

New Citizens' Participation and 'Struggles for Recognition': An Oral Case Study of Identity Construction of North Korean Defector-Residents*

Yi, Hee Young**

North Korean defectors who are settling into South Korean society are becoming a 'meaningful' minority. Having experienced the ideological antagonisms produced by the Cold War and now trying to make their lives in South Korea, i.e., on the other side of the political border, these actors' biographies are of great socio-theoretical significance as a social reality mutually constructed by the individual and society. Following this perspective, this study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents as they are (re)constructed in interaction with 'generalized others' in Korean society.

The case study shows, firstly, that North Korean defector-residents carry out everyday recognition struggles in order to assert their civil rights which cannot be reduced to South Korean citizenship. Transcending the binary political logic of having to choose between 'pro-North' or 'anti-North' as well as going beyond the legal belonging known as 'citizen of the Republic of Korea', they engage in various forms of everyday struggles for recognition, from 'devotion,' and 'assimilation,' to 'superiority,' and 'criticism.' This can also be understood as a process of identity (re)construction whereby North Korean defector-residents interact with the reality of being disrespected by generalized others in South Korean society—as coming from an ideologically hostile nation or as 'food refugees'—, and through which they strive to secure their self-respect and social esteem.

Secondly, the settlement of North Korean defector-residents in South Korean society signifies the participation of new citizens with personal life stories, political belonging, and socio-cultural experiences that differ from those of other South Koreans. In particular, the various forms of 'distancing' based on the biographical experiences of North Korean defector-residents do not indicate their 'lack of adaptation' to the dominant value system in South

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** Professor, Department of Sociology, Daegu University

Korean society, but rather imply the possibility of acting as a new critical power for South Korean civil society.

Thirdly, in order to overcome the limitations of existing research on North Korean defector-residents' 'adaptation', this study explores theoretical possibilities of understanding them as active subjects of a multicultural civil society. In this process, the author inquires into the discussions on identity formation based on the notion of 'recognition struggle' as one such possibility. At the same time, the findings show that Honneth's 'struggle for recognition', which implicitly presupposes the modern nation-state as the public sphere for action, is limited in conveying the lives of migrant and other minorities that are actualized by acts of border crossings between states.

Keywords: North Korean defector-residents, North Korean refugees, minority, 'struggle for recognition,' identity (re)construction, self-respect, 'generalized Others'

I. INTRODUCTION

North Korean defectors¹ who are settling into South Korean society are becoming a 'meaningful' minority.² First of all, they are leading lives that transcend the political boundaries of North and South that have been separated by the war. Having experienced the ideological antagonisms produced by the Cold War and now trying to make their lives in South Korea, i.e., on the other side of the political border, these actors' biographies are of great socio-theoretical significance as a social reality mutually constructed by the individual and society.

At the moment, their political belonging is legally defined as 'citizens of the Republic of Korea.' However, an individual's social and political experiences and identity cannot be reduced to one's legal belonging. In

¹ North Koreans in South Korea are called by various names such as North Korean defectors, North Korean migrants, or new settlers. In this essay, I will use the official legal terminology of "North Korean defector-residents." However, depending on the context, this expression will be used co-terminously with "new settlers" and "North Korean defectors" as well.

² Minorities are not determined by the size of the collective or by numbers. In fact, the term is understood in relations to societal power. Also, the concept of 'minority' is newly constructed during the process of social change (Pak, K. 2008: 12-64).

particular, North Korean defector-residents experienced history, culture, and politics in socialist North Korea, which maintains a hostile relationship with the South in the context of the Cold War; what socio-political experiences these persons live through in their interactions with the 'generalized others' of South Korean society, and what kind of action-orientation the former develop as a result, cannot but become important socio-theoretical questions. In short, this is a question of 'the politics of recognition' in South Korea.

However, within current studies of North Korean defector-residents, the question of the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents is not treated in depth. This tendency in existing research may result from a politicized interpretation framework which strictly construes North Koreans' choice of 'defecting from North Korea' as an anti-North and pro-South statement. Also, in South Korean society, where the National Security Law still exists, everyone's free expression of political views is restricted, irrespective of whether you are from North or South Korea. Moreover, it is all the more probable that the binary norms of South Korean society operate even more strongly against the political stance of these people who have come to South Korea by crossing the political border. This may constitute the main reason why both researchers and North Korean defectors' have kept silent about their socio-political identities and inclinations.

With the questions raised above, this study examines the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents being (re)constructed in their quotidian experiences of South Korean society. Instead of following the black/white logic of 'anti-North or pro North' or studying their identities as 'phenomena of deviation' within the framework of adaptation or assimilation, this research aims at understanding the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents in light of their different biographical experiences and as (re)constructed through their participation and actions within the various spheres of interaction in South Korean society today.

More specifically, the research questions raised in this study are as follows. Firstly, what kind of life histories did the interviewees bring with them to the South? Secondly, what are the everyday interactions that these subjects experience as 'meaningful' in their lives within South Korean society? Thirdly, what are the characteristics of the socio-political identities that are being (re)constructed in this process, and what is their sociological significance?

To critically examine the above questions, this paper will first explore the concept of identity in relation to discussions on the ‘struggle for recognition’ (Honneth 1992; Taylor 1995).³ Afterwards, the biographic experiences of North Korean defector-residents will be reconstructed utilizing qualitative methodology. This paper will then conclude with a discussion of the results of this case study and their significance for sociological studies.

II. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Examination and Discussion of Existing Literature

The number of North Korean defectors who—due to the economic hardship in North Korea—are crossing the border to settle in the South has continually been on the rise. According to the following statistics on North Korean defector-residents in South Korea, this number has been rapidly increasing since the mid-1990s, and in recent years has reached around two thousand per year.

With the rise in number, however, the purpose of border crossing seems to have been changing as well. In addition to the difficulties brought on by the “Arduous March” in North Korea in the past decade, the ‘blurring of borders’ resulting from the development and spread of various media technologies seems to have contributed to the rise.⁴ One study shows that the motivation of North Korean defector-residents to risk their lives and cross the border has been changing from escaping food shortages to ‘pursuing a better future.’ This implies dynamic changes in the biographic experiences that North Korean

³ Although Taylor first proposed ‘the politics of recognition’ in his 1992 essay, this paper uses his 1995 work. Hegel’s argument of ‘recognition,’ which had been previously re-interpreted by Habermas, has been continued by Honneth and Taylor.

⁴ According to the oral testimonies, since 2000, North Koreans watching video recordings of South Korean TV dramas have been on the rise, particularly in the border regions. Through these, they are becoming increasingly familiar with Korean pop songs and culture. Moreover, the mass media are also enabling a growth of ‘fantasies’ about South Korean society (Interview Transcript Kim, Yöllan, 2008).

Table1. The Current Settlement Status of North Korean Defector-Residents

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Men	43	56	53	90	179	294
Women	13	30	18	58	133	289
Total	56	86	71	148	312	538

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Men	506	469	626	423	509	570	609
Women	632	812	1268	960	1509	1974	2200
Total	1139	1281	1894	1383	2018	2544	2809

defector-settlers are bringing to South Korea.

Since the mid-1990s, various studies have been conducted not only on the situation and realities of these border crossers but also on their everyday experiences in the South.⁵ What these studies have in common is their focus on the 'assimilation' or the 'adaptation' of North Korean defectors according to sex, age or group.⁶ According to these studies, androcentric structures and relationships are still being maintained within North Korean families living in South Korea, despite the changes in gender roles and status in South Korean society. With regard to women, their role and influence within the family have increased in comparison to life in North Korea and with this, their critical awareness of marital relations have been raised as well (Yoon, I. et. al. 2007). The myriad of problems these women face every day has also been illustrated (Cho, Y. and Jeon, W. 2005). Moreover, the studies also point to the lack of social support and the effect this has on the adaptation into South Korean society by North Korean defector youths (Pak, Y. and Yoon, I. 2007).

⁵ Two examples of such studies are *The Report on the Conditions and Human Rights of the North Korean Food Refugee* published by Good Friends in 1999 and *The Current Status of the Defectors*, which came out in 2005 (Kim, I. 2005).

⁶ *The Theory of Attitude Change*, by Yoon Yeo Sang, is one such theoretical work that discusses 'the adaptation perspective.' (Yoon, Y. 2002) Some recent works have looked into the psychological adaptation of North Korean women in South Korea (Cho, Y. and Jeon, W. 2005), the problem of 'family' adaptation (Yoon, I. et. al. 2007), and the adaptation of North Korean youths (Park, Y. and Yoon, I. 2007).

However, there have been relatively few works on the formation of North Korean defector-residents' socio-political identities. For example, in a quantitative study conducted on the 'value-orientation' of defector-settlers, the North Korean defectors are shown to be more accepting of authority and order than South Koreans. In addition, they are shown to have a higher degree of 'vertical individualism,' which is related to goal-orientedness. In the following studies on the social adaptation of North Korean defector-residents (Yoon, I. 2007), the subjects identify themselves as being more 'progressive' (27.6%) than 'conservative' (13.8%) and admit to being emotionally closer to North Korea than South Korea despite living here. The studies cited above provide important knowledge for understanding the adaptation of North Korean defectors in South Korea today.

