

***WHEN WILL THE 'ARDUOUS JOURNEY' END?:
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When will the ‘Arduous Journey’ End?: The Experience of North Korean Temporal Migrants in China and Australia

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The paper seeks to explore North Korean refugees’ migratory trajectories and the lived experience of each stage of transient/temporal living in China and Australia. Emerging studies on onward migration challenge the view that sees migration as a linear process involving the departure of national origin and the permanent settlement of a destination country. Rather the research on onward migration understands “migratory journeys are multiple, iterative and fragmented, involving steps and stages,” (Della Puppa & King 2018: 14). This paper looks at how transient mobilities of North Korean refugees in the transnational migration journey construct migrant experiences in settled countries. By addressing key pull and push factors for North Korean defectors in each destination, coming to China and Australia and exploring various aspects of their living and working conditions and social networks, the paper gives insight into the unique experience of North Korean refugees as onward, often transient migrants, and addresses the problems that the refugees confront. It then proposes some practical programs and internationally appropriate policies that would facilitate the delivery of assistance to this community. This study is a valuable contribution to the emerging area of research on onward migration and temporary migration by offering an empirical case study of North Korean refugees.

Keywords: North Korea, North Korean refugees, serial refugee claims, onward migration, temporal migration, refugee policy, settlement policy.

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Introduction

North Koreans are on the move. This emerging trend has attracted both attention from the South Korean government and international community. Many South Korean media have reported this move as an exodus of North Korean refugees and ungrateful North Koreans who betrayed the hospitality of fellow South Korean citizens. Since the mid-1990s when North Korea was severely hit by famine and economic crisis, a growing number of North Koreans have flocked to South Korea, most coming via China, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. To support these North Koreans, South Korea's central and local governments enacted the North Korean refugee law in 1997 and implemented a series of programs to fund everything from housing and education to job training for the North Korean refugees.

Despite these resettlement services, some North Korean defectors began to seek another asylum in foreign countries. In particular, since the passage of the US North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) in 2004, an increasing number of North Korean defectors living in South Korea have been seeking refugee status in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe. Some 2000 to 3000 are estimated to live in the UK, the US, Australia and EU countries. Some 1,000 North Koreans have applied for asylum in the UK alone since 2004, 70 per cent of them presumably holding South Korean citizenship (*Chosunilbo*, 15 July, 2011). Some North Koreans even seem to seek serial asylum. For example, up to 40 per cent of North Koreans in Canada are reported to be re-migrants from the UK (Kim, 2013). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s *Global Trends 2011 report*, North Korean defectors who were given refugee status around the world in 2011 (not including South Korea and China) amounted to 1,052, with most migrating to the United Kingdom (603), then Germany (193), Canada (64), Belgium (31), Australia (29) and the United States (25). Since 2006, Australia has become one of the key destinations for North Korean defectors, along with the UK, Canada, the US and Norway.

This paper approaches this mobility of North Korean refugees from a growing trend of onward migration and temporary migration. These days migration journey has become "multiple, iterative and

fragmented” (Della Puppa & King 2018: 14) and the nature of migration has become more temporal and not a one-directional flow, including one journey from a country of origin to permanent settlement in a chosen country. This paper aims to explore North Koreans’ migration trajectories from North Korea through China and South Korea to Australia.

It is not easy to estimate how many North Korean defectors live in Australia. Data from the Refugee Council of Australia (see Table 1) show that 70 North Korean defectors were granted refugee settlement visas to Australia between 2000 and 2009. However, a considerable number of North Korean defectors are currently residing in Australia illegally whilst hiding from authorities after failing to obtain a refugee protection visa. Some of them face deportation to South Korea. One media report indicates that a total of 70 North Korean asylum seekers are currently in this situation in Australia (Stewart 2012). This paper seeks to explore this tiny group of North Koreans staying in Australia as secondary or multiple asylum seekers or temporary migrants on various visa schemes.

Table 1: Refugee Settlement by the Country of Origin (South and North Korea), 2000-2009

Country of Origin	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Total
North Korea	-	-	-	1	-	-	26	-	23	20	70
South Korea	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1

Source: Refugee Council of Australia (2011)

Empirical evidence for this paper draws on studies of North Korean defectors in China, South Korea and elsewhere, media reports, non-participant observation, interviews with four North Koreans in northeast China¹ in February 2013, and semi-structured interviews with eleven North Korean defectors and four support workers in Sydney in

¹ To protect privacy and confidentiality, the details of interviews conducted in China are not included in the paper. Interviews with North Koreans in China were rather used for supplementary data.

April 2012 and April 2013. The field trip to Jilin province, Northeast of China was chosen to 'feel' and see the escaping trajectories from North Korea. China, in particular, bordering provinces and cities, like Jilin and Dandong, was the route when *North Korean* defectors flee from North Korea. *Jilin* province alone shares a 200 kilometre border with *North Korea* and most of it is split by the narrow Tumen River, which is shallow enough to wade across in summer or walk on when frozen in winter.

To better understand the defection journey North Koreans have taken and their lives as temporal/transient migrants in China, the researcher visited bordering villages and places frequented by North Koreans, such as an ethnic Korean church, markets, shopping centres and restaurants run by North Koreans. In addition, the researcher met church missionaries, international NGO workers who had been working with North Koreans and people engaged in business-related activities with North Korea.

In Australia, due to the small number of North Koreans living here, recruiting North Korean refugees and asylum seekers was challenging. Working to approach potential interview participants, the researcher contacted migration agents, organisations (Korean community local churches in Sydney, Korean community organisations and Asylum Seekers Centre) that are understood to have frequent contacts with North Korean refugees. Convenience and snowball techniques were used for the recruitment. As a result, between April 2012 to April 2013 eleven North Korean defectors were met, all of whom were based in Sydney at the time of the interviews, which is often the gateway for Koreans to enter Australia. All interviews were conducted in Korean in places, at times, and in locations convenient to participants for two to three hours, and were recorded with participants' consent. Interview questions included defection and migration process, the motivations behind their decision to leave North Korea and again South Korea, why Australia was chosen, and the experiences of living in China and Australia (education, housing, social services and other social activities).

