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여성연구소

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공동연구원: 천경효, 최윤영, 최은영
연구보조원: 박준영

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Migrant placemaking as a response to governing through mobility-making: An ethnic enclave and a digital community in South Korea

HaeRan Shin and Cassandra Gutierrez

Department of Geography, Institute for Korean Regional Studies, Institute for Gender Research, Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University, Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, 08826, Republic of Korea.
Email: haeranshin@snu.ac.kr.

Abstract: *This paper examines migrant placemaking in South Korea as a proactive response to governing power that works through making (im)mobilities. Unlike previous discussions that have viewed migrants' empowerment in political activities and identity-related in a particular type of enclaves, this study sees migrant placemaking as a proactive response to governing through mobilities and comprehensively embraces various types of placemaking in South Korea. Based on mix-up of various qualitative research methods, this study documents the migrant placemaking practices over time of two representative and quite different migrant groups: Chosŏnjok's enclave in Kuro-Taerim area of Seoul and Latin Americans' digital communities. The former represents a big migrant group's physical and discursive migrant placemaking. Chosŏnjok migrants struggled with their stigmatised images and mistrust towards both China and Korea. The latter represents a small migrant group's digital placemaking. Latin American migrants were left without much knowledge about and recognition from the Korean society. We demonstrate how in seeking a community for themselves they adapt their environment, thereby empowering themselves. In demonstrating the interrelation of migrant placemaking and governing power, this study contributes to the understanding of the circuits of power, mobility and place in the case of migrants in South Korea.*

Keywords: *digital place, empowerment, enclave, governmobility, migrant placemaking, placemaking*

Introduction

This paper examines migrant placemaking[1] in South Korea as a proactive response to the governing power of the mobility-making process. Migrant placemaking refers to the social process by which migrants create communities built on common ethnicity and culture that offer social support networks and provide information and resources to help new migrants acclimatise. Placemaking is a method that migrants often employ to forge and assert a collective identity among host populations (Pemberton and Phillimore, 2018). The concept of migrant placemaking contributes to the processual and flexible understanding of the dynamics within ethnic enclaves and more recently digital communities. The process of establishing digital diaspora communities allows not only for connections with other migrants but now includes their families back home, offering the experience of a new country by proxy. This research suggests that migrant placemaking is an ongoing social process in which international migrants shape and reshape physical, social and digital communities to cope with their diasporic status (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2023). In doing so, not only do they empower themselves but establish their identity in a foreign country.

In addition to creating a community and sense of identity, migrant placemaking is also seen as a response to a country's governing power. The Foucauldian perspective on the art of governing (Foucault, 1982, 1991) explained

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[1]The term 'migrant placemaking' has been in use for the past decade and has gained significant traction in sociology and migrant studies over the last few years. For example, see Chica (2021).

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as governmentality has due to increased mobility evolved to governing through mobility or governmobility. Governmobility refers to governing *through* (im)mobilities usually to meet the demands in labour and marriage markets (Bærenholdt, 2013; Kim and Shin, 2018; Tazzioli, 2020). Scholarly interest in the significance of mobilities in modern society has revealed a governing logic that does not solely base itself on state regulation but also considers social discourse, cultural norms and informal migration brokers. This approach to governing permits certain levels of subjective interpretation and agency in the exercise of power. By examining how mobility-governing power and migrants' placemaking intersect, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the circular relations of power, mobility and place in the case of migrants in South Korea.

Relational approaches to mobilities and migrants' places (Darling, 2010; Shin, 2018) represented by ethnic enclaves have received increasing attention in various social science disciplines, including geography, urban studies and migrant studies. However, the everyday empowerment of individuals and the various types of placemaking if considered at all receive only cursory deliberation. Those studies that do address migrants' empowerment tend to focus on political activities quite often to the exclusion of all else. Since placemaking as everyday empowerment is commonly a response to the destination society's governing and treatment, as such it should be considered an extension of the political activities in those studies. Other studies that do consider migrants' identity in a specific type of enclave (Kim, 2012; Leitner and Strunk, 2014) mainly explore physical placemaking without providing a comprehensive understanding of various types of migrant placemaking practices (Adey, 2017; Iaquinto, 2020). In addition, most studies have excluded smaller populations of migrants' digital placemaking, which has emerged in recent years and deserves attention.

This study sees migrant placemaking as a proactive response to governing through mobilities and comprehensively embraces various types of placemaking. Two research questions are proposed: How have these migrants responded to governing power in their everyday placemaking practices? How have different placemaking practices—physical and digital—formed, managed migrants' mobilities and offered empowerment?

The Korean context articulates the interaction between governmobility and migrants' agency. The social acceptance of multiculturalism is low, and the state mobilises migration in the supply of labour and international students (Ho, 2014), and so migrants face particularly challenging circumstances and devise strategies for coping in a new society and come up with tools for empowerment. Based on mixed qualitative research methods, this study documents the migrant placemaking practices over time of two representative and quite different migrant groups: *Chosŏnjok*'s[2] enclave in the Kuro-Taerim area of Seoul and Latin Americans' digital communities. The former group represents a large migrant group's physical and discursive migrant placemaking (Shin, 2016; Shin and Park, 2017). *Chosŏnjok* migrants have struggled with their stigmatised image and mistrust toward both China and Korea (Shin, 2017). The latter group represents a small migrant group's digital placemaking. Latin American migrants have been left without much knowledge about and recognition from Korean society.

The purpose of selecting these different groups is to demonstrate first that, although the groups' sizes and nature of migrant placemaking differ, both types of placemaking commonly offer proactive coping and empowering methods to manage the migrants' precarious and constrained positions in Korean society (Shin, 2021). Second, *Chosŏnjok*'s physical and discursive migrant placemaking has created a 'third place' where they can empower themselves and reimaged the stigmatised Kuro-Taerim enclave. The Latin Americans' digital placemaking has also created a third place, a digital Latin American society in Korea, and enabled the community-building of a sparse population.

For the above arguments, the rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section theoretically discusses previous studies on the intertwined relations between power and migrants' spatiality and suggests engaging with political perspectives on variegated forms of

[2] *Chosŏnjok* (Joseonjok or Chaoxianzu) are ethnically Korean people who grew up in China as an ethnic minority.

migrant placemaking for coping and empowerment. This is followed by a section that describes the research methods and examines the two case studies of an ethnic enclave and of digital placemaking. The first section of findings discusses the ethnic enclave as a physical and discursive place(re)making of *Chosŏnjok* to respond to their in-between identity and Korean society's treatment of them. The second section of findings examines the Latin American minority group's digital placemaking that has helped them cope and created an alternative community. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of migrant placemaking in relation to governing power in the Korean context.

Theoretical framework: Migrant placemaking as a response to governing through mobilities

Mobilities and migration are increasingly being linked to power and technology (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Sheller and Urry, 2006). The concept of governmobility is premised on Foucault's theory of governmentality and the idea that subjects are willing participants in their governing. Governmobility was developed as a governing concept to administer a society for which (im)mobilities are important, and like Foucault's governmentality approach a tool that relies on cooperation not coercion. The concept of governmobility is not only shaped by state regulations of mobilities and employment policies (Jensen, 2013) but also by social norms, ideologies, gender roles, surveillance, securitization and production of knowledge about mobilities (Sheller, 2016). Regarding migrants, Tazzioli (2020) posits that mobility is both a subject of government and a tool for governing migrants.

Observing migrants' behaviours through the lens of governmobility, it becomes clear how macro power and individuals' daily lives are interconnected (Sheller, 2004). In the mobility-governing dynamic, migrants or potential migrants develop a form of self-governance and are either compliant with or resistant to the governing logic (Sheller, 2016). Individuals who have developed an 'addiction of governmobility' (Bærenholdt, 2013: 29) will use mobilities to cope with feelings of displacement and placelessness. The concept that governing mobility intersects with migrants' daily lives (Friedmann, 2010; Doughty and Murray, 2016) to produce an everyday empowerment and agency that emerge from migrant placemaking deserves more attention.

The spatiality of migrant belonging, as exemplified by Collins (2012a,b), has been influential. Ethnic enclaves, a focal point in the literature, are examined for their distinct features and effects of segregation from mainstream society (Murdie and Ghosh, 2010). While some view ethnic enclaves positively as sites of voluntary separation, unique cultural experiences and potential tourist attractions (Pang and Rath, 2007), others raise concerns about negative effects, such as spatial segregation impacting migrants' job opportunities, earnings and upward mobility (Peach, 2003; Wang, 2010; Xie and Gough, 2011). The study of ethnic enclaves has been influenced by policy needs and political pressure, leading to value-laden interpretations of ethnic segregation (Phillips, 2007, 2015). These have turned 'segregation into congregation' (Lipsitz, 2011: 56).

Despite holding opposing views on ethnic enclaves, both perspectives share in their neglect to fully embrace geopolitical insights or acknowledge the process of establishing those places and the meaning of struggle, belonging and empowerment (Smith and Ley, 2008). This oversight results in a missed opportunity to consider the dynamic and complex nature of ethnic enclaves and their continuous formation over time (Schiller and Çağlar, 2013). The concept of migrant placemaking offers a more nuanced interpretation of migrant places to those approaches that view them as bounded, prejudiced, unproductive and isolated from one another and the wider city (Hunter *et al.*, 2016). The evidence of migrants' capacity to transform restrictive urban spaces into places of enjoyment, celebration, political engagement and recreation (Hunter *et al.*, 2016) has become an area of interest in planning and urban studies. Recent studies on Black placemaking (Hunter *et al.*, 2016), for example, have started to regard ethnic enclaves as sites of endurance, resistance and belonging through social interaction.

Migrant placemaking has attracted attention (Plöger and Becker, 2015; Goebel, 2020) due to the significant social shift that mobilities have

created (Cresswell, 2014). However, migrant placemaking, in terms of its relations with macro structures and empowerment, has been largely overlooked. Most previous discussions on migrants' places have focused generally on migrants' identities and their social integration into destination societies. Migrant placemaking is inherently relational and power-laden (Wu, 2000; McCann, 2002; Dyck, 2005; Pierce *et al*., 2011) and focuses on place-based and community-centred approaches (Goebel, 2020). As communication technologies have developed and people's mobilities have increased dramatically (Urry, 2002; Hannam *et al*., 2006; Sheller, 2007; Larsen and Urry, 2016), approaches to place in more relational, contested, cultural and mobile ways have developed (Wigley, 2016). Seeing placemaking as a product of politics (Massey, 2005), some studies (Kim, 2012; Leitner and Strunk, 2014) have discussed empowerment but primarily in terms of political activism. However, migrants' participatory practices (Hall, 2015) and collective resistance take place outside of the workplace (Paret and Gleeson, 2016).

This study proposes the concept of migrant placemaking as a way to comprehend governmobility and its power to create mobility. This research focuses on the theoretical framework of two case studies by building upon Arefi's (2014) frameworks on how places are physically created, socially mobilised and politically contested. It specifically examines the processes of (1) accommodating governmobility and (2) empowering migrants in their placemaking efforts.

First, in the era of globalisation, migrants, driven by the need to be strategically mobile, create their own places as a means of navigating their governmobile social life. Migrant placemaking helps migrants adapt to their mobility by providing the practical benefits of residence, work, transport and leisure (Jensen and Richardson, 2004). Through placemaking, migrants can address feelings of placelessness and longing for home (Friedmann, 2010; Suda, 2016), re-establish social and cultural relations (Qian and Zhu, 2014), establish a sense of belonging (Oke *et al*., 2018) and broaden their sense of belonging (Gao-Miles, 2017; Pemberton and Phillimore, 2018).

Second, by forming new communities and transforming existing spaces, migrants challenge existing power relations, thereby sometimes gaining attention from mainstream society. Migrant placemaking is an expression of agency (Bork-Hüffer *et al*., 2016) that challenges the state's mandate for assimilation into society (Lee *et al*., 2014a; Lara, 2018; Shim, 2018). The placemaking process can lead to the creation of vibrant, culturally diverse and dynamic communities, but it can also result in the marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination of certain migrant groups. Since migration and placemaking are intertwined (Conradson and Latham, 2005), this introduces an inherent contradiction in migrant placemaking, making it an unstable process that does not necessarily lead to the perpetuation of individuals or groups in the host country (Castillo, 2014). Rising concern over discomfort and disputes surrounding large-scale migration or refugees has been attracting more attention, particularly following Brexit, which is often considered a result of the host society's attitudes toward migrants (Goodhart, 2017). Placemaking is a complex and multi-faceted social process that involves the ongoing negotiation of migrants' identity, power and recognition.

This study explores two types of migrant placemaking through case studies of a *Chosŏnjok* ethnic enclave and Latin American digital communities. The first form is physical and discursive placemaking, the Kuro-Taerim area. The area provides support primarily through ethnic businesses and provides practical benefits, such as housing, food, transportation and information. Migrants can also find comfort, re-create a sense of home in the host country, preserve their cultural identity in a new environment and engage in constant remaking of their place.[3] In addition to the physical manipulation of space, this process encompasses imaginary (Shatkin, 2005) and discursive placemaking (Breek *et al*., 2021). The destination society's discourses about an ethnic enclave can also shape discursive placemaking, which is closely tied to material experiences

[3]A number of previous studies have focused on those aspects. See the following among many: Hume (2015), Ndofor *et al*. (2011), Hayden (1997), Blunt (2007), Faria (2014), Conradson and McKay (2007), Walsh (2012), Ho (2009), Collins (2012a,b).

(Triece, 2016). Migrants' responses to such discourses play a crucial role in their placemaking efforts, especially since migrant places are often stigmatised through their alleged associations with crime (Ko, 2020).

The second form of migrant placemaking discussed in this study is digital placemaking (i.e. online communities), which is based on the flow of networks rather than a fixed location. Online communities, such as social media, messaging apps, online forums and mapping/translation apps, play a significant role in this emerging form of placemaking. Through virtual placemaking facilitated by cyber networks (Kim, 2005; Habarakada and Shin, 2019), migrants can maintain daily contact with their compatriots via the internet (Miller and Slater, 2020). Jirón et al. (2016) have discussed the rise of digital placemaking, a new method of creating places that are significant to people's lives. The interaction between physical and digital placemaking has also been discussed by Habarakada and Shin (2019). Technology not only facilitates more efficient and cost-effective communication but also creates a sense that the person is in two places simultaneously (de Souza e Silva, 2006). Migrants use these new technologies to bridge the gap between their origin and destination societies, stay connected to their families and friends in their home countries and overcome feelings of unfamiliarity due to language, cultural and local barriers (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Yeoh and Willis, 2005; Marino, 2015; Newell *et al.*, 2016). Previous studies have also explored the interplay between migrants and mobile technology to consider its impact on issues of inequality (Fotel and Thomsen, 2003; Sheller, 2004).

Research methods

To examine the placemaking efforts of the two selected migrant groups and interpret them within the framework of governmobility and migrant placemaking, the research methodology included document analysis, site visits, participant observation in the enclave and online communities and semi-structured in-depth interviews with *Chosŏnjok* and Latin American migrants. To understand the context within which governmobility occurred, news media coverage and policy documents related to migration policies were collected and analysed. The information on the Kuro-Taerim area and digital communities is a compilation of the authors' fieldwork for this and other studies conducted from 2011 to 2023. Of the research, the more in-depth studies were conducted in 2011, 2015 and 2022.

Each author conducted in-depth interviews of *Chosŏnjok* residents in Korean and Latin American migrants who frequented digital communities in Spanish. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent, translated into English when cited and focused on the ways in which these places helped sustain the migrants' stays and mobilities and how they engaged in placemaking.

In the *Chosŏnjok* case, participant observations were made at various locations in the Kuro-Taerim area, including a church ceremony, a dance group in a park, shelters, ethnic organisations and restaurants. The fieldwork for the case of the Latin Americans was conducted in 2018 and 2022 and included observing the contents and dynamics of conversations in digital communities. Of the interviews, 18 were conducted with university students, Catholic parishioners and customers from various countries in restaurants, bars and dance clubs. Most interviewees were in their 20s and 30s.

Additional information was gathered by visiting *Chosŏnjok* migrants' digital communities, and with permission, a Kakao closed group chat of 95 *Chosŏnjok* members was observed over two years. The Latin American migrants' physical locations were visited, including Mexican food restaurants, coffee shops, Latin American-themed bars/dance clubs and a parish in Seoul. The results of the fieldwork were analysed by cross-referencing multiple sources and using interpretive methods.

The cases: *Chosŏnjok* and Latin American migrants in South Korea

At the time of this research, the largest group of international migrants in South Korea was *Chosŏnjok*, making up 63% of the total number of migrants, with an approximate population of 700 000 (KOSIS, 2021). The *Chosŏnjok*'s

ancestors migrated from the Korean peninsula to China from the 1880s until the 1950s. During the Cold War, contact with relatives still in Korea was severely prohibited, with restrictions lifted in 1974 to allow correspondence through letters and in 1983 to permit visits to Korea (Yoon, 2010). Following the Memorandum of Understanding between South Korea and China in 1992, which resolved geopolitical tension between the two countries, a massive migration of *Chosŏnjok* to South Korea took place, and so began the *Chosŏnjok*'s migrant physical placemaking in the Kuro-Taerim area of Seoul (Fig. 1).

Although Korea's citizenry has viewed *Chosŏnjok* migrants with hostility (Na, 2021), the government has accepted that they fill a need, which has resulted in increasingly flexible mobility and employment. Since 2004, the Korean government has granted *Chosŏnjok* migrants more flexible visitor and work visas (Kim, 2009; Jang and Kang, 2017), and following the 2008 financial crisis, the labour shortages in small- and medium-size manufacturing companies led to further allowances and easing of restrictions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, although anti-Chinese sentiment increased (Kim, 2020), the demand for *Chosŏnjok* migrants in the job market increased due to the declining number of migrant workers from other countries.

While South Koreans have formed a negative opinion of *Chosŏnjok* migrants, they know very little about Latin American migrants and almost have no opinions. As such, Latin Americans face different circumstances. To some extent Koreans know so little about Latin Americans due to the fact that there are so few of them in Korea. Data show that the number of Latin Americans in Korea make up less than 1% of the foreign population in the country and tend to be short-term residents (Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), 2021). It is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of Latin American foreign residents since the existing data compiled by the KOSIS only documents Latin Americans' migrations between the years 2000 and 2023 (KOSIS, 2021). The data do show, however, that there seems to be an equal or greater number of citizens from countries in Latin America departing Korea in comparison to the incoming numbers each year.

Attempting to ascertain the number of Latin American citizens in Korea through the issuances of visas is equally difficult since Latin American countries are exempt from this requirement if it is a short-term stay. However, student visas to study in Korea are required.

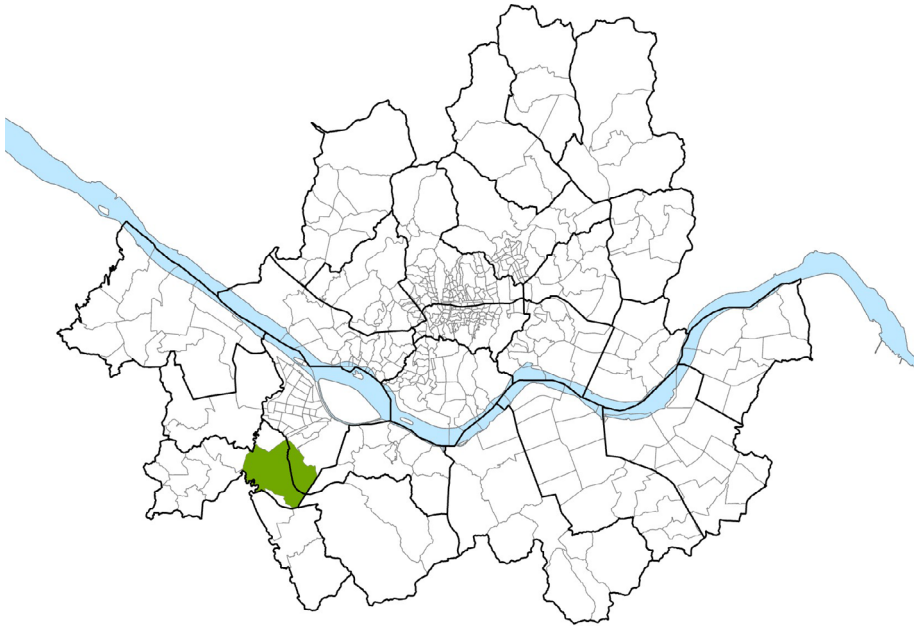

Figure 1. Kuro-Taerim area in Seoul [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Data reflect a yearly surge in the number of incoming Latin Americans to Korea during the months of August and February for semesters starting in September and March. That the majority of the Latin Americans in Korea are students enrolled in Korean universities explains the short-term residency discussed above. Upon graduation, a few choose to remain in Korea if they successfully find employment, making up the small percentage of Latin Americans living permanently in Korea. Contributing to this small percentage are the international marriage migrants of Latin American origin, predominantly women married to Korean men (KOSIS, 2021).

While in US cities, Latin American migrants have the numbers to support collective action (Gómez-Barris, 2007; Diaz and Torres, 2012; González, 2017), Latin Americans are such a minority in South Korea and in Seoul that there they have little to no leverage. Due to their migration oftentimes being characterised as temporary, calculating their numbers is challenging. An estimate of Latin American migrants is approximately 1200 (KOSIS, 2021), made up of mostly Mexican nationals, followed closely by those from Argentina, Ecuador and Paraguay. There are Latin Americans from other countries, but those number less than 100 people in their national communities. The majority are aged between 20 and 35 years.

Digital Latin American society in Korea has developed mostly through Facebook and Twitter, as well as nationality-based associations, such as the Association for Ecuadorian Residents in South Korea and the Association for Honduran Students in Korea, and regional ones, such as the Latin Americans in Korea group or Spanish Speakers in Seoul group. The marketing success of Latin American cultural products, such as Mexican food, Latin music, Salsa dance clubs and tequila, has raised awareness of a Latin American presence in South Korea (Rosales, 2018).

Migrant physical/discursive place(re)making for everyday empowerment: *Chosŏnjok*'s enclave in Seoul

The case of *Chosŏnjok* demonstrates how state policies to rectify a deficiency in the job market exemplify governmobility. Initially, first- and second-generation *Chosŏnjok* visiting their relatives in Korea were issued working holiday visas that permitted employment during their short-term stay (Shin, 2017). In 1993, as labour shortages for low-paying jobs became dire, Korea initiated an industrial trainee system and invited *Chosŏnjok* to enrol. Since *Chosŏnjok* and Korean share ethnicity and language, *Chosŏnjok* easily filled the gaps in the job market (Shin, 2021), though the jobs available to them did not include benefits or social welfare protections. With these policy changes, *Chosŏnjok* could legally immigrate to South Korea and did so in large numbers, engaging in governmobility by quickly establishing their enclaves. Immigration policies and regulations changed again, however, as the Korean state's concerns extended beyond labour shortages to include the country's significant gender imbalance and decreasing fertility rate and the need to attract migrant brides (Kim, 2009).

Once *Chosŏnjok* migrants experienced life and work in Korea, even marrying Koreans and sponsoring other family members to immigrate, they came to embrace the logic of the mobility (Yoon, 2010; Song, 2014). In fact, mobility to Korea became so popular among *Chosŏnjok* living in China, one *Chosŏnjok* migrant described the situation as follows:

> It was such an exodus by the *Chosŏnjok* community [in China]. My neighbours all went to South Korea, and my children asked me when I would go. They were not happy about a separation, but they expected our family's economic situation would get better like our neighbours had. (16 May 2011, *Chosŏnjok* care worker)

This statement demonstrates that mobility was not only influenced by external factors but by domestic considerations such as families encouraging other family members to seek the same financial advantages others had found.

Early *Chosŏnjok* migrants, however, laid the foundation that would support and ease the transition for the migrants that followed. *Chosŏnjok* migrant placemaking in the Kuro-Taerim area is an articulated example of Arefi's framework of physical formation, social

mobilisation and political contestation of placemaking. First, as *Chosŏnjok* migrants started to arrive in larger numbers in the early 2000s, placemaking was as rudimentary as fulfilling their need for housing and easy access to transportation.

The fact that the Kuro-Taerim area offered solutions to these two specific needs contributed to the enclave's physical placemaking. *Chosŏnjok* migrants' need for affordable lodging that accommodated their repeated mobility and short-term residency (Jun *et al*., 2013; Kim *et al*., 2015) was met by the Beol-jip (i.e. small houses used by workers from the 1960s to the 1990s) that had been abandoned when factories moved to neighbouring cities (Jun *et al*., 2013). The location of these houses offered further advantages in that Lines 7 and 2 of the Seoul subway were easily accessible, which made travel outside the enclave to workplaces, for example, relatively simple. In some cases, work came to the area as anyone looking for day labourers could come to the corner designated as the congregation point and hire as many workers as needed for the day. The association of Line 2 with Kuro-Taerim, one exit specifically, became so widely known that even *Chosŏnjok* in China had heard of it. One *Chosŏnjok* interviewee explained,

> Exit 8 of the Daerim subway station is famous among *Chosŏnjok* who live in China. They think that if they want to live in South Korea they just have to get here. Once one is here, the transport is convenient for potential job places and we can get a cheap rent. (28 July 2015, *Chosŏnjok* construction worker)

For *Chosŏnjok* in China, if they could just reach Exit 8, they would have reached the all-important gateway to the Korean society.

After the essentials such as shelter had been achieved, the migrant placemaking graduated to the second stage of Arefi's framework: social mobilisation. Once an industrial hub, the area was now a social hub and a symbol of multiculturalism and variation of ethnic Koreans. This migrant placemaking was a process in which migrants developed their collective knowledge so that they could be armed with information and empowered. The Kuro-Taerim area was a nucleus for various agencies, including travel agencies, job agencies, law offices and ethnic organisations in the community that offered information and street/tacit knowledge. Several interviewees confirmed that those agencies in the community had assisted countless undocumented *Chosŏnjok* migrants. *Chosŏnjok* One interviewee said,

> You can get the latest news very quickly in this area. For example, when the Korean government finally legalized undocumented *Chosŏnjok* migrants, news traveled quickly through the area, preparing us to adapt to the new situation. (10 October 2015, *Chosŏnjok* worker in a moving company)

This interviewee meant that even those who no longer lived in the area would return just for information on visa and migration policies since understanding current legislation is critical for the migrants' management of their mobility and residency.

Managing migrants' feelings of displacement and rootlessness is another role that migrant placemaking plays. At the same time, it constitutes governmobility by helping migrants internalise the governing logic through mobility. Although *Chosŏnjok*'s in-betweenness first developed while still in China, living in the prefecture of Yanbian as an ethnic minority, it continued in South Korea. When *Chosŏnjok*'s ethnic enclave became known as Chinatown[4] by Koreans, the common feeling expressed in their online communities and in the in-depth interviews was that there was a sense of not belonging fully in either China or South Korea.

Both governmobility and migrant placemaking were strongly associated with their dual identities (i.e. Korean ethnicity and Chinese nationality), which are a product of geopolitics (Jung and Jeong, 2016). This in-betweenness combined with Korean society's reluctance to adapt to increasing multiculturalism manifested what some considered to be Chinese traits that provoked Koreans (Han, 2013; Yi and Jung, 2015). Their linguistic and cultural abilities contributed to direct encounters in the service and care industries. Exaggerated images of the criminal elements in

[4] http://realty.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/09/08/2020090803217.html

Kuro-Taerim were aired on the news and in the media (Lee and Choi, 2019),[5] further stigmatising the area's image. For *Chosŏnjok* who had to assimilate first to China and then South Korea, migrant placemaking was an effort to find a safe place where they could be themselves. Regarding that, one interviewee admitted,

> I don't know why, but I just get nervous when I am with Koreans. I become self-conscious of my accent, voice volume, and expressions. In this area, I am surrounded by other *Chosŏnjok* and I feel free from the pressure to act like Koreans. (11 August 2022, *Chosŏnjok* worker in a restaurant)

A number of interviewees confessed that *Chosŏnjok* they could 'feel comfortable and kind of at home' in Kuro-Taerim. Many attributed this to the fact that there they did not have to hide their accent, which is similar to the North Korean accent and often a cause of distinction and discrimination (Shin, 2016, 2018). Since *Chosŏnjok* migrants have established their own churches, restaurants and organisations, they do not need to venture into South Korean places or attempt to assimilate.

