

Articles

Education for
Young North Korean Migrants:
South Koreans' Ambivalent "Others"
and the Challenges of Belonging

Lee Soo-Jung

Introduction

Globalization, with the help of technological developments such as the transport and communication revolution, has brought about a dramatic increase in the movement of materials, population, capital, and information across national boundaries. The demise of the international Cold War order has also intensified this globalization process as it has opened various borders that had been until now difficult to cross. At this historic moment of globalization, we observe the unprecedented extent of migration across porous borders, and these migrants challenge us to reconsider the meaning of both belonging and citizenship. Our commonsensical understanding of coherence among one's residence, citizenship, and sense of belonging is called into question (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:9-10).

Nation-states have responded to these challenges in different ways, depending on their historical and socio-political contexts. In any case, negotiations over national boundaries are an inevitable process, and they are accompanied by the reconstitution of the stratified structure of citizenship. Here, I use "citizenship" to refer not only to issues of legal citizenship or nationality, but also to encompass "cultural citizenship" as well. The increase in numbers of migrants produces groups of people who have varying degrees and types of relationships with the nation-state. Some people have difficulty in achieving legal citizenship while others have relatively easy access to legal citizenship but have difficulty in achieving full citizenship due to sociopolitical boundaries. Thus, the concept of "cultural citizenship" has been developed to analyze the political, social, and cultural technologies that exclude people; and their strategies and negotiations in their endeavor to become equal citizens and thus challenge and change the very boundaries of citizenship (Castle and Davidson 2000; Ong 1996; Rosaldo 2003).

South Korea is no exception to the challenges of citizenship in a globalized world. Many types of migrant populations, including marriage

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migrants, migrant workers, Korean ethnic returnees, and North Korean migrants, have been dramatically increasing in South Korea, contributing to the rapid diversification of its society. With its changing demographics, South Korean society is confronted with new problems as previously established notions of Koreanness and national belonging no longer hold, and as it struggles to find the terms with which to define Koreans and Koreanness. In this process, various migrant groups are differentially included as, or excluded from, the category of “South Koreans” in legal, socio-cultural, and political terms.

Among these various groups, this article examines a particular group of people, young North Korean migrants, who have no problem acquiring legal citizenship because they are considered “Korean” but still have difficulty in achieving full citizenship in that they are intractably considered as “other” with North Korean characteristics due to their country of origin. They are given citizenship on their arrival in South Korea and enjoy special governmental supports that are not given to other migrants including other ethnic Koreans (e.g., from China). However, as we will examine shortly, these young migrants have not yet been integrated into South Korean society very successfully.

This article explores the nature of the difficulties these young North Korean migrants experience, the ways in which they negotiate these constraints, and in turn, how this negotiation shapes their sense of belonging. The wane of the Cold War facilitated globalization, but there are still many things on the ground that remake internal ideological/cultural/political boundaries that mediate against full citizenship. I argue that for this particular intra-national migrant population, these social processes take shape at the intersection of the demise of the international Cold War (a pivotal condition for globalization) and the locally persisting cold war even into this era of globalization and migration. In fact, while they also are products of the demise of the Cold War in the sense that they also could move into South Korea due to the collapse of the Socialist bloc, Korean national division and the persistent cold war culture that the division has produced contribute to both their nearly automatic gain of legal membership and their difficulties in achieving full membership. In particular, I examine education as a key context in which these young people experience these regimes of dis/incorporation.

The stories introduced in this article were collected in various settings over the last four years. Some are from my observations and conversations,

both in casual and official settings, with young North Korean migrants as well as teachers whom I met with for nearly two years (April 2007 – March 2009) while working at an NGO, established and funded by the South Korean government to support youth with migrant backgrounds.¹ I have kept relationships with some of them to this date and thus some of the data are drawn from my recent conversations with them. By paying attention to the stories of these young migrants about their school life, especially to the stories of their interactions with their teacher and peers, this article examines the issues of citizenship and belonging from their own perspectives.

Education and Migrants

One of the most visible indicators of globalization is the unprecedented influx of children of migrants in public schools. School is the first formal institution in which a child learns how to be a citizen of the society. For migrant youth, school also plays a crucial role for their transition to their new society in that it is the first sustained and meaningful institution where they participate in as members of the society. Through schooling, migrant youth transform themselves into citizens of new society (Suarez-Orozco 2001:3-8). Thus many countries consider school education as a pivotal venue for the incorporation of migrant students into the society and thus develop various policies to support them. In turn, however, education becomes a contested site where the question of appropriate and effective policies and practices to meet the challenges of increasing societal diversification are constantly debated and negotiated.