North Korean in China, Transients or Economic Migrants

Most North Koreans who flee their home country head north for China. Estimates of the number of North Korean refugees residing in China are unhelpfully broad, and range from 60,000 to 300,000. It is believed that since famine struck in the mid-1990s, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have crossed the Tumen River into Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture in the northeast of China. They sought temporary employment or emergency relief from relatives in China and often returned to North Korea with cash and goods to ensure the survival of their families (Charny 2004: 77). North Koreans caught making unauthorised movement across the border with China usually face harsh punishment, the severity of which depends on authorities' assessment of intent. Temporarily travelling for trade in China is considered less serious, but those whom authorities believe to be en-route to South Korea are likely to face arbitrary detention, torture and forced labour. The severity of the punishment facing repatriated North Koreans cannot be underestimated and has been reported on extensively. Nevertheless, those that manage to live in China have no legal rights, are not entitled to any government assistance, and live under constant fear of arrest and deportation. The severity of human rights abuses in North Korea itself notwithstanding, the plight of this often clandestine community in China and elsewhere, like Australia, deserves wider international attention.

Although a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol, China does not recognise North Korean defectors as refugees, and instead considers them to be illegal migrants who cross the border for economic reasons. Indeed, China has no refugee adjudication process to determine refugee status and generally provides limited or no access to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assess the status of North Koreans crossing the border. Therefore, it has not been possible to ascertain how many North Koreans are seeking asylum in China because of a well-founded fear of political or other persecution.

China is concerned about the impact of potential large-scale outflows from North Korea on North Korea's stability (Cohen 2012)². China also has sovereign treaties with the DPRK, including agreements from the early 1960s, and more recently one concluded in 1986, obliging it to deport illegal migrants and criminals seeking to cross the border from North Korea (Charny 2004: 81). Since the mid-1990s, China has repatriated tens of thousands of North Koreans, despite requests from human rights groups to acknowledge them as refugees. North Koreans in China have no legal rights, are not entitled to any government assistance, and live under constant fear of arrest and deportation.

Most North Koreans staying in China are seen as temporal/transient migrants no matter whether they come to work with legal permit (as a factory worker) or they are staying temporarily to go to South Korea or another country. To flee from North Korea some North Koreans even volunteer to be trafficked or indentured. Those transients who prepare for asylum seeking to another country live under constant fear of arrest and deportation. Compulsory repatriation to North Korea entails severe punishment, making defectors cling to whatever harsh alternatives they have. To survive in China and/or to avoid Chinese authorities, most seek assistance from the Korean Chinese community, South Korean church networks and humanitarian NGOs. Their supports are also critical for the asylum seeking process, such as traveling to third countries including Thailand, Vietnam, Mongolia and Laos, in an attempt to enter South Korean diplomatic posts in order to apply for asylum in South Korea. Crossing these other borders often requires hiring assistance from brokers.

Despite attempts by both Chinese and North Korean authorities to tighten security along the border and North Korea's intensification of the crackdown on attempted defections, North Koreans have been willing to take the risk for a range of reasons. A study based on

² In December 2017, there were several media reports indicating that China is quietly building a network of refugee camps along its border with North Korea as it prepares for the human exodus in case of an internal conflict or the collapse of Kim Jong-un's regime.

interviews with 75 North Koreans in 2003 and 2004 found that North Koreans left their country for various reasons, including food deprivation following the collapse of the public food distribution system, loss of employment as state enterprises ceased to function, the death of family members in the famine, and health problems (personally, or of a family member) which led individuals to seek money for medicine in China (Refugees International 2005). Another study found that some North Koreans left their country simply in pursuit of a better life (Lee, 2006). Among the four interviewed in China for the current research, three came to China to earn money, one to seek help from relatives living in China, and one female in her mid-fifties was trying to make money for her daughter's upcoming wedding through labour work, such as a kitchen hand and a housemaid. One female participant in her late sixties worked as a housemaid and one male in his mid-sixties worked as a security guard for a construction site in a remote and isolated area. Both said that they worked hard for their families in North Korea who were in a desperate situation and in need of urgent financial help.

Both the Refugees International (2005) report and Chang, Haggard and Noland's (2006) survey indicated that the majority of the North Koreans coming to China in the mid-2000s were from North Hamgyong province. This province borders China and is one of the poorest provinces in the country. It was hit hardest by the famine and food shortages of the 1990s (Smith 2002; Haggard and Noland 2005, 2007). It has also been argued that both North and South Hamgyong provinces were "deliberately cut off from national and international food assistance during the famine as part of a 'triage' strategy to husband scarce food resources" (Charney 2004: 80). The support and protection provided by the Korean communities thriving in the three northeastern provinces of China (Jilin, Heilongjiang and Liaoning) is one of the pull factors that have encouraged North Koreans to cross the border as a viable avenue for survival (Lee 2006).

No matter what reasons they come to China, their experience as transient/temporal, often illegal, migrants is far from what they have expected when they decided to escape extreme circumstances at home. Several research reports on North Korean defectors in China highlight that they continue to experience suffering and deprivation in China

(Chang, Haggard & Noland 2006; Charny 2004; Lee 2006; Lee 2009). The North Koreans in China struggle to meet their basic needs (Refugees International 2005) and lack employment opportunities in addition to fearing arrest. They experience low levels of employment due to fear of detection, the lack of papers such as a “hukou” (residence permit) or a “shenfenzheng” (ID card), or lack of skills, including language skills. In Chang’s (2006) survey, only 22 percent of those interviewed were formally employed. Most work in the informal economy as farm workers at orchards or at sheep farms in remote areas; kitchen hands at restaurants; housemaids; low-wage nurses, and as security guards (Lee, 2006). These uncertain circumstances of being an illegal/ temporal migrant take a significant toll on individuals’ emotional and psychological wellbeing as well as physical wellbeing. North Korean refugees in China often suffer from anxiety and depression associated with the uncertainty of their circumstances, as well as the loss associated with their severed ties with North Korea (Chang, Haggard & Noland 2006). Two participants for the research were in a critical situation, one male participant had serious eye problems, probably due to malnutrition for a long period of time. Another female in her late sixties required medical treatment. At her age, 24 hour a day duties as a housemaid/nanny might be too difficult to endure for her fragile, sick body. Due to their 'overstay' visa status, they were not able to receive medical treatment urgently required.

