as the opportunity to live in Pyongyang (Collins, 2012, 6-7). The majority of the population however constitutes of the wavering class. Those in the "wavering" (dongyo) class are those deemed questionable in terms of loyalty to the regime, but who can demonstrate their loyalty by working hard

economically and show a good political performance (Collins, 2012, 7). The lowest level class, the “hostile” (choktae) class, consists of those perceived as being disloyal to the regime, the party and the Kim family. They are regarded as “enemies of the state”, “politically unredeemable” and “impure elements” (Collins, 2012, 7). Because of this they suffer the most in the North Korean society:

Kim Il-sung reengineered North Korean society so as to make the work unit the basic social element. Food distribution was tied to the workplace. Being of lower songbun meant being assigned to menial jobs that were labor intensive in heavy industry, mining, or agriculture. Quitting such jobs was unthinkable, because not reporting to your workplace meant that you not only would not receive your food ration, but might lose your housing associated with that work unit (Collins, 2012, 57).

As the majority of the defectors arriving in South Korea are from the northern parts of North Korea, this correlates with their low songbun status (Collins, 2012, 68-69). The Northern provinces are predominantly populated by those deemed “enemies of the state”. The people of the hostile class were moved to the “Siberia” of North Korea, an isolated mountain area, since the 1940s (Collins, 2012, 67), where the survival opportunities are tough. The famine of the 1990s hit the hardest here because people were already doing poorly, and had few coping mechanisms.

Songbun is not static, and one can alter one’s status. But what this generally means is that one’s songbun can worsen. There are few cases where people have moved up the social ladder, because one’s songbun hinges on “one’s family’s pre-revolutionary class status” (Collins, 2012, 7). One way to move up social class is actually to meet the leader in person or have your picture taken with him. Falling from a good songbun status to a bad songbun status is more common. Political crime will not only cause one’s own songbun status to drop, but also that of one’s family members up to three generations (Collins, 2012, 7). This can happen due to committing offenses, political or criminal, or even by marrying someone with a lower songbun status. This happened to Mrs. X. In her testimony to the UN Commission of Inquiry in Washington 30th October 2013, she explained how her marriage made her songbun status drop (UN Web TV, 2013). She told the Commission that she belonged to the first class, but was dropped to the third class. When she got married she acquired the songbun status of her husband. Mrs. X jokingly said that she did not know her husband’s songbun was bad, because

he was such a handsome man. She married him without knowing the fact that he was from a bad class.

The government keeps a secret file on every citizen's personal conduct and family background. My informants remember the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion that separated people from each other through the constant fear of surveillance. The omnipresent secret security police *Bowibu* and their informants could in principle always overhear everyone's conversations, and this led to self-censorship and suspicion of neighbors and friends. Was your neighbor an informant who worked for the *Bowibu*? Did the neighbor know that you listened to the illegal radio station?

The entire population was afraid of the *Bowibu* and the "*inminban*". All neighborhoods have an "*inminban*", a neighborhood watch union. Their duty is to report any suspicious activity to the North Korean security apparatus. One did not have the courage to tell what they really thought because one did not know whether their friends would tell on them, or if others overheard. Or, if you talked to someone on the street, you first looked right and left, front and behind: "The arbitrariness of the system serves to keep everyone on edge, including the most loyal, making them fearful and obedient" (Collins, 2012, 44). The secret police produced through monitoring lots of paperwork and folders. Efforts to produce documents, and thus political entities, created an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion that separated people from each other.

COMMUNIST SUCCESSION

Kim Jong Il inherited control after his father's death in 1994, and continued the personality cult surrounding the Kim-family. It was the first hereditary succession in the communist world. North Korea is called "The first communist dynasty", because power has been successfully transferred in the family. In 1998 Kim Il Sung, his father, became "The Eternal President", four years after his death (Kang and Rigoulot, 2001). Kim Jong Il introduced the "songun", the "military first" policy. Enormous resources are used to arm the military and feed soldiers. The unsuccessful planned economy with a focus on collective farming, lack of fertilizer, little modernized agriculture, and natural disasters led to major food shortages and, in the 1990s, a great famine (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 26-27). Kim Jong Il was known not to talk in public, and to give few appearances. Very few people knew anything about his personal life, and many speculated about who was going to take over after he would pass away. The

sovereign power position was transferred to Kim Jong-un in 2011, after Kim Jong Il's death. The young leader took over at the age of 32. Many experts on North Korea hoped for a more liberal leader, firstly because of his young age and also because he has received education in Switzerland. But Kim Jong-un has been busy purging top officials, even his own uncle Jang Song-thaek, and amping up the security in border areas. Kim Jong-un is constantly on TV and gives many appearances, and on the spot guidance. His wife, Ri Sol-ju is also often by his side, smiling and sometimes even touching him in public (Harden, 2012, 53). Kim Jong-un is portrayed as a huggable family man, similar to the way Kim Il-sung, his grandfather, was portrayed. However, he is not portrayed that way in Western media. Recently the Hollywood comedy "The Interview" (2014) by Sony received much attention. The movie shows how the US makes fun of Kim Jong-un, and he is portrayed in many unflattering ways. Sony pulled the movie because of "terrorism", which they linked to hacking coming from North Korea. They re-released the movie later after pressure from civil society.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON NORTH KOREA

Socialism and the glorification of the regime have left its mark on the life and culture in North Korea. Mass media, literature and art are strictly controlled by central authorities who want to nurture the cult around the Kim family. North Korean media are heavily censored and there are only the state regulated television channel, newspapers and radio channels available (Human Rights Watch n.d.). There is no "internet", but a domestic intranet which is highly monitored. State controlled media is the only permitted source of information. Cell phones are becoming more popular in the capital, but citizens cannot make international calls. Foreign media is not allowed and those bits that are shown on the state media are severely censored. Watching unauthorized non-state TV or radio is punishable. Everything that is shown is added a good dose of propaganda and state nationalism, praising the Kim family, the socialist revolution, and condemning the US, Japan and South Korea. North Korea is largely a mystery to the general public of the world:

North Korea gets international attention, but for all the wrong reasons; military provocations, nuclear weapons, an atrocious record on human rights, a failing economy and for their leadership. To outsiders looking in we get a glimpse of totally outrageous propaganda, infallible leadership, unshakable collective solidarity, a society of perfect happiness (Armstrong, 2011, 358).

Images of nuclear missiles and weapons of mass destruction, military parades, the astonishing Arirang shows²¹, people crying hysterically in front of statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, are maybe what the majority of the world thinks about when they hear North Korea. These images are conjured up and Western media really have reduced North Korea to a story of crazy dictators and nuclear weapons. The international media is concerned about security issues and conflict. But in reality the general picture has been stability and it has been that way for the past 60 years. There have been a few provocations inflicted on South Korea. This was the case in 2010, when North Korea sank the Cheonan, a warship sailing in South Korean waters. The sneak submarine attack killed forty-six South Korean sailors. The same year the North also shelled a small South Korean island, killing four people (Harden, 2012). In August 2015 tensions ran high at the Korean Peninsula when South Korea accused the North of planting two landmines which maimed two South Korean soldiers at the DMZ. South Korea proceeded to use propaganda speakers after a lull of 11 years. Artillery fire were shot from both sides, before an agreement was reached to ease tensions.

The international media are also very interested in the Kim family. They are treated as tabloid news. When Kim Jong-Il died in December 2011, overnight Kim Jong-un became famous. For weeks the media followed him and his family commenting on their clothes, appearance and spreading rumors that Kim Jong-un had had plastic surgery to look more alike his grandfather Kim Il-sung. The media angle is more on the leadership and I think few asked what this change in leadership would do for the ordinary people of North Korea, how this would impact or affect them.

The impact of the media and their portrayal of North Korea shape how many see the country. Although North Korea is trying their best to keep information from the outside from coming in, many North Koreans have watched smuggled and illegal movies and dramas. Dana told me she watched Titanic, Cinderella, James Bond and other foreign movies in North Korea. South Korean dramas are very popular, and some reach the North just months after they finished showing in the South. Because of the growing interest in foreign movies, the North Korean people's mindsets are changing as a consequence. They see how people around

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Arirang shows are huge theatrical performances, including gymnastics and flashing of image boards, by thousands of North Korea citizens.

the world also have love, and they can see how even the people portrayed as poor in these movies or dramas are considered affluent in North Korea. That was one of the reasons why Dana and her family decided to escape. If they didn't know that there was something better out there and better than North Korea they would not take the risk.

When she watched Titanic she saw there was no propaganda, there was nothing, but just a story about people and love. They did not teach about a revolution or anything. *“There they die for love! They are not talking about North Korea in the movies. They are just talking about everyday things.”* That curiosity combined with the situation in North Korea led to their escape. I was shocked, having assumed that North Koreans did not have access to foreign films at all. She told me there were plenty of foreign films as well as South Korean films and dramas.

Later I asked my other informants if they had watched or heard on the radio of foreign movies and dramas. All of them said they had. Titanic was a repeat offender as Sulli and Dana not knowing of each other told me that they both had a crush on Leonardo DiCaprio. After reading on the subject I have learned that many North Korean defectors arriving in South Korea have said they listened, using Chinese made radios, to Chinese and South Korean radio stations (Harden, 2012, 163).

The way they would watch these illegal movies or listen to the radio was during the nighttime, closing the curtains and pulling a blanket over their heads so light and sound would be trapped inside. They would also use headphones and have the volume at the lowest. Dana said they had to be quiet, showing me this by holding her index finger up to her mouth, and pointing at the walls. She said that you could not even trust your neighbors, because of the *inminban*. But as the police wanted to catch people watching these “impure recorded visual materials” (Harden, 2012, 172) they would resort to other ways to catch these criminals. As more and more illegal visual materials came over the border from China, the North Korean police became alarmed and came up with a tactic to catch people who watched them: “they cut electricity to specific apartment blocks and then raided every apartment to see what tapes and disks were stuck inside the players” (Harden, 2012, 164).

INFORMATION BALLOONS

During North Korea Freedom week, held annually in Seoul, I was given the opportunity to join defectors and activists for a balloon launch. These are huge transparent plastic balloon tubes filled with hydrogen, at the bottom of which there are big bundles attached filled with

various items such as Choco pie, USBs, DVDs, transistor radios, Bibles, 1\$ bills, and tens of thousands of counter propaganda leaflets such as the human rights declaration in Korean, and anti-Kim Jong-un leaflets (McCoy 2014). Why send these items to North Korea? They are all illegal contraband. A timer is attached to the balloons so when according to the weather measurements taken beforehand the activists are sure the balloons will float in the right direction, and blow up the bundle and distribute the items over a large area.

I went with Inside North Korea, an NGO which follows Shin dong-hyuk. I had met with Inside North Korea on a meeting arranged by North Korean Freedom Week. The launch was held at a parking lot in Paju, close to the DMZ, and I would never have found it unless I was with the NGO. And that was the point. There are numerous controversies about the balloon launches and their effectiveness in reaching the North Korean population. Countless times have the North Korean government condemned the act of these “human scum”, and the citizens of Paju fear for their own security. Park Sang-hak, a defector, is the most well-known balloon launch activist, and he was present at the two launches I went to. He is the leader of the NGO Fighters for a Free North Korea, whose main objective is to send information from South Korea to North Korea. Park is on the top of the list of defectors North Korea want to disappear. He is “target zero” and North Korean spies had already attempted to assassinate him (Human Rights Foundation n.d.). We were surrounded by police, and we had undercover officers in our van. Present were also the People’s Liberation Front (PFL), which are military defectors there to protect the activists. The PFL are former officers in the North Korean army, clad in berets and gray-camouflage fatigues, but they would have seemed more intimidating if the women did not wear combat boots with high heels.



(Picture taken by author)

WHY DO THEY DEFECT?

It is not an easy decision to choose to defect. Most people either defect alone, or with one or more family members. Often refugees do not carry many possessions with them and do not have a clear idea of where they may finally settle. Most of their family they have to leave behind at the mercy of the North Korean security apparatus. The family will most likely be classified as politically disloyal having been in close contact with a “traitor”. This is because of “*yeon-jwa-ja*”, or guilt by association. Kim Il-Sung introduced the law in 1972. It is one of many social control tools North Korea uses on its citizens: “Kim Il-sung said, ‘it is necessary to root out three generations...’ If one of the family members committed the crime, they are all guilty, or it is presumed they will be” (Collins, 2012, 51). Family members up to three generations, as well as friends, neighbors or colleagues may suffer because of your defection. They may be tortured, purged, or sent to prison camps as punishment. It is also very dangerous for the individual defecting:

The bare statistics of defection mask the danger, hardship and suffering that North Koreans experience when they flee their country. Those who are captured in the act of defecting run the risk of arrest, torture, imprisonment, years of hard labor, and in some cases a lingering death in prison camps (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 224).

In the latter half of the 1990s, intercity domestic travel restrictions lessened. The North Korean government realized that people needed to go somewhere for food, and border guards accepted bribes from people wanting to cross over to China (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 220). This was an important factor contributing to the outflow of defectors in the 1990s. Before the late 1990s, domestic travel and travel across the border to China was almost impossible. Without a travel permit, which would have to be officially issued at your workplace, ordinary citizens did not get the chance to travel outside one's province, or move inside the country. This travel permit document was modelled after the old Soviet Union identification cards (Harden, 2012, 150). Travelers going to Pyongyang, border areas or other restricted areas would need an additional permit (Harden, 2012, 150; Hassig and Oh, 2009, 226).

