“Not Korean Enough”: North Korean Defectors and Their Struggle for Identity. [1]

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Abstract

The onward migration of North Korean refugees challenges prevailing research that focuses on economic motivations for onward moves. Little attention has been given to non-economic factors, particularly the habitus of migrants, in understanding transnational mobility. This study employs Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as a theoretical framework to investigate the motivations and experiences of 27 North Korean refugees engaging in onward or temporary migration in Australia. The study suggests that the transformation of North Korean refugees’ habitus – adopting a cosmopolitan habitus and a flexible new identity – is the primary impetus for their migration. Their aspirations, exemplified by a strong desire to learn English, drive them to pursue the onward move to Australia. This highlights the significance of political and socio-cultural contexts in shaping motivations for onward migration. Moreover, the study argues that onward migration should not be seen automatically as an indication of unsuccessful integration or inadequate settlement programs in the initial country of asylum or settlement. Instead, it suggests onward migration reflects refugees’ desire to autonomously navigate and facilitate their own integration through transnational mobility.

Key words: North Korea, North Korean refugees in Australia, onward migration, temporary migration, refugee policy, settlement policy, habitus, cosmopolitanism

[1] I acknowledge that an earlier version of this work has been published by the *Cosmopolitan Civil Society* Journal (2017). This chapter draws on data collected from 2019, 2020, and 2022, as well as data collected in 2012, 2013, and 2014. The previous version of this work relied solely on the earlier data.

Introduction

South Korea is often considered the most suitable country for North Korean defectors to rebuild their lives, due to shared ethnicity, language, and culture, as well as generous settlement programs. However, this assumption may not hold true. Up to 3,000 North Koreans are reported to have chosen to settle in other countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia, and European nations in recent years.
It is important to understand that North Koreans' situation in South Korea is far different from that of refugees who settle in other countries. As the South Korean government considers itself the sole legitimate authority on the Korean peninsula, North Korean defectors are not actually regarded as refugees but as South Korean citizens (Lankov 2006). Some 33,916 North Koreans settled in South Korea between the end of the 1950-53 Korean War and March 2023, with numbers increasing markedly following the mid-1990s famine period (Ministry of Unification 2023). To deal with this sharp increase, the South Korean government enacted the North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act 1997. Under the Act, which was revised in 2010 and 2013, a series of support programs were implemented for North Korean arrivals only, ranging through protection, education, employment, accommodation, medical care, and support for minimum living standards (Ministry of Unification 2015).

Despite South Korea's generous settlement programs, some North Koreans have attempted onward migration by seeking refugee status particularly since the implementation of the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA) in the US in 2004. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR [2016a]), the number of North Korean refugees around the world in 2015 (not including South Korea and China) amounted to 1,089, with most in the UK, (608), Canada (126), Germany (101), Russia (72), the Netherlands (56), Belgium (46), Australia (26) and the US (19). Some North Korean defectors made refugee claims to more than one country (Kim 2013). This has prompted concern on the part of the South Korean government as to the effectiveness of its resettlement programs. Internationally, countries such as Australia, Canada, and the US are grappling with how to deal with serial refugee claims by North Korean defectors who have already been granted citizenship in South Korea. In addition, many North Korean refugees, particularly youth, pursue temporary migration through scholarships, exchange student programs and working holiday visas.

Theoretically, the onward migration of North Korean refugees challenges research findings that suggest onward moves are largely motivated by economic concerns. Most research understands onward migration to be motivated by the pursuit of improved economic conditions and wellbeing, or an effort to overcome difficulties such as discrimination and racism in a first settled county (Ahrens et al. 2016). Very little attention has been paid to non-economic factors, such as the habitus of migrants (and specifically for North Korean refugees, the acquisition of cosmopolitan habitus), as a potential driving force. Although there is no denying there are structural and economic reasons behind onward migration, attention needs to be paid to how structural inequality has played out in the embodiment of resettled migrants and how this might affect onward migration decisions. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a theoretical framework, this chapter addressed the motivations and experiences of North Korean refugees' participation in onward migration.

Research methodology

Data from the UNHCR (2016b) indicates that 159 North Korean refugees applied for refugee settlement visas to Australia between 2000 and 2015 – 33 successfully − making Australia one of the key destinations for North Korean refugees. But according to the interviewees for this study, between 60 and 70 North Koreans were living in Sydney in 2011, falling to around 40 after a hardening of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's (DIAC) position on illegal North Korean arrivals in early 2012. This is in line with UNHCR data. That said, one Australian media report indicated that in 2012 alone 70 North Korean asylum seekers were staying in Australia illegally after failing to obtain a refugee protection visa. Some faced deportation to South Korea (Stewart 2012).