Those North Koreans living in China receive help mostly from the ethnic Korean community in China. Some 88 percent of Chang’s (2006) interviewees reported receiving help from Korean Chinese and three-quarters reported living with Korean Chinese. The Korean communities in China have a very strong “intra-ethnic solidarity” (Charny 2004: 81), and many of them feel a deep personal indebtedness to their North Korean relatives and friends who provided them with considerable support and assistance during the difficult period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Consequently, the Korean ethnic community, individually and at regional levels, have extended significant support and protection for North Korean escapees, particularly in the early phase of the food shortages (Lee 2006). In more recent times this goodwill has been tested. Some North Korean defectors have allegedly been involved in crimes including robbery,

murder, and human trafficking. Providing assistance has also become more risky. Since the early 2000s Chinese authorities have tightened up policies toward North Korean defectors, making it very difficult for the Korean communities in China to extend protection to the North Korean escapees (Lee 2006).

It is widely known that many individual Christian churches or church groups have been covertly involved in the protection and support of North Korean defectors in China. Most of these groups provide basic support, such as food, shelter and clothing, but some extend to providing physical protection from arrest and deportation. In special cases, some South Korean organisations arrange transit to South Korea (Lee 2006). It is not surprising to find that five percent of the participants in Chang's survey responded that they lived with missionaries/Christian workers (Chang, Haggard & Noland 2006). One male interviewee also received some assistance from a church minister and Christian workers.

The risks for North Korean women in China are particularly high (Lee 2009). By the mid-1990s, more North Korean men had fled to China than women. However, recently, more and more North Korean women have crossed the border. They are in serious danger of being trafficked for prostitution, forced labour and forced marriage.³ According to the *2012 Trafficking in Persons Report* (US Department of State 2012), there are thousands of undocumented North Koreans in northeast China, and about 70 percent of them are women. Female defectors are easily exposed to sexual violence and forced marriage to meet the demand caused by China's gender imbalance. According to the CEO of the Seoul-based human rights group Helping Hands Korea, Tim Peters, "[S]eventy to 90 percent of North Korean women in China fall into trafficking" (cited in Strother 2012).

A growing number of young North Korean women, mostly under the age of 25, are also lured to cross the border by brokers and peer North Koreans who make false promises of what is described to them as "computer-related" jobs in China. Instead, it has been reported

³ There are some cases that women voluntarily take these risks as a survival strategy for them and their families, with many remitting money to relatives that remain in North Korea.

that they are forced to work for online sex sites and even work in voice phishing (KINU 2011)⁴. The story of Choe, cited in the *Chosun Ilbo* below, illustrates the typical experiences of young North Korean women in China:

One woman identified only by her surname Choe (25) was arrested along with a Chinese national also identified only by his family name Shi, reports said. She was quoted as saying she lived a "rough life" after being targeted by human traffickers. Choe said she crossed the border into China in 2007 at the age of 19 after finishing high school in order to make money for her family. But instead of finding a job in China, she was sold to a mentally disabled man in Heilongjiang Province. She realized she was a victim of human trafficking, but her inability to communicate in Chinese made it impossible for her to escape. A few months later, she was sold to another Chinese man and had his child. Choe met Shi early last year after he was released from prison after serving time for human trafficking and helped him recruit other North Koreans for their human trafficking ring, Chinese police said. They lured 20 North Korean women between in their 20s to 40s to China. The gang were paid 10,000-15,000 yuan per woman, and accomplices in North Korea 3,000-5,000 yuan. Before selling the women, they confined the women in a room where they were forced to perform sexual acts on the Internet. Chinese media said nine North Korean women were confined in three rooms when police raided their quarters (*Chosunilbo*, 17 January, 2013).

Another distressing issue is the increasing number of children born to North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers. It is estimated that there are between 15,000 and 50,000 such children (KINU 2010). The National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK) estimates that there are some 10,000 children under the age of 19, born in China to

⁴ In voice phishing, a caller will imitate a bank, police officer, or other official who needs to find out someone's bank account information to trick the target into giving them money.

North Korean mothers, based on the estimates by South Korean NGOs and researchers at Johns Hopkins University. Some NGO groups working with North Korean defectors from China estimate that there are as many as 50,000 stateless orphans. They have been deprived of formal education, medical services and other social support. According to a NHRCK report, based on interviews with 100 children born to defecting North Korean mothers in 14 regions in China's Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Shandong provinces in 2012, only 21 of the children lived with their North Korean birth mother, and 20 lived with their father only. Another 39 were looked after by grandparents or relatives, and 20 lived in shelters run by evangelical missionaries. The NHRCK report has found that the main reason these children are abandoned is because China deported the mothers back to North Korea, accounting for 36 percent. Another 31 percent said the family broke down when the mother left the family, mostly by going to South Korea. To register the child, the father is required to prove that the mother has been deported back to North Korea. Another reported reason for abandonment was that the Chinese fathers did not have the money to rear the child (NHRCK 2012). There is a clear need for the international community to recognise the plight of these North Korean defectors, including trafficked women and children in China and to develop appropriate policies and programs. Not all North Koreans wish to leave China because they want to continue to live nearby their families and make contact with their families. Some decide to leave China for South Korea or another country.