The majority of defectors come from the three northernmost provinces of North Korea, North Hamgyong, South Hamgyong and Ryanggang. This means low songbun status, poverty, easier accessibility to border areas, and their natural environment (Harden, 2012, 152). Farming is difficult in these mountainous areas, so crossing the Sino-Korean border to China has been used by merchants and traders going back between China and North Korea. "... by 2000, traders had begun to move back and forth across the border in their thousands, supplying food and goods for markets that had all but replaced the governments public distribution system" (Harden, 2012, 162-163).

Park, one of the young defectors who is currently attending a university in Seoul, explained how he thinks most defectors feel about defection. From his perspective he thinks that they follow the Maslow pyramid²². Because basic needs such as food, water and sleep,

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The psychologist Abraham Maslow described the people's needs as a pyramid where the most basic needs come first. Using this pyramid, he showed how the needs govern human development and motivation. The various steps build on each other, so one must have covered the bottom step before one can "climb" up the pyramid. Maslow believed that the needs built on each other and that could only be move up the pyramid when the needs at the level below was covered. Today, most people agree that this is not absolute. We can meet several needs simultaneously, and we may find that the need for recognition is satisfied even if we for example are hungry (Maslow 2014).

were not fulfilled in North Korea, many went over to China to meet their needs. “*These are instinctive needs*” Park explained. Many border-crossers leave for China to return back to North Korea, and some do it as a job, becoming a professional border-crosser bringing in food, money, goods and information. Many defectors escape to China without the intention to go further. But as they are considered illegal migrants in China, and therefore the risk of being repatriated back to North Korea is high, their need for security heightens. Subsequently, defectors decide that they would make the risky escape to South Korea or other asylum friendly countries.

ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

There are three main ways to escape North Korea. One is by sea to either China, Japan or South Korea, another is through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to South Korea and lastly, crossing either the Tumen or Yalu (Amnok) rivers to China.

Escaping by sea is dangerous, and there are only a few who have made it (Choson Ilbo 2011). To escape successfully by sea would involve more than one person, because an individual could not navigate the distances it takes to get to safety. One would need a larger boat, and a good sailor to maneuver the boat away from North Korean navy patrol boats. The journey by sea is to either navigate down the coastline directly to South Korea, or “across the West Sea to reach China two hundred miles to the west (but much closer if the boat just crosses the North Korea-China border), or sailing across the East Sea some five to six hundred miles to Japan” (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 225).

The second route is trying to make one’s way through the minefield of the four-kilometer-wide DMZ separating North and South Korea. People who have managed to get through the DMZ to South Korea successfully have been North Korean border guards who know their way in the DMZ area. The last route, the most common and easiest way of defecting North Korea is to cross either the Tumen or Yalu (Amnok) Rivers into Jilin or Liaoning provinces in China, or Russia²³. It is the safest of them all, but it leaves the person a

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Going to Russia is rarely attempted because it leaves the refugees even farther from their destination. Blending in with the local population is also more difficult than it is in China.

long way from South Korea. The Yalu River that separates China and North Korea's western borders is deep and wide, making it more difficult to cross without a boat (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 226). The Tumen River, which is shallow and narrow, forms about a third of the eastern border with China and the short border with Russia (Harden, 2012, 160).

Because of the porous border between North Korea and China with only the Tumen River separating the two countries it has become the primary defect route for defectors. The Tumen usually freezes during the winter making it easier for defectors to escape by just running over the few meters it takes to cross (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 226). Although it may not be deep, during the summer it has powerful currents which can be difficult to wade through. On the Chinese side of the river there are dense trees and bushes working as cover for the defectors that they can hide in. Although the border areas are filled with North Korean border guards they can be eluded or bribed. Border security in North Korea became stricter around 2004. North Korea enforced higher punishments for illegal border crossers, with prison terms of up to five years (Harden, 2012, 164). Electronic, motion and photographic surveillance systems were installed along the border. China also increased border security in the run up to their 2008 Summer Olympics (Harden, 2012, 165). They wanted to discourage North Koreans from entering the country. This scared the many people who had made their living by trading. Also, after the succession of Kim Jong-un, the security was again reinforced and the numbers of defectors arriving in South Korea dropped (Ministry of Unification, n.d. a).

THE “JOSEONJOK” PEOPLE

When crossing into China, the first people defectors meet are usually ethnic Koreans. Dana remembers that as a child she could hear Chinese children yelling from the other side of the river, taunting her, asking if she was hungry. The three northernmost provinces of Northern China consist of “Joseonjok” people, numbering up to 2 million people (Harden, 2012, 171; Freeman, 2005, 80). They speak Korean, eat similar food and share many cultural similarities. Since the late 1800s, ethnic Koreans from Korea (at that time the peninsula was not divided) fled across the Tumen and Yalu Rivers into northeast China. China welcomed them and used them as a buffer against Russian expansion (Harden, 2012, 171). Because of these ethnic Koreans, North Korean defectors can blend in easier when they defect over to China. But, since the number of defectors fleeing North Korea has been growing, the local people are not as friendly as they used to be. Many have turned desperate defectors into a business

trafficking North Korean women to lonely Chinese men, and North Korean men to businesses that need cheap labor (Bloomberg 2015).

As shown in the statistics in the introduction of this thesis, 70 percent of defectors are women (Ministry of Unification, n.d. a). These are under risk of being trafficked and abused during their flight from the North. None of my informants had personally been taken advantage of, but their mothers with whom they defected with were. The mother of Victoria was sold to a poor Chinese man. He was a single farmer and wanted a son from the middle-aged mother. They worked at his farm for several years as virtual slaves before the mother managed to get pregnant and give him a son. Now Victoria has a half-brother in China whom she has not seen in many years. Dana's mother was raped because a Chinese broker did not get enough money to transport them to the border between Mongolia and China. He initially wanted the underage Dana, but her mother offered herself for her daughter's sake.

IN CHINA

Due to The People's Republic of China being a close ally to North Korea, fleeing to a third country is the best option for defectors. China refuses to grant North Korean defectors refugee status and consider them illegal economic migrants. If defectors are caught in China, they are repatriated back to North Korea to face harsh punishments, or even death (Human Rights Watch n.d.; Hassig and Oh, 2009, 227). Although they can blend in easily with the local population in China, living in China without being caught is harder. Despite China's obligations to the 1951 and 1967 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, they forcibly repatriate North Korean defectors (UNHCR n.d.). The best way for defectors to hide from the police is to go to one of the many NGOs or South Korean religious organizations operating in the border areas between China and North Korea. The real challenge for defectors is to get out of China and into South Korea or another country that will treat them as legitimate refugees. No one knows for certain the number of North Korean defectors living illegally in China. But NGOs and human rights groups estimate that it can be from about 30,000 to 100,000 or even more (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 218).

If caught in China defectors face interrogations once repatriated back in North Korea. These interrogations are often accompanied by beatings and torture. The interrogator wants to know if you have been in contact with South Koreans or any religious organizations (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 231). They also want to know if you have watched South Korean TV, movies

or listened to South Korean radio. Hassig and Oh (2009) explains that the North Korean police wants answers to certain questions to determine the punishment. If you are found guilty in wanting to defect to South Korea you will face longer sentences than if you just went to China to trade and earn money. Women are also asked if they had any sexual relations with Chinese men. Those defectors, who can answer no to all of these questions, would be sentenced to a few months to a year in a labor camp as punishment. Any yes answer will earn the defector a sentence in a political prison camp for more than one year, on the charges of being a spy or a traitor (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 231). Once they are sentenced as a defector it will be on their personal record, and also affecting their songbun status. They will be branded as politically disloyal, and must endure closer surveillance than ordinary citizens.

Although to learn about the escape and the lives of my informants in North Korea were not my main objective during my fieldwork, it was certainly a crucial part of my informants' past. They told me how they defected rather soon after meeting me. Sulli shocked me by telling me on our first meeting, while others waited to our second or third meeting.

Sulli told me her defection story while we were walking from her apartment to the subway station. It was our first meeting, and during my visit to her apartment for two hours we had just talked small talk about ourselves, and planned for the next time we were meeting. While we were walking to the subway station it was already nighttime and dark. We walked through a tunnel and she excitedly asked me if I wanted to know how she defected from North Korea. Taken aback, I let her tell her story. We spoke in English and there was an echo in the tunnel. She told me that she ran across the Tumen River at nighttime, during winter. The river was mostly frozen. She had paid off the border guards with money. What really shocked me was when she said that "Jenny", her then 4-5 year old daughter, was on her back. She was afraid that some other guard, not the one bribed, would see them and shoot her in the back. She said her heart kept beating so hard, that she thought others could hear it. Later when I met other defectors their story was very similar to Sulli's. They had all gone across the Tumen River, during winter at night. Some had done it several times. Some had been repatriated back to North Korea. Park had a broker on the Chinese side waiting for him to assist him in his defection all the way to South Korea. Others went to China with no help, and found brokers there.

ESCAPING TO SOUTH KOREA

There are four escape routes to South Korea for North Korean defectors. The main objective for defectors when they decide, in China, that they want to go further, is to get to South Korea where the government grants them automatic citizenship.

The cheapest way is to run inside a South Korean or any foreign consulate or embassy in China. The United Nations office has also been used by defectors as a safe house. This became very popular in the early 2000s (Hassig and Oh, 2009). Although there are many military and security personnel outside the consulates and embassies, if defectors go as a big group the police cannot catch them all. This escape route was shown in the movie “*Crossing*” (2008), and was how Shin Dong Hyuk got into safety (Harden, 2012).

The most expensive way is to get a forged passport and fly from an airport in China to Seoul. The costs are from \$10,000 for these services (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 228-229). This is how my informant Park travelled to Seoul. He explained that his father was a high ranking military officer in North Korea and therefore had important information to give to the South Korean government. For this his father got paid a lot of money which he used to get his son to South Korea. Park was picked up at his grandparents’ house in North Korea, helped across the Tumen River and led all the way to the airport gate by different brokers. He was even shocked by how the passport controller at the Beijing airport was in on the operation. “*Money talks*” he said. Not many defectors can afford to get a fake passport and identity papers. It is the quickest escape, and a “first-class” escape from start to finish could take as little as three weeks (Harden, 2012, 145).

The most dangerous route is going through the Gobi desert in Mongolia to the South Korean embassy in Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia. Mongolia does not repatriate defectors. From the Chinese border they walk following the railway tracks at a far distance. However, reaching Mongolia is difficult as there are only open plains of unforgiving desert, making navigation at night difficult. It is easy to get lost in the vast desert, and some never make it (Hassig and Oh, 2009, 229). Sulli said she did not know whether she saw walking in the correct direction, in circles or back to China. Seeing the police and guards in Mongolia the defectors are so happy to be taken to the police station. All of my informants chose this route except Park, as mentioned above. The price for this escape is around \$2,000 and up.

Victoria told me about a girl she met during the escape to Mongolia through the Gobi desert who really upset her. This girl had defected alone from North Korea and therefore had no one to help her. At the age of 18 she had been sold three times and she had two children.

Victoria said to me that even though she had a tough time in China, there were other stories that were far worse than hers.

The longest, but safer route is through Southeast Asia down to Thailand. They usually go through Laos, but Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam have also been used as transit countries. Thailand however is the only country that will send defectors to South Korea, not North Korea. Arriving in Thailand would require travelling many miles along an underground transportation network consisting of railways, buses, automobiles, treacherous river crossings and arduous travel on foot (Harden, 2012, 145; Hassig and Oh, 2009, 229). In Thailand the defectors will stay in a Thai prison for about one month before they are flown to Seoul. This route was the one “Halmoni”, Sulli’s mother, used to arrive in South Korea. Sulli paid for Halmoni to take the safest route since she is approaching 80 years old.

ARRIVING IN SOUTH KOREA

The South Korean government recognizes North Korean refugees as “dislocated people” (Ministry of Unification n.d. a). When a defector requests protection and transfer to South Korea, the MoU, will take the appropriate measures so that the refugees are transferred to South Korea (Ministry of Unification n.d. d). In the meantime refugees will be accommodated in foreign diplomatic offices or temporary shelters in the host country. South Korea’s Ministry of Unification was established in 1969 as a government organization in charge of all issues pertaining to Inter-Korean relations and is making preparations for a future unification between North and South Korea (Ministry of Unification n.d. c). It is responsible for managing North Korean defectors in South Korea, manage resettlement policies and educate both defectors and the general public about inter-Korean problems: “The existence of Ministry of Unification reflects the unique reality of the Korean peninsula, which still remains divided since the end of the Korean War” (Ministry of Unification n.d c).

Upon entrance in South Korea, interrogation by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and other government agencies will take place. All North Korean defectors arriving in South Korea have to go through one month (or more) of interrogation, for security reasons. Here the NIS will weed out potential North Korean spies or ethnic Korean Chinese. Defectors will here be given medical examination and access to free health care. After interrogation, they will be transferred to the “Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees”, the

governmental educational facility of *Hanawon* to “undergo basic social orientation to become South Korean citizens” (Ministry of Unification n.d. d).

Hanawon was established in Anseong, Gyeonggi Province in 1999. In December 2012 a second Hanawon opened in Hwacheon-gun, Gangwon Province because of the increase in defectors arriving each year. The training at Hanawon is about twelve weeks, around 392 hours of classes. At Hanawon defectors receive education for social adaptation in four areas to help them adjust to South Korean society: «physical health and psychological stability; understanding South Korean society; initial settlement support; and career counselling and vocational training» (ICG 2011, 22). At Hanawon defectors learn about the peninsula's history (that the North started the Korean War), democracy and human rights. The orientation is intended to give defectors basic knowledge necessary to function in South Korean society such as using the subway, an ATM, use credit cards and read the Roman alphabet. The main objective is to get defectors to regain emotional stability and motivate them to become socially and economically independent (Ministry of Unification n.d. d). During their stay at Hanawon they are taken on field trips where they learn how to buy clothes, order drinks and food at cafes, and visit the grocery stores. These field trips are the only times defectors are allowed outside of Hanawon. During their stay they are under heavy travel restrictions, and security is tight with barbed wire, security guards and cameras. This is because of the security concerns that surround defectors. The threat of kidnapping and assassination is real. Some higher ranking defectors have South Korean police agents present at all times, even when they are let back into South Korean society.