Yet, studies that do not describe only one side of interaction by relying on the chronicling of the difficulties and conflict faced by North Koreans, but that encompass both sides and explore the origin of these problems and the dynamics of change as interactive processes, are still warranted. In fact, in-depth studies that examine the interactions between the 'generalized others' of South Korea and the North Korean defector-residents and look at the socio-political action orientations produced by the everyday experiences of these subjects are fairly recent.⁷ This tendency in existing research correlates to the limitations often found in early studies of immigrants' which mainly concentrated on their 'adaptation' into the 'host society.' However, the notion of 'adaptation, irrespective of how broadly it is 'defined', presupposes a certain 'core'; this perspective builds on the premise that a given society has relatively homogeneous values and rules and, consequently, operates as a mechanism for instituting social discrimination and exclusion. Various forms of prejudice against North Korean defector-residents that are found in South Korea today are products of interactions in which this notion of 'core culture' is utilized as a yardstick for 'differences.'⁸

⁷ Works such as Chung, Byung Ho's study on the apoliticization of defector-refugees (Chung, B. et al., eds. 2006) and Lee Jung Woo's examination of the socialization process of North Korean defector youths (Lee, J. 2006) have already pointed to these problems.

⁸ Kang, Ju Won's work, which analyzes the mechanisms that use the notion of North Korean defector-residents as "others" in South Korea today, provides an important

Furthermore, the methodological problems within current studies conducted on the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents needs to be pointed out. The works cited above (Dockgoh, S. 2001; Yoon, I. 2007) utilize quantitative methodology to approach issues of socio-political identities. These studies take the South Korean liberal democratic order and its capitalistic culture as 'the standard' for assessing the degrees of adaptation. With such an approach, these studies cannot adequately convey the dynamic identity construction process of the actor-subject, which transcend the narrow boundaries of adaptation. On the other hand, some of the more recent studies on the identity formations of various North Korean defector groups have tried to explore these issues more in-depth based on qualitative methodologies and are showing possibilities for new interpretations and understandings.⁹ In short, the discussion thus far on the literature on North Korean defector-residents shows not only the need for critically reflecting on the problems of the 'adaptation perspective', but also for deepening and widening the prospects of qualitative research on the subject.

2. The 'Struggle for Recognition' and Identity

This section will critically examine the theoretical concept of socio-political 'identity' in relation to discussions on the 'struggle for recognition.' In this study, the adoption of 'recognition struggle' to understand identity construction resulted from a process of abduction. While analyzing the oral testimonies on the everyday experiences of North Korean defector-residents, changes in their socio-political identities surfaced as an important aspect of the interviewees' overall biographic experiences. Such experiences led the author to explore the theoretical significance of the 'recognition struggle' to better explain the characteristics of the cases studied.

The concept of identity has been frequently used in migration and

point in this regard (Kang, J. 2002).

⁹ These qualitative studies have been mainly conducted as part of MA theses. Some of these works have looked into the identity of North Korean women (Kim, J. 1999), the identity of North Korean children (Kim, Y. 2002), the self-identity of North Korean defector-residents (Park, S. 2002) and the identity of North Korean defector-resident college students (Kwon, N. 2006).

minorities studies but has faced much criticism.¹⁰ The main critique of the concept emphasizes that identity is often essentialized and construed as static, and thus functions as a mechanism of social exclusion (Riegel 2004: 124). In contrast, with regard to explaining the individual's identity formation, the discussion on the 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth 1992; Taylor 1995), which is based on Hegel and Mead's theories on 'mutual recognition,' seems to provide a more productive theoretical underpinning for understanding the lives of North Korean defector-residents from the perspective of the politics of difference.

Honneth deems Mead's classic argument, that the identity of a human subject is formed by intersubjective 'recognition,' as having rescued Hegel's discussion on intersubjectivity from the planes of metaphysics. According to Mead, "the individual identity maintained within the collective can only be so when others recognize the individual as such" (Mead 1963: 194). From the viewpoint of the 'generalized others,' self-understanding, which allows one to define the Self, is derived from a process of inter-recognition. In the process of socialization, an individual experiences not only the duties and responsibilities attached to him or her by society but also the rights granted. With these rights, the individual comes to understand that his or her demands are being legally valued within the social collective and as result, arrives at the point of 'self-respect' (*Selbstachtung*). Through the recognition of rights bestowed, the members of society come to 'recognize' the individual as a particular human being and concordantly, the individual comes to acquire the identity of self-affirmation (Honneth 1992: 127-128).

Honneth here uses Mead's thesis of the incomplete subsumption of the passion and impulsiveness of the subjective 'I' by the objective 'Me' to explain the psychological mechanism in the individual that makes the mutual recognition of social rights possible.

In any given situation, the existence of the objective 'Me' makes the subject explore new forms of recognition for the subjective 'I.' In so doing, the possibility to actively resolve moral conflicts is opened up as well. To cite

¹⁰ Niethammer in particular criticizes collective identity to be nothing more than a 'plastic concept' (*Plastikbegriff*) that exhibits exclusionary tendencies (Niethammer 2000).

Taylor, human beings, as 'self-interpreting animals,' re-evaluate hopes and actions by interacting with others. Eventually, this leads to an expansion of the horizon of self-interpretation (Taylor 1976). That is, for the passion and impulsiveness of the subjective 'I' to acquire legitimacy by the objective 'Me,' the subjects cannot but continue to deconstruct the norms embodied in the 'generalized others.' Honneth terms the mode of social practice whereby the individual—based on this mechanism of actions—strives to expand the recognition of his or her rights as the 'struggle for recognition' (*Kampf um Anerkennung*) (Honneth 1992: 136). In short, the process of 'struggling for recognition' is another expression for the construction of individual identity.

According to Honneth, depending on the type of social interactions, social recognition is categorized into love, right and solidarity. Out of self-belief, the individual comes to construct a sense of self-respect (*Selbstachtung*) and self-esteem (*Selbstschätzung*). At the same time, all forms of humiliation and insult against an individual's dignity or the revocation of one's social recognition needs to be paid attention as well, for the destructive danger it poses on one's sense of self-identity. Experiences of physical abuse and violence, social discrimination, exclusion, and of devaluation as an inferior social class all feed into conflicts in the formation of individual identity. Honneth understands the 'moral feelings of denial' that are derived from experiences of neglect, humiliation and shame as violations of individual identity. At the same time, he also sees their potential as an energy source for staging social 'recognition struggles' (Honneth 1991: 150-). With this, Taylor proposes not so much the recognition of particularity or of universality, but 'the politics of recognition' whereby the demand for privileged recognition of particularities can be made. He emphasizes that the identity of an individual is formed in dialogue with the 'generalized others' and that the suspension of social recognition can become a form of social repression (Taylor 1995: 1-230).

Based on the above discussions, this study will consider the formation of the individual's socio-political identity as a process of 'recognition struggles,' which changes due to interactions between the individual and 'generalized others.' Such exploration of the politics of recognition and difference offers the possibility of overcoming the limitations of the 'uniform universality and absolutism' much criticized within studies on minorities and

multiculturalism, thus providing a more in-depth understanding of the lives of North Korean defector-residents. To sum up, this approach will allow us to consider not only the actions of North Korean defector-residents but, at the same time, those of the 'generalized others' in South Korean society, from the viewpoint of their mutual interaction. It provides a perspective from which we can study the process of recognition struggles, i.e. the socio-political identities of North Korean defector-residents without treating them as objects having to unilaterally adapt to South Korean culture but as subjects actively constructing their lives and identities.

3. Qualitative Research Methodology and Research Process

Based on the theoretical discussion above, this study will reconstruct the life experiences of North Korean defector-residents using the methodology of biographical reconstruction much used in qualitative social research (Rosenthal 1995; Yi, H. 2005). The biographical reconstruction methodology emphasizes that the individual's identity is formed with reference to his or her past, present, and future life time, and expressed through the medium of narratives. In dialogue with others, using both physical and non-physical linguistic symbols,¹¹ individuals engage in a process of newly constructing themselves through mutual recognition. Biographical reconstruction aims at studying in depth the everyday experiences of actors, by way of comparative analysis of oral texts produced in narrative interviews from the different viewpoints of 'talk' and 'experiences.' This approach critically reflects on problems that have been raised in theoretical discussions of methods used within North Korean studies, such as the specificity of research materials and the problem of 'arbitrary interpretation' on part of the researcher, and considers these as important in the research process (Kim, K. 2002; Kyongnam University Graduate Studies on North Korea 2003). Moreover, this methodology allows us to be attentive to the 'process of fleeing North Korea,' recognized in recent studies as an important aspect to comprehend the forms of adaptation and life experiences of North Korean defector-residents in

¹¹ This 'broad range of texts' includes not only recorded interview transcripts, but physical gestures and written records (autobiography, letters, memos etc.) as well.