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gathering data. The first data collection was based on a small convenience and snowball sample: all participants (interviewed in 2012,

2013 and 2014) were based in Sydney at the time of interviews and consented to be interviewed. Given the small number of North Korean refugees living in Australia and their undefined legal status, it was extremely difficult to recruit research participants. This was addressed with the help of groups such as Korean community churches, migration agents and asylum seeker centers, and by using snowballing techniques to gain referrals to further subjects. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven women and seven men between April 2012 and January 2013 and in April 2014. In addition, nine interviews (7 women and 2 men) were conducted in Seoul, South Korea, in 2019, 2020, and 2022. This latter group comprised North Korean refugee youth who had previously resided in Australia as temporary migrants. Furthermore, four interviews (3 women and 1 man) were conducted in Sydney, Australia, in 2020. Each interview lasted one to three hours and was recorded with the participants' consent. The questions delved into a range of topics, including underlying motivations for departure from South Korea, reasons for choosing Australia, experiences in English learning, employment, relations with Korean diaspora communities, social activities, and future plans. No identifying information, except age and gender, is included for privacy and confidentiality.

Discussion about habitus in migration studies.

In the past, refugees and migrants typically settled in one country and established permanent residency. However, in today's globalized world, there is a growing trend of refugees and migrants moving on to other countries, navigating between various opportunities and constraints. Despite its increasing prevalence, research on this onward movement is rudimentary, offering various and sometimes contradictory reasons. Some scholars emphasize that onward migration represents an exercise of agency, allowing individuals to seek out places that better fulfill their social, economic, and cultural needs (Jung et al 2017; Kelly 2013; Skeggs 2004). It is crucial to recognize that mobility is not equally accessible to all individuals. Factors such as personal histories, diasporic consciousness, diasporic networks, and higher levels of education and skills can facilitate this movement. Moreover, it is essential to consider non-economic factors that drive refugees to engage in onward migration. Therefore, Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) concept of habitus provides a new perspective on migration studies.

Habitus refers to a collection of culturally and historically specific knowledge, values, and dispositions that individuals acquire and internalize. It shapes their understanding of their inclusion or exclusion within a society. Habitus acts as a guiding framework that influences and structures everyday practices, yet its transmission occurs through individual bodily experiences. This bodily incorporation of habitus is manifested in various aspects, including clothing choices, grooming habits, mannerisms, communication styles, postures, and social interactions. In this way, habitus is the product of history, and accumulated knowledge and experience, of members of a given society who have a common social positioning (Lechte 2003, pp. 103-104). Habitus also encompasses "taste". Bourdieu (1984, p. 190) explains that "the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste" – that is, the body and its presentation are the manifestation of the tastes, values and cultural capital of a class or group. Cultural capital is expressed through lifestyles and habitus, and is reproduced through membership of a specific class/group or in a given material context.

Not only are social class and material possessions critical for migrants to adjust to a new country, so too is embodied habitus (Jung et al. 2017). When migrants/refugees move to a country radically different from the one that shaped their primary habitus, they feel out of place and displaced.

This sudden change disrupts their ability to perform in accordance with societal expectations. Their refugee or migrant status, often accompanied by low social and economic standing, along with their distinct habitus, including accents, tastes, and embodied practices, contribute to experiences of discrimination and isolation. Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes the potential for habitus to be reconstructed or changed in the event of encounters with the unfamiliar, such as resettling in a new country. He defines habitus as "a complex interplay between past and present" (Reay et al 2009, p. 1104) and notes that rather than being fixed, habitus is learned, acquired and transformed, both through new experiences in one's social environment and the process of socialization. As Reay et al. (2009, p. 1104) explain, while an individual's past experiences and history play a fundamental role in shaping their habitus, habitus is simultaneously "permeable and responsive" to new experiences and encounters.

Cosmopolitan habitus specifically relates to both "global" skills and a global mindset, which individuals can draw on to successfully negotiate global communities. This entails cultural tastes and knowledge that increase global competitiveness and participation (Weenink 2008, p.

1092). Attaining English language competency, for example, constitutes a skill that would bolster one's cultural and cosmopolitan capital, increasing the chance of upward social mobility and success in the global arena (Bourdieu 1986; Weenink 2008). This also involves demonstrating a sensitivity and acceptance of difference and diversity (Beck & Sznaider 2006). Cosmopolitan habitus also tends to foster an outlook whereby individuals work to understand their realities and experiences from a global, rather than local, perspective. This engenders mental and physical flexibility that encourages fluid/hybrid identities and promotes a sense of not being tied to any geographical or ethnic location (Giddens 1991; Hayden et al. 2000).

Generally, North Koreans who settle in South Korea wish to rid themselves of their North Korean habitus and learn South Korean habitus. They become aware that to be like South Koreans they need to acquire cosmopolitan habitus, including the experience of living and/or studying overseas, and competency in a foreign language, in particular English. Such competencies are a requirement of being a member of the global community in a globalized world, and one cannot truly fit in, or be competitive, without such skills. North Koreans, in general do not possess cultural capital to give them cosmopolitan habitus. Moving again, to another country, might be the only option to construct cosmopolitan habitus for themselves and their children.

North Korea refugees and North Korean habitus in South Korea

In July 2019, the bodies of Han Sung-ok and her six-year-old son were discovered in their modest apartment in Seoul. This tragic incident gained national and international attention due to the revelation that Ms. Han, a 42-year-old North Korean refugee, had escaped famine in her home country yet she and her son had passed away, alone and impoverished, in Seoul, one of the wealthiest cities in Asia. The reported cause of their deaths was starvation (Choe 2019). This distressing event serves as a stark reminder of the challenges faced by many North Korean refugees in South Korea as they attempt, often with difficulty, to adapt to a drastically different life.