Schools, on the other hand, are implicated in political processes and discourses of the larger society. Through school education, nation-states have tried to develop citizens who internalize specific versions of national

1. Some of the data are drawn from the stories collected from April to September 2008, while I was working as an organizer for a research team to produce a policy report to assist young North Korean migrants with their adaptation to South Korean society. As a policy report, it encompassed diverse issues confronting these youth ranging from state policies, various social exclusion, and these migrants' "path finding" strategies (see Kim et al. 2008). For this article, I reanalyzed some of the data that are relevant to the issues of "othering" practices and sense of belonging in the field of education.

values. The increasing diversity of the population due to extensive migration presents new challenges to this national project as national identity and the responsibility of the government in educating those outside the mainstream become volatile issues (Valdes 1998). Nation-states have to transform school education to reflect and incorporate the diversity of their citizens and yet have an overarching set of shared values, ideals and goals to which all citizens are committed (Banks 2007). Public schools serve as a site of contact between differently positioned groups of people and thus play as a primary location for struggles over membership and citizenship (Bejerano 2005).

In case of South Korea, ‘multicultural education’ is considered the major educational framework for coping with the increasing numbers of migrant students at school. Education based on mythical purity and homogeneity has been under scrutiny, and a variety of programs have been implemented and practiced at school. While there are various approaches to “multicultural education,” scholars point out that current multicultural education in South Korea has certain limitations (Oh 2010; Park et al. 2010; Hwang 2010). First, multicultural education is identified to support migrant students who have various problems and issues. The vast majority of programs belong to this category of multicultural education based on a “deficit model” that considers migrants and their children as having deficient abilities, attitudes, and skills. Second, South Korean multicultural education tends to essentialize the concept of “culture.” This version of multiculturalism tends to see each individual as a member of a distinct cultural group that, in turn, stands for each nation-state. Thus it emphasizes essential differences among groups. This differentiation hinders us as we seek to critically analyze how boundaries and inequalities are constructed, maintained and redrawn in the process of struggles over the nature of the nation.

Issues of education for North Korean migrant youth are not considered within the framework of multiculturalism because they are officially regarded as “Korean nationals.” However, educational supports for these migrants are similar to the ones for other migrants in that they are mostly based on the “deficit” and “cultural contact” models for which their North Korean origins become problematic. Difference is emphasized while the way that difference is constructed and translates into inequality is not critically examined. By critically examining the ways young North Korean migrants are constructed as “other” at schools and how they negotiate this construction, this article

illuminates a peculiar way that South Korea deals with its growing diversity and questions of social membership. It will show that a remaining lingering cold war and division have informed South Korean education at a fundamental level, and thus the meaning of the Korean nation in spite of South Korea's longing for multiculturalism.

The Status of Young North Korean Migrants and their Situation in the Education System

As of December 2010, the number of North Koreans who have come to the South (henceforth, North Korean migrants) since the armistice agreement signed in July 1953 stands at about 20,407. Of these, the number who came (mostly for political reasons) between 1953 and 1993 is 641 (594 males and 47 females). The number began to rapidly increase in the mid-1990s and continues into the present. This dramatic increase was facilitated by two elements of the globalization process – the collapse of the socialist bloc and the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China. At the end of the 1980s, the North began to suffer from dire economic difficulties amid the collapse of the socialist economic bloc. The situation worsened following repeated floods and droughts in 1995 and thereafter. The socialist government could not distribute food to the people and thus North Koreans faced a drastic food shortage. There were reports that hundreds of thousands of North Koreans died of hunger between 1996 and 1998. It was in this context that many North Koreans escaped and that some began to arrive in the South. Diplomatic relations between South Korea and China were central to this migration because the majority of these North Koreans passed through China (Kim et al. 2008:28-9).

In recent years, the reasons for relocation from the North have become more diversified. In addition to political and economic reasons, the following two factors have been documented: desire to live in a more affluent society fanned by the influx of external information, and the chain migration effect of other family members already in the South (Yoon 2009:82-4). However, North Korean migrants can still be classified as “refugees,” as many escape due to political oppression and hunger, and risk the possibility that they will be repatriated and subject to arrest and severe punishment. This said, I appreciate

that these refugees also have some of the same social characteristics of “migrants” who choose to move out of the country to live in better conditions, one of the major and common factors for international migration. In either case, however, North Koreans who leave their country are a “particular kind of migrant” in that by choosing to come to the South, they have lost their right to return to their hometown and country (Kim et al. 2008:33-4).

