The Geopolitical Ethnic Networks for De-bordering: North Korean Defectors in Los Angeles and London

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The transnational ethnic networks developed by North Korean defectors are factors in the (de-)bordering of North Korea. Ethnographic fieldwork in two destinations—London and Los Angeles—demonstrates, first, that through their practices of financial and social remittances, the defectors have proved that North Korea's border control is porous, and second, that the defectors have developed global and regional networks to challenge North Korean sovereignty. In the interaction between the defectors' daily lives and the geopolitical environment, these geopolitical ethnic networks play important roles. This contribution to the debate on borders and defectors encourages us to shift our attention from nation-states' laws and policies on border-crossers to the agency of the border-crossers themselves.

Keywords　North Korea, ethnic networks, London, Los Angeles, remittances, bordering

Introduction

This study uses the concept of "geopolitical ethnic networks" to explain how the transnational ethnic networks of North Korean defectors[1] have developed and become factors in the (de-)bordering of North Korea. Here, as in previous studies (Newman and Paasi 1998; van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002; van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005; Rumford 2006), de-bordering refers to various social and cultural practices and narratives that challenge and reproduce inclusion and exclusion. The first step in contesting the border is escaping its confines. While most North Korean escapees flee to South Korea and settle there, others eventually move to other countries, including the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Germany, and the United States (US). Through these multiple mobilities, North Koreans have developed geopolitical ethnic networks (Shin 2018, 2019) whose economic and political activities have been critical in de-bordering North

Korea. By drawing attention to border-crossers' activities as factors in their agency rather than to nation states' laws and policies on refugees and defectors, this article contributes to the academic debates on bordering as a process.

I examine how the defectors' activities, both economic (in the form of remittances to North Korea) and political (the formation of regional and global networks) contribute to de-bordering North Korea (see Gelézeau, De Ceuster, and Delissen 2013a for de-bordering Korea) and the creation of a North Korean nation outside the state proper. Previous geopolitical and border studies have discussed the physical aspects of bordering dynamics. Undoubtedly, physical mobility is a significant de-bordering practice in and of itself, but it has become evident that bordering and de-bordering should be understood as both physical and mental constructs (Agnew 2008; Armbruster 2011; Krasteva 2017). Indeed, de-bordering is defined as the "simultaneous processes of boosting cross-border interactions, through the implementation of facilitating mechanisms compatible with the exercise of sovereign power" (Leandro and Duarte 2020, xx). As the mobility of people, cash, information, narratives, and culture (Amelung and Machado 2019; Németh 2017; Tervonen and Enache 2017) has accelerated, focus has shifted to migrants' movements. These studies do not include, however, North Korean defectors' transnational ethnic networks that facilitate de-bordering practices by defying North Korea's border control.

De-bordering consists of two post-escape activities: remittances and political activities that re-imagine North Korea (S. Choi 2014). These two activities were chosen for this discussion specifically on account of their economic and political impact on the de-bordering of North Korea. Remittances that provided family members with the money to buy necessities and even black-market goods have had a subversive economic impact on the country because they circumvent border controls in a covert act of de-bordering. And global and regional political networks that raise awareness or endeavor to create governments-in-exile present an overt challenge to North Korea's physical border. North Korean defectors' transnational ethnic networks have developed for and from these activities. These networks specifically connect them to their families and friends at home and to other networks that create an association of defectors fighting for political reform at home.

This article asks two questions. How has North Korean defectors' networking been shaped by their remaining connected to families and friends at home as well as forging connections with other North and South Koreans abroad? How have social remittances (Hoang 2019; Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011) and alternative political activities challenged North Korea's border and authority? Here, social remittances refer to the information, ideas, attitudes, and practices that defectors absorb then transmit to their home society through contact with home-based social networks (Levitt 1998; Rapoport 2016).

Founded on the results of ethnographic fieldwork, this study expands on

the relational and processual approaches to investigating the interaction between geopolitical dynamics and migrants' daily lives. The author conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation to document the de-bordering practices of North Korean defectors in two representative and quite different locations: London and Los Angeles. The purpose of selecting these disparate locations is to demonstrate that although the defectors' activities are alike, their situations sometimes affect the results of their efforts. First, it was found that North Korean defectors in both cities remained in contact with their families at home through remittances and verbal or electronic communications. These transnational networks, centered on material and informational mobility, are in opposition to border control. Second, networks of North Korean defectors engaged in political activities meant to undermine the existing sovereignty. Although these networks did not challenge border control directly, they did create narratives for alternative political power. By means of that interaction between the daily lives of the North Korean diaspora and the geopolitical environment, these networks play important roles.