South Korean society (Cho, Y. and Jeon, W. 2005: 19). The methodology of biographical reconstruction thus constitutes a useful tool to explore North Korean defector-residents' experiences, as they relate to specific times and themes, against the horizon of their entire biographies.

The meetings with interviewees to be discussed here came about through various routes from 2006 to 2008. The very first interview for this research took place with Ms. Kim Chuhŭi (Case #3) in the summer of 2006. The author met her through an acquaintance at an academic conference on North Korea. At that time, the author was conducting field research on social groups on the 'margins' of politics. Over the years, these encounters became the foundation for this research. Also, the help and contacts received from 'Good Friends,' a Buddhist organization working in support of North Korean defector-residents, and other support groups in various regions cannot go without mention. Through these three routes, the author had the opportunity to hear the life stories of the following interviewees and to record them in order draw a map of life experiences within the parameters of her comprehension and interpretation. The data of the interviewees to be discussed are as follows (See Table 2).

The biographic characteristics of the interviewees summarized in diagram #2 are as follows. Firstly, although the sex ratio had not been paid particular attention at the outset of this research, in the end, the number of interviewees totaled eight people, with five women and three men. This ratio also resembles the current trend with 60-70 percent of new arrivals from North Korea are women.¹² Moreover, women's more active participation in South Korean society indicates a higher chance of meeting them as interview subjects than men. In fact, the author was frequently told during interviews that North Korean men faced more obstacles than women in becoming active in South Korean society. There are various reasons for such statements; e.g. the menial labor many recently arrived men end up with as employment, and the difficulties they face with this kind of physically strenuous work as they

¹² According to reports by the Ministry of Unification, until the end of 1990s, most people arriving from North Korea were men. Since 2003, the number of women has doubled in size in comparison to men (2003: men 268, women 813; 2004: men 626, women 1268). This trend still continues today (see chart #1 on the current settlement status of North Korean defector-residents).

Table 2. Profile of the interviewees¹³

Case no.	Name (Sex)	Date of birth (current age)	Hometown/ Current Address	Occupation in North Korea	Escaped from North Korea	Arrived in South Korea	Current Occupation
1	Yu Chimin (F)	1983 (25 yrs)	Hambuk/ Kyöngbuk Andong	Middle School Graduate	1999 (16 yrs old)	2003	Graduate Student
2	Cho Myöngghüi (F)	1977 (31 yrs)	Hambuk/ Daegu	Student	1997 (20 yrs old)	2002	Housewife
3	Kim Chuhüi	1959 (49 yrs)	P'yöngyang/ Seoul	Poet in Writers' Federa-tion	1998 (39 yrs old)	1999	Ph.D. can-didate & magazine editor
4	Ko Sunja	1951 (57 yrs)	Hambuk/ Seoul	Manager in Food pro-cess-ing plant	1998 (47 yrs)	2003	Active in NK settlers organization
5	Kim Yöllan (F)	1941 (67 yrs)	Hambuk/ Seoul	Teacher, Laborer	2006 (65 yrs old)	2006	Pensioner
6	Pak T'aesu (M)	1952 (56 yrs)	Chagangdo/ Seoul	Economic Financial Bureau-crat/ Overseas work experi-ence	2002 (50 yrs old)	2002	Runs private tutorial school
7	Cho Kwangmo (M)	1945 (63 yrs)	Hambuk/ Daegu	Doctor	1995 (50 yrs old)	2000	Published auto-biogra-phy
8	Kim Chölnam	1966 (42 yrs old)	Hambuk/ Kyöngbuk Andong	Medical Profession	2003 (37 yrs old)	2004	Works in service Sector

¹³ For reasons of data protection, interviewees' names and locations have been altered. In some cases, sensitive information has been partially withheld or revised as well. The year 2008 has been used to calculate the age of the interviewees.

have undergone a prolonged period of food deprivation.¹⁴

As stated previously, six of the eight interviewees live with their families in South Korea. Some defected from North Korea with their family (case no. 3, 4, 6, 8), while others escaped separately and then later reunited with their families once in South Korea (case no. 2, 7). This is certainly the case for Ms. Cho Myŏnghŭi. She is the daughter of Mr. Cho Kwangmo who first left North Korea and came to Korea. As for Ms. Cho, she came to Korea via China and then later her older brother and mother joined the family.¹⁵ As one of the two interviewees who are single (case no. 1, 5), Ms. Kim Yŏllan was already so when she was living in North Korea. She married young and, after her divorce, made a living through menial labor. Ms. Yu Chimin, on the other hand, left her family at an early age and defected.

Most of the interviewees lived near the North Korean-Chinese border and were aided by 'defection guides' (also known as 'brokers'). They came to Korea via China and other countries. Ms. Kim Chuhŭi, on the other hand, received an order for expulsion from P'yŏngyang and after being deported to Chŏngjin, fled to China. Mr. Pak T'aesu worked overseas as a high-ranking economic bureaucrat and directly sought asylum in South Korea. As for the age groups, the interviewees range from the 20s to 60s. The difficulties brought by food shortages during the 'Arduous March' (or the March of Tribulation) in the 1990s and the escalating political tensions compelled them to escape to China and other nations.

III. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CASE STUDIES

In this section, the interviewees' life experiences will be analyzed and introduced. In order to understand the narrators' experiences of specific situations as well as their actions and strategies in the context of their

¹⁴ This was also confirmed in Mr. Kim Chŏlnam's testimony (Case #8).

¹⁵ So far, many of the North Korean defectors came to South Korea via China. Persons who first passed through other countries (Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand) are categorized into those who sought asylum at foreign consulates in China and those who forged passports in an attempt to directly enter South Korea (Chung, B. 2006: 52)

entire biographical horizon, the author will try to convey the development process of the biographical histories as much as possible. Due to the page limitations, however, the discussion will center on the main characteristics found. These typical features surfaced in the process of establishing themes from the oral cases through a comparative perspective and analysis of the distinct characteristics of each case. The four cases introduced below have been selected based on maximum and minimum points of comparisons of characteristics of each socio-political identity construction process.¹⁶

In the following, in consideration of the interviewees who have families in North Korea, personal information and the testimonies of some of the interviewees have been withheld for protection of privacy.

1. “I am devoted to wherever I am given recognition”: Ko Sunja

1) *The ‘non-citizen’ who left North Korea*

The author was introduced to Ms. Ko Sunja by a Buddhist organization and meet her for the first time at her home in January of 2008.¹⁷ In total, three meetings took place, and during the interviews Ms. Ko spoke of her life as the daughter of a ‘family who was politically persecuted for thirty years in North Korea.’ Ms. Ko Sunja was born as the sixth of seven children in December 1951. During her initial narration, she wept bitterly as she spoke of “[Korean] Thanksgiving day on September 20th 1964,” when her father was arrested and taken to some unknown place from which he never returned. (Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 I/6-7).¹⁸ According to the interviews, when her family faced economic difficulties because her grandfather, who had been

¹⁶ Cases exhibiting commonalities have been referred to as a case of minimum comparison. Cases showing differences have been used as a case of maximum comparison. For a more detailed discussion, see (Yi, H. 2005: 143).

¹⁷ The interviewee works at a North Korean defector-resident support organization. In our meetings, she tried to deliver information regarding North Korean defector-residents as ‘professionally’ as possible. In fact, she served as an important ‘gatekeeper’ who opened up the North Korean defector-resident community to the researcher.

¹⁸ This is the citation style of the oral transcripts for this paper. For example, the code within the brackets refers to quotations from the transcript from pages 6-7 of the first interview taken in 2008.

a doctor under Japanese imperialist rule, supported the independence movement abroad, her father started work as a manager at a forestry site near the border operated by the Japanese colonial government. However, during the 1960s, when programs to establish cooperatives were being carried out in North Korea, this family history seems to have become the basis for their political persecution. After her father was arrested, the interviewee's family was officially categorized as "supporters of and ready to die for Japanese Imperialism," and it appears they faced physical and non-physical forms of political oppression. When the interviewee received awards for perfect attendance and excellent grades at her high school in 1967, her record of having a "bad family origin" prevented her from being admitted into a university. She was also turned down for admittance into an agricultural professional school.¹⁹ Until she married in 1978, she worked at a farm near her home as a menial laborer for 10 years.

In North Korea, I am of the lowest class, but you know ~~ even when I worked at the farm, I never lagged behind others, anyway, what (I) mean ~~ we, when others were taking one step after the other at a time, we had to take ten steps, when others were walking ten um, taking ten steps um~ we had to take hundred, you know, we took hundred steps running, we, others, could follow others ~ we could do that ~

(Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 I/15-16)²⁰

In the above text, the interviewee emphasizes how she and her family tried their very best given the situation. That is, in order to compensate for her 'bad family origin,' she "ran hundred steps when others were walking ten steps." After her marriage, through her active participation in local affairs, she was

¹⁹ A similar case and thus a case of minimum comparison is Ms. Kim Yöllan's. With parents who had moved to the South Korea in 1947 and an aunt who was purged at the end of the 1970s, the interviewee was categorized as a 'person under surveillance.' She experienced so many difficulties in her everyday life that she eventually defected.