As the reasons to come to the South have diversified, the composition of North Korean migrants has diversified too. Until the early 1990s, most North Korean migrants were uniformed male soldiers in their 20s. With the increase in the number of family migrants, the age groups have greatly diversified. As of November 2009, the number of migrants from age 6 to 20 stands at 1,711, 10% of all the migrants (Kyoyukinjeokjawonbu 2010).

Among this group, 1,417 or 82.8% attend elementary, middle, and high schools. Their dropout rate from middle and high schools stands at 8.8%, 6.3 times higher than the average South Korean middle and high school dropout rate (1.4%). Some dropouts manage to move on to college by attending unauthorized alternative secondary schools or taking a State-administered qualifying exam. However, many never return to school.

Like other socio-cultural groups, young North Korean migrants are a diverse group with diversified experiences. However, the majority is experiencing various difficulties in the South as the above-mentioned numbers signify. Typical difficulties that scholars note are poor academic performance, economic difficulties, familial problems, and issues concerning physical and mental health (Chung et al. 2006; Kim et al. 2008; Yoon 2009).

Many young North Korean migrants appear to fall behind average South Koreans in academic performance, particularly in higher levels of schooling. Migrants in their early stages tend to face challenges, as the education system, process, and contents differ from their previous education experience. A more serious problem for these young North Korean migrants is that many did not receive a proper education due to the collapse of the educational system in the North amid its economic difficulties. Furthermore, there was a significant lapse of education while they hid in China or another country, looking for a chance to come to the South.

Their economic status also influences their academic performance. In South Korea, youths’ relative academic competence is mostly developed through private education, and thus a strong correlation exists between one’s

economic status and academic performance. In this way, most North Korean families who tend to be economically poor are severely disadvantaged.

Young North Korean migrants' familial situations are also often problematic. Many migrants experience "family break-up" in the course of their migration. Some of these young migrants who live with their families also experience serious conflicts with other family members in an effort to adapt to South Korean society.² Moreover, with insufficient knowledge about the South Korean educational system, their parents often have difficulty providing proper schooling support.

At the same time, many young North Korean migrants have health issues because of experiencing malnutrition in the North resulting in a weak immune system. Many also suffer mental distress associated with the disintegration of their family and the hardships they endured while looking for a chance to come to the South. All these factors pose barriers to a stable, healthy life and educational achievement. These difficulties have escalating effects in the South Korean educational and social culture, characterized by fierce competition, efficiency, and uniformity.

The South Korean government has adopted various measures to help young migrants adapt to school life, focusing on the improvement of their academic achievement. For students at public schools, it provides them with special programs such as individual tutoring and counseling, cultural activities, and financial support. The level of support is much more extensive than educational support for average students from low-income families. One of middle school teachers, who is very supportive of students from North Korea, once spoke of his uneasiness about this discrepancy.

In terms of budget, students from North Korea receive more than ten times the assistance than kids from low-income families. I am concerned if parents of these kids get to know of this fact and complain about "reverse discrimination."

In spite of multi-layered personal and family difficulties and their genuine hope

2. Women and children tend to do better than male adults in adapting to their new living environment.

to improve academic performance, young North Korean migrants are often very ambivalent about these “special” school programs and assistance: indeed, many insist they do not want “special treatment” and prefer “to be left alone.” This resistance speaks to their precarious social location in South Korea as they experience “exclusion” in the practices of everyday life.

The Production of North Korean Migrants as “Other”

