

Site for Multivocality

: Locating Overseas North Korean Defectors

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Abstract

The number of North Korean defectors arrived in South Korea hit the mark of 30,000 in early November of 2016. The majority of previous literature on North Korean defectors focused on their adaptation to and resettlement in South Korean society with heavy implications on policy making sector. Often ignored or less acknowledged reality is that South Korea is not always the final destination for people who escaped from North Korea. In fact, the majority of overseas North Korean defectors turns out to have previously spent some time in South Korea before coming to other countries. These overseas North Korean defectors are often considered as an extraordinary case testifying failure on both levels: on the one hand, the South Korean government's support system and on the other, the North Korean defectors' adjustment effort. This article attempts to go beyond the hitherto familiar frame of analysis centered on the premise of "North Korean defectors becoming good citizens in South Korea," extending the boundary

by paying attention to the case of overseas North Korean defectors, not as a derailment or failure, but as an exemplary case in which the multi-layered issue of North Korean defectors is distinctly presented. Also this article address the importance of overseas North Koran defectors' experience as site for multivocality.

Key Words: overseas North Korean defectors, talnam, South Korea, multivocality.

I . Introduction

The number of North Korean defectors arrived in South Korea hit the mark of 30,000 in early November of 2016. Even before the number became the reality, the phrase of “30,000-North Korean defectors” had widely been employed by mass media as well as policy makers to shed light on the imminent phenomenon, but that did not necessarily mean that then soon-to-be reality was well prepared for.

Compared to the entire South Korean population of approximate fifty million, North Korean defectors constitute relatively small part, but the general public has been much exposed to the existence of North Korean defectors especially through media representations. North Koreans living in South Korea is no more seen as a rarity to most South Korean people, and the importance of North Korean defectors' successful adjustment to South Korean society in terms of national integration has been well recognized. The general public's acknowledgement of the existence of North Koreans in

South Korea as fellow citizens is a significant leap forward considering that prior to 2000s, the prevalent perception of the possible North Korean existence in South Korea was primarily as secret agents or spies. Nonetheless, most attention and consideration toward North Korean defectors are still focused on those who arrived and decided to remain permanently in South Korea, obscuring experiences of North Korean defectors living outside South Korea. Most South Koreans do not pay much attention to North Korean defectors outside South Korea, or more precisely speaking, not a few South Koreans are not aware of the existence of North Korean defectors in other free countries. The underlying assumption of this ignorance is that North Korean defectors left their home countries risking their lives to come and settle in South Korea. It is half true and half false, especially taking into account the fact that the majority of North Korean defectors currently living in countries other than South Korea had come to South Korea first before relocating to another country. This article examines challenges and significance of studying the cases of North Korean defectors outside South Korea to fully understand the multi-layered nature and the context of North Korean defector issue. The majority of literature on North Korean defectors bases their argument on interviews and private conversations, but the ways in which the contents are being used is rather simplistic or superficial in that North Koreans' voices are directly transposed as the oral evidence of the North Korean life and as the one-dimensional proof for North Korean defectors' emotional status. Paying attention to the multi-dimensionality of intersecting memories, this article attempts to pinpoint challenges in addressing the experiences of overseas North Korean defectors.

II. North Korean Defectors In and Outside South Korea

1. North Korean Defectors as Domestic Issue

With the total number of North Korean defectors constantly adding up, there has been renewed attention towards North Korean defectors in South Korea, both in negative and positive light. Negative, in that North Korean defectors are seen as foremostly economic as well as social burden for South Koreans to pay for. At the same time, positive aspect embedded in North Korean defectors are also pointed out, since the ever-growing number is a powerful testimonial for instability and inefficiency of North Korean regime, which alludes the picture of unification of Korea more plausible. In this light, North Korean defectors are often phrased as “early indicator of unification” or “unification ahead of time” (mǒnjǒ on tongil) Political gesture garnered attention on North Korean defectors as well, as seen in the former South Korean president Park Geun-Hye’s speech in 2016; she publicly encouraged North Korean people “to get out of there and come to us, a land of freedom, we will welcome you any time.” North Korean defectors also often take part in keeping their profile high, especially in the political sphere. There was a recent news report that some North Korean defectors outside South Korea are arranging a plan to build “North Korean government in-exile.” All these circumstances and opinions add up to have an effect to highlight the issue of North Korean defectors and its

implications to South Korean society.