In 2012, Hanawon started to focus their efforts in instilling a work ethic and the desire to work in defectors. They provide gender-specific job training for defectors. Hanawon also offers educational programs for refugee children. They try to help them catch up to education they have missed while in North Korea or in transit countries. The students are placed in classes according to their age and academic level. MoU writes on its webpage that “It specifically emphasizes education in South Korean language and vocational training, which are especially useful for quick settlement” (Ministry of Unification n.d. d).

Although the training at Hanawon is useful for adapting to South Korean life, it is limited. Defectors are expected to master an almost entirely different culture in three months, while recovering from the traumas they experienced in North Korea and on their journey to South Korea. After they complete the training from Hanawon, defectors are granted certain benefits including healthcare, financial subsidies for settlement, job training, employment

incentive and subsidy. Refugees are transferred to their residences after registration of family relation and arrangement for housing is cleared. After this is complete, North Korean defectors obtain residence registration number and legal status as citizens of South Korea (Sohn, 2013, 113). MoU also helps in educational support, such as special admission and transfer to schools and support tuition (Ministry of Unification n.d. d).

After their stay at Hanawon is complete refugees receive “Residence support” for five years. Because of the sums it costs to defect completely to South Korea, many defectors were in debt to their brokers as soon as they arrived in Seoul. But by 2008, the South Korean government changed the way it distributed its cash support for defectors to keep brokers from taking all their money. Instead of offering a lump-sum, money is paid over time. Money also goes directly to housing, eliminating any chance for it to be taken by a broker (Harden, 2012, 146). Defectors will receive housing in an area of their choice, but it may sometimes be determined by lottery as well, depending on the availability in that area. The MoU organizes the regional adaptation centers called Hana Centers, which help defectors in their daily life, after graduation from Hanawon. There are 32 Hana Centers nationwide, and their task is to provide information on everyday life, psychological and career counseling services, and education to help refugees adapt to their community (Ministry of Unification n.d d). In 2014, the delivery system was improved in such a way that each Hana Center will offer one-stop support services for all purposes including employment, education, and welfare.

However, when defectors finish their stay at Hanawon, several problems arise. As most of my informants told me, they were not interested in learning about history and computers at that time, and they did not wrap their minds around the fact that it would be so important when outside. Dana told me *“After staying hidden in China for many months that turned into years, and then staying in the Mongolian prison for three months. Being told that we were going to Hanawon to receive education for three more months felt like another prison to me. I just wanted to go outside and meet people.”* When they are let outside many become bewildered and overwhelmed by feelings of being ostracized and alienated. Differences in cultural norms and values make everyday life hard. In chapter four I will be discussing this more deeply as we discuss identity problems, stigma and networking among North Korean defectors.

SONGBUN FOLLOWS DEFECTORS

I will highlight the life stories of Sulli and Krystal, two North Korean women who are about the same age. The difference between them is how their lives were in North Korea. Their previous life in North Korea and the privileges or lack of privileges in some ways followed them to South Korea.

Sulli, is a woman from the city Musan, North Hamgyong province in North Korea. She was classified in the hostile class, as most of the people living in the northern parts of North Korea. Her father was a miner and her mother a housewife. After Sulli graduated high school she did not have a good enough songbun status to go to university, and therefore worked as a telephone operator. Because of her low status and therefore low education she did not have many choices in life to move up the social ladder. She married someone in her songbun class, and they got a daughter together. Their daughter, Jenny, would have the same limitations as Sulli had because of her husband's songbun. Sulli quit her job when she found out she was pregnant. After her husband died in an mining accident, she decided to defect. North Korea operated on a distribution system and had rations. Without her husband it would be difficult getting an adequate ration. Because of hunger she decided to go over the Tumen River with Jenny on her back, to China. With the help of a broker Sulli and Jenny did not stay in China for long, nor were they taken advantage of the way many North Korean women are. They went to the Gobi desert in Mongolia and got caught by Mongolian border police and sent to South Korea after a few months there. After arriving in South Korea and going through investigation and Hanawon she was finally a South Korean citizen.

The day I met her she had just graduated from nursing school from a good university in South Korea. It had now been eight years since she arrived in South Korea. She told me how she was ostracized in university by other students because she was from the North. She called herself a penguin which were left out in in the cold, outside of the ring that keeps all the other penguins warm. She said she tried to hide the fact that she is from the North, but was revealed by the other students. Sulli had a hard time at university and she told me studying did not come natural for her, and especially not studying for eight hours or more each day. While I was doing my fieldwork Sulli were going to many interviews, and she told me how they reacted negatively to her being from the North. Even with a university degree in nursing, she did not have a full time job when I left South Korea after my fieldwork was done. When I arrived back in August 2015, I went to visit Sulli and her family to see how they were doing. Sulli now works full time at a hospital close to her house.

Krystal however had a different life story than Sulli. Krystal grew up in Pyongyang which only the core class is allowed to. Her father was a member of the Korean Workers Party, meaning they were well off. She went to one of the best universities in North Korea and graduated with a bachelor degree in economics. Her family was kicked out of Pyongyang, for reasons she did not tell me. Experiencing this decline in social mobility she decided to escape North Korea to South Korea looking for freedom. When she arrived she applied for work in the same industry that she had been working in while in the North. However her education was not transferable and up to par with South Korean standards. She got a job in the service industry, far from what she had previously done. The pay were less than 10,000 KRW an hour and the days were 10-12 hours long. This really hit her hard because she was from the upper class, the elite, and now she had hit, for her, rock bottom. This was not what she expected when she left North Korea. Later she was employed by a bigger company and worked at the front desk. The problems that occurred were that this company had a lot of business with foreigners and foreign brand names. Customers would talk to her but she did not understand the names, and was let go after a few months. This became a turning point in her life and she decided to start on scratch and go back to university. She used the competence that she had acquired at university in North Korea, such as reading and studying skills, and she graduated with a master's degree from a good South Korean university. Now she is working for North Korean defectors rights in Seoul.

How life unfolded in North Korea, in the collectivized society, based on songbun status, has ramifications for those who end up leaving the North. As for Sulli she tries to move up the social ladder, and to rid herself of the social status she had previously in North Korea. Krystal came from a privileged family living in Pyongyang, but was moved to the countryside. When she arrived in South Korea she thought that she again would be a part of the middle or high-class, but were confronted with her expectations. She was forced to reconsider her skills, and built her way up again, to what can be considered a very good life even after South Korean standards.

Chapter IV

Modernity, identity and stigma

This chapter is about how North Koreans are portrayed in South Korean society. The first section of this chapter addresses the subject of modernity and individualization. From the topic of individualization I move to the subject of who is considered Korean in South Korea and how this matters to defectors and their identities. Nationalism, ethnicity, belonging and identity will be touched upon in that segment of the chapter. I also bring up the subject of stigma. With the North Korean defector population approaching 30,000 they still are a minority group in South Korea, facing increasing discrimination.

INCREASINGLY FACING DISCRIMINATION

Joanna Hosaniak in *“Homecoming Kinsmen or Indigenous Foreigners”* (2011) explains that despite North Koreans being ethnic Korean, they face the same problems and challenges as a non-Korean immigrant would face in South Korea. Similarities but at the same time differences in language, culture and norms create difficulties assimilating. North Korea, although technically the same “nation” as the South is perceived by both North and South Koreans as different. This is revealed in the difficulties faced by North Koreans re-settling in other countries, particularly South Korea, and the attitudes towards return migration amongst many refugees (Hosaniak 2011). Being refugees they had to leave their homes and their roots, but what is different is that their host country is a place with similar culture and language. This could have been an advantage, but becomes a disadvantage in that their host country, South Korea, feels like defectors should adapt quicker and better than other immigrants. North Koreans are viewed as most likely to adapt to the South Korean society based on shared ethnicity and common language (Hosaniak 2011). This social expectation that defectors will adapt and integrate faster does not take into consideration their hardships before coming to and the confusion they experience when arriving in South Korea.

“In this sense, being a burden on society, and lacking even some form of birth right, places North Korean refugees in an extremely ambiguous position: they are not quite foreigners, in that they are classified as Koreans, members of the same ethnic group as South Koreans; yet neither are they quite South Korean nationals, in that they behave unconventionally, fail to adapt to South Korean norms, and long remain dependent on the contributions of South Koreans. Their existence runs counter to the prevailing neo-liberal ethic in South Korea, because they do not contribute toward society’s wealth on the one hand and are unable to assume responsibility for their own well-being on the other. Not only do they fail to obtain and hold jobs, but many do not stay in school, complete high school or college courses, become rich or successful, and become proper South Koreans by participating in a competitive social environment.”(Ryang, 2012, 7)

MODERNITY AND INDIVIDUALIZATION

After completing Hanawon, Harry, one of the younger defectors I got to meet, was enrolled in a South Korean high school. He went to a store to buy school supplies such as stationery and pens. He said that in front of him there were hundreds of pens in different colors, prints and patterns, and with different colored ink. He was so overwhelmed by the choices that he was unable to choose a pen that day. He told me that in North Korea there was the option of one single pen only, and therefore it was easy. “*You could not question your choice, if it was the right one or not, because you only had one option*”, Harry said. As creativity can be seen as a threat to the Kim regime, people try to follow the rules instead of questioning their validity. Conversely, almost everything you do is open for reconsideration in South Korea. What may seem like a trivial thing, not being able to choose a pen, is the reality that some defectors face arriving in South Korea. The life trajectory of the individual was largely predetermined in North Korea while in South Korea it must be created. Coming from a place where one is told what to do and how to do it, and suddenly arriving at a place where the choices are endless can be very confusing:

Everyone is constantly being forced to consider how to live his or her life. There are no more predetermined answers to that question: ‘Today’s individual feel steamrolled, smothered by options which, although they are not actual choices, none the less demand that decisions be made as fast as possible, in an almost reflex-like manner, so to say... the individual... in this

way is no longer able to construct linear, narrative biographies.’ (Beck, 2007a: 583: our translation quoted in Sørensen and Christiansen, 2012, 47)

Modernity theorists such as sociologists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) both focus on the impact modernity has on social life. Both Beck and Giddens look at the consequences of the changes Western societies are going through at the socio-political level and how the modern industrial societies are transforming. And because of this historical development people's condition of life, trajectory and experiences are changing. The new society, the new modernity, can be described with words like globalization, individualization, reflexivity, new forms of risk, doubt, choice and freedom. All these new changes represent new premises for identity and socialization. It is important to specify that globalization is central in the understanding of modernity. After World War II there has been an acceleration of commodities, ideas, and people on a global scale across national borders. A common ground among Beck and Giddens is that they both focus on the freedom to choose who a person wants to be, and how a person wants others to perceive him or her. Much responsibility is placed on the individual to make their own choices - and the freedom of choice is too big for some.

The core in Ulrich Beck's theory is that modernity is characterized by risk (1992). He focuses on the “radicalization of the individual”, and how the generally collective such as family, education, gender roles and social classes are losing their function and meaning. There are fewer normative rules to follow, and the goal is not fixed. Accordingly, focus shifts to the individual and his or her individual realization of a life of their own. Individualization means increased freedom, but it also means an increased possibility for failure, more uncertainty and unpredictability. In what Beck calls “first modern societies” (Beck 1992 in Sørensen and Christiansen, 2012, 29) the individual is controlled. Here the collective puts limits on the individual, whose life trajectory and social status are (largely) predetermined. North Korea can be seen as a “first modern society” as it monitors the information that goes in and out of the country, controls the individual, and determines their social status. Moving to South Korea, the safety the North Korean system previously provided in the form of free school, kindergarten, residence and a secure job are suddenly gone, and responsibility is entrusted to the individual. For many informants changes involved a movement from order to chaos, from forced everyday life to freedom, and from security to insecurity. As society evolved to a “second modernity” the collective restraints loosened, while the welfare state blossomed. The individual was given the freedom to choose to live a life of their own. South Korea can be

considered a “second modern society”. Here, life is mostly up to the individual to choose, with guidance from parents, friends and others:

Most of the conditions and affairs that come together to form the life of an individual today demand of each individual that he or she be involved in an active and ongoing process of decision-making. This is the case for every life decision, from the most trivial everyday thing to the large, existential questions of life (Sørensen and Christiansen, 2012, 40).

Park said coming to South Korea was: “*like arriving in the modern world in a time machine.*” He told me that he was very confused. He now had a South Korean citizenship, but he was born in North Korea. He considered himself North Korean, but on paper he was South Korean. He said that for three years after his arrival he could not answer any question about identity. “*Who am I?*” was a question he frequently asked himself. Classmates would ask him which country was better, South Korea or North Korea. He felt very ambivalent because “*of course South Korea was better*”, but he had many good memories from the North as it was where he was born and had grown up. He also had some bad memories of both North and South Korea. He experienced difficulties in South Korea regarding discrimination. After those three years of confusion he came to the conclusion that he is just Korean, a person of the whole Korean peninsula, a person that does not differentiate between the North and the South: “*Whether Hanguk (South Korea) or Choson (North Korea) they are all the same minjok (nation)*²⁴.”