These young North Korean migrants’ assertion, “we don’t want special treatment,” is closely related to the historical background through which South Korea has produced North Korea as an “antagonistic other” in its nation-state building process and the transference of this image to North Korean migrants. Since the national division (1945) and the devastating Korean War (1950-1953), the two Korean states (South and North) began endless competition over the legitimacy to represent the Korean nation. In this context, South Korea has developed its national identity based on an ideology that is anti-North Korea, and has produced its citizen-subjects to be anything but North Korean. North Korea has been seen as a dreadful enemy of the nation, and North Koreans have been both demonized as inhumane puppets of the North Korean state and pitied as brethren who should be saved by South Korea (Lee 2006:7-11, 37-8). In spite of the local and global changes over the last decade, including South Korea’s transition from military to civilian rule, and the global wane of the Cold War, this ambivalence persists (Chon 2000). These images have been transferred to North Korean migrants in South Korea in a peculiar way. On the one hand, they are still seen as a potentially threatening enemy, and thus objects of suspicion and distrust. This perspective combines assumptions that these migrants might have internalized negative aspects of the North Korean communist system and that it might be precisely these inhuman characteristics learned under the communist rule that have allowed them to cruelly leave behind their families in the North. Their difficulties in the South are often related to “remnants of socialist culture that they internalized in the North” and they are considered as “distrustful people who have betrayed their families and homeland.” On the other hand, they are considered as pitiful brothers who have suffered under North Korean tyranny and thus human beings in need of sympathy and salvation. Also, as their move to South Korea

is considered the act of denial of North Korea, they are positioned as the proof of the legitimacy and victory of the South Korean state over North Korea. According to this perspective, North Korean migrants are those who “have to forget everything they learned and experienced before coming south” and who “have to reborn as South Koreans,” as one of the students commented.

While on the surface, these two perspectives seem to be opposed, in both cases North Korean migrants are not seen as equal citizens of South Korea or as diverse individuals with different experiences, personalities, and desires. They are “otherized” as “a group” with North Korean characteristics that should thus be eliminated but are understood to be in fact quite intractable. In other words, while they are required to transform their identity from North Korean migrants/refugees into South Korean citizens, they are at once considered to be “un-assimilable” subjects.

This ambivalent perspective is well reflected in the South Korean government’s policy toward these migrants. Upon arrival, they face interrogation by military personnel who evaluate their backgrounds and their motivations for coming to the South to assure that they are not northern spies. After their “genuine” motives are proven, they are automatically given legal citizenship based on the South Korean constitution that claims North Korean territory as its own and thus North Koreans as its citizens. This entitlement of legal citizenship is only the first step toward becoming South Korean. Beginning with the three-month education program at *Hanawon*, an orientation facility operated by the Ministry of Unification, migrants from the North are rendered “problematic subjects” from whom all the markers of being North Korean should be erased in order to transform them into proper citizen-subjects of South Korea. At *Hanawon*, they are asked to learn how to speak, act, and think as South Koreans (Choo 2006:583; Chung 2009:20-2). The educational program at *Hanawon* is distinctive among migrant/refugee programs in the world in that it is practiced in an isolated place, separated from the everyday lives of South Koreans. Over three liminal months, North Korean migrants collectively eat and sleep while they are trained to be South Koreans according to strict rules. While this special program is considered a special and favorable support for North Korean migrants that other types of migrants cannot enjoy, a closer look at the program – both in terms of its content and form – reveals that it is based on the view of North Korean migrants as more problematic than any other migrants. In fact, one of the officers of Ministry

of Education suggested that one of the most important roles of *Hanawon* is to “politically re-socialize” North Korean migrants.

After *Hanawon*, they are given special provisions and benefits, including public housing, financial subsidies for settlement and health care, that are not awarded to other migrants. In this way, they become special beneficiaries of the South Korean welfare system. This subjectification of North Korean migrants as both potential enemies and welfare beneficiaries has contributed to their negative image among the South Korean public. They are perceived as strangers who have problems assimilating and are social burdens that drain state resources.

In addition to state policies, South Korean media representation of North Korean migrants also contributes to the formation of these negative images. Because the number of North Korean migrants is only around 20,000, South Koreans still have very limited direct and daily interactions with North Korean migrants. Thus, South Koreans’ view of North Korean migrants is influenced by media images as well as by longstanding images of North Korea. As Kim (2009) argues, the South Korean media’s reports of North Korean migrants focus primarily on their difficulties, rendering them as problematic subjects for social integration and social burdens.

The influence of state policies and media representation can be assessed by examining South Koreans’ perspectives on North Korean migrants. A recent study on South Koreans’ attitude toward different migrant groups shows that their attitudes about North Korean migrants’ thinking, emotions, and behavior are much more negative than toward other migrant populations, including those marrying migrants’ offspring, Korean Chinese, and foreign migrant workers (Yang et al. 2008:127-92). Indeed for South Koreans, North Korean migrants represent the clearest “other” who has ambivalent characteristics.