Mobility of North Korean Refugees from South Korea to Australia: Asylum Seekers and Onward Migrants

According to the interviewees and data from the Refugee Council of Australia (Table 1), North Koreans began coming to Australia in the mid-2000s. The Refugee Council of Australia data indicate that in 2006, 26 North Koreans were granted a refugee protection visa. This might trigger the interest of North Korean refugees in South Korea with respect to onward migration to Australia. The interviewees for this research seemed to agree that more North Koreans came to Australia in

late 2007 and 2008. One man who came here in November 2007 claimed that he was the first North Korean defector in Australia. Another female participant, who had been living in Sydney since June 2008, suggested that she was the first. The participants estimated that there were between 60 and 70 North Koreans living in Sydney in 2011. After the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) began to crack down on illegal or overstaying North Korean defectors in January and February 2012, that number has fallen to approximately forty. With the crackdown by immigration officers and the slim possibility of securing a Protection Visa, more North Koreans are likely to return to South Korea. At the time of writing, five out of the eleven interviewed for this study have already left Australia for South Korea.

North Koreans interviewed for this research chose to come to Australia with a hope of obtaining a permanent refugee visa. Five said that they falsely claimed that they came to Australia directly from China, hiding the fact they had already been settled in South Korea and granted South Korean citizenship. Two came to Australia directly from China with fabricated documents. Six failed to obtain a Protection Visa and three were living on temporary visas while exploring other ways of securing permanent residency. Two sought to marry Australian citizens and two secured student visas. Only one participant came to Australia on a South Korean working holiday visa exploring the possibility of permanent settlement. Two of the participants came to Australia after their refugee claims in the UK had failed. The migratory journey for these two involved many locations – China to South Korea, South Korea to UK, UK to South Korea and South Korea to Australia. Other than the two, the migration trajectories involve journey from North Korea to China, from China to South Korea (often via a very short stay in a third country) and from South Korea to Australia. As mentioned earlier, if the asylum seeking has failed, most North Koreans in Australia return to South Korea and/ or they are likely to plan to move to another country. Their migration journey has been a circular, fragmented and ruptured one, made of a series of temporal stays in different locations.

Under Australian law, North Korean asylum seekers are considered to be dual citizens of both North and South Korea and are typically deported to South Korea within 14 days (Stewart 2012). As

many as 80 North Korean asylum seekers were thrown into this situation in 2011, when the High Court said refugees cannot stay here if they are entitled to protection in a third country (Piotrowski 2013a). It appears that some Chinese citizens of Korean descent pretend to be North Korean defectors in order to acquire refugee status in Australia, the UK and other EU countries. These ethnic Koreans, often illegal immigrants from China, study North Korean history, songs, geography, and its political system. In some cases, they even present North Korean notes, birth certificates, IDs, and other official documents. Sometimes, even legitimate North Koreans fail to prove their nationality, finding that North Korean bank notes or Kim Il Sung badges are not valid evidence of their nationality. Indeed, this kind of North Korean 'merchandise' can be purchased online (Choi 2011). One female participant suggested that not a single genuine North Korean defector has been granted a Refugee Protection Visa in Australia, and that all of those who had received a visa were ethnic Koreans from China.

Some of the interviewees were reluctant to tell their true stories. Some implied that to get refugee status they had to employ unlawful methods. For example, one male participant who came to Australia directly from China in November 2007, described how he came to Australia with a broker's help. His story was remarkably similar to that reported in a story that appeared in *The Australian* about a North Korean refugee who came to Australia in March 2011 and failed to be granted a Protection Visa by the Australian Department of Immigration.

Growing up in North Korea, Mr Jeong had never heard of Australia. He didn't even know it was a country. But in one of the towns along the Chinese border where many Koreans lived, he heard Australia was a place he could go, live in peace, and make money working as a welder. Mr Jeong made friends with a wealthy local businessman who ran a big supermarket and was involved in the people smuggling trade. They purchased a spot for him on a Chinese tour group's trip to Australia, buying a man's place, passport (which they got doctored) and all. Mr Jeong ditched the tour group when he got here, and on his second day in Sydney, he headed to the Department of Immigration, near the city's Central Station transport hub. He

approached the reception desk and cried: "North Korea! North Korea! North Korea!", as he had been told to say by the people smuggler. Officials granted Mr Jeong a bridging visa, which is a placeholder accreditation that allows people to stay in Australia while Immigration decides on their future. He did it rough, living in a Sydney hostel, even working as a welder in Horsley Park, in the city's far south-west. But in November 2011 he received a letter which said his application for a refugee protection visa had been rejected (Piotrowski 2013b).

All participants except one said that they obtained information about seeking refugee status from friends and acquaintances, and that there were no professional brokers involved. However, as the above newspaper implies, there are brokers in China and South Korea who offer information and resources and help with refugee applications. Most of the participants had detailed knowledge of the refugee support programs of Australia and other countries, including the UK, the US, various EU countries and Canada. Through their onward migration, they seem to have accumulated 'migratory knowledge' (Ramos 2017) so that they are able to make more informed decisions about their onward mobility.

Motivation to Live in Australia and North Koreans' Experience of Australian Life

Given their relatively recent and limited numbers, very little is known about why North Koreans come to Australia or what it is like for North Korean defectors to live and work in Australia. This section discusses some of the key pull and push factors for North Korean defectors coming to Australia and explores various aspects of their living and working conditions, including how they use (or fail to access) various social networks. Based on the interviews, reasons for leaving South Korea for Australia include access to education in English; a more relaxed education system; better social safety nets and the advanced welfare system (education and health); the chance to live in a cleaner natural environment and more broadly the hope that Australia could

deliver them a better life. It appears that many of the pull factors that attract North Koreans are applicable to many onward migrants moving to Australia. There is, however, one distinctive reason, which is to live far away from North Korea for the safety of their family members who are still living in North Korea and may have had additional difficulty, such as punishment and more close surveillance by authorities, due to their defection to South Korea.