While Park’s experiences and predicaments were clearly and genuinely his own, they resonate well with Anthony Giddens’s observations on life in “late” or “high modern” societies (1991). Giddens is mostly known for his theory on reflexivity. According to him people have a whole range of choices before them, not only about lifestyle and appearance, but also in relationships, where the individuals now have to make choices on their own. “The question ‘What do you want to be?’ used to have to do merely with education and trade; today, it covers every aspect of our human existence; religion, identity, marriage, parenthood” (Sørensen and Christiansen, 2012, 47). The formation of identity is according to Giddens a reflexive project. As a result, modern individuals have to be constantly “self-reflexive,”

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“Minjok” can also be translated to “people”, “race” or “ethnicity”.

thinking about what they should do and who they should be. He focuses on how modernity can be dynamical. Giddens: “recognizes that this new freedom places new burdens and responsibilities on people; particularly in a world of increasing risk and insecurity, the individual is placed under greater emotional stress” (Buckingham, 2008, 9).

But the process of adaptation is also a creative one, of establishing a new culture and new identities, of exploration and experimentation. In the process of losing country, community, family, status, property, culture, and even a sense of personal identity, replacements for these losses must be created for refugees’ lives to continue, as well as for adjustment to the new and changing circumstances of their lives in the places they now find themselves (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994, x).

Everyone in a special way has to reflect on themselves - who they are. Identity is something that needs to be maintained and produced continuously and is an ongoing process. When someone looks in the mirror, he or she knows that this person must actively be created daily. This person has to take a stand on different ways to be “someone”. It becomes important to create an identity that you wish to communicate to the outside world. The modern world places this responsibility on each individual.

IMAGINED COMMUNITY AND NATION BUILDING

Most societies are based on a common or shared identity. To use Benedict Anderson's (1991) well known phrase, communities are “imagined”. An "imagined community" according to Anderson is an imaginary belonging to a community. The term was introduced in terms of nationalism and nation states. A national community is "imagined" because the members of even the smallest nation will never meet or get to know all the members of a nation, yet have a notion of a community with these people, they are bound together by “abstractions rather than physical connections” (Lim, 2009, 1). A nation is defined in the sense that there are absolute limits that distinguish one nation from other nations. A nation exists and defines itself largely on the basis of its borders, and in opposition to other nations. One needs other nations to feel as a nation (Anderson, 1991). The nation is perceived as an equal brotherhood, regardless of socio-economic differences that may exist in a country (Anderson, 1991, 6). As a constructivist, Anderson argues that nations and nationalism are products of modernity. The state uses nationalism as a tool to organize the thousands of people living in it to fight, even

die for the state. Nation, nationalism, ethnicity and identity are not static, but constantly changing. But for Koreans this concept of a nation as something that is constructed is unfamiliar. Koreans believe that Korea is something fixed and eternal, and something that has been since the beginning of time (Won, 2010, 96).

Nation building is a process in which national identity is formed in a group of people through the state. Nation building is most common after major structural changes such as the dissolution of states or when a colonial power pulls out of a country (Hylland Eriksen 1996). It is not only the society or the economy that needs to be rebuilt, but also the national identity of the people. In nation building common history, ethnicity, language, past and future is emphasized as cultural characteristics. The state will use metaphors like the nation is a family, and transfer the feelings and loyalty one has towards family to apply to the nation. In many nations and in South Korea as well, kinship terms like mother tongue, fatherland and that we are all “brothers and sisters” is used to strengthen the “imagined community”, the ethnic group or the nation (Hylland Eriksen 1996).

During competitions, and especially international sports events such as The World Cup and the Olympics, nationalistic feelings are promoted. The events can be seen as “battles”, country against country. The performers are not participants on their own behalf, but on behalf of a nation. During the time I was in Seoul in 2014 the Winter Olympics were held in Sochi, Russia. South Korea participated in many competitions and won three gold, three silver and two bronze medals. After our second meeting, the same night as the event of the kimchi cabbage head, as I am on my way out, Sulli said to me to watch TV that night. Especially at 2AM as it was then figure skater Kim Yuna, South Korea’s “Queen Yuna”, would compete for the gold. Although Sulli was going to her first job interview as a qualified nurse the next morning, she was going to stay up from 2AM to 4AM to watch Kim Yuna figure skate. She felt that rooting for South Korea was important. Coming from Norway, a country that usually does very well at the Olympics, I wanted to watch the Olympics and cheer on my nation. But to my surprise South Korean television, at least the channels I had access to, did not show any events unless South Korea was competing. Although the majority of the inhabitants of every nation probably becomes more nationalistic during competitions against other countries, it was very interesting to see that there was no opportunity to watch countries other than South Korea perform.

NATION BUILDING IN SOUTH KOREA

The problem of identity and South Korean “Koreanness” is a reflection of a history of being subordinate to powerful foreign states and the tragedy of national division after World War II (Savada and Shaw 1990a). Carter Eckert notes that there was little collective feeling toward the abstract concept of “Korea” as a nation before the 20th century (Eckert, 1990, 226). The shaping of Korean nationalism has largely been credited to historian and journalist Shin Chae-ho (1880-1936). Shin focused on the idea of the Korean nation as an ethnic identity, emphasizing the ancientness of the Korean nation and the narration of the founding myth of Dangun (Won, 2010, 96).

Shin’s interpretation of Korean history greatly influenced Koreans’ view of their nation.

Adopting Shin’s ethnicist or primordialist view, many Koreans regard the idea of the Korean ethnic unity as natural, since all Koreans are considered descendants of Dangun. According to those who hold this view, the Korean nation has been a “unitary nation of common blood, territory, language, culture, and historical destiny for thousands of years” (Won, 2010, 96-97).

The process of nation building in Korea began when Japan colonized Korea. Japan attempted to assimilate Koreans into Japanese society by using a variety of different strategies. A few examples were that Japanese language was introduced at all schools, banning the Korean language as a consequence. Japan also enforced Japanese names. Japan and South Korea are also in a dispute over the territorial sovereignty over the Liancourt Rocks, known as Dok-do in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan²⁵. But these are minor issues compared to the use of Korean women as sex slaves, “comfort women”, during World War II. Japan never officially apologized, and this is a huge diplomatic issue to this day (Lim, 2009, 12; Panda 2015). Nationalism was used as a motivation for the Korean nation to resist Japanese assimilation and to hope to be an independent nation soon. Japan is often used as an opposing state, often given the role of “other” and evil:

National and ethnic groups often need an “other”, a group of outsiders against whom they can define themselves. While Western countries with their individualistic and, from a Confucian

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As a visitor to the South Korean War Memorial Museum, the first thing you see when you enter is a big TV screen showing “Dok-do” island, where cameras 24/7 follow the situation on the island.

perspective, self-centered ways of life provide important images of “otherness” for South Koreans, the principal source of such images for many years has been Japan (Savada and Shaw 1990a).

The Korean notion of Japan as other is based on ill feelings for Japan when Korea were under Japanese rule, and how brutally the Japanese used the Korean population. When Korea regained independence from the Japanese after World War II “the sense of ethnic nationalism and unity was at its highest point” (Won, 2010, 97). After the division of Korea into two separate hostile states, again a process of nation building started. A building of “Koreanness”, and efforts at determining what it means to be Korean took place. Dennis Hart notes that there was a process from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s where the southern government featured North Korea as the national “other” (Hart, 2000, 142). At the time North Korea were having economic success and boasted of socialism and self-reliance. In contrast, the South were having problems with political unrest, autocratic military governments and the South were dependent on foreign aid both politically and economically (Hart, 2000, 142). It is interesting that both South and North Korea continued to proclaim a pure bloodline and ethnic homogeneity, but with respect to other political aspects they differed greatly.

These early contrasts prompted the southern regime to treat the north as their national Other so as to increase popular acceptance of the southern regime and delegitimize the claims from the north. The northern government has chosen a national Other that emphasizes non-Koreans and voices a need to excise the demons of foreign influences (Hart, 2000, 142).

South Korean nationalism was very much built during authoritarian military leader Park Chung-hee (in office from 1961 to 1979), the current president Park Geun-hye’s father. He proposed the “construction first, unification later” theory (Won, 2010, 98). The motto of the times became anti-communism, along with nationalism with an emphasis on “racial purity” (Kim Hyung-a 2004). It was during Park Chung-hee’s that South Korea went from rags to riches in a very short time.

“KOREANNESS”

Since Korea was divided, both countries have used propaganda to undermine the opposing state. Before the turn of the millennium, North Koreans were portrayed as: “almost inevitably

monochromatic, treating counterparts across the 38th Parallel as virulently evil Communists or downtrodden, brainwashed automatons” (Green and Epstein, 2013, 1). The South Korean society portrays defectors as outsiders: “This society has a way of saying, ‘you are different, and therefore you are the problem,’ ” said Kim [a defector]” (Sunwoo 2013). North Korean defectors are considered another type of Korean, and are therefore “other”:

In the absence of concrete ethnic differences between North and South, two postwar states of North and South produced state-based nationhood, a pseudo-ethnicity, in which North Korean settlers in contemporary South Korea are regarded as a distinct ethnic-like group that represents the North Korean nation-state, and thus “other” to South Koreanness. North Korean settlers are expected to get rid of ethnic markers as North Koreans and transform themselves into modern citizen-subjects of South Korea (Choo, 2006, 577).

Who is considered to be “real” Korean, and why does it matter? Timothy Lim’s article “*Who is Korean? Migration, Immigration, and the Challenge of Multiculturalism in Homogeneous Societies*” (2009) helps shed light on this difficult subject:

To be “truly” Korean, one must not only have Korean blood, but must also embody the values, the mores, and the mindset of Korean society. This helps explain why overseas Koreans (from China, Russia, Japan, the United States and other countries throughout the world have not fit into Korean society as Koreans. They are different, “real” Koreans recognize, despite sharing the same blood. At the same time, those who lack a “pure blood” relationship, no matter how acculturated they may be, have also been rejected as outsiders. This rejection, more importantly, has generally led to severe forms of discrimination (Lim, 2009, 1)

As Lim writes there is an extremely narrow concept of “Koreanness”, that categorizes who is, and who is not classified as Korean. Victoria, who arrived in South Korea six years ago, told me the story about when she went to a PC-bang, an internet cafe²⁶, a few months after she arrived. She went inside and asked the clerk how much they charged for the hour. The answer she got back shocked her as she was told it was not for foreigners. She was confused because

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Internet cafes are where you pay to use the internet and they are all over South Korea.

they were speaking Korean. She thought to herself, “why is he saying it is not for foreigners?” She told me how she said: “*Good thing I am Korean, I am from North Korea.*” Victoria proceeded to show her South Korean citizenship and her South Korean student identification, but without success. She had a struggle with her identity because of that incident. “*Am I not South Korean? I though South Korea was also my country. Why does it matter where I am from? I am me.*” When she came to South Korea she thought they shared a common identity. “*I thought that we are the same people. But coming to South Korea I now know that South Korean people think differently.*” In South Korea modernity itself is used as an ethnic marker, and there is an “othering” process at work:

It is not ethnically marked difference per se that is at stake in such “othering” processes but rather that “racial and cultural difference become coded ways of talking about other differences that matter, differences in power and in interests” (Lutz and Collins, 1993, 156). This is especially clear when no differences exist prior to the division, as in the case of partitioned states like Korea (Choo, 2006, 578).

The creation of “another Korean” is not something just Lim discusses in his paper, but others such as Sonia Ryang (2012), Choo Hae-yeon (2006), and Joanna Hosaniak (2011) have also grappled with this topic. In Korea as a whole, the notion of shared blood, homogenous ethnicity or both is the source of identity. But, as Lim writes, even if you share blood and a Korean ethnicity, there are other factors used to distinguish you as “other”. There is a focus on differences, not similarities:

Koreans do not employ a concept of difference that evokes the positive sense of a melting pot or multiculturalism often found in European and North American societies. Difference is assumed to be negative (Grinker, 1998, 269).

Koreanness is unfortunately an elusive idea that slips through your fingers as soon as someone tries to define what it really is. Therefore Koreanness is often recognized by what it is not, through some sort of negative identification. The fact that there exists a “difference”, a negative contrast, is just as necessary as the positive definition of Koreanness. One might say that the former is indispensable to the latter. In the beginning you start to differentiate between who belongs to a particular group and who does not. There is an inclusion and exclusion of who is inside and who is outside, creating oppositions between two or more

groups. Notably, those who share Korean blood, like the Joseonjok ethnic Koreans from China, ethnic Koreans from overseas, or North Koreans, are considered another type of Korean.

In a similar vein, Korea's "brethren" from China, the Joseonjok, who generally speak Korean and have a strong cultural affinity, have also suffered discriminatory treatment and have effectively been identified as outsiders. This suggests that the primary issue is not necessarily the unwillingness or inability of marginalized groups to "assimilate" (or at least try to assimilate) into Korean society, but rather it is the hitherto impenetrable barrier of a rigidly and narrowly defined conception of belongingness and identity (Lim, 2009, 6).

Fredrik Barth (1969) in "*Ethnic groups and Boundaries*" argues that we should focus on the cultural boundaries that define groups, and not on the cultural content of the group. The argument is that identity is something created where people meet. Within an ethnic group there can be conflict, and there can exist differences between members. But what is important is that as a group they agree that they are different from other groups they can contrast themselves against. By focusing on boundaries, we can say something about who is included in a community, but by the same token we can also say something about who is *not* part of the community. Such boundaries need not be national borders or ethnic boundaries, but social boundaries more generally (Barth 1969).