There has been not a few research on North Korean defectors, but the majority of these literature, especially up until early 2000s, focused on the adjustment process of North Korean defectors in South Korea, with heavy implications on policy makers.¹⁾ Such studies usually locate source of problems either in South Korea's ineffective support policy, or in each individual's incompetence, or the combination of the two. For example, Tara O's examination of the integration of North Korean defectors in South Korea explores resettlement and support system operated by the South Korean government, and highlights the hardships on the part of North Korean defectors such as their infamiliarity with a capitalist economic system.²⁾

More recent studies on North Korean defectors have revealed a slightly different direction by showing their interest in North Korean defectors' adaptation process from psychological perspectives, employing such concepts

¹⁾ see Hae-ryong Kwak, *Pukhanitaljumin hyŏnhwanggwwa munje* [Issues and Status of North Korean Defectors] (Goyang: Korean Studies Information, 2005); Jae-jean Shu, "North Korean Defectors: Their Adaptation and Resettlement," *East Asian Review*, vol.14, no.3 (Autumn 2002), p. 72; Sung Ho Ko et al, "North Korean Defectors: Their Life and Well-Being after Defection," *Asian Perspective*, vol.28, no.2 (2004), pp. 65~99; Keumsoon Lee, "Yŏsŏngjijaŭi sahoejŏgŭnggwajŏng yŏngu [A Study on the Social Adaptation Process of Women Migrants]," *The Journal of Asian Women*, vol.45, no.1 (2006), pp. 91~234; JungRan Park, "Yŏsŏngsaetŏminŭi chanyŏ tollbongwa il: siltaewa chiwonbangan [Female Saeteomins' Childcare and Work: The Current State and Support Measures]," *The Review of Korean Cultural Studies*, vol.27 (2009), pp. 97~135.

²⁾ Tara O, "The Integration of North Korean Defectors in South Korea: Problems and Prospects," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. XV, no.2 (Fall 2011), pp. 151~169.

as identity formation, mental health, post-traumatic syndrome, etc.³⁾ Seol and Song points out not just economic adaptation but also self-esteem of North Korea women in South Korea plays a pivotal role in enhancing their perception of quality of life.⁴⁾ Jyung-Soo Kim and Joon-Ho Kim illustrate the adaptation process of people from North Korea within South Korean society, emphasizing social support network and the sense of security as one of the key factors in alleviating cultural stress for North Korean defectors.⁵⁾ In line of studies with emphasis on self identification of the North Korean defectors, young people came from North Korea garner particular attention in gauging psychological effect in growing up in and becoming a member of South Korean society in that they could showcase the transitional process between two different social systems.⁶⁾ While research themes on North

3) Mi-ja Kim, "Pukhanitalyōsōngŭi oesang kyōnghōme kwanhan yōngu [A Study on North Korean Female Defectors' Traumatic Experience]," *Korean Journal of Clinical Social Work*, vol.7, no.1 (2010), pp. 1~18; Bit-nae Choi and Kim Hee Kyung, "Talbuk yōsōngŭi oesang kyōnghōmgwa sōnggyōkbyōngliga simli chūngsange michinŭn yōnghyang [Effects of Traumatic Experiences and Personality Pathology of North Korean Female Refugees on Psychological Symptom]," *The Korean Journal of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, vol.23, no.1 (2011), pp. 195~212; Minkyu Sung, "The Psychiatric Power of Neo-Liberal Citizenship: the North Korean Human Rights Crisis, North Korean Settlers, and Incompetent Citizens," *Citizenship Studies*, vol.14, no.2 (April 2010), pp. 127~144.

4) Jin-Bae Sul and Song Eun-Hee, "Pukhanitalyōsōngŭi chajongamgwa kyōnggiejōk chōkŭngi saenghwalmanjokdoe michinŭn yōnghyang [The Effect of Female North Korean Refugees' Self-esteem and Economic Adaptation on Their Satisfaction with Life in South Korea]," *The Journal of Peace Studies*, vol.14, no.4 (2013), pp. 291~314.

5) Jyung-Soo Kim and Kim Joon-Ho, "The Relationship between Social Support and Acculturative Stress from Cultural Adaptation of People Displaced from North Korea to South Korea," *China Journal of Social Work*, vol.90, no.1 (2016), pp. 3~24.

Korean defectors slightly changing over time, remained rather solid the assumption in which South Korea is considered as the final destination, rendering the ultimate goal for North Korean defectors as becoming successful citizens of South Korea.

This is far more protrude in the government's perception of North Korean defectors. A glance into the 2016 Unification White Book, published annually by the South Korean government under the Department of Unification, clearly exhibits this frame of thought.

⁶⁾ see Hyeon-suk Kang, "Pukhanitalmoŭi chodŭnghaksaeng chanyŏ yangyuk kyŏnghŏm yŏngu [A Study on North Korean Mothers' Parenting of Their Elementary School Children in South Korea]," *The Journal of Korean Education*, vol.36, no.2 (2009), pp. 93~112; Myonghee, Kim, "A North Korean Defector's Journey Through the Identity-Transformation Process," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, vol. 15, no.1 (2016), pp. 3~16; Ji-Hye Yun and Oh Young-Rim, "Talbukchŏngsonyŏnŭi oesang ihu sŏngjang chehŏmyŏngu [A Study on Experience of Posttraumatic Growth among North Korean Refugee Adolescents in South Korea]," *Korean Journal of Youth Studies*, vol.17, no.12 (2010), pp. 49~82.