²⁰ To reproduce the narrations as closely as possible, this paper uses the following signs within the transcripts cited. (3) indicates pauses in the narration (time in seconds). (()) indicates an explanation added by the recorder. ~~~ stands for the narration slowing down. Bold letters signal loud voice. _____ (underline) means that this word was emphasized in speech, and (...) signifies an omission.

recognized for her diligence and abilities. From 1986 until her defection, she was the de-facto manager in charge of the food processing plant where she worked.

On the other hand, her family's efforts to rehabilitate themselves and get her grandfather's support of the independence movement recognized finally succeeded in the mid-1990s when they became known as a "family of a patriotic martyr." However, at around the same time, the so-called 'Arduous March' officially began in North Korean society.²¹ Unlike in P'yongyang and other major cities, in the border regions rations had already been discontinued a long time ago and, in the mid-1990s, deaths due to starvation became more and more apparent. Even those who had special privileges were engaging in 'black market trade,' still wearing the party uniform. By 1998, the interviewee's eldest daughter was working without any wage or rations at the propaganda unit. She was told to take a leave of absence. At the time, leave of absence meant 'time to engage in business or any other means of earning a living without working.' However, the interviewee's family did not have the seed money to start a business.²² Inevitably, the eldest daughter crossed the border with China-bound brokers in order to obtain money. In June 1998, when the eldest daughter failed to return after one week despite her promises, the interviewee, who was forty-seven years old at the time, crossed the border into China with her other daughters "to live and to die together (as a family)." The following transcript describes what the interviewee wrote to her older sister just before she left North Korea.

Sister, by the time you get this letter ~ I don't think I will be here ~ OO ((the name of the oldest daughter)) if I find her, I will come back ~ if I cannot find,

²¹ Shortages in the food ration system were already apparent during the 3rd Seven Year Plan. Followed by severe cold weather in 1994 and floods in 1995, the ration system as a whole became impossible to maintain. In the official New Year address of 1996, the North Korean government urged people to be armed with the "Spirit of the Arduous March." (Kim, S. 1997)

²² With the increased economic difficulties of the 1990s, many women who had been housewives became the actual head of the household through their engagement in trading activities. The most basic economic activity carried out in order to earn a living or obtain foreign currency were various forms of trade, followed by forming work groups within family networks (Lee, M. 2006: 37-).

I will not come back anyway ~~ (3) tsut ((tongue clucking sound)) yet will still what I wanted to say inside ~~ um ~~ originally I THAT ~ HERE ~ I WORKED DILIGENTLY FOR THIS COUNTRY. I when I think back it was too much ~ when I went to the police station ~ it's written there 'serving the people,' I don't know if ~ I am included within that category of people, these people who say they serve the people ~ without any proof, arrest people, say 'this b**ch that b**ch,' without any proof come into the house ~ touch everything ~~ how can they do this? ~~ , (...) because of this, because it was like this for me, this ~ country where I lived until now, I feel no great attachment I wrote this ~~ yet, although it is such ~ country, it is the country where I was born and lived until now that I would pray that things will be okay for this country ~ this is what I wrote all down ~ after that I packed - (4)

(Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 I/23-24)

In the above paragraph, the interviewee emphasizes the fact that her crossing of the border was the desperate choice of a mother with children. At the same time, she shows strong feelings about leaving a society that refused to recognize her as one of 'the people.' In this part of the story where her narration moves from past to 'present,' her escalating voice takes us back to a time ten years ago in 1998, when she was writing the letter just before her defection. The narrator demonstrates that the reason for the North Korean regime arresting her family members without any evidence, violating her privacy and exploiting her through bribery and corruption—even though she showed ten times more dedication than others in order to overcome the political stigma and discrimination forced upon her as being of 'bad family origin'—was the fact that she was not recognized as one of 'the people.' According to the case analysis, although the family was politically rehabilitated as a 'family of a patriotic martyr' in the 1990s, in everyday life, they were continually denied their rights and treated as 'non-people.' Faced with increasingly negative public attitudes that threatened not only their social existence but their very own life, it appears this 'females-only' family made the decision to cross the border. In other words, after the mid-1990s, the North Korean regime was politically unable to care for what constituted the elite in North Korean society, for those with privileges and whom they called a 'patriotic martyr family.' During this process, the interviewee lost pride and political solidarity with the society she belonged to and as result,

left her country. Yet, despite all this, in the last paragraph of the interview, she expressed her ‘emotional affinity’ to the country where she had grown up and lived.

2) *Physical Abuse and Migration to South Korea*

After leaving North Korea, many of the interviewees stayed in China for some time; from one year to 5-6 years. During that time, they experienced various forms of physical abuse.²³ They experienced forced marriage, slave trade, sexual abuse, and endured physical abuse under threats of deportation.²⁴

Ms. Ko Sunja described her time in China as “an experience she never wanted to recall.” In 1998, members of her family who had been sold to various places in China were reunited again. After strenuous efforts, they arrived in South Korea through the South Korean consulate in Beijing in January 2003. It appears the interviewee and her daughters heard about other North Korean defectors through South Korean radio broadcasts and hoped to find a way to reach South Korea. Having already lost her political solidarity with the North, she lived in China under constant fear and faced physical abuse. She evaluated her coming to Korea as “really being shoved into coming to the South” (Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 II/34). Given China’s political ties with the North Korean regime, the pressure levied by the Chinese government towards the defectors seems to have paradoxically become an important catalyst in making them choose the South.²⁵

²³ In the case of Ms. Kim Yöllan, a few days after leaving North Korea in 2006 with the help of a broker, she took a plane from China and came through Inchön airport. As a result, she did not experience any physical abuse in China. After 2002, various different routes of travelling directly to South Korea seem to have developed.

²⁴ Studies show that the sexual violence North Korean women experience as refugees in China and other countries prior to their arrival in South Korea have an effect on their settlement process in Korea (Cho, Y. and Jeon, W. 2005: 19). For a report on the general conditions of these women during this time, see the following (Paek, Y. 2002: 247-253).

²⁵ According to the 2004 report by ‘Refugees International,’ an American professional civilian organization, the majority of the 65 people surveyed expressed hopes of living in China, from where they would have the possibility of returning due to the proximity to North Korea, if only they did not have to fear arrest and forced deportation. It was rare to find anyone who wished to sever ties with North Korea.

3) *Being committed to my rights*

In the second interview, the interviewee gave a detailed and lively testimony of the “disappointment” she felt while speaking about the discrimination and corruption of South Korean officials who were in charge of educating the defectors (Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 II/43-44).²⁶ An important point in the case analysis was that the officials in charge exercised this ‘privilege’ intended for the security and protection of the interviewee to further their own interests. This also happened in a circumstance where the interviewee could plainly see and directly experience this type of behavior. In other words, although the interviewee and her daughter were present, the officials were acting as if the two were incapable of understanding their actions. What the interviewee protests against through the interview is the denial of her lawful rights and the humiliation of not being recognized as a moral being. Despite having gained citizenship of the Republic of Korea, in reality, the interviewee experienced the demotion of her social status, unable to receive recognition as a moral being of equal capability and intelligence.

According to the continuing biographical material, her leadership skills came to be recognized among her peers at a support group organized by North Korean defectors. For four to five years, she provided great emotional and other forms of support, and it was this that made others recognize her leadership skills. She assumed the role of a mentor to many North Korean defector-residents. According to the case analysis, this interviewee who lacked material and social support for herself, sought to actively participate in her current life world based on her own diligence and her very best efforts.

I, at this age to for me to ~ I ~ so hard ~ worked hard at what was given, I was so grateful that they were able to do that for me, anyway, as I worked to my very BEST (...) At the present, I am just ~ motto is like this ~ just me ~ day by day ~ to do my BEST, I ~ it is my motto. Just to do MY BEST everyday ~ last ~ as if it is my last day, to do my best, that is my motto

(Interview Transcript Ko Sunja, 2008 I/ 51-52).

(Chung, B. 2006: 58).

²⁶ To protect the interviewee, the rest of the transcript has been omitted.

In the text above, she thanks the North Korean defector-residents' organization for entrusting her with a leadership role. At the same time, within the text, she repeatedly stresses her diligence and efforts to implicitly show her pride and social recognition. The important analytical point here is the parallel between her tenfold efforts she made in North Korea and the 'very best efforts' she is currently making in South Korea. In short, whether it is overcoming the stained family background of pro-Japanese collaboration or her social minority status as a defector, one can see the performance of 'dedication' that she exhibits. The biographic history of Ms. Ko Sunja shows her efforts to gain respect and recognition through her devotion to socio-moral values and rules of the society to which she belongs, regardless of the political ideologies of North Korean socialism or South Korean capitalism. This is also being carried out through interaction with the 'generalized others,' be it through the political repression in North Korea or the discrimination against defectors in the South. In fact, this constitutes the other side of her identity she is currently constructing with the heightened 'devotion' discussed above.