A perception of having the same ethnicity as others normally builds on one or more common characteristics: the same history and origins, the same language and culture, the same way of life and traditions, and the same religion. Apart from the vague term "origin" this is a collection of cultural traits. Barth considers ethnicity as a fundamental social phenomenon. He sets up a set of criteria describing an ethnic group, and says it is a group of people who is biologically self-reproductive. This group of people share fundamental cultural values and expresses them in obvious ways and at the same time forms a field of interaction and communication. The last criterion is that they attribute to themselves a separate identity and is ascribed a separate identity by others, so that they form a unit distinguishable from other comparable groups (Barth 1969). The last specification concerns the subjective perception of themselves and others. Self-identification and identification by others as a group has in recent decades been more central to ethnic definitions than the other three criteria.

(...) there may be a continuous flow of people and information across ethnic boundaries even though they are maintained as boundaries. If such divisions are maintained, this must be because they have some social relevance. In the relationship between the sedentary Fur and the nomadic Baggara in the Sudan, for example, there is an economic complementarity. They are mutually dependent on commodity exchange and occupy complementary ecological niches. As Gunnar Haaland (1969) has shown, Fur may become Baggara by changing their way of life, just as Leach (1954) showed that Kachin could become Shan; but the ethnic boundary separating the groups remains untouched in the process (Hylland Eriksen, 2001, 263).

Lim does not bring up North Korean defectors in his article, but there are similarities between North Korean defectors and the Joseonjok, in that they both speak Korean, and have a “strong cultural affinity” to Korea. Especially immigrants, or people coming from other countries outside of the “host country”, are expected to pledge allegiance to the nation they live in, and not the “homeland”. North Koreans live on the Korean Peninsula, but are still not considered “real” Koreans. North Koreans do not fit the South Korean definition of “Koreanness”. North Koreans have Korean blood and ethnicity, but are discriminated against, and thereby a stigma is created.

STIGMA

In “Stigma”, Erving Goffman (1963) emphasizes the importance of impression management concerning stigma. Stigma pertains to the shame that a person may feel when he or she fails to meet other people's standards – physically, culturally or characterwise.

When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his "social identity" [...] We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands. [...] It is [when an active question arises as to whether these demands will be filled] that we are likely to realize that all along we had been making certain assumptions as to what the individual before us ought to be. [These assumed demands and the character we impute to the individual will be called] virtual social identity. The category and attributes he could in fact be proved to possess will be called his actual social identity. While the stranger is present

before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others [...]. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole [...] to a tainted, discounted one (Goffman 1963, 2-3).

The existence of a stigma limits and changes the impression management and interaction between “stigmatized” and “normals”. Having a stigma is socially discrediting, and being stigmatized, the person is reduced from a whole to a rejected stereotype. The process of stigma is highly situational, and the role of stigmatized and stigmatizer may vary from different settings, therefore the process of stigma is dynamic and complex. The emphasis on idealized, normative identity and conduct limits the ability of the “stigmatized” individual to achieve full social acceptance by the population that he or she is forced to assimilate into. For the “stigmatized” individual who attempts to "pass" as “normal” they would employ "disidentifiers" to establish him or herself as "normal" (Goffman, 1963, 44). “Disidentifiers” are symbols stigmatized people use to cover their stigma and pass as “normal”. Feelings of ambivalence and alienation are likely to emerge as a result of limited social intercourse. The informants I met had indeed tried to erase their North Korean ethnic markers, took active measures in changing the way they spoke, and dressed and acted as best as they could in order to pass as "normals", to use Goffman's term. What they did and how will be introduced in the section below and the next chapter. In the next chapter I will discuss how North Korean defectors turn to consumption in an effort to shed their “North Korean markers”.

ATTAINING SOUTH KOREAN MARKERS

At Hanawon they try to help defectors erase their North Korean accents. As one of their first meetings with South Korea they are told almost from the beginning that being North Korean is not a value that is essentially attractive in South Korea. Their North Korean dialect is in essence not good enough, and they should change it to sound more South Korean, preferably more like the standard Seoulite dialect. Instead of encouraging the defectors to proudly announce their identity as North Koreans, they are told that their identity as North Koreans is something they should alter, and preferably hide, according to Sulli. In the introduction I quoted Choo saying that “North Korean settlers are expected to get rid of their ethnic markers and transform themselves into modern citizen-subjects of South Korea” (Choo 2006, 576).

Dialect, (*sattori*), is one trait according to which a Korean person can easily identify others, and especially North Koreans as they have a different way of intonation and enunciating words. Loanwords from other languages, especially English, is commonly used in South Korean colloquial speech as an effect of globalization. Foreign loanwords like “menu”, “coffee”, “wife”, “stress” and “hot” are now a part of the vocabulary in South Korea, forming what people like to call “Konglish”. This is frustrating for North Koreans who only have very limited exposure to English. North Koreans are not familiar with these words because the Kim regime decreed that only “pure” Korean should be used. In Sung Min-kyu’s article “*An Abuse of Culture*” she mentions a manual by The Korea Hana Foundation called “Manuals for North Koreans’ Successful Social Adaption” (2015, 51). This manual takes up “host language integration” among a wide range of topics. The term “host language” is indicative for the differences between the Korean spoken in the two Koreas: “In these assimilationist instructions North Korean can hardly find any *equal access* to South Korean society. *Being national* to them means merely conforming to *South Korean* values” (Sung, 2015, 52).

In the 1990s many South Korean popular television shows started making fun of North Korean speech styles:

which ends up assigning to ‘South’ Koreans ‘a discursive password’ of ‘who’s in and who’s out’ regarding national belonging (Hopper 1986 in Sung 2009: 445). The scheme of national belonging blames ‘North’ Korean settlers for the presumed differentiated speech style, dismissing the discursive privilege of the South Korean speech style (Sung 2009, 445).

A discourse decides what knowledge is regarded as possible, acceptable and true within a social field. Discourse is closely related to power. Foucault believes power defines knowledge and is defined by knowledge (Foucault 1980). Persons who have the “right” knowledge about a topic define what is true and not:

Language, codes of conduct and relevant skills are defined, and mastered, by the majority. The majority defines the cultural framework relevant for life careers, and thus has a surplus of symbolic capital over the minorities. For this reason, many minority members may be disqualified in the labour market and other contexts where their skills are not valued (Hylland Eriksen, 2001, 285)

The knowledge that becomes the dominant often excludes other types of knowledge about a topic. Hiding her identity as a North Korean is something Sulli, told me she does. She has learned how to speak with a Seoulite accent. After living in South Korea for eight years she has mastered it well according to my South Korean friend who met Sulli. But on occasion someone would ask her where her hometown is. She would say it is in Gwangju or Jeolla province in southern South Korea. She was told by other defectors that the southern dialect in South Korea sounds similar to the North Korean. Sometimes she told me that someone would say her dialect did not sound from that area. At that time she told me: *“I wanted to hit them. Why is it so important for South Koreans to know where my hometown is?”* Even though someone would jokingly call her a country “bumpkin”, she accepted it because at least they would recognize her as a South Korean. Identity is created in interaction with others, and here special emphasis is on the other's perception of us. Stigmatized persons have to be self-consciously aware of how they present themselves, and the impression they make on others. They have to constantly be aware of the way they present themselves, but keeping this up can be very hard. When we see a stranger, we attribute to him or her certain characteristics. These characteristics may not be consistent with the person's actual social identity (Goffman 1963).

HIDING AN ETHNIC IDENTITY IN NORWAY

Hiding, or attempting to hide, a stigma or ethnic identity is not an isolated event just happening to North Koreans in South Korea, but can occur wherever there is a minority who wants to fit in with the majority for different reasons. A comparative example would be from Harald Eidheim's article (1971) from a mixed Norwegian- Sami community in Northern Norway. His material shows a situation:

where an ethnic status (or identity) is, in a sense, illegitimate, and therefore not acted out in institutional inter-ethnic behavior. Nevertheless, this very illegitimacy has definite implications in the process of role-taking in elementary interaction and thus adds form to inter-ethnic relations (Eidheim 1971, 50).

At the time Eidheim did his fieldwork the costal Sami were a stigmatized group in the Norwegian society. Eidheim shows how the use of ethnic labels attached to communities, families and individual persons are in use between persons having contrasting as well as

similar identities (Eidheim 1971). Language becomes the most obvious contrast for the ethnic markers between the Sami and Norwegian population. Just as in the case among the North Korean refugees I talked to, about their maneuverings in Seoul, Eidheim's article shows how members of a stigmatized ethnic identity "seek to qualify themselves as full participants in the Norwegian society. In order to obtain this membership they have to develop techniques to avoid or tolerate sanctions from the local Norwegian population" (Eidheim, 1971, 51). The Sami would "under-communicate" their ethnic identities as Sami in the public sphere. In these public spheres the Sami would "over-communicate" what they thought of as Norwegian cultural markers, to distance themselves from their stigma. He says that the basis of this is because in order to achieve material and social goods, and to participate in the opportunities in society, "people have to get rid of, or cover up, those social characteristics which Norwegians take as signs of Lappishness" (Eidheim 1971, 56).

STEREOTYPES

This fear of disclosing their identity as North Koreans probably stems from how they are perceived in South Korea. There is a stereotype where North Koreans are popularly portrayed as lazy, state leeches, spies, criminals or communists (Tandia, 2012). Similar stereotypes are mentioned by Eidheim in his article about how Norwegians see the Sami population living in Norway. There were false stereotypes about the Sami being "dirty", "drunken" and "pagan" (Hylland Eriksen, 2001, 266). Stereotyping is a common result of people's social information limitations and experiences. The knowledge that becomes the dominant often excludes other types of knowledge about a topic. What happens in such processes is the creation of labels; "We", "them", "good" and "bad", and it is seen as the "truth". "They" are dirty, abnormal and dangerous, while "we" are the opposite, when creating this image of "the other". When a characteristic is imputed to someone long enough, it acquires a certain degree of truth, though it may not be true, or is partially true. In this way the discourse becomes hegemonic, it becomes the dominant way to see something, which cannot be discussed further since it becomes reality. In this way knowledge and power is tied together (Foucault 1980).

In Andrei Lankov's article "*Bitter Taste of Paradise: North Korean refugees in South Korea*" (2006) he mentions an article published by the newspaper Dong-A Ilbo from 2004

where the newspaper found it necessary to publish misperceptions and stereotypes about North Korean defectors:

The list includes such statements 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?" Even though the article's author, Chu Seongha, tries to refute all these ideas one by one as groundless or exaggerated, the very list is telling enough (Lankov, 2006, 15-16).

The South Korean media depicts defectors as outsiders: "not too differently from how it treats ethnic Koreans from China, who are often stereotyped as criminals" (Sunwoo 2014).

Whenever I met with a South Korean stranger who wondered why I was in Seoul, and I told them I researched North Koreans the question I would receive often was: "*Why?*" "*Why would you study them? South Koreans are also good for study.*" These comments were telling in that there exists a distinction between "us" and "them". South Koreans have different impressions of the refugees; some were not aware that there were that many refugees in South Korea, while others were skeptical of strangers in general. "*There is already stiff competition for jobs*" one South Korean man told me, and meant since they had a difficult time with the high competition for jobs already, they should not share with "*those who did not belong.*" After getting into a discussion with a South Korean stranger he said to me: "*Why should I hire a refugee when there are so many South Koreans who do not have a job?*" Sonia Ryang explains that there are many ways South Koreans are critical of North Korean defectors:

It is important to register that the complex nature of prejudicial treatment meted out to North Korean migrants reflects South Korean society's own moral ambiguities. For example, South Koreans are critical of North Korean migrants who are unwilling to take up so-called 3D occupations: dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs (Suh 2002:76). Behind such criticism lies the logic that these are the kinds of jobs North Korean refugees deserve, the assumption being that they should consider themselves fortunate even to be alive, accompanied by feelings of disbelief that they dare to shun this type of work. Another factor encouraging disdain toward migrants is the assumption in some sectors of South Korean society that migrants expect permanent financial support. In addition, the fact that many have left their families behind and betrayed their country is seen as a sign of a personality defect and a lack of moral integrity (see Jeon 2000). (Ryang, 2012, 7)

In the book “Aquariums of Pyongyang” (2001) Kang Chol-hwan expresses how himself has been “the target of such misperceptions: whenever I dress elegantly, people look at me with suspicion” (Kang and Rigoulot, 2001, 230). He says that the “poverty and economic inferiority are too often taken as a reflection of some natural inferiority” (Kang and Rigoulot, 2001, 230).

THE FEMINIZATION OF NORTH KOREA AND NORTH KOREAN WOMEN

These misconceptions are just a few of many images South Koreans have about North Koreans. The phrase “namnam buknyeo”²⁷, which literally translates “Southern man, Northern woman” shapes perceptions on the ideal couple being a man from the South and a woman from the North. This phrase dates pre national division, but also suggests in gendered terms a hierarchical relationship between the two nations.

The implication of the gendered discourse of the South and the North, which are respectively represented as man and woman, becomes evident: such a hegemonic dimension of nationalism is the demonstration that the politics of national identification is anything but the form of cultural differentiation (Sung, 2009, 445-446).

The South is characterized as a masculine subject while the North is feminized.

In Said’s parlance, the post-colonial criticism calls particular attention to the feminization of North Korea, which recalls the Orientalism about North Korea, thereby positioning South Korea as mimicking Western hegemonic culture. Said argues that the ‘almost uniform association between orient and sex’ has facilitated a ‘male conception of the world’ (Said 1978:188, 207 quoted in Sung 2009: 448).

This proverb of “namnam buknyeo” has appeared as a title on movies and sitcoms on both TV and radio. Matchmaking services have also adopted the name as an indicator for their

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남남북녀.

services. Matchmaking and dating agencies has been a part of Korean society, both in the North and South. Traditionally marriage was seen as a union of two families, not just a commitment between two individuals, with the purpose of producing a male heir to the family line.