One interviewee described the *Chosŏnjok* as a people with luggage to try to explain their rootlessness and placelessness. He said:

> *Chosŏnjok* are a people with luggage. The first generation was migrants from the Korean peninsula, and the second and third generations are just as inclined to migrate, going to South Korea and other countries not only for money but because they don't belong to China completely either as they are ethnic minorities. We [*Chosŏnjok*] cannot rely on China or on Korea. […] Here [Kuro-Taerim], we can feel comfortable and kind of at home. (25 November 2019, *Chosŏnjok* man in his 50s)

His expression 'at home' did not refer to China where he grew up but to an ethnic minority's place like the *Chosŏnjok*'s enclave in China. It should be noted that *Chosŏnjok* are a people with a history of migration and that this tendency toward migration has continued across multiple generations. While *Chosŏnjok* have a sense of uncertainty about their place in China and South Korea, migrant placemaking in Kuro-Taerim has helped alleviate the migrants' feelings of placelessness by continuing their traditions and preserving their identities. The implication being that this location is a place of refuge for the *Chosŏnjok*, where they can escape the sense of not belonging they experience in other places.

Now that the *Chosŏnjok* have established a recognised enclave, this sets the stage for the third phase of Arefi's framework: political contestation of placemaking. Migrant placemaking is a reaction to the host society's hospitality and social atmosphere. Over the past century, strict governmental regulations on non-Korean businesses coupled with opposition from local residents have made it difficult for a Chinatown to exist in Korea. Previous attempts to establish one were met with significant resistance, highlighting the general public's discriminatory policies and attitudes.[6] However, since the early 2000s, there has been a split as some exhibit a gradual movement toward acceptance while others grow ever more obdurate in their rejection of the *Chosŏnjok*. On one side, various local governments started to show interest in creating Chinatowns. The goal was to dispel negative attitudes to *Chosŏnjok* and attract Chinese tourists and investment, which had risen significantly as China's economy grew (Kim, 2012). On the other, as China rose as a global power in the 21st century, Korean society's position toward China and *Chosŏnjok* became complicated. Korean society's overall attitude to *Chosŏnjok* migrants became even more hostile than before. *Chosŏnjok* According to surveys conducted by the Migration Research and Training Centre in 2008 and again in 2018,[7] Korean society viewed *Chosŏnjok* least favourably of all migrants and this lack of approval did not improve over the 10 years between surveys. *Chosŏnjok* efforts at

[5] *Chosŏnjok*'s crime rate is not as high as those of Koreans' and other migrants from Vietnam, Russia and the United States.

[6] Those attempts were declined. See https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/2407 and https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/A2021042618320002428 (accessed 11 April 2022).

[7] 'Koreans' views on foreigners became warmer, but China is the exception', https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20210520063400371

placemaking were negatively impacted by association as Koreans' resentment of China's rise as a global power grew. Pressure on *Chosŏnjok* to assimilate and thereby prove their allegiance to Korea increased as China's role on the world stage expanded.

The interactions with Korean society were dynamic, and placemaking played a resistant role in self-governance and empowerment. It became a contested area where *Chosŏnjok*'s migrant placemaking and mainstream society's suppression competed. Resistant agency (Lee *et al*., 2014b) was formed in the process by which they reacted to the stereotyping of the Kuro-Taerim area, evidenced by online observations in the comment sections of news-related stories on *Chosŏnjok*. *Chosŏnjok* migrants reacted actively, especially to the film *Midnight Runners* released in 2017 that portrayed the Taerim area as a haven for *Chosŏnjok* gangsters harvesting unfertilized eggs from captive women, and so they organised a task force and urged an immediate ban of the film. These proactive demonstrations were a form of discursive migrant place(re)making and active resistance to a negative image perpetuated by the media.

Regarding the resistance, one interviewee said:

> The media and people have created a very bad image of us [*Chosŏnjok*]. The criminalized reputations made us a threat to Korean society, and even though we work very hard and were compliant, they still discriminate against us. This is not fair. I think that we should do something and that Koreans should reconsider how they think about us. (30 June 2018, *Chosŏnjok* organization leader)

This statement suggests that *Chosŏnjok* contribute to Korean society, but the speaker felt frustrated with how she and her people are misrepresented in power-laden relations with the destination society and believed that something needed to be done to address the issue.

Another method of empowerment was reimaging the area, which was a less resistant and more pragmatic approach to their relations with the destination country. *Chosŏnjok* efforts at discursive place(re)making have started to reimage the enclave in the eyes of the Korean native-speaking population, which has led to the area's development as a tourist attraction. Chinese characters on billboards and Chinese cuisine, though simultaneously intriguing and distressing for native Koreans, have attracted the kind of attention that could draw tourists. *Chosŏnjok* elites and middle-class residents, realising the potential, saw an opportunity to reimage the area for their empowerment (Ahn, 2022) and their children's education (*The Chosunilbo*, 2020). Taerim-gu Council collaborated with *Chosŏnjok* migrants to renovate the Taerim market and sweep the street. While those outside the Kuro-Taerim area remained wary, the Korean residents and local authorities in the community developed collaborative relations, working and living alongside one another. As those Korean businesses were dependent on the fortunes of the area, it was in their best interest to contribute positively to *Chosŏnjok* migrants' discursive place(re)making.

During COVID-19, when their community centre was closed, elderly *Chosŏnjok* women continued to meet every day at 1 PM to dance in front of the shelter, serving as a way to minimise the stress they experienced while adapting to their new environment. Placemaking could come in less tangible forms of home, such as the practice of square dancing, also known as plaza dancing. Dance has been a common exercise routine among middle-aged and elderly women in China due to its low cost and ease of participation, and it can fill the void of a lack of social life.[8] It was a joyful coping mechanism that helped them adapt to the Korean environment. However, Korean news media (*Kukmin Ilbo,* 2022) reported that many Koreans felt this form of music and dancing was a nuisance and a threat to Korean mainstream society.

More recently, a multiculturalism library that runs various education programs for *Chosŏnjok* children was established in 2023 in the Taerim area (*eKorea World News*, 2023). Over time, *Chosŏnjok* migrants have adapted to their mobile lifestyle and become proactive, resulting in the revitalization and affluence of the Kuro-Taerim area, which has continued even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

[8]https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/24/china-seeks-to-impose-its-own-routine-on-public-dancing/ (accessed 20 June 2020).

Migrants' digital placemaking: Latin Americans' homemaking

Governmobility in the case of Latin American migrants appears clear in the effects of governmental scholarships, such as the Global Korea Scholarship, which financially supports international students to undertake undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Korean universities. The Korean government aims to strengthen the global competitiveness of Korean universities and promote the appreciation of Korean culture. To accomplish this, scholarships have been awarded to recipients from various countries, and Latin American students have been driven to move to an unfamiliar country. This means that governing mobility has worked well in making mobilities, while sustaining mobility and internalising the motive for mobility was challenging.

Since migrants attended universities in cities across the country, physical placemaking was not possible, and individual migrants were often isolated and marginalised in their new environment. Seeking an alternative to physical placemaking, migrants engaged in digital placemaking that capitalised on the advantages provided by communication technologies. Most being millennials and young professionals, these migrants generally had more than one *social media* app or account and were accustomed to utilising their phones for multiple purposes in their everyday lives. Many of these young people belong to the middle to upper socioeconomic classes in their home countries, and, as such, they have the means to travel to a far-off country such as South Korea. This daily contact appeals to their need to boast about their exciting new experiences over their social media accounts as Tweeters, Facebookers, YouTubers and Instagrammers documenting their everyday lives in South Korea. They are bound to have their own followers of Latinos from around the world, who are fans of Korean popular culture and of K-pop and K-dramas in particular. To attract Latino and other migrants, South Korea has promoted the idea that success can as easily be found there as in the United States if only migrants take advantage of the opportunities that technology and social media create for everyone.

The online platforms that these Latin American migrants used provided insights and information about Korean society to students like those from Latin America. Even foreign embassies in Korea that might not have their own personal social media accounts often include links to the social media accounts managed by the corresponding Ministry of Foreign Relations of their country on their official websites. Since embassies are representatives of their country's home governments, these embassy-related networks have influenced the development of these digital communities.

Digital migrant placemaking was achieved through the skills migrants developed to cope with governmobility. To help minimise the culture shock they experienced daily, they created an extra node so to speak where they could network with other Latin American expatriates, usually through internationally popular social network platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Those already familiar with different kinds of social media and apps arrived in South Korea with a vast network in place and the awareness that a supportive community already existed for them within the country. These social media accounts were the key to the existing networks and developed encounters among Latino migrants in Korea. In answer to a question about how these online associations could support daily life in South Korea, one interviewee replied,

> For everything. We can easily discover planned social gatherings or events, and we can indicate our intention to attend if we wish.

From this answer, it is evident that these efforts at digital placemaking generated governmobility, mobility-making power through social events that were vital to overcoming feelings of isolation. These online associations also prepared potential migrants for their arrival in South Korea with information on affordable housing, work, transport and leisure. For example, money transfers to or from their families in their home countries were especially complicated since there were no associate banks between Latin America and South Korea. Long-term residents who had already discovered solutions could post this useful information on their social media platforms to help newcomers

quickly solve this problem. In a sense, governing through their mobility works in partnership with their placemaking through the information that they glean through the digital communities.

Like physical migrant placemaking, digital placemaking serves as a means for migrants to collectively develop knowledge quickly, thus empowering themselves. Online communities acted as hubs for long-term migrants, helping potential incomers' mobility. Various Latin American associations played the role of providing a bridge between current and potential students, as well as the assorted social media portals for residents, students, event organisers, Spanish language teachers and learners, both in Seoul and their home countries. Through these associations, potential students could contact Latin American students currently attending university there for information on the admission process, academic life and living in South Korea. The comment sections of these websites or pages provide audience members with an opportunity to ask more specific questions, to which the blogger in question will often offer additional explanations and details. By doing so, digital migrant placemaking has become a part of governmobility.

Digital migrant placemaking also empowered them by easing their rootlessness and loneliness and supporting self-governance. It enabled those migrants not only to make their transnational lives manageable but also to create familial bonds of friendships and proactively choose mobility in a country where ethnic and linguistic differences were significant (Harris and Quicke, 2019). One interviewee explained:

> I don't think there's a place in Seoul that makes me feel like home because it's so different to what I'm used to. But if it's about comfort, then I think another friend's home? For example, if they are Latin American, we can speak Spanish, and if we are close friends, then they can feel like my family. We may not have a whole history together, but at least during our time in Korea, we have known each other and shared similar experiences. But I don't think this has to do with the physical place but rather with the people. (20 March 2018, office worker from Ecuador)

This interviewee suggested that what made them feel comfortable and at home was not a physical place but rather the people they were with. Digital migrant placemaking connected them to people who understood their background and experiences and created a sense of comfort and home.

These digital associations were based on two different geographies. The first is associations of the national type, which are based on the members' legal country of origin and closely related to their home country's embassy in South Korea. Common themes for associations such as these are resident and student associations, such as the Association for Ecuadorian Residents in South Korea and the Association for Honduran Students in Korea. The second type of associations are those that group members in broader regional terms or in terms of interest, such as the Latinos in Korea group or Spanish Speakers in Seoul group. It should be noted that during the process of responding to governmobility, their cultural and ethnic sense of belonging changed. Latin American identity, not national identity, became heightened when juxtaposed with the extreme distinctness of South Korean society. These sociocultural differences led many Latin American migrants to seek out people with a common background—geographical, language, religion and culture—from other Latin American societies.

Placemaking was a social process that created digital Latin American society, a new spatiality of their belongingness. The scaling-up effect established an inclusive identity that created a sense of empowerment and an expression of agency. Latin Americans' participatory practices connected them to many others in the new imagined community, even though their community was small, and made connections that had an empowering effect. One interviewee said:

> This is the first time in my life where I feel that I can proudly say that I am a Latin American person. And since I came to Korea, I've met many Latin people, and overall, it's one of the most positive energies to have around. I feel that we support each other, so it's like a big family, even if we don't see each other so often and only stay connected through a Kakaotalk

> chat group or Facebook group. (27 March 2018, Student from Chile)

The statement implies that the interviewee had not previously felt proud of their Latin American identity but that this changed since they came to Korea and met other Latin Americans. They described the sense of community and support among this group of people as positive and felt that it was like a big family, despite the fact that they may not see each other frequently and only stay connected through online groups. This suggests that the interviewee found a sense of belonging and pride in their Latin American identity through their experiences in Korea.

Their social media platforms offered more than finding friends and organising gatherings; they were a source of tangible support. For example, when a member of the Latin American community developed cancer, the family sent a formal request to all the Latin American associations asking members for donations to help with the costs of the cancer treatment. In another request for financial support, a migrant member who had lost their spouse asked for donations from the members of these associations to cover the funeral costs. In both cases, the appeal for financial aid was answered, and there was a feeling of empowerment and pride in taking care of each other, even indirectly, through these online associations.

The coming together of Latin American residents in South Korea to help each other or to celebrate significant Latin American holidays, such as Independence Day, enhances the feeling of empowerment as a Latin American community in Korea. The complex network of communication and organisation required not only for planning celebrations but also for ensuring that as many members of their community as possible are invited, whether by email, social media, or via these associations, is a huge undertaking. In this sense, digital placemaking that facilitates virtual connections and expands Latin American migrants' networks of contacts creates a virtual and real community that offers belongingness and empowerment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governmobility and empowerment were articulated in digital migrant placemaking. These migrants not only drew contrasts with the native-speaking population but also compared the Korean situation with their origin societies, having more active online connections with their home countries. They had more conversations with their friends and family back home through social media, and news articles, videos and comparisons of different countries' different coronavirus situations became part of their lives.

One interviewee added that she thought that in her country, there was a difference between those who went to public universities (who received less funding and had more students) and those who went to private, expensive universities. She commented:

> Do you know what most students are doing back in my country? Nothing. They can't do classes online, so they're bored at home, wasting time, or just working on assignments. If I weren't here, I would be just like them. (4 April 2021, Student from Mexico)

Like many other interviewees, this interviewee lamented that back in their own home countries, not all schools and universities were able to continue the semester through online video-conferencing platforms, such as Zoom. Some reported that their school-aged friends and relatives were not attending online lectures but instead had been given a series of written assignments that they had to submit to the professor by email or via a messaging app. They also praised the easy access in Korea to coronavirus testing, both physically and financially. Not only were these tests available at local health centres in large quantities, but Korean society also used drive-throughs. Test results were provided in less than 48 hours to both the patient and to online databases.

By these migrants sharing such comparisons and relief online, digital migrant placemaking became compliant with and celebratory of their migration and promotive for others. Upon doing so, the interviewees expressed feeling fortunate and secure, mainly due to Korean smart technology and the country's demonstrated ability to manage the crisis. Justifying their preference for living in the destination in comparison with their origin societies empowered them in a different way from sharing concerns and

resistance. Either way, everyday empowerment agency emerged in migrant placemaking and became part of the structure of governmobility.

In summary, though the two different groups' migrant placemaking stand in sharp contrast, the findings of the research uncovered a more nuanced yet still very important common ground: the dynamics between governmobility and migrant placemaking. While *Chosŏnjok* migrants' experiences closely followed Arefi's framework of physical creation, social mobilisation and political resistance *Chosŏnjok*, Latin American migrants charted their own path that started with social mobilisation through digital placemaking to create physical gatherings. Despite the different approaches, both groups' placemaking efforts reflected the rationale behind governmobility, which is how society is ruled through mobility and connections.

One noticeable consequence of migrant placemaking is that it eventually stops being purely an outcome of governmobility and starts to become a catalyst for social integration and community development. Migrant placemaking, over time, transitions from being a passive outcome to an active force that attracts more migrants and fosters further development in the community. Now, the enclave and the digital community are one of the attractions for *Chosŏnjok* and Latin migrants and are akin to a beacon drawing them to a safe place in South Korea. Such influences constitute the potential of mobilities.

Conclusion

This paper examined and compared the physical and discursive place(re)making of *Chosŏnjok* migrants, the largest migrant group in South Korea, to the digital placemaking of Latin American migrants, a minority group in the country. Despite these quite different approaches that best suited each group's size, they provided both groups with a common ground for meeting, coping mechanisms for their rootlessness and placelessness, resistance against assimilation pressure and empowerment through agency. In demonstrating the interrelation of migrant placemaking and governing power, this study contributes to the understanding of the circuits of power, mobility and place in the case of migrants in South Korea.

Chosŏnjok and Latin migrants' placemaking was an empowering result of their collective efforts to combat precarity and establish themselves in a host society where multiculturalism is a concept slowly being accepted. These social constructs that were shaped by governmobility, the social relations and power dynamics demonstrated the intersection of global and local political economy with hegemonic relationships (Kim, 2021). The Korean state, for example, was motivated by labour shortages, an aging population and the appearance of globalisation to expand the legal framework and opportunities for those migrants when they arrived. The circuit among power, mobility and place was initiated by the governmobility mobilising mobility, which has led to and has been accommodated by placemaking.

The conceptual contribution of this study is the importance of the link and the circular relations between governmobility and migrants' placemaking. The experiences of these migrant groups imply that, as both Korean society and migrants face uncertain paths, their identities and ways of occupying space will continuously evolve. During this process, geopolitical conditions, governing through mobilities, the host society's reaction, and the movements of migrants are interconnected. The roles of migrant placemaking can be seen as saving migrants from suffering life in isolation in a new environment and as empowering themselves. In the long term, it contributes to making mobilities bearable and sustainable, so it helps migrants internalise the governing logic. In this sense, migrant placemaking ultimately becomes a part of governmobility. After all, various forms of migrant placemaking, including physical, imaginary, discursive and digital, and place-based practices (Koczberski *et al.*, 2009) become a part of governmobility.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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North Korean Female Entrepreneurs in South Korea: Empowerment through Informality and Resilience in Post-Cold War Geopolitics

HaeRan Shin

This study examines how the post-Cold War geopolitical context penetrated through the struggles and empowerment of North Korean female defector entrepreneurs in South Korea. Reconceptualizing the notion of intersectionality, the study focuses on a grey area of informality and the resilience of these women. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observations, the findings indicate that these women leveraged geopolitical limits to develop their entrepreneurial assets. Informality developed through their involvement in *Jangmadang* and cross-border mobilities via informal brokerage. Through human-trafficked marriages, they stayed in China, learning the Chinese language and working in South Korean companies. The disadvantages of the job market and gender roles motivated them to start their businesses. The research emphasizes the complex ways in which agency, mobility, and geopolitics intersect.

Keywords post-Cold War geopolitics, North Korean women, migrant entrepreneurship, informality, empowerment, gender

Introduction

This study examines how the post-Cold War geopolitical context penetrated the struggles and empowerment of North Korean women who left North Korea, stayed in China for a while, settled down, and proactively ran their businesses or organizations in South Korea. By viewing North Korean defectors not as a monolithic victim group but as a population located at the intersection of suppression and opportunities, this research reconceptualizes the notion of intersectionality in the fluctuating geopolitical context of the Korean Peninsula and surrounding regions. It also examines how they came to be driven by and to utilize informality to both cope with the geopolitical limits in their lives and turn their experiences and networks into assets for their entrepreneurship and

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empowerment. Entrepreneurship within the context of North Korean defectors includes small-scale businesses, with some exceptions of larger enterprises. The intention of this study is not to seek their success stories but to explore how geopolitics permeate their career paths. By exploring the intersection of their victimization and empowerment, this research contributes to a multifaceted and ambivalent understanding of agency and empowerment.

Previous studies on the geopolitics of the Korean Peninsula and North Korean defectors have focused on human rights issues (Kim 2023; Song 2021b) and life challenges that defectors endure (Kim and Jang 2007; Lee 2015; Park 2023). In particular, human trafficking and victimization of female defectors' (Song 2021b) have been discussed in terms of the intersectionality of different discriminations and oppressions as a major paradigm. Focusing on double discrimination, previous discussions have not paid enough attention to the formation of agency or the effect of empowerment. In recent years, North Korean defector groups have become diversified, and proactive groups have emerged (Song 2021a). Research on North Korean women's agency began considering cases of women trafficked for marriage (Choi 2014; Kim 2014; Kook 2018; Song 2013) and, later, diverse cases about their settlement (Shin 2022), motherhood (Kim 2020), activism (Lim 2023), art activities (Sands 2019), and fashion (Jung and Dalton 2022). Advancing the debates on gender, migration, and post-settlement economic activities, this study suggests a reconceptualization of intersectionality in the context of economic activities, marriage, and mobilities. This study examines the roles of informality in these areas, revealing how they contribute to an intersectionality that encompasses not only oppression and discrimination but also agency and empowerment among proactive groups of North Korean female defectors..

The subject group of this study is middle-aged female North Korean entrepreneurs. North Korean defectors[1] are an articulated example of how geopolitics and migrant's daily lives intersect and how individuals are driven by and utilize informality simultaneously. The subject group comprises women who experienced the 1994-1998 famine in North Korea, participated in *Jangmadang* (informal markets), crossed the border to make money through informal trade, were forced by human traffickers to marry Chinese men, worked in a South Korean company before arriving in South Korea, crossed the border to arrive in South Korea, and started their businesses after trying several jobs.

This study asks: How have these North Korean defector women come to establish their businesses or organizations in South Korea? How have they coped with geopolitical constraints and empowered themselves during their life course? Based on in-depth interviews, participant observations, and media and government documents, the results of this study demonstrate that the women leveraged geopolitical limits to turn them into business resources. They faced significant challenges in navigating the shifting geopolitical landscape both

within North Korea and in the wider region. The Cold War geopolitics, including the division of Korea, the related ideological confrontation, and the political and economic changes of the post-Cold War era, intersected and permeated the daily lives of those women. While the women were driven to be involved in informal activities, they also utilized informality as a way to increase their life opportunities in fluctuating situations. In doing so, the women empowered themselves by turning those experiences into entrepreneurial assets. Their struggles and empowerment are not only important, but they also have wider geopolitical implications.

To further elaborate on this argument, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses theoretical debates on the intersectionality of multiple discriminations and the concept of informality as a product of geopolitical shifts. The research methods and the case of this study are then introduced. The first finding section discusses how North Korean women developed their insights out of their informal economic activities in North Korea and China. It also illustrates how their forced marriages led them to access business experiences and informal mobility in South Korea. The second finding section discusses how career barriers and discrimination led them to open their businesses in South Korea. The concluding section discusses the academic and practical implications of the results of the study.

Surviving Geopolitical Intersectionality through Informality

This section discusses how North Korean women's intersectionality is practiced in post-Cold War geopolitics and how ambiguity and deregulation in informality are entangled with the (geo)political context (Mielke 2023). There have been distinguished approaches to intersectionality and empowerment. On the one hand, previous discussions on migrant women have delved into the concept of intersectionality (Hopkins 2019), highlighting the compounded discrimination faced by migrants who are also women. This intersectionality manifests further in the convergence of gender inequality and racial/ethnic bias (ibid.). On the other hand, the discourse about empowerment, particularly concerning migrant women (Briones 2017; Krummel 2012; Pei, Chib and Ling 2022), has primarily centred around their proactive resistance and organizational endeavours. Central to these discussions is the concept of agency, which is a pivotal keyword within such contexts.

Despite differences, both approaches have commonly dismissed the notion that practical consequences are not necessarily the same as the phenomena of intersected discrimination. However, tracing the experiences of female migrants has unveiled the significant importance of focusing on consequences: their seemingly passive coping mechanisms in response to difficulties have

evolved into sources of empowerment. The intersection of various factors of discrimination, such as gender and nationality, does not necessarily determine disadvantageous consequences. Instead, it often leads to a diverse range of outcomes in the experiences of North Korean women in the context of migration and entrepreneurship. For example, the lack of a support system does not automatically lead to the defectors' failure to be integrated because the situation is mediated by their self-initiative and resourcefulness (Muhumad and Jaji 2023). Particularly in highly precarious circumstances, such as geopolitical turbulence, intersectionality provides not only constraints but also new opportunities. The informal avenues they navigate, along with their mobility, can engender both upward and downward social mobility, providing female migrants with opportunities for advancement (Ho and Ting 2021; Srivastava 2022).

It is essential to note that these post-Cold War geopolitical shifts provide particular limitations and opportunities in complicated ways (Shin 2022). The trajectory from precarity to empowerment is also not strictly linear; these women might engage in acts of resistance or simply exhibit resilience in survival (Sung 2023). However, these very experiences contribute to their eventual empowerment, signifying that their coping strategies within constricting circumstances can metamorphose into sources of strength (Shin 2022). The dynamics of these barrier-to-opportunity transitions are marked by their dramatic and context-sensitive nature.

An illustrative case of empowerment within the realm of geopolitics is exemplified by East German women's experiences of post-German reunification (Choi 2022). After reunification, young East German women actively sought opportunities in West Germany, a move that initially attracted criticism due to the perceived disparities in feminist advancement between the two regions. However, over the span of thirty years, the women began to outshine their West German counterparts, claiming around seventy percent of high-ranking roles in the economic, legal, academic, administrative, and political domains. The myth about East German women highlights their self-assuredness, work passion, autonomy, and career-focused orientation, which were all bolstered by state-supported childcare services (Born 2019; Corbin 2020).

This study brings forth new prospects and proposes an expansion of the concept of intersectionality in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics. Rather than simplifying the group of North Korean women as a homogeneous group of victims of human rights violations, gender hierarchy, and commercialized sexuality, this study focuses on a particular group of actors who implement their own strategies of action in the context of intersecting oppression and opportunity. In the current ideological terrain, the complex contexts in which North Korean defectors live and the diverse strategies and agency they generate are obscured. The discourse can ultimately reinforce hierarchies of power between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. Although discrimination inherently

obstructs individual empowerment, instances arise in which proactive individuals showcase their resilience and capacity to wield power amidst adversity. As Nietzsche (1974) posited, challenges that do not prove fatal often contribute to inner strength.

The acknowledgement of informality as an integral facet of daily life has garnered increasing attention (Kudva 2009), with a particular focus on transnational migrants and refugees who have devised alternative modes of existence outside traditional institutional frameworks. Undocumented migrants have carved out sustainable lives through the creation of informal settlements (Samers 2003; Jones, Ram and Theodorakopoulos 2010; Porter et al. 2011; Pisani, Richardson and Patrick 2008) and the establishment of informal support networks and economic endeavours. Within migrants' lives, the boundary between formal and informal domains is blurred, and the domains are shaped by negotiation and transformation. Furthermore, informality serves as a strategic means of governance to cater to people's needs within the constraints of geopolitics and limited urban infrastructure (Innes, Connick and Booher 2007). The post-war geopolitical climate still exerts control over the movement of people between North Korea and China, as well as between South Korea and North Korea, concurrently giving rise to legal and illegal grey areas.

Previous studies focused on informal settlements and informal mobility, but the mechanisms have not received enough attention (Degli Uberti 2021) in terms of empowerment. As literature on migrants' and defectors' entrepreneurship and formal and informal networks (Jung 2022; Kim 2019; Shin 2021) demonstrates, migration has the capacity to develop its own logics, its own motivations, and its own trajectories. This occurs without political resistance, as noted by Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, 184). In this vein, they (ibid., 188) examined social transformations "sustained and nurtured silently through the everyday and seemingly non-political experiences and actions of people" (Darling 2017, 190). For example, although North Koreans' defections were not based on political intention but rather made in response to their circumstances, the informality of their mobility and settlement was turned into empowerment.

Migrants and refugees grapple with structural challenges through informality (Ruhs and Anderson 2010; Srivastava 2022), which they do by using existing informal channels such as intermediaries, navigating the complexities of human-trafficked marriages, and both utilizing and innovating informal approaches. The type of informality that displays heightened flexibility and resilience in confronting the obstacles presented by worldwide uncertainties and (post-) Cold War politics underlines both the necessity and risk inherent within informal practices.

The geopolitics of the Cold War continues to shape Korean migration both within and around the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's approach to border control differs from that of Western countries. Placing the geopolitics

of migration within the Korean context enhances our understanding of the connection between the Cold War and the post-Cold War international order, and how these political forces influence the lives of defectors (Choi 2014; Song 2013). This perspective involves examining communication networks (such as mobile phones), economic networks (such as remittances and smuggling) (Kim 2018; Shin 2022), and the mobility of broadcasting and media to analyze perceived permeability and revised transnationalism (Tsagarousianou and Retis 2019) across borders that may appear tightly regulated.

Research Design

In this study, mixed ethnographic methods were employed, utilizing personal narratives obtained through interviews and participant observations to delve into the lived experiences of individuals. The fieldwork was carried out between June 2021 and January 2023 with research ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board, Seoul National University (IRB 2305/004-010).