2. "I have the ability to assimilate into South Korean society":

Yu Chimin

1) *Towards an Independent Life*

Ms. Yu Chimin belongs to the youngest generation among the interviewees. She is the daughter of a family with no party membership. After graduation from high school, she was unable to find a suitable job. The fact that she came to South Korea through China makes her a case of minimum comparison to Ms. Ko Sunja. Ms. Yu Chimin was born in 1983 as the only daughter to a father who worked overseas and a mother who was a housewife. Although she ended up neglecting her studies to care for her mother who suffered from asthma, thanks to her father's resourcefulness, she grew up in a relatively wealthy household. Her family was affluent enough to avoid hunger even during the 'Arduous March.' In 1995, when the interviewee turned fifteen, her mother succumbed to an epidemic outbreak and died. The following year, her father remarried and it appears the interviewee began to experience emotional difficulties. The loss of her mother who had been with her everyday

and her father's sudden remarriage seem to have made the interviewee all the more aware of her "lone" existence and fueled her desire for 'an independent life.'

In 1998, just before her high school graduation, the interviewee attempted to enlist in the military to become a party member, but gave up after opposition from her family. Around the same time, she established close ties with 'a younger sister' in her town who went to China and was deported back. As a result of contacts with her, the interviewee seems to have begun harboring dreams of going to unknown places such as Harbin. In 1999, when she was 17 years old, the interviewee crossed the border into China "to work six months to earn seed money for a business." She was first sold to an old farming couple as a laborer, but in 2001, she was able to escape to another region where an older North Korean female acquaintance lived. She bought a forged Chinese family registry and got a job as an assistant guide at a Korean travel agency there. Yet, she was living in an unstable situation without a legal residence permit. In 2003, after finding out that her employer helped people travel to South Korea, she asked for his help. In the winter of 2003, the interviewee arrived in South Korea through the South Korean consulate in Beijing.

2) *Becoming a 'Citizen' of the Republic of Korea*

After finishing her education at Hanawön in 2004, the interviewee was by herself when she was assigned rental housing in the Kyöngbuk region. In the interview, the interviewee evaluated "the year 2004 as one of the hardest years." The loneliness arising from not having any emotional and unconditional support seems to have been the main cause for this hardship.²⁷ Being a foreigner who "did not know anything, computer, did not know how to use a computer, culture, do not know culture, style of speaking, cannot adapt to the style of speaking," she felt as if she "was branded for being like a foreigner, embarrassed by it and also felt shame like a criminal." The

²⁷ A study on the social support of North Korean defector youths (Park, Y. and Yoon, I. 2007) shows that in comparison to South Korean youths, North Korean defector youths lack a support base. The study also illustrates how close supporting relations play an important role in their lives.

reason for feeling the stigma of not being born a South Korean comes from a devaluation of lifestyle and beliefs of North Koreans by the hierarchical South Korean social values. The interviewee probably experienced ‘the revocation of recognition’ where she felt humiliation and shame rather than support and encouragement for her abilities to make contributions to society. In this case, computer skills become not simply knowledge but a marker that distinguish her from a ‘citizen of South Korea.’ Given such experiences, instead of risking unfriendly stares by revealing her origin, the interviewee seems to have decided to erase the stigma that separated her from the rest of the society. She chose to do so by becoming a ‘citizen of the Republic of Korea.’ First, she registered for computer classes and learned how to use a computer. Utilizing her experience of working at a Korean travel agency in China, she manufactured ‘an appropriate resume.’ To produce an identity suitable for local society, she changed her hometown and style of speaking to the Kangwŏn dialect and made revisions to her time in China (Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/19). With the newly manufactured resume and ‘a bright and energetic appearance’ in hand, the interviewee got her first job at a cosmetic sales counter. However, more than any other occupation, this occupation was inundated with foreign words that she did not know. Yu admitted to feeling quite anxious when she learned how the job entailed timely responses towards numerous products and fast changing trends. Her fellow colleagues were puzzled by the interviewee who did not know not only the names or brands of the various cosmetic companies, but also the types of cosmetics such as toner, lotion, and spray. All these were foreign words to the interviewee. Invariably, just three days after beginning her work, she came to agonize whether to quit her job. She decided to stay on by telling herself that she “was at a crossroad between life and death and that (she) could do this” (Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/20). With a fabricated resume, Yu ended up learning the counter work through observations and guesswork. As a result, she seems to have been assigned cleaning more than learning the sales work, and this seems to have produced problems as well. She spoke about her incomprehension of the shop owner’s request to go out and purchase a hotdog. Not even knowing whether a hotdog was an edible product, she expressed in her interview the difficulties she faced when she decided to assimilate into Korean culture through a presumed South

Korean identity. The price paid for not risking the obvious contempt and discrimination that awaited her once 'coming out' as a North Korean defector was to learn the ropes of South Korean mainstream culture through side glances and guesswork.

Few months after this incident, her experience of selling cosmetics to Chinese students who visited the shop motivated her to apply to graduate schools in the hopes of securing a better future. After six months of training at "the professional school for simultaneous translation," she was admitted into the Chinese studies program at a local university in March 2003. Her life experience in China became an important biographic resource. Due to her fluency in Chinese, the interviewee came to be accepted among her peers in the university (Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/24). Currently, the interviewee is engaged in various extra-curricular activities and also serves as the president of the student recruitment club for her department. She is now open to telling her experiences of defection and encourages other students to volunteer at support organizations for North Korean defector-residents.

3) *"No matter what anyone says, I am a citizen of the Republic of Korea"*

In the above retelling of her life history, the interviewee showed a highly concentrated effort to construct a biographic experience by someone in their twenties. While enduring 'the unfriendly stares' that North Korean defector-residents faced every day, she came to acquire the culture and abilities of a 'citizen of the Republic of Korea' through furtive glances, guesswork, and studies on her own. Opting to invest in her future rather than in a job that pays the bills, the interviewee is now in her 4th year of university, facing graduation. She assesses her life at the moment "as the best in my life" (Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/36). In all the interviews with her, the interviewee emphasized, despite the loneliness and hardship, her pride and hope in the better future she was forging ahead here in Kyōngbuk than she ever did back in North Korea.

On the other hand, the interviewee admitted to shedding tears when she watches North Korean athletes at the Olympic Games and wishing them victory. Also, tears welled up in her eyes when recollecting memories of her family left behind in North Korea (Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/31). Although she chose to leave, to the interviewee, North Korea

is an emotional pillar that has allowed her to believe in herself (self-belief, *Selbstvertrauen*) by giving her unconditional support and encouragement. Yet at the same time, the interviewee emphatically defines herself as a citizen of the Republic of Korea.

No matter what anyone says, even though I speak with a Chǒngjin dialect, I am a citizen of the Republic of Korea. Legally, I am so and since I am going to live and contribute to this country, my being here, of course when others see, just because I receive support from the state, that this person will become a burden, towards such prejudice, I say there is absolutely no such thing. Of course, there are others who don't say that as well. LIVING IN A COUNTRY WHERE I PAY TAXES, I AM GOING TO BECOME A PERSON NEEDED BY THIS SOCIETY. THAT KIND OF PERSON, I AM. I also tell the new settlers, you are all needed people, who is ever not needed? How is it that people need only what they want?

(Interview Transcript Yu Chimin, 2008 I/39)

In the above paragraph, the interviewee emphasizes that legal membership to the modern nation-state should be given to individuals regardless of their 'North Korean dialect.' Furthermore, in lieu of the widespread prejudice that sees 'the welfare-receiving North Korean defector as social burden,' she reminds herself of becoming 'a needed person' who will 'contribute' to this nation. In short, the interviewee is promising her social contribution as payment for the legal rights bestowed upon her. This is an attempt to compensate for her membership in the South Korean nation-state that was not as 'naturally' acquired through blood and birthplace as it has been for others. Moreover, it also speaks of her strong desire to be recognized as having the necessary social values and not as a freeloader. By possessing the needed social values, she wishes to forge solidarity with this society. From what has been examined thus far, the life history of Ms. Yu Chimin shows active efforts to be 'assimilated' into the culture and order of South Korean society. This indicates the interviewee's distinct biographical practice aimed at winning herself the recognition of South Korean society as someone who has crossed the border in her teenage years. Moreover, it is an identity reconstruction process of someone who is trying to define herself as a citizen of Republic of Korea "no matter what anyone says."