There are a range of push factors. Interviews with the defectors also reveal that they encountered a wide range of social and financial problems in South Korea. Cases of depression, psychological distress and family breakdown are disproportionately high among the North Korean refugee population (Haggard & Noland 2011; Jeong 2009; Yi et al. 2007, 2009). These problems may arise both from extensive periods of time spent hiding in unstable, dangerous conditions in China, and difficulty adapting to life in South Korea.

All interviewees expressed their desire to raise their children without the stigma of being North Korean. Prejudice and discrimination among South Koreans was another push factor despite their common ethnicity. According to a recent report published by the National Human Rights Commission, South Korea (2016), most North Koreans living in South Korea hide their North Korean background to avoid discrimination. Two interviewees who were working as welders in Australia mentioned that in South Korea they pretended they were from Gangwondo in South Korea [its accent and dialect are similar to a North Korean accent] to avoid discrimination and prejudice against them. The same report indicated that North Korean refugees in South Korea are reluctant to reveal their identity and mingle with South Koreans in their local community and workplaces because of the attitude of South Koreans towards them. Prejudice and discrimination against North Koreans have affected the overall life of North Koreans in South Korea, including their employment. A female interviewee in her mid-thirties who came to Australia in 2008 said:

I would like to get rid of my North Korean identity. In South Korea, when I look for a job, my accent and [slightly different] use of the Korean language were

barriers to getting employed. I didn't like the thought of my children suffering due to their 'North Korean tag'.

Most interviewees also reported that they struggled financially in South Korea. This is in line with the findings of other studies. According to a survey of 1,785 North Korean refugees resettled in South Korea, in 2014, only 53.1 percent were employed and that 19.8 percent were employed as casuals (Korea Hana Foundation 2014). Both of these statistics indicated a worse situation for North Koreans than the general population, with South Korea's total employment rate at 60.8 percent, and its casual employee rate at 6.1 percent. They earn less than their South Korean counterparts, earning on average KRW1.47 million per month, compared to the national average of KRW2.23 million (AUD\$1, approximately KRW 840).

As discussed, there are a multiplicity of interlocking motivations behind onward migration and secondary asylum seeking. Despite these expectations of a better life in Australia, their "new" life has its challenges. Their temporal often undefined legal status is the main constraint in Australian life. Some lived in fear of arrest and deportation because of 'overstay'. One male participant in his mid-thirties came to Australia in November 2010 and applied for a refugee protection visa with his wife and two children. His application was declined and his family had already left for South Korea, but he remained in Sydney while working as a cleaner. He told the researcher that he could not visit a doctor even when he was sick because of his visa status and due to his ill health and high costs of living, he could hardly send money to his family in South Korea nowadays. Later he was caught by the immigration police and finally deported to South Korea. A couple came to Australia in June 2008 and gave birth to two children aged two and four years old in Australia. At the time of the interview in 2012, and unlike their expectation, their refugee applications were rejected. Their main concern was their children's education. They could not send their children to childcare or kindergarten. The 37 year-old wife and mother told of her family's desperate situation:

While waiting for the outcomes of our applications for the protection visa, we hoped that we could finally live in a country

without discrimination, and that we didn't have to wander again in pursuit of a better life. We felt happy and secure. In particular, given that I gave birth to two children in Australia, I strongly believed that the Australian government would not send us back to South Korea, and that they would certainly grant us a protection visa. We studied English very hard. After being rejected, I was very stressed out; 'What should I do?' I thought, and, 'Where should I go from here?' I am most concerned about my children's future. In this situation where we are staying on temporary visa in Australia, we can't send our children to school. ...Medical costs are another problem. My second child didn't get vaccinated because we didn't have AUD \$180. We could barely afford milk and nappies... I hope some charity organisations can support us, who are in a desperate need.

Most North Korean defectors interviewed suffer financial difficulties and experience professional devaluation and deskilling due to their language barrier as well as their temporal status. While their refugee protection applications are being processed, they are normally entitled to social welfare support, health care and education. However, once their applications are declined they can no longer access these services and instead they must support themselves and their families, often by doing casual and labour intensive work. Their lack of English competency has limited their employment opportunities. The majority of the North Korean defectors interviewed were working in informal sectors, such as cleaning, painting, shop-keeping and tiling, mostly in Australian-Korean owned small businesses. Some said that they have never done this menial work either in South Korea or North Korea. Their jobs were mostly casual, precarious and cash-in-hand. They typically worked 50-70 hours per week. This type of work does not require any legal documents or English language ability. A male painter in the early fifties said, "Communication is a big problem. For example, now I have become very good at painting, I could have started my own business, but my English has prevented me from proceeding with this plan. I am just a casual labourer".

Most of those interviewed lived in Korean ethnic enclaves with a high concentration of Koreans near railway stations, such as the Sydney suburbs of Strathfield and Lidcombe, where many Korean businesses and shops are located. One interviewee mentioned that “although we live in Australia geographically, we still live in South Korea”. This has also led to limited social interaction with ‘mainstream’ Australians. They mostly spent time with other North Koreans, Chinese Koreans and Korean Australians. Some even said that they were very socially isolated from so-called mainstream Australian society. The high living expenses and unexpected poor quality and expensive housing were other disappointments to North Korean refugees living in Sydney. One female interviewee in her early thirties who came to Australia in May 2011 with her daughter commented on her frustration of the quality of housing:

As you know, in Korea I owned my unit, although that was provided by the Korean government. The unit was clean and its internal layout was convenient to live in. In Australia, the places I have lived were dirty, cold, no central heating system and often very shabby.

All interviewees lived in shared units with other people, usually other North Korean defectors and Chinese Koreans or in a boarding house, often run by a North Korean defector. As renting an entire house or unit was well beyond their means, these might be the only options for temporal, often illegal migrants. For example, the weekly rent for a two bedroom unit in Strathfield was approximately between AUD \$500 to \$600 at the time of the interviews. Two of the homes visited showed the extent of their poor living conditions and their liminal status of being unsettled and ready to depart at any time. One place was a tiny unit inside a small commercial building near a railway station. The only furniture the owner had was a mattress to sleep on. Another house was very run-down, and there was little furniture. To earn extra income while raising her two children, the female defector rented the house at a cheaper rate from her church member and used to run a boarding house for fellow North Korean refugees. She mentioned that from 2012 many North Korean defectors began to return to South Korea after their

refugee applications were declined and that she was going to close down the boarding house and move to a smaller unit to save money.