I conducted thirty-six in-depth interviews with twenty-six North Korean defector businesswomen and ten South Koreans. The North Korean interviewees were selected through snowball sampling; that is, by being introduced to me by organizations or acquaintances, and through liaisons that I established by attending various events and activities. I selected these South Koreans based on their roles in supporting North Korean entrepreneurs and their accessibility. They worked with various organizations, including the Korea Hana Foundation (North Korean Refugees Foundation), the Ministry of Unification, South Korean organizations that support North Korean entrepreneurs, business consultants, and a US-based organization that supports North Korean defectors. The North Korean defectors ran businesses that include restaurants, trade, manufacturing, matchmaking of North Korean women and South Korean men, online shopping, coffee shops, beauty salons, flower shops, kids' cafés, medical facilities, and brokerages. The interviews are summarized in Table 1.

Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours, with a few extending up to four hours. The interviews were semi-structured around a roughly designed framework of questions. The interview questions for the North Korean interviewees focused on the jobs they had held chronologically, the motivations behind their job and business choices, and the factors that aided or hindered their career paths. The questions for South Korean interviewees centred on the nature of their work with North Korean defectors and the roles of their organizations.

I also conducted participant observations in various settings involving North Korean defector entrepreneurs. This included a two-day workshop with twenty-four defectors and three South Koreans, two year-end parties, events organized by

Table 1. Interviewees' Characteristics

South/ North Korean	Number (no.)	Place of origin	Business item/ organization	Interview date	Interview place
N	1	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	June 7, 2021	Office
N	2	Hamkyungbuk-do	Sign board	June 4, 2022	Office
N	3	Pyungyang	Media	April 14, 2022	Office
N	4	Pyungyang	Online shopping mall	April 29, 2022	Phone interview
N	5	Hamkyungbuk-do	Coffee production and coffee shops (big)	May 15, 2022	Workplace
N	6	Hamkyungbuk-do	Trade and organization	June 4, 2022	Office
N	7	Hamkyungbuk-do	Health facility manufacturing (big)	June 11, 2022	Office
N	8	Hamkyungbuk-do	Hair salon	June 23, 2022	Phone interview
N	9	Hamkyungbuk-do	Organization	July 3, 2022	Coffee shop
N	10	Ryanggang-do	Organization	July 3, 2022	House
N	11	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	July 4, 2022	Workplace
N	12	Pyungyang	Convenient store	July 13, 2022	Coffee shop
N	13	Hamkyungbuk-do	Trade, organization	July 13, 2022	House
N	14	Hamkyung-do	Restaurant	July 13, 2022	Coffee shop
N	15	Hamkyungbuk-do	Restaurant	July 15, 2022	Coffee shop
N	16	Pyunganbuk-do	Matchmaking company	November 8, 2022	Coffee Shop
N	17	Pyungyang	Matchmaking company	March 12, 2023	Coffee shop
N	18	Hamkyungbuk-do	Defection brokerage	March 22, June 9, 2023	Office
N	19	Hamgyungbuk-do	National security speaker	May 30, 2023	Coffee shop
N	20	Pyunganbuk-do	Restaurant	June 22, 2023	Restaurant
N	21	Hamgyungnam-do	Restaurant	June 25, 2023	Bakery cafe
N	22	Hamkyungbuk-do	Kids' café	August 5, 2023	Phone interview
N	23	Pyunganbuk-do	Chinese grocery market	October 14, 2023	The shop
N	24	Hamgyungbuk-do	Medical product trade	January 9, 2024	Coffee shop
N	25	Ryanggang-do	Flower shop, hair salon	January 18, 2024	Phone
N	26	Hwanghaedo	Organic baby clothes	January 19, 2024	Coffee shop
S	1		Hana Foundation	November 18, 2021	Office

Table 1. (continued)

South/ North Korean	Number (no.)	Place of origin	Business item/ organization	Interview date	Interview place
S	2		Ministry of Unification	November 3, 2021	Coffee shop
S	3, 4		US organization	May 8, 2023	Coffee shop
S	5		Business consultant	May 10, 2023	Office
S	6		Business consultant	October 14, 2023	Coffee shop
S	7, 8		South Korean organization for North Korean defectors	September 27, 2023	Coffee shop
S	9		North Korean career school	November 9, 2023	Coffee shop
S	10		Hana Center	Januray 23, 2024	Coffee shop

Source: Author.

supportive South Korean organizations, a business consulting meeting, informal gatherings, a wedding reception, and participation in an online community of these entrepreneurs. These observations offered insights into their daily activities, business-related concerns, and personal experiences. During the workshop, in particular, I was able to observe the participants' distinct North Korean characteristics, or "North Koreanness." For analysis, I repeatedly reviewed the interviews and fieldnotes to cross-check and interpret the results of the fieldwork.

Understanding this cultural background becomes more significant when the women's experiences are considered in the broader historical and geopolitical context. The post-Cold War era, marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and South Korea's establishment of diplomatic relations with Russia and China, significantly impacted the North Korean economy. As Joo (1996) notes, the collapse of North Korea's food distribution system led to the rise of the black market, or Jangmadang, across the country. People's mobility increased as they sought food (Kim 2020), and the once-rigid North Korean system began to show cracks. The black market system not only thrived but was eventually legitimized in 2002. During this period of confusion, border control between North Korea and China loosened. Concurrently, in South Korea, the reduction of political tensions with North Korea under the Kim Young Sam regime led to decreased financial support for North Korean defectors (Kim 2016). This backdrop provides a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that I observed facing the North Korean defector entrepreneurs.

Finding 1: The Informality of Economic Activities and Mobility

This section discusses how these women's economic activity and mobility collide with the post-Cold War geopolitical context, how informality is produced in the geopolitical context, and what niches it embodies. The transition geopolitics emerged during the post-Cold War era, primarily driven by North Korea and China. It challenged the existing system and provided opportunities, especially for women, to have income from informal activities. This shift witnessed the involvement of various state actors, enabling North Korean defectors to achieve greater mobility. The normalization of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea further promoted informal routes to South Korea.

During these women's chronological life trajectories, different aspects of post-Cold War geopolitics provided particular limits and opportunities. These include: (1) the transition economy of North Korea; (2) porous border control between North Korea and China; (3) rapid urbanization of China; (4) strengthened relations between North Korea and China in the 2000s; and (5) the beginning of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China.

First, when the North Korean economy was severely challenged by natural disasters and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the shaking up of the national distribution system (especially for food) drove the women to explore alternative possibilities to survive. Because these women survived post-war geopolitics through the informality of their economic activities and mobilities, informality became a natural part of their lives during the turbulent era. Going through severe hunger during the Arduous March, most of these women became involved in informal entrepreneurship in Jangmadang.

Notably, the women's inferior positions allowed them to access informal ways to survive relatively easily. While men had to work and were paid officially as household heads, women were free to choose to work or not, and they could survive better. Regarding this irony, one interviewee (no. 15) in her 60s from Hamkyungbuk-do, who used to be an art teacher in North Korea and was running a restaurant in South Korea at the time of the interview, said that she survived the North Korean famine because she was both ordinary and a woman. She said that women were often mobilized to work for the community for free, while men were paid. She meant that women became familiar with various types of work rather than going to a single workplace. She explained her positioning in the crisis:

> During the hardship march, the people who were most loyal to the [communist] party were the first to starve to death, and the reason for that was that they couldn't do [informal activities] because of their conscience and reputation. It was a big loss. Ordinary people like me would go to the market and sneakily sell whatever business

> we were doing, and even if it were taken away from us, we would put an iron plate in our faces (author's interview with no. 15, July 15, 2022).

She meant that such informal activities developed among non-elite ordinary people. The Jangmadang businesses were considered illegal and informal, so elites and those conservative people who cared about their reputation did not participate. This also means that by participating in the capitalist market, these women had more opportunities to make money and develop their skills. She moved on to describe her business in the informal market:

> I was a teacher, but I did hairdressing as a side job at home. I did it at home, and if they asked me, I travelled and did their hair. The job went well. Even *Kkotjebi,* homeless kids, would get their hair cut…I also made liquor and sold it, and made and sold tofu. I think I have some sense of business (author's interview with no. 15, July 15, 2022).

This interviewee described her innovative approaches with excitement. It was clear she was proud of her success with those businesses, which gave her confidence. A number of other interviewees spent much time enthusiastically talking about their successful achievements as business people during this period, while describing the general economic situation and starvation with frustration. A few resented that they were not able to participate in the market because their conservative parents stopped them.

Second, as the border control between North Korea and China loosened, the informal economic activities in Jangmadang drove the women to move to China to make money. Doing a business involved selling items that were smuggled from China. *Milsu* (smuggling) was one of the most frequently and comfortably spoken words during interviews with North Korean female defectors. The mobilities expanded as new escape routes and informal brokerage networks were developed in combination with globalization and the weakened economy of North Korea (Shin and Chun 2022). The available routes enabled these women to think about leaving North Korea for a while to make money. They found a method of crossing the border and exchanged North Korean vegetables, such as Schisandra, with Chinese items to sell in Jangmadang.

One interviewee (no. 9) in her 50s, who used to be a prestigious soldier, said that her desire to make money led her to defect against her intention to remain in North Korea. She said:

> I went to China because I heard that I could make 10,000 won in North Korean money in a week. The first place where defections started was in North Hamgyeong Province, because there was no food, and it's right across the Tumen River from China (author's interview with no. 9, July 3, 2022).

This interviewee, a North Korean organizer, was even a member of the Communist Party. She tried to get a machine of soy meat from China so that she could produce soy meat, which was popular in Jangmadang. The stories highlight instances in which individuals actively sought opportunities for financial independence, leading them to engage in informal migration to neighbouring countries, such as China. The allure of substantial earnings in China may have been exaggerated and potentially perpetuated by brokers seeking to profit from such migration. This was the starting point for the majority of the interviewees who would eventually run from Chinese control and Chinese efforts to arrest North Korean defectors.

The woman (no. 9) stayed with her cousin, a *Joseonjok* (ethnic Korean born and raised in China), who told her that he could give her a stable life in China by forcing her to marry a Joseonjok man. She did not want the marriage, but she could not go back to North Korea because border control had been strengthened, and she had lost her mobility pass. Eventually, she ended up leaving North Korea permanently, contrary to her intentions to return. Moving to China similarly led many other women into informal marriages. Most interviewees heard that if they engaged in informal trade or worked in a field for a week in China, they could make a lot of money. Smuggling and human trafficking are interrelated in this context—the women went to China through brokerage where they faced human trafficking in the form of marriage.

Third, during the rapid urbanization of China since the 1990s, this trafficking of North Korean women developed in response to a demand from Chinese men who lived deep in the countryside where they had difficulty finding women to marry—brides who could have a child for them. North Korean women who visited China temporarily were easy targets. Interview subjects voluntarily brought up their stories of such experiences, despite the topic not being within the scope of the study. The women explained that these experiences were part of their answers to my question about how they came to establish their businesses. Marriages formulated through human trafficking articulate the intersectionality of suffering and opportunities.

Their experiences of these marriages and the effects they had on their businesses can be discussed from two perspectives. On the one hand, such unethical and human rights-violating marriages were based on the structured patriarchal violence inherent in the assumption that women could be bought and sold. The prevailing narrative of human trafficking often involves the portrayal of victims who are forcefully trafficked by malevolent perpetrators, made to endure unimaginable suffering, and coerced into involuntary marriages, only to eventually escape their captors. Many interviewees described their human trafficking experiences in China as painful. The shifting post-Cold War geopolitics that brought about the mechanisms through which trafficking served as a survival strategy for women reproduced structures of sexualized violence and

gendered oppression.

On the other hand, the forced marriages protected these women from arrest by the Chinese police. As they sought safety from the policing of defectors, these women were forced to agree to arranged marriages that involved an exchange of money. Focusing on the outcomes rather than the meaning of human-trafficked marriage, the interviewees explained that human-trafficked marriage was the only way to be safe from being sent back to North Korea. In fact, every one of the interviewees who raised the issue of such experiences made statements similar to the following: "Human trafficking indeed helped us. Although it was a difficult experience, it ultimately helped me in my career path" (author's interview with no. 13, July 13, 2022). By this, the woman (no. 13) meant that the marriages were helpful in avoiding the Chinese anti-defecting policy.

Some of the interviewees acknowledged the potential risks inherent in their chosen paths, such as becoming victims of human trafficking. Trafficked marriage was considered a matter of luck because they were randomly partnered with a man, and yet it provided the women with a choice that decided the success of their future: stay in China or be sent back to North Korea. In light of the particular position of North Korean migrant women, including their illegal statuses and the extreme violence and human rights abuses they might experience if they were sent back, the interviews reveal that trafficking did not simply translate to "violence" or "crime."

The narratives of the interviewed women demonstrate the intricate and multifaceted realities faced by individuals involved in human trafficking. Criticizing a monolithic approach to human trafficking, a North Korean who worked in a governmental agency said that his mother was a so-called human trafficking victim, but he observed that her marriage life was not very different from his marriage with a South Korean woman based on romance. As such, the lives of women in trafficked marriages varied.

Unlike the typical image of human trafficking, some women were given time to think about their choice and/or allowed to reject some men before making the choice of engaging in such marriages. One interview subject (no. 13), who ran a trade business and a North Korean organization in South Korea, used to be a nurse in North Korea. She ran away to China and was forced to marry a Chinese man. She ran away from her three arranged marriages and settled down with her fourth husband because the former three men were old. Although her husband remained in China, she kept in touch with him and called him "my boyfriend," revealing the intimate nature of their relationship while not living as a married couple. Some of these women still maintained their marriages, bringing their husbands, who were either Joseonjok or Han Chinese, to South Korea. It is possible, however, that these interview subjects with successful marriages had more positive experiences than many others who were similarly pulled into human trafficking in this way.

Fourth, China and South Korea developed diplomatic relationships, promoting formal and informal trade that increased the entry of South Korean companies and various actors (churches and NGOs) into China. The shift enabled North Korean defectors to be exposed to South Koreans in China so they could learn about South Korean society. A notable finding was the presence of agency among survivors, as they exhibited resilience and resourcefulness in navigating their circumstances within geoeconomic and geopolitical shifts. One opportunity that the human-trafficked marriage provided was networking with South Korean entrepreneurs. One interviewee (no. 20) who was running a restaurant said:

> After having a baby, my parents-in-law told me to go out to work in the city and that they would take care of the baby. So, I got a job in the city. I worked for a South Korean company. Because I worked very hard, everyone acknowledged me and introduced me to others. I learned how to run a business in Korean ways at that time (author's interview with no. 20, June 22, 2023).

This kind of experience was common among most of the interviewees. In Qingdao and Shimchun of China, for example, a number of Korean companies emerged that needed staff who could speak both Korean and Chinese. Some of the interviewees were protected and hired by South Korean bosses, while others pretended to be a Joseonjok, who have a similar accent with a North Korean one. Working in South Korean companies, they learned how to manage a company. Although the women found success with their own businesses in South Korea, they reported that their greatest business achievements were in China.

The skills of conducting business and speaking the language were crucial to the women's achievements. These women capitalized on their proficiency in Chinese and the encounters with South Korean entrepreneurs that they experienced while living in China. Their proficiency in Chinese and their experiences in China empowered them to view themselves as international actors and to engage in international trade or act as mediators between South Korea and China. South Korean business consultants noted that numerous North Korean entrepreneurs expressed a desire to be involved in businesses with Chinese partners or customers.

One interviewee (no. 11) and her brother had a difficult time with a Chinese family who, through human trafficking, bought them and their mother. This interviewee, who ran her own restaurant in South Korea, had lived in North Korea for the first fourteen or fifteen years of her life, in China for fourteen years, and in South Korea for ten years. Since her education stopped when she was a teenager, she worked in household work and restaurants for a long time. Her traumatic memory of discrimination and child labour was so severe that she and her brother never talked about their lives in China. She said, "I didn't want to even think about the hardship. Even now, I cannot sleep without pills. But I didn't

know that learning Chinese was so helpful" (author's interview with no. 11, July 4, 2022).

She never went to school in China, but she gradually learned Chinese by working in restaurants and watching TV. Although her experience in China was very harsh, she discovered her passion and talents during this time. When she worked in a Korean restaurant in China, she was asked to interpret Chinese into Korean. She said that she felt like running away; she was so scared of being discovered to be a North Korean because, at the time, she was pretending to be a Joseonjok. Ironically, she said in her interview that she wants that kind of job. She explained that running a restaurant and interpreting are common service jobs based on helping people, and she shared that she was still passionate about interpreting Chinese.

Another interviewee became a partner of her former boss mainly because her Chinese was fluent. She went on a business trip to Hong Kong with her boss and her fluent Chinese was very helpful. Her boss was impressed, and he offered that she become independent and that they collaborate.

Finding 2: Turning Experiences into Entrepreneurial Assets

Continuing the discussion on the interactions between geopolitical contexts and North Korean defector businesswomen, this section focuses on their settlement and economic activities in South Korea. Cold War geopolitics between North Korea and China, and between North Korea and South Korea, continued to control people's mobility across controlled borders while creating a grey area of informality and fostering their resilience in the post-Cold War era. In the process, the women's experiences of limitations were transformed into entrepreneurial assets. Existing research on North Korean women's difficult defection processes (Kook 2018; Song 2013) and on North Korean female defector entrepreneurs (Jung 2022; Kim 2019) misses this point about turning their experiences into entrepreneurial assets.

As the collaboration between China and North Korea was strengthened in the 2000s, not only were the police committed to arresting defectors, but residents also looked out for illegal North Korean migrants (Charny 2004). Most of the interviewees stayed in China with informal identifications, usually the identifications of unreported dead persons. As most of their economic activities went well, they could have continued to stay in China. However, as many interviewees agreed, the biggest fear during their stay in China was the constant vigilance required to evade detection by Chinese authorities. Some interviewees said that they always slept with their shoes beside their pillows so that they could run away if the police arrived in the middle of the night. In addition, there was suspicion and surveillance from their husbands and village neighbours, who

knew that a number of North Korean women ran away from their husbands in China. The recurring theme of escape highlighted both the ongoing challenges faced by these women and the precarious nature of their lives.

The fear of being caught and suspected was a factor that pushed these women away from China. The factor pulling them to South Korea, however, was not strong in that moment of their lives. These middle-aged North Korean women did not know much about South Korea, so they had no desire to go there; yet their solution to their precarious informal stay in China was informal mobility to South Korea. A pull factor was a brokerage developed for going to South Korea, as massive migration was made from China to South Korea. This brokerage made North Korean defectors' further mobility possible. The majority of the interviewees said that they chose living in subsidized housing with welfare over living illegally. This made North Korean women's stay in China a middle route on their way to South Korea. An interviewee who ran a matchmaking company mentioned that her relatively short stay in China (compared to others) made adapting to South Korean society more difficult. Others had the advantage of learning about South Korean products available in Chinese markets during their time in China.

Many of the interviewees agreed that their ability to move across borders led to significant changes in their lives. They recognized that their mobility could put their families left behind at risk. However, as time passed, they began to value new opportunities; although there were moments when they regretted their decision to come to South Korea. Interpreting the grey area of her mobility, one interviewee (no. 19), a national security speaker in her 40s, said:

> I am actually the one who may have ruined my family in North Korea because I defected. But my father said, "Watch famous movies about our nation and destiny. Even though you seem to be betraying the country now, if you bring back money later, you can be buried in the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery (author's interview with no. 19, May 30, 2023).

This interviewee felt conflicted about openly expressing her desire to go to South Korea due to the political climate in North Korea. When this interviewee subtly mentioned that she was considering going even farther away, her father immediately grasped her intentions and expressed his approval, deeming it a good idea. He inquired whether contemplating the future would not be safer and wiser, as opposed to enduring the risks of remaining in China and facing potential capture. She noted that his response greatly empowered her.

Mobility to South Korea empowered the women's decision-making as well as their ability to face the consequences of the move. They emphasized that they did not want to go to South Korea, correcting people's misunderstandings, as though they would be guilty if they had wanted to. It was clear, however, that

their mobility dramatically changed their lives and opened new opportunities. In response to my research question about the factors distinguishing successful North Korean businesswomen from those leading difficult lives, an interviewed broker summed it up in one word: mobility. She was a defector, and in helping her family and friends, she became a broker. Through networking with other brokers, she has assisted numerous North Koreans in China to relocate to South Korea.

As post-Cold War geopolitics resulted in less tension between North Korea and South Korea, North Korean defectors, paradoxically, faced less support from the South Korean government. They were no longer considered "brave defectors" (*gwisunyongsa*) but "defectors" (*bukanitaljumin* or *saeteomin*), and the administration of Kim Young Sam dramatically reduced financial support for North Korean defectors. The change motivated the defectors in this study to find an income source. Upon their arrival, they spent the first three months at Hanawon, a settlement education center. They referred to this place as their "school," where they learned how to live and behave in South Korea. Hanawon also offered start-up training tailored to North Korean defectors, with a focus on specific types of work, such as art or service roles in restaurants.

In the South Korean job market, lower-income service jobs were more accessible than professional roles; although, they demanded polished communication, and differing accents were seen as potential sources of discomfort and stratified ethnicity (Choo 2006). The assimilation of the women in this study was especially complicated by their North Korean accent, which proved to be a significant barrier to their initial employment prospects. Many of the people I interviewed talked about being treated badly and unfairly because of how they spoke. These experiences actually made many of them quit their jobs and start working for themselves. In a meeting I observed as a participant, a group of North Korean entrepreneurs talked about the difficulties they faced because of their accents and how they were treated. Some said they did not mention that they were from North Korea because they were scared of being treated badly.

One interviewee (no. 16) who arrived in South Korea through a broker after residing in China for six months displayed ambition by actively applying for positions at supermarkets, hospitals, telemarketing firms, and marriage agencies. While at a telemarketing company, she faced criticism due to her North Korean accent, which was similar to that of Joseonjok individuals, leading customers to suspect that her calls were voice phishing attempts. She made earnest efforts to adjust her accent to blend into South Korean society. She expressed, "I just wish I could be 'ordinary' in South Korea" (author's interview with no. 16, November 8, 2022). With the social skills she learned at the telemarketing company, she successfully ran a matchmaking company. The limitations they faced turned into more opportunities for these women to pursue their own careers. There was also an atmosphere of increasing start-up support in the 2000s, as the job market

reduced.

A big barrier was that, as entrepreneurs, these women needed to apply for governmental funding for small businesses and, in particular, for North Korean defectors' businesses by filling in an application form. The form requested written statements regarding business status and start-up items, technology suggestions, a business model, marketability, investment status, a distribution strategy, growth possibility, and others. The Hana Foundation supports defectors' applications by supporting business consultants. A South Korean business consultant said, "They don't understand why they need to do market research and therefore why they need a strategy. I thought that maybe these terms were not defined in their minds in the first place" (author's interview with South Korean no. 5, May 10, 2023). Thus, the so-called support for North Korean entrepreneurs did not work well due to their lack of knowledge needed for an application.

Their gender roles as mothers also challenged their employment, as many of them raised children in South Korea. An interviewee (no. 3), who used to be an engineer from Pyongyang, had two children while running a business. Regarding her motivation, she said, "I started my own business because it was really tough to find a job with my North Korean accent, and taking care of my child made it hard to work full time." Discussing her work with great passion and detail, she let out a sigh about her role as a woman, and with a desperation-filled expression, she said:

> Every day, I receive many calls about my children and often need to go home. It's quite unfortunate. Just imagine how much better I could do if I could work like a male entrepreneur who can concentrate on their work without having to worry about their children (author's interview with no. 3, April 14, 2022).

Although their journey to their current positions might have been somewhat accidental, these accomplished women were truly dedicated to the success of their businesses. Simultaneously, their identities as women and North Koreans became valuable resources for their businesses. Their marriages to South Korean men and traditional gender roles sometimes led them to start their own businesses. Some began by assisting their husbands' businesses, and, surprisingly, they achieved much higher profits than their husbands. Gradually, their roles expanded, while the husbands often took on more passive roles, focusing on childcare.

Their characteristics influenced their responses to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their businesses, which was relatively less severe than for South Koreans. This was attributed to North Koreans' tendency to avoid relying heavily on bank loans and instead run family-oriented businesses. They downsized their operations during the pandemic. However, a positive outcome was the adoption of online training and meetings, which enabled easier participation in education and gatherings, even for those residing outside Seoul.

In other instances, their identity as North Koreans, their origin, and their unique experiences became the foundation for their work. Some interviewees worked as freelance speakers on national security matters, sharing their personal stories with students and organizations. Gaining attention from the media also played a positive role in boosting their businesses. One interviewee (no. 14) in her 60s, for instance, mentioned that because she had a background in performing on stages in North Korea, she took the opportunity to talk about North Korea on television. She believed it was a way to inform people about her home country. The show she appeared on, called *Eemangab*, was well-received, and as her fame grew, she received suggestions to open a restaurant. She skilfully utilized a government program designed to support the happiness and success of North Korean defectors. By utilizing funds and her own capabilities, she transitioned from that support to running her own restaurant.

The interviewees who led North Korean organizations were notably dedicated. Grateful for what they received from South Korean society, they felt a sense of responsibility to give back. They organized voluntary initiatives, such as visiting nursing homes. Some actively collaborated with fellow North Korean businesses, hiring fellow North Koreans. To them, their North Korean identity held an important sense of responsibility. Many emphasized their desire to be contributors rather than recipients of services, aware of criticism regarding free housing and other benefits South Koreans provide to North Koreans. Certain North Korean organizations were established to contribute to their local communities, consistently engaging in voluntary work to assist the elderly and the less fortunate. They also took the initiative to learn about accounting and management, recognizing the need for business management knowledge in a capitalist society, especially in South Korea.

Their experiences, shaped by the social environment and education in North Korea, along with their involvement in informal economic activities and mobility, provided them with a remarkable level of resilience and empowerment. One interviewee (no. 9), who is particularly passionate about organizing voluntary work, was asked why she does it. Her response was straightforward:

> As human beings, it's what we're meant to do. Being involved with people's needs is ingrained in me. This was the same in North Korea, where even the tasks given by the Communist Party were related to serving the people. This principle holds true both in South Korea and North Korea (author's interview with no. 9, July 3, 2022).

This interviewee had a history of active participation in various types of organizational activities. She compared the seriousness of such activities in North and South Korea, noting that those who experienced organizational tasks in North Korea tended to approach them more earnestly.

Across the interviewees, a common sentiment emerged: if South Korea

and North Korea were to slightly open up, they would eagerly conduct business in their hometowns. The following statement by one interviewee was common among all the North Korean defector businesswomen: "I would undoubtedly return to my hometown if my safety were guaranteed. North Korea is an emerging market. I understand the demands and supply within North Korean society" (author's interview with no.5, May 15, 2022). This statement indicates that they see new opportunities as entrepreneurs. They also expressed a sense of guilt for leaving their hometowns and yearned to be reunited with friends and family.

Conclusion

By highlighting the agency of North Korean female entrepreneurs, this study emphasizes the complex ways in which gender, mobility, and geopolitics intersect to shape their experiences and opportunities. The findings demonstrate that geopolitical shifts consistently gave these women a chance of adaptability and survival through informal economic activities and mobilities. Their adaptability and resilience have enabled them to not only survive uncertain situations but also flourish. Locating the women's agency in the process requires an understanding of multifaceted aspects and circular effects. They leveraged informal mechanisms for their survival. There was a desensitization to trafficking as a survival resource or survival strategy that women in the most disadvantaged situations enacted.

The theoretical implications of these findings encompass the strength of a relational approach, which enabled the exploration of these women's rich and multifaceted experiences and achievements. This study contributes to the multifaceted and ambivalent understanding of agency and empowerment. Without actively resisting or engaging in political activities, the women ended up inadvertently empowering themselves. Therefore, agency possesses a double-edged nature, encompassing traps and opportunities, victimization and empowerment. The narratives highlight survivors' agency and the intricate dynamics they navigate within their circumstances.

This study does not argue that all North Korean female defectors survived as these businesswomen did. The subject group of the research exhibited considerable agency, but it is also important to recognize that their experiences represent a small part of the multi-layered outcomes of North Korean women's experiences. A significant number have struggled with their complicated marriages, the education of their children in transnational families, and other difficulties caused by their Chinese husbands, and some have been caught up in the sex industry in South Korean society. These North Korean female defectors are less accessible and thus more invisible in empirical studies. However, by investigating the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees, this study

challenges the dominant narrative of North Korean defectors as monolithic and repressed victims and sheds light on how women's experiences and perspectives can enhance our understanding of geopolitical processes. The politicization of the single human rights paradigm about victims of trafficking should be questioned. The actual realities of human trafficking are much more intricate and diverse than initial assumptions suggest.

The findings also underscore the necessity for comprehensive awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to effectively combat human trafficking and provide support for survivors in rebuilding their lives. Further, within South Korea, it is necessary to analyze how both the South Korean government's post-Cold War geopolitics and the narratives of non-governmental and human rights organizations and the media understand and shape the lives of North Korean female defectors.