To establish the above arguments, I divide the rest of the article into six sections. The first two sections first demonstrate how transnational ethnic networks develop into geopolitical ethnic networks through de-bordering. I then present a summary of my research methods followed by a comparison of North Korean defectors in the Los Angeles and London Koreatowns. The first finding section examines the consequences of remittances as geopolitical activities for de-bordering and the combined impact of financial and social remittances on de-bordering, and the second illustrates the regional and then the global networks that connect North Korean defectors living abroad. While these networks have not had a significant impact on moving reforms forward, they suggest alternatives to the existing North Korean regime. I conclude by discussing how the activities of the geopolitical ethnic networks engage international agents in the de-bordering of North Korea.

Literature Review: The Rise of Geopolitical Ethnic Networks

I have suggested the concept of "geopolitical ethnic networks" to define the encounter between transnational ethnic networks and geopolitical dynamics, something that by and large has been overlooked. Although the previous literature has touched on the topic of transnational ethnic networks, the implications of defectors' networks have not been clearly delineated and discussed. Existing debates on transnational ethnic networks (Kim 2013; Mitchell 2000; Wayland 2004) have concerned migrants' daily lives and the results of social forces such as globalization. It is only recently that defectors' lives have been studied specifically in terms of globalization, the development of communication technologies, and

the growth of global organizations (Leurs and Ponzanesi 2018).

Those studies that do reference transnational ethnic networks tend to concentrate on ethnic businesses (for example, see Kariv et al. 2009; Rusinovic 2008; Yeung 2000, 2008; Etemad and Wright 2003). Following ground-breaking work by Mark Granovetter (1973) on the importance of interpersonal ties, several studies focused on the relevance of shared ethnicity and culture to international businesses. Geography and migrant studies argue that asylum-seeker (Barak-Bianco and Raijman 2015) and refugee entrepreneurship (Desai, Naudé, and Stel 2021) relies on social embeddedness and migrants' patronage to establish itself (Bagwell 2008; Katila and Wahlbeck 2012; Portes 1999; Wong and Ng 2002; Müller and Wehrhahn 2013; Jones, Ram, and Theodorakopoulos 2010; Miera 2008; Mitchell 2000; Yeung 1997).

According to these studies, ethnic connections and therefore ethnic networks are invaluable for building trust in transnational entrepreneurship (Chen and Tan 2009; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Yet there are those that suggest that the significance of the relationship between ethnic networks and business has been exaggerated (Hsu and Saxenian 2000). Others cite the exclusion of transnational ethnic networks developed for political change, knowledge sharing, and religious purposes (Friesen and Collins 2017; Shin 2019; Wayland 2004), as well as those ethnic networks that offer housing, education, and psychological comfort (Bloch 2014; Datta et al. 2006) to individuals. In the case of defectors, including refugees and asylum seekers, transnational ethnic networks play an important role in social bonding (Hanley et al. 2018) and support for post-settlement life in terms of, for example, employment and housing. Refugees' first, second, and even third choices of destination tend toward populations that have a history of accepting ethnic and co-ethnic refugees (Rüegger and Bohnet 2018), as they know that an ethnic network will already be in place.

Although economic migrants also depend on ethnic networks to a degree, studies have shown that refugees, who cannot depend on support from home, have a more urgent need for them. Some studies in countries including Canada have found that refugees struggle to integrate economically into the host economy and have higher unemployment and poverty rates (DeVoretz, Pivnenko, and Beiser 2004) than economic migrants. It follows that refugees are more dependent on ethnic networks for support. However, a study of refugees in the United States showed that they made greater strides than economic migrants in their employment (Cortes 2004), proving their self-reliance. This could be because defectors tend to be more flexible and are not averse to repeat migration, being enticed to move by the allure of internationalized job markets (Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford 2016; Vertovec 2004).

From these increasingly complicated migrations, ethnic and multi-ethnic networks have emerged (Wang, Zhang, and Wu 2015), connecting refugees, their families and friends, and other collaborative actors across their society of origin,

their destination society, and successive destination societies (Bashi 2007; Olwig 2007; Shin 2018; Sperling 2014). Observing the case of the multi-ethnic networks of North Korean defectors (Chung 2005; Shin 2018), it becomes apparent that various ethnic Koreans, including Korean-Chinese and South Korean migrants, play roles in sending remittances and organizing political activities.

