

Penetrant Transnational Strategies of North Korean Migrants in South Korea and Beyond

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Introduction

When North Korean migrants arrive in South Korea, they receive many privileges and various kinds of support, including citizenship and resettlement funds. But, for fear of discrimination, they often do not wish to reveal their identity to South Koreans and live in an “invisible community” (Chung BH 2012). In spite of this invisibility, North Korean migrants are active subjects who not only escape the repressive North but also create transnational networks, families, and spaces between North and South Korea by crossing many borders over time.

Most North Korean migrants send money to their families in the North clandestinely, communicate with them through smuggled Chinese mobile phones, arrange to bring over family members, and even send over contemporary South Korean dramas. By doing so, they are violating the most serious national security laws and regulations in both sides of divided Korea.¹ Actually, North Korean migrants have accomplished communication, remittance, and even the meeting and reuniting of families that, in compliance with Cold War regulations for the past sixty years since the end of the Korean War, millions of separated families in the South and North have not even dared to attempt. Having escaped from the repressive system of North Korea, they also make use of transnational strategies to penetrate South Korean regulations that stubbornly persist to this day.

¹ South Korean National Security Act defines North Korean regime and its organizations or groups as "Anti-State groups," whose intentions are to conduct or assist infiltration of the Government or to cause national disturbances. Especially the Article 9 specifically states the punishment of those who knowingly provide valuables or other monetary benefits or facilities for hiding, meeting, communicating, and contacting or provide other conveniences to persons who have committed or plan to commit anti-state acts. North Korean Criminal laws and Party regulations broadly define the acts of "Anti-Republic" and "Anti-National Liberation Struggles" and punish them severely.

Recently, nearly 10% of North Korean migrants in South Korea have re-migrated to other countries. Their remigration to richer countries and the obtaining of new citizenship is a transnational strategy for accumulating symbolic capital and climbing up the class ladder in the South Korean social context. They achieve “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) by mobilizing "transcultural capital," which is a particular blend of social and cultural capital in migrant lives that can have positive economic consequences (Triandafyllidou 2008: 94). For North Korean migrants, transcultural capital is accumulated by border crossing, especially when their knowledge and experiences in North Korea are valued and when they are recognized as "refugees" by the international human rights regimes.

In this study, the concept of “penetrant transnationalism” is proposed to characterize transnational activities that are carried out by penetrating multiple layers of strict regulations and close surveillance on the border. "Penetrant transnationalism" means the illegal transnational movements of people, information, and goods that penetrate strictly controlled borders and, as a result, induce changes in the involved countries.² The penetrant transnational movements of North Korean migrants may be limited in terms of both numbers and scope, but precisely because the border has been so strictly closed and regulated, the impact of these penetrations, once they begin to take place, can give rise to enormous transformations inside, both directly and indirectly.

1. Living in South Korea

Compared to other ethnic Korean migrant groups such as Korean Chinese and Central Asians of Korean ethnicity, North Korean migrants in South Korea are relatively privileged. They obtain citizenship immediately upon arrival and receive resettlement funds, permanent rental apartments, and many other

² The word "penetrant" literally means a person or a thing that penetrates. And, it also means the service of a structural item penetrating a fire-resistance rated wall or, in biochemistry, the function of a chemical increasing the ability of a toxic chemical effect to a living organism.

forms of governmental support (Chung BH 2009). All these forms of support certainly expedite their initial settlement, but on the other hand, they also generate critical adaptation problems like their continued dependency on governmental support and arrangement.

The status and identity of North Korean migrants in South Korea can be understood through the concept of "circumstantial citizenship," which introduces the circumstantially determined citizenship rights by varying political and economic factors rather than cultural factors, such as (Korean) ethnic or national identity, or universal and egalitarian principles (Chang KS 2012). Their South Korean citizenship is granted by the constitution based on the legal logic of the division system that grants the inclusive citizenship of Republic of Korea (South Korea) to all residents in the Korean peninsula and related islands. The application of their citizenship is supposed to be automatic. However, it is truly "circumstantial."