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Notes

1. This study uses the term "defectors," which refers to those who escaped from their homeland. "Refugees" refers to their status in the receiving country. As South Korea does not consider North Korea a country but an anti-governmental organization, those who escaped from North Korea are not considered refugees but as those who escaped from that organization. "Migrants" are people free to return to their home countries; North Koreans cannot do so.

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HaeRan Shin is a professor of Geography and an adjunct professor at the Institute for Korean Regional Studies, the Institute for Gender Studies, and the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University. Based on actor-focused approaches, she has focused on political geography and migrant studies, exploring how different actors form and develop power relations, strategies, and adaptive preferences. Her publications include *The Cultural Politics of Urban Development in South Korea* (Routledge, 2020) and *North Korean Defectors in Diaspora: Identities, Mobilities, and Resettlements* (Lexington Books, 2022). After teaching at University College London, she began teaching in South Korea in 2013. Email: haeranshin@snu.ac.kr

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The End of Feminized Migration?: Gendering Violent Borders and Geographies of North Korean Migration from the Arduous March to the COVID-19 Era

Eunyoung Christina Choi

This article examines the spatial and temporal changes of North Korean (NK) migration by analyzing the interactive process between NKs' efforts to cross borders amidst changing geopolitical and economic circumstances and the activities at the domestic, local, state, and international levels to manage displacement from a gender perspective. In doing so, I argue that the border between North Korea and China became violent and that NK migrations became spatially gendered and class-stratified. The proportion of NK women entering South Korea remains high, primarily due to the secondary migration of those who have long resided in China in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men. In contrast, among recent direct defectors, NK men constitute a significant proportion and they often play an active role in family migration.

Keywords violent borders, North Korea, gender, feminization of migration, transit migration

Introduction

The gendered landscape of North Korean (NK) migratory flows across different transit spaces has shifted over time, although NK migration is commonly portrayed as a feminized flow. The dramatic increase in the number of female NK migrants since the NK famine of the 1990s as well as their vulnerable status in neighboring China have been widely studied (Sung 2023; Park 2022; Kook 2018; Choi 2014, 2010; Kim 2014). In particular, the trafficking of NK women for unofficial marriages to Chinese men has been identified as a major factor contributing to the feminization of NK migration. The existing literature, however, lacks a comprehensive account of the spatial and temporal changes in NK migration. With the tightening of border controls, the cost of crossing the

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North Korea-China border has increased dramatically. The shifts in migration patterns, modes, and routes resulting from these changes have not been addressed well. The increase in chain migration by families arriving first in South Korea and direct defections by sea or through posts where NKs work or study call for a discussion of how borders are being classed and re-gendered. In addition, previous research has focused primarily on NK women, while the involvement and experiences of NK men in migration have been largely ignored (Lee 2020).

Through linking existing research on gender and migration in Asia (Cheng and Choo 2015; Fan 2004; Pratt 2012; Piper 2003; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014; Yi 2012) with feminist political geographers' work on border and undocumented/forced migration (Torres et al. 2022; Sahraoui 2020; Choi 2010; Hyndman 2000; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Mountz 2010, 2020; Scarpellino 2007), this article analyzes spatial and temporal changes in NK migration from a gender perspective. The focus is specifically on NK defection—NKs' escape from North Korea and their entry into South Korea through various transit spaces—spanning the period from the Arduous March (a time marked by severe economic hardship and famine in North Korea in the 1990s) to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main research question is how the interactive process between NKs' efforts to cross borders in the midst of changing geopolitical and economic circumstances and activities at the domestic, local, state, and international levels to manage displacement have produced gendered patterns and experiences of NK migration. Furthermore, I will illuminate how gendered spaces of transit have been politically and socially constructed between the imagined state of origin and the state of destination. This analysis will highlight NK migrants' security implications, which vary depending on their political and economic positions in transit spaces, as well as the power relations between them.

Through extensive fieldwork in the North Korea-China border area, interviews with NK migrants in South Korea, and analysis of available statistical and survey data, I argue that not only are the methods of migration across violent borders gendered, but so too are the duration and routes of migration. The proportion of NK women entering South Korea is still high due to the secondary migration of those who have long resided in China in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men. In contrast, men represent an increasing proportion of recent defectors who left North Korea with the intention of reaching South Korea, and they are also frequently playing an active role in family migration. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified digital surveillance in China, making border crossing more difficult and dangerous, which has contributed to a resurgence of masculinized defections organized primarily by men, whether directly from North Korea or from overseas posts where they work or study.

After outlining the research methods and theoretical framework, this article is divided into four chronological sections. First, I analyze the early phase of NK migration between the mid-1990s and 2005, which took place primarily in

the North Korea-China border regions and featured gendered border enforcement and feminized migration. Second, I explore the subsequent phase of NK migration between 2006 and 2011, examining the interplay of human rights politics, Cold War geopolitics, and the refugee industry that influenced the expansion of migration routes and produced gendered transit spaces. Third, I examine the sudden decreases in NK migration and changes in gendered migration during the Kim Jong Un regime, focusing on the decline in trafficking and increase in direct defections in relation to gender dynamics and border controls. Fourth, I explore the border enforcement and changing geographies of gender and migration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Methods

This study relies on a comprehensive approach, integrating various available statistical and survey data concerning NK refugees, with the primary objective of discerning subtle shifts in migration patterns and population composition. Obtaining accurate statistics on NKs escaping their homeland and on those residing in neighboring countries, primarily China, is challenging due to their clandestine and undocumented status. However, insights can be derived from data produced within South Korea with NK defectors and secondary information sourced from recent human trafficking research conducted in China.

Limited information on annual entries of NK defectors into South Korea has been disclosed through South Korean government data. This data includes the gender ratio of NK defectors entering South Korea each year and their socio-economic backgrounds when in North Korea. Nevertheless, since this information is based on the year of entry into South Korea, and the duration spent in transit countries (particularly China) remains unknown, inferring the scale of escapes from North Korea and changes in the socio-economic backgrounds of escapees by year of entry proves challenging. Yet, the "2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights" (Ministry of Unification 2023) and "The Perception on Economic and Social Status of North Korea: Informed by 6,351 North Korean Defectors" (Lee et al. 2024), both conducted by the South Korean government and released in 2023 and 2024, respectively, offer extensive survey data on recently arrived defectors entering South Korea. In addition, this data was made based on the year of final departure from North Korea. A survey (Kim et al. 2022) of NKs' reunification consciousness was also used, which was conducted annually with recent defectors in South Korea between 2008 and 2020 by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University. These sources enable speculation on evolving trends in NK migration, both spatially and temporally.

Extensive fieldwork undertaken in the North Korea-China borderland of Yanbian in July 2003, ten months between March and December 2005, and

during January 2007 has yielded invaluable insights into both the dynamics of enforcement of the North Korea-China border and the migration experiences of NK women residing in China. Subsequent fieldwork was also conducted in that borderland region October 14-18, 2023, to elucidate alterations in the border landscape and border regime. Fieldwork was emotionally and physically challenging and entailed ethical and methodological difficulties of doing research with a highly vulnerable population. Conducting rigorous research while simultaneously negotiating dangers in the field proved to be an immense challenge. Therefore, in 2003 and 2005, rather than conducting independent research, I worked as a full-time student intern for a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides humanitarian aid to undocumented NK migrants in China. My colleagues at the NGO were familiar with the region and followed specific security guidelines that were based on their past experiences in the field. I complied with the NGO's security guidelines and carefully protected research participants. Through the support of colleagues who had a network across villages in Yanbian, I interviewed and observed the daily lives of undocumented NK migrants throughout Yanbian by travelling from Yanji city to Tumen, Lonjing, Helong city, Dunhua, Hunchun, and Antu. I selected key informants based on initial interviews and met them multiple times and over specific intervals in order to collect meaningful data, which was gathered on the basis of mutual trust between myself and the research participants.

I conducted other research projects in South Korea between 2013 and 2020, in which I collected interview data that I have revisited for this study. Between 2021 and 2023, I conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews with forty-three NK defectors in South Korea. Among the interviewees, eight defectors left North Korea in the 1990s and early 2000s, residing first in China in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men for durations ranging from seven to eighteen years before entering South Korea. The remaining thirty-five interviewees are among those who left North Korea between 2017 and 2022. One individual managed to escape during the COVID-19 pandemic, directly reaching South Korea by sea. Additionally, four interviewees were laborers sent overseas by the North Korean government and were stationed in Russia and on other continents with official visas. These individuals departed their work locations during the pandemic, arriving in South Korea within several months of their departure. The remaining interviewees left North Korea before the pandemic, within three years of their interviews, and entered South Korea via China. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, stringent confidentiality measures have been implemented to safeguard the security and privacy of the interviewees, including the protection of their names.

Theoretical Framework: When Feminized Migration Meets Violent Borders

The end of the Cold War brought a significant shift in global migration patterns in Asia. As borders loosened, some citizens of former communist states found new opportunities outside their home countries, leading to extensive international movements. Feminist scholars pay particular attention to the gendered nature of these migration patterns in relation to capitalist globalization, focusing particularly on the phenomenon of the feminization of migration (Jung 2008; Choi 2010; Freeman 2011; Cheng and Choo 2015; Piper 2003; Yi 2012). This stream of research often analyzes two main aspects of international migration. First, feminist scholars observe not only the increasing participation of women in international migration flows, but also their move away from their traditional role as mere companions in migration to actively deciding and undertaking migration as their own initiative. Second, these scholars emphasize the reality of women's migration into fields traditionally considered women's work, particularly in the areas of reproductive and sexual labor. Women's geographical movements across borders toward more developed countries have a potential to enhance their economic and social status. However, the academic and international communities have also been attentive to the exploitation and gender-based violence experienced by migrant women during the process of migration and settlement (Piper 2003).

NK migration has commonly been understood as feminized migration because women comprise an extremely high proportion of migrants. It is also regarded as feminized because, in the transit space of China, NK women frequently undertake the reproductive and sexual labor previously performed by Chinese women who leave the rural borderlands for either urban areas or foreign countries (Choi 2010). Much research exists about NK women's efforts to cross the border, including by way of human trafficking, and their experiences of human rights violations (Sung 2023; Kook 2018; Choi 2014; Kim 2014). Comparatively, very little research has analyzed the feminization of NK migration in relation to other gendered migrations in Asia. There is notable research that underscores the interconnectedness of *Joseonjok* (ethnic Koreans who have Chinese citizenship) migration and NK migration and the intersectional processes of NK defection, marriage migration, and labor migration. In her analysis of the life story of a NK woman experiencing transnational migration involving North Korea, China, and South Korea, Hee-Young Yi (2012) illustrates how the NK woman's body served as a tool for the migration of her Joseonjok family to South Korea, while experiencing changes in her identity as she crossed borders. Within the discourse on migration, involvement in human smuggling and human trafficking for the purpose of seeking asylum is often delineated

from the formal processes of labor migration and marriage-related migration. A more thorough examination can unveil a profound interconnectedness among these seemingly disparate realms and offer analytical insights to comprehend the feminization of NK migration.

The undocumented marriage migrations, often in the form of marriage trafficking in China, have increased with marketization in China and are still being conducted (Zhao 2003; Zhuang 1998; Robinson, Branchini, and Weissberg 2018; Liang 2023). In China's peripheral regions, undocumented international marriages, specifically between people of the same ethnicity across borders are common. Elena Barabantseva (2015) explores Yao ethnic marriages across the China-Vietnam border. She argues that border regulations illegalize customary ethnic marriages and strictly enforce family planning policies. Nevertheless, undocumented spouses remain crucial to the Chinese border economy and society, revealing the complex effects of border governance. Thus, in the case of the human trafficking of NK women for the purpose of marriage to Chinese men, questions arise about how the trafficked NK women's mobility is constructed differently from that of Yao women. Namely, why has China become a transit space for some NK women (and not, for example, Yao women) as they move on to other destinations in other safe countries?

Political geographers' work on borders and forced migration provides an analytical framework for understanding how international concerns and politics, inter-Korean relations, transnational NGOs' activities, and even gender dynamics at the household level have interacted and contributed to promoting and regulating the mobility and migration of NKs. Many scholars argue that with increased border security, forced displacement and undocumented migration flows are more tightly regulated than ever before and their security has consequently been seriously threatened (Newman 2006; Mountz 2010; Varsanyi 2008; Torres et al. 2022; Fluri 2023). The strengthening of discourses and restrictive laws has intensified the criminalization of displaced populations, instilling fears of arrest, detention, and deportation. Nadig (2002, 1) argues that as receiving states have further tightened their immigration procedures, more sophisticated and lucrative forms of irregular migration—and, specifically, human smuggling—have developed. She contends that the intricate relationship between the reinforcement of external borders in host nations and the concomitant rise in human smuggling creates a self-reinforcing cycle. As a consequence of this phenomenon, undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers find themselves exposed to increasingly precarious circumstances (Koser 2005, 2). Furthermore, the tightening of regulations at international borders to curb unauthorized migration has resulted in severe suffering and even tragic loss of life among individuals attempting to reach safe countries. These violent borders have changed the geographies of migration as people attempt to evade detection, manifesting the cycle described by Nadig.

Those researchers tend to exclusively focus on the receiving state's immigration policies, and few examine migration at the international or global level of geopolitics (Hyndman 2000; Mountz 2020). While it is true that receiving states' policies directly impact the security of undocumented migrants and displaced people, I contend that state policies toward NK migrants are always negotiated with and challenged by non-governmental and supranational actors (such as the United Nations [UN]), by other states, and by migrants themselves. The way that strategic concerns over NK human rights and NKs' active efforts to use them to increase their mobility needs to be explored.

Next, I ask, how have violent borders produced gendered mobility and migration? Along many borders, young male migrants are more often the ones involved in active human smuggling to seek refuge in safe third countries in the global North. Hyndman and Giles (2011) specifically highlight the gendered mobility of asylum seekers. They contrast the feminization of the "still waiting" and the confined "long-term limbo" status of asylum-seekers in the global South with the active, mobile masculinities of asylum seekers attempting to reach the global North (ibid., 362). They argue that the feminization of asylum in protracted situations is depoliticized and these asylum seekers are understood as being "in place," but asylum-seekers and refugees on the move to the global North are considered to be threatening and highly politicized.

In contrast, in the case of NK refugee flows, women tend to cross highly controlled and dangerous borders and then bring their families in chain migration after settling in safe countries. NK women have been at the forefront of migration, and trafficking has made this possible. Although trafficking is the most exploitative form of forced migration, it has provided the necessary mobility for poor NK women to cross violent borders. This contradictory nature of human trafficking has been understood very differently, even within feminism, and has led to debates about anti-trafficking programs. In my previous research on NK trafficking (Choi 2014), I argue that the international concern about NK women that led to anti-trafficking programs (whose activities aim to protect women at risk), unfortunately hindered the mobility of NK women who—despite being trafficked—are wanting to move. It needs to be explored further how the international concerns about NK women have produced different mobility between women who are already in China and seek asylum in other safe countries and women who are waiting to cross the border from inside North Korea. Since China's border controls have tightened through digitized surveillance, trafficking on the North Korea-China border has become very difficult. In response, NKs have tried to develop new routes, which can be more dangerous and precarious. At this time, NK men moved to the frontline of migration flows. This variation in gendered mobility evolves over time, suggesting that work on feminist political geography on border and forced/informal migration and gender and migration in global restructuring need to be linked to fully explain the phenomenon.

NK Famine, Gendered Border Enforcement, and Feminization in NK Migration (Mid-1990s-2005)

As per research by Seoul National University's Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (Park et al. 2011), NK migration before Kim Jong Un's tenure can be classified into five stages: (1) 1989-1994, which largely involved defections of overseas NK workers and students in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, amidst global anti-communist sentiments; (2) 1995-1999, which was the most significant exodus of NKs, due to famine; (3) 2000-2003, when the number of NK defectors entering South Korea increased, driven by greater access to information and economic factors; (4) 2004-2008, when NKs gained refugee status with the passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act in the US, which prompted international attention on NK refugee rights and led to the international spread of their resettlement; and (5) after 2009, when defections diversified, reflecting varied motives and migration patterns. I agree with this classification, but from a gender perspective, I conceptualize just two stages and focus only on migration toward South Korea through the transit space of China. The first stage (1990s to 2005) is the period that, even though forceful deportation is severe and the numbers of NK migrants moving to South Korea started to increase, there were still significant numbers of NK women residing in rural areas in northeastern province of China.

The NK famine in the 1990s drove destitute NKs to cross the North Korea-China border for survival. In the very early stage of mass migration, the Yanbian area in China's Jilin Province exhibited discernible manifestations of NK presence. This included NKs visiting their Joseonjok relatives in pursuit of material assistance, unaccompanied NK minors wandering the streets engaging in activities such as theft and panhandling, and short-term NK labor migrants seeking employment (author's interviews with NGO workers, Yanji city, 2005). The dynamics of migration in the Yanbian area, however, swiftly evolved into a gendered phenomenon. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was estimated that at least seventy-five percent of undocumented NK migrants in China were women, most of whom were in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese partners (Baek 2002; Kang 2004). Poverty and the expansion of global markets for brides and reproductive labor have resulted in the trafficking of NK women, which has been identified as a significant contributor to the feminization of NK migration. However, the gendered presence of NKs in China must also be understood in the context of gendered practices of border enforcement in China.

In the mid- and late 1990s, each year, hundreds or thousands of NKs were repatriated to North Korea, even though China knew that repatriated NKs were starved, tortured, made to do hard labor, and even executed as "betrayal against the people and the fatherland" (Article 86 of the old North Korean constitution)

(Lee 2004). Since the early 2000s, international concern over NKs' human rights violations both in China and upon repatriation have proliferated, accompanied by a mounting chorus advocating for legal refugee status of NKs in China. The catalyst for this attention was when, on June 26, 2001, the NK family of Jang Gil-soo entered the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Beijing after their refugee application in China failed because China considered them to be economic migrants. Their visit to the UNHCR office was filmed and broadcasted internationally. The South Korean government responded with a diplomatic effort to have the family enter South Korea via the Philippines. Such stories continued to raise international awareness about the human rights issues facing NKs. In response, China only further intensified its crackdown and repatriations. In just June and July of 2001, for example, about six thousand North Koreans were arrested and detained (USCR 2002). Two years later in June 2003, UNHCR estimated the number of escapees in China at one hundred thousand (Lee 2004, 39).

From a national security perspective, Chinese policymakers believe that granting refugee status to undocumented NK migrants will lead to a mass influx into China, which could cause enormous economic strain and social disorder (Choi 2011). Chinese security authorities have searched homes, street corners, churches, and factories for illegal NKs and forcibly repatriated them under the "Strike Hard Campaign," an anti-crime campaign launched in 2001 (Pomfret 2001). Even those who are found to have helped NKs are subject to large fines, and those who report undocumented NK migrants to the police receive a reward from the Chinese government.

The increased surveillance of NK migrants threatens their very survival, and their numbers in China in the 2000s decreased significantly from the peak in the 1990s. The arrests and deportations of NKs, however, are practiced differently according to gender. A Joseonjok Christian pastor who has a church in the borderland near the Tumen River told me that "NK beggars can be changed into thieves. Since there is nothing to eat in North Korea, they secretly crossed the river at night to steal unripe grains and take clothes left out to dry. As NK men spend ten years in military, we are afraid of fighting" (author's interview with the Joseonjok pastor, Yanji, 2005). At the beginning of the mass NK migration in the mid-1990s, those in the Joseonjok community were willing to support NKs since many of them had NK relatives and, during the political turbulence of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, Joseonjok went to North Korea and received assistance (Margresson 2007, 5). The campaign to detect NKs in China, however, has deepened the social distance between NKs and Joseojok by depicting NKs as dangerous criminals and by encouraging them to report NKs to authorities in the name of protecting the security of "our" people (Choi 2011, 522).

In particular, NK men are often believed to be violent, aggressive, and

dangerous. Because finding a place to stay in China was hard for NK men, many men returned to North Korea immediately after they got food or other support from relatives or refugee support organizations in China (Charney 2004, 83). Some NK men were lucky enough to stay in shelters provided by humanitarian or religious organizations and then tried to get to safe third countries. On the other hand, women are seen as more docile and controllable. Therefore, they have more chances than men to lead a relatively hidden life in Chinese households as hired domestic workers and nannies or in de facto marriage relationships with Chinese men (Muico 2005, 2). In 2003 and 2005 when I was in Yanbian, NK women largely stayed in rural areas of Yanbian as de facto wives of Chinese men. They told me that if they paid regular bribes to local policemen, they could obtain information about police searches.

These women were advised to "behave well" as good mothers, good wives, good daughters-in-law, and good neighbors so as not to be blamed for anything by the local villagers. My informants told me that if they have a baby with a Chinese partner, the Chinese family will often try to help them, even by bribing the police, so that the police will be more sympathetic. Bodies are disciplined by government regulations that define and inform acceptable bodies (Pratt 1998, 283-304). Gendered Chinese border enforcement reflects and reinforces traditional gender norms. Most NK women stayed at home and conformed to expected social norms, lest they be accused of unacceptable bodies and thus be forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

In 2005, the NGO I worked for focused on providing Chinese language education, vocational training in home crafts and cooking, and health education to NK women in rural areas, as it was believed that if NK women stayed at home and stayed out of trouble, they could settle in China. However, NKs had already begun moving either further inland in China and far from the border area, or to South Korea. The number of NKs entering South Korea each year were as follows: 72 in 1998; 148 in 1999; 312 in 2000; 538 in 2001; 1,139 in 2002; and 1,281 in 2003 (Ministry of Unification 2024). As the South Korean constitution proclaims jurisdiction over the whole Korean Peninsula and its adjacent island, the Constitutional Court has interpreted this to mean that every NK is the citizen of the Republic of Korea. Based on this Cold War geopolitical legal fiction, the South Korean government has an official policy that accepts all NKs who wish to resettle in South Korea and give them citizenship right after they arrive in South Korea (Chang, Haggard, and Noland 2009). Thus South Korea provides citizenship, resettlement funds, and a house to all NK migrants—which are pull factors promoting NK defections into South Korea—under the "Protection of Defecting of North Korean Residents and Support of Their Settlement Act" enacted in 1997 (Lee 2004, 46).

The peak period for NKs entering China clandestinely was in the 1990s. Their substantial influx into South Korea, however, has significantly increased

since the 2000s, and from 2001 onwards, the number of women entering South Korea surpassed that of men. Among the NKs who entered South Korea in 2002, over sixty-three percent had lived in China for more than four years (ibid.). According to interview data, most defectors initially entered China without the intention of entering South Korea but later decided to pursue resettlement in South Korea.

The Refugee Industry, Extended Transit Spaces, and the Explosion of Feminized Secondary Migration (2006-2010)

International criticism—specifically, a naming and shaming strategy—to pressure China to improve its protection of refugees intensified around the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The global relay of the torch leading up to the Games sparked protests in many cities, highlighting concerns about China's human rights violations, including those related to NK refugees (*New York Times* 2008). This criticism, however, did not lead to positive changes. International intervention is perceived as hostile by the targeted state and can trigger a rallying effect when authoritarian states manipulate the information to frame the intervention as an attack against their regime (Kim 2023). China perceives international pressure concerning the human rights issues of NK refugees as interference in its sovereignty. Crackdowns and forced repatriations of NKs notably intensified in the period before and after the Beijing Olympics, affecting even NK women residing with Chinese partners and their children born in China. The secondary migration of NKs who lived in China before moving toward safer third countries has led to a feminized flow. The willingness of countries like the US, Canada, Australia, and those in Western Europe to accept NKs as refugees served as an impetus for this departure from China. Significant humanitarian funds have been used to rescue NKs in China.

According to Hyndman (2000), because money for humanitarian aid is limited, the refugee industry is selectively implemented in specific sites around the globe, often for geopolitical strategies, such as colonial practices, Cold War interests, or cultural politics. The international community's enormous attention to the human rights of NK refugees in China was not unrelated to China's increasing power and its efforts to constrain North Korea's nuclear development. In particular, the suffering and exploitation experienced by North Koreans in China resonated well with the international community's human rights concerns.

Most NKs move to Thailand to seek asylum after traversing the vast expanse of China (over three thousand kilometers), and then they go to South Korea. The physical dangers of multiple border crossings have, at times, resulted in migration-related deaths and, more frequently, led to traumatic experiences for those involved. The following interview illustrates the difficulties faced by

NK women as the number of defectors wanting to go to South Korea suddenly increased in 2006 compared to the previous year:

> In October 2006, I left Yanbian and arrived in Thailand after just thirteen days. From October to March, nearly six months, I was trapped in a detention center in Bangkok. The conditions inside were extremely poor. There were too many people. The space could accommodate around three hundred people, but there were eight hundred inside. You had to pay money to someone leaving for South Korea just to have a place to sit. I paid KRW 1.5 million (US$1,500) for my spot. People had to stand or even sleep standing. There was no room even in the restroom. Before experiencing it, I didn't understand why people recommend to gather money before leaving for South Korea. I bought a tile, 90 cm by 30 cm, as my spot. It's a cramped space to lie down. People with more money bought two tiles, and those with even more rent out their spots to earn money, about THB 25 per day in Thai currency. People hung their belongings on the wire mesh wall because there was no place to put them down. People with no money are the most pitiful. They can't buy water or food. Provided food was terrible. The journey to South Korea is a battle against money. Those helped by their Chinese husbands or by families in South Korea paid broker fees and had enough money for expenses during the journey, but for escapees from Chinese families or direct NK refugees who do not family for support, it's challenging. However, the situation for men was quite different. With only a small number of NK men in the detention center, it appeared that they could even play football (author's interview with a NK woman, South Korea, November 15, 2023).

The interviewee told me that she stayed there shorter than other people because she was pregnant. The situation, coupled with the insecurities experienced during the journey and the dire conditions in the detention center, highlights the challenges women face as a result of the feminization of asylum in protracted situations.

Some NK women who escaped from abusive Chinese husbands embarked on the journey to South Korea without financial resources. They could start their journeys without money but with a contract with a migration broker, promising to relinquish the entirety of their settlement fund as payment once in South Korea. Thus, these women did not have money to spend during the journey or in a detention center and commenced their new lives with hardship. Conversely, others have proactively exerted agency by engaging in negotiations with their Chinese families. The goal of attaining citizenship in South Korea empowers these constrained NK women to negotiate with their established Chinese families for the necessary resources to make the journey to South Korea. These negotiations involve promises that the women will either invite their Chinese husbands and their husbands' families to South Korea or send remittances to China after making money in South Korea. Those receiving financial support from Chinese husbands or relatives in South Korea can afford safer routes and more comfortable stays in detention centers. It has been observed that certain

NK women who enter unofficial marriages with Chinese nationals opt to acquire forged *hukou* and Chinese passports and then subsequently travel via direct flights from China to Jeju Island in South Korea, where Chinese citizens do not require visas (Kang 2019, 7). This range of experiences highlights that NK women are not a homogeneous group and shows how class intersects with gender to create diverse experiences of transit migration.

From 2006 until Kim Jong Un's rise to power, over two thousand NK defectors entered South Korea annually, with peak numbers recorded as 2,803 in 2008 and 2,915 in 2009. Women constituted over seventy-five percent of this group, while the number of NK men entering South Korea remained relatively low and stable throughout the 2000s. While the exodus of NK refugees from China accelerated in the late 2000s, migrations along the North Korea-China border decreased due to tightened border controls. Nevertheless, NK women who have resettled in South Korea have played an important role in reshaping NK migration by sending remittances to family members in North Korea and facilitating their relocation through providing brokerage fees, essential information, and networks.

Shifts in Gendered Migration Under Kim Jong Un Regime (2012-2020)

The number of NKs entering South Korea in 2012 decreased to 1,502 from 2,402 the previous year. The decline in NK migration since the Kim Jong Un regime took power in 2011 has been influenced by tighter border controls due to strained inter-Korean relations and changes in North Korea's political and economic situation.

During the famine and before the July 1, 2002, economic reform measures, NKs exchanged goods and earned incomes from black markets. The July 1, 2002, measures, however, absorbed many of the unofficial economic activities into a new set of institutions (Kim 2021, 77). Marketization in North Korea not only increased in the exchanges of goods, capital, labor, and information, it also changed NKs' ways of thinking and living (Cho et al. 2023). After Kim Jong Un came to power, the market became more active. Yet there is a contradiction in how much this change actually improved the lives of the general NK population. According to Hong and Kim (2021, 191), living conditions of NKs under the governance of Kim Jong Un experienced notable enhancement, at least until 2016 when sanctions against North Korea were tightened after its first nuclear test. Jung (2022) also contends that despite the challenging initial circumstances, the regime managed to sustain consistent economic growth for the first six years following the July 1, 2002, measures. However, with the tightening of the UN economic sanctions, followed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NK economy has significantly deteriorated.