In the case of North Koreans, their defection automatically bars them from communicating with those remaining in their home country or from sending money and information home (Seo 2019). Now, North Korean ethnic networks become geopolitical in nature as the existence and practices of these networks circumvent border controls (Su and Cai 2020; Rafiq 2020; Carbonara 2019). Although their origin society's borders are almost impenetrable, defectors do connect with their family members through remittances (Hoang 2019; Levitt 1998; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). The geopolitical ethnic networks that make the remittances possible overcome the country's dominion over everything coming in from outside.

Previous studies demonstrate that diaspora groups contribute to both stability and instability in their respective homelands through remittances and other forms of activities (Lyons 2004; Horst 2008). Lum et al.'s (2013) analysis indicates that government policy as a barrier to diaspora involvement can provoke opposition to the government and result in destabilizing activities which are an extension of the geopolitical ethnic networks that were started by the remittances sent home by refugees. Now, members of geopolitical ethnic networks begin to be politically disruptive and seek to unsettle the status quo in a way that can in extreme cases incite civil war (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Cederman, Buhaug, and Rød 2009). Should the desired upheaval occur, these defectors' discourses and networks are prepared to offer financial assistance and political advice once their homelands begin implementing reforms (Dietz 2000; Kolstø 1999; Korobkov and Zaionchkovskaia 2004; Le Bail and Shen 2008; Ma 1993; Song 2017).

The physical border between North Korea and China has long been known to have weaknesses that defectors exploit to make their escape. The role of Chinese actors in the transmission of remittances such as outside information (Ha 2011) and cash remittances (Lee and Gray 2017) to North Korea has recently attracted growing interest. But most studies have not acknowledged the importance of defectors' activities outside the Korean peninsula, which has led to a failure to explicitly connect the flow of remittances and political activity to the issue of de-bordering and re-bordering.

Generally, studies on North Korean defectors (Chubb 2013; Jeon et al. 2005; Gelézeau, De Ceuster, and Delissen 2013b; Ko, Chung, and Oh 2004, for example) are narrowly focused on the Korean peninsula and border areas (Chubb 2013) or in relation to North Korea (Lee and Gerber 2009; Song and Denney 2019). Studies on the North Korean diaspora (Yoon 2001) have focused on

defectors' traumatic experiences and resettlement (Chung 2008; Davis 2006; Eom 2009; Jeon et al. 2005). In recent years, however, several anthropological studies have begun to examine the experiences (Chun 2018; Chung 2014; Jung, Dalton, and Willis 2017; Lee and Lee 2014; Lee, 2019a, 2019c) and political activities (Lee 2019b) of North Korean defectors who have relocated to the global North. Developing this trend toward examining the relations between daily lives and geopolitical bordering, this article focuses on the financial flows and political activities shaping the geopolitical ethnic networks that challenge the existing North Korean border (Shin 2018, 2020).

Theoretical Framework: De-bordering Effects of Remittances and Geopolitical Activities

North Korean defectors' remittances and geopolitical activities made possible by geopolitical ethnic networks are acts of de-bordering. First, sending financial remittances to relatives in North Korea has promoted the development of geo-political ethnic networks. Since North Korea prohibits an influx of money from Western countries, sending remittances involves networks not only between defectors and their families but also informal actors such as brokers who relay the money (Hastings 2016, 116). Globalization (or technology) has expedited the sending of remittances and the aid they offer the families and communities in the origin countries (Bakker 2015; Hudson 2008). Remittances to North Korea are usually funneled through North Koreans living in Japan, China, and South Korea. According to Haggard and Noland (2017), approximately 80 percent of the respondents they surveyed send money to North Korea, with average remittances ranging between 1.5 and 2 million won a year (US$1,350-1,800). The annual value of remittances from South Korea was estimated by the South Korean Ministry of Unification at around US$10 million.

Opinions on the relationship between remittances and development are mixed, and much is still unknown about the outcomes of remittances sent to and from the displaced (Vargas-Silva 2017). Many studies have found they have a positive effect on economic growth, poverty reduction, and consumption levels (Adams and Page 2005; Chami, Fullenkamp, and Jahjah 2005; Stark and Lucas 1988; Meyer and Shera 2017; Taylor 1992). But negative consequences, including economic burdens on the migrants themselves, have also been observed (Kozel and Alderman 1990; Stahl and Arnold 1986). What does tend to hold true is that the effect on low-income countries is noticeably positive, while the stimulus of remittances is not quite so obvious among upper-middle and high-income countries (Issahaku, Abor, and Amidu 2018). One study on the case of a closed economy like North Korea's (Kim 2014) illustrates how remittances are making a significant impact on the country's regional economy. The provision of money has

subsidized some families' long-term business plans, while for others it financed their economic networking in the *Jangmadang* (market in Korean) located between the Hamgyung region of North Korea and Jilin Province in China. The remittances also afford their families the means to buy luxury items such as cell phones (Kim 2014).