Struggles with Ambivalence: Young North Korean Migrants at School

Public schools tend to embody the relationships and tensions of the larger society. Through school curriculum that reflects a nationalist agenda and through attitudes and actions of peers and teachers, certain groups of students – those who are related to elements that are considered outside of, and

problematic to, the nation – have a disadvantaged position at school. Muslim students in “the West” occupy such problematic position especially after 9.11 (Abu El-Haj 2002; Fine 2008; Keaton 2006). They are extremely otherized because of their religious background that is regarded as being inimical to “Western” or “American” values and traditions. Young North Korean migrants also have to struggle with various “othering practices” at schools. This othering is much more complicated than Muslims in “the West.” As I discussed earlier, North Korea in South Korean representations such as textbooks and media is dangerous and inferior “other.” Young North Korean migrants are constantly positioned to represent this dangerous and inferior North Korea in various ways at schools. This is a similar process experienced by Muslims in “the West.” Differently from them, however, young North Koreans are expected to negate North Korea and become loyal citizens of South Korea. This process, in turn, is seen as an easy process because they belong to the same ethnic community as South Koreans for which South Korea has representational power. On the other hand, however, the process of negation is considered ultimately impossible due to their difference by virtue of their North Korean origins and experience. This ambivalent disposition of South Korean peers and teachers toward young North Korean migrants makes it very hard for these migrants to develop a sense of belonging.

Young North Korean migrants’ struggles to achieve a sense of belonging begin on the first day of their schooling. Because South Korean students have little chance to meet North Koreans in person, these young migrants are initially considered as objects of curiosity and inquiry. Many have relayed their stories about their first days at school when they become “a famous figure like entertainers” among peers. High school student Gwangcheol recounted his first day of school experience in middle school as follows.

When I first went to (a South Korean) school, I was a hero. I was surrounded by armies of kids who were curious about North Koreans. They had a lot of questions... such as whether I had any family member who died of hunger.

He was sure that all the students at his school came to his classroom to “see” him for the first few days. He was subjected to questions regarding North Korea, many of which were based on his new classmates’ partial and

stereotypical understandings. As time went on, however, they lost interest in him, and made fun of his “differences” considering them “outdated.”

Another high school student, Minsu, talked to me about several uncomfortable moments when he was otherized by his classmates.

I get these questions all the time. “Have you ever tasted this in the North? Have you ever seen this in the North? If I say yes, they think that I am lying. They think that there is nothing in North Korea.

His classmates had stereotypical images of North Korea as a “starving country,” and thus did not even believe Minsu’s comment that he had apples in the North. They considered Minsu a representative of North Korea: they wanted to check if there were apples in North Korea assuming that the answer would be negative according to their stereotypes. Minsu’s statement of having eaten apples at home was then considered siding with North Korea. They called him a liar who was defending North Korea. This case exhibits the potentially dangerous consequences of expressing any “positive” aspect of North Korean society. Minsu also told me that the worst case he experienced was when his classmate called him a “red” as he did not confirm their stereotypes. Both Minsu and Gwangcheol’s cases reveal the way in which they were initially considered as objects of curiosity, but then turned into representatives of the enemy. Either way, they cannot escape from their social location as the premier “other” of South Koreans.

This identification of young North Korean migrants with North Korea is also practiced by teachers. College student Cheolmin shared his experience of a history class in his high school years.

We were learning about 6.25 in history class. The teacher suddenly asked me about which side (North or South) invaded first. I knew it was the North. I learned it after coming to the South. However, I did not answer. I was mad at him. Why did he ask ME that question? Then he said, “Look at him. He does not know about the truth of 6.25, because he learned it wrong in the North.” I was so mad. I had lived here (in the South) for 5 years.

The history teacher considered Cheolmin a representative of North Korea even

though Cheolmin was reluctant to identify himself as such. His silence to the teacher's question was an act of denial to the teacher's positioning. However, the teacher interpreted his silence as conforming to the North Korean interpretation of the Korean War. This experience made Cheolmin afraid of the history and social affairs class for a long time. It also gave him a deep confusion about his identity. He had a recurring question about whether he was a real South Korean for the rest of high school years.

Other North Korean migrant students also often talk about their "bad experience" in history, social affairs or ethics classes. They are often singled out to talk about North Korean perspectives and experiences in the North, and are expected to negatively comment on them. Whenever the class covers issues of North Korea or national unification, they "feel like they committed some kind of sin." They report that some teachers "talk about '*ppalgaeng* (reds)' embarrassingly often, and showed their anger and hatred toward North Korea." These young North Koreans "feel like everybody in class is looking at" them. Many of them have their families in the North.