[Picture 1] Table of Contents of 2016 White Book on Unification (partial view)

2016년도 통일백서 contents

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Chapter 5. Support for North Korean Defectors

1. Social Adaptation Education for North Korean Defectors

- (1) Basic programs for social adaptation
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- (3) Child and youth education
- (4) Early health management
- (5) Intensive education, Task-based education

2. Categorical Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors

- (1) Early Settlement Support
- (2) Protection and Support in the Residential Area
- (3) Asset formation and employment support for self-support basis
- (4) Youth Education Support for Future unification leaders
- (5) Support for livelihood stability
- (6) Perception Improvement and cooperation with NGOs

Source: 2016 White Book on Unification, Seoul: Department of Unification

As seen in the picture 1, chapter five, which is the only part that addresses North Korean defectors in the context of unification, lists up various programs assisting North Korean defectors adapt to South Korean society. There is no trace of North Korean defectors who decided to leave South Korea, or those who chose other countries over South Korea from the beginning. By definition, White Book is supposed to inclusively contain relevant information on the subject, but the White Book on Unification does not even recognize the existence of North Korean defectors living in countries other than South Korea, not to mention its implication to South Korean society, and by extension, to the unification of Korea.

2. North Korean Defectors outside South Korea

Beginning in early 2000s, overseas North Korean defectors began to get people's attention and came into the picture thanks to media report or documentary. Some of them went to Western countries after they had fled from North Korea and had spent some time either in China or Southeast Asia, but the majority of North Korean defectors in Western world are those who spent considerable period of time in South Korea after they escaped from North Korea. Since most attention had been given to North Korean defectors within South Korea, the existence of North Korean defector outside South Korea itself was received as unexpected turn of event to many people. Why are North Koreans living in countries other than South Korea? People started to ask questions, experts sought for answers.

A few research on North Korean defectors found in countries other than South Korea existed before⁷⁾, but last twenty years saw a boom of academic

inquires on the issue. Recent studies attempt to situate overseas North Koreans defectors in the context of refugee policy, migration studies and human rights activism. Facing the reality that the number of overseas North Korean defectors is increasing, Kim Soo-am highlights the need to fortify diplomatic channels to deal with the situation.⁸⁾ Lee Shin-wha also made similar suggestions on the much needed diplomatic efforts across Asia to aptly address North Korean defectors issue.⁹⁾ Focusing on legal aspect of refugee status of North Korean defectors is another stream of academic effort to address the issue. Han Hee Won analyzes legality of refugee status and its implication in the frame of North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) legislation in the USA, and calls for more active role of South Korea and China in improving the dire condition of overseas North Korean defectors.¹⁰⁾ Kim Seunghwan pays attention to the tribunal decisions on refugee status of overseas North Korean defectors and contends that even with the case of dual nationality, protective perspective should be adopted

7) Joo-Shin Chung, "Talbukūi palsaengyoingwa talbukja munjeūi kukjehwa [Causes of North Korea Defectors and International Issue]," *The Journal of Northeast Asia Research*, vol.21, no.2 (2006), pp. 117~139; Elim Chan and Andreas Schloenhardt, "North Korean Refugees and International Refugee Law," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol.19, no.2 (2007), pp. 215~245.

8) Soo-am Kim, "Status of North Korean Defectors and Policies of Countries Concerned with Them," *Journal of Peace and Unification*, vol.1, no.2 (Fall 2011), pp. 3~29.

9) Shin-wha Lee, "Tongbuka chuyo kukgaūi talbukja jeongchaek [Northeast Asian Responses to Overseas North Korean Refugees and Mass Defection]," *The Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.53, no.3 (2010).

10) Hee-Won Han, "saeroūn hwangyōnge italūn pukhaningqanbubūi chejunggwa talbukjaūi nanminsōnge taehan kochal [A Normative Study on the Right Enactment Direction of the North Korean Human Right Act Under the New Circumstance and the Legality of North Korean Defectors Under the International Refugee Law]," *Law Review*, vol.50 (2013), pp. 29~53.

to ensure the value of human rights.¹¹⁾ Thanks to forementioned studies, it is true that the research scope for North Korean defectors has been extended to include those who currently reside in countries other than South Korea. It is also true that the legal aspects of refugee status of North Korean defector has been much discussed.

On the life of overseas North Korean defectors, interviews and participant observation are employed for qualitative research. O Won Hwan's dissertation on North Korean defector youth mains close look on the entire course of journey from North Korea to South Korea, and to other countries in the West.¹²⁾ He understands the identity of the North Korean defector youth is a combined result of conflicting interpretation of national identity and the new form of transnational identity. One of the most populated ared in the UK in terms of North Korean defectors is New Malden UK. Lee Soo Jung and Lee Woo Young defines New Malden Korea town as a transnational contact zone, and look into the mutual perception and social relations, identifying North Korean defectors as one of the solid agency in the space of transnationalism.¹³⁾ Shin Hae Ran also looks into the transnational relationship between North Korean refugees and South Korean immigrants

11) Seunghwan Kim, "Lack of State Protection or Fear of Persecution? Determining the Refugee Status of North Koreans in Canada," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol.28, no.1 (2016), pp. 85~108.