A go-between or matchmaker, usually a middle-aged woman, carried on the negotiation between the two families involved who, because of a very strict law of exogamy, sometimes did not know each other and often lived in different communities (Savada and Shaw 1990b).

In October 2009 South Korean newspaper “Segye Ilbo” reported that by 2014 there will be 382,000 men who will not be able to find Korean brides (Won, 2010, 101). Because of this “marriage crisis” South Korean men began looking across borders for a potential wife. International marriage between Koreans and non-Korean, mostly from Southeast Asian countries has become more common. Non-Koreans, Joseonjok and North Korean women have been able to fill in this void (Freeman 2005).

There is a shortage of “marriageable women” for certain groups of Korean men—specifically, for never-married men in rural areas and previously married (divorced or widowed) or disabled men of “low socio-economic status” in urban areas (Lim, 2009, 4)

But there is still the preference for someone who shares the same values and background. Like one of my South Korean friends said: *“I could date a foreigner, but I would marry a Korean”*. During my fieldwork I got the opportunity to have an interview with a marriage matching agency called “Namnam Buknyeo”. I met with the owner of the agency, Mr. Hong Seong-woo. As we arrived at the office there were many women working there. During the interview we were told that most of the women working there were North Korean defectors. At the table in his office we could see wedding invitations and news articles. He had a binder with different statistics from the Ministry of Unification, as well as his own statistics from his company. He told me to look at the binder to get an overview of the statistics. “Namnam buknyeo” is his own business. He has a copyright on the name. He has patent on nine other items connected to the business as well. *“I started the business 8 years ago, in 2006. My company is the oldest marriage matching company matching North Koreans with South Koreans. The main purpose of this agency is that people marry with someone that they see being married to for a long time and being happy. It is not about just matching people.”*

While we are having the interview Mr. Hong gets a phone call from a man from Daejeon. He was on his way to Seoul, and wanted to come to Mr. Hong's office that day. After he finished the phone call he went back in the binder to show me the news articles and TV appearances he has been on. KBS, The Times, Financial Times, Chosun Ilbo, Globalpost, Korea Herald, Wall Street were just some newspapers that have interviewed him. Some articles were in English and others in Korean.

Not everyone can sign up for the services this marriage agency provides. Those who are unemployed, have bad financial credit, have a criminal background and those who are physically disabled cannot apply. Mr. Hong explains this by saying: *"I want the North Korean women to be taken care of, and therefore I have a few restrictions on who can apply for our services."* He also has restrictions on gender so only North Korean women and South Korean men can apply. *"North Korean men have a reputation of being too conservative and abusive. While South Korean women have a reputation of being too needy and independent."* I found it interesting that he said that the South Korean women are "too independent" as a negative trait. He said that South Korean women place a lot of emphasis on the man's education, job and subsequently his salary and outer appearance. Unfortunately for recently arrived male defectors it is harder to fulfill these requirements. *"South Korean men look for two things: appearance and looks, and personality. North Korean women are natural beauties, and even if they wanted to fix something most of them would not because they don't have the finances to do so."* According to the images of beauty in South Korea, Northern women's beauty lies in being pure and naturally pretty, in contrast to the beauty in the South which is imagined to consist in sexiness, often surgically enhanced. He credits the North Koreans: *"North Koreans have another mentality than South Koreans. The older generation South Koreans has the same mentality, and that is: "if it is broken, we fix it. They do not get a new one. While the younger generation has the mentality of 'use and dispose'."*

The South Korean men have to pay a fee to be a part of the database. *"It is free for North Koreans because when they come to South Korea they only bring their bodies and nothing more. Even with the money they get from the government it is not enough to spend on other things than the necessities. South Koreans have to pay so that the business knows they have money to support their wife, and also my business would not work without money."* He claims to have matched about 480 couples, with only 10 getting a divorce. The Korea Hana Foundation did a survey of 8299 defectors. The result was 10.2% of the defector men married South Korean women, and 32.7% of the defector women married South Korean men (Seoul Sinmun 2012).

The demographics of who uses the agency service have changed. When he first started he only helped men in their late 30s to 40s. These were men who were too old to date and needed help. Nowadays men in their 20s come to him for help. He tells a story about a 25 year old man whose former South Korean girlfriend demanded too many things, both material and physical, and even cheated on him. Even though he was young and could find a girlfriend on his own, he did not want to date South Korean girls anymore. Therefore, he contacted Mr. Hongs business to help him get a North Korean girlfriend. *“Even if North and South is divided, they are the same people. But because of how the South have been progressing, new foreign words and technology is being used, and if there is too big an age gap it may be hard for the woman to adapt. They (husbands) help them (wives) with the language which is the most difficult obstacle when they come here. Most people are shy and do not want to come off as stupid if they ask what a tomato is. They feel ashamed asking for the meaning and explanation of English words.”* He tells us how people graduated from Yonsei, people who have studied in Paris, lawyers, doctors and even a judge are in his database. *“Before, when I first started, it was mostly blue collar workers who came to my office. However it has been changing and now white collar workers, people with good jobs and high education want to apply.”* As we can see from my interview with Mr. Hong, North Korean defector women are accepted in South Korean society better than North Korean defector men. This is mostly because of the “marriage crisis” South Korea is experiencing.

Chapter V

Consumerism and modernity

This chapter is about how North Korean defectors use South Korean consumption patterns to “transform” into “modern South Koreans” by acquiring material goods, wealth, consuming Western goods, and pursuing a modern lifestyle with whatever that may include. North Koreans who seek refuge in the south face a myriad of social hurdles. Transitioning from a planned economy to a market economy is almost an overnight phenomenon for North Korean defectors. Although there has been gradual reform in North Korea where underground black markets and other markets have made its way into the society, it can almost not be compared to the extent of choice and options in the liberal market economy of South Korea²⁸. The collapse of the North Korean economy and the Public Distribution system (PDS) created conditions where money and bribery have taken over the role of *songbun*. There has been a growing of grassroot initiatives happening in North Korea. This has paved the path for individual initiatives and opportunities as well as a breeding ground for corruption (Collins, 2012, 5). In socialism, distribution economy, consumption and spending were heavily regulated. After they left North Korea people were suddenly presented with multiple choice and assortment. It is a chaotic and unpredictable landscape to navigate through.

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The generation that grew up in North Korea after the famine of the early 1990s, are often called the “Black Market Generation”, or the “Jangmadang”. They are different from their parents’ generation as they have little or no recollection of a socialist economy where the North Korean state provided food through the PDS. They have also experienced more information seeping into the North Korean society from China. The black market has provided DVDs, USBs and Chinese cellphones. They have sources of information other than those provided by the state. Because of markets and a higher influx of information, the Jangmadang generation is more capitalistic and individualistic compared to their parent generation (Park Yeon-mi 2014).

THE KOREAN DREAM

Connected to Beck's theories on modernity and second modernity, it is interesting to pay attention to how the South Korean society has developed from the early 1960s until the current society of today. As previously mentioned, South Korea went through a transformation on many levels. The economic growth South Korea has experienced during the last five decades has for the most part opened up for a South Korean middle-class in the larger cities. Citizens of Seoul, Seoulites, are influenced by the images of modernity and consumption coming from abroad, and this creates different ways of competition, and puts a pressure to achieve and perform in the competitive society. As many North Korean defectors before reaching South Korea, watched South Korean movies, dramas and TV-shows, many also had high expectations of what life in South Korea would be like. Like Victoria mentioned she did not think of leaving North Korea until she saw Titanic, which changed her mindset about the outside world.

Many defectors dream of a new beginning, a "Korean dream", but South Korea may not be the dream country they anticipated. Along with living in a country with freedom and individuality, they have to take responsibility for their own lives and trajectory. Nana said how before she arrived in South Korea she had very high expectations about her new life. She thought that South Korea would be the easiest place for her to live, because they share a common history and ancestry. However, when she started to maneuver in the society she realized that it was like living in a foreign country. The things she felt she would have in common where actually the things she started to hide, such as the Korean language. She, as a consequence, became withdrawn.

When defectors first arrive in South Korea, they feel confident about their future. After a while, they realize that six decades of division have created differences between the two countries.

(...) comprehending Korean is the last handicap that most would want to recognize, as it runs counter to a fundamental belief in a homogeneous Korean language and culture - the myth of oneness - that forms the very foundation of their fragile claim to belonging in South Korea (Chung, 2008, 16).

Park told me the story of when he graduated from Hanawon. His father was already in Seoul so he moved in with him. When I asked him what was the most difficult thing he experienced

since he came to South Korea he laughed and said “*studying English*”. Park was the one of my informants who spoke the best English. He said he had learned to read the word “sale” in English quickly because it was everywhere. Park went to the local shopping mall one early morning and saw signs saying “puktan seil”²⁹, “bomb sale”. He was so confused because he had been told that South Korea was pacifist, at least compared to North Korea. He was so surprised that they were selling bombs to common people in South Korea. He stood in line intrigued by this “bomb sale”. He got even more confused when he was lining up between old grandmothers and grandfathers. As soon as the mall opened one grandmother elbowed him to get before him in line. In front of him there were tables of discounted clothes. He realized that “bomb sale”, did not mean that they are selling actual bombs, but that the sales were so explosive or shocking. This was when Park realized that even though he can read and speak Korean it does not mean that he understands the meaning.

Smartphones were very useful, Harry told me, because if there was something he did not understand he could just search for it on his phone and there would be clear explanations, pictures and videos. Although smartphones are useful in their own right, they also are not cheap. Public Radio International (PRI) published an article explaining that a new free smartphone application has launched to help defectors (Strother 2015). The application is called Univoca, short for “unification vocabulary”. Users could either type or take a picture of an unknown word and get a translation in North Korean (Strother 2015). When I arrived back in South Korea August 2015 I met up with Harry and the other defectors to hear how their life had been since I left June 2014. One of the things I was wondering about was this new application, if they had even heard of it, and in that case, if they used it. None of them had heard of it. Park explained this by saying “Because we left Hanawon some time ago we do not get all the recent information which could have helped in our daily life.”

DEFECTORS AS CONSUMERS

Arriving in South Korea, North Korean defectors are confused by the entirely different political, economic and social system. Alongside this the defectors have to try to adapt to the

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society while at the same time experiencing change in “residential status, social position, family, and living environment” (Sohn, 2013, 110). A number of studies have pointed out that defectors of all ages experience difficulties adapting to South Korean society, both at school, at work, and in their local communities. Many deal with mental problems such as post-traumatic stress syndrome, loneliness, low self-worth and isolation (Hosaniak, 2011, 41).

I will not dwell on the psychological adaptation problems. But the newest data from the MoU suggest there is a decline in defectors experience of happiness and satisfaction of life in South Korea. South Korea is among the 34 industrialized OECD member countries the country with the highest suicide rate. Mental health, depression and suicidal thoughts are taboo and stigmatized in South Korea, which makes it very difficult for those suffering to make the effort to seek help. The report “Health at a Glance”, issued by the OECD in 2015, states that South Koreans are reluctant to seek medical help and among the OECD countries is the country that uses the least antidepressants (Kim Se-jeong 2015). This correlation between South Korea being the leading country in suicide rates in the OECD, and the fact that medical help is rarely used is frightening. According to figures from 2013, about 28,5 people per 100,000 committed suicide. This is more than double the average of 12 per 100,000 in OECD (Kim Se-jeong 2015). Interestingly enough, figures from the MoU suggest that 15.2 percent of the North Korean defectors who died in South Korea so far in 2015, died because of suicide. North Korean defectors end up taking their lives on a three times higher scale than South Koreans (Shim 2015).

“Defectors described their social status in North Korea as “upper class” in 12.7 percent of cases, “middle class” in 36.6 percent and “lower class” in 50.5 percent. Currently in South Korea, only 3.3 percent of them said they are “upper class”, and 23.1 percent think they are “middle class”. Those regarding themselves as “lower class” amounted to 73.2 percent” (Choi 2015).

The vast majority of defectors now perceive themselves as lower class in South Korea. Departing a country where even though there were classes, people of the same class lived in the same communities, largely masking the social gaps. Arriving in South Korea where the social gaps are more obvious, the social fall is easier to recognize.

Sohn in her article “*Living in a Consumer Society: Adaptation Experiences of North Korean Youth Defectors in South Korea*” was told by her participants:

“I thought if I came to Korea, I didn’t have to work that hard to have my wallet full,” (Case 15, male, 23). Another participant expressed her disappointment: On TV, they all live in elegant houses and drive nice cars. ‘Is Korea that rich?’ I thought back then. ‘I will be well off in Korea.’ But when I came, it wasn’t like that. (Case 13, female, 25) (Sohn, 2013, 118)

Focusing on consumerism is interesting because as most of my informants said one of the main reasons they left North Korea was economic. Some left because they did not have food on a daily basis, and some left because they hoped for a better economic life for themselves compared to what they had in the North. What is interesting about defectors experiences as consumers in South Korea is that they came from a socialist society. North Korea has control over what is produced and distributed in the country. In North Korea, citizens were not considered “consumers”, as the state provided them with what they would need with respect to housing, clothes and food. They used products produced by the state, and did not have to take in consideration personal decisions such as where to purchase, where the bargains are or whether to negotiate the price. North Korea has altered some of their policies towards a market economy such as the “7.1 Economy Management Improvement Act” (Choe and Cho, 2013), where small markets are allowed to operate. Still, it cannot be compared to the extent of the South Korean market environment which imports and exports goods, and where there is mass production and massive quantities of choice. As well as the huge assortment of products to buy, there are many places to buy them:

modern department stores, general discount stores, traditional Korean market where varieties of specialty stores are densely congregated, small neighborhood stores, home shopping networks on television, Internet stores, and even mobile trucking stores (Choe and Cho, 2013, 555).