Many of the 33,916 North Koreans in the South (as of March 2023; Ministry of Unification 2023) experience financial difficulties, discrimination, indifference, prejudice, and ostracism. About three-quarters of those (73.1 percent) are under the age of 39. Choo Seoung Hyun

crossed the demilitarized zone and defected to South Korea in 2002, going on to become the first North Korean defector to obtain a doctoral degree in Unification Studies. He said in a newspaper interview:

> I risked my life crossing the demilitarized zone, but I immediately fell into becoming a 'useless person'. I had never experienced hunger in North Korea, but in South Korea I experienced hunger for the first time. I went to a gas station to have a [job] interview in order to earn a living, but I was constantly rejected. Local living information magazines filled my house with job advertisements, but there was nowhere that would accept North Korean defectors (cited in Lee 2018).

North Korean refugees must deal with being the subjects of negative stereotypes depicting them as "cold-blooded communists … unfeminine women workers, and . . . starving and helpless refugees" (Choo 2006, p. 590). South Korean media have reported North Korean settlers describing themselves as being treated as second-class citizens, "even the untouchables" (Lee 2018), "worse treated than ethnic Koreans from China" (Lee 2018), "a laughingstock", (Cho 2019) and spies (Cho 2019):

> Basically, there are doubts, boundaries, and distrust of North Koreans. 'They're going to be lazy', 'Unfortunately they can't work', is underneath South Korean's mind. But it is not because North Korean defectors are lazy, but it is difficult for them to acquire the ability or skills to make money in Korean society. Regardless of what people did in North Korea, the types of jobs that defectors can choose are mainly limited to 3D [dirty, dangerous, and demeaning] industries. (Cited in Lee 2018)

Perceptible differences in their use of language, fashion, comportment and other social behaviors set North Koreans apart from "the cosmopolitan, image-conscious socialites" of the South (Bell 2014, p. 103). Upon arrival in South Korea, North Korean refugees undergo three months of training, offered by the South Korean Government, during which time they learn practical skills and about the South Korean political and economic system (Choo 2006, p. 583). In acknowledgement of the stigmatizing potential of the North Korean accent, the government provides South Korean accent lessons as part of the program (Choo 2006, p. 591). Some refugees even attend special accent "institutes" to obtain the "perfect Seoulite accent" (cited in Choo 2006, p. 590). Some adopt South Korean styles of living and self-presentation (taste and make-up), including the conspicuous consumption of high-end brand items and even undergoing cosmetic surgery (Bell 2014). As a male participant in this study, aged in his early 40s, recalled: "We were working really hard to earn money sufficient enough to buy a

good car. We bought the most expensive car in our neighborhood so that we were not looked down upon as North Koreans by our South Korean neighbors."

Despite such attempts to adapt, conspicuous and distinct North Korean habitus often leads to mistreatment, discrimination, alienation, and suspicion, posing significant obstacles to the successful resettlement (Sung & Go 2014). North Koreans are constantly presented as "other", reinforcing a national discourse that has distinguished North Koreans from South Koreans since the division of the peninsula (Choo 2006, p. 590). A report indicated that 45.6 percent of South Koreans surveyed held prejudice and stereotypes about North Korean refugees based on their distinct embodiment and accent (NHRC 2014). Another Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI [2011]) survey found that 10.7 percent of 429 elementary and middle school North Korean refugee students experienced discrimination or ostracism. In another study based in the workplace, North Korean refugees reported receiving similar reactions from their co-workers and superiors. These biases and stereotypes have limited their opportunities for social mobility, including employment prospects. According to a survey of 1,785 refugees in South Korea (Korea Hana Foundation, 2014), only 53.1% were employed in 2014, with 19.8% working in casual positions. In comparison, the overall employment rate in South Korea was 60.8%, with casual employment accounting for 6.1%. Employed defectors worked an average of 47 hours per week, exceeding the South Korean average work week of 44.1 hours. Their earnings are relatively lower compared to their South Korean counterparts, with an average monthly income of KRW1.47 million, whereas the national average stands at KRW2.23 million.

All interviewees for this study indicated their desire to live without the stigma of being North Korean, which they said could not be escaped while living in South Korea. Two interviewees said that, to avoid discrimination in South Korea and secure employment, they had to pretend they were from the South Korean border province of Gangwon-do, northeast of Seoul, where the accent and dialect are similar to that in North Korea:

> We rang the agencies, and they asked us if we were Chinese Koreans. We said, 'no' then they told us, 'Come to the office' … They interviewed us and found that we had a North Korean accent. They told us that they would give us a call. That's the end of the story.

As a result, some want to move far away from the Koreas in the hope of not being seen as North Korean. They want to shed North Korean habitus – embedded in their body and identity

through accent, taste, and social interactions – and reconstruct a new identity in a new country. This is a major push factor driving North Korean defectors' decisions to leave for another country. Gaining legal citizenship does not necessarily make North Koreans "South Korean". North Korean habitus, and a lack of cosmopolitan habitus, serve as distinct markers of difference and a major obstacle to remaking themselves as South Korean citizens.