The political relationship between North and South Korea also influences the cultural acceptance of North Korean migrants as full citizens. In practice, they are welcomed when they have political value and downgraded when they are considered to be an economic or social burden. "These changing status and social perceptions have impacted greatly their level of social adjustment in (South) Korean society and their self-concept and identity. (Yoon IJ 2011: 220)"

Focusing on the discriminatory labor and migration policies toward ethnic Korean returning migrants, Seol and Skrentny (2009) argue that the South Korean conception of "hierarchical nationhood" is shaped by its economic interests in combination with the geopolitical goals of another (more powerful) state. According to the South Korean social conception of the hierarchical nationhood, which is critically determined by the level of national economy, North Korea is ranked as one of the lowest, and consequently, so are North Koreans. North Korean children and youth in South Korean schools usually try to pass as South Koreans, but when they fail to pass because of their dialect or some other cultural markers, they would rather be identified as an ethnic Korean from China because of its relatively higher rank (Chung BH 2009).

In 2012, the total number of this politically "special" migrant group increased to over 25,000.

The government budget for support for North Korean migrants has rapidly increased over the last five years, when the conflict with North Korea was aggravated with renewed tension. However, this high-cost resettlement support still transmits a mixed message to North Korean migrants.

Most North Korean migrants conceal their identity to South Koreans in residential areas, schools, or work places due to the fear that the prevalent stereotypes and prejudices against North Korea as an enemy state could be extended to themselves. This fear of being "exposed" causes them to constantly hide their politically sensitive identity to the people they come across in daily life (Chung BH, Jeon WT, and Chung JK eds. 2006).

However, a few become celebrities as living witnesses and victims of the North Korean regime and gain transcultural capital through making public statements and media appearances. While giving them a voice, these kinds of media appearances often reinforce the pre-existing regimes of knowledge and actually impede a more nuanced understanding of North Korea and its people (Green and Eptein 2013). Some North Korean migrants criticize such appearances as an "act of selling out" their group image for personal interests by aligning themselves with the hierarchical system of "*tajahwa* (Othering)" in South Korea. As political discourse gives more prominence to their "special" existence as symbols and witnesses of the Cold War division, their social relationships in the community paradoxically become more distant and invisible.

2. Re-migrating from South Korea

During the past seven years, nearly 10% (estimated at over 2,000) of the North Korean migrants who have received South Korean citizenship, resettlement fund, and other special social benefits, have subsequently re-migrated to countries such as the UK, Canada, the US, Germany, Belgium, and Norway (Oh WH 2011; Park MK et al. 2012). This re-migration was a surprise to South Korean society, which regarded *talbuk* (escaping from the North) as choosing the South. Puzzled, South Korean media started to

call this remigration *talman* (escaping from the South). Conservative media and political groups, who had insisted on exceptional treatment for North Korean migrants based on Cold War logic, labeled this remigration from South Korea to richer countries as "opportunistic betrayal." To them, this phenomenon constitutes a serious defamation of the national pride of the Republic of Korea with its miraculous economic growth.³

However, the fierce competition in South Korean society and the discrimination based on "hierarchical nationhood" are the reasons for North Koreans' remigration. It was reported that among the North Korean migrant children who quit the South Korean school system during 2012, 43% left for emigration to other countries (Hangyeoreh 2013). It's not only their mal-adaptation to South Korean schools that motivates such remigration, but also the difficulties they face to adapt to life in South Korea itself. In addition to the examination-oriented competitive schooling in South Korea, the ideological stereotypes and prejudices toward North Korea are major obstacles to the successful resettlement of North Koreans in South Korean society. Many of them find a solution by making another border crossing to richer countries with less discrimination. The majority of those who have re-migrated lived in South Korea for many years. The younger they were at their time of arrival, and the more education they received while living in South Korea, the more likely they were to leave. It has become evident that "escaping the North" is not necessarily taking the "The Road to Reunification," and the ideal final destination is not necessarily South Korea.

Just as Korean churches and human rights organizations were pathfinders to "escape the North," they also began to lead the movement to "escape the South." North Korean migrants' overseas travel started with giving testimonies at international hearings or religious confessions at overseas Korean churches on the subject of the North Korean human rights condition. The North Korean Human Rights

³ Conservative media attributed the problem to the lack of adequate support for North Korean migrants by the progressive South Korean government and agitated for better treatment for them. However, even though the support for North Korean migrants has been reinforced drastically during the recent six years by the conservative government, the so-called "escaping the South" has increased geometrically.