As financial remittances have increased in recent years, so too have social remittances, and their combined effects on the de-bordering of North Korea have been noticeable (Bansak and Simpson 2019). Social remittances include the information, attitudes, and practices that migrants and defectors adopt as their own (Luttmer and Singhal 2011) then export to their home societies when they contact their families and other social networks (Levitt 1998; Rapoport 2016) during the transfer of money. Both types of remittances circumvent the regulations that prevent mobilities and flows of money and communication, and they are instrumental in de-bordering North Korea. This is an example of political bottom-up activism that challenges the existing regime and identity of the controlled society (Hartnett 2020; Rapoport 2016).

Second, geopolitical activities by like-minded refugees united for political change create geopolitical ethnic networks intent on de-bordering the North Korean regime or at least initiating reforms. The previous literature demonstrates that defectors' political activism can lead to alternative sovereignty in the form of North Korean governments-in-exile (Song 2017), as well as Tibetan (McConnell 2016) and Polish (Engel 1993) governments-in-exile. According to the findings of this study, to effectively challenge the existing sovereignty of North Korea, the defectors' political activities have to be organized, which has involved the establishment and development of regional and global networks. Mostly thanks to the increased encounters generated by multiple-destination migration, the North Korean defectors in the study were able to enlist support for and from these networks anywhere in the world. As a result, the networks became a worldwide organization, connecting North Korean defectors in different countries and friends and families at home.

De-bordering is not solely a matter of policy and laws (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018) but takes place socially and symbolically through narratives and practices that reconstruct the national border (Agnew 2008; Amelung and Machado 2019; Chouliaraki 2017; Rumford 2006; Krasteva 2017). The book on de-bordering North Korea by Gelézeau, De Ceuster, and Delissen (2013a) acknowledges the dynamics of bordering, but their research concentrated on the Korean peninsula and South Korea's Sunshine Policy. What this focus on one place ignores is that the physical, mental, and institutional construction (Agnew 2008; Armbruster 2011; Krasteva 2017) and social and cultural practices and narratives of (de-)bordering can take place anywhere and in any form (Amelung and Machado 2019; Németh 2017).

Research Methods

The research methods used in this study include in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and archival analysis of two cases. The fieldwork was conducted in December 2018 and January 2019 in London and in November 2019 in Los Angeles. As I have conducted fieldwork in London before, some data and insights from previous studies (Shin 2018, 2019) were also used here.

The subjects interviewed include key actors in organizations such as North Korean ethnic associations, the North Korean defectors' global network, North Korean churches, the South Korean elderly association, and a North Korean second-generation school. I carried out eighteen in-depth interviews with two North Korean defectors and five South Korean migrants in Los Angeles and nine North Korean defectors and two South Korean migrants in London. Each interview lasted between one and two hours, and all were in Korean, were semi-structured, and usually tape-recorded. Those who were worried about their status in the country refused to give information about themselves. It was especially difficult to access North Korean defectors in Los Angeles for this reason.

I supplemented the interviews with participant observation, focus groups, and interviews with South Koreans who used to be involved in North Korea-related activities. Participant observations were made in a North Korean church in Los Angeles, in a school for North Korean children, and at a social gathering in London. Any information that I acquired through participant observations and in-depth interviews was cross-checked. I conducted two focus groups with key actors in ethnic Korean community activities (one in Los Angeles and one in London). I also collected archival data from various sources including newspaper articles and the website Conversation.com. In analyzing the data, I used an interpretive approach. I focused on categorizing the interview data according to the key themes of the study and finding sequences of spoken events.

North Korean Defectors in Los Angeles and London

As North Korean defectors speak of the atrocities they have suffered, tales of human rights violations (Hong 2014), human trafficking (E. Choi 2014; Kim et al. 2009) and life under a harsh dictatorship (Sung 2019) have emerged. Of the approximately thirty thousand North Korean defectors settled in South Korea, many have arrived via either China or Thailand. The defectors who left South Korea[2] dispersed to twenty-five different countries, including the US, the UK, Germany, and Israel, with twenty-eight of them returning to North Korea (Kim 2017; Jeon 2020; author's interview with a South Korean involved in a North Korean church, November 1, 2019).