12) O, Won Han, "Study on the Identity of North Korean Defector Youth" (Doctoral Dissertation, Korea University, 2011).

13) Lee, Soo Jung and Lee Woo Young, "Yöngguk nyumoldün koria taunnae namhan chumingwa pukhannanmin kanüi kwangyewa snaghoinisik [Social Relations and Attitudes between South Korean Migrants and North Korean Refugees in the Korea Town, New Malden, U.K.]," *North Korean Studies*, vol.18, no.1 (2014), pp. 137~174.

in New Malden with the concept of “State territorialization.”¹⁴⁾ Shin understand the social power of a group as representing their state territoriality, although such categorical thinking seems not always in tune with her strong emphasis on transnationalism. Kim Sung Kyung adds another realm in transnationalism studies on North Korean defectors. Tracing down the border-crossing across China and the North Korea, Kim presents how the transnational ethnic spaces got expanded through increased mobility between North Koreans and ethnic Korean Chinese.¹⁵⁾ In terms of agency on the part of overseas North Korean defectors, studies by Jun Myung Hee and Yi Hee-Young offer good examples. Jun Myung Hee successfully employed ground theory to examine the strong presence of agency among North Korean defectors settled in the USA.¹⁶⁾ With the case of North Korean defectors in Germany, Yi Hee-Young argues that they reconstruct “narrative of tragedy” to secure protection of human right as a citizen of a nation-state.¹⁷⁾

14) Shin, Hae Ran, “Tong hwa, chogukjŏkjuŭi chijŏnghak: lŏndŏn hanintaun nae hangukingwaŭi kyoryu sok talbukminŭi ilsanggwa tamloesŏ natanan chaeyŏngtohwa [The Geopolitics of Assimilation and Transnationalism-State Reterritorialization Constituted in Daily Lives of North Korean Refugees and South Korean Migrants in London],” *Journal of the Korean Geographical Society*, vol.53, no.1 (2018), pp. 7~57.

15) Kim, Sung-Kyung, “Kyŏnghŏmdoinŭn Puk-chung kyŏnggyejiyŏkgwa idonggyŏngro [Experiencing North Korea-China Borderland and Routes of Mobility: ‘Border Crossing’ of North Korean border-crossers and the Expanding of Transnational Ethnic Spaces],” *Space and Society*, vol.22, no.2 (2018), pp. 114~158.

16) Jun, Myung Hee, “Migukŭro kan talbukjaeŭŭi chŏngchakgwa chŏkŭne kwanhan chiljŏk yŏngu [North Koreans’ Lives in the United States],” *Korean Academy of Social Welfare*, vol.64, no.4 (2012), pp. 89~111.

17) Yi, Hee Young, “kukje ingwonjangchiwa pikŭkŭi sŏsa [International Dispositive of Human Rights and the Narrative of Tragedy],” *Economy and Society*, vol.109

While the current state of overseas North Koreans has successfully attracted academic attention as noted above, though, the issue seems to be considered as a deviation rather than situated within the extended spectrum of North Korean defector issue.

3. Talnam Phenomenon

The term talnam —“escaping from the South (Korea)”— is coined as a mirrored image of talbuk, which means “escaping from the North (Korea).” Talnam refers to the cases where North Korean defectors who once settled in South Korea relocate themselves to third country. As mentioned above, the existence of North Korean defectors outside South Korea has garnered attention on the trajectory of their journey, which in turn highlights the fact that the majority of North Koreans who aspire to settle in third countries have resided in South Korea beforehand. Since many countries approve refugee status for those who directly came from North Korea, talnam North Koreans usually hide the fact that their first destination was indeed South Korea.

The reasons for escaping from the South can be vary depending on individual case, but the forementioned “unequal exchange of information” plays a pivotal role in that the engine of talnam phenomenon lies in “dissatisfaction.” Dissatisfaction unfolds in different realms of life, including work environment, social relations, and cultural difference. The echoing dissatisfaction on the part of North Korean defectors, however, seems to be aggravated, if not generated, by the high expectation that they had for South Korean life based on incorrect or incomplete information. Their

(2016), pp. 216~217.

expectation toward life in South Korea was formed by fragmentary information that they gathered from unequal relationship with brokers, neighbors, and sometimes government-related people. Considering all the difficulties that North Korean defectors have had even before leaving North Korea, it is clear that their expectation for South Korean life far exceeds the reality. South Korea cannot provide North Korean defectors a panacea for all their problems and from there a sense of betrayal can be germinated.