Act (2004) in the United States, legislated to improve the human rights situation in North Korea, permits North Korean refugees to take exile in the United States. This Act has initiated the transnational movement of North Korean migrants beyond East Asia to many Western countries, including the UK, Germany, and Canada.⁴

Both the South Korean government and society were deeply disconcerted when the United States court actually accepted their arguments for political oppression and physical danger in South Korea and made diplomatic appeals. As the United States became discreet in taking political exile cases, North Korean migrants with South Korean passports started to develop tricky detour courses in order to be accepted as refugees. Typically, they traveled to the desired country and discarded their South Korean passports, reporting that they had just arrived from North Korea and crossed the border illegally. This method of claiming that they have just escaped from North Korea as a refugee has since become the most general pattern for remigration to richer Western countries.⁵

Those who re-emigrated to richer countries with advanced human rights policies obtain basic qualifications for sojourn and employment as well as some social welfare, but the conditions for refugee migrants are far short of the benefits they receive from the resettlement support system in South Korea, which has evolved in the frame of Cold War competition. Instead, they usually gain basic information and find jobs in the host society through the local Korean communities and churches (Kim HM 2008).

There are many successful members in the Korean diaspora community, particularly in the United States and Canada—many of who fled from North Korea during the Korean War and re-emigrated from South Korea. When new migrants arrived, the old Korean migrants helped them in their early stages of settlement, sometimes providing the kinship care. Thus, their re-migration from South Korea, just as

⁴ The United States actually applied a very strict principle for the recognition of refugee status and accepted a much smaller number of North Koreans compared to the other Western countries.

⁵ The British and Canadian governments later found out North Korean Migrants strategies for re-migration and began implementing a very strict screening process to grant refugee status to North Koreans, with the British Government even officially asking the South Korean government to share the list of North Korean migrants in South Korea. Since then, re-migration to the United Kingdom has decreased drastically. Canada was considered an alternative destination for a while until the government recently became more discreet in accepting North Korean refugees.

their migration from North Korea, mostly depends on transnational Korean community networks. Today, the North Korean migrants' dynamic "transnational space" (Faist and Özveren 2004), where multifaceted border crossing networks and information are concentrated, has formed not only in Chinese border areas, but also in South Korea and beyond, in major cities such as London, Toronto, and Los Angeles.

"If you had the chance, wouldn't you (a South Korean) come to America?" This was the answer a North Korean migrant in LA gave me when I asked him why he is living there. He was working as a night-shift janitor and hardly had any English training. I asked because I had seen the difficulties they experienced in South Korea due to the frequent use of English words and the influence of foreign culture in everyday life. However, this answer gave me an important clue in understanding the cultural logic of their remigration from South Korea. Their choice for country of residence cannot be explained by factors such as language proficiency or cultural difference.

The concept of "flexible citizenship" proposed by Aihwa Ong (1999) is helpful in explaining why North Korean migrants leave South Korea for another country, where the language and culture are unfamiliar. The flexible citizenship refers to the "cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions (Ong 1999: 6)." The newly affluent South Korean middle class is pursuing flexible citizenship in the face of periodic national crisis and concentrating on transnational strategies to accumulate symbolic and cultural capital. To earn the symbolic capital of English proficiency and cultural capital, such as the attainment of prestigious foreign academic degrees, they practice transnational strategies extensively, often breaching traditional Korean family values (for example, going abroad to give birth, going abroad to study at an early age, and leaving "goose fathers" behind in Korea to pay for their children to live and study abroad). The concept of hierarchical nationhood bestowed special symbolic values upon permanent residency rights and citizenships of the richer English-speaking countries.

For North Korean migrants who have experienced low socio-economic status because of their North Korean background, migration to richer countries and the attainment of a "higher" citizenship

might be the most effective, perhaps even the only possible, transnational strategy for climbing up the class ladder. In contrast to the enormous cultural and social capital the South Korean middle class invests in transnational strategies in order to obtain symbolic capital, the only capital North Korean migrants can mobilize is the "transcultural capital" that they earned by crossing one of the most dangerous borders in the world. Notably, the political interests of many Western governments, and the cultural logic of international human rights regimes, fostered a situation whereby they are able to receive international recognition of their transnational capital.

It is now evident that the phenomenon of "escaping the South" is not caused by a shortage in support policy or resettlement funds. Rather, it should be seen as a more fundamental transnational strategy counteracting the cultural logic of South Korea, a neo-liberal capitalist society that is notoriously fierce in terms of social, economic, and educational competition. In a way, it is a shrewd imitation of the class-conscious transnational strategy of the South Korean middle class, but it is also a key, and quite logical, transnational survival strategy by a lower class minority group that collectively faces a future of dependency on the social welfare system.