In pursuit of Cosmopolitan Habitus: global aspiration and 'English fever' in South Korea

One of the critics analyzing the acclaimed Korean film *Parasite* astutely observes how, in the context of neoliberalism and neocolonialism in South Korea, English serves as a prominent indicator of social class differentiation (Park 2020)). In this socio-economic structure, an individual's class status is determined by their level of engagement with the English language, which subsequently influences opportunities for upward social mobility. English proficiency has become an essential tool for navigating daily life, securing employment, and shaping individuals' prospects for a prosperous future.

In the era of globalisation, South Korea is enveloped by "English fever". English education is highly valued as a symbol of prestige and high social standing (Lee 2014, p. 21). For Koreans, learning a foreign language, such as English, constitutes a type of "cosmopolitan knowledge", providing influence potential in the form of social and cultural (cosmopolitan) capital (Weenink 2008, p. 1092). As a much sought after symbol of class distinction, English has become crucial to upward social mobility and competitiveness in the global employment market (Rizvi 2005; Waters 2008; Kenway & Fahey 2014). Working to ensure its international competitiveness, South Korea invests heavily in education. In 2012, nearly 12 percent of all consumer spending was devoted to education, principally to English language tuition (ICEF Monitor 2014). In the mid-1990s, middle and upper-class South Korean parents began to send their children to primarily English-speaking countries in rapidly expanding numbers (Lee & Koo 2006). Some families even decided to emigrate so their children could learn English from an early age – part of a trend dubbed *gyoyukimin* (educational immigration) (Lee 2014, p. 28). A survey conducted by South Korean newspaper *Dong-A Ilbo* found that a quarter of all South Koreans strongly aspired to partake in "educational immigration", while 21.8 percent had desires for their children to study abroad. These findings were echoed in another survey of 1008 South Koreans, which found 44.7 percent of

respondents would send their children overseas for education if they could afford to (Bae 2007, cited in Lee 2014, p. 29). It is no exaggeration to say "the whole nation has an inferiority complex about English" (Choi 2005, cited in Lee 2014, p. 45). But this means there is also an "English Divid*e*", a social division created by differing levels of access to English language tuition (Shin 2014, p. 100 l).

For North Korean refugees, one of the most formidable obstacles they in their daily lives is the acquisition of English. Despite the two Koreas sharing a common language, albeit with varying dialects, the prevalence of English vocabulary in the South poses an unexpected difficulty for defectors who, instead, received compulsory Russian language education in North Korea (Cho 2019). Many interviewees said learning English in South Korea was much more challenging than "escaping from North Korea." In North Korea, English was regarded as the language of the US, which is considered their nation's number one enemy. Consequently, most had not had the opportunity to learn English and were even prohibited from wearing clothes displaying English words. But in South Korea they needed English to carry out everyday tasks such as ordering food and navigating places like Seoul, where many apartment buildings have English names. Even when Korean is being spoken, they will encounter the increasing number of loanwords from English.

The language barrier led to more than a quarter of North Korean defectors who entered universities in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, through a special admission process, dropping out, according to one report (*Chosun Ilbo*, 5 October 2010). In this study, the interviewees who were university students unanimously identified deficiency in English as the main impediment to their academic pursuits and social assimilation as "South Koreans." They said they struggled to keep pace with coursework as South Korean universities increasingly conducted classes in English. Even when Korean was spoken, young defectors encountered challenges because technical terminology frequently adopted English nomenclature. They were reluctant to actively participate in class discussions, fearing exposure as North Korean defectors through language. Proficiency in English was uniformly regarded as indispensable for university life, career prospects, and "success" in South Korea. The interviewees firmly believed fluency in English was a discernible demarcation between North Koreans and South Korean.

The young former North Koreans interviewed in this study relied on financial assistance from

the government, scholarships, support from family, and part-time jobs to sustain themselves. However, earning an income and studying are competing demands. The young North Korean refugees needed to attend additional language classes to enhance their English proficiency but might lack the financial means to do this. However, if they secured part-time work this took away from time to study. A female interviewee in her early 30s expressed her aspiration to learn English after meeting a fellow North Korean at a church who had secured a good job after studying in the US. The interviewee aspired to follow a similar path by going to the US to learn English but faced a difficult path.

> Because of my financial situation, I couldn't afford formal English classes. That meant I had to teach myself. For three whole years, I made a habit of waking up at the crack of dawn – 5am sharp – just to study English every day for 3 hours.

Another female refugee working at a Korean restaurant in Sydney on a working holiday visa at the time of interview (February 2020) said she had to use a free English program specifically organized for North Korean refugees by an NGO and fit her learning into school and work commitments.

> After finishing my regular high school classes, I would head straight to the program and dedicate two to three hours to studying English. I kept up this routine for almost a year. Once the class was over, I would usually get back home around midnight. But my day wasn't done yet. I still had homework to complete, which meant I often stayed up late into the night. It was tough, but I had to make ends meet. That's why I applied for a school job serving breakfast to students. It brought in some much-needed income – around 200,000 KRW per month. However, with such a demanding schedule, I barely got around four hours of sleep every night. It was challenging, but I managed to maintain this routine for nearly a year, determined to improve my English skills.