It appears evident that the market economy in North Korea did alleviate the economic challenges of the 1990s NK famine era. Despite the near cessation of state food provisions, NKs found means to survive through engagement with the market economy. According to "Perception on North Korean Economic and Social Status: Informed by 6,351 North Korean Defectors" (Lee et al. 2024, 164), among defectors who left North Korea after 2012 and resettled in South Korea, 89.7% reported having three meals a day while in North Korea.

Anti-Trafficking Campaign and Immobility of Poor Young Women

According to my own interviews and empirical research on the trafficking of NK women for forced marriage in China using official Chinese court documents, although the number of trafficking cases has decreased, the practice continues (see also Xia et al. 2020; Mei 2023). The following interview was conducted with Youngha (pseudonym) in her sixties who entered South Korea with the support of her daughter. Her daughter was trafficked to China in December 2016, when Youngha was hospitalized. Because Youngha was sick, her family had economic difficulties. Then her daughter decided to go to China to earn money without discussing her plans with her family members. Youngha explained her daughter's involvement in human trafficking as follows:

> In 1998 and 2000, the price of a NK woman was about CNY 3,000, CNY 4,000, CNY 7,000 yuan. Fifteen years ago, people were selling for CNY 10,000, CNY 20,000, CNY 30,000… the price is getting higher and higher. I said, "How much did you really sell for?" Then my daughter said, "I sold for CNY 100,000. She was twenty years old and a virgin. Even a forty-year-old woman in the same group sold for CNY 60,000. My daughter was lucky because she was sold into marriage and not into the sex industry. It's better to marry and live with a man. My daughter's Chinese husband told her, "If you have my baby, I'll send CNY 10,000 home to North Korea every year. Ten thousand Yuan is a lot of money in North Korea. Smart daughters go out and make their own money or somehow convince their Chinese husbands to send money home. My daughter sent money home regularly (author's interview with Youngha, a woman in her sixties, Seoul, September 4, 2023).

The above information about the cost of trafficking was consistent with the information I gathered from other interviewees. In the interviews, I also heard testimonies that the conditions of trafficking have improved and human rights violations have reduced. Although most women use the term trafficking, they use the word like the brokage of international marriages. Although, because the NK women who have resettled in South Korea tend to hide their trafficking experiences or pretend that they lived a normal married life in their de-facto marriage relationships, I may be interpreting their silences as less serious.

It has been noticed that traffickers on the Chinese side try to match NK women with Chinese men who can afford the high brokerage fees, and not men

in poor situations—women might more easily run away if they are sold into a very poor family. And, if the NK women do not endure one year of marriage (the contractual guarantee often given to Chinese men), traffickers would not receive their expected payments (author's interview with a woman in her sixties, Seoul, August 7, 2022). Nonetheless, it is clear that the tremendous international attention given to the trafficking of NKs has led both China and North Korea to impose the highest penalties on traffickers of NK women. Because NK women may reveal the names of their traffickers during the investigation process if they are returned to North Korea from China, trafficking has become a very dangerous business, as evidenced by the comments of one NK women who used to transfer money in North Korea:

> There are many poor young girls who are looking for a line to go to China without their own money. Even when people close to me asked me to help them find a trafficking route as I had a Chinese cell phone that can be connected with a Chinese-side merchant, I told them that I did not want to risk my life for that (author's interview with a woman in her sixties, Seoul, August 7, 2022).

According to the 2020 "White Paper on North Korean Human Rights" published by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (Ahn et al. 2020), 42.7% of the 288 cases of trafficking of NK women that were investigated occurred in the 1990s, while 37.5% were from 2000-2005, and 9.4% were from 2006-2009. Although there is no statistical data available, data from my interviews suggest that the trafficking of women has decreased significantly, even in the 2010s. In contrast, as China's economy has grown, the number of young women from neighboring countries, such as Myanmar and Vietnam, marrying Chinese rural bachelors in the form of human trafficking has increased significantly (Xia et al. 2020; Mei 2023). NK women are becoming less desirable in the marriage market due to their risk of deportation, the possibility of them running away to South Korea, and the increased cost of crossing the border. For example, it was found that some NK women were asked by the traffickers not to reveal their nationality to their husbands' families until the marriage was settled because some Chinese families are afraid of buying NK women. Most of the women I interviewed were sent far away from the North Korea-China border where they would not be able to find an ethical Korean network, but the increasing telecommunications and Internet networks have nonetheless provided opportunities for these women to make the connections necessary to cross the border into South Korea.

Direct Defections: Changing Migration Motives and Changing Gender Roles in Migration

According to the survey (Kim et al. 2022) of NKs' reunification consciousness

Table 1. Main Motivations for Escaping North Korea (Escaped Between 2017-2019)

Main motivations for escaping North Korea	Number of respondents (%)
Dissatisfaction with the NK regime/political oppression	94 (30.13%)
Persuasions of family members who already resettled in South Korea	63 (20.19%)
Yearning for freedom	56 (17.95%)
Economic difficulty	49 (15.71%)
Providing better opportunities for children	36 (11.54%)
No response/error	14 (4.49%)
Total	312 (100.00%)

Source: Kim et al. (2022, 217).

conducted annually by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University (with individuals who had departed North Korea within one year from the time of the survey), there have been changes in the motivations for departing North Korea. The respondents are mostly defectors who left North Korea with the intention of entering South Korea and passed through transit spaces. In response to the question, "What is the main factor that made you leave North Korea?" among 312 NK respondents who departed North Korea between 2017 and 2019, "the dissatisfaction with the North Korean regime and political oppression" became the number one reason for escaping North Korea (see Table 1).

Economic difficulties, including food shortages, were the main reasons for NKs escaping in the 1990s and 2000s. But for recent migrants, discontent, oppression, and family encouragement were the most important motives. As seen in the interview below, however, the various motivations are interconnected:

> I'm here for my children's future. My husband went to prison, and that has limited my sons' career paths… It affects everything from them going to college and getting a job. We felt so sorry for them, because the decedents of the man who has any troubled records cannot go to good schools and cannot be a member of the political party. Being a member of the political party is essential to get a good job, which provides the power to protect the family and can make you money with that position… The record follows even after the death to the decedents. We want to be free from that restriction. Furthermore, after being freed from prison, my husband had nothing to do and suffered from the cold look of neighbors. Since he was the one who got into trouble with the law, he couldn't do anything because they were watching his every move. Even at night, police just came in and checked our room. That means they want some money. My husband decided to escape from North Korea. He said there is no hope for us. I followed (author's interview with a woman in forties, Seoul, May 18, 2023).

The above narrative shows how the motivations of yearning for freedom and providing better opportunities for children are mixed. As the border crossings from Hyesan in Yangan province were severely regulated, the family decided to cross the border from Jagang province. As water was deep, they practiced several times, and then crossed into China. Then, they paid US$8,000 each for their journey from China to South Korea. Half was paid by cash before the journey and half paid once they arrived in South Korea. According to interviewees, average brokage fees, which are paid to arrange and support the trip from North Korea and China, were around US$20,000 in 2019. With the marketization in North Korea, the number of people who have accumulated capital has increased. Thus, NKs who already knew about the conditions of life outside North Korea through information from transnational networks and who had specific reasons to escape risked making the journey to South Korea, despite the very high cost and real risk of losing their lives on the way.

There was a time when NKs used the settlement fund that is provided by the South Korean government to plan their defections by promising the migration broker their funds. However, during the first pro-work reform period (2005-2014), there was a reduction in the provision of unconditional cash transfers, and during the second pro-work reform period (2015-2019), conditional cash transfers were linked to job preparation (Han 2023). The reduction in the provision of cash meant that only NKs with enough existing funds could afford the journey to South Korea, thus turning it into a class-based opportunity.

Direct defections organized from North Korea, as opposed to family chain migration supported and organized by family members in South Korea, are often led by the men of the household. Prior to the Kim Jong Un era, married women in North Korea played a central role in market activities, resulting in higher mobility for women than for men. However, under the Kim Jong Un regime, there has been a significant increase in the number of men—known as "8.3 workers"—who have received official permission to engage in informal economic activities on the condition that they contribute a portion of their income to the workplace. In addition, it has become increasingly acceptable and common for NK men to use their positions in the government or military to earn money in the market. With the increasing role of men in the market, the patriarchal structure within households is regaining strength. These changes also have implications for NK migration, where family defections are on the rise and men are taking the lead in migration decisions.

There is no publicly usable data that shows detailed demographic characteristics of NKs at the time of their escape from North Korea. However, with the publication of the "2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights" by the North Korean Human Rights Records Center of the Ministry of Unification (2023, 16), it has become possible to approximate the gender composition of recent NK defectors. Of the total 508 respondents who left North Korea between 2017 and 2022 and

subsequently arrived in South Korea, the gender distribution of respondents is 53.1% female and 46.9% male. Considering that females made up about 80% of the arrivals between 2017 and 2019, it can be inferred that the gender gap among those who left North Korea since 2017 has narrowed significantly. The data also shows that those under the age of thirty, including teenagers, make up 67% of the total, indicating that defections are predominantly led by the younger demographic.

COVID-19, Digitalized Border Surveillance, and the Spatially Gendered Migration (2021-2023)

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the North Korea-China border was tightly regulated for fear of the virus spreading to both sides. In addition, the movement of NKs within China was severely restricted by a digital surveillance system that was expanded during the pandemic. Based on fieldwork conducted in October 2023, technological measures to monitor irregular migration along the border, including the use of CCTV, facial recognition, and electronic ID authentication at checkpoints, have made it very difficult for NKs to cross the border to China and to migrate through China to safe countries.

As a result of this situation, the number of NK defectors entering South Korea has sharply declined. In 2021, the proportion of male defectors was higher than that of female defectors, with forty males and twenty-three females, and in 2022, the number of defectors was still higher for males, with thirty-five males and thirty-two females (Ministry of Unification 2024). The strict control of the North Korea-China border has led to a significant decrease in the number of defectors passing through China, most of whom are overseas residents (mostly foreign workers). According to interviewees, there have also been direct defections from North Korea to South Korea without going through China. Whether by swimming or by boat, these cases have involved physically healthy young men or were planned by male heads of households. One who swam from Kangwon province to South Korea told me that he escaped from North Korea due to economic difficulties during the pandemic. According to that interviewee, as the North Korean regime did not allow fishing during the pandemic (out of the fear that the virus could be spread through the water) and he had made his living by diving and collecting seafood, he experienced severe economic difficulties (author's interview with a male in twenties, Seoul, October 25, 2021). The extreme poverty during the pandemic pushed him to cross the Korean Demilitarized Zone (the heavily militarized border between North Korea and South Korea), fully aware of the high risk of being killed.

Even after COVID-19, the number of NK defectors has not recovered much because of the established digital infrastructure of surveillance in China. The

North Korea-China border is effectively considered to be blocked, while chain migrations supported by resettlers in South Korea are also almost impossible.

> Everyone says it's hard to get my daughter out of North Korea, even if I pay US$100 million. I do not have that much money. Even if I take a loan, how will I pay it back? … And there is no guarantee that she can safely come to South Korea. If I have that much money, I will not take her out and (instead) just send the money to North Korea… With that money, my daughter can live very well in North Korea even though she can be continuously checked by police, as I am here.

A total of 196 NK defectors (164 females and 32 males) entered South Korea in 2023, most of them after long stays in third countries, especially China (Ministry of Unification 2024). According to information released by the Ministry of Unification (Koo 2024), there is an increase in elite defectors who went abroad as workers or students and then went to South Korea. Around ten such defectors arrived in 2023. It happened at end of the pandemic as they felt pressure to return to North Korea. In addition, in May and September of 2023, two families with a total of thirteen members arrived by boat directly from North Korea. The information can be analyzed as the spatially gendered patterns of NK migration. Migration routes differ spatially and also differ by gender: secondary migration, which is mainly done by women who have lived in China for a long time, and defection, which is mainly organized and led by men and takes place either directly from North Korea or from foreign posts where they have been working or studying.

Conclusion

The interrelationship of the need for reproductive labor in Chinese households, severe economic difficulty in North Korea, and gendered border enforcement has produced insecure forms of feminized NK migration and vulnerability in China through lack of protection in their marital status. Since 2001, international attention on the human rights of NK refugees and international society's active involvement of rescuing NK people in China caused more severe crackdowns and have facilitated the secondary migration of NK women who have resided in China for longer periods to safe third countries, mostly South Korea. NK women have experienced various hardships and violence during their migration and settlement. The feminization of migration, however, also means that women have taken an active role in deciding their own migration and that of their family members. They have been at the forefront of migration by developing migration routes, expanding resettlement spaces, supporting their families back home through the remittance economy, and helping them find their way to South Korea

and other safe countries by providing information and financial support.

However, changes in North Korea's political and economic situation, migration policies, and NK men's increased mobility via North Korea's marketization has led to a rising number of family defections and to men frequently taking the lead in migration decisions. Specifically, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased militarization of the North Korea-China border and increased digital surveillance in China. This produced spatially gendered migration patterns. While NK women who have lived in China for a long time continue to enter South Korea, their numbers have dwindled dramatically, and the new NK escapees are led by men via direct maritime migration from North to South and the migration of overseas workers or students. The ostensible closure of the North Korea-China border has led to a return to the era of defection before the mass migration caused by the 1990s famine, when only a small number of people who could afford the journey entered South Korea mainly to escape political oppression and direct punishment and to pursue freedom.

North Koreans' efforts to cross the border and migrate to safer countries and the states' level of management to control those unofficial flows have been a continuous cycle. In this process, the North Korea-China border became classed and almost blocked, pushing migrants to use more dangerous routes to cross these violent borders. Furthermore, as chain migration decreases after the pandemic, family separation will become a more serious issue. Throughout this article, I have demonstrated how international society's enormous concerns also contributed the intensification of border enforcement both in North Korea and China, producing gendered patterns of migration. By highlighting various power relations that have influenced the changes in NK migration over the last three decades, I argue that the security of displaced people needs to be considered as a matter of public concern, but caution against strategic interests in achieving this goal.

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Eunyoung Christina Choi is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University. She focuses on feminist geography, border studies, and migration studies. Choi's publications include "North Korean Women's Narratives of Migration: Challenging Hegemonic Discourses of Trafficking and Geopolitics" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 2014) and *The Routledge Research Companion to Border Studies* (Routledge, 2016). Email: tinachoi@snu.ac.kr

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Introduction: Gender, (In)Securities, and North Korean Migration

Eunyoung Christina Choi

This article serves as an introduction to this special issue, which focuses on the current situation of North Korean (NK) migration and the safety and resilience of NK migrants from a gender perspective. This introduction highlights the importance of this topic by examining debates about the influence of China as a transit space on gendered mobility and security, the geopolitical implications for the daily lives of NK migrants, and the agency of NK women. We anticipate that the provision of up-to-date data and the application of multidisciplinary analysis based on different research methodologies will deepen the understanding of the changing landscape of NK migration and the (in)securities experienced by these migrants, and contribute to the discovery of possible and critical ways to empower them.

Keywords gender, North Korea, migration, security, agency, geopolitics

This article serves as the introduction to the special issue, "Gender, (In)Securities, and North Korean Migration: Survival and Resilience in the Face of Violence." It outlines the background, themes, and significance of the contributions in this volume. Increased number of individuals from conflict-ridden and economically deprived regions migrate to survive, but the migration process itself often threatens their safety and security and expose them to violence. Studies which examine human security through the lens of gender and intersectionality seek to understand the causes, manifestations, and impacts of multiple forms of vulnerability and violence experienced differently by migrants, and discuss possible and just ways to support them. Guided by these approaches, this special issue focuses on the group of North Korean migrants. It provides an overview of the insecurity and violence that they face throughout their migratory process of departure, transit, deportation, detention, and resettlement. At the same time, rather than portraying North Korean migrants as only powerless victims, this issue also explores their gendered strategies for survival and empowerment.

At the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was divided into North

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and South Korea, coinciding with its liberation from Imperial Japan. Since the creation of the two Koreas, there have been two periods of mass migration. The first was the movement in both directions between the North and South, from the division of Korea in 1945 to the end of the Korean War in 1953. After the Korean War, the creation of the world's most heavily militarized and controlled border (the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ]) and the geopolitics of the Cold War prevented interaction between people in North and South Korea, and those who remained in South Korea, often referred to as *silhyangmin* (displaced people), were cut off from the North. The second mass migration was caused by the North Korean (NK) famine that began in the mid-1990s. Driven primarily by economic hardship and political instability in North Korea, this migration flow often involved routes from North Korea to South Korea that detoured through China and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, a small number of NKs settled as refugees in Europe, North America, and Australia. The individuals who left during this period are commonly referred to by various terms, such as asylum-seekers or refugees in internationoal organizations, illegal border-crossers in China, and *Talbukmin* (defectors) or *Saetemin* (resettlers) in South Korea, depending on their location and/or the entities referring to them.

The second wave of NK migration to South Korea has persisted for nearly three decades, although new escapes from North Korea had already declined sharply since the beginning of the Kim Jong Un regime in 2011. While opinions differ as to whether the nearly impossible NK migration across the North Korea-China border after the COVID-19 pandemic is a temporary phenomenon or the end of an era of mass defections, there is consensus that future escapes from North Korea are likely to be more dangerous and fewer in number. In this moment that sees the second wave of mass defections coming to an end, this special issue presents a collection of six articles that scrutinize the current state of NK migration, focusing on—from a gender perspective—NK migrants' security and resilience and the ways they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the outside world. This introduction underscores the significance of the special issue by examining the debates about the influence of China's transit spaces on gendered mobility and security, the geopolitical implications for the daily lives of NK migrants, and the agency of NK women.

The contributors of this issue speak from a variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, this issue is multi-disciplinary, including views from economics, geography, anthropology, public administration, and linguistics. The common denominator among all of them is the purpose of this study: to contribute to enhancing the safety and supporting the empowerment of NK migrants by providing up-to-date data and applying multidisciplinary analysis using different research methodologies to deepen our understanding of the migrants' gendered security.

Gender, (In)Securities, and North Korean Migration

Until the mid-1990s, most NK refugees were male and from privileged families (Lankov 2006). Due to the restrictive control of international migration, privileged males had more chances of crossing the border into other countries, which was mainly political defection. However, when political and economic conditions in North Korea began to deteriorate in the 1990s, those experiencing poverty began to flee the country, resulting in a higher proportion of women in the overall NK refugee population.

The reasons why more NK women than men crossed the border into China have been widely studied, and the experiences of NK women on the migration journey and in resettlement have also received scholarly and policy attention (Choi 2010; Yi 2022; Kim 2023; Shin 2022a; Shin 2023). Tight border regulations enforced by both North Korea and China, alongside patriarchal state policies shaping gender-specific mobility and migrations, compounded by poverty and the growing global demand for brides, reproductive labor, and sex workers, have collectively fostered gendered migration from North Korea (Choi 2010, 165-6). Yi (2022, 420-5) describes the process of NK women crossing the North Korea-China border as a direct exchange of their bodies as collateral, and argues that poor NK women, who occupy the lowest position in the NK system and have never had access to capital, cross the border by sacrificing their very existence. For women risking their lives to cross the North Korea-China border, the private houses they stay in as de facto marriage partners or reproductive workers, and the hidden places of the sex industry in China often serve as invisible spaces where they can hide their bodies from the threat of arrest and forced deportation. However, in these spaces, they frequently encounter patriarchal power dynamics, violence, and capitalist exploitation.

The gender-based violence and insecurities experienced by NK women in China and also in North Korea after repatriation have received enormous attention, and international non-governmental organizations and scholars have called for international action for these women (Human Rights Watch 2002; Amnesty International 2003; Muico 2005). Migration scholars' research on refugees and undocumented migrants challenge the necessity and legitimacy of employing violent migration controls to safeguard national security. They advocate instead for prioritizing human security and social justice for displaced NKs who cross the North Korea-China border in search of survival (Choi 2014; Song 2015, 2021). Related research has been continuously been conducted on various aspects concerning NK women in China, as well as those who have resettled in safe third countries. This research encompasses topics such as NK women's survival strategies and agency (Shin 2017, 2018; Shin 2022b), NK women's health risks (Kim et al. 2017; Jeon et al. 2008), their citizenship

issues (Choo 2006; Hough and Bell 2020), NK women's self-representation and representation in the media (Green and Epstein 2013; Cho 2018; Chun 2022), and separated families and long-distance motherhood (Lee 2019; Kim 2020).

Emphasis on women's migration and security, however, has left NK men invisible in the research. Soo-Jung Lee (2020) makes this point, that gender research on NK refugees/defectors has focused on the experiences of female migrants to the exclusion of research on male migrants. She argues that this phenomenon happened for two reasons. One is that women have been the overwhelming majority of NK migrants to South Korea since the early 2000s. The other reason is that the various difficulties that NK migrant women experienced related to the NK human rights discourse in both South Korea and the international community. Rather than focusing on the different migrant experiences of men and women per se, Soo-Jung Lee suggests that migration and gender should be seen as mutually constitutive, with gender itself as both a mechanism for differentiating migrant experiences and something that is reconfigured during the migration process. While Soo-Jung Lee's call for conceptually integrating gender into analyses of migration provides an important avenue for future research, the contributions to this special issue predominantly focus on NK women's experiences, in response to the research needs that arise from the significant gender disparities in NK migration processes and experiences. Some articles in this issue nevertheless incorporate data and analysis of NK men's experiences (see Wee, Lee, and Jung 2024; Choi 2024). These studies emphasize that the safety and resilience of NK women, as well as NK men, need to be addressed and should be a public concern.

This special issue contributes to existing research on gendered NK migration and (in)securities by expanding upon or introducing new perspectives in following three areas. First, this special issue revisits the *transit space* of China. Gerald and Pickering (2014) examine the direct and structural violence that refugee women face during transit. They emphasize how border securitization worsens the violence endured during transit and creates circumstances where mobility becomes more costly. As undocumented migrants and women, NK women in China also experience different levels of oppression and suffering. Because NK women often have lengthy stays in China, however, they are learning Chinese and subsequently moving on to more stable and secure jobs; yet, their restrictions as undocumented migrants still hinder their mobility. Furthermore, through in-depth interviews with resettled NKs in South Korea and the UK, Shin (2022b, 2024) argues that the majority of NK women bring with them not only trauma from China, but also assets that can empower them, such as Chinese language skills and business experience. Unlike most NK men who move to other safer countries by transiting through China in a very short period, many NK women unofficially marry, raise children, and work in China to send remittances back to North Korea. While some women pass through China in a chain migration

over the course of a few days, most of them settle and live there for years or even decades. Thus, in this issue, we seek to understand China not only as a *space of transit* between departing and arriving countries, but also as a *place of settlement*.

The prevailing assumption that China is a transit space where migrants live only temporarily before moving to another country can be also challenged. Living conditions in China influence NKs' decisions about whether to stay in China or leave for safe third countries. Over the past decades, the international community's humanitarian assistance to NKs in China has focused on rescuing them and transporting them to South Korea and the West. This effort is based on the assumption that they will have a better life outside of North Korea and China, and that all NKs in China desperately hope to leave for South Korea or the West. However, it has been noted that some choose to stay in China and maintain their precarious status, given the high risks of traveling to South Korea, the hardships their families in the North would face if they defected to liberal countries, and China's economic growth and the increased amount of money they can send to their families. NKs strategically decide whether to stay or go to another country, and these decisions can change depending on family situations and border controls.

In recent years, China's border controls and policies toward undocumented migrants have changed dramatically. In 2018, as China was becoming a growing destination for foreign workers, the government established a new bureaucratic immigration agency to standardize practices across the nation (Plümmer 2022). Guided by Xi Jinping's goal of unity of all ethnic groups, regional differences in border enforcement have been strictly regulated, especially in regions with ethnic ties across borders (ibid.). On the other hand, in response to demographic changes, China has adopted a more proactive inclusive stance for the undocumented migrant women and their children born to Chinese fathers (Seo 2024). Thus, we recognized the need to revisit the gendered aspects of NK migration and migrants' lives in the context of China's economic rise, political power, and demographic changes compared to the early post-Cold War era.

Second, Cold War and post-Cold War geopolitics heavily influence the daily lives of NKs. Scholars have tended to emphasize the transnational activities of NK migrants and their potential for challenging the North-South division of Korea in post-Cold War geopolitics (Lee and Kim 2022; Chung 2019; Chung 2014). These scholars focus on communication networks, such as mobile phones across the North and South, and economic networks, such as remittances and smuggling. Specifically, through using the concept of "penetrant transnational strategy," Chung (2014) shows how NKs challenge not only the political division of two Koreas, but also the international borders beyond South Korea through transnational movements of people, information, and goods, to improve their lives.

However, the dominance of Cold War geopolitics and the governmentality of the North and South division still strongly promote and regulate the mobility

and security of NKs. Due to their shared ethnic identity and aspiration for Korean reunification, South Korea has welcomed NKs, providing citizenship and settlement support upon their arrival. Nonetheless, the South Korean government often categorizes NKs under the neutral term "North Korean resettlers", but tends to perceive them primarily through a political lens, emphasizing their act of defection. Their migrations are often seen as symbols of the host country's triumph over the other part of Korea, reflecting Cold War ideology. Furthermore, it continues to implement policies of "assimilationist integration" or "integrative exclusion" that are based on Cold War and nationalist ideologies (Lee 2020, 180-1).

Koreans who migrate from their place of origin to the other part of Korea, regardless of the reasons for migration—be it economic, political, or for family reunification—typically do not return to their place of origin once their arrival is officially documented. Some NKs have claimed that they were trafficked to South Korea because they were unaware that they could not return to North Korea and that the realities of life in South Korea were different from what the brokers had described. Cases have been reported of NK defectors in South Korea returning to North Korea after crossing the heavily militarized DMZ. According to South Korean government statistics, at least thirty-one NK defectors returned to North Korea between 2012 and 2022 due to maladjustment in South Korea and for family reunification in North Korea (*BBC News Korea* 2022). North Korea has actively used these cases by organizing press conferences to highlight unfavorable aspects of South Korean society, mostly the competitive and exploitative capitalist system, and using them as tools to deter further defections to South Korea. Tensions between the North and the South on the issue of NK defectors intensified in recent years, and North Korea has continued to strictly keep the migration door closed. Consequently, the ideological understanding and representation of NK defectors play a significant role in shaping the lives NK defectors. Cold War and post-Cold War geopolitics permeate their individual lives, both enhancing and constraining their mobility and security through interconnections and interactions. This special issue explores these geopolitical influences through the individual lives of NK defectors (see Shin 2024; Choi 2024) and their representation in the media (see Lee and Kang 2024).

Third involves a discussion of agency. Namely, how can we understand the agency of NK defectors? In order to explore this question, postcolonial feminist understandings of agency have been invoked (Mohanty 2003; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Mernissi 1994; Mahmood 2005; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2006). Specifically, Mahmood (2005, 112) argues that agency can be thought of "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create." By detaching the concept of agency from the trap of resistance, the possibility of restoring deprived women's agency opens up (ibid., 115). Restoring NK women's

agency is important in order to regard NKs as active subjects who are struggling for their safety. By restoring agency to NK defectors in academic understandings and in activist agendas, the voices and actions of migrants can be incorporated into strategies aimed at ensuring the security of NKs in China and in South Korea.

In circumstances of severely limited options, individuals may resort to survival strategies that diverge from societal norms or that are deemed morally unacceptable. It is imperative to exercise caution in categorizing these survival mechanisms as inherently immoral through an exaggerated emphasis on individual agency. Furthermore, we try to avoid overlooking the plight of the majority who endure hardship by disproportionately highlighting the successes of a select few. With these objectives in mind, the articles in this special issue that deal with the issue of agency strive to animate the narratives of interviewees in order to provide contextualization and enhance comprehension.

The Contributions to This Issue

The children born to NK women and Chinese fathers are often described, without much evidence to substantiate the narrative, as stateless children who exist outside of public services—specifically education—in China. This image has been circulated and reproduced in human rights activism as well as in research papers. Kang Seo's article in this issue, "Citizenship Redefined: China's *Hukou* System Reform and the Status of North Korean Refugee Women and Their Children in China," argues that China's household registration system, *hukou*, has evolved, and its impact on the social and legal status of NK mothers and their children born to Chinese fathers needs to be reexamined. Based on previous studies and available data, Seo shows that most children born to NK mothers and Chinese fathers have obtained hukou and that NK mothers have been provided temporary permits allowing them to access essential social services. Meanwhile, Seo found that the hukou reform resulted in a Chinese demographic change that views NK women as biological reproducers whose bodies are monitored and controlled by an expanded surveillance system. In addition, changes in the Chinese population regime expects that intermarriage children will become market participants who will sustain China's economy. Due to the difficulty of data collection in China, a regrettable limitation exists in empirical data. Existing data is nonetheless significant because it shows the recent situation of NK women and their children in the context of China's hukou reform. Seo's article also provides important information for human rights activists, who advocate for NK refugee women in China and their children born in China, to re-adjust the goals of their movements.