The main reason given for leaving South Korea was disappointment with their lives there and the treatment they received. During the in-depth interviews, I was told that even the National Intelligence Service team criticized the escapees from North Korea, complaining that they were being resettled at South Korea's expense. Although quite a few interviewees disclosed that they had not planned on living in London or Los Angeles, they admitted to preferring economically advanced countries. This preference was usually attributed to these countries' superior welfare benefits and education system, their children's education being their biggest concern.

Out of the approximately 130 North Korean defectors who had settled in the US, fifty were living in the Los Angeles Koreatown (Chu 2018) at the time of this study. Considering that there were fifty North Koreans in Los Angeles compared to the seven hundred to one thousand living in and around the London suburb of New Malden, their experiences are quite different. The ratio of North Koreans to South Koreans in London is 1:10-15, while in Los Angeles it is 1:1,083. Lacking the security that comes with numbers, the Los Angeles defectors are socially isolated and distrustful, trying to blend in with the local community rather than establishing an enclave. North Korean defectors in London, however, are well adjusted and approach their daily encounters with South Koreans more as equals, collaborating with them on events, joint sponsorship, and committee memberships. The similarities and differences between the two cases are as follows.

Their similarities are practical and quickly summed up in one paragraph. Due to the language barrier, nearly all the North Korean defectors settled in the Koreatowns in both cities or nearby to gain easy access to the ethnic job market and ethnic shops. For the same reason, most North Korean defectors work for South Korean businesses, including those who had worked in South Korea and would have preferred not to work for a South Korean again. The majority of those same North Koreans working for South Korean ethnic businesses are sending remittances home.

As mentioned already, there are far fewer North Korean defectors in Los Angeles than in London, and their community is minuscule compared to that of the 72,523 South Koreans. Some North Koreans admitted to pretending to come from the Kang Won province of South Korea, which has a similar accent to that of North Korea, to avoid a negative reaction to their North Korean-ness. Since there are so few of them, attempts to form North Korean ethnic organizations have struggled. Even though these organizations failed to take root, the northerners avoid participating in South Korean organizations.

Unlike Los Angeles, London's Koreatown is the site of a "North Korean village" and is recognized as having the largest concentration of expatriate North Koreans outside South Korea. The reason why so many North Korean defectors have chosen to settle in the UK is linked to its having a less discriminatory

environment and better welfare system than many other countries (Bell 2018). Due to their significant numbers, North Koreans in London have established their own ethnic organizations as well as interacting closely with South Korean organizations and individuals.

Although the North Korean community in Los Angeles has little in the way of organizations, there are several small North Korean churches.[3] At the time of this fieldwork there were only a few members in each, but those churches were still able to carry out relatively significant activities and were building a reputation. The pastor of one of them, the Church of Nazarene that was established in New York in 2003 and moved to Los Angeles, had established a shelter and was active in the community. After the pastor left the city in 2012, the North Korean community was bereft and without support or guidance as the church's activities and atmosphere deteriorated. That the loss of one person could so deeply impact the community exposes the limited scope of the support systems in the city.

The organizational activities of North Korean defectors in London, however, are diverse and have deep roots. North Korean ethnic associations, Korean-language schools for children, churches, and unification organizations play an important role in the North Korean community. Since North Koreans actively participate in events organized by the South Korean ethnic associations, they are consolidating their position in the larger Korean community even as identity tensions between North and South Koreans linger (Shin 2018, 2019; Watson 2015).

Another way in which the experiences of North Koreans in Los Angeles are distinct from those in London is that they are the recipients of South Korean migrants' charity. For example, organizations such as the National Unification Advisory Committee invite the North Korean defectors to Thanksgiving and New Year's celebrations. Individual donors also invite North Korean defectors to celebrations at Christmas or New Year's, and one South Korean lawyer has invited them to take a tour of Universal Studios every year since 2007. Ethnic Korean Christian churches do play a role in providing donations and help with housing and job hunting in both cities. But unlike in Los Angeles, in London there is an affinity between the North and South Koreans that is not built on donations and charity but on building a new future side by side.

