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**BORDERS OF BELONGING: NATIONALISM, NORTH KOREAN
DEFECTORS, AND THE SPIRITUAL PROJECT FOR A UNIFIED KOREA**

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Eunkyung Chee

Borders of Belonging: Nationalism, North Korean Defectors, and the Spiritual Project for a Unified Korea

My dissertation examines the conflicts and contradictions of national identity that emerge out of the interactions between North Korean defectors and Protestant South Korean Protestants who give them aid. Since the mid 1990s, a significant number of North Koreans have migrated to South Korea in search of food and opportunities as a result of a devastating famine. Instead of the warm welcome they expect, defectors are treated with suspicion by South Koreans who have been taught that North Korea is their mortal enemy. South Korean Protestants, who make up the majority of defector aid workers, are unique in their welcome to defectors through material and emotional support. My research shows that this welcome is not without conditions: South Korean Protestants subject defectors to a process of domestication – of eradicating undesirable elements of North Korean “culture” as well as the stigma of their communist past, in the process of bringing them in to the “family” of God and the nation. The process of domestication includes conversion to Christianity as well as transformation into “God’s Warriors” to work for the future downfall of North Korea and the unification of Korea. While North Korean defectors are being domesticated, I argue that South Koreans are also domesticating themselves to absorb

elements of Korean purity that North Korea is perceived to have, thus creating a part of a new Korean nation.

This study draws upon 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork in multiple fieldsites in Seoul and outside of Seoul, including a Protestant church with a large defector congregation, an alternative school for North Korean youth, and multiple defector aid organizations. Through ethnographic observation, interviews, and media analysis, I illuminate the tensions of domesticating a population against which South Korean identity has been formed. These contradictions include the myth of Korean purity in a growing multiethnic demographic and the drive to unify two deeply divided countries. I argue that these processes of domesticating North and South Koreans are attempts to find belonging to the nation of South Korea, to the world, and finally to themselves.

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Chapter 1

Borders of Belonging

I am living in a country where the people look like me and speak the same language, but their lifestyle and mentality are so vastly different that I feel like an alien.

— A North Korean defector in South Korea¹

“Warm welcome to returnees,”² proclaims one of the many giant signs that face the North on the border that separates North from South Korea. “Returnees” is a euphemism for North Koreans, implying that they are “returning” to the only legitimate state in the Korean peninsula, South Korea. It is a sign meant to encourage North Koreans to defect to the South, telling them they will have a place in their new home. Similarly, when the first large group of North Koreans “defected” to the South in 1997, they were welcomed as heroes. The message mirrors generous South Korean state assistance to North Korean defectors, which includes a cash award, government-subsidized housing, tuition-free college, and job training programs.

However, in a different area on the South Korean border facing the south, two other signs warn viewers that they are in a “Spy Infiltration Area” and call them to action with messages like, “Let’s capture them as they come.”³ State policy also mirrors these signs, with the North Korean state legally delineated as an “enemy

¹ From (Sims 2000).

² My translation of “귀순자 대환영.”

³ My translation of “간첩 침투지역” and “오는대로 잡자.”

organization,” harsh penalties for anyone making contact with or traveling to North Korea without state sponsorship, and a secret government agency in charge of weeding out North Korean spies and pro-North sympathizers. Arrests of “spies” living in the midst of South Korea pop up with regular frequency, and until recently, there were warnings on the subways to be vigilant of disguised communists waiting for the opportunity to attack.

The tension between these vastly opposing positions toward North Korea is at the heart of the problems facing the more than 28,000 defectors living in South Korea (as of June 2015, according to Ministry of Unification statistics). Large-scale “defection”⁴ of North Koreans began in the late 1990s, when severe flooding in North Korea aggravated already declining social, economic, and agricultural systems affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁵ The floods triggered what became known as the “Arduous March,” a long period of famine that devastated the country. The Arduous March instigated a stream of North Koreans “defecting” to South Korea, the largest in four decades of division. Starvation resulted in a temporary mass exodus of North Koreans, mostly from the poorest areas in the northernmost part of North Korea, into China in search of work and food (by some estimates, close to half a million people at the height of the famine). As the famine continued, North Koreans in China stayed for longer periods, with some marrying and

⁴ Most defectors leave North Korea for economic rather than political reasons. I discuss this further in Chapter 3.