Joowon Park explores the feminization of NK migration and long-distance

motherhood of NK mothers in his article, "Transnational Mothering and North Korean Women's Strategies of Survival: Impact of China's One-Child Policy and *Hukou* on Migration and Kinship." Park examines both the structural factors that led NK women to leave their children born to Chinese fathers in China when they resettled in South Korea and also their strategies for caring for those children who remain in China. The consequential new forms of kinship and family structure, he argues, represent survival strategies of NK women who made the tough choice to seek security and legal status in South Korea. The article also illustrates the discrimination that such children born in China face, not only in their home country but also in South Korea, and the challenges and possibilities of changing their status in both countries. Park's detailed ethnographic data enrich the understanding of NK women's agency as well as their sufferings.

HaeRan Shin's article, "North Korean Female Entrepreneurs in South Korea: Empowerment through Informality and Resilience in Post-Cold War Geopolitics," deals with the intersection of agency, mobility, and geopolitics. The study's fresh perspective redirects attention from the deprived NK women to those who have found success managing businesses in South Korea. It emphasizes the diversity within the NK defector population and recognizes the dual nature of NK women's experiences in China—both challenging and empowering. Despite not directly confronting the system, these women demonstrate resilience and adaptability in navigating their lives amidst geopolitical shifts by drawing strength from their past hardships. This study broadens our understanding of survivors' agency and empowerment. While many of the women who experience trafficking continue to struggle, some are able to succeed in South Korea with skills they learned in China. Research about the empowerment process that uses detailed empirical data, like this article does, can greatly assist in helping more women successfully resettle in receiving countries.

The article "Health-Seeking Patterns of Female North Korean Defectors in South Korea for Mental Health: Evidence from Nationwide Health Insurance Data" by HyeSeung Wee, Jongmin Lee, and Seungho Jung presents a quantitative analysis of NK defectors' use of mental health care services in South Korea. By analyzing mental health indicators (such as depression, anxiety, and reaction to severe stress and adjustment disorders) from South Korea's National Health Insurance Database, the study shows that NK female defectors utilize mental healthcare services significantly more than NK male defectors. Both groups, however, have higher healthcare utilization rates compared to their matched counterparts among either South Korean natives or other immigrants. The study, which was based on data from the entire population of NK defectors in South Korea has implications not only for researchers but also for policymakers. Although the article does not explain the causes of the high rates and continued use of mental health services among NK defectors, the strong research findings presented through rigorous statistical analysis will stimulate the development of

research in related fields, such as refugee studies and healthcare studies.

The article "Framing Identity and Gender in Public Discourse: A Corpus Analysis of Representation of North Korean Female Defectors" by Sun-Hee Lee and Beomil Kang employs a corpus-based methodology to examine media representation of NK defector women in major South Korean newspapers. Lee and Kang argue that the differences in portrayals of NK women among media outlets reflect the media's complex and contradictory perspectives on North Korea, which are rooted in Cold War ideology, and often involve stereotyping NK women as victims of violence. Given that the media has a significant impact on South Korean society's perceptions of NK refugees and that these views are so closely tied to the resettlement and well-being of NK refugees, critical research on how the media portrays NK women should continue.

In the last article, "The End of Feminized North Korean Migration?: Gendering Violent Borders and Geographies of North Korean Migration from the Arduous March to the COVID-19 Era," Eunyoung Christina Choi traces the changes of gendered NK migration over the last three decades. She shows how the North Korea-China border became violent and produced gendered and classed mobility. Beyond attributing the feminization of migration solely to North Korea's economic hardships and China's reproductive labor shortage, this research goes further to show how gendered border enforcement in China and international attention to vulnerable women have created spatially gendered patterns of migration. The research sheds light on the migration experiences of NK men, which have been the subject of little research. Furthermore, this study lays the groundwork for research into the changes brought about by the Kim Jong Un regime and the COVID-19 era, which have been largely overlooked in studies of NK refugees and defectors.

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Eunyoung Christina Choi is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University. She focuses on feminist geography, border studies, and migration studies. Choi's publications include "North Korean Women's Narratives of Migration: Challenging Hegemonic Discourses of Trafficking and Geopolitics" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 2014) and *The Routledge Research Companion to Border Studies* (Routledge, 2016). Email: tinachoi@snu.ac.kr

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이주민 장소만들기에 대한 관계적 접근
– 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 설립과 정착을 중심으로 –

장주은*·신혜란**

Relational Approaches to Migrant Place-making: Establishing and Settling Alternative Schools for North Korean Defectors in the Seoul Metropolitan Area

Joo-Eun Jang* · HaeRan Shin**

요약 : 본 연구는 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 여덟 곳을 사례로 탈북청소년 교육공간이 형성되는 과정을 탐구한다. 문헌자료 분석과 심층 면담의 질적 연구 방법을 활용해 ① 다양한 한국 선주민 단체와 개인이 개입한 탈북민 대안학교의 설립 과정과 ② 탈북민 대안학교의 위기 적응 전략을 살펴본다. 연구 결과는 다음과 같다. 첫째, 정부의 탈북민 지원이 불충분했던 2000년대 초반 한국의 종교기관에서 탈북민 대안학교의 설립 필요성을 주장하며 학교를 설립하였다. 한국 종교기관은 교육청, 교육부, 통일부, 지역주민 등과 상호작용하며 탈북민 대안학교를 설립하였다. 둘째, 2000년대 중후반에 들어서며 늘어나는 탈북학생 수에 조응하며 탈북민 학교 수가 늘어났으나, 2020년 들어 코로나19 발생 이후 북한과 중국이 국경을 더욱 통제하면서 한국에 입국하는 탈북학생 수가 줄어들었다. 더욱이 탈북청소년의 한국 정착 교육에 정부가 적극적으로 개입하기 시작하자 존립 정당성을 위협받은 탈북민 대안학교는 한국 공교육과 상호작용 속 역할을 재조정하였다. 각 학교의 상황에 맞게 미인가 학교를 인가 학교로 전환하여 공교육 체제에 흡수되거나 미인가와 인가의 중간 단계인 위탁교육기관으로 전향하여 학교를 존속하고자 하였다. 본 연구는 이주민 장소 만들기에서 선주민이 주도적인 역할을 한 과정을 보여줌으로써 이주민 공간에 대한 논의에 기여한다.

주요어 : 탈북민, 선주민, 장소만들기, 교육공간, 탈북민 대안학교, 적응 전략

Abstract : This study employs relational approaches to explore how educational spaces for North Korean youth defectors are shaped by 'migrant place-making' in conjunction with South Korean residents. Focusing on eight alternative schools for North Koreans in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, the research investigates two main aspects through literature analysis and in-depth interviews: ① the interactions between South Koreans during the school establishment, and ② the adaptation strategies of the schools in response to existential threats. The findings reveal that, first, religious institutions played a crucial role in advocating for the establishment of the schools when government support was minimal. These institutions secured physical educational spaces through interactions with Metropolitan and Provincial Offices of Education as well as the Ministry of Education and Unification. Second, the schools have evolved in response to various challenges, including increased governmental support, a rise in the number of alternative schools in 2010s, and reduced student enrollment due to stricter border controls post-COVID-19 in 2020s. To navigate the challenges, the schools have adopted strategies such as seeking formal approval or operating as outsourced educational providers. This research enriches the discourse on migrant place-making by emphasizing the relational approaches within initial residents.

Key Words : North Korean defectors, initial residents, place-making, educational space, alternative schools for North Koreans, adaptation strategies

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* 서울대학교 사회과학대학 지리학과 석사과정(M.A. Student, Department of Geography, Seoul National University), star0942@snu.ac.kr

** 서울대학교 지리학과 교수; 서울대학교 국토문제연구소 겸무연구원; 서울대학교 여성학연구소 겸무연구원; 서울대학교 여성학협동과정 겸무 교수; 서울대학교 통일평화연구원 겸무연구원(Professor, Department of Geography, Institute for Korean Regional Studies, Institute for Gender Research, Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University), haeranshin@snu.ac.kr

1. 서론

본 연구는 탈북민 학교를 설립하는 과정을 다양한 한국 선주민 행위자의 역할과 상호작용을 중심으로 분석한다. 본 연구에서 탈북민 학교 설립과정을 '이주민 장소만들기'로 개념화한다. '이주민 장소만들기'는 이주민의 디아스포라 처지에 대처하고 자신의 정체성을 보호하고 역량을 강화하기 위해 물리적, 사회적 디지털 커뮤니티를 형성하고 재구성하는 지속적인 사회적 과정(Boccagni and Hondagneu Sotelo, 2023; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011)을 뜻한다.[1] 이주민 장소만들기에 관한 기존 문헌(박소연, 2022; 정현주, 2010; Pemberton and Phillimore, 2018)이 이주민의 장소만들기에 초점을 둔 데 비해 본 연구는 다양한 이해관계를 가진 한국 선주민 단체와 개인이 개입한 이주민 장소만들기 과정에 초점을 맞춘다. 구체적으로 한국 선주민은 한국 종교기관, 한국 교사, 통일부, 교육부, 교육청, 학교 지역주민이 개입하여 북한이탈주민(이하 탈북민)[2] 대안학교를 설립하는 과정을 고찰하고, 탈북민 대안학교가 위기에 대응하고자 여러 전략을 구사하는 역동성을 살펴본다. 그 과정은 주요 행위자의 탈북청소년[3]을 교육하기 위한 물리적 공간 마련과 제도적 기반 정비부터 설립과 운영에 필요한 기금 조성, 교사 모집, 학생 모집, 교육 내용 조직과 구상, 탈북민 학교 설립 반대를 포함하는 총체적 과정을 아우른다. 이 연구는 이주민 장소만들기를 공간적, 관계적, 총체적인 메커니즘으로 분석(Shin, 2018)하여 정치지리학, 사회지리학에서 증가하는 이주민 공간 논의에 기여할 것이다.

지리학을 포함한 사회과학 분야에서 탈북민을 비롯한 이주민 공간에 관한 연구는 최근 몇 년간 급격히 성장하였다(Chica, 2021). 하지만 기존 연구(박소연, 2022; Habarakada and Shin, 2019; Pemberton and Phillimore, 2018; Seo and Skelton, 2017)는 다음과 같은 한계를 보인다. 첫째, 이주민 공간 연구의 가장 주된 논의는 이주민이 형성한 밀집지역과 이주민 사업체, 이주민 공동체, 이주민 종교공간을 중심으로 이뤄졌다. 이주민 장소 만들기가 단지 이주민의 활동, 노력의 결과가 아니라 선주민과 다른 이주민과의 관계 속에서 이루어지는 역동적인 과정이라고 보는 관계적 접근이 제시되었다(Castaneda and Aranda, 2023; Delaisse *et al.*, 2024; Hubner and Dirksmeier, 2023; Shin, 2019). 이주민 장소에 대한 관계적 접근과 시각이 발전하였지만, 지정학적 갈등이 고조된 두 사회의 사람들의 장소만들기인 탈북민의 장소에 대해서는 관계적 접근이 미흡하였다. 북한에서 한국으로 이동과 이주는 국경통제에 의해 철저히 불허되고 한국정부가 공공임대주택에 배정하면서 당시 임대주택 상황에 따라 밀집지역의 형성이나 분산배치도 좌우한다. 이렇게 선주민이 주도한 이주민 장소만들기의 특징이 유의미한데도 불구하고 조명받지 못하였다. 둘째, 탈북청소년 교육공간을 대상으로 한 연구는 주로 다문화 연구와 북한학 분야에서 청소년들의 적응과 정착을 중심으로 이루어졌다. 탈북민의 교육공간을 마련하는 과정은 법적, 제도적, 사회적 역동성을 보여주는 중요한 주제임에도 지리학 내에서 그 논의가 충분하지 않았다.

본 연구는 다음의 연구 질문을 제기한다. 첫째, 탈북민과 한국 선주민의 상호작용 속에서 어떻게 탈북민 대안학교가 설립되었는가? 둘째, 탈북민 대안학교는 제도적 사회적 변화에 어떻게 대응하고 적응하였나? 본 연구는 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 8곳을 사례로 문헌자료 분석과 심층 면담의 질적 연구 방법을 활용하여 위의 두 가지 질문에 답하고자 한다.

전체적인 논문 구성은 다음과 같다. 2장 문헌 연구에서는 기존 이주민 공간 연구의 한계점을 비판적으로 검토하고, 지리학에서 관계적 접근으로 이주민 교육공간을 고찰해야 한다는 연구 필요성을 제기한다. 3장에서는 연구 방법을 제시하고 연구 사례를 소개한다. 연구 결과를 다루는 4장에서는 선주민이 주요행위자가 되어 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 설립 과정을 살펴본다. 더불어 탈북민 대안학교가 위기 상황을 극복하기 위한 적응 전략을 분석한다. 마지막 5장 결론에서는 본 연구의 학술적·사회적 함의를 논한다.

2. 선행연구 및 개념적 틀: 관계적 이주민 장소만들기

1) 이주민 장소만들기와 탈북민 교육공간에 관한 기존 논의

지리학 분야에서 이주민 연구는 최근 몇 년간 급격히 성장해 왔으며, 북한이탈주민을 비롯해 한국 내 이주민 혹은 재외한국인의 정착이 중심적인 연구 대상이었다. 그동안 이주민 장소만들기(Migrant Place-making)는 이주민, 난민이 자신의 정체성을 지키는 동시에 새로운 지역사회에 자

리 잡기 위한 공간 확장 전략으로 조명되어 왔다(Pemberton and Phillimore, 2018). 특히 이주민 밀집지역 내에 있는 이주민 거주지(박소연, 2022), 이주민 종교 공간(정현주, 2010; Habarakada and Shin, 2019), 이주민 사업체(이영민·이종희, 2013) 그리고 이주민 여가 공간(Seo and Skelton, 2017) 등이 주로 논의되는 주제였다. 기존 연구는 이주민의 정착 과정에서 다양한 장소만들기 과정이 핵심적인 역할을 하는 것을 보여주었으며, 대부분 이주민의 주체성에 방점을 찍어 이주민을 핵심 주체로 조명하였다(Zhuang, 2021).

한편, 지리학을 위시한 공간 연구는 근래 들어 이주민 밀집지역의 역동적인 과정을 공간적, 관계적, 총체적인 메커니즘으로 밝히고자 하였다(Shin and Gutierrez, 2024). 하지만 다음과 같은 한계가 있었다. 첫째, 이주민 밀집지역에서 그 민족적 구성과 계층이 세분화(안누리, 2022; 정현주, 2020)되는 양상을 분석하거나 다양한 인종의 이주민이 서로 공존하고 갈등을 빚는 사례(Acolin and Vitiello, 2018)를 집중적으로 조명하였다. 그 결과 이주민 장소만들기 과정에서 선주민의 역할이 활발히 논의되지 않았다(Adey, 2017; Iaquinto, 2020).

둘째, 선주민의 역할과 선주민과 이뤄지는 관계가 이주민 장소만들기 과정에서 중요함에도 불구하고 선주민이 주도하여 형성하는 이주민 장소에 충분히 주의를 기울이지 않았다. 탈북민 장소만들기는 집중거주지를 형성하고 내부적 네트워크를 강화하여 정보를 교류한다는 측면에서 장소만들기가 수반하는 역할과 기능이 이주민 장소만들기와 유사하다. 하지만 탈북민은 여타 이주민들과 달리 남북한 관계의 특성상 주거지원 정책의 대상이므로 알선된 임대주택에 살게 되어 집중거주지 형성과정이 다르다. 또한 본국으로 귀환할 가능성이 매우 제한되어 있고 그들을 위한 지원과 그들의 안녕이 정치적인 함의를 내포하는 까닭에 장소만들기에 참여하는 주체의 범위가 훨씬 방대하다는 차별점을 가진다(신혜란, 2018; Shin, 2021). 탈북민과 같이 지정학적 관계가 복잡하고 역동적인 경우, 지정학적 맥락 변화에 따라 탈북민에 대한 혜택과 규제가 달라지므로 도착국 선주민의 역할이 중추적이다.

탈북민 교육공간은 관계적 이주민 장소만들기의 역동적인 변화를 보여주는 대표적 사례임에도 불구하고 지리학계에서 연구가 미진하였다. 사실 한반도 분단 상황에서 등장한 탈북민은 국내 및 국외 정세에 영향을 받는 지정학적 존재인 까닭에 남북관계의 양상, 북한과 중국의 국경 통제 정도, 탈북민 입국 경로, 탈북민 가족관계 구성(Shin, 2024), 탈북민 지원 정책의 변화가 탈북민 교육공간을 연쇄적으로 변화시키고 있다. 이처럼 지정학적 맥락 속에서 변화하는 탈북민 교육공간은 탈북민 1.5세와 탈북민 2세를 비롯한 탈북청소년들이 한국 사회에 통합될 수 있도록 촉진하는 물리적, 상징적 토대로 기능할 뿐 아니라 선주민과 이주민의 상호작용이 두드러지는 대표적 사례라고 할 수 있으나 장소만들기 관점에서 논의되지 않았다.

오히려 탈북민 교육공간에 관한 기존 논의는 다문화 연구 및 북한학 분야에서 중점적으로 이루어졌다. 다문화 연구와 북한학 연구자들은 제도권 교육에서는 탈북청소년의 특성을 반영한 적응 지원 체계를 충분히 마련하지 못한 점을 지적하며(이은혜, 2019), 탈북청소년 대상의 통합교육을 궁극적인 목표에 도달하기 위한 징검다리로서 탈북청소년의 특성을 고려한 대안적 교육공간의 필요성을 제기하였다(심양섭·김현주, 2015). 왜냐하면 대안학교는 일반학교보다 탈북청소년의 성장과 정착을 가장 중요한 목표로 두어(강윤희·모경환, 2021) 탈북청소년의 발달 정도를 고려한 교육적 처치와 심리적 지지를 적절히 제공함으로써 탈북청소년이 건강한 자아정체성을 확립한 사회구성원으로 성장하도록 지원하기 때문이다(박병애, 2024). 한국 정부기관과 지원단체는 특히 탈북청소년을 남북 분단 상황에서 지정학적으로 중요한 존재로 보고 있으며, 궁극적으로 그들을 한국 사회에 통합시키기 위해 탈북민 대안학교가 탈북청소년의 남한 사회적응을 돕는 중간 지대로써 중추적인 역할을 감당해야 한다는 시선이 지배적이다.

탈북청소년을 위한 대안학교의 필요성을 주장했던 기존 논의를 발전시키기 위해서는 다양한 요소를 포괄적으로 고려하여 한국의 탈북민 대안학교 사례를 분석해야 한다(Kraftl, 2020). 탈북민 교육공간의 외부적 차원에서 선주민의 주도로 탈북민 대안학교가 만들어지는 과정은 학교 설립에 필요한 정부의 허가, 지역 주민 간 갈등, 학교 임차료와 밀접하게 연관된 부동산 시장 관련성, 학교 운영을 위한 지역사회와 연계, 탈북민 대안학교 간 학생 모집을 위한 경쟁 같은 요소들을 고루 살펴보아야 한다. 특히 부동산 가격이 높은 한국의 대도시에서 소수자 공간(장애인 공간, 퀴어 공간, 다문화 공간 등)을 확보하는 행위는 소수자 공간의 정당성을 주류사회에 설득하고 선주민의 강한 저항(Mapitsa, 2019)에 부딪히는 일련의 과정을 수반하여 부동산 문제나 사회운동과 밀접하게 연관된다는 사회적 함의를 내포한다. 한편, 탈북민 교육공간의 내부적 차원에서 공교육에서 탈북청소년을 위한 교육지원이 점차 증가하고 기존 탈북

민 학교 교사들이 새로운 탈북민 학교를 설립하며 학교의 수가 증가했으나, 코로나 팬데믹 이후 중국과 북한의 국경 통제가 강화되고 남북 관계가 경색됨에 따라 입국하는 탈북학생 수가 급감하였다. 따라서, 본 연구는 탈북민 학교의 존립을 위협하는 다양한 요인들을 고려하여 한국 선주민이 주도하는 탈북민 장소만들기 과정을 규명하고자 한다.

2) 이주민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근

본 연구는 '이주민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근'를 개념적 틀로 제안한다. 장소만들기에 관한 기존 연구는 정부 주도의 도시계획이나 재개발과 같이 특정 목적 아래 공공장소를 탈바꿈하려는 활동(Sweeney *et al.*, 2018)부터 시민들이 주축이 되어 일상 공간을 재구성하는 다소 즉흥적이고 조직화되지 않은 움직임(Lew, 2017)까지 다양한 형태를 포괄하고 있다. 탈북민 대안학교의 경우 정부의 인가를 받은 대안학교부터 민간에서 운영하는 대안교육시설까지 장소가 가지는 공공성의 스펙트럼이 넓은 까닭에 장소만들기 개념을 적용하기에 적합하다.

더불어 장소만들기는 장소에 관한 서로 다른 의도와 인식이 경합하는 장소의 정치(진예린, 2018)를 이해할 수 있도록 돕는다. 쉽게 말해 특정 장소에서 여러 이해관계가 갈등하고 교차(Pierce *et al.*, 2011)하는 동시에 사회적 협상을 통해 장소의 의미가 구성되고 타협되는 총체적 과정을 고찰하기에 유용하다는 것이다(Yashadhana *et al.*, 2023). 특히 이주민 장소는 선주민을 포함한 여러 행위자의 이해관계가 첨예하게 대립하고 상충한다는 점에서 주목할 필요가 있다. 왜냐하면 이주민 장소만들기는 특정 장소에 이주민의 집단적 정체성을 부여하여(Castañeda *et al.*, 2023) 주류사회를 설득하는 사회적 구성물(Delaisse *et al.*, 2024)이자 과정적 결과물(Hubner and Dirksmeier, 2023)로써 중요한 의미를 가지기 때문이다.

나아가 본 연구에서는 이주민 장소만들기를 주요 행위자의 상호작용을 핵심으로 상정하는 관계적 접근을 취하고자 한다. 즉, 이주민 장소를 하나의 고정불변한 개체로 간주하지 않고, 장소에 관여하는 개인과 집단의 관계가 투영되는 유동적 실체로 개념화한다는 것이다(최병두, 2017; Harvey, 1973). 선주민의 핵심적인 역할에 주목한 본 연구는 한국 종교기관, 한국인 교사, 한국의 지역단체, 통일부, 교육부, 교육청이 주도하는 탈북민 장소만들기가 탈북학생, 탈북학생 학부모, 지역 주민을 포함한 다양한 행위자와 교류하며 공간적 실천을 도모하고 협상하는 일련의 과정을 고찰하고자 한다(Liu, 2022).

본 연구의 이주민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근 분석 틀은 다음 두 가지 측면에서 기여점이 있다. 첫째, 이주민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근은 선주민의 핵심적 역할을 강조하여 선주민과 도착지 정부, 도착지 기관 간 관계 양상을 중점적으로 고찰한다. 더욱이 법적, 제도적, 사회적으로 유리한 위치에 있는 선주민은 많은 이주민 장소만들기 사례에서 중요한 역할을 이행하는데, 특히 지정학적 이유로 특정 이주민이 사회적 관심을 받는 경우와 법적, 제도적 허가가 필요한 경우 선주민의 역할은 필수적이다.

둘째, 장소만들기가 단편적인 결과가 아니라 과정에 중점을 두는 개념(Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2023)이므로 단기적, 장기적으로 그 장소만들기 과정이 보여주는 역동성을 주요 행위자의 상호작용 속에서 이해할 수 있다. 이주민 장소만들기는 정부기관, 민간단체, 선주민 개인, 다른 이주민과 상호작용을 고려할 때 비로소 그 역동성을 종합적이고 체계적으로 조망할 수 있기 때문이다. 특히 이주민 장소는 각국의 정치적, 사회적 분위기나 국제 관계를 비롯한 외부적 요인에 영향을 많이 받기에 장소 변화가 상당히 급진적으로 나타난다(Schiller and Çağlar, 2013). 탈북민 장소만들기 역시 정부의 지원이나 사회적 시선에 직·간접적으로 영향을 받는 까닭에 행위자 간 상호작용이 탈북민 장소의 존립과 철폐를 결정한다.

3. 연구 방법과 사례 소개

1) 연구 방법

본 연구는 문헌자료 분석과 심층 면담을 연구 방법으로 선택하였다. 먼저, 문헌자료 분석은 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 여덟 곳의 학교 설립 배경, 교육목표, 학교 운영의 핵심 주체, 학교 존립의 위기와 극복 과정을 파악하기 위해 수행하였다. 이를 위하여 각 탈북민 대안학교 공식 홈페이지 자료, 탈북민 대안학교의 이전과 정착에 관한 신문 기사와 뉴스 보도 영상, 탈북민 대안학교의 운영과 지원에 관한 법률, 탈북청소년의 연도별 입국자 수와 탈북민 대안학교 분포 현황 관련 교육부 통계자료, 탈북청소년 지원에 관한 정부 정책, 학교 정보를 소개하는 안내 책자 등을 이용하였다.

심층 면담은 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 여덟 곳 중 면담 요청을 받아들인 여섯 곳의 핵심 관계자를 대상으로 진행하였다.[5] 더불어 초기 학교 형성 과정을 잘 알고 있는 수도권 외 다른 지역 학교 관계자와 심층 면담을 시행하여 수도권 탈북민 학교 관계자의 면담 내용을 교차 검증하였다. 심층 면담은 2023년 9월부터 2024년 6월까지 총 15명의 한국 선주민을 대상으로 하였다. 탈북민 대안학교는 수가 적고 위치도 수도권 내에 분산되어 있는 까닭에 학교가 속한 지역을 명시한다면 면담 참여자의 익명성 유지가 어렵다. 따라서 본 연구에서 학교 명칭을 A~F 학교로 명명하였으며 면담 참여자가 속한 대안학교의 상세 정보는 아래 표 1과 같다.

각 면담은 한 시간에서 세 시간 정도 소요되었으며, 한 차례 면담을 원칙으로 하되 필요한 경우 추가 면담을 진행하였다. 연구 참여자가 선택한 장소에서 반구조화된 면담, 즉 면담의 기본적인 방향은 유지하되 면담 참여자의 상황에 맞게 질문을 수정하는 유연한 방식을 적용하였다. 주요 면담 질문은 탈북민 대안학교를 설립한 목적과 배경, 탈북민 대안학교의 위치 선정 이유, 탈북민 대안학교의 장소 이전 계기와 이전 과정에서 직면한 어려움과 극복 과정, 탈북민 대안학교의 지역사회 정착에 중요했던 정책이나 사업, 탈북민 대안학교의 재정구조, 탈북민 교육공간 만들기 과정에 참여한 주요행위자의 유형과 역할, 행위자 간 협력과 갈등에 관한 것이었다. 면담 내용은 면담 참여자의 동의 아래 녹음되었으며, 녹음 미동의 시 면담 내용을 필기하였다. 면담을 통해 확보한 질적 자료는 해석학적 방법을 활용해 분석하였다.

2) 탈북민 학교 사례 소개

본 연구에서 다루는 탈북민 대안학교는 대안교육 특성화학교, 대안학교, 그리고 대안교육시설을 포괄한다. 탈북학생은 ①대안교육 특성화학교, ②대안학교, ③대안교육시설, ④일반학교 네 가지 유형의 학교 가운데 선택하여 재학할 수 있다(김성기·곽재석, 2019). 본 연구는 남한 사회 통합을 목표로 대안교육을 이행하는 교육공간인 ①번부터 ③번까지의 학교를 사례 대상으로 선정하였다. 본 연구의 사례인 여덟 학교의 ①, ②, ③ 분류는 표 2와 같다.