De-bordering by Means of Financial and Social Remittances

Having discussed the economic aspects of remittances, in this section I focus on de-bordering through a combination of financial and social remittances and their social and political outcomes. But first, it is important to understand how remittances as transnational obligations (Ives et al. 2014) impact defectors' lives and why they choose or choose not to send them.

Remittances seem to be an unavoidable consequence of defectors' escape. North Korean defectors flee to seek a better life and send remittances almost as a justification for leaving their families behind. Sometimes they send remittances out of a sense of guilt. One interviewee in Los Angeles (November 5, 2019) confessed that she regretted leaving her daughter behind in North Korea. She supposed that sending remittances to her daughter and niece had become her main purpose in life and what drives her to continue to work so hard. Other times, defectors send money as an expression of their love, since not all families in North Korea necessarily require remittances to alleviate their lot. One interviewee in London clarified this,

> I think every North Korean keeps sending remittances to their families in North Korea. Once a month, or once a year. Usually when we send money, we say hi. Otherwise, people call just to talk without sending money. … I haven't sent money for a while because my siblings are well-off, probably better than I am (author's interview with a North Korean defector, London, January 15, 2019).

But mostly North Koreans send money because there is an expectation that the defectors will support their extended family. That not all defectors can afford to do this makes it difficult for them to save money for their own futures in the host societies (Ives et al. 2014). As one defector living in London said,

> My brother contacted me through a broker to announce his son's wedding. It's been ten years since I sent money. I sent £2,000. They called me back, saying they need more because my nephew's bride is from an affluent family. I refused it. I said that the cost of living and education in the UK are so expensive, and I have two children, so I really couldn't send more (author's interview with a North Korean defector, London, January 8, 2019).

Regardless of why they send remittances, the fact is that in doing so they have established transnational ethnic networks between North Koreans inside and outside North Korea. By initiating cash flow and information sharing, they challenge the border control and become critical agents of change. This is accomplished in two ways.

First, the broker systems that support financial and, by extension, social remittances foster de-bordering. As already mentioned, brokers channeling defectors' remittances into North Korea contest the regime's jurisdiction over the country's finances. What also needs to be considered are the innocuous conversations the broker arranges between the defectors and their families in North Korea so they can be assured that the money was delivered. Now this is about more than money, as communication on everything from advice on setting up businesses (Kim 2010) to updates on their lives flows in and sometimes out through these geopolitical ethnic networks. These phone conversations that

facilitate social remittances strengthen geopolitical ethnic networks among defectors and their families and quietly instigate de-bordering.

However, that is what happens when everything goes according to plan. One North Korean defector in London explained what happens when a family is caught receiving remittances,

> There is a video of a North Korean defector's family in North Korea apologizing for the defector's escape. A rumor among us [North Korean defectors] is that the family was receiving remittances from the defector, and a communist party member was bribed to let it slide. The party member was caught, so the family had to make the video as a punishment (author's interview with a North Korean defector, London, January 10, 2019).

The overt message this video conveyed was that their own communist party members have accepted bribes and are therefore involved in the informal remittances system. This demonstrates that the de-bordering by social remittances is having a massive ripple effect.

North Korean defector interviewees have reported that brokers have started to send video footage of defectors' families confirming the money was received. This is an expedient alternative to coordinating a conference call made difficult by the time difference between North Korea and the US or the UK. Whether it is financial remittances going in or social remittances in the form of information coming out, technology is the newest and likely the most effective tool for de-bordering.

Now this same easily accessible technology allows defectors to buy SIM cards they can install in their phones (Kim 2014, 54) to access North Korea's Koryolink network, bypassing the state's directives. Technology is responsible for the easing of defectors' concerns with regard to contacting family members. One interviewee mentioned that he made calls to his sister and mother in North Korea. When I asked about his sister, his response was "My sister? I talked to her last week," as if the strict rules forbidding contact were of no consequence. This is particularly perplexing since even commonplace updates on life and society in general are in fact acts that challenge the borders. Thanks to technology, however, defectors have found a way to bypass state restrictions and the social remittances exchanged through conversation play a substantial role in de-bordering.

Defectors' actions in terms of financial and social remittances have tested North Korea's borders and demonstrated that they are more porous than some might have expected. Even though there has been de-bordering, and remittances have created geopolitical ethnic networks connecting North Korea to other societies, the country's economic and political structure has not changed significantly (Connell 2016), but North Korean defectors persist in engaging North Korea in a limited form of globalization through their financial and social remittances and thereby renegotiating the border even if only incrementally.