Ironically, North Korean refugees living in Australia have experienced downward mobility, unlike their expectation of social-economic upward mobility. They even remain in lower-status/unskilled jobs. Some interviewees said that their lives as precarious labourers in Australia were even worse than their lives in North Korea, let alone their lives in South Korea. The male interviewee in his thirties who worked as a cleaner said that in South Korea, “I felt like I almost reached the middle class, as my income was four to five million won [approximately AUD 5000 to 6000] in a month. I had my own house, although that was offered to me by the government. My family and I saved enough money to buy the most luxurious car in our neighbourhood, so that my South Korean neighbours would not look down upon us.” Another male interviewee in his fifties also lamented:

My life [in Australia] is definitely worse than the life I lived in North Korea. I worked for a big company in the North. Once I was jailed for being involved in illegal activities in the North [he didn't reveal the nature of the activities to the researcher]. In the North, education and health care is free. I couldn't imagine that my life in Australia ended up working as a *Nogada* [casual labour] living hand to mouth.

Some were very frustrated by the poor quality of life, including the speed of internet in Australia compared to the advanced information technology in South Korea. A 27 year-old male interviewee who came to Australia in February 2012 and worked at a farm and as a shop assistant told of his disappointment about living in Australia. He paid AUD 125 a week for a shared room with three other people and often had AUD 3 lunches at McDonald's to cope with the high living expenses in Sydney:

I would like to say to those who plan to go overseas, don't go overseas with false expectations. Having spent some time in Australia, I realised that living in Korea is more comfortable for Koreans [including North Koreans]...I didn't know that [South]

Korea is such a developed country to live in. For young people like me, [South] Korea is the best place to live in.

It is also noteworthy that most interviewees felt closer to South Korea than North Korea or Australia, and most of them are very proud of being Korean in Australia given the well-recognised South Korean companies like Samsung, Hyundai, LG and Kia. Also, South Korean culture, in particular, pop culture, has attracted more attention from the Australian media and general public in Australia in recent years. One female interviewee remarked that when she watched an SBS (Special Broadcast Services) program about K-Pop songs every week, she felt very proud of being Korean. Their experiences in Australia have helped them evaluate the South Korean government's settlement support, and South Korea in general, in an objective and positive way. In particular, given that they were living in a shared unit or a boarding house, most of the interviewed considered the housing support from the South Korean government more generous than ones in other countries. It is evident that they have not decided to leave South Korea because of their dissatisfaction with South Korean settlement services.

Most of the North Koreans were in need of legal, financial and emotional support. However, there are no formal support services in place in Australia. A staff member from the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) confirmed that a few North Korean defectors have contacted the ASC for legal support and English learning. ASC provides a range of services, including legal advice, English classes, an employment program, health care support and a leisure program. The defectors gained informal support mostly from local churches in the Korean community. Local churches offer a range of support services including settlement, employment, visa application guidance, and tutoring and study advice for North Korean children. As churches have played a critical role in the defection process from North Korea to South Korea and in China, it seems that the local Korean church community has generously supported North Koreans, as demonstrated in an interview with a male in his fifties:

The church I have been attending now gave our family a car so that I could drive to work. I couldn't get a job because driving a

car is essential for working as a painter. One day before Christmas Day last year, I didn't get to work because I didn't have a car. ... A church deacon gave a car to my wife. I was astounded by their generosity. Although it was a very old second-hand car, it wasn't something that could be given away so easily.

Other than local churches and fellow Christians, North Korea related community groups and people have given their generous support for North Koreans who share the same hometown with the groups. In Australia there are several associations consisting of those who were born, or had parents born in North Korea. They provide support for settlement, employment and scholarships for defectors and the children of defectors. Migration agents, migration lawyers and professional interpreters and translators also have been involved in support services for defectors. Ironically, North Koreans have left South Korea to erase the North Korean tag, however, to gain support from the Korean community and other groups, they need to stick to the North Korean identity.

Despite these challenges and frustrations in Australia and more positive evaluation of South Korea, all interviewed for this research wanted to stay in Australia for a while or for good. Some North Koreans explored other options for getting permanent residency - by marrying Australians, being enrolled in a university or college, or waiting for their children who were born in Australia to turn 10 years old. Once 10, their children gain Australian citizenship and there is a possibility that parents can get permanent residency through their children. Some North Koreans whose refugee claims were declined decided to leave this country only after they had exhausted all opportunities to get a permanent visa, or only leave if they were deported by the authorities.

The complicated yet seemingly ambivalent reasons why they still stay in Australia despite the constraints need to be unpacked. In the era of globalisation, English has become an essential skill for success and employment across the world, including South Korea. North Korean defectors, who are unlikely to have the social and cultural capital or financial resources to study overseas or send their children overseas to

learn English and further their education, take this onward migration or secondary asylum seeking opportunity seriously. Like many South Koreans with children studying in Australia, the growing power of English as a critical asset of occupational mobility, the problems of the intense exam-oriented high stakes Korean educational system, providing opportunities for children to learn English at an early age, and access to a better and more cosmopolitan education, are the reasons behind the hope in stay in Australia in spite of challenges. For some North Koreans, a low-status job, social isolation and sometimes extreme poverty can be acceptable trade-offs for their children's future. Even some participants for this research revealed that many North Korean refugees tried to apply for second asylum seeking to give their children and themselves a chance to live overseas and, experience cosmopolitan life, let alone to learn English. One male informant who supports the children of North Korean refugees told the researcher that while the application has been processed, asylum seekers, including their children, are entitled to attend school and English education. For example, it took more than four years for the painter asylum seeker to get the final decision about his application. Although their asylum seeking applications fail, they can at least have a cosmopolitan experience and language training during the processing period.