The realization of limited competitiveness with their South Korean-born peers has motivated many North Korean defectors to pursue onward or temporary transnational moves (Oh, 2011). Two empirical studies highlight the influence of desiring cosmopolitan habitus on defectors' decisions to seek asylum in English-speaking countries like the US and UK. One study involving 11 North Korean refugees found they left South Korea for the US due to discrimination, hardships, and the expectation of better opportunities and education, particularly English language learning (Shin, 2008). Another study involving 13 North Koreans who migrated to the UK identified motives such as English education, poverty, insecurity, discrimination, prejudice, and a lack of social network (Oh, 2011).

All interviewees in this study highlighted access to immersive English education as the main reason for their move to Australia. Some North Koreans used a refugee application as a way of learning English free of charge, or to provide that opportunity to their children. One male interviewee in his 40s remarked:

> I thought even if my application for asylum was unsuccessful, my family would have stayed in Australia and my kids could have experienced Australian life, such as learning English, at least for the period the application was being processed.

In this way, the decision to move to Australia, though various means of migration, including applying for another refugee protection visa, is also seen as a strategy of transnational education migration, for the family members to become cosmopolitan. Another female interviewee in her 30s made this point clearly:

> I want to raise my kids as world-class citizens. Unlike me, I want to give them the chance to learn English and experience many countries so that one day they can be global elites regardless of their North Korean origins.

North Korean refugees actively seek out every available opportunity to go abroad. Some defectors have sought asylum in English-speaking countries such as Australia, while others have explored options like scholarships provided by governments, NGOs, and churches. They also consider obtaining working holiday visas to study and live overseas temporarily, with the aim of enhancing their competitiveness and job prospects. However, North Korean refugees who have already established themselves in South Korea find it exceedingly challenging to secure asylum elsewhere. Opportunities for temporary migration are also severely restricted. Furthermore, selection for scholarships and English programs is a formidable task, because of a vicious cycle: attaining a commendable score in English proficiency exams like TOEFL or TOEIC is a prerequisite for applying, but most young North Korean refugees lack the financial means and time to attend “cram” schools to secure those high scores.

Some young refugees from privileged social backgrounds in the North arrive in South Korea at a young age and benefit from robust familial assistance that allows them to concentrate exclusively on their studies. Consequently, these individuals can attain remarkable scores in English examinations and secure admission into diverse English programs – occasionally participating in multiple initiatives. To illustrate, one student who engaged in a 30-week language program facilitated by an Australian university for North Korean refugee youth, had

already benefited from a comparable English support program in the UK. One interviewee, who was self-supported in Sydney (with only half of the tuition fee covered by a private donor), sadly expressed to the researcher that Some North Korean youth on scholarships had already been given numerous opportunities to study abroad.

Other individuals unable to apply for these scholarships and free language programs have opted for working holiday visas. One female refugee who arrived in Australia on such a visa expressed gratitude for this opportunity as "a ray of hope".

> I did think about studying overseas. But the tuition is expensive, so I couldn't consider it. I couldn't even work part-time while attending university. I would get too tired from working part-time and I couldn't focus on my studies. So, I didn't work and didn't have much money. Therefore, in my situation, I couldn't come to study abroad. Also, our mom's health isn't good, so she couldn't work either. That's why we're really financially struggling, only relying on the government allowance. For me, the only way to come here was through a working holiday. So, if I were to exaggerate, this working holiday was like a ray of hope for me. I thought I had to seize this opportunity.

North Koreans who have resettled in South Korea actively seek experiences abroad, develop foreign language skills, and pursue education or residency in foreign countries.

Challenges to acquiring cosmopolitan habitus

Despite their efforts to reinvent themselves through onward/temporary migration, the realities experienced by North Korean refugees in Australia differ significantly from the expectations they held prior to their departure for Australia.

Australia has taken a hard line on granting asylum to North Koreans arriving from South Korea (Bell 2013). To be eligible for a protection visa, a North Korean applicant must satisfy the criteria outlined in the 1958 Migration Act. One of the requirements is to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in their home country and an inability to seek protection from the government. But Australian law recognizes North Koreans as dual citizens of both North and South Korea. As a result, Australia is not legally obligated to offer protection to North Koreans, as they already hold South Korean citizenship. Therefore, North Korean refugees are typically deported to South Korea within 14 days (Stewart 2012). In 2011, this situation affected 80 North Korean asylum seekers following a High Court ruling that

refugees eligible for protection in a third country cannot be granted protection in Australia (Piotrowski 2013). Furthermore, some North Korean refugees face difficulties in seeking asylum in Australia due to engaging in unauthorized methods, such as concealing their prior settlement in South Korea.

This uncertain legal status of North Korean refugees in Australia intensifies their challenges. They are eligible to seek financial assistance, health care, and legal services during the processing of their refugee protection visa applications. However, if their applications are rejected, access to these services is immediately terminated. Interviewees expressed deep apprehension about deportation but also about disqualification from social welfare, health, and education programs. One male participant, employed as a cleaner, recounted being unable to visit a doctor after falling ill, due to his unresolved legal status. A couple with children aged two and four expressed concern about their education as they were unable to enroll them in childcare or kindergarten. Another participant, working as a house painter, revealed having only a few coins in his wallet, making it impossible to afford milk or diapers, or to take his young children to a hospital for vaccinations.