3. "I am an internationally trained businessman." - Pak T'aesu²⁸

Considering that the above two cases showed the experiences of persons who – as non-party members – were committed to or lived their lives in North Korean society when being faced with the 'Arduous March' of the mid-1990s and subsequently crossed the border, the case of Mr. Pak T'aesu, who led a life as part of the high elite of North Korean society until he became subjected to a political purge in the mid-1990s that led him to flee to the South, serves as a case of maximum comparison. Based on his experience of working as an executive officer of an economic bureau, he spoke about various aspects of North Korean society in a logical and systematic fashion. Also, by speaking freely and frankly of his biographic experiences in both North and South, he provided a glimpse into the figure of a 'broad-minded and virile' North Korean economic bureaucrat.

1) *The Purge of an Overseas Trade Bureaucrat and Exile*

The interviewee was born in 1952 into a proletariat family in Chagang Island. In his 2008 interview, he described his early life as "never having enough to eat." After the early passing of his parents, the young interviewee led an orphan-like existence and graduated from middle school in 1969. For 10 years afterwards, he worked as an official of the Chosŏn Socialist Labor Youth Federation at a military supply plant. In 1979, when he was 27 years old, his loyalty as a worker to the plant was recognized, and he was admitted to the best university to study economics. In this way, he established the foundations to spend "the prime of his life" as a trade bureaucrat (Interview Transcript Pak T'aesu, 2008 I/4).

The interviewee first began working in overseas trade in 1986. Starting from his mid-thirties until he sought asylum in 2002, the subject visited numerous countries in a period of fifteen years. In particular, he witnessed the collapse of East European states and the opening and reforms in China.

²⁸ Two interviews with this interviewee took place between January and February of 2008. While interviewing him at his private tutorial school, a brief introduction to his wife took place as well.

Moreover, with his direct experience of Western capitalist societies, he came to see the crisis within the North Korean economy as well (Interview Transcript Pak T'aesu, 2008 II/22-23). During the interview, the interviewee described the inner conflict he felt while working as a North Korean economic bureaucrat engaging in overseas trade. He evaluated his inner turmoil as the status of a trader coming from "a wretched society." As a proletariat who ended up going to the very best school to become a trading elite, he felt 'wretched' in having to 'lie' to maintain his socialistic life. This visible gap between ideology and rules enforced in the public sphere and everyday life experiences in socialist systems has been pointed out as one of the factors that led to the inevitable collapse of the East European socialist system (Niethammer, et al. 1991). It can also be seen as the result of a gap between ideal and reality of socialist society, which allowed no open criticism of the system.

In the summer of 1996, the interviewee, who had been working as a North Korean economic representative in Poland since January of that year, was removed from his post and was ordered to two years of farm labor. He was found to be lacking enthusiasm in expressing his loyalty to the central party and, as a punishment, he was ordered to carry out a revolutionary project at a rural farm. The reason for this demotion seems to have come from efforts to prevent the defection of overseas workers by the party. When the discontinuation of rations made the failure of the North Korean system public in February of 1996, it appears the central power undertook efforts to stall the ideological deviation of overseas workers; one method to do so was to intensify 'ideological conflicts.' During his time at the farm, the interviewee and his family made a living by hard labor. In 1999, he was reinstated by the central apparatus, and in July 2000, he was appointed as the head of the overseas joint venture company for three years. However, in February 2002, he detected another possible purge. He took his wife and his youngest child with him to South Korea via Amsterdam. He turned his back on North Korean society, which had not only refused to recognize his social values but had also threatened his life. In search of a "place which is good merely by allowing him in" he came to South Korea.

2) *To Compete in the Capitalist Private Education Market*

After the re-education period at Hanawŏn, the family was given housing in Seoul. Soon afterwards, his wife began her training as an English teacher for 'Education.' The interviewee who had first hand knowledge of the market principles of capitalism, focused his attention on the South Korean private education market. As the daughter of an elite North Korean family, his wife was "educated in Switzerland where Kim Jeong Il's children studied, taught by American kids and also studied abroad" (Interview Transcript Pak T'aesu, 2008 II/17). After obtaining her private teaching certificate, she began working as a visiting private tutor. However, when the regional director of the institute in her area "refused to accept a teacher from North Korea," she was assigned to a branch far from her home. Moreover, her students' parents complained: "Are we so lacking that we have to be taught by a North Korean defector," and cancelled her classes. In effect, in these important social relationships, the interviewee's family faced situations in which they were not judged on their personalities but reduced to belonging to the socially devalued group of 'North Korean defectors.' However, with near native pronunciation and excellent teaching skills, the interviewee's wife began teaching the remaining students. In one year, she became one of the most sought after teachers at the institute. Possessing superior foreign language skills wanted by the Korean private education market, the interviewee's wife eventually received recognition as an individual with worthwhile social values.

Also, the interviewee earned a living by working at construction sites such as the Chŏnggye creek restoration project. According to the interviews, the interviewee's family did not use up all of the money they received from the government for settlement and living support. They pooled the money together and with extra wages earned by him and his wife, they saved as much as possible. In fact, they were so focused on this endeavor that in a matter of three years, the family was able to accumulate one hundred million Korean Won of start-up capital. This was the result of living according to 'the principle of maximum economic activities and minimum consumption.' Based on this, in the middle of 2006, the interviewee overcame the contempt and discrimination of his neighbors to open up a regional branch of the

said private tutorial institute. Also, in 2007, a year after the opening, his branch was selected as the best out of the 600 tutorial institutes in Korea. The interviewee, utilizing his biographic experience as an overseas trade official, now successfully transformed himself into a competent businessman in the South. Moreover, having witnessed the changes in East European socialism, he told of his plan to open up an “education business” in North Korea once the unification is about to happen. The interviewee and his family successfully competed in the South Korean private education market. With superior foreign language skills and business acumen, he and his family were able to establish an economic base and receive social recognition.

3) *The Loss of Social Prestige and Despair*

However, at the end of the second interview, the interviewee confessed recent bouts of feeling “despair.” Unlike his attitude in the previous interview, when he spoke of his life and thoughts without any hesitation, this time, he slowly unraveled the “unspeakable” and poured out his heart. According to the interviews, as a cost saving measure, instead of hiring a driver for the institute school bus, the interviewee had decided to drive the school bus himself. From his words, the ‘humiliation’ and ‘dismissal’ he suffered from children and their parents became apparent.

See, because it was shaking, the car, driving with the kids at night going to dark places, how could the car go? My heart was palpitating. Stopped the car for about four ~ five minutes, tears started to come down. Wow, this, I mean this, is the sin for deserting the Fatherland this great? That was when the thought came to my mind. No, I must endure all this in order to become successful, let’s clap my hands together ten times (...) honestly. I mean, wow ~ I can die like this. No, MORE THAN DEATH, I FEEL AS IF I AM IN DESPAIR, drowning in pain.

(Interview Transcript Pak T’aesu, 2008 II/33)

The above text shows how—despite having established an economic foundation in the South—the loss of ‘social prestige’ by ‘deserting the Fatherland’ makes his attribution of self-worth a struggle for the interviewee. The contempt and discrimination against North Korean defectors as shown by the children and their parents also added to this difficulty felt by the

interviewee. He experiences a sense of shame considering the difference between his past self "travelling the world" and his present self enduring the cutting remarks of "mothers and their kids." The biographic experiences of Mr. Pak T'aesu's examined thus far show the will and tension as well as the attempt to compensate for the loss of social prestige and recognition derived from political exile with economic 'supremacy.' In short, Mr. Pak T'aesu's internationally trained, outstanding economic activities are an important mode for carrying out 'struggles for recognition' by utilizing his biographical resources in capitalist South Korean society. The results of the case reconstruction illustrates the interviewee's action orientation as he asserts the 'superiority' of the successful businessman who manages to overcome the dismissal and discrimination against North Korean defectors through his everyday 'recognition struggles.' The 'superiority' of being a successful entrepreneur and 'the despair' felt from the loss of social prestige are the core dual aspects of the new identity he is constructing at the moment.

4. "I am 'a critical intellectual' who is in solidarity with North Korean residents." - Kim Chuhŭi

If Mr. Pak T'aesu constitutes a case of someone from the proletariat becoming high elite through college education, Ms. Kim Chuhŭi is a case of someone born one. This interviewee was born into 'an intellectual family' and was recognized for her literary talents. She provides a case of minimum comparison to Mr. Pak T'aesu.

1) The Political Banishment of a Poet of the Writers' Federation and Physical Abuse

Ms. Kim Chuhŭi was born in 1959 as the eldest daughter to a family of four sons and two daughters in P'yŏngyang.²⁹ Her father was a teacher who served as the vice-president of the Chosŏn-Soviet Union Literary Association of P'yŏngyang, and her mother studied in Japan. Examining the interview

²⁹ Interviews with Ms. Kim Chuhŭi took place twice, in May 2006 and August 2007. The case was reconstructed with interview materials as well as her autobiographical account (2005) and her MA thesis (2006) and other writings she contributed.

material, it seems that the interviewee nurtured her literary ambitions within such intellectual family atmosphere. In 1977, after graduating from high school, the interviewee worked at a factory for a while and later as a manuscript copier for the editing bureau of a publisher. At the same time, the interviewee studied under her brother, who worked as the senior translator of the P'yöngyang April 15th Creative Group, and in 1980, she published two poems in the 'P'yöngyang Newspaper' and received social recognition at the young age of 21 (Interview Transcript Kim Chuhüi, 2006 I/28-30). In 1991, she graduated from the Kim Hyöngjik Teacher's College Creative Writing Course and with a publication in *Chosön munhak*, the most prestigious literary journal in North Korea, she began her professional career as a poet.