Published interviews with North Korean defectors indicate dissatisfaction with South Korean society made them search for alternative place for supposedly better life. Some North Korean defectors choose Western countries over South Korea in hope that these countries will provide better environment for their children, especially in terms of global competence based one English speaking ability.¹⁸⁾ Another point worth attention is that not a few North Korean defectors believed that they were discriminated in South Korean society, and they also thought that being discriminated by same Korean people is far much intolerable than by other people, and this is mentioned as one of the reasons for them to decide to relocate to countries other than South Korea.¹⁹⁾

The term of talnam conveys rather negative connotations among South Koreans, sometimes talnam North Koreans being accused as betrayers.²⁰⁾ This sentiment is shared by many South Koreans because of “support” that

¹⁸⁾ O, Won Han, “Study on the Identity of North Korean Defector Youth” (Doctoral Dissertation, Korea University, 2011), pp. 195~196.

¹⁹⁾ *ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁰⁾ see Young Hoon Song, “Haeoetalbukiju hyönsangŭi hyönhwanggwä changjŏm [Current State and Issues of International Migration of North Korean Defectors],” *JPI Policy Forum*, vol.107, no.15 (2012), pp. 1~22.

South Korea provides for their fellow North Koreans. North Korean defectors, once they arrive in South Korea, receive special care package and benefits from South Korean government for settlement: it includes government-paid housing, living stipends, a career counselor, job training at local employment support centers, and most of all, non-competitive basis admission to universities coupled with generous scholarship. Considering the education fervor and extremely competitive circumstance to enter privileged universities in South Korea, this is an enormous advantage that most South Koreans only dream of. The reason that talnam North Koreans get criticized in South Korea is that they appear to take advantage, without much appreciation, of all the support and benefit that South Korea generously offer. Such hospitality seems not being reciprocated, as talnam North Koreans flee from South Korea looking for better place.

III. Challenges in Studying Overseas North Korean Defectors

1. Gathering and Assessing Information

In examining the overseas North Korean defectors, the particularity of the issue needs to be pointed out. To start with countries where North Korean defectors are found, China has the largest population of North Koreans within its territory, but not all of them can be counted as so-called defectors. Many North Koreans come to China to get food and other goods

or sometime to find temporary employment and then go back to North Korea after some period of time, making repeated trips over each side of the borders. During this process, North Koreans who routinely cross borders even establish economic as well as sociopolitical relationship with ethnic Korean Chinese community.²¹⁾ The fact that Chinese government currently acknowledges North Korean defectors not as refugees but as economic immigrants makes the complete enumeration more complicated. Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia are known popular locations for North Korean defectors to head, but these countries are used more passages than destinations. In the West, resettled North Korean defectors are most found in Germany, UK, US, Canada, and Belgium, which calls for comparative studies in regard to different refugee admissions and resettlement policy in each country. The crucial aspect of comparative studies is not that it shows clear-cut parallels for convenient juxtaposition, but that it can provide clues for grasping the overall trends and patterns of migratory movements of North Korean defectors over different parts of the world, from which reflection and prediction can be further made to better understand the issue of North Korean defectors. In this context, comparative studies need to take into account different trajectory of policy development in each country as well as the frame of thought based on which different sets of policies have been configured.

Grasping the number of North Korean defectors outside South Korea is

²¹⁾ see Kim, Sung-Kyung, “Kyŏnghŏmdoinŭn Puk-chung kyŏnggyejyŏkgwa idonggyŏngro [Experiencing North Korea-China Borderland and Routes of Mobility: ‘Border Crossing’ of North Korean border-crossers and the Expanding of Transnational Ethnic Spaces],” *Space and Society*, vol.22, no.2 (2018), pp. 114-158.

highly restricted since many of them are living as illegal immigrants or “undocumented” immigrants, shying away from the official statistics. Furthermore, despite refugee admissions and related policy studies have so far produced considerable data to consult, there exist loopholes that have an effect of falsifying the reality. For example, once a person succeeded in obtaining refugee status and subsequently get a permanent residency or citizenship in five years or so depending on that country's policy, this person no longer appears in refugee related statistics, rendering the presented official number somewhat deceptive in that all the previous refugees vanishes into citizens, not leaving the trace of once-a-refugee status. The current number of refugees in particular countries does not include the accumulative number of people who began their life in that country as refugees.

To make up above-mentioned limit regarding numbers and to add some flesh onto it, considerable number of studies turn to interviews. In this case, the reliability of the data is always in the heart of problem. It is not the intention of this article to raise the dismissive point that those interviews, memoirs are inappropriate for so-called “scientific research.” Nonetheless, the reconstructed and (re)interpreted aspects of those contents needs to be carefully addressed. One of the often-noticed problem with the interviews told by North Korean defectors is that they are dubbed with exaggeration. Stories imbued with exaggeration need to be understood not as mere indication of lack of personal integrity and sincerity, but more as a symptom of unstable circumstances through which North Korean defectors have gone. Finding a line between “fact” and “fake” is not the primary task here. Rather, sorting out factors and circumstances that generated such exaggeration is

helpful to understand the psychological functioning of North Korean defectors within specific sociocultural context.