The North Korean refugees who migrated to Australia on temporary visas, such as working holiday visas or scholarship-related student visas, also faced notable financial difficulties. A female student in her late 20s, who pursued English studies with a scholarship that only partially covered her tuition fees, vividly described the economic hardships she experienced:

> I quit my job in that other city and moved to Sydney. It was a tough situation because I had to handle everything on my own. I had to find a place to live and figure out how to pay for transportation and meals. It was a challenging time, but there's one memory that sticks with me – I remember buying a triangular gimbap near the language institute where I was attending classes. I ended up dividing it for both breakfast and lunch because I couldn't afford much else at the time.

One man on a working holiday visa, who worked as a coffee barista in Sydney, mentioned that he and his friends often survived for a week on one loaf of bread. Another woman studied English on a partially funded scholarship and had to work multiple jobs, including waiting tables, sales, and Chinese language tutoring, to meet her living costs:

> I had to be really tight with my money. I didn't have much to spare, so I tried to spend as little as possible on food. I often managed to survive for a couple of days by buying a pack of kimchi and eating it bit by bit. Usually I'm not stingy with my friends, but

> when I was in Sydney I had to be. I brought most of my stuff from Korea, like face cleanser, and planned to use them until I finished my stay in Sydney. But then I found out that my roommate had been using my stuff without asking. I got pretty pissed and told her not to touch my things if she couldn't afford to buy her own. It really upset her though …
>
> As I always used my earnings to cover rent and other expenses, I had no money left for a plane ticket back to South Korea when my language course finished. I had one month remaining before departing for South Korea, so I urgently needed to find a job. I searched extensively for part-time positions, but no one was willing to hire me for just a month. Eventually, I managed to secure a job at a barbecue restaurant, but it was located an hour away from my home. I would finish work late at night and the journey back home was quite unsettling. Australia appeared to have a significant number of drug addicts and beggars on the streets, which made me feel uneasy. But I had no other choice but to make money somehow.

All the North Korean refugees came to Australia with the hope of learning English, but deficiency in English presents a major hurdle to adjustment in Australia. North Korean refugees' lack of English competency constrains their employment opportunities and social interactions. Most interviewees, excluding those on full scholarships, supported themselves by engaging in labour-intensive, predominantly casual, precarious, and/or cash-in-hand work, often requiring long hours. Jobs included cleaning, painting, shop-keeping, child-minding, waitressing, farming, tiling and coffee making. The majority of participants were employed by Korean employers. Many interviewees said their lives as blue-collar workers (*nogada*) in Australia were even tougher than their lives in North or South Korea. Some interviewees had to take on multiple jobs simultaneously to sustain themselves. One female student who came to study English in Sydney in 2020, with tuition fees supported by a Korean community in Sydney, had to take on various jobs and work long hours as well:

> After I quit my job distributing flyers for a ballet school, I dedicated my time to studying English. However, I quickly ran out of money, even though I spent only AUD 20 per week on living expenses, [except the rent] including food. So, I began working at a Korean grocery store for eight hours every day, and occasionally took on office cleaning jobs as well.

Many migrants with limited English and little or no knowledge of the employment market or Australian society rely on the ethnic enclave community and economy in their destination country. However, much research has indicated that ethnic networks and the ethnic enclave economy can result in co-ethnic exploitation (Li 2017). For example, some immigrant employers use ethnic social networks to minimize labor costs (Li 2017). Onward migrants, as

well as temporary migrants such as students and working holiday visa holders, are more likely to be the subject of co-ethnic exploitation.

A male refugee in his late 20s who stayed in Australia for 17 months on a working holiday visa from 2015 shared his experience. He strongly expressed the opinion that "there were two most difficult things in Australia – one, English, but the other is 'ugly Koreans.'"

> The [Korean] businessmen saw the youth [temporal migrants] as 'money'. They exploited the youth. These young people suffered a lot in this foreign land. This might be an inevitable strategy for ethnic Koreans to survive but I felt bad … Koreans treat Koreans so badly. Not only I experienced this but I heard that most [temporary] migrants living there for long do not want to get close to Koreans. All people regardless of being rich or being poor take advantage of temporal migrants like me.

Exploitative employment includes sub-standard employment practices and delayed or unpaid wages. One female student who worked for a well-known restaurant in "Koreatown" in Sydney said she experienced unfair treatment:

> My boss is saying he is not much interested in making more money, but he is very strict and stingy, and he counted how many minutes we work in every possible way, and he is trying to cut my wage off, so I quit.

At the time of interview (August 2020), she was working for a Chinese drinks shop thanks to the fluent Chinese she learned during the eight years she spent in that country after leaving North Korea at the age of eight.

A male refugee in his late 20s who came to Australia "even without learning the English alphabet", was working as a tiler on a working holiday visa at the time of interview (February 2020). He said he experienced underpayment and delayed payment by Korean employers.

> Since we can't communicate in English, we work for Koreans. You know when you go to places like farms, it's mostly those working holiday folks. Isn't the minimum wage in Australia over 17 bucks? But here's the messed-up part, they don't pay up! It's downright unfair. I should get what's due to me. It's our fellow Koreans who aren't paying. And it's not just one person doing this, it's those [Korean] farm managers ... I consider this to be collective crime.