When she reached her mid thirties, in 1994, the interviewee married a widower who was seventeen years older than her. Her husband's social standing as one of the first graduates of the Kim Ch'aek Industrial College in the physics department and as an official in the North Korean atomic industrial bureau, provided her with a stable living foundation and child-rearing experiences. As a result, the interviewee was able to lead an uninterrupted life of creative writing (Interview Transcript Kim Chuhüi, 2005: 65-68). However, three years after her marriage in 1997, the interviewee's family received orders to be deported from P'yöngyang to Chöngjin. When the ideological conflicts deepened due to the 'Arduous March', her stepson's 'bad behavior' became welcome fodder for the party apparatus, which was already critical of the interviewee for lacking enthusiasm in her praise of Kim Jeong Il. When one year of petitioning and pleas came to naught, the interviewee and her family boarded the train to Chöngjin in May 1998. To secure their livelihood amidst the food shortage, job loss and banishment to the countryside, the interviewee and her husband agreed to divorce. Afterwards, when desperately searching for employment, the interviewee came into full contact with the chronic shortage of supplies already underway in the rural areas as early as the late 1980s. She went around the outskirts of the Chöngjin area for two months in search of employment and came to see 'border- crossings' happening in public. With the encouragement of her cousin, in the early morning of July 11th, 1998, she crossed the border to not only alleviate her hunger but also to freely engage in her creative writing efforts.

After crossing by herself, the interviewee later risked two more crossings to bring her son. However, in China, she was sold into slavery many times. In her autobiographic account, the interviewee describes in graphic detail the horrendous sexual violence and threats to life that she suffered during this period. In January 1999, the interviewee, in clothing stained with blood and sweat and with her son in her arms, sought refuge inside a church. Under the protection of Korean missionaries in the Yanbian area, the interviewee went into hiding for ten months and on November 13, 1999, the interviewee arrived at Kimp'o Airport via the Mongolian border. Writing of her feelings at the time (*The autobiography of Kim Chuhŭi*, 2005: 295), she described herself as a woman who had been deserted by someone she had loved. In the book, she confesses how she was abandoned by the North Korean regime despite her avid courtship and devotion. Thrown into the rough seas of life, she reveals how she ended up coming all the way to 'the enemy state' of South Korea. Through this description, one can witness the strong resentment she felt towards the North Korean state that responded to her life-long devotion as an artist not with protection and love but with banishment from P'yŏngyang, deprivation of her livelihood, experiences of hunger, human trafficking, and sexual violence, eventually driving her into the enemy state of South Korea.

According to the results of the case reconstruction, it is not the interviewee's flight from North Korea that constitutes her biographical turning point. Instead, her fall from social grace and the multiple border-crossings (1998-1999) that were tempered with repeated experiences of hunger and violence were the factors that became the biographical turning point in her life.

2) *Reflection Not as a 'Defector' but as a Writer*

After her arrival in South Korea, the interviewee underwent several months of education on settlement and was assigned an apartment in the Ch'ungch'ŏng region in 2001. To continue her literary career, she applied to and was admitted into a Women's Studies program at a college in Seoul, and graduated in July 2006. During her graduate studies, she published an autobiographic account of her flight from North Korea and also came to see new sides to the black and white histories of North and South Korea that she had been taught before. Within her own biographical history, she faced the

task of having to newly reconfigure the South Korea her past self had known and the North Korea, now seen from within South Korea as the political ‘other.’ In a similar context, through the publication of her book, she presented a biographical perspective of “I, who had to go through unprecedented life experiences to reflect on both South and North and become a border-crosser” and illustrates her efforts to newly understand herself and the ‘generalized others’ mutually interacting with her. This also constitutes the interviewee’s new self-understanding. At the same time, in her MA theses written between 2005 and 2006, she projected and reflected on her self-image as a female poet in her analysis of the works of North Korean female poets.

However, despite these self-reflections, the interviewee often faced the reality of being defined only as ‘the North Korean defector.’ One specific case where she faced such problem took place at an academic conference (Interview Transcript Kim Chuhi, 2006: I/14-15). While preparing for a Women’s Studies event, she felt humiliated for being dismissed as a North Korean defector. In her interview, she told of how a ‘non-major’ in Women’s Studies, food nutrition major, was given an opportunity to present on an issue related to Women’s Studies while she was relegated to giving a presentation on her ‘defection.’ As she saw this unfolding before her eyes, the interviewee seems to have felt her academic knowledge and her life experiences being reduced to that of the ‘North Korean defector.’ It is quite possible that she, who had been treated as the best artist in North Korea, felt ‘humiliated’ at being dismissed as less than a student of food nutrition. Moreover, she came to realize how she was being defined only by her ‘act of escaping from North Korea’ within her peer group. The moral contents of any given society, that are based on such reduction and hierarchization of an individual’s sex, skin color, birth place, etc into distinct categories, rather than each and everyone’s ‘individuality’, provide a typical example of social exclusion and discrimination.

3) The Path Towards Forging Solidarity with North Koreans as an Intellectual

In 2003, the interviewee met her future husband who had also escaped from North Korea and was living in Japan working in mass media. Three years after a meeting by chance, in 2006, the two got married (Interview Transcript Kim Chuhüi, 2007 II/16). Moreover, in 2007, she became an editor of a magazine that is devoted to informing others on the life of North Koreans. Through

her husband, the interviewee came to hear the news that North Koreans were being sent to third countries. With her husband, she collected these news stories and decided to devote her life to editing them. In the very first issue of the magazine, the interviewee speaks of her life that had been “turned upside down.”

For the first time since coming to Korea, I came to reflect upon my identity. For the first few years, I thought if I studied hard and settled well, I would become Korean. What happened afterwards only reminded me of the fact that I was nothing other than a North Korean (...) It was the process where I came to realize how the historical destiny of the North Korean problem must be solved by North Koreans themselves. In the end, I gave up the dream of going to Harvard. I came to accept North Korea which I swore I will never look back at lest the grave dirt gets into my eyes, as all of my remaining future (...) The path of the poet – choosing the road of destiny pointed out by the heart.

(From magazine article, Kim Chuhüi, 2007: 9-10)

In the above paragraph, the interviewee deems her decision to embrace North Korea once again as “the path of the poet—choosing the road of destiny pointed out by the heart.” Also, she emphasizes that this choice came after long reflections on her life in Korea. According to the case analysis, the interviewee, through meeting her husband, came to see the North Korea she had left from a more social scientific perspective. The interviewee has come to ‘scientifically understand’ her political banishment and defection to be not of her fault for not adhering to the socialistic principles. Instead, she developed an understanding of how the structural incompetence of the North Korean regime had produced an “overall supply” crisis. By so doing, she was able to absolve herself of the guilt she had been harboring. Moreover, by identifying with the voice of North Korean residents who were suffering under the incompetence and corruption of the Kim Jeong Il regime, she discovered possibilities for forging solidarity with North Koreans despite herself being in the South.

The biographic experiences of Ms. Kim Chuhüi highlight the critical action orientation of someone who can politically belong to South Korean society and yet still go beyond the territorial borders to forge solidarity with North Koreans. This is an expression of the critical identity that has been

formed through the supra-national experiences of traversing the borders of ideologically hostile nation-states. From this perspective, the interviewee's struggle for recognition which is based on her 'criticism' transcends the sphere of action that is the modern nation-state.

5. Comparison of Cases and Characteristic Features

According to the results of the above biographical case reconstructions, the interviewees experienced the changes in North Korean society, which, following the famines of the mid-1990s, appeared as political and everyday tensions, then as an accelerating crisis and provided different biographical backgrounds for their flight from North Korea. With threats to their survival and fear of political retaliation hanging over their heads, these defectors came to South Korea through China and other third countries. In this relatively 'long process of defection,' the interviewees seem to have lost their identification with North Korea as a 'value community' (Honneth 1992: 221). To most of the interviewees, South Korea is the next-best place for obtaining a legal residence permit and securing the conditions for survival. At least until the early 2000s, only a small number of people crossed the North Korean border in the hope of reaching the South. Those who ended up in South Korea coming from China often did so in order to avoid complications arising from their uncertain status as illegal aliens, economic hardship and physical abuse.