To Hide or Not to Hide: Managing Othering Practices

Confronted by the social stereotypes and discrimination experienced at schools, young North Korean migrants have adopted several strategies for negotiating their identities and acquiring social membership. Whether to reveal or hide their origins becomes a primary issue for these strategies (Kim et al. 2008:83-6). Because their North Korea origins are the greatest source of their uneasiness in South Korea, many try to hide them. Their parents, having been informed about South Koreans' negative feelings toward North Korea and North Korean migrants by other North Korean migrants already settled in South Korea, suggest that their children hide their origins from the outset. While many follow this suggestion, others do not hide their background at their first school in the South but, after painful experiences, begin to do so at the second school. Some say that they are from Gangwon-do, a northeastern province of South Korea, where the regional accent is similar to that of North Korea due to its proximity. When it is hard to convince people that they are from South Korea due to their strong accent and lack of information about South Korean society, others say that they are Korean Chinese. Even though

the Korean Chinese experience certain discrimination in South Korea, they think it is better than being known as North Korean migrants. Such efforts aside, many admit that it is not so easy to disguise, and that they are constantly worried that their real origins will be revealed. Several North Korean youth mentioned they did not talk much at school because they were worried that their classmates would notice their origins due to their strong accent. The most common way of concealing their origins was to quickly replace their North Korean accent with a South Korean one. But even acquiring a South Korean accent did not completely remove their sense of insecurity.

Sunhui, who came to the South a few years ago, is a middle school student who succeeded in acquiring a South Korean accent, but she still worries about being discovered to be a North Korean. Due to her bad experience in elementary school, where she felt isolated and alienated because she had come from the North, she hid her origins at middle school except from a few teachers. Nevertheless, she has continued to feel insecure about the possibility of disclosure and has decided not to tell anybody when she goes to high school. Negation of an important part of herself, her origins, in public spaces, also has a negative impact on her sense of self. “I am always debating who I am. It is difficult to know,” Sunhui said.

There are some youth who try to reveal their origins even though they are well aware of native South Koreans’ tendency to stereotype. Most of them are critical of South Koreans’ discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes. Some feel a certain responsibility to correct these misperceptions. This effort, however, often comes with a strategy to distinguish themselves from other North Korean migrants. They position themselves as exceptional from the negative stereotypes. It is ironic to distance themselves from fellow North Korean migrants to assert themselves as proper North Korean migrants. Many feel a great deal of psychological tension.

For example, high school student Gangmin squarely tells everybody that he came from North Korea. He argues that when he tells people that he is from North Hamgyeong province – one of the provinces in North Korea – some of his fellow students have asked him, “Why are you saying that openly when others are anxious to conceal it?” However, he thinks he cannot change the fact that he was born there. Also, he has decided to feel pity for those who look down upon North Koreans. According to him, it is those native South Korean students who have a problem when they form stereotypes, and thus

he believes he should not cower. Still, he has to struggle with various forms of stigmatization, and thus confessed that he sometimes finds himself wanting to be Chinese to make it easier to deal with native South Korean peers.

Stigmatization can be thought about as the social exclusion from meaningful relations. The stigma of being a “North Korean migrant” is threatening because it means exclusion from meaningful social networks in South Korea and thus from full membership. Thus, young North Korean migrants adopt strategies to hide their origins in order to evade the effects of stigmatization and thus live as full members of South Korea. However, by hiding their origin to prevent this exclusion, these young North Korean migrants often suffer insecurity, alienation, and discomfort. Those who chose to reveal their origin also feel tensions as they are subjected to stigmatization. In sum, regardless of which strategies they take, young North Korean migrants are struggling to cope with everyday “othering” practices of native South Koreans.

This is the very reason many North Korean migrants do not want “special treatment” and want “to be left alone” at school. Because they have to constantly struggle with othering practices to the extent that they consider if they need to hide their origin or not, being “outed” or “singled out” in public as North Korean by other people would be devastating. They refuse to be grouped by virtue of their origins.

Thus, it is not surprising to find out that Mr. Kim, a teacher who is famous for his devotion to young North Korean students at a middle school in Seoul, has a relatively bad reputation among those same students at his school. In the students’ words, he chases them all the time. His actions to help them, however well-intentioned, are unwarranted. By singling out young North Korean migrant students, his actions publicly associate young North Korean migrants with the identity they don’t want to have and signaled to other students that students from North Korea are problems.