De-bordering North Korea through Regional and Global Networks

In this section, I discuss defectors' de-bordering practices that challenge North Korean sovereignty by creating regional and global networks that suggest an alternative political entity. The political networks of North Korean defectors produce discourses and activities meant to empower those who have escaped. In fact, the defectors' escape was their first step toward empowerment and is in itself an act of de-bordering since it represented a defiance of state authority over the national border.

Some North Korean defectors based in Los Angeles announced in 2016 that they would establish a government-in-exile the following year. Plagued by problems, the project was delayed until 2018. Even after it was established, the organization, consisting of approximately twenty North Korean defectors, struggled. One interviewee active in the organization explained that what they did manage to create collapsed altogether within a year or two mainly due to infighting. This interviewee stated that he would have preferred to form organizations focused on daily needs, such as an ethnic association, but his colleagues were anxious to build a government-in-exile. This same person confessed to being conscious of criticism from within the North Korean community and liberal South Korean organizations in Los Angeles.

According to North Korean interviewees in both cities, there were those who considered the idea of a government-in-exile as neither feasible nor sensible and thought it was no more than a fantasy dreamt up by a few people. North Koreans opposed to the idea of a government-in-exile who still wished to find ways to make life better for their fellow defectors have often established ethnic associations like the one mentioned by the previous interviewee. Whether they agreed or disagreed, however, the consensus was that since the existence of the government-in-exile and its members' activities attracted media attention, it did at least raise awareness.

One active member of the government-in-exile in Los Angeles explained that publicizing the Kim Jong-un regime's brutality is the main goal, arguing, "A government-in-exile should put pressure on the North Korean government and expose their wrongdoings" (author's interview with North Korean defector, Los Angeles, November 3, 2019). This is why the North Korean defectors who organized a political group were angry rather than celebratory when the Moon Jae-In government in South Korea attempted a reconciliation with Pyongyang. This act of reconciliation, as opposed to condemnation, felt like a betrayal. But even before this, North Koreans believed that the South Korean government neither understood nor supported them. They accused the government in Seoul of left-wing sympathies, and some believed that it was trying to manipulate them. One interviewee in Los Angeles criticized the Moon government for cutting

financial support to North Korean-related organizations. When a prominent North Korean defector celebrated the election of Moon Jae-In, many fellow defectors withdrew their support for his leadership, another interviewee revealed.

The political activities of North Koreans in the US have tended to be allied with the activities of Korean churches and Korean-American organizations that focus on the conservative Christian politics of human rights and discourses driven by Cold War politics (Kim 2016; Min 1996). But even though their primary purpose was to liberate North Korea, these churches organized various activities to support North Korean defectors financially and politically. These networks of churches and organizations included North Koreans and South Korean migrants, and according to all five South Korean interviewees in Los Angeles, they were firmly established by the 1990s and the early 2000s. It was during those years that some Korean-Americans even volunteered to travel to North Korea for charity work.

My interviewees explained that as time passed, however, only a few charity activities continued, and the defectors' organizational activities declined in every area except their political participation. This was partly due to the influence of conservative Christian politics on North Koreans, as well as US actors focused on establishing a government-in-exile. The belief that a government-in-exile would put pressure on the North Korean government and could take over when the regime collapsed was compelling. Deciding that they could not trust the South Korean government, they set about creating regional political networks in Los Angeles and London, believing that these activities would give them a say in their country's future.

The political aspirations of North Koreans in Los Angeles are not shared by their counterparts in London. European actors saw themselves as mediators between the North Korean and South Korean regimes and representatives of North Koreans' interests. As one interviewee in London stated, "It does not replace the North Korean government, but the presence of a government-in-exile is itself meaningful because many people in North Korea neither like nor trust the South Korean government" (author's interview with North Korean defector, London, January 8, 2019). This interviewee argued that North Korean defectors who had experience of living in the two Koreas and in Europe should take the lead in a future united Korea. Unlike the Los Angeles government-in-exile that aspired to govern, the European government-in-exile saw itself not as a potential government but as part of the discursive dynamics around the government. Though key actors in both cities similarly attempted to form a government-in-exile, they were not interested in collaborating with each other. According to the European faction, the US actors were incapable of organizing a government and were merely the tools of right-wing American politicians. The Los Angeles actors were barely able to sustain their organization so were not interested in extending the networks.