구체적으로 ①대안교육 특성화학교는 대안교육과정을 전문적으로 시행하기 위해 만들어졌으며 시도교육청의 관리와 감독을 받는다(초·중등교육법 시행령 제76조 제1항). 대표적인 예로 한겨레중·고등학교가 있으며 약 130명 내외의 학생이 재학 중이다. 다음으로 ②대안학교는 시도교육감의 인가를 받아 운영되는 학교로 학생들이 교육과정을 이수하면 학력이 인정된다는 특징이 있다(초·중등교육법 시행령 제60조의3). 여명학교와 하늘꿈중·고등학교가 대안학교에 속하며, 각 학교는 대략 70~80명의 학생을 수

표 1. 면담 참여자의 대안학교 특성

번호	소속	설립연도	설립주체	설립목적	이전 여부	학생 수	학교 유형
1	A 학교	2004년	남한 종교인	통일 세대 교육과 한국 사회 정착	O	약 40명	대안교육시설
2							
3							
4	B 학교	2003년	남한 종교인	통일 세대 교육과 북한교회 회복	O	약 70명	대안학교
5							
6							
7	C 학교	2004년	남한 종교인	남한 사회통합과 남북한 통일 준비	O	약 80명	대안학교
8							
9	D 학교	2016년	북한 종교인	통일 인재 양성	O	약 40명	대안교육시설
10							
11							
12	E 학교	2006년	남한 종교인	남한사회 적응력 향상	X	약 130명	대안교육 특성화학교
13	F 학교	2006년	남한 종교인	통일 준비	O	약 30명	대안교육시설
14	전 관계자						
15							

용하고 있다. 반면 ③대안교육시설은 대안교육을 시행하는 시설, 법인, 단체 등으로 시도교육청에 대안교육기관으로 등록하였으나 학력을 미인정하는 곳이다(대안교육기관에 관한 법률 제2조). 이로 인해 대안교육시설에 다니는 학생이 대학에 진학하기 위해서는 검정고시를 통과하여 고등학교 학력을 인정받아야 한다. 대안교육시설에는 다음학교, 반석학교, 한꿈학교, 우리들학교, 남북사랑학교가 포함되며, 학교당 학생 수는 약 30~40명 안팎이다. 이때, 대안교육 특성화학교와 대안학교는 대개 만 13세에서 25세

표 2. 수도권 탈북민 학교 분류표

통합교육기관	대안교육기관		
	학력인정		학력불인정
	대안교육 특성화학교	대안학교 (인가)	대안교육시설 (미인가)
일반 학교 (초·중·고)	한겨레중·고등학교	여명학교	다음학교
		하늘꿈중·고등학교	반석학교
			한꿈학교
			우리들학교
			남북사랑학교

사이의 탈북청소년의 입학을 허가하는 반면, 미인가 대안교육시설은 별도의 연령 제한을 두지 않아 탈북 배경을 가진 모든 이들에게 교육 기회를 제공한다. 세 유형의 학교를 포함한 대안교육기관은 교육부 산하의 탈북청소년지원센터에서 탈북학생을 지원하는 일반학교와 달리, 통일부 산하 남북하나재단의 지원과 감독을 받는다(강윤희·모경환, 2021).

본 연구에서 사례 학교의 지리적 범위를 수도권으로 한정한 까닭은 수도권에 탈북학생과 탈북민 학교가 집중되어 있기 때문이다. 수도권 탈북학생은 서울특별시 353명(20%), 경기도 585명(33.1%), 인천광역시 171명(9.7%)으로 전체 탈북학생의 과반수(62.8%)를 차지한다. 그리고 탈북민 대안학교는 전국에 열한 곳이 존재하는데, 그중 여덟 곳이 수도권에 있다. 사례 학교 여덟 곳 가운데 여명학교, 우리들학교, 다음학교, 반석학교, 남북사랑학교 다섯 곳은 서울에 위치하며, 하늘꿈중고등학교, 한겨레중고등학교, 한꿈학교 세 곳은 경기도에 자리한다(그림 1 참조). 수도권에 집중한 대부분의 탈북민 대안학교는 기숙사를 운영하여 전국 단위로 학생을 모집하고 있다.

현재 모든 탈북민 대안학교에서 북한 출생 탈북학생보다 중국을 포함한 제3국 출생 탈북학생의 비중이 커지고 있다. 교육부에서 발표한 2023년 탈북학생 통계 현황에 따르

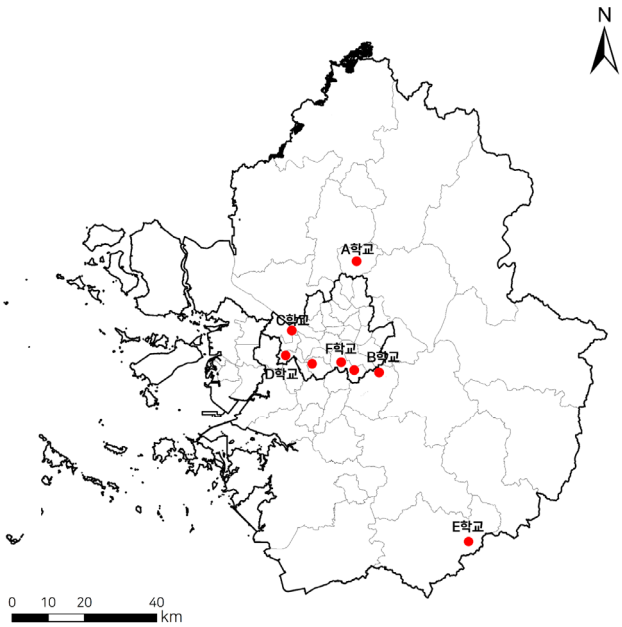

그림 1. 수도권 탈북민 대안학교 위치

면, 2015년부터 제3국에서 출생한 탈북학생의 수가 북한에서 출생한 학생의 수를 압도하기 시작하였으며, 2023년 기준 전체 탈북학생 중 약 70%가 제3국 출생 탈북학생임을 알 수 있다(교육부, 2023). 이러한 경향은 북한 출생 탈북학생이 많았던 기존 추세와 달리 2010년대 중반에 접어들며 제3국 출생 탈북학생이 늘어나고 있음을 보여준다. 즉, 현재 입국하는 탈북학생은 북한이 아닌 다른 나라에서 태어난 경우가 많으며 출생 이후 한국으로 이주하는 경우가 점점 증가하고 있음을 시사한다.

탈북학생 가운데 제3국 출생이 늘어나고 있는 이유는 탈북학생 어머니의 이주 과정과 밀접한 관련이 있다. 탈북민 여성이 북한에서 중국으로 이주하는 과정에서 낳은 자녀가 중국에서 유년기를 보내고 청소년기에 어머니를 따라 한국에 입국한 경우가 대다수이기 때문이다. 중국어에 익숙한 제3국 출생 탈북청소년들은 한국어 언어 장벽으로 일반학교 적응에 어려움을 겪는다(백인옥, 2020; 양혜린 등, 2017). 한국의 탈북민 대안학교는 탈북학생이 향후 한국의 공교육 체제에 합류될 수 있도록 이중언어가 가능한 교사를 모집하여 한국어 교육을 강화하고 있다. 더불어 탈북민 대안학교는 탈북학생의 출생 국적 비율 변화에 대응하여 제3국 출생 탈북학생이 한국 문화를 체험할 수 있도록 역사 유적지 탐방, 백두대간 종주, 문학기행 등을 진행하고 있다.

4. 탈북민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근: 대안적 교육공간을 중심으로

1) 탈북민 대안학교 설립과 정착: 한국 종교기관 주도, 정부부처 참여, 지역민 반대

(1) 한국 종교기관의 탈북민 학교 필요성 제기

수도권 탈북민 대안학교는 2000년대 중반부터 종교기관에 의해 설립되기 시작하였다. 1990년대 고난의 행군으로 대표되던 북한의 경제난으로 탈북민의 남한 유입이 증가하였으나 당시 탈북민을 지원하는 법률과 제도가 부재하였다. 이에 따라 한국 개신교 선교단체들은 정부를 대신하여 제3국을 통한 탈북민 구출, 한국 내 탈북민 보호, 북한 식량 지원 등 여러 방식으로 복지 사각지대에 놓여 있던 탈북민들을 지원하였다. 이러한 선교단체들은 남한 사회에 도착한 무연고 탈북청소년들이 어른들의 보호 없이 방치되고 있던 실태를 알게 되자 탈북민 자녀 세대의 한국 정착과 적응을 돕기 위해 한국에 탈북민 대안학교를 설립하였다. 탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 한국의 탈북민 대안학교 설립 과정을 다음과 같이 설명하였다.

> 북한에서는 가난해서 여러 가지 어려운 형편 때문에 배우지 못했고, 또 여자들은 중국에 팔려가서 시집살이하는 동안에 공부를 못 했고, 북한에서도 못 했고, 중국 체류 기간에도 못 했고, 그래서 그런 것들을 위해서 학교를 세웠죠.
> (D탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2023년 9월 22일)

이 면담 참여자에 따르면, 한국의 탈북민 대안학교는 다양한 사유로 교육의 기회를 박탈당했던 탈북청소년과 탈북청년들의 교육권을 실질적으로 보장하고자 설립되었다. D탈북민 대안학교의 초대 교장이 조직한 선교회는 한국 입국을 앞둔 탈북민을 대상으로 석 달 동안 성경공부를 진행하면서 탈북청소년과 탈북청년들이 경제적 어려움, 시집살이 등으로 학교에 다니지 못했던 현실을 파악하였다. 선교회는 한국에 있는 젊은 세대의 교육적 필요를 충족시키고 한국 정착을 지원하기 위해 탈북민이 다수 거주하는 서울 서부 지역에 학교를 세웠다. D탈북민 대안학교뿐만 아니라 다른 탈북민 대안학교들도 탈북청소년에 대한 물질적, 심리적 지원의 필요성을 포착한 선교단체가 탈북민 대안학교를 설립하는 유사한 과정을 거쳤다.

한편, 탈북민 대안학교는 크게 두 가지 목적을 위해 설립되었다. 첫째, 공교육에서 다루지 못하는 탈북민 자녀들의 어려움을 해소하여 그들의 정착을 돕는 것이었다. 탈북학생들의 경우 한국어 의사소통이 대부분 제한되는 까닭에 또래 남한 친구들로부터 따돌림을 당하는 등 남한 친구들과 원만한 교우관계를 맺는 데에 문화적, 사회적 장벽이 존재했다. 또한 이주 과정에서 학습 공백을 겪은 탈북학생들은 한국 교육체계로의 흡수가 어려웠다. 예컨대, 북한 출생 탈북학생에게 주사위를 한 번 던져서 짝수가 나오는 경우의 수를 질문했을 때 주사위가 어떤 물건인지 알지 못해 대답하지 못하는 어려움이 있던 것이다. 따라서 한국 교회들은 탈북학생의 사회 통합을 위해 언어 교육, 심리·정서적 지원, 사회적 의사소통 규범 교육 등을 진행하였다. 둘째, 대부분의 탈북민 대안학교는 한국 교회가 북한 선교를 위해 탈북청소년을 통일 세대의 주역으로 성장시키는 것을 목표하여 설립되었다. 교회는 아침 묵상, 예배시간, 성경공부, 수련회, 해외 선교단체와 함께하는 워크숍 등을 통해 학

생들이 기독교적 가치관을 형성해 나갈 수 있도록 힘썼으며, 매일 아침 예배당에서 학생들이 QT(Quiet Time, 묵상 시간)을 통해 작은 일에도 감사하는 마음을 가지고 살아갈 수 있도록 교육하였다. 탈북청소년의 한국 정착과 북한 선교를 목적으로 탈북민 학교를 설립한 한국 교회는 통일 한국을 이끌 지도자이자 선교사로서 탈북청소년에 대한 기대감을 다음과 같이 밝혔다.

> 학교를 설립한 분은 그 탈북자들을 어떻게 인정했냐 하면, '통일 유학생이다. 남북한은 반드시 통일이 될 거고, 통일이 되었을 때를 (대비해) 먼저 온 통일민이다' 이렇게 생각하셨다는 거예요. '먼저 이 학생들이 북한에서 우리 남한으로 유학을 온 거고 남한을 배워야 통일이 되어도 함께하지 않겠느냐' 그런 생각을 가지고 학교를 시작하셨더라고요.
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> (A탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2023년 9월 22일)

면담 참여자가 밝혔듯 탈북민 대안학교는 탈북청소년이 통일 한국을 이끌 지도자이자 선교사로 성장하리라는 기대와 확신으로 설립되었다. 탈북청소년은 정치·경제·사회·문화 등 모든 방면에서 남한과 북한 양쪽 상황을 충분히 이해하는 거의 유일한 존재였기 때문이다. 이를 통해 한국의 탈북청소년은 난민이나 이주민과는 다른, 특별한 범주로 인식됨을 파악할 수 있다. 탈북민은 한국에 입국하자마자 한반도 분단상황으로 과 대한민국 헌법에 의해 대한민국 국적과 신분을 획득할 수 있기 때문에 난민과 구별되었다. 왜냐하면, 한국에 입국한 모든 탈북민은 한반도 분단이라는 특수 상황으로 인해 대한민국의 국적과 신분을 신속하게 획득할 수 있었기 때문이다. 그리고 탈북민은 한국인과 같이 사회적 신분을 보장받고 취업 가능 업종에 제한이 없다는 점에서 외국인 노동자나 재외 동포와도 차이가 존재하였다. 이와 달리, 탈북민 대안학교를 설립한 한국 종교단체들은 탈북청소년을 오히려 북한 땅에서 넘어온 이웃으로 간주하여 탈북청소년이 통일 세대의 선구자 역할을 감당하리라 생각하였다.

(2) 한국 선주민의 탈북민 대안학교 설립 지원

① 교회의 지원

한국 종교기관은 탈북민 대안학교 공간을 마련하기 위해 교회 공간 일부를 대여하였으며, 체육관과 같은 종교기관의 생활근린시설을 학교와 함께 공유하거나 종교기관에 소속된 신자들이 자원하여 급식, 행정, 멘토링 등 다양한 분야에서 봉사활동을 하였다. 대표적 사례인 B탈북민 대안학교는 한국 감리교선교회가 사용하던 건물 2층을 빌려 2000년대 중반 개교하였다. B탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 학교 설립 초기 교육공간이 그림 2처럼 구성되었다고 설명하였다. 건물 입구에서 계단을 타고 2층으로 올라가면 육중한 철문이 있었는데, 철문을 열면 왼편으로는 교무실과 교실들이, 정면으로는 좁다란 복도가, 오른편으로는 창문들이 연이어 있었다고 한다.

B탈북민 대안학교의 물리적 공간은 열악하였다. 기초, 중등, 고등, 대입 등으로 학급을 구분하고자 가벽을 세웠던 까닭에 학생들이 벽을 치면 옆 반까지 들릴 정도로 교실 간 소음이 심하였다. 복도는 두 사람이 일렬로 걸어가기 어려울 정도로 비좁아서 서로 약간씩 비켜서야 지나갈 수 있었다. 겨울에는 교실에서 난방을 위해 가스난로를 사용했기 때문에 가스 냄새로 교실이 매캐해질 때면 학생들이 반에서 공부하기를 포기하고 복도에 나와야 했었다. B탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 열악했던 학교 시설을 회상하며 다음과 같이 말하였다.

> 물론 시설이 너무 열악해서 아이들이 이제 화장실(쓰는 것)이나, 이런 부분도 너무 열악했죠. 다행히 인근 공원에 화장실이 있어서 그걸 쓰기도 했었고요. 또 거기(공원 화장실에서) 가까운 교회의 화장실도 이용할 수 있었어요. 학교 시설은 비록 열악했으나 화장실은 밖으로 나가고 그랬었죠. 학교 인근 지역 시설을 이용하는 그런 부분에서 이

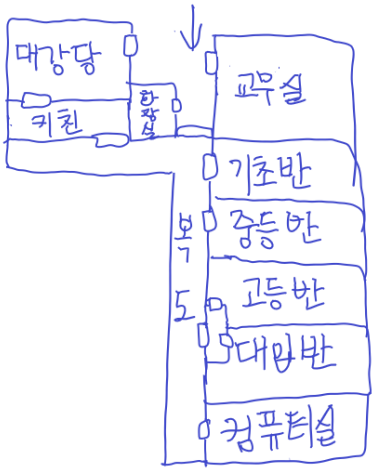

그림 2. B탈북민 대안학교 평면도

출처: B대안학교 관계자 a의 그림

제 더 도움을 받았어요.

(B탈북민 대안학교 관계자 b, 2024년 2월 13일)

대안학교 관계자의 진술은 2000년대 중반 설립된 초기 탈북민 대안학교는 학교에서 화장실을 이용하기 어려울 정도로 시설이 열악했음을 드러낸다. 동시에 탈북민 대안학교가 공간의 물질적 한계를 극복하기 위해 지역 공간의 공공시설을 이용하거나 종교기관의 허락 아래 사적 시설을 활용하는 방식으로 지역사회의 물질적 자원에 의존하였음이 나타난다. 그러나 열악한 물리적 조건이 오히려 탈북민 학생과 교사들이 서로 일상을 공유하고 어려움을 함께 극복하도록 하여 탈북민 학교를 따뜻하고 재미있던 집으로 기능하는 데 도움이 되었다. B탈북민 대안학교의 한 학교 관계자들은 학생들과 친밀하게 교류하던 학교가 본인에게는 아늑하고 정다운 집이었다며 다음과 같이 회상하였다.

그러니까, 교실과 교무실에 큰 경계가 없이 아이들이 교무실에도 그냥 자주 와서 수시로 이야기 나누고 … 생활도 사실 같이하는 그런 환경이었던 데다가 그런 공간상의 구분이 크게 없이 공유되는 부분이 많았었던 것 같아요. 아이들이 느낄 때 그런 부분에서 좀 편안하게 더 이렇게 했던(느꼈던) 것 같아요.

(B탈북민 대안학교 관계자 b, 2024년 2월 13일)

저는 기숙사가 너무 좋았어요. 기숙사 선생님이랑 쇼핑도 같이 하면서 "선생님 이거 어떻게 사요?"하면 선생님께서 먼저 어떻게 하는지 딱 알려주시고 … 기숙사에서는 북한 음식도 해 먹고 생일 파티도 되게 많이 하고 선물도 주고받고 … 되게 불안했지만 뭔가 그래도 따뜻했던 기숙사였고 … 어쨌든 새로운 사회에 오다 보면 그런 새로운 것에 적응해야 하는 부담감(으로) 되게 불안한 시기잖아요. 그런데 그때 따뜻한 공동체가 있어서 학교생활이 너무 즐겁고 재밌었던 것 같아요.

(B탈북민 대안학교 관계자 a, 2024년 2월 13일)

면담 참여자들의 설명에 따르면, 탈북민 대안학교는 학생과 교사가 활동하는 공간 경계가 뚜렷하게 구분되지 않았기 때문에 오히려 서로의 공간에 자연스럽게 녹아들 수 있었다. 학생과 교사 간 물리적 장벽이 흐릿한 공간구조는 탈북청소년이 교사와 학생들로부터 직접적인 심리적 지지를 받을 수 있도록 하는, 다정하고 살가운 안식처로써 탈북민 학교의 장소성을 형성하였다.

② 정부의 지원

다음으로 탈북민 대안학교는 재정적, 행정적 기반을 확보하기 위해 정부의 지원을 받았다. 통일부는 학교 운영비를, 시도교육청에서는 교사 인건비를 지급함으로써 탈북민 대안학교를 지원하였다. 정부의 지원으로 학교의 운영과 발전이 가능했던 대표적인 사례로는 A탈북민 대안학교가 있다. A탈북민 대안학교는 2004년 한국인 초대 교장이 사비로 주민센터 건물의 반지하 공간을 마련하여 개교할 수 있었다. 그러나 2009년 수해를 겪으면서 새로운 교육공간이 필요해졌고, 통일부에 탈북청소년들이 공부할 수 있는 교육공간을 마련해 달라고 요청하였다. 당시 탈북민의 한국 정착에 관심을 가지고 남북하나재단을 설립하던 통일부는 이웃하는 시의 한국토지주택공사(LH) 영구임대주택 단지 상가의 지하공간을 대안으로 제안하였다. 그 지하공간에는 본래 슈퍼마켓이 입점해 있었으나 독거노인이 집중적으로 거주하는 단지 특성상 소비자들의 구매력이 작았던 까닭에 장사가 유지되지 않아 지하공간이 오랫동안 비어 있었다. 사회복지사로 구성된 A탈북민 대안학교 이사회는 상가 지하공간에 교육공간을 마련하기로 합의하였다. 그에 따라 학교 이사회는 지하공간을 교장실, 행정실, 교실, 식당, 도서실, 컴퓨터실, 다목적 강당으로 구획하여 탈북학생들이 일반 정규학교과 유사한 학교생활을 영위할 수 있도록 교육공간을 조성하였다. 학교 관계자는 당시 상황을 다음과 같이 설명하였다.

2009년 … 통일부에서 탈북자들을 케어해야겠다는 게 시작됐을 때 … 여기가 LH공사 건물이에요. 그러니까 이제 형편이 좀 어려운 사람들이 주변에 있으니까 상가 건물 지하에서 아무것도 안 되는 거예요. 슈퍼를 차려도 망하고 … 그러니까 여기가 비어 있는 공간이었어요. 폐공간처럼 쓰레기들도 뒹굴고 … 그래서 2009년에 우리가 여기로 들어온 거예요. 그때 학교 이사회가 만들어지고 그분들이 돈을 좀 모아서 학교로 리모델링이 된 거죠. 그러니까 주변이 독거노인들이 계시기 때문에 우리도 이제 여기서 탈북자 대안학교가 들어오고 뭐 잘 모르니까 문제없이 여기 있을 수 있었던 거죠. 여기가 한 달에 지금도 저희가 한 40만 원을(공과금으로) 내고 … 그러니까 월세가 없는 거예요. 원래 비어 있던 공간이었기 때문에 무상임대로 지금 쓰고 있는 거죠.

(A탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2023년 9월 22일)

면담 내용에서 언급된 것처럼 A탈북민 대안학교는 탈북민 지원에 관심을 가지던 사회적 분위기에 기대어 통일부의 제안으로 상가 지하에 학교를 세울 수 있었다. 그 덕분에 학교가 감당할 수 있는 재정 범위 안에서 교육공간을 확보할 수 있었다. 교육공간을 지하에 조성하여 탈북민 학교의 입지를 반대하는 지역주민들의 반대를 피할 수 있었지만, 동시에 학교가 학생들이 마땅히 누려야 할 생활시설을 제공하지 못하는 한계로 작동하였다. 지하공간은 학생들이 안전하게 뛰어놀 수 있는 옥외 체육장이 부재하고, 채광이나 환기 측면에서도 교수학습 활동에 적합하지 않았기 때문이다.

A탈북민 대안학교 관계자 역시 지하에서 운영하는 교육공간의 해악을 충분히 인지하고 있었기에 지하에서 지상으로 나가는 것을 학교의 궁극적인 목표로 삼았다. 지하공간에서 근무하던 교사들의 건강이 악화되었고 학생들에게도 햇빛이 드는 따뜻하고 안락한 교육공간이 필요했다. 하지만 A탈북민 학교가 마련한 지금의 교육공간은 한국 선주민 교사들의 관심과 열정으로 일구어진 편안하고 안정적인 공간이지만, 동시에 계절과 날씨의 변화를 생동감 있게 느끼지 못하는 정적인 공간이라고 할 수 있다.

한편, 재정적 불안정성이 높은 A탈북민 대안학교가 지상에 학교를 설립하는 가장 현실적이고 확실한 방법은 외부 주체로부터 학교 용지 마련 비용과 학교 건물 설립 비용을 후원받아 인가 조건을 충족한 후 시도교육청 교육감의 승인을 받아 인가 대안학교로 전환하는 것이었다. 그러나 A탈북민 대안학교를 운영하는 한국 선주민들의 관점에서 지하공간은 학교가 현실적으로 감당할 수 있는 정도의 공과금을 납부하면서, 부모로부터 충분히 보살핌받지 못하고 한국 사회 정착에 어려움을 겪는 탈북학생들을 위해 학교를 운영해 나갈 수 있는 최선의 타협점이었기에 외부 주체의 지원 없이 지하에서 지상으로 학교 이전을 감행하기에는 현실적 한계가 존재하였다.

③ 지역사회의 지원과 갈등

지방정부에서는 탈북민 학교 주방 인력을 제공해주고 지역 소방서 등 지역단체는 교육프로그램을 제공하는 등의 역할을 하였다. 탈북민 교육의 필요성이 사회적으로 확산되면서 교육부, 통일부, 교육청 그리고 다른 종교기관도 탈북민 대안학교의 공간마련의 주요행위자로 등장하였다. 2004년 원불교재단에 기반한 학교법인이 교육부 장관으로부터 탈북민 대안학교 운영 요청을 제안받아 탈북민 대안학교를 설립하였다. 학교법인은 용지 구매, 교육부는 학교 건물 건설, 통일부와 시도교육청은 학교 운영비를 지원하며 다양한 기관의 협력으로 탈북민 대안학교의 운영이 시작되었다. 탈북 과정을 지원하는 이들 중 80% 이상이 개신교 선교사들이라는 점에서 개신교가 학교 운영을 도맡아 하는 것이냐는 불만도 제기되었지만, 교육부는 제도권 밖에 있는 학생들을 대상으로 교육한 경험이 풍부한 해당 학교법인이 탈북청소년을 안정적으로 교육할 수 있으리라고 판단하였다.

한국 지역주민들은 이 탈북민 대안학교 만들기 과정에 반대하는 주체로서 개입하였다. C 탈북민 대안학교가 이전하려는 과정에서 해당 지역주민들은 탈북민 대안학교의 이전에 반대하였다. 지역주민들은 인터넷 지역 커뮤니티를 통해 탈북청소년 교육보다 지역 학생들의 과밀학급 문제부터 해결하라는 여론을 조성하였다(박요셉, 2019). 심지어 일각에서는 이전 반대의 근거로 탈북민 대안학교가 기피 시설에 해당한다는 점, 탈북학생과 일반학생이 교류하여 부정적 영향을 끼칠 수 있는 점을 들기도 하였다(박요셉, 2019; 이철호, 2020; 정민구, 2019). 부동산 가격 하락을 우려하는 주민들의 반대는 탈북민 대안학교를 님비(NIMBY) 대상으로 만들고 학교 이전 과정의 장벽이 되었다. C탈북민 대안학교의 주요 관계자는 학교 이전에 대한 지역민들의 반대가 학생들에게 미친 영향을 다음과 같이 언급하였다.

> 학생들이 아무래도 상처를 많이 받죠. 그런 부분에 있어서. 그게(반대 내용이) 인터넷에 떠돌잖아요, 기사들이. 그래서 교장 선생님이 이제 댓글을 보지 마라, 마음 아프다고 했는데 애들이 이제 그걸 보면서 알게 되니까, 이제 학교 측에서는 학생들의 상처가 좀 많이 걱정되기도 하고 많이 힘들었죠. 그런 상황이 한 1~2년 지나다가 이제 이번에 감사하게도 교육청에서 이런 임시적으로 쓸 수 있는 폐교된 공간, 잠시 쉬고 있는 공간을 이제 저희가 임시로 2년 반 정도 쓰게 된 거고요.
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> (C탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2023년 10월 16일)

C탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 탈북학생들이 지역민들의 학교 이전 반대 소식을 접하지 못하도록 정보 검색을 만류해야 했다며 당시 학생들이 받은 마음의 상처를 염려하고 있다고 밝혔다. 이는 탈북학생을 위한 교육공간 형성 과정에 개입한 이해관계자들의 관계가 새롭게 구축되고 변형됨에 따라 대안학교 교사와 탈북학생들이 심리적 위축을

겪었음을 시사한다. 실제로 지역주민들은 지역 학생이 아닌 탈북학생을 위해 편익시설 부지의 용도를 변경할 수 없으며 학생 인구 과밀을 겪고 있는 지역으로 탈북민 대안학교가 이전하는 것을 납득할 수 없다며 구청에 민원을 제기하였다(리혜, 2019; 박요셉, 2019; 황기현, 2019; attheheart, 2019). 지역주민들은 탈북민 대안학교 이전 반대 안건을 청와대 국민청원에 올렸으며, 그 여파로 탈북민 대안학교의 이전 결정이 답보 상태에 머물렀다(고유찬, 2023; 이철호, 2020).

C탈북민 대안학교는 지역주민들의 여론을 긍정적으로 바꾸기 위해 학교 도서관과 주차장을 주민에게 무료로 개방하고 지역 학생들과 함께 영어캠프를 진행하는 사회 공헌 프로그램을 약속하였다(김철영, 2020). 하지만 결국 시청과 구청이 탈북민 학교의 진입을 막아섰던 지역주민들의 요구를 수용하여 C탈북민 대안학교의 학교 이전이 무산되었다. 이후 C탈북민 대안학교는 교육청의 지원으로 폐교를 재정비하여 2년 동안 이용할 수 있게 되었다. 그러나 임대 기한이 끝났을 때 학교를 다시 옮겨야 하는 부담이 남아있었다(김형준, 2024; 제은효, 2023).

C탈북민 대안학교의 사례는 교육공간의 이전 역시 장소 만들기의 한 부분으로써 갈등과 대립이 역동하는 공간의 정치가 수반된다는 사실을 보여준다. 탈북민 대안학교가 제도권 교육에 흡수되는 정도를 결정하는 과정은 외부 자원에 의존해야 하는 탈북민 대안학교의 재정적 취약성과 대도시 부동산 시장 논리에 따른 개발 정치적 논쟁 그리고 시도 관할 구역 내에서만 학력을 인정하는 제도적 장치와 밀접하게 맞물려 전개됨을 시사한다.