The market is an essential key in a capitalistic society, where the consumers have power in what and where to buy. But not having the sufficient knowledge of how a market economy works can have implications for defectors. Not having enough and detailed information on how products and the South Korean systems works, many felt wary of buying. Although they could have asked questions, they were afraid to ask because sometimes they did not know exactly what to ask.

Consumption can help individuals to distinguish themselves with the means of economical capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1995) in “*Distinction*” introduces three dimensions of

capital; economic, cultural and social, in his theory on class. His ethnography is based on 1960s French society. Economic capital is the capital a person has in reference to material wealth, how much money a person has in the bank and may be used to acquire property, to take one example. Cultural capital refers to non-financial social assets such as language, education, appearance and dress, which can contribute to social mobility beyond economic capital. Cultural capital essentially refers to how cultured one is. Cultural capital can be converted, on certain conditions, into economic capital. While social capital is a private resource one has in virtue of belonging to a social status, it is based on mutual recognition of symbolic difference. Social network and group membership are central forms of social capital. To possess social capital is to be rich in connections, and it is others, not the person himself/herself, who is the origin of his/her social wealth. The topic of “Distinction” is taste and how taste manifests itself for different people. Bourdieu asked questions based on preference in clothing, furniture, art, music and leisure activities. Taste is used by classes to distinguish between others, and thereby classes can be stratified. The different choices people make according to taste are all distinctions. Consumption affects everyday life of everyone in this world as it conveys certain ways we as consumers should aspire to be, by buying.

LEARNING BY DOING

Thus, in a consumer society, consumption is not only an economic behavior of pursuing efficient choices, but is also a cultural behavior with its own unique lifestyle, especially for the young generation whose cultural identity is in flux. North Korean youth defectors who had been accustomed to a lifestyle of obedience to given orders may experience difficulties in adapting to an environment where they make choices, including making decisions as consumers (Sohn, 2013, 111).

Sulli liked to go to Costco which is an American wholesale supermarket. One time I went with Sulli and Jenny to Costco, primarily to buy meat. Even though we were supposed to only buy meat, we ended up walking all the aisles at both floors of Costco. Top floor is for homeware and appliances, while the floor below it is where the food is located. Sulli would point out which brands were good, and the things she had tried before. Snickers chocolate bar, Kirkland (Costco’s own brand) potato chips and Kirkland honey made its way down in her basket. Sulli had brought me because she was puzzled I had never heard of or been to a

Costco before. Before we went home we stopped at the Costco food court, where one can buy low quality food at very low prices. As I was considering my options she guided me towards the things that she liked, and thought I would like as well. It was clear to me that this was a place she knew well, and frequently visited. As we were sitting down eating our hot dogs and pizza Sulli said “*At first I did not know anything. I would just go to Shinsegae³⁰ and buy what I needed. Now I know everything so I now go to many different places*”.

When defectors first arrived they did not know the values or reasonableness of certain goods, and would go to more expensive supermarkets. Smaller markets would often require them to haggle, but they did not know to which price to haggle down to, risking to reveal themselves as North Koreans. Krystal were even afraid that she would be treated differently if her identity as North Korean were revealed, such as by increasing the price on what she was trying to buy. As we learn through the experiences of Harry and Sulli, arriving in a market based society has its challenges. With only the subsidies from Hanawon as economic capital, it was important to them to make sound economic decisions but they lacked the knowledge to do so.

Defectors wanted many things, but realized they did not have the money. Sulli revealed that she bought lottery tickets hoping she would win the big prize. Becoming so attentive to money, they thought about what they had been told in North Korea that capitalism were the ultimate evil. Although they did not want to become absorbed too much in the financial difficulties, they knew they needed money to live. Many though South Korea was a paradise, where finding work was easy. Nana explains how this really let her down, and she became nostalgic about North Korea. For me it was a paradox: how could someone who has lived in a totalitarian regime be nostalgic for it? How can anyone miss not having freedom of expression, to be monitored by the secret police and to stand in endless lines for food? Distance in time can cause the strangest beliefs when the present, is characterized by tighter economy and a fall in living standards, “as they compete for a living in a society that mostly rejects them and their past, they may more readily call up positive memories of their former lives as sources of comfort and national pride” (Fahy, 2001, 21). Even though many expressed

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Shinsegae is one of the big and expensive department stores with huge selections of both food and other stores.

deep satisfaction about their current life, which was a lot better than their lives in North Korea, they also wanted me to know that not everything was dismal in North Korea.

Defectors perceive themselves as "poor" when they compare their position with that of their South Korean neighbors, but there is no doubt that an overwhelming majority still enjoy higher standards of living than they would ever have reached in the North. Sulli explained to me that she divides South Korea's population into three parts, those who are rich, middle-class or poor. She included herself in the lowest category. Andrei Lankov explains that even an elite family living in the showpiece capital of Pyongyang would not live nearly as well in terms of material possessions, as some defectors do in the South. But it is not only financial "poverty" that keeps defectors thinking that they are poor in the South.

These comments suggest that the well-being of defectors is strongly affected not by income per se but by inequality and alienation between the refugees and the "host community." Former North Koreans quickly discover that the attitudes and values of South Korean society differ in many respects from what they used to consider "normal." A South Korean leftist journalist writes: "North Koreans, not used to capitalism, are surprised with the individualistic style of relations between people in the South." One of the most prosperous defectors, the owner of a restaurant chain, Jeong Cheol-u, noted: "North Korea is poor. But its people are close to each other. It has nothing like the local (South Korean) heartlessness.... This is a society where everything is decided by money." The remarks about alienation felt by defectors can be found in all publications on this topic (Lankov, 2006, 14).

CONSUMING BEAUTY

Magazines and commercials say "If you buy this you will become successful" or "your life will be better if you have this commodity in your life".

According to studies on South Korean adolescents, this population's consumption behavior is a marker for social status and self-identity. They define certain brands and looks as important standards to evaluate themselves and others; those who do not subscribe to the same standards risk isolation from their peers (Ju et al., 2001; Lee and Ryou, 2011; Sohn, 1997; Sohn and Chun, 2004; Yoo, 2009) (Sohn, 2013, 125).

When defectors arrive in South Korea without economic capital they have yet to learn the South Korean social codes such as the way of dress, and grooming. A habitus of consumption is part of the everyday life of South Koreans. Style and fashion are viewed as important and wearing brand clothes represents high status³¹. Keeping up with the latest trends and styles can rapidly become expensive. To be modern, one has to present oneself as advised (and advertised) by the mainstream and hegemonic “elite”. And as defectors want to become a “cultural citizen”, they hope that by assuming South Korean materialistic consumption patterns they are “exorcising ethnicity” (Choo 2006, 591). North Koreans often misplace and misuse money buying commercialized symbols, as they are not used to a capitalistic economy. The sense that buying expensive commodities enriches your cultural capital encourages a competition to own the newest and the best products. All of my informants had the latest smartphones which they had learnt to use as if it was ingrained in them.

When I met Harry, I could tell he was different. His physical proportions were not as they should for a man in his early twenties, and he looked much younger than the age he told me. In “Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea” Byoung Ho Chung writes about Chul who has a children’s measuring stick on his wall, and who at age nineteen “stood less than five feet tall” (Chung, 2008, 2). Defectors often arrive in South Korea with serious health problems. After the floods and famine of 1995, North Korea faced a health crisis. Because of lack of food, resources and electricity, hospitals and medical services ran on bare minimum, and the population suffered an enduring problem of malnutrition. In this socialist state people depended on the state for food rations, and when rationing stopped, the diet was supplemented with indigestible filler from fibrous plant matter and husks (Demick 2010).

Many North Korean children suffer from stunting, wasting and cognitive development problems. There are many reported cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety among defectors. The constant fear of their lives both in North Korea and on their journey to South Korea may have led to such trauma. Informants told about food shortages and scarcity of other goods, fear of surveillance, suspicion, distrust and long, irregular periods

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I have been interested in South Korean popular culture since 2006. So although I do not have a full understanding of what at any time is perceived as “trendy” and “cool”, I still have an idea about it, having followed the trends in South Korea for over nine years.

of power outages due to rationing of electricity and water. These experiences have left their marks on the people who lived through them. Many defectors have also suffered abuse on their way to South Korea, and many of them have been tangled up in human trafficking. As many defectors do not actively seek treatment, these problems have only exacerbated, as they do not fully understand the nature and potential severity of mental problems. Koreans tend to suppress and tolerate mental health problems instead of seeking treatment (ICG 2011, 11).

The emphasis on appearance in South Korea is proven difficult for those who fall short, literally, of the highly specific criteria that supposedly make one “beautiful”. With South Korean society paying huge attention to appearance, many North Koreans become self-conscious about the way they look, their height and weight being on average lower than that of South Koreans³²:

South Korean sensitivity regarding height is particularly striking. Many parents spend substantial sums on height-stretching treatments, in addition to special exercise programs and dietary regimens for their children, in the belief that taller individuals are more likely to be successful (Choe 2009). The bullying of short children (i.e. North Korean refugees) is compounded by additional factors, such as an unfamiliar accent, unfashionable clothing, a less-developed physique, and skin appearance that are the product of years of malnutrition and irregular eating. On top of all of these factors is the stigma associated with being housed in segregated residential areas, a common occurrence. Social attention to the physical appearance of North Korean refugees has the effect of inventing a “North Korean race” in South Korea (Ryang, 2012, 7)

One of my South Korean friends’ little brother who is 16 years old, used heeled insoles in his shoes so he would appear taller. The maintenance of beauty is for some so necessary that they use costly interventions such as plastic surgery. As one of my good South Korean friends put it “*Plastic surgery is directly related to success in (South) Korea.*” Being able to purchase expensive clothing, plastic surgery and other materialistic things, defectors feel they are shedding their “North Koreanness”.

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“The average North Korean male defector is 164.4cm tall and weighs 60.2kg, compared to the average South Korean man, who stands 171.4cm tall and weighs 72 kg. The figures for North Korean female defectors and South Korean women are: 154.2cm and 158.4cm; 52.8kg and 57.1kg” (ICG 2011, 13).

But this observation does not apply with equal force to all. Dana, who is in her mid-twenties, told me she is proud to tell people she is North Korean. She was the only one of my informants who told me that she was proud of her North Korean identity. However, she talked with a hard-won Seoulite accent and dressed and portrayed herself as if she was South Korean. Her hair was colored a warm brown with red hints in it, shown better when the sun hit her hair. Her purse was from Zara, a Spanish clothing store known for their clean and streamlined fashion. After we had lunch, she touched up her make-up and lipstick before we went into the streets of Seoul. She told me she did struggle with her identity during her first years in South Korea and therefore did her best to attain different markers attached to South Korean identity. She was not afraid to tell people she originated from North Korea. From the “outside” there is no difference between her and other South Korean girls, so it will be on her terms if she wants to disclose her background as a North Korean.

Sang-Hee Sohn explains that “In a post-capitalist consumer society, such as South Korea, products are used to create social distinctions and to project an identity or image” (Sohn, 2013, 123). Like Dana who now uses make-up, European fashion brands and has her hair dyed it did not take long for defectors to take up the consumer culture in South Korea. My female informants liked to spend money on make-up, fashion and food, while my male informants liked to have the newest gadgets such as cell phones. Harry had the newest Samsung Galaxy S5 when I met him, while I a month before meeting him I had bought the previous model, Samsung Galaxy S4, which he made a point to tell me about. Wanting to portray themselves as South Korean “cultural” citizens, defectors often misplace or overspend money.

Sohn explains that her North Korean participants did not understand the importance of brands and why following fashion trends was so important for South Koreans, “but feared that they might be left out if they did not follow the crowd. They wanted to assimilate into the young South Korean culture, hoping to adjust” (Sohn, 2013, 125). One of her male participants age 22 said that: “I’m stressed out, following the crowd without understanding why. To live among them, I have to move at a similar pace, even if I can’t move at the exact same speed” (Sohn, 2013, 122). To survive and have the survivability can be termed as an implicit social knowledge, a “know-how”; it is an ability and a trait that is gained through practice or learning, such as one’s mother tongue. To have implicit social knowledge is to be a fully socialized person in society, having tools for and knowledge on how to maneuver in the social landscape without quite knowing why or how (Taussig 1987). Those who do not

behave in a manner that is consistent with what it means to be South Korean are most likely placed "outside" society: "Becoming a cultural citizen requires outsiders to not only understand a certain set of societal values, but also accept and adopt these values and cultural norms as their own" (Chung, 2008, 16). In order to be consumers they must have the finances for it. When the money from the government runs out, defectors must acquire either education or jobs to get an income.

EDUCATION AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Group memberships are an important source of pride, self-esteem and self-worth, and it gives a sense of belonging in a social world. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are and identify with based on their group membership (s). Byung Ho Chung (2008) writes: "Entering into a new society creates a crisis of social status. One has little control over how his or her background, skills, abilities, and social and cultural capital will translate into his or her identity in the new society" (Chung, 2008, 15).

Education is a way to make important network connections and increase social mobility. But because the journey from the North to the South for many defectors took so long, quite a number of them lost years of schooling. For those who have completed schooling in North Korea there is a discrepancy between the teaching methods in the two Koreas. Most North Koreans cannot compete with their South Korean classmates, and the dropout rate is very high. There are some South Korean universities which are willing to admit defectors, and where the government pays tuition. Being enrolled at a prestigious university can lead to job opportunities, social network, marriage prospects and it provides symbolic capital. Graduating from a prestigious university like the S.K.Y, would open doors to a middle-class lifestyle. However, maintaining a passing grade can be difficult, and most do not graduate from those prestigious universities they have been accepted to (Chung 2008). In South Korea, receiving low grades in high school virtually ensures that a person will be permanently confined to a badly paid manual job. Networks of alumni connections (hakyeon) and regional connections (jiyeon) are considered very important, and those who did not graduate from a good South Korean university are strictly speaking, excluded.