Theoretical Implications of North Korean Refugee Cases or Migration Studies

A close look into the multiple migration trajectory of North Korean refugees (from North Korea to China, China to South Korea, South Korea to Australia) and their experience at each location, challenges a linear migration view of one directional mobility from the national origin to destination. Rather, this research illustrates that the nature of migration is changing and includes multiple locations and different experiences and motivations behind mobility at each stage of migration. North Korean refugees' onward migration confirms the multi-directional fragmented nature of migration argued by Della Puppa and King (2018):

The reality is that migratory journeys are multiple, iterative and fragmented, involving steps and stages. Return migration turns origins into destinations, and onward migration turns destinations into new origins, subverting the 'origin-destination' optic that frames much thinking about migration and its consequences. (p.14)

The analysis of the temporal dimensions in their onward migration process implies that North Korean refugees exist somewhere in between the binaries like transients and permanent residents, migrants/refugees, asylum seekers/refugees, skilled/unskilled and legal/illegal. North Koreans often live in limbo and cut across the boundaries around the binary categories of permanent and temporary migration.

Multi-directional flows of migration experience has enabled North Koreans refugees to develop new forms of migrant agency (initiating multiple asylum seeking and expanded yet often overlapping migrant subjectivities (playing strategically with multiple identities as South and North Korean, Asian and Cosmopolitan. Having already moved in another country once or twice, they have developed their 'migratory knowledge' (Ramos 2017) to make a seemingly rational choice for another onward migration for their children and themselves. For North Korean refugees, 'the rational choice' they have made for onward migration can result in them living in limbo as temporal and illegal migrants and can involve downward mobility and trade-offs between their careers and their children's cosmopolitan experiences.

As Bailey et al. (2002) have pointed out, North Koreans' 'being temporary' at each location through their migration journey has an impact on their life in a settled country and being temporary serves as a mode of governmental 'disciplining power.' As discussed earlier, some live with fear of detention and deportation and experience no or little access to social welfare, health care and education as most social security programs and support are for permanent settler migrants.

The scholars in the area of onward migration question the motivations behind the onward drive and if the motivations for onward migration are similar to, or different from, those of the first departure

from their home country. The North Korean case shows that while to access 'a better life' is a common push factor behind their transnational mobility from North Korea through China and/or South Korea to Australia, motivations may vary in each country along the transnational migration journey. Economic necessity and survival may be the main reasons behind the escape from North Korea to China, while the move from China to South Korea seems to be more dominated by economic motivation and the South Korean government's generous settlement programs. For some North Korean refugees staying in China, their final destination has always been South Korea and China is just a transit country. Whilst many North Koreans initially had only South Korea in their minds, but decided to onward-migrate to Australia and elsewhere due to their frustrations and dissatisfactions with life in South Korea, including the extremely competitive nature of society and the experience of discrimination and prejudice, in spite of assumed common ethnicity, culture, language and ancestry.

The expectation of cosmopolitan life and desire to learn English for their children and themselves, plus accumulated migration knowledge have also driven North Koreans to onward migrate to Australia, with expectations that the social security system and social safety nets for refugees and migrants far exceed than those in South Korea. Due to a small of number of cases, the findings from this research is preliminary. To understand how their temporal migration experiences will be constructed by the host country, age, gender, education, skills and family, far more large scale and transnational research into the specific experiences of North Korean onward migrants in different countries is warranted.

Onward and Serial Migration of North Korean Refugees: Policy Implications

The international community needs to develop consistent policies to effectively deal with 'onward migration' or 'serial refugee claims' by North Korean refugees. China should ensure the humanitarian treatment of North Korean defectors and grant human rights activists and international and South Korean NGOs permission to assist vulnerable

refugee populations from North Korea. China should also urgently revisit its policy of not acknowledging North Korean defectors as refugees based on the bilateral agreement it enacted with North Korea in 1960. China joined both the “United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR)” in 1951 and the “Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugee in 1967”, and therefore has treaty obligations to recognise refugees and treat them humanely. Under the Refugee Convention, a person is deemed a refugee when he or she is outside her country of origin because of “a well-founded fear of being persecuted” in that country “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” and therefore is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (Cohen 2010). That means that North Koreans who cross into China with a well-founded fear of persecution on political, religious or other grounds should be considered refugees under the Refugee Convention, and not be forcibly returned to North Korea where their lives or freedom would be threatened. The Convention specifically prohibits their expulsion, except on grounds of national security or public order (Cohen 2011).

Even North Koreans crossing into China for reasons of economic hardship should be considered refugees, as North Korean economic policies are on a par with political persecution for those not part of the privileged political elite. Many of the North Koreans crossing into China during periods of famine were reported to come from the unprivileged classes, under the *songbun* “caste system” (Cohen 2010; Charny 2004).

In any respect, many North Koreans outside their country fit the category of *refugees sur place*. As defined by the UNHCR, *refugees sur place* are not persons who are refugees when they leave their country. They become refugees at a later date because of a valid fear of persecution upon return. The North Koreans who leave their country for economic reasons can become *refugees sur place* if they have valid fears of persecution and harsh punishment upon return. In the case of North Koreans, this would not be difficult to prove. Their government deems it a criminal offence to leave the country without permission, and if they return they are likely to be arrested and detained, and while detained

suffer physical and sexual violence, forced labour, forced abortion, torture and in some cases death (Cohen 2010).

One measure open to China is to consider granting Special Resident Visas to those North Koreans who have stable employment and shelter. Some North Koreans wish to stay in China where there is cultural compatibility and geographic proximity to their North Korean home, relatives and friends (RI 2005)⁵. More urgently, China should grant legal residency to the spouses of Chinese citizens and their children (Charny 2004) and should not send them back to North Korea.

As the most common first asylum country for North Korean defectors, China should allow the UNHCR access to determine the refugee status of the North Koreans living there. China also should allow aid agencies access to the border region. After all, the UNHCR has offered assistance and South Korea is willing to resettle North Korean refugees (Ji 2011). Other adjacent states should equally provide assistance to North Korean defectors and work together with international institutions and NGOs.