E탈북민 대안학교를 처음 설립할 때 장소를 물색하는 과정에서도 인근 지역 주민들의 반대가 극심하였다. 가장 가까운 민가가 1.5km 떨어진 지역에 학교를 설립하기로 하였으나 마을 주민들이 시청 도시과장실을 방문하여 학교 설립 결정에 이의를 제기했고 학교 설립 반대 서명운동에 약 300명이 동참하여 반대 의견을 적극적으로 표출하였다(송상호, 2005). 마을 주민들이 반대하는 이유로 사전 환경성 검토의 불충분성, 주민 의견 미반영, 도시계획시설 공고 기한의 자의성 등을 제시하였다. 하지만 지역주민이 탈북청소년을 위한 학교 설립을 반대했던 근본적인 이유는 공격적인 성향을 보이는 탈북청소년이 마을의 안전을 위협할 수 있다는 우려 때문이었다. 그 당시 마을 주민들의 거센 반발을 겪었던 학교 관계자는 다음과 같이 설명하였다.

> 그 당시 '탈북민들을 위한 학교를 설립한다, 간첩 만드는 학교다'라고 이야기되면서 부정적인 반응이 컸었어요. 아이들의 성향이 거칠어서 칼부림 나고 뭐, 하여튼 온갖 폭력이 난무할 거라고, 이 학교를 이렇게 집단으로 애들 몇백 명 모아놓으면 이 학교는 하루도 안 돼서 없어질 거라고…. 그런 위험 요소(에 대한 걱정을) 많이 (전해) 들었죠.
>
> (E탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2024년 1월 18일)

탈북민 대안학교 관계자의 진술에 따르면, 학교 입지가 예정된 부지의 인근 지역 주민들은 탈북청소년이 폭력적일 것이라는 짐작으로 탈북민 대안학교 설립에 반대하였다. 탈북민 대안학교가 마을을 위해 경제적 후원을 하지 못한다는 점도 반대의 이유가 되었다. 하지만 마을 주민들은 탈북민 대안학교 설립을 반대하는 정당성보다, 탈북청소년을 위한 대안교육 특성화학교를 하나원 근처에 설립하는 타당성이 더욱 충분하였기에 학교 설립은 예정대로 이행되었다. 2000년대 후반 학교 운영이 어느 정도 안정 궤도에 접어들자, 당시 교장은 마을 주민들이 탈북학생에게 가지는 부정적 인식을 긍정적으로 바꿀 수 있도록 학교 졸업식마다 지역주민들을 초대하여 마을 잔치를 열었다. 탈북학생과 직접 상호작용한 마을 주민들은 그들에 대한 편견이 점차 감소했으며, 이후 마을 부녀회가 졸업생들을 대상으로 장학금을 마련하여 지급하는 등 학교 설립 초기와 달리 한국 선주민과 탈북학생 간 교류가 활발해졌다.

한편, E탈북민 대안학교는 학교 건물이 완공되기 1년 전 컨테이너에서 개교하였다. 학교는 전문 건축가가 지은 컨테이너를 교장실, 교무실, 행정실, 보건실, 교실 등으로 구획하고, 23명의 한국 선주민 교사가 143명의 탈북학생을 대상으로 교수학습 활동을 진행하였다. 컨테이너의 규모가 작았던 까닭에 컨테이너에서는 여학생들만 잠을 잤고, 남학생들은 밤마다 마을회관에서 자고 아침에 일어나 다시 등교하는 생활을 1년 반 동안 지속하였다. 샤워실도 마땅하지 않아 당시 탈북학생들은 밤에 마을 실개천에서 몸을 씻어야 하였다. 하지만 거대한 규모의 학교 건물이 완공되자 한국 선주민 교사와 탈북학생들의 삶은 크게 향상되었다. 학교 내부에 교실, 대강당, 체육관, 기숙사 등 각종 교육시설이 갖추어졌을 뿐 아니라 형태를 제대로 갖춘 화장실과 샤워실이 마련되었고 교사 휴게 공간도 별도로 구획되었기 때문이다.

C, E 학교 뿐 아니라 B학교를 비롯한 다른 학교도 학교공간을 구할 때 탈북민 학교라는 이유로 거절을 당했다. 거절

을 당할 수 있을 것이라고 생각해 학교 관계자가 심리적으로 위축되는 효과도 가져왔다. 탈북학생들이 가정에서 식사를 해결하지 못하는 경우가 많아 주방이 필요한 것도 학교공간을 구하기 힘든 이유였다.

2) 탈북민 대안학교의 위기와 적응 전략

(1) 탈북민 학교의 위기

탈북민 대안학교는 교육부와 통일부가 탈북민 사회 통합의 핵심 주체로 기능을 강화함에 따라 탈북학생의 한국 정착을 지원하던 탈북민 대안학교의 입지가 점차 축소되었다. 교육부는 2009년 탈북청소년교육지원센터를 설립하여 탈북청소년을 위한 교육 지원 방안을 종합적으로 마련하기 시작하였고, 탈북학생의 역량 강화 프로그램, 하나원 학부모 연수, 탈북학생 담당 교사 연수와 같이 학생, 학부모, 교사 맞춤형 교육 서비스를 제공하기 시작하였다. 통일부도 2010년 북한이탈주민지원재단(남북하나재단)을 설립하고 북한에서 교사 생활을 하였던 이들을 탈북학생이 있는 일반학교에 통일전담교육사로 파견하여 탈북청소년의 사회 통합을 지원할 수 있도록 하였다. 정부는 탈북학생은 분단 상황에서 남한과 북한을 잇는 중간자적 존재로 보고 제도적 지원을 제공하기 시작하였다. 그 결과, 탈북학생의 한국 사회 정착을 돕고 통일 인재를 양성하고자 학교를 설립하였던 민간인들의 역할이 제도권으로 이양되고 탈북민 대안학교의 당위성이 점차 줄어들었다.

2010년대 탈북민 지원에 관심을 가지던 선교회나 기존 탈북민 학교에서 파생된 교사들이 새로운 탈북민 학교를 설립하면서 탈북민 대안학교의 수가 늘어났다. 하지만, 2020년대 팬데믹 확산을 막기 위해 북한과 중국의 국경이 강화되자 한국에 입국하는 탈북청소년의 수가 줄어들어 각 대안학교에 입학하는 학생 수 역시 감소하였다. 이처럼 탈북민 학교의 수는 이전보다 증가한 데 비해 학생 수는 감소하였기 때문에 학교들이 학생 유치를 위해 하나원에 방문하여 수도권 소재, 내실 있는 교육과정, 자격증 취득 등을 근거로 학교를 홍보하였다. 그리고 탈북민 한마당 같이 탈북민이 많이 모이는 행사에서도 학교 홍보 부스를 별도로 마련하여 탈북학생 학부모들에게 학교를 소개하기도 하였다.

탈북민 대안학교는 정부의 지원으로 초기 독자적 역할이 약해지고 코로나 팬데믹 이후 학생 유치를 둘러싼 학교 간 경쟁이 가열되는 위기 상황에 직면하였다. 탈북민 대안학교가 대내외적인 환경 변화에 적응하는 현실적인 대안은 역설적으로 공교육 체제에 포함되는 것이었다. 탈북민 대안학교가 존립하기 위해서는 학교의 자율성을 낮추더라도 재정적 안정성을 높이고 학력 인정이 되는 제도권에 포섭되는 편이 합리적이라고 판단한 것이다. 결과적으로 탈북민 대안학교는 위기에 대응하기 위해 시도교육감으로부터 인가를 승인받아 학력 인정 학교로 전환하거나, 일반학교 학생들을 대신 교육하는 위탁학교로 지정받아 지속가능한 전략을 선택하였다.

(2) 탈북민 대안학교의 위기 적응 전략

① 인가 대안학교로의 전환

탈북민 학교가 장기적으로 존립하기 위하여 공교육 체제에 포함되는 한 가지 방법은 미인가 대안학교에서 인가 대안학교로 전환하는 것이다. B탈북민 대안학교는 인가 제도가 학교 이전을 촉진하여 더 나은 교육공간을 확보할 수 있었던 대표적인 사례이다. B탈북민 대안학교는 본래 허름한 2층 건물에서 제대로 된 화장실도 없이 탈북학생과 한국 선주민 교사가 이용했으나, 2016년 교회가 토지를 무상으로 제공하고 기업이 학교 건축을 후원하였다. 인가 학교로 전환하여 학교 이전과 운영에 필요한 비용을 최소화하여 양적으로나 질적으로 개선된 학교 공간을 설립할 수 있었다. 대안학교를 설립하려면 먼저 수도권 내에서 저렴한 가격에 학교 부지를 구입하거나, 교육 용도로 지정된 건물을 임대할 수 있어야 한다. 해당 학교의 경우 경기도의 한국 선주민 목사가 사택을 허물고 그 자리의 토지를 탈북민 대안학교에 무상으로 임대하겠다고 제안하였기에 학교공간을 안정적으로 확립할 수 있었다. 학교 관계자는 그 당시를 회고하며 다음과 같이 말하였다.

> 이제 교육청에서 인가를 받으라고 계속 요청하시기도 했고, 그리고 기업에서 학교를 지어주겠다고 제안해 주셨어요. 그때 마침 경기도 □□시에 있는 한 교회에서 목사 사택을 허물고 그 자리에 학교가 들어올 수 있게끔 20년간 무상임대를 해 주겠다고 하셨죠. 그 덕분에 지금 이 자리에서 우리가 이렇게 학교를 운영할 수 있었어요.
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> (B탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2023년 10월 16일)

B탈북민 대안학교는 안정적인 물리적 기반을 확보하였고 자금 조달 계획도 세웠기 때문에 인가 제도를 통해 기존보다 더 나은 교육환경을 가질 가능성이 높았다. 그러나 인근의 국제학교가 학교 이전을 반대하기 시작하였다. 탈북

청소년의 유입이 교육환경의 전반적인 질적 저하로 이어질 수 있다는 이유에서였다. 이후 탈북민 대안학교의 교장이 국제학교에 찾아가 탈북학생에 대한 오해를 해소하고 국제학교와 동아리 활동을 통해 교류하는 등 상호 도움이 되는 합의점을 찾아 갈등이 해소되었다.

B탈북민 대안학교는 인가 대안학교로 전환됨으로써 제도권 교육으로부터 얻을 수 있는 여러 이점을 누릴 수 있었다. 우선, B탈북민 학교는 인가 학교가 갖추어야 하는 조건을 충족하는 과정에서 학생들이 학교 공간을 마련할 수 있었고, 나이스 체계에 따라 학교 행정 관리를 체계화할 수 있었다. 그리고 B탈북민 대안학교가 통일 교육 연구학교로 지정되면서 정부 지원금을 토대로 탈북청소년을 위한 교재와 수업모델을 마련하는 것도 가능해졌다. 교사들은 임금이 상승하였고 일반학교 교사처럼 다양한 교직원 연수 프로그램에 참여할 수 있는 기회가 확대되었다. 특히나 탈북학생들은 새로운 교육공간에 대한 만족도가 굉장히 높아졌다. 학교 이전 과정을 경험한 탈북민 학교 관계자는 당시 상황을 아래와 같이 설명하였다.

> (학교를 옮기니까) 저희는 너무 좋았어요. 왜냐하면 그전에도 정겹고 따뜻했지만 뭔가 학교의 모습이라기보다는 그냥 진짜 허름한 상가를 빌려서 하다 보니까 "정말 이게 우리 학교야"라고 자랑할 수 없는 그런 곳이었거든요. 그 건물이 우리 건물도 아니고 … 그랬는데 여기 와서 우리만을 위한 공간이 생겼다는 그 자체가 굉장히 좋고 … 그리고 학교가 되게 예쁘거든요. 테라스도 있고, 옥상에 텃밭도 있고 … 그리고 저희는 (복도가 교차하는 지점이) 이렇게 삼각형으로 되어 있어서 … 여기서 다 모여서 놀고 약간 이러거든요. 저희는 여기를 모세 광장이라고 부르는데 조금 산만하기도 하지만 여기 있는 애가 저기 (반에) 들어가고 저기 있는 애가 여기 (반에) 들어가고 그러거든요 … 화장실도 너무 깨끗하고 … 진짜 뭔가 공간 자체가 되게 학생들을 위해서 잘 지어진 것 같아요. 그래서 좋았던 것 같아요.
>
> (B탈북민 대안학교 관계자 b, 2024년 2월 13일)

탈북민 대안학교 관계자의 설명처럼 학교가 마련한 새로운 교육공간은 탈북학생들의 자긍심과 애교심을 고취하였다. 탈북학생들은 체계적으로 마련된 교육공간에서 한국 학교 교과서로 공부하기 시작하였으며 학력 인정을 받을 수 있게 되었기 때문이다. 결과적으로 새로이 마련된 교육공간은 탈북학생들의 만족스러움과 자랑스러움을 고취하는 공간으로 격상하여 자부심의 근간이 되었다.

반대로 C탈북민 대안학교는 인가학교로 전환하면서 학교 이전이 제한되어 장소 기반의 안정성을 상실하였다. 인가 대안학교는 시도교육청에서 학력 인정을 하므로 해당 시도 관할 구역을 벗어날 수 없다(최선용, 2023). 게다가 학교 운영 자금의 50% 이상을 후원에 의지해야 하는 탈북민 대안학교의 특성상 수도권 내에서 적합한 면적과 시설을 갖추어 인가 조건을 충족하는 낮은 가격의 교육공간을 찾기는 어렵다.

C탈북민 대안학교는 건물 임대 계약이 만료되면서 학교가 속한 시도 관할 구역 내에서 학생 180여 명을 수용할 수 있는 학교 용지를 물색하여야 하였다(이철호, 2020). 학교가 관할 광역자치단체에 지원을 문의하자, 해당 자치단체는 10년째 유휴지로 남아 있던 주택공사 소유의 부지를 학교로 사용하는 방안을 제안하였다 (김태규, 2019). 학교가 제안받은 부지는 통일의 징검다리로 발돋움할 것임을 홍보하는 지역 자치단체에 속해 있었기 때문에, 탈북민 대안학교의 위치로 적합한 명분이 되었다.(김태규, 2019; 조충길, 2021).

B탈북민 학교와 C탈북민 학교의 이전 사례는 각 학교가 직면한 위기 상황에 따라 학력 인가 제도의 득(得)과 실(失)이 다른다는 것을 보여준다. 인가제도는 탈북민 대안학교가 지속가능할 수 있도록 도움을 준 반면, 향후 학교 이전 선택이 제한되었고 지역주민들의 반대 때문에 임시 공간에 자리잡게 되기도 하였다.

② 탈북민 학교의 위기 적응 전략: 위탁교육기관 등록

탈북민 대안학교 가운데 미인가 대안교육시설은 재정적으로 불안정하여 인가학교로 전환하기는 어려웠다. 그 대신 관할 시도교육청으로부터 위탁 학교로 지정받는 방법을 통해 제도권 교육과 연계될 수 있다. 위탁교육기관은 인가 학교와 미인가 학교의 중간 수준으로 미인가 대안교육시설이 공교육 체제에 참여할 수 있는 현실적인 통로였다. 위탁교육을 받는 탈북학생들은 위탁학교에서 출결이 인정되고 성적이 처리되지만, 위탁학교 과정을 마치면 재적학교의 졸업장을 받을 수 있다는 점에서 탈북학생들이 학력 인정 대안학교와 유사한 혜택을 누릴 수 있다. 일반학교의 교육과정을 따라가기 힘든 탈북민 학생들은 전화상담, 대면상담, 준비적응, 최종상담, 수탁 결정 등 비교적 간단한 절차를 거쳐 위탁학교인 탈북민 대안학교에 등록할 수 있으며, 위탁학교에서 국어, 수학, 영어 같은 일반 교과와 함

께 한국언어문화, 중국언어문화와 같은 대안 교과도 배우게 된다. 이러한 위탁교육제도는 탈북학생들이 재학 연한을 충족하면 졸업장을 수여받을 수 있는 시스템이므로 탈북학생 유치에 효과적이다. 결과적으로 위탁교육기관으로 등록된 미인가 탈북민 대안학교는 위탁교육을 통해 학생 모집 대상 범위을 확대하고 교육청으로부터 학교 운영비도 안정적으로 확보하여 학교 존속의 제도적 정당성을 높일 수 있다.

탈북민 대안학교를 위탁교육기관으로 등록하는 것은 학교 운영 뿐만 아니라 학생들의 졸업과 취업에 도움이 된다. 과거에는 제3국 출생 탈북청소년이 비교적 늦은 나이에 한국으로 입국한 경우 한국어보다 중국어에 익숙하여 검정고시를 통과하기 위해 많은 시간을 투자해야 했다. 하지만 위탁교육 제도가 도입되면서 위탁교육기관에서 큰 어려움 없이 고등학교를 졸업하고 취업을 준비할 수 있게 되었다. D탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 위탁교육 제도를 전략적으로 활용한 이유를 다음과 같이 밝혔다.

> 근데 이미 있는 애(탈북청소년)들이 졸업이 안 되니까, 졸업부터 해야 얘가 취업도 할 수 있고 뭔가 사회로 나갈 수 있잖아요. 그래서 위탁을 만든 거예요.
>
> (D탈북민 대안학교 관계자, 2024년 1월 22일)

이처럼 제도권 교육과 연계한 전략은 일반학교에서 탈북학생을 수용함으로써 미인가 대안학교로서 학교 운영의 영속성을 확보할 수 있는 최선의 적응 방안이었으며 기존 탈북학생들의 사회 진출을 촉진하는 장치로도 활용되었다.

더불어 D탈븍민 대안학교는 위탁교육기관 등록을 통해 위탁 교육을 신청할 수 있는 학생들까지 포함할 수 있었다. D 학교는 출생 국가과 무관하게 탈북 배경이 있는 청소년들의 입학을 모두 허용하고 있다. 탈북학생뿐 아니라 조선족 청소년, 고려인 청소년, 한족 청소년, 남한 청소년 등 다양한 학생들을 포함하는 공동 학교로의 발전을 목표하고 있다. 이를 통해 D탈북민 대안학교가 학교 생존전략으로써 위탁교육제도를 적극적으로 활용하고 있음을 확인할 수 있다.

F탈북민 대안학교는 일반학교 교사가 위탁교육에 동의하지 않아 위탁교육을 할 수 없었다. F탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 탈북학생의 어머니가 정부로부터 할당받은 임대주택이 서울 안에서도 유달리 학구열을 높은 지역사회에 속해 있었기 때문에 탈북학생을 집과 가까운 일반학교로 전학시키는 과정이 녹록지 않았다고 밝혔다.

> 전학을 시키는데 (일반학교) 선생님이 싫어하는 거예요. 너무 싫어하는 거예요. 아니 얘 학교(일반학교) 안 다니고 우리 학교(탈북민 대안학교)에 그냥 다니고 거기(일반학교) 이름만 주는 건데도 싫대요. 싫어하면 안 되고 그냥 학교만 배정받는 것이기 때문에 선생님은 그럴 권한이 없다고 말해도… 그리고 여기에 온 이유가 학군 때문이라는 거예요. 그래서 우리 아이는 학군이 필요 없고 그냥 단지 집이 거기여서… 이 아이의 상황이 그냥 누가 봐도 위장전입은 아니잖아요.
>
> (F대안교육시설 관계자, 2024년 2월 29일)

이 면담 내용은 일반학교의 특정 교사가 탈북청소년에 대한 편견과 혐오로 탈북청소년의 전학을 저지함으로써 탈북학생의 위탁교육 기회를 박탈할 수 있음을 시사한다. 결국 교육청의 개입으로 탈북학생의 전학 처리에 성공하였으나 탈북학생의 입학을 반대하던 교사와 탈북학생이 지속적으로 소통해야만 하는 상황이 연쇄적으로 발생하였다. 탈북학생은 위탁학교에서 어떻게 적응하며 지내고 있는지 일반학교 교사에게 전달해야 했고, 학력 신장을 검증하기 위해 일반학교에서 정기적으로 시험을 치러야 했으며, 3주 동안 재적학교에서 적응 훈련도 받아야 했다. 결국 위탁교육을 통한 학력 취득보다 탈북청소년의 교육을 가로막는 현실적 장벽이 탈북학생에게 미치는 부정적 영향이 더 크다고 판단한 F탈북민 대안학교 관계자는 그 뒤로 위탁 처리가 예정되어 있었던 학생들을 추가로 받지 않았다. D탈북민 학교와 E탈북민 대안학교의 사례를 종합하자면, 탈북민 대안학교가 위탁교육 제도를 활용하더라도 학교 관계자의 학교 운영 목표와 탈북민 대안학교가 속한 지역사회의 분위기에 따라 탈북민 교육공간의 확장 가능성이 완전히 달라질 수 있음을 파악할 수 있다.

5. 결론

본 연구에서 탈북민 대안학교 형성 과정을 '이주민 장소만들기의 관계적 접근'라는 개념적 틀로 분석한 결과는 다음과 같다. 탈북민의 교육공간 만들기 과정에서 한국 선주민이 주소, 지원, 반대와 같은 다양한 역할을 하였다. 첫째, 2000년대 중반 중국에서 탈북민 구출을 지원하던 선교회가 탈북청소년의 교육권을 보장하고 그들을 통일 인재로

양성하기 위해 한국에 탈북민 대안학교 설립 필요성을 제안하였다. 당시 탈북민 대안학교들은 교회 공간 일부를 대여하여 교육공간을 마련하는 경우가 대다수였다. 공간의 열악함이 주요 한계였지만 결과적으로 한국 선주민 교사와 탈북학생 간 심리적 장벽을 낮추기도 하였다. 한편, 탈북민 대안학교 설립은 지역주민의 거센 반대에 부딪히기도 하였다. 이후 학교는 탈북학생에 대한 마을 주민들의 오해를 풀기 위하여 마을 주민과 탈북학생의 교류를 강화함으로써 학교 설립을 둘러싼 갈등이 해결되었다.

둘째, 2010년대 이후 정부의 탈북청소년 지원이 체계화됨에 따라 탈북학생의 남한 사회 정착을 돕는 방법과 자원이 다변화되었다. 탈북민 학교의 수가 늘어난 한편, 코로나 팬데믹 이후, 한국에 입국하는 탈북청소년의 수가 감소하여 학교에 재학할 수 있는 탈북학생의 수가 절대적으로 줄어들었다. 이러한 위기 상황을 타개하기 위해 탈북민 대안학교는 미인가 대안학교에서 인가 대안학교로 전환하거나 미인가 대안학교가 위탁교육기관으로 등록하였다. 저렴한 교육공간을 관할 구역 안에서 찾는 데 어려움을 겪었고, 적합한 장소를 찾았더라도 지역민들의 저항이 극심하여 실질적인 공간 확보에 실패하기도 하였다.

본 연구의 주된 학술적 함의는 이주민 장소에 대한 관계적 접근의 필요성과 유효성을 밝혀냈다는 것이다. 기존 연구에서는 이주민 밀집지역에서 형성되는 이주민 사업공간, 이주민 종교공간 연구는 이주민들의 주체성과 자발성을 강조하는 장소만들기 과정을 보여주었다. 하지만 이주민 장소를 다각적으로 조망하기 위해서는 이주민 장소의 형성 과정을 다양한 행위자 간 상호작용을 중점적으로 분석해야 하며, 특히 선주민들과의 관계를 핵심적으로 파악할 필요가 있다. 무엇보다도 탈북민 장소는 한반도 분단이라는 특수한 지정학적 맥락 속에서 통일을 대비하고 준비하기 위하여 교육부, 통일부, 교육청, 종교기관, 지역단체 등의 적극적 관심과 지원이나 지역주민들의 반대가 핵심적인 역할을 하여 관계적 접근이 필수적이다. 이를 통해 한반도 통일 담론의 지형의 변화 과정 속에서 탈북청소년을 위한 남한 사회 통합 양상을 다층적으로 이해할 수 있기 때문이다. 따라서, 본 연구는 탈북청소년 대안학교의 필요성을 주장하는 기존 논의의 한계에서 벗어나 탈북청소년을 위한 교육공간이 한국 선주민들에 의해 어떻게 설립되고 정착되는지 총체적으로 조망하는 관계적 접근의 필요성과 유효성을 제시하였다. 또한 사회적 약자인 동시에 미래 한반도에서 중요한 역할을 할 탈북민을 한국사회에 이어주는 교육 공간을 연구대상으로 선정한 것이 지리학 연구에서 의의를 가진다.

본 연구의 정책적 함의는 이주민 교육공간이 이주민 자녀 세대가 한국 사회에 곧바로 통합되기에 앞서 그들이 언어적·문화적·사회적 규범을 이해하고 예비적으로 소통하는 장치이자 공교육 밖에 존재하는 중간 지대로 중요하게 기능한다는 것이다. 탈북청소년 연구는 그간 탈북청소년의 내적 성장에 집중하는 교육학적, 심리학적 관점에 집중되어 있었으나, 정작 탈북청소년 내적 성장의 근간이 되는 교육공간에 대해서는 정책적 관심이 부족하였다. 따라서 본 연구는 탈북민 교육공간 형성 과정에서 나타나는 위기와 적응 전략을 종합적으로 보여줌으로써 탈북청소년 교육공간을 둘러싼 포함과 배제, 교착과 타협, 협상과 갈등을 다면적으로 고려하여 탈북민 지원 정책을 다루어야 함을 시사한다. 본 연구는 교육공간 뿐만 아니라 탈북민의 거주지가 대한민국 정부 임대주택지원으로 집중지역이 조성되고 선주민 주도로 장소와 장소성이 이루어진다는 것도 시사점을 가진다. 대안학교뿐 아니라 중간지대역할을 하는 방과후학교나 그룹홈(공동생활시설)과 같은 교육공간, 거주공간도 포함하는 종합적인 접근이 필요할 것이다.

주

1) '장소만들기(place-making)'란 특정한 물리적 공간을 변화시키고 유지하는 행위(Dupre, 2019)뿐 아니라 장소와 관련된 다양한 주요행위자들과 상호작용(Platt and Medway, 2022)하며 장소에 의미와 목적을 부여하고 가치를 부여하는 과정(Sen and Nagendra, 2019)을 의미한다.
2) 북한이탈주민의 보호 및 정착지원에 관한 법률에 따르면, 북한이탈주민은 "군사분계선 이북지역(이하 "북한"이라 한다)에 주소, 직계가족, 배우자, 직장 등을 두고 있는 사람으로서 북한을 벗어난 후 외국 국적을 취득하지 아니한 사람"을 뜻한다. 정부는 2008년을 기점으로 이들을 새터민이 아닌 북한이탈주민으로 지칭하도록 권장하여 본래 법률적 용어로 쓰이던 "북한이탈주민"이 보편적으로 상용화되었다. "탈북민"은 같은 의미의 축약된 형태이다. 본 연구는 북한이탈주민을 이하 탈북민으로 지칭한다.
3) 교육부 산하 탈북청소년교육지원센터에 따르면 탈북청소년이란 "군사분계선 이북 지역(이하 "북한")에 주소, 직계가족, 배우자, 직장 등을 두고 있는 사람으로서 북한을 벗어난 후 외국 국적을 취득하지 아니한" 북한이탈주민 가운데 청소년 연령에 해당하는 이들을 지칭한다. 탈북청소년은 출생

국가에 따라 더욱 상세하게 구분되는데, 북한에서 태어나 한국 학교에 재학 중이면 '북한 출생', 부모 가운데 최소 한 쪽이 탈북민으로 제3국에서 태어나 한국 학교에 재학 중이면 '제3국 출생', 한국에 입국한 탈북민이 한국에서 자녀를 출생하였다면 '남한 출생'으로 분류되며 이때 '북한 출생'과 '제3국 출생'을 합하여 '탈북학생'이라고 칭한다. 탈북학교에서 대체로 만 13세에서 25세 사이의 탈북청소년을 대상으로 신입생을 모집한다. 미인가 학교에서는 학교장의 재량으로 해당 연령대를 넘어서는 탈북학생의 입학도 가능하다.

4) 본 연구는 서울대학교 생명윤리 심의위원회로부터 인간 대상 연구의 진행을 승인받았다(IRB: SNU 23-05-016).

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교신: 신혜란, 08826, 서울시 관악구 관악로 1 서울대학교 지리학과 (이메일: haeranshin@snu.ac.kr, 전화: 02-880-6444)
Correspondence: HaeRan Shin, 08826, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea (e-mail: haeranshin@snu.ac.kr, phone: +82-2-880-6444).

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