This person had unpaid of wages of AUD3000 in a recent job, where there was a "cash-in-hand" arrangement. There was no written contract, so he did not take action to recover the wages. Most interviewees were not aware of the implications of cash-in-hand jobs. These arrangements mean there is no worker's compensation insurance in place, for example,

meanwhile the employer can evade payroll tax. While these migrants have such adverse experiences with Korean employers, the support from the broader Korean community (such as community groups and churches) is indispensable.

North Korean defectors in Australia face worse housing conditions than in South Korea. The South Korean settlement programs for North Korean defectors include housing support. The government provides subsidized rental programs and financial assistance for deposits, rent subsidies, and public housing, tailored to the individual circumstances of defectors.
Due to the instability of their jobs and the high rental accommodation cost in Australia, the interviewees had settled for basic living arrangements. Two of the homes visited during the interview process revealed how poor the living conditions were. One house was in a dilapidated state, sparsely furnished, and was operated as a boarding house by a female refugee. In another instance, the tiny unit lacked even basic amenities like beds. Two female students who didn't meet the English score requirements for scholarships available in Australia had to partially self-fund their studies. Private donors at their university covered half their tuition fees. They couldn't afford the top-tier language institute and opted for a more affordable option. During their five-month stay in Sydney, both students had to relocate three times, making accommodation the most challenging aspect due to cost and safety concerns.

> When we first arrived in Sydney, we were taken to a shared house but we found that there were like 40 people living there – yes, in a big house. What a shock!

To minimize commuting time and public transport expenses, they chose to live in the downtown area, which offered more job opportunities at that time (August 2020). One student shared a one-bedroom unit with three other girls, while the other student lived in a one-bedroom unit with two other young Korean women. Due to the limited space, there was no furniture, let alone essential appliances like a refrigerator or a washing machine. One male refugee who had lived in Brisbane recollected his accommodation:

> It's an uncomfortable house for even five people to live in but more than 10 people were living there. There's only one bathroom, and it would be enough for two people to use.

"Although we live in Australia geographically, we still live in South Korea.": as a 50-year-old male refugee 50 succinctly mentioned, those interviewed were socially isolated from so-called mainstream Australian society; They mostly socialised with other North Koreans, Chinese

Koreans, Korean Australians and South Korean temporary migrants. North Koreans' demanding work schedules left them with little time for socializing, cultural activities, and English learning. When asked about their experience in Australia, one interviewee commented:

> There is nothing I am satisfied with here in Australia. I get up at five in the morning and come back from work after six in the evening. Then, I take a shower, have dinner, watch a Korean drama, and go to sleep again.

Responding to a question, "What is the toughest thing while you are in Australia?", a man in his late 20s pointed to the language barrier:

> Was it tough in Australia? ... Not being able to speak English, it's frustrating because I know how Korean community in Australia treat Korean migrants but have no choice but to rely on that community. Why? Well, you have to eat and survive. It puts a lot of stress on me … If I could speak English, I'd love to work with [Australian] local folks. There's this language barrier that I need to overcome, and once I do, life would be happier, I think. It would be smoother than I anticipated, and I could delve deeper into studying Australia. Plus, I could interact more with Australians just doing everyday things. But the foundation is English. It's all about language, language.

Despite the primary objective of migrating to Australia being English language acquisition, numerous North Koreans faced limited opportunities to improve their English skills due to financial constraints. In an interview conducted in February 2020, a female participant on a working holiday visa expressed:

> I struggled to find a suitable English learning environment in Australia. My priority was to earn money, since I arrived with a mere 1 million won (KRW). My initial plan was to work and save up for language school. I constantly searched the internet for job opportunities. Even when I found employment, the language school fees were too expensive. Balancing living expenses, including rent, made it seem impractical to attend a language course for even just a month.

Discrimination and mistreatment towards North Korean refugees based on their North Korean habitus persist in Australia, leading many to hide their origin from Korean employers due to apprehensions of further discrimination. An instance of such discrimination occurred when a female student, employed at a sushi shop, revealed her status as a North Korean refugee, leading her manager to criticize her Korean language proficiency and communication abilities.

Transnational Mobility and Cosmopolitanism

Despite these hardships and lower quality of life (financial difficulties, poor housing, precarious employment, and social isolation), all those interviewed wished to remain in Australia if possible. During their stays in Australia, although brief, they seemed to develop "a cosmopolitan sensibility and a willingness to be … transnationally mobile" (Maxwell & Aggleton 2016, p. 781). Most of those interviewed talked about transnational mobility as a central part of their future trajectories. A female student in her mid-20s who attended a language institute while working in Australia said, "I should have had this experience earlier. If I were in my teens, I could have explored some ways of achieving this but I feel that this might be too late." She worried about her life in South Korea after her return.

> If I can't keep up with my South Korean peers, I will be far left behind and won't be given many chances in Korea. I wish to live overseas like Australia but for that I need money and language competency. I feel that I am too old to leave for another country. When I arrived in [South] Korea, I was still in my teens … I told my mum, 'Why didn't you go overseas to take me? If then, I could have finished my university in overseas… if then, I could have been given more opportunities and choices.' That's what I learned through my stay in Australia.