2. Identifying Blind Spots

One of the huddles that researchers of the overseas North Korean defectors come across is the incompleteness of the puzzle: combining refugee admissions and resettlement policies of different countries cannot yield a seamless picture on the current state of overseas North Korean defectors due to the simple fact that there are many cracks and loopholes in official policy that cannot reflect the reality. The issue of North Korean defectors and their migration provides a field played by multiple agents, and the irony is that the more crucial the roles are, the more tacit the players' movements appear, manipulating the cracks where official policy and statistics fail to cover.

The main players in the issue of overseas North Korean defectors include governments, international institutions, academic experts, non-profit organizations, community workers, religious groups, brokers, family and friends, police, and of course, North Korean defectors themselves. The decisions-making process of these players is naturally conditioned by the will to maximize their interest and benefit. In addition to conflicting interests, unequal exchange of information among different groups of people is one of the fundamental aspects that requires special attention in explicating the issue of North Korean defectors. The power to control information reproduces the hierarchical relationships between players, notably those between brokers and the North Koreans. As seen in many

interviews with North Korean defectors who headed for third countries, the destination is often not a result of North Korean defectors' informed decisions, but a decision made "on behalf of them" by brokers, who in turn received information from other sources on each countries refugee admission situation and policy changes at that moment.²²⁾ In one extreme case, a North Korean defector confessed that he did not know to which country he was applying for refugee status even until the moment he found himself in the immigration office of Belgium.²³⁾ He thought he was in France, based on the last piece of information he was told by the broker. Inability to control information on the part of North Korean defectors accounts for the their physical, economical, and mental instability during the defection and resettlement period.

Considering that the brokers play roles far more exceeding mere assisting talnam process, their intention and motivation can also be of use in filling in the cracks in the picture of overseas North Korean defectors issue. However, rarely the brokers are included in the research as legitimate interviewees: their voices are dubbed with those of the North Korean defectors,' often being portrayed as all-mighty money mongers.²⁴⁾ Given that some of the brokers are in fact those who previously defected from North Korea, and that various groups of brokers continue to actively intervene the North Korean defectors' life in South Korea as messengers, including these

²²⁾ O, Won Han, "Study on the Identity of North Korean Defector Youth," (Doctoral Dissertation, Korea University, 2011), pp. 232~236.

²³⁾ Ryu, Chong Hoon, 『Talbuk kù hu, òttõn korian[After escaping from North, some Koreans]』 (Seoul: Sungan Books, 2014), pp. 57~58.

²⁴⁾ see O, Won Han, "Study on the Identity of North Korean Defector Youth," Doctoral Dissertation, Korea University (2011), pp. 88~90.

people within the research frame as active agency can fill in areas remained rather dim.

IV. Overseas North Korean Defectors as (Possible) Sites for Multivocality

1. Ambivalence toward South Korea(ns)

It is interesting to note that in spite that overseas North Korean defectors chose to leave South Korea blaming South Korean society for discrimination and unequal opportunities, they end up maintaining strong relationship with South Korean community in the host country. The fact that two Koreas use same language would be the primary reason. Also, considering that North Korean defectors have little social network and social capital in third countries, making livelihood depending on South Korean community seems to be realistic survival strategy. This brings up another aspect that North Korean people might form a subordinated group to South Korean immigrants. They are economically subordinated in that the usual structure consists of South Korean employers and North Korean employees.²⁵⁾ They

²⁵⁾ for details, see Lee, Soo Jung and Lee Woo Young, "Yōngguk nyumoldūn koria taunnae namhan chumingwa pukhannanmin kanūi kwangyewa snaghoinsik [Social Relations and Attitudes between South Korean Migrants and North Korean Refugees in the Korea Town, New Malden, U.K.]," *North Korean Studies*, vol.18, no.1 (2014), pp. 137-174.

are in many cases socially subordinated as well in that undocumented North Korean defectors keep low profile in making opinions on social issues due to their illegal status.

Such hierarchical relationship between South and North Koreans in third countries have both positive and negative potentials. On one hand, interviews with both South and North Koreans in third countries indicate that conflict and hostility between two groups are less protrude than in South Korea.²⁶⁾ It is mainly because both groups are not the majority but minority in that society. In addition, being abroad has an effect of easing out the sense of political and military tensions between two Koreas, which otherwise plays main huddle in cooperating each other. On the other hand, it is also possible that North Koreans, especially talnam North Korean defectors, can get another round of feeling of discrimination out of this typical relationship between South and North Koreans where economic and social hierarchy present itself. In the latter case, in particular, the relationship can be understood as an extension of the problem that was initiated within South Korea. That said, both positive and negative, the ambivalent perception toward South Korea(ns) on the part of the North Korean defectors began to form when they arrived and resided in South Korea, but as they relocate themselves to another country after talnam, such attitudes get either fortified or reversed. The fact that North Korean defectors and South Korean immigrants interact each other in the third space of contact zone increases the possibility for the bilateral relationship to unfold in a different direction.