⁵ Previous to 1993, fewer than ten North Koreans defected to South Korea per year. The population was mostly male, and diplomats or military men by profession. The Great Famine of 1995 changed the population of defectors, as women outnumbered men 2:1, many came with family, and 20% were adolescents. Many of the first to leave North Korea did so as orphans (Chung 2008).

having children. However, difficult living conditions in China under threat of repatriation to the North as well as promises of the “good life,” seen through South Korean dramas and concretized by South Korean missionaries, led to notable numbers of North Koreans migrating to industrialized countries, with the vast majority going to South Korea.

Largely due to the work of South Korean Protestants in China, the number of North Korean defectors living in South Korea has jumped from fewer than 700 in 1994 to more than 28,000 in 2015, 88% of whom identified as Protestant Christian (Chung 2008). The significant number of North Korean defectors is touted by the South Korean government as a symbol of their supremacy over a North Korea in demise, and that unification is imminent (Lankov 2008). The number of North Koreans converting to Christianity is seen by South Korean Christians as a sign from God that South Koreans, but also Christians all over the world, should dedicate their lives to unification, with defector aid at the center of their work.

As potential spies and followers of the North Korean regime, defectors are dangerous and alien. Yet, as part of an extremely isolationist country, they are seen as holders of a pure Korean tradition untouched by the West (Grinker 2000). The process of North Korean defectors coming to the South is seen as the return of “family” members to their rightful home. The North considers them traitors to the country, claiming they are criminals running away from persecution. In South Korea, defectors are both “freedom seekers” as well as suspected spies. Despite these contradictions, the successful integration of defectors is indisputably important to the

South Korean state. At stake is the political and moral legitimacy of their nation over the totalitarian North, as well as what is often touted as a “test case for unification.” For the average South Korean, however, North Korean defectors are either a cause for suspicion or a source of worry about the cost of future unification.

While some of the earlier literature on defectors downplay the vital role of Protestant churches in adjustment (Choo 2006; Chung 2008; Lankov 2006) recent academic work on North Korean defectors examines Protestant aid in churches in South Korea and China (Choi 2010; Jung 2010) and in creating new fictive kin networks (Bell 2012). Indeed, the adjustment process seems designed – with the tacit authority of the state – to bring new defectors into the fold of South Korean Protestantism.

Up until the time of my fieldwork, there were many opportunities for North Koreans to convert to Christianity, even while living in North Korea.⁶ A small minority of North Koreans were introduced to Christianity through an underground network of Protestants who distributed Bibles and held secret services at the risk of extreme punishment. Others came into contact through South Korean and Korean Chinese missionaries in China. Moreover, defectors who decided to make the dangerous trip to Mongolia or Thailand were often accompanied by South Korean missionaries. Many North Koreans spoke highly of the sacrifice of these missionaries who risked their lives to hide or feed them during their transit, as the Chinese government conducts regular crackdowns and deportations of North Koreans. In

⁶ I use the past tense to emphasize how quickly things are changing in the field, depending on China’s policy and North-South relations.

addition to direct aid work and smuggling, South Korean church members made regular visits to China, Thailand, and Mongolia on “mission trips” to send food, money, and material goods to North Koreans.

Protestants filled a gap left by the lack of a well-organized state social welfare infrastructure able to handle the specific needs of defectors’ trauma, health and money problems – in addition to the general adjustment issues of living in a new society. These services offered by Protestants – initially, the only significant source of settlement support – made affiliation to Christianity appealing, if not essential, to survival once North Korean defectors were released into general society. From the moment a defector left the settlement program, church volunteers accompanied them to get identification cards, register children in school, and helped them buy necessities for their house. Other settlement aid came in the form of cash and material benefits for attending church, as well as important social networks through churches and psychological support for those suffering from trauma and having difficulties in adjustment. While some of these programs were later coordinated by a non-governmental organization (NGO) that acted as a coalition for the various churches working with defectors, most churches continued to conduct this support informally according to each church’s resources. For the South Korean Protestants who earnestly gave aid to defectors, converting and transforming North Koreans was about a vision of a future nation that combines the best elements of the North (purity, tradition) and the South (technology, economic resources), united by God’s grace and love.