Information on the better social welfare systems of richer countries in the West certainly provides attractive and tempting alternatives. Recently, the relatively poor social welfare system of the United States has become a subject of serious consideration in choosing the country of remigration despite its high symbolic capital. Incentives for "escaping the South" include a less competitive and discriminatory work environment and life style, a better social welfare system and social security for the aged, and most of all escaping from the feverish educational competition in South Korea. The previously mentioned North Korean migrant living in LA was essentially asking South Koreans, tired of living in a highly competitive neo-liberal society, if these are not the very reasons why they would consider migrating.

Most importantly, "escaping the South" is not considered a one-way trip, just as "escaping the North" is not entirely one directional. Through the internet, telephone, and social network systems, they

continuously keep their family, kinship, and friendship networks in South Korea, China, and even North Korea, seizing opportunities for creating and extending transnational capital in various ways. Those who have secured permanent residency or citizenship go back and forth to South Korea as 'Overseas Koreans' with better employment or business opportunities, utilizing English and foreign citizenship as transnational symbolic capital while enjoying the cheaper national health care system for overseas Koreans available in South Korea.

3. Back to North Korea

Transnational Families and the Penetrant Remittances

According to one study, most of the North Korean migrants settled in South Korea send money to their families in North Korea (47.5% of the respondents answered that they had sent money, but it is estimated that more than 70% of them are actually sending money), through a variety of routes (Database Center for North Korean Human Rights 2011: 101-110). The initial resettlement funds given by the South Korean government provides them with the financial ability to send money back immediately after their arrival (Saejowi 2010). The burden of having "betrayed" their country to come to its Cold War adversary, as well as the guilt of leaving their family, who often had to suffer the consequences of their acts of "defection," make them preoccupied with finding ways to remit money, as well as routes of chain migration for their remaining family members in North Korea and China.

The penetrant transnational remittances, sent to the North for the wellbeing of their family members, actually have disproportionately greater effects in informal ways in North Korean society, which is suffering from a serious shortage of foreign currency. These economic advantages ironically become bribes for further border crossings and a form of transnational capital for enhancing the families' social position and educational opportunities within the North Korean system. The rapidly increasing

illegal transnational remittances to North Korea were estimated at approximately 10 million USD in 2011 (Kukminilbo 2012). The power and prestige that families in the North can acquire with these remittances are even called "Mt. Halla Lines," nicknamed after a symbolic mountain in South Korea.⁶

All transnational activities connecting people on the other side of the border are a serious violation of the national security law in both the South and North. Such activities, however, were covertly fostered, or at least ignored, by the hard-line powers of both South Korea and the U. S., as a means of puncturing a closed-off North Korean society, with the ultimate aim of bringing down the regime.

The routes were not one-way, however, and the movements along the routes were not advantageous to any one side. Border crossing out of state control was regarded as a threat to the system on both sides, shaking the Cold War logic of the border at its very basis. In reality, some North Korean migrants have crossed the border again back to North Korea several times even after their arrival in South Korea.

People who have crossed the border were labeled as "spies" once caught and put on trial in South Korea, a country that claims to stand for liberal democracy but still has Cold War era laws on her statute books. However, many of them were found to be legally "innocent" of spying accusations (Washington Post 2013). From the perspective of the conservative media, their repeated border crossing is still considered to be "suspicious" and constitutes acts which mock state power (Foreign Policy In Focus 2013). Those who believe in the superior material affluence of South Korea with its aggressive developmentalism assume that the reason for re-entering the North must be either espionage activity or unavoidable circumstances such as threats by the North against their families. Those who understand the difficulties the migrants face in neo-liberal South Korean society assume that the reason for return must be social discrimination, alienation from the labor market, and despair at dismal future.

⁶ In North Korea, the inherited status and privileges of the descendants of Kim Il-Sung's legendary partisan groups are called "Mt. Baekdu Lines," nicknamed after the symbolic mountain in North Korea During and after the Great Famine in North Korea, people who received support from their relatives in other countries have lived relatively well. The special wealth and privileges acquired with the resources from overseas are nicknamed after the symbolic places of the country of origin. For example, "Mt. Fuji Lines" from Japan, "River Tumen Lines" from China, and "Mt. Halla Lines" from South Korea.

Challenges and Transformations

North Korean migrants' penetrant transnationalism across the North Korean border is still relatively minimal in quantity and quality, and limited by region, gender, and class, but it is still a serious challenge to the symbolic politics that have functioned on the basis of absolute control of the movements of people, information, and goods. They do not yet constitute a critical mass of political dissidents who can directly trigger the collapse of the North Korean political system or precipitate regime change, as conservative rhetoric has long anticipated (Park KA 2010).