In addition, it is expected the US North Korean Child Welfare Act will play a critical role in advocating for and protecting North Korean children. In January 2013, President Obama signed the North Korean Child Welfare Act of 2012. This Act was introduced to assist stateless North Korean children who face starvation and neglect because they are neither North Korean citizens nor citizens of the country where they currently reside. The Act is expected to underpin strategies to help reunite North Korean refugee children with their families or facilitate their adoption by citizens of South Korea, China or other countries. Many of these children have Chinese fathers and North Korean mothers but are not claimed by either parent. Being stateless, they cannot access the education, health and welfare services of either country. This Act will also help provide for their immediate care and begin the process of permanent settlement. Those who make it to South Korea are provided an education, a path to citizenship and even a chance at adoption.

⁵ Two North Koreans we interviewed in China want to live in China rather than going to South Korea so that they can support their families in North Korea.

Serial Migration or Repeated Refugee Claims

It appears that most countries have begun to take more stringent measures in the screening process of North Korean refugee claimants to filter out fraudulent refugee claimants. For Canada and the UK, decisions on granting asylum to North Korean re-migrants have been arbitrary. Australia, meanwhile, seems to be pursuing a hard-line on this issue, refusing to grant asylum to any North Koreans arriving from South Korea (Bell 2013). For instance, the UK government rejects the application of defectors who already have South Korean citizenship or are supposed to apply for that citizenship. The UK also requires those defectors to provide their fingerprints in order to check whether they came to the UK via South Korea. In 2008, the UK deported North Korean defectors who claimed that they came directly from North Korea but actually had resided in South Korea (Choi 2011). The United States also adopted more stringent screening of North Korean refugee claimants to curtail the serial or repeated migration of North Korean refugees.

In principle, given the extraordinary situation of North Korean defectors, special consideration is given to them by the international community when reviewing refugee applications, and special migrant visas will be considered for North Korean asylum seekers on humanitarian grounds. Unlike other asylum seekers, they are from a country so reclusive that they are barely aware of the outside world. It seems hardly possible for North Korean asylum seekers who arrive in Southeast Asia from China to make informed choices and have accurate information about resettlement programs in other countries as well as South Korea. North Koreans should be provided with accurate information before making a decision whether or not to become South Korean citizens (Cohen 2011; Bell 2013). For example, they should know that the waiting time to go to a country other than South Korea, while in a Thai, Burmese or Mongolian detention centre is considerably longer than opting for South Korea (Bell 2013).

In particular, the US needs to make efforts to grant more North Koreans refugee visas based on the NKHRA. As of 2011, the US had admitted only 122 North Korean refugees since the adoption of NKHRA in 2004. The US should consider ways of allowing North Korean

defectors in South Korea to resettle in the US, in close cooperation with the South Korean government (Cohen 2011). For all North Koreans in foreign countries other than China and South Korea, a blanket, one-off amnesty with permission to remain is a possible option until further internationally consistent policies for North Korean defectors' multiple refugee claims can be developed. According to the report of the UNHCR, *Global Trend 2012*, there are 1027 North Korean Asylum cases pending for decision (UNHCR 2013).

Another positive measure would be to provide accurate information and resources for those who wish to leave South Korea for another country. This could be done with the cooperation of the South Korean government and through various NGO networks. This may have the effect of reducing the number of unsuccessful serial refugee claims and a higher number of North Koreans choosing officially sanctioned methods to migration to other countries. As suggested by the interviews with North Korean defectors in Australia, they wished to move here for a better life and better opportunities – just as South Koreans have done in the past. Their attempt to leave South Korea should not be seen as a betrayal. For them to make an informed decision and not get misled by brokers' exaggerated or unreliable information, South Korea needs to provide information on legal migration processes as well as the life and experiences of migrants to other countries. In fact, a number of North Koreans have been detained in detention centres⁶ and deported to South Korea.

Support programs such as scholarships, exchange programs and English language classes for North Korean defectors living in South Korea would help them find work and adapt to life in South Korea. For example, the British Embassy in Seoul has been running a free English language program, "English for the Future", for North Korean defectors since June 2010. This is done in cooperation with the Unification Ministry, the Pony Chung Foundation, the Asan Foundation, LG Corporation, and Korea Investment and Securities. Students are also given an opportunity of a three-month internship with one of 11 sponsor

⁶ When the researcher visited the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney in March 2013, there were four North Koreans, one female and three males detained.

organisations, and study in the UK on a scholarship. The NKHRA (North Korean Human Rights Act) will be used to support a wide range of programs as well as humanitarian assistance for North Koreans outside of North Korea.

Adversity for North Koreans does not necessarily end after fleeing their country. In China, they are treated as illegal migrants and live under constant fear of repatriation and arrest. Some are victims of trafficking and sexual violence. In South Korea, they are among the most socially disadvantaged, often unemployed and subject to discrimination and prejudice. For those who move to other countries as asylum seekers such as the UK, Canada, the US, Australia and EU countries, their lives in their newly adopted countries are not what was initially expected. Contrary to ungrounded information obtained through friends and brokers claiming that a refugee visa or humanitarian visa would easily be granted, in reality, it is almost impossible to gain a refugee protection visa in Australia and elsewhere. Despite these challenges, these North Koreans stay in Australia for as long as possible, no matter how bad their situations become, because of their wish to shed their North Korean identity, which has served as a source of prejudice and discrimination in South Korea, and to offer a better opportunity for their children and themselves.

Serial refugee claims made by North Koreans have recently attracted international attention. The absence of specific policies toward North Korean refugees, and inconsistent refugee review criteria and interpretation by countries, have left some refugees living in very dire situations. Constrained by temporal/ legal status, they are often subject to deportation, detention and arrest. International policies and humanitarian solutions should be urgently developed to deal with the unique issue of North Korean asylum seekers.

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