My dissertation explores how the contradictions of South Korean identity are reflected in the day-to-day interactions between aid workers and North Korean defectors. I argue that South Korean Protestants are engaged in a project of domesticating North Korean defectors – of ridding them of the undesirable elements of communism – while at the same time, attempting to domesticate themselves by absorbing the essence of Koreanness that defectors are seen to have. Through this process of domestication, South Korean Protestants attempt to create a new Christian family with defectors at the center, for the purpose of unification and the creation of a new national identity. Ultimately, the interaction between North Korean defectors and Christian aid workers are redefining what it means to be Korean for South Korean Protestants as well as for South Korea as a whole.

Historical Overview of North and South Korea

Korea was temporarily divided into North and South at the 38th parallel at the conclusion of World War II in August 1945. Below the 38th parallel, the South was occupied by the United States and later became the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.). The Soviet Union occupied the North above the 38th parallel, which eventually became the People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.).⁷ Through division, Korea became the first casualty of the Cold War when in 1950 a standoff between Russia and the United States resulted in a devastating civil war known as the Korean War. The armistice

⁷ For the purpose of this dissertation, I will use the terms "South Korea" and "North Korea" instead of the acronyms R.O.K. and D.P.R.K.

that ended the Korean War in 1953 made division “permanent,” and cemented American involvement in South Korea. Throughout the chaos of liberation, division and war, there were many exchanges of people across the border. Some were merely caught on the wrong side when the border was created. Others deliberately escaped into the South. Some Southerners became Northerners, and some Northerners became Southerners as the border shifted south and then back north during the Korean War.

Since the division of Korea, the U.S. has been the most influential player in South Korean politics, economy, and culture. While officially considered an “alliance,” the South’s relationship with the United States can be characterized as an unofficial “protectorate” state, although South Koreans like to refer to the U.S. as their “big brother.” During the three-year conflict, over 36,000 American troops and two million Koreans (civilians and soldiers) died (Cumings 2005). Legally, the Korean War has never ended. There was a ceasefire, and an armistice agreement between the United Nations Command on the one hand (a straw man organization completely under the command of the U.S. military, and to whom Syngman Rhee ceded command of the ROK forces), and the Commanders of the North Korean People’s army and the Chinese People’s Volunteers, but a peace treaty was neither successfully negotiated nor signed. Thus, the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the Unending War (Kim 2009).

After the War, North Korea retreated behind the Iron Curtain, shunning contact with western nations, and South Korea began its rapid ascent to join the elite club of industrialized nations. In the aftermath of the devastating Korean War, South

Korea, with the help of massive U.S. aid, began a rapid process of rebuilding and industrialization under military rule that continued into the late 1970s and early 1980s. The United States maintains a strong military presence in South Korea, with 26,500 soldiers and 15 military bases in the South, as part of a greater deterrent against China (Glaser 2014). The U.S. and South Korea also hold regular military “exercises” which mimic war. These exercises almost inevitably end in heightened military or political tensions with North Korea. Some notable recent conflicts with North Korea have arisen surrounding the development and presence of nuclear weapons in North Korea (starting from 2006); the sinking of a South Korean submarine by North Korea (March 2010); and the shelling of [South Korean] Yeonpyeong Island (November 2010).

North Korean Mission (NKM): Saving Defectors, Saving South Korea

The Protestant involvement in North Korean defector aid was part of North Korean Mission (NKM), a movement to convert and save North Korea from the “evils” of godless communism that was seen to be the main stumbling block to unification, and to propel a united Korea to its holy place as a center of a new Christian revival. North Korean Mission was loosely defined as a project of South Korean Protestants working for the downfall of North Korea and the unification of North and South. North Korean defectors were central to the Mission, as they would be ideal to convert North Koreans once unification happened. Therefore, aiding North

Korean defectors was a test case for unification as well as the test case for the Christian transformation of North Korea.