WORK AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Coming from a country where jobs are allocated by the state, many defectors have a difficulty competing for jobs in the highly competitive South Korean society. When seeking employment, a social network and references are essential to vouch for one's credibility. North Koreans face an extremely difficult challenge, as they usually have no contacts upon arrival in South Korea. There is also a licensing system for many professional jobs in South Korea, and North Koreans lack certification to prove their skills. There is a difference in the skills and knowledge required for jobs in an industrialized society (Chung 2008). Even for South Koreans it is hard to get and keep a job. In South Korea it is common for people to be among the “precariat”, a social class where people are in a situation characterized by an existence of uncertainty, insecurity and stress (Standing 2011). Those in the precariat lack job security, as they are part-time or short-term workers or have contracts that gives them little security for the future. This leads to an existence that affects both the material and psychological well-being of a person. After finishing Hanawon, defectors are presented with multiple choices in almost everything they do and want to become. It is confusing coming from a place where jobs were allocated by the state, to a place where in theory the possibilities are endless.

Unemployment is a worldwide issue. But North Korea boasts of 100% employment. Because the state allocates positions, there are no jobless people. Officially, unemployment becomes zero, but it does not mean that everyone has to do work every day. The communist country allots jobs to all its citizens regardless of their wills. Irrespective of their aspirations, most people have to stick to the career the state has chosen for them. The North Korean social system is a tightly organized one where individual initiatives tends to be discredited. Generally speaking, an individual's life is severely constrained with respect to choice of jobs, education, and many aspects of daily life.

Many defectors do not know which kinds of jobs are available and where to seek them out. Where do they want to work? Do they want to become entrepreneurs or chefs, to work with computers or with animals? The MoU tries to present the opportunities defectors have, and also sets up annual job fairs to help defectors who are struggling to find work. Securing employment is crucial for them in their efforts to find stability and settle successfully in a new country. Choosing a career that can guarantee a good income and stability and at the same time reflect their abilities and their interests effectively is a major issue. But with education

and work experience from North Korea things may not work out in South Korea. Instead, many people change their career path. Skills learnt in the North, are not always transferable to the labor market in the South.

Having used up their resettlement money, defectors have a hard time getting and keeping employment. There can be many reasons for this such as discrimination at the workplace or during the interview, or that defectors are shunning the 3D jobs.

According to a survey by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights in 2011, the unemployment rate for North Korean defectors was 13.8 percent, 4.5 times higher than the rate for the general citizens of South Korea, and their average income barely exceeded the legal minimum cost of living. The monthly average living expenses of 78.7 percent of the North Korean defector households did not meet the legal minimum cost of living, and 45.5 percent of them were welfare recipients (Seo et al., 2012). (Sohn, 2013, 110-111).

A recent government poll from the Korean Hana Foundation showed that defectors on average work more than South Koreans, but earn less. Defectors monthly income is about 1,47 million KRW compared to 2,23 million KRW earned by South Koreans (Korea Herald 2015). Sulli said that she experienced discrimination during job interviews. In South Korea it is expected that every educational or work experience should be on the resume. When they realized that Sulli had attended school in North Korea she said they were shocked or would say they would call her on a later occasion. One time she was offered the job but was asked if she was fine being paid half of what another person would receive. Talking about it makes her angry, and her whole body language changed just by telling me this incident. *“Why would I accept it? Am I not human because I am “talbukja”?* Since she doesn’t have a choice in letting her boss know her identity as a North Korean, she told me that she would never let her co-workers know she is from North Korea.

After reading Joanna Hosaniak’s report I noticed that one of her North Korean interviewees expressed a similar feeling after she felt she was being treated unfairly at her job saying that “I quit that job and in the new one they don’t know I’m from North Korea” (2011: 24). Sonia Ryang in her article *“North Koreans in South Korea: In Search for their humanity”* (2012) also presents a story where a young woman working part-time as a waitress in an restaurant was often approached by customers:

who assume that she is available for prostitution due to her “culturally inferior marker as a North Korean defector” and the associated assumption that she would do almost anything in order to get a little more money (Yi 2010: 283) (Ryang, 2012, 6).

To protect their identities, defectors may withhold information. But hiding their stigma can lead to further isolation, depression and anxiety. Trying to pass as a “normal” and hide their stigma, individuals have to be vigilant, and always check their behavior for even tiny traces of their stigma (Goffman 1963). Because of Victoria’s episode at the PC-bang, she does not disclose her identity as a North Korean defector unless it is with close friends. Identity is developed by the individual, but it has to be recognized and confirmed by others. So although they try to claim membership in the South Korean society, their effort may be in vain if the society does not acknowledge their claim and instead continue to treat them as other, despite their best effort to pass (Choo, 2006, 591-592). Hiding their true identity could cause a problem of insecurity as they start to believe this perceived identity, and when they are not ascribed this identity by others they may start questioning their existence. People now have to link the past, present and future together, and create an overall identity accordingly. Social identity is not static or constant, but dynamic and changing, and should be seen as a social process (Jenkins 2000). Social identity is never something you can take for granted, and that simply *is*, identity is something created and recreated, and something that must always reinvent itself in new ways (Jenkins 2000). Identity is something we ascribe to ourselves or each other without having necessarily particularly good reasons for it. If I were asked about my nationality, I would say for example I was Norwegian. But "Norwegian" is not something I can be, it is something I call myself, something I said (or someone else says) that I "am". This thinking has proved particularly useful when seeking to understand the living conditions in modern, globalized society, characterized by migration and cultural encounters, flickering media images, unstable family relationships and increasingly rapid pace of change everywhere in society. In such a world identity is never something you simply are or “have”, and can take for granted. It is something created and recreated, always re-invented in new ways, as circumstances and selves change through time.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation has been to explore the challenges North Korean defectors experience being integrated into South Korean society and the status of North Korean refugees in South Korea. My informants gave me an insight into North Korea's history and implicitly, and sometimes directly, explaining why they chose to defect. They also told me about experiences living in South Korea. There are stories about meeting South Korean people, the struggle to adapt, difficulties with the language, getting a stable job and developing a network. It involves them as North Koreans, as defectors, as minority group and as new citizens.

Chapter one provided an overview, and introduced the research question and the informants. Chapter two, the methodological chapter, described the fieldwork location and the history of South Korea. While chapter three provided an insight into the North Korean context and the songbun system, it also gave an overview of the routes out of North Korea and a description of what defectors experience arriving in South Korea. The main points of the thesis emerged in chapter four about South Korean “Koreanness”, and how it is intertwined with nationalism, identity and stigma. Chapter five dwells on how modernity and consumption becomes a tool defectors actively use to portray themselves as South Koreans.

One of the biggest challenges for North Korean defectors are the expectations of the South Korean society. What I have experienced throughout my fieldwork and the writing of this thesis is that both North Korean defectors and the South Korean society and its people have expectations of each other, and sometimes conflicting expectations. North Koreans have expectations before they leave North Korea about their new lives on the outside. As many had watched South Korean dramas before they left, defectors had an idea of South Korean society, and a supposition of how possibly their new life would unfold itself. The South Korean society, on the other hand, have high assumptions and expectations of North Koreans regarding adaptation and integration. The biggest challenge for South Korean society is to change the mindset of the South Korean people in how they portray North Koreans and foreigners in general. The idea of South Korea being a homogenous population needs to be slowly chipped away. Arriving in a country that is so fast-paced puts pressure on defectors to adapt fast. This new society is characterized by risk and choice. In this new society there are

so many choices of who you want to be which creates an anxiety of not making the right choices and not being as great or achieving ones full potential. The sheer volume of consumption in this modern world makes it easier to buy a self-identity instead of creating one. The individuals have to be constantly updating and upgrading their self-identities in a fast paced modern society, where it seems that everything is just temporary.

While on paper the defectors are South Korean citizens, they have to create this South Korean identity in everyday life. This social expectation that defectors will adapt and integrate faster does not take into consideration their hardships before coming to and the confusion they experience when arriving in South Korea. Defectors are a heterogeneous group where people adapt to society in different ways and at different pace where age, gender, mental condition, traumas, status in North Korea, skills and abilities all work differently for different people. Although the South Korean society provides many benefits for defectors, adapting to a capitalist and highly competitive society can be difficult for any refugee, not just those from North Korea. The break with the traditional “first society” of North Korea meant for defectors a newfound freedom. The social systems that previously provided the defectors with a security system is now gone. As members of the “second society”, defectors try to find their individuality and self-identity in the South Korean society. Defectors now have to rely on themselves and make their own future. This newfound freedom has for my informants worked in different ways. Park for instance, after several years has accepted his identity as a person of the Korean peninsula, not distinguishing between North or South Korea. Dana, is open about her identity as a North Korean, if she is asked about it. Victoria, Krystal, Nana, Harry and Sulli on the other hand try their best to hide their identities as North Koreans. They now have to make reflexive biographies, where almost every choice is up for question, and there are no right answers.

South Koreans seem to be apathetic about defectors and towards national unification. Despite the steady number of incoming defectors coming each year, there seems to be little interest in learning about them among the South Korean population. In South Korea it is almost expected that a person is to perform exceptionally well in life, in all categories such as appearance, education, profession and socially. In the South Korean society, there is an overarching strive to become wealthier, better-looking and more successful:

In the eyes of many South Koreans, however, the New Settlers have little to offer. Especially now, as more North Korean women and children reach South Korea, many South Koreans view them as an increased burden on taxpayers. Moreover, North Korea is no longer of very

great interest to South Koreans. Specifically, South Koreans today are no longer interested in the possibility of national reunification; reunification figures prominently neither in their daily lives nor in their visions of the future. [...] The passion of South Koreans across the political spectrum no longer concerns reunification. Rather, monetary gain, material success, financial security, and improvement of status and looks, are much more urgent concerns for most Koreans. Accordingly, the value of North Korean defectors has fallen, even as the cost of their maintenance has risen (Ryang, 2012, 7).

The South Korean society cannot just expect North Koreans to integrate into society but also to be included into the society by South Koreans. As South Korea has little experience with multiculturalism and is a monistic society, it is expected of refugees to change their ways of life instead of accepting the differences and living in a multicultural society.

NGOs, private organizations and volunteers also try to assist defectors in this adaptation and settlement process. As some of my informants show, some have successfully succeeded in changing their mindset from collectivistic to individual-centered, but some of them still find this shift difficult. The shift is from emphasizing on sacrifice and hard work for the socialist society to focusing on self-realization and personal achievements in the capitalistic society. Although defectors try to ascribe themselves the identity of South Korean there is a too narrow concept of who can be considered Korean in South Korea. As defectors try hard to become “cultured citizens”, but not being ascribed this identity can be very hard. My informants did take active steps in erasing their “North Koreanness”, but they still would never be able to fully become South Koreans even how hard they try. Stigmatization and discrimination because one was born in the “wrong” Korea, occurs as my informants told me both at school, work and even at PC-bangs.

The narrowness of who is considered “real” Korean in South Korea, turns identity into problems. “Who am I”, was a question Park asked himself with good reason, once he had escaped the classificatory strait-jacket of the North Korean *songbun* system. Categorization based on a notion of ethnic and/or racial homogeneity creates a narrow and rigid category of belonging: “certain groups of people, or even entire communities are marginalized and subordinated because they do not meet the criteria for “membership” (Lim, 2009, 2). It will take a long time to change a people's mindset. After decades of propaganda about North Korea, the Southern idea and perception of North Korea was shaped. The minister of the MoU, Mr. Hong Yong-pyo, has highlighted that the South Korean government and society will “work hard to help them, but North Korean refugees' willingness and efforts are most

important” (Ministry of Unification 2015). Timothy Lim however feels differently and in his article states that;

These were well-intended measures, but such measures, for the most part, failed to address the underlying source of discrimination, marginalization, and subordination, namely, a national identity that defines difference and diversity as undesirable and, therefore, inferior (Lim, 2009, 6).

The South Korean state and government together with NGOs, civil society, religious, and volunteer organizations has to cooperate to achieve this goal of changing the mindset of the people. The main hindrance towards reunification is the growing difference between the two people living North and South of the 38th parallel. Looking at the current situation that the North Korean defectors face in South Korea the future of integrating even more North Koreans looks uncertain. As North and South Korea has developed at different pace and directions over the past sixty years, the expectations of North Koreans are not met and many North Koreans struggle with acculturation.

Human rights activists believe North Korean defectors have considerable influence on North Korean citizens and the most power to weaken the regime. In other words, North Korean defectors are who the North Korean regime fears most. In that regard, it is appropriate to establish and strengthen a North Korean community in South Korea, as one unified group is stronger than several individual voices. To date it is more or less taboo to be of North Korean origin. Therefore, we see a tendency that defectors largely attempts to integrate into the South Korean society while distancing themselves from their North Korean identity. If North Korean defectors positions are strengthened and valued, they can play an active role in the changes not just in South Korea but also within North Korea.

ABBREVIATIONS

NGO - Non-governmental organization

KWP - Korean Workers Party (North Korea)

NIS - National Intelligence Service (South Korea)

Bowibu - State Security Department

Inminban - Neighborhood watch

Songbun - social class system

Songun - military first policy

Kim Il-sung - founder of North Korea

Kim Jong-Il - Son of Kim Il-sung

Kim Jong-eun - Grandson of Kim Il-sung

DMZ – Demilitarized Zone (military zone between North and South Korea)

MoU - Ministry of Unification in South Korea

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