²⁶⁾ *ibid.*, pp. 150~160.

2. Sense of Uprootedness and Multi-layered Identities

The life of overseas North Korean defectors appears to be in ever-floating status, in constant movement toward better environment for better life. First they escaped from North Korea, half-settled in South Korea with care package, and then escaped from South Korea again for Western countries with hope that they can find a better fair society²⁷⁾. For some, their journey continues even after they land in the Western world.²⁸⁾ Some people even use a derogatory term of “citizenship shopping,” or “refugee shopping” to point out this tendency among talnam North Korean defectors. Each case has its own story and reason, making a generalized assumption not much of meaning, but it is fair to consider the opportunity cost that North Korean defectors paid to get out of North Korea. We do not have access to the background information of each North Korean defector's case, but we at least all know that they risked life in escaping North Korea, in many instance leaving behind family and friends with absolutely no guarantee to see them again. With such high opportunity cost, and with such extreme experience, it is not unthinkable for North Korean defectors to make another move pursuing a better reward for their life risking decision of escaping from North Korean.

²⁷⁾ Hee Young Yi, “kukje ingwonjangchiwa pikŭlkŭi sŏsa [International Dispositive of Human Rights and the Narrative of Tragedy],” *Economy and Society*, vol.109 (2016), pp. 216~217.

²⁸⁾ Hee Young Yi, “(Tal)bundangwa kukjeijuŭi haengwija netŭwakŭ: ‘yŏhanghanŭn’ talbuk nanmindŭlŭi samgwa ingwane taehan saryeyŏngu [(Post)Division and Actor-Network of International Migration: Case Study on the Life and Human Rights of “Traveling” North Korean Refugees],” *North Korean Studies Review*, vol. 17, no.1 (2013), pp. 355~393.

This ever-floating life style alludes problems in political, social, and emotional levels. First, granting a refugee status is affected by domestic as well as international political circumstances. If refugee admission rate in each country stays on constant level without much fluctuation due to political factors, chances for North Korean defectors flocking together searching for more favorable countries would be minimized, resulting in high possibility for “rooting” in one place. Second, if North Korean defectors have social network or support system for long-term relationship, the satisfaction with current life can be considerably elevated. Lack of social capital easily exhausts more reliable and durable options for North Korean defectors, cornering them into unconfirmed but seemingly specious alternatives presented by brokers. Emotionally, being separated from one's own niche and family has traumatic effect which begets a profound sense of “eternal homeless.” With such feeling, it is not unnatural for North Korean defectors to arm themselves with multi-layered identities according to circumstantial factors. Any individual has multiple identities across different relational positions over the course of his or her life, but the case of overseas North Korean defectors is significant in that their series of experiences as being North Koreans, South Koreans, undocumented immigrants, and acknowledged refugees imprints multiple layers in their identity. This co-evalness of experiential traces and the resulted multi-layered identity provide room for explaining the inconsistency often noted in the narratives of overseas North Korean defectors.

3. The Unuttered and the Silenced

So-called “anecdotal evidences” based on interviews are great for giving life to the dry or mute numbers, making the experience of North Korean defectors vividly heard. At the same time, anecdotal evidences are often presented in a fragmentary manner, far from serving a role as abridged version of life history that contains not just experiences but also the contexts and the interviewees’ own reflection. It is unfortunate that anecdotal pieces are sometimes used as sensational media stunt, often based on unconfirmed sources. Making a judgement on the interview contents as either correct or fake is not the primary concern in accounting for the experience of North Korean defectors. Still, the ways in which certain contents are selected in particular fashion deserves more nuanced analysis. Although many literatures on North Korean defectors contain considerable amounts of interviews, it is often unfortunate that interview pieces are directly used as verbalized evidence of the dire conditions of North Korea, the harsh life of North Korean defectors, and the cold receptions they received in South Korea, etc without being filtered through the researcher’s interpretation and reflection. More attention should be given to how the interviewees remember their experiences at which point, how they reconstruct memories into what kind of narratives, and to whom they are willing to share such narratives. Depending heavily on interviews has another drawback: dismissing those who remain less vocal in sharing their experience and emotions through interviews. Voices are heard from only those who want their voices heard. It should be noted that those who keep low profile as interviewees also form a significant portion of the North Korean defector

community. Acknowledging their existence and lack of their opinion represented in research would be a significant initial step forward to expand the research boundary of North Korean defectors. Also the omitted or unuttered parts within a vocal interviewee's stories needs more attention since the void might be a powerful indication that suppressing mechanism is at work in reconstructing and reorganizing memories. Full spectrum of the experience of overseas North Korean defectors can be revealed not only vocalized, but also murmured, and silenced voices are carefully pursued and sorted out.