Because of the changes caused by this "transnationalism from below" (Smith and Guarnizo 1998) with innumerable holes and lines for contact with the outside world, the North Korean regime has recently given up unrealistic expectations for absolute severance from the rest of the world. Instead, it is now pursuing more controlled and systematic "transnationalism from above," sending labor out to China, Russia, and Middle Eastern and African countries, and creating a large-scale industrial complex in the border area near China. In doing so, they are actively participating in the international labor division of the East Asian economy (Kang JW 2013), which constitutes a remarkable policy change for North Korea. The regime also started to extend the market economy, which broadly appropriates informal trades through illegal border crossings. A constellation of tiny holes in the border made from continuous "penetrant transnational activities" has eventually created a reality that the government was not able to ignore or hold back.

Recently, Pyongyang's Central TV has been repeatedly broadcasting the testimonies of former escapees who have come back. The total number of returnees is estimated at approximately 100 in 2012 alone (Sisa Journal 2013). Most of these returnees claimed to have had relatively good social status and professional jobs in the North, such as teachers or engineers, but in most cases, their social status and roles in the South were markedly lower with little prospects for the future, and they had to take jobs such

as janitors or part-time care givers.

The typical account of each returnee is accompanied by confession, repentance, and forgiveness and aired repeatedly on national broadcasting by the North Korean regime. The 'supreme love' of the Leader and 'humble gratitude' of the returnee are highlighted in every confession—the North Korean version of the "politics of defection." The message is simple and direct—defectors will not enjoy the affluence of the outside world and as North Koreans, they will be discriminated against and despised, even in South Korea despite being of the same ethnicity. The cultural logic is juxtaposed with the historical experience of subordination and submission during Japanese colonial rule, where the colonial collaborator landlords (South Koreans) exploited the tenant laborers (North Koreans).

In order to guard the solidarity of its people in these transnational situations, the regime is developing a new dimension of “identity politics” that emphasizes the North Korean nationality instead of the Unified Korean ethnicity. Repeatedly publicizing the experience of discrimination in South Korea and other countries, they are now taking a “developmental state (Chang KS 2012)” model, telling people that the economic development of North Korea as a state is directly related to their own well-being and socio-economic status in the hierarchical nationhood of the world.

The transnational strategies of the North Korean migrants have already begun penetrating the fundamental contradictions of the division system on both sides, revealing the arbitrariness of Cold War laws and shaking their very conceptual basis. Their practices are multidimensional, including all sorts of transnational activities directly violating not only the North Korean laws and regulations but also South Korean national security law. Recently a North Korean migrant publicly appealed to the South Korean government to let him go back to North Korea legally. His public expression of intent to go back to North Korea is an act of protest, an act of cultural resistance against the hegemonic power of the division system. His act penetrates the contradictions of the Cold War politics of both Koreas, as well as the cultural logics of the international human rights regimes.

4. Conclusion

While the usual transnational activities assume the efficient flow of communication and transportation, North Korean migrants have to penetrate strictly regulated borders that control the transnational movement of people, money, and information. However, once they cross the border, the images and messages of Cold War politics become not only obstacles but also opportunities for North Korean migrants. The high-risk border crossings from North to South Korea give them special status and access to financial support as "defectors" in South Korea. The illegal remittance transactions from the South to the North as "migrants" yield high returns for the security and welfare of their family members still in North Korea. The tricky re-migration from South Korea to Western countries as "refugees" opens an opportunity to gain symbolic capital for upward mobility in the South Korean and the global social field.

In fact, North Korean migrants widely use transnational strategies based on a network of transnational families and organizations linked through the Korean diaspora communities in many regions around the world. The most distinctive characteristics of North Korean migrants' transnational strategies can be viewed as "penetrant," since they not only penetrate closed borders but also transform the societies of both sides of their migration. They are transforming North Korean society by making sustained connections and ongoing exchanges among family members across the world's most tightly controlled border. They are also challenging the South Korean order by maintaining contact with their families in North Korea, enemy territory, through illegal correspondence and remittance.

The penetrant transnational strategies of the North Korean migrants are transforming both Koreas beyond the realm of Cold War ideology. In other words, they are making transnational realities that disturb the syncretic identities of individual, family, nation, and ethnicity that the ideological systems of two divided nation states have formulated. Recently, both Koreas are undertaking new processes of identity reconstructions that emphasize the divided nationalities over the unified one.

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