Even though the London group was not interested in collaborating with the US actors, there was interest in connecting with defectors in other countries to form a "North Korean refugees' global network." The network held its first meeting in London in 2013 and elected two chairs for the European network based in London and Brussels. While the existence of such an organization is essential, it cannot quite match the reach of North Korean defectors' geopolitical ethnic networks created through repeated mobilities. To maintain these networks and receive information about what is going on in other countries, North Korean defectors stay connected mainly through Kakaotalk, a free mobile instant messaging app. Together, these two kinds of networking activities constitute discourses on an alternative sovereignty that envisions a future version of the North Korean nation proper.

Although the main goals of the geopolitical ethnic networks based in the two cities differ, they both have a re-bordering effect. Regardless of how they envisaged it being done, their collective purpose was to defeat the North Korean regime. As geopolitical ethnic networks linked even the smallest pockets of North Korean defectors, the activities and discourses of these networks were building a newly imagined North Korea outside the Korean peninsula. Ironically, while geopolitical ethnic networks have had the effect of de-bordering North Korea, by emphasizing the existence of their home country, they have in essence been re-bordering it.

Conclusion

This research has examined the effects of North Korean defectors' geopolitical ethnic networks on the de-bordering of North Korea. First, these networks have challenged the border and opposed the regime through the defectors' continued contact with family in the home country. Beyond their actual defection and through their practices of financial and social remittances, they contribute to de-bordering by proving that Pyongyang's border control is fallible. Second, North Korean defectors have developed global and regional networks to directly challenge the North Korean regime.

The development of the networks depends on the geopolitical environment, migrant and defector policies, and the demographics of the Korean community. The past few years have witnessed slight changes in the geopolitical economy of the Korean peninsula, as well as in relations between North Korea and other involved countries. As recent studies on defectors show (see Song 2017), when the situation in a country of origin undergoes changes, the networks and their activities evolve in response. North Korean defectors are an articulated case in terms of migrants' impacts on the interactions between human agents and the geopolitical bordering dynamics of their society of origin.

Since defectors usually leave their society of origin less by choice than by the need to escape an untenable political situation, their national identity is very important to them. Cultural and ethnic identities emerge in the form of nationalist thought about culture, place, and identity among defectors (Eastmond 1998). Attachment to their national identity combined with their continued or re-established connection to their home country has political implications. As agents of the state, their migration extends their home society by maintaining and developing their social and cultural identity, which has the effect of re-bordering North Korea. In the greater scheme of an entire country's geopolitical and economic situation, defectors' influence might not be glaringly obvious, but their existence and activities have bordering and de- and re-bordering potential.

By providing contextualized information and linking it to the defectors' geopolitical ethnic networks, this article contributes to the debate on de-bordering and enhances our understanding of it. It also calls for a development of the debate on re-bordering in terms of human agents' discourses and networks. The discussion on remittances and the ease with which funds can now be transferred also has implications for the migration-development nexus (Bailey 2010; Henry, Mohan, and Yanacopulos 2004). Financial remittances might or might not have the problematic secondary effect of supporting the sustainability and development of North Korea under the current regime, but the long-term consequences of them are difficult to predict. The remittances can either continue to simply supplement the North Korean economy and allow the regime to stay in power, or they might motivate the country to open its doors. Regardless of the eventual outcome, the country's structural development will likely be assisted by the money individual defectors send to their families to legitimize their defection and assuage their guilt.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   I prefer to use the term "defector" in this study as it indicates those who have escaped from their homeland, forsaking everything, and therefore applies to all North Koreans living in another country. The term "refugee" refers to the individual's legal status determined by the destination society. My interviewees include refugees, applicants for refugee status, and permanent residents/citizens. Migrants, unlike defectors and refugees, are usually free to return to their home countries, and for that reason it is not a designation

that is appropriate for North Koreans. Kim (2012) discusses the changing and occasionally controversial social discourses surrounding each of these terms and the ways in which they have been applied to North Korean defectors in South Korea. Where I use the terms migrant or refugee in this article, it has been in keeping with their use in other studies under discussion, such as that of Kim (2012).

2.   Sources differ as to the number of North Korean defectors who have left South Korea after staying for a while. Among the around thirty thousand defectors, estimates of the number who have moved to other countries range from 749 (https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/view/2019/10/813016/), to 1,500 (*Chosun*, November 18, 2019. https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2019/11/18/2019111800332.html. Accessed April 23, 2020), to 3,000 (*Topdaily*, June 18, 2019. http://www.topdaily.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=57567. Accessed April 23, 2020).

3.   Christianity is quite strong among Koreans in Los Angeles. There are more than ten thousand Korean churches, big and small.

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