4. Adjustment Process across Generations

When it comes to resettlement of overseas North Korean defectors, we need to find a way to measure successful integration. The usual ways of measuring success include checking their legal status, gauging their income and job security, and examining the degree of cultural adjustment: how much they share value system with other citizens, how strong social support or network they succeeded to form. These are all needed information, but to get a further meaningful measurement, a long term vision that includes the next generation's acculturation process and the resulted sociocultural security in the host society is essential. We have seen the examples of second or third generations of Muslim immigrants in Europe who turned out to be complete outsiders to that society, even though their parents fully secured upper middle class life and their children were born and raised in that society as native speakers. These cases tell us that we need to have long term vision to have research span extended to the second and third

generations forward. Inquires have been made in regard to the motivations and expectations of the first generation of talnam North Koreans, while their children have been research subject for presenting acculturation process. Relatively less visited area is how both the parents and the children themselves understand each other's motivation and expectation, and how the past, the present, and the future images are differently remembered and narrativized across different generations. Identifying and contextualizing varied memories within a family who assume they have gone through the same tunnel would open a space for multiple voices which in turn enables multi-dimensional understanding of overseas North Korean defectors' life.

V. Concluding Remarks

Overseas North Korean defectors' experience cannot be understood the entire course of journey they made from North Korea to South Korea, to another country. Many of them are still on constant move, sometimes with strong intentions, at other times under circumstantial pressure and allurements. At any rate, overseas North Korean defectors' experience needs to be addressed in the extended context of their life and adjustment in South Korea. Overseas North Korean defectors, or talnam North Koreans are not examples of derailment or failure, rather, they present us a possible site for multi-vocality in which different layers of experiences are combined to generate intersecting motivations, expectations, and struggles. This article aims to make a small preparatory effort toward the study of overseas North

Korean defectors. Further research on full scale with empirical data needs to be followed to yield meaningful step forward.

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다성(多聲) 공간으로서의 해외탈북자 연구

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국문요약

2016년 11월에 대한민국 내 북한이탈주민의 수는 공식적으로 3만 명을 넘어서었다. 2008-2009년에 정점을 이루었던 북한이탈주민의 숫자는 2011년 이후 눈에 띄는 감소추세를 보이고 있긴 하다. 하지만 이전보다 그 속도가 다소 느려졌다고 하더라도, 장기적으로 볼 때 북한을 이탈하는 주민의 누적숫자는 꾸준히 늘어날 수밖에 없는 상황이라는 점은 명확하다. 북한이탈주민의 규모와 성격은 자연재해, 국제관계, 남북관계, 북한의 내부 상황, 국제적인 난민정책 상황 등의 여러 요인에 영향을 받기 때문에, 그 변동의 폭을 예측하고 대비하기 위해서는 다학제적인 관점에서의 장기적인 연구가 필수적이라고 하겠다. 북한이탈주민에 대한 기존연구는 대한민국 내에 거주하는 이들의 적응문제와 지원 정책 부분에 초점을 맞춘 것이 주를 이루고 있다. 이러한 분석들은 남한을 최종목적지로 상정하고 북한이탈주민의 궁극적 목표를 “정상적인 남한주민이 되는 것”으로 제한한다는 문제점을 지닌다. 본 글은 이러한 인식과 가치를 넘어서 해외의 북한이탈주민 연구에 관심을 돌리며, 특히 ‘탈남’한 북한이탈주민들을 실패나 일탈의 특수한 사례로 접근하는 것을 지양하고 탈북과 남한에서의 생활의 연장선상으로 이해하는 것이 중요함을 지적한다. 해외의 탈남 북한이탈주민들이 겪은 다양한 굴곡의 경험은 필연적으로 다층적 정체성을 발현시키며 이는 종종 인터뷰를 통해 드러나는 비밀관성과 과장과 같은 부분을 설명해준다. 또한 극한의 경험이 축적된 탈남 북한이탈주민들의 경우, 오히려 그로 인해 다성(多聲)의 공간으로 해석될 여지가 충분하여 이를 통해 그들이 스스로의 기억과 경험을 재구성하는 방식을 이해하는 것이 용이해질 수 있다.

주제어: 해외 북한이탈주민, 탈남현상, 남한, 다성(多聲).

천경효(Chun, Kyung Hyo)

캐나다 브리티시 컬럼비아 대학교에서 인류학으로 박사학위를 받았으며 성균관대 동아시아 학술원, 건국대 인문학연구원을 거쳐 현재 서울대 통일평화연구원에 선임연구원으로 있다. 최근 논문으로는 “전쟁과 여성인권 박물관과 공공기억”, “통제된 다양성: 베트남의 소수민족과 민족학박물관” 등이 있다.