Interviewees also used their North Korean diasporic networks (brokers, friends and acquaintances who had attempted onward migration). This ability to exercise agency challenges a prevalent view of North Koreans as "fundamentally deprived of the human nature of self-autonomy and self-promotion presumed in liberal capitalism" (Sung 2010, p. 127).

For those who returned to South Korea after improving their English competency, enhanced facility in English was "a game changer". A female refugee who at the time of interview was working in international development commented how she had benefited from her English proficiency through two scholarship opportunities in Australia and the US.

> It's all about English, you know? Have I been putting in the effort to study hard, especially English? Absolutely. And let me tell you, English is a real game-changer in my current job. In Korean society, just having a bit of English skills, even a bit better than others, keeps bringing in benefits. Oh, having that line about getting a scholarship from the US and Australia and showcasing my English expertise on my resume really helped me land a better job.

Many of the interviewees expressed that one of the most positive experiences in Australia was being treated in their daily interactions not as "poor North Koreans" but simply as "Koreans" or as part of the diverse Asian community.

> One time, I met an Australian guy on the subway and he asked me, 'Oh, so you're from South Korea? Where's your hometown? Busan or something?' And I was like, 'No, my hometown is in North Korea.' And guess what? He jokingly asked me if I had met Kim Jong-il. But you know, I just laughed it off, but it felt good. In the past, if I mentioned coming from North Korea, people in South Korea would be like, 'Oh, you must have had a really tough time there.' Nowadays, the image of North Korea has improved a lot in South Korea. It's shown on TV and all that. But back in 2015, when I first came to South Korea, people had a negative perception. It was great to be seen without those biases right from the start here in Australia. It made me think a bit about living abroad, you know? That's actually the best part.

Likewise, a young male refugee reiterated that the primary motivation for his transnational move was the desire to be seen and treated not as a North Korean but as an individual without the label or associated stigma.

> In Australia, being a North Korean doesn't seem like such a big deal. But being a North Korean in South Korea is a whole different story. So I think it's better to stay away. That's actually one of the main reasons why I came to Australia in the first place. I can't help but wonder what South Korea did to make these young folks willing to go through all these hardships in Australia or even refuse to come back to Korea if possible.

Encounters and experiences with the diverse ethnic groups in Australia provided the North Koreans interviewees with opportunities to embrace cosmopolitan values such as egalitarianism and multiculturalism. Interestingly, the identities of these individuals appeared to transcend specific locations, being no longer solely tied to either South Korea or North Korea. Instead, North Korean refugees developed de-territorialized identities, such as identifying as "Asian," and formed multiple affiliations. They engaged in transnational practices while residing in a transnational space, maintaining connections with their families and friends in South Korea, China, and even North Korea through remittances, phone calls, and instant messaging. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) played a critical role in enabling this cosmopolitanism and transnationality by facilitating transnational networking and fostering a sense of belonging that surpassed geographical boundaries.

Unlike most onward migrants, who move to another country for mainly economic reasons, onward migration for North Koreans is regarded as the means of escaping their visibility as

North Korean and ridding themselves of their habitus. For most North Koreans, moving to another developed country seems to be their only opportunity to break free from their old North Korean identity. No longer perceived as North Korean, they can reconstruct their identity as Korean, or even cosmopolitan beyond the territorial boundary of South Korea. They can avoid stigmatisation and marginalisation and participate in cosmopolitan education, including English learning. Acquiring a cosmopolitan habitus, learning English, living abroad, and experiencing other cultures ultimately offers the opportunity for upward social mobility for North Korean refugees and their children. While attempts at onward migration are thwarted sometimes, the temporary experience of living overseas still serves as a valuable chance to experience a different life and attain cosmopolitan habitus. Foreign language skills better position them in the global labour market in South Korea and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Mobility is significant in the lives of migrants. It is an important avenue through which they can access agency as they search for a place that satisfies their social, economic, and cultural needs. For North Korean refugees in South Korea, in particular, who typically have never enjoyed freedom of movement – nationally or internationally – and who lack economic, social and cultural capital, onward migration is perhaps the only means through which to pursue cosmopolitan habitus. In this way, onward movement, even via temporary migration and potentially multiple refugee claims, constitutes an opportunity to secure newfound freedom and live a cosmopolitan life.

This study, despite the inevitably small number of research participants, contributes fresh perspectives to migration studies which have so far focused primarily on economic and material motivations underlying onward migration. By employing habitus as a theoretical framework, this chapter posits that the opportunity to shed North Korean identity and habitus, and embrace a cosmopolitan habitus and flexible new identity, are the main drivers for North Koreans' onward migration. Aspirations for cosmopolitanism, exemplified by a fervent desire to acquire English language skills, have compelled North Koreans to pursue onward migration to Australia. This suggests that motivations for onward migration can vary depending on the political and socio-cultural context of the initial host country and the refugees' country of origin. Furthermore, the study argues that onward migration does not necessarily indicate unsuccessful integration or inadequate settlement programs in the initial

asylum country; instead, it signifies that refugees have developed the capacity to act autonomously and facilitate their own integration through sustained and repeated movements.

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