In South Korea, defector-residents also experience various forms of exclusion and discrimination in their everyday life interactions with the hierarchical order of the 'generalized others.' With the traditional culture and values of North Korean defector-residents being socially devaluated as inferior, their pride as moral beings are violated and as result, they experience shame and humiliation. In the face of such 'withdrawal of recognition,' the interviewees utilize their biographic experiences as resources to produce action orientations ranging from 'devotion' and 'assimilation' to 'superiority and 'criticism.' This also constitutes the main characteristic of the process whereby the interviewees constructed new identities

When examining the characteristics of each case, Ms. Ko Sunja and Ms. Yu Chimin show a process in which non-party members of the North Korean state end up crossing the borders due to the economic crisis. Ms. Ko Sunja,

whose experience of physical abuse and the fear for her survival in China 'pushed her towards' South Korea, uses her biographic resource of 'devotion' to lead the North Korean defector support organization in the Republic of Korea which affords her 'recognition' as a citizen. In short, the biographical history of Ms. Ko Sunja shows an identity of a devoted individual constructed to secure social recognition across societies based on opposite political ideologies. In contrast, Ms. Yu Chimin, who crossed the border dreaming of a new future in her teen years, attempts to deflect social devaluation against North Korean defectors by actively acquiring the cultural code and resources of South Korean society. By showing herself as 'an individual who can assimilate' into the value system of South Korean society, she seeks recognition of her rights as citizen. From a cosmetic salesperson to a major in Chinese Studies, she defines herself as a citizen of the Republic of Korea. She also demands the hierarchical value system of South Korea to 'recognize' the culture and values of the North Korean residents as well.

Mr. Pak T'aesu and Ms. Kim Chuhüi, who are cases of maximum comparison to Ms. Ko Sunja and Ms. Yu Chimin, share a common history of undergoing a political purge by the North Korean regime. This specific instance of political repression became the catalyst for their defection to South Korea. Deprived of their social rights and with threats made against their lives, South Korea became the last resort to seek refuge against the apparent dangers they faced. From the stand-point of biographical history, the two cases show rapid political transformation from socialism to capitalism and vertical status change from social elite to that of social minority at the same time. As the son of a proletarian and with his long history of loyalty to the party, Mr. Pak T'aesu worked as an overseas trade bureaucrat from the mid-1980s until his defection in 2002. With his second political purge imminent, he sought asylum in South Korea, which 'legally accepted' him. Mr. Pak T'aesu, who previously mastered surplus accumulation of a capitalist society, employed his 'superior' economic skills and his wife's fluency in English as biographic resources to build entrepreneurial success. The economic success he is accumulating at the moment, however, cannot erase the deprivation of social prestige he experiences on a daily basis in the running of their business. The 'superiority' of the successful entrepreneur and 'despair' over the loss of social prestige forms the central duality constructing

his new identity. As for Ms. Kim Chuhüi, before coming to South Korea, she led a life of North Korean high elite who adhered to the rules and values of North Korean socialism as the absolute truth. However, after the political purge, her life had meant a rapid fall from social grace when she experienced divorce, malnutrition, sexual violence and even threats to her life. Whereas Mr. Pak T'aesu was loyal to the system despite being aware of the hypocrisy immanent, for Ms. Kim Chuhüi, despite her critical awareness as an artist, she had no opportunities to raise questions on the fundamental problems of the socialist system. In this regard, her relatively long 'self-reflection' which is continued through her graduate studies and her literary activities, can be understood as a process of change into a 'critical expert' trying to distance herself from the 'self-understanding' as a member of the North Korean high elite and critically reflecting on both North and South Korea.

Her 'criticism' of not only the North Korean regime but also of the South Korean social hierarchy and its actualization of capitalistic values is an important mode of constructing her identity at the moment. Also, her work as the editor of a magazine on North Korea shows her action orientation to become 'a citizen of the Republic of Korea' who can transcend political boundaries to establish solidarity with North Koreans.

When the individual identities above are examined in conjunction with the collective identity of the 'political regimes' of North and South, the interviewees all show their traversing of the binary logic of the 'North or South Korean state.' Specifically, in the case of Ms. Ko Sun Ja, she displays a dual identity of accepting both North and South Korea and devotes herself to this 'Korean Nation.' Ms. Yu Chimin in contrast, despite her emotional affinity to North Korea, by actively trying to become 'loyal' to the South, displays a more individualized trait. Mr. Pak T'aesu, on the other hand, desires to use his economic skills to establish ties to both North and South Korea. In other words, his case illustrates a perspective which, rather than being based on political convictions and aimed at becoming a member of the political communities of either the North or South, assesses North and South Korea from an understanding orientated towards his economic activities. For Ms. Kim Chuhüi, she seeks to approach North and South, not from the level of the nation-state but from the perspective of class or status. As such, Ms. Kim is a legal citizen of South Korea who tries to maintain a critical distance

to both North and South and yet establish solidarity with North Korean citizens at the same time as well.

The construction processes of the interviewees' socio-political identities examined here show the following commonalities. Firstly, in the life histories of the interviewees, North Korean society is no longer considered a subject that grants them legal rights, i.e. the impersonalized values derived from being members of society; nor does it afford them with social worth or extend solidarity. Yet, the North Korea they know still exists as a source of emotional affinity. Many interviewees do not shy away from providing material support to families and relatives left behind in North Korea. Direct and indirect communication and exchanges take place as well.

Secondly, the interviewees distance themselves from the quotidian values of South Korean society, based on their previous experiences in a socialist society. The distance maintained as North Koreans and their 'margins' are means of problematizing the 'denial of recognition' for North Koreans by South Korean society and also functions as the mode of affirming belief in oneself as a moral being. In other words, with the 'unfamiliar eyes' of 'the stranger' (*der Fremde*) (Schuetz 1972), these North Korean defectors are raising questions on the quotidian order of South Korean society. For example, their problematization of the capitalist order is not simply a complaint launched by individuals who had been inured to being 'dependent' on a (socialist) state, but that of 'new citizens' whose life experiences can throw light on the omniscient belief in the market. From this point of view, the social participation of North Korean defector-residents as 'new citizens' holds the potential to serve as a new source of critical energy within South Korean society.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the case studies examined here show the 'recognition struggles' North Korean defector-residents face in their daily experiences. The lack of recognition that these defectors encounter in relations to 'generalized others' act as a catalyst for their reconstruction of everyday life identities. In comparison to foreign migrant workers, North Korean defector-residents

have relatively easily gained the political right of being citizens of the Republic of Korea. Yet, at the same time, they are devalued as 'food shortage refugees' from 'an ideologically hostile state.' As a result, the assignment of self-respect and attribution of social worth to their own traditions of culture and values have been deferred at the moment. To transcend the limitations of legal nationality and secure their actual rights as citizens, the interviewees carry out various modes of social participation from 'devotion' and 'assimilation' to 'supremacy' and 'criticism.' This way, their identity reconstruction process shows the blurring of the binary politics of choosing between 'North or South Korea.'

Secondly, although many of these North Koreans moved to South Korea as the next-best option and despite engaging in complex processes of 'recognition struggles,' many of them do not wish to turn their lives back to the life before 'defection.' The case study of everyday 'recognition struggles' examined here hints at the new possibility of North Korean defectors, 'the strangers' who bring different biographical experiences, becoming 'the new citizens' of South Korean society. The various forms of 'distancing' based on the biographical experiences of North Korean defector-residents do not indicate their 'lack of adaptation' to the dominant value system in South Korean society, but rather imply the possibility of acting as a new critical power for South Korean civil society.

These results leave the following theoretical and methodological task for research on North Korean defectors. Firstly, they show the necessity for a research framework that can overcome the existing reliance on the 'adaptation' perspective and interpret North Korean defectors as active subjects of a multicultural civil society. The discussion on the 'struggle for recognition' by Honneth and Taylor provide a useful theoretical framework for this task. Second, despite its usefulness in provoking questions on identity, Honneth's notion of 'struggles for recognition' have been applied strictly within the confines of the modern nation-state. This brings about limitations for understanding North Korean defectors, whose lives as migrants and minorities in South Korean society have been initiated through acts of border crossing. Therefore, theoretical explorations that can adequately convey the multiple 'risks and chances' brought about by increased global mobility and the demands this mobility creates for individuals are warranted.

Thirdly, a more active use of qualitative methodologies is called for in the in-depth examination of the everyday lives of defectors. The limitations with quantifying migration status and adaptation process have been pointed out before. New theoretical experiments are needed whereby researchers can qualitatively transform these dynamic life experiences into new horizons of understanding.

Lastly, the case studies show the changes that have been taking place in the everyday life worlds of North Koreans residing near the borders since the early 2000s. They show an increase in migrants who cross the border in search of a better life more than those who do so as 'food refugees.' Since the 1990s, the transnational human network formed by North Korean defectors, aided by various information and media technologies have been increasingly blurring the political and cultural boundaries of the two states, which reminds of East Germany just before re-unification. What kind of social transformation—from the perspective of the individual's life world—the various tangible and intangible economic and cultural communications passing between South and North Korean society via third countries and transcending the political reality of Korea, where the National Security Law continues to exist, will trigger remains as an important research question for the future.

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