In a similar vein, many migrants also did not like cultural activities related to North Korea and North Koreans organized for them. Sunhui once told me:

The teacher took us to see the movie “*Keurosing* (Crossing).”³ Only us,

3. *Keurosing* is a 2008 South Korean film about a tragic story of a North Korean defector and his family.

those from North Korea. I was very upset. I did not want to go. Why did he want us to see the movie? Only us? I don't understand. If it is a good movie, worthy of seeing, he should have shown to everybody in the class.

Neither South nor North Koreans: Forging a New Identity

...[I]dentities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from,' so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. Stuart Hall (1996:4)

One of the consequences of native South Koreans' othering practices is that the stereotypes and discrimination against young North Korean migrants strengthen their sense of a divide between themselves and native South Koreans. By doing so, it mitigates young North Korean migrants' possibility of becoming "South Korean" even though many really wanted to be. Sunhui, who "wanted to erase her North Korean identity and become a perfect South Korean," has "finally realized that we (North Korean migrants) can never become South Koreans."

Most of young North Korean migrants I met constantly distinguished *uri* (us) from *nambansaram* (South Koreans). This does not mean that they do not appreciate their legal citizenship in South Korea. As Choo (2006) points out, North Koreans learned about the importance of citizenship while they were seeking refuge in China: where they are often ill-treated due to their illegal status and threatened with repatriation to North Korea. Thus, they claim their legal membership as a South Korean and appreciate various rights they can entertain with it. They "don't have to fear for persecution," "can be well-fed and educated," and "can go anywhere in the world with the South Korean passport."

However, many distinguish social membership from legal membership to exhibit their sense of alienation, as Sumin's comments reveal.

I know that I am a citizen of *Taehanminguk* (the Republic of Korea). But I don't feel like that I am a *nambansaram* (a South Korean). I don't feel that

people of South Korea will acknowledge me as such if they figure out that I am from North Korea.

Her words suggest hesitation and a tenuous relationship with the South Korean nation-state. She acknowledges that she is a citizen of South Korea, but she has to wrestle with her sense of belonging in South Korea. Her careful distinction between legal citizenship and a sense of belonging reveals the ways in which citizenship in a divided nation is a complex matter for those who are defined as outsiders due to their previous belonging to the other half of the imagined Korean national community.

For most young North Korean migrants, their sense of an “us” that is distinguished from “South Koreans” is closely connected to North Korea. However, this is not because they prefer the North Korean political system or want to associate themselves as “North Korean citizens.” They all appreciate that the North Korean political system is problematic, and they do not want to belong to North Korea as a political entity. They articulate their association with North Korea in terms of culture, people and memory. For them, compared to South Koreans whom they experience as “individualistic,” “competitive,” and “selfish,” North Koreans are more “collectivistic,” “cooperative,” and “altruistic.” North Korean society as they remember it is where “no people complain about children who play and make noise until the sunset” and “neighbors know how many spoons and chopsticks they each have” and “full of friends they can play with,” compared to the South Korean society where “people constantly complain about neighbors’ noises,” “nobody knows who are their neighbors,” and “there are no friends due to busy extra-curricular schedules.” These nostalgic images of the North Korean people and culture are a response to South Korean society’s alienating perception that the migrants are the inferior and problematic ‘other,’ rather than a sign of their own genuine belonging in the North Korean society. Thus, as Jihun mentioned, the most embarrassing question they get from native South Koreans is about which country they consider to be their motherland.

People tend to ask, “What do you think of as your motherland? South Korea? Or North Korea?” It is a really embarrassing question.

Many young migrants told me that they get similar questions all the time.

They do not want to identify themselves as North Korean per se, but they are not South Korean enough. Thus, many suffer from an identity crisis. “I don’t know who really I am,” they lament.

However, some create a new identity out of that crisis by negating binary logics. Jihun explained how he answered people’s questions about his identity. “Then, I tell them my motherland is *Hanbando* (the Korean Peninsula).” Explaining a similar situation, another student from North Korea told me that he had declared that his homeland is *Koria* (Korea). They think that the Korean words ‘*Namhan*’ (what South Korea is called in South Korea), ‘*Bukhan*’ (what North Korea is called in South Korea), ‘*Namjoseon*’ (what South Korea is called in North Korea), and ‘*Bukjoseon*’ (what North Korea is called in North Korea) already signify that the enunciator has taken sides with one part of the divided nation. They don’t want to choose between South Korea for which they have to distinguish legal citizenship and a sense of belonging and North Korea for which they have to draw a clear line between a political system and culture/people. Rather, they create their own imaginary homeland – a sense of belonging - that includes both South and North Korea. Thus, they encompass both Koreas with phrases such as “*Korean peninsula*” or “*Korea*.” In so doing, they try to erase the existing border between the two Koreas that has been created under the Cold War order. In these ways, they negotiate the multilayered construction of their associations and affiliations. At the same time, they push the boundaries of South and North Korean nationalism based on the dualistic logic, us versus the enemy. Many put this position into practice by secretly maintaining contacts with their friends and families in the North, a practice that is illegal under both Korean governments (Chung 2008:29-31). Others migrate to other countries where they do not need to constantly negotiate their identity as South or North Koreans. Yeoungman, who re-migrated to Britain after dropping out of high school in South Korea, said that even if it is very inconvenient to live in a foreign country where he could not speak the language properly, he has “peace in mind” because he can introduce himself as “just Korean.”

In spite of these efforts, however, young North Korean migrants are not yet capable of openly speaking about their new identity or of forming a collective identity based on their shared historical and cultural experiences. Rather, they are individually experimenting with their goals and fates. This shows their precarious social location as border crossers of a divided nation, a

nation that is still experiencing cold-war antagonism in this globalized world. We need to see how these young North Korean migrants' various experiments develop as their numbers increase and as domestic and international political circumstances change.

Implications for Educating Young North Korean Migrants

As the primary institution where young North Korean migrants encounter fellow young citizens and the nation-state, schools play a key role in shaping citizenship and their sense of belonging. Thus, supporting these migrants' success should not be limited to helping these students' academic achievement. Or, to support their academic achievement in a better way, we should consider the ways in which these students are represented and positioned at schools, and how this affects their sense of belonging. In fact, schooling is not just about teaching academic and practical skills but a set of social practices that are embedded in power relations, social interactions, and cultural meanings that, in turn, influence the outcomes of schooling (Bartlett 2007).

The effects of "othering" young North Korean migrants at schools have particular ramifications on their education. These students' sense of exclusion translated into strategies that often served to alienate themselves and reify their status as "other." This, however, does not call for a banal sense of multiculturalism that aims to increase awareness and understanding about North Korea and North Koreans. This may result in the reproduction of young North Koreans as "other." Rather we should critically examine how education plays a critical role in the construction of the symbolic boundaries of a nation and how these boundaries organize social practice. We also should consider the disruptions of boundaries and multiple affiliations of these migrants not as signs of disloyalty and threats to social cohesion, but as a source for new visions of identity and belonging that are required to pursue national unification in this multicultural and globalized world.

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Lee Soo-Jung (lee.soojung@gmail.com) is a full-time instructor at the University of North Korean Studies. Her research interests include in the field of anthropology of the issues of division culture and subjects, everyday life of North Koreans, and post-division projects. She served as a vice director of the Rainbowyouth Center, a South Korean NGO that works with youth with migrant backgrounds from April 2007 to March 2009.

Abstract

This article explores the nature of the difficulties young North Korean migrants experience in South Korea, the ways in which they negotiate these constraints, and in turn how this negotiation shapes their sense of belonging. The wane of the Cold War facilitated globalization, but there are still many things on the ground that remake internal ideological/cultural/political boundaries that mediate against full citizenship. I argue that while young North Korean migrants also are products of the demise of the Cold War, Korean national division and the persistent cold war culture that the division has produced contribute to both their nearly automatic gain of legal membership and their difficulties in achieving full membership. In particular, I examine education as a key context in which these young people experience these regimes of dis/incorporation. Constructed as an ambivalent “other” at schools by peers and teachers based on their stereotypes of North Korea and the transference of these stereotypes to North Korean migrants, these young migrants are struggling to have a sense of belonging by developing various strategies. I suggest considering the disruptions of boundaries and multiple affiliations of these migrants not as signs of disloyalty and threats to social cohesion, but as a source for new visions of identity and belonging that are required to pursue national unification in this multicultural and globalized world.

Keywords: young North Korean migrants, education, citizenship, sense of belonging, othering