North Korean Mission is a non-centrally coordinated movement to reclaim the “pure faith of Christianity that was lost in North Korea.”⁸ Because of the secretive nature of NKM, there is little information given openly about which churches are involved, and the scope of its work. In documents given at “Peace Church” trainings, the stated goal of NKM is to work toward the common goal for the downfall of North Korea and the “recovery of churches which were involved in the Great Revival.”⁹ The activities of NKM include 1) going into North Korea and preaching the Gospel, which can also involve North Koreans or other overseas Koreans; 2) converting and training North Korean defectors, and 3) mission through direct North-South exchanges, including giving food aid to North Korea. There are many Protestant churches, in various coalitions, working as a part of this movement since division. These coalitions are often led by North Koreans who left the North during the war. However, there has been a shift in focus and urgency, including the added role of North Korean defectors, since the influx of defectors in the mid-1990s. The loose nature of the NKM has led one pastor to call for a “unified leadership” to coordinate the various activities of churches and NGOs around the world (Ch’oe 2014). While the vast majority of churches and institutions working for North Korean Mission is

⁸ Quote from training documents given at Peace Church. Peace Church is a pseudonym for one of my main field sites.

⁹ Quote from training documents given at Peace Church.

located in South Korea, there are also many overseas organizations, most of them led by overseas Koreans, that operate under the NKM umbrella.

It is important to note that the goal of North Korean Mission was not simply the takeover of North Korea by South Koreans. Most of the Protestants I met while doing fieldwork were unhappy with the corruption and excesses of the unbridled development model of South Korea. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, for these Protestants, unification was about returning to a moral tradition that South Korea had seemingly lost in its push for economic success. The pureness of the North was paradoxically maintained due to North Korea's extreme isolationist policy – their language and culture had remained virtually untouched by outside influences since national division in 1945, while South Korea had embraced English and Western modernization into its daily life.

At the same time, to South Korean Protestants, North Korea was under the clutches of an evil and “foreign” power – the corruption of communism. Thus, the work of Protestants was not only to recover the pureness of Korean tradition; it was also to save the Northerners from the evil influence of the state. As part of the holders of a perceived “purity” of Koreanness, North Korea is considered the mythical birthplace of all Korean peoples¹⁰ as well as the birthplace of Korean Christianity since the Pyongyang Great Revival of 1907.¹¹ Therefore, while the unification of Korea was promoted by the government as the melding of the best of the two sides of

¹⁰ The birthplace of all Korean people is considered to be Paektu Mountain, at the northernmost tip of North Korea.

¹¹ When the conversion of over 50,000 Koreans happened over a three-year period. It was considered part of a wave of revivals that included the Welsh Revival of 1904 and spread to India in 1906 (Moffet 1962).

Korea – the technological advances of the South with the purity of North Korean tradition – Protestants have a vision of unification tempered by the moralizing force of God. In many ways, North Korean Mission was a project of creating a better version of South Korea than currently existed. In the process of what I call “spiritual unification,” South Korean Protestants saw themselves as not only finding a sense of belonging in a new and moral Korea, but also a place in the world.

Korea Interrupted: A Longing for Unification

Our wish is *t'ongil*,
Even in our dreams our wish is *t'ongil*,
T'ongil with all our hearts and souls,
Let's make *t'ongil* happen,
T'ongil will save our people
T'ongil will save our nation
Come quickly, *t'ongil*!
Come, *t'ongil*!

“Our wish is *t'ongil* (unification)” is the name of a popular song that is almost always sung in events relating to North Korea and unification. When the first North-South Presidential Summit happened in 2000, the leaders of North and South Korea held hands and sang the song together. The song evokes sadness and longing for a unified nation that seems so close but is unattainable. As the song states, unification “will save our people” and “our nation.” It is a song of desired completion. With the recent influx of defectors into South Korea, and the imminent collapse of North Korea predicted almost daily, unification is arguably more politically important than

ever. Despite these developments, interest in unification in South Korea is at an all-time low.

The question, “Why is unification so important?” was the unspoken elephant in a room of high school students attending T’ongil Lectures at an all-girls’ high school in Seoul at the end of my fieldwork period in 2012. During the mandatory lectures, young defectors spoke about their lives in North Korea and about their adjustment to the South. The lectures, sponsored by the state and implemented by NGOs, were meant to induce interest in the younger population about North Korea and the need for unification — an interest that was quickly dying, according to polls. In the lecture, much of the audience’s attention focused on one of the speakers, a handsome young defector who a few of the students claimed “looked like a movie star.” Their questions focused on who he was, if he had a girlfriend, and only later, on his life in North Korea. At the end of the session, the young girls said they cared about unification, although it was unclear if they had concrete reasons other than attraction for their interest.

According to newspaper and government polls, in 2014 less than 40% of South Koreans in their 20s were interested in unification. The declining interest in unification, particularly in the younger generation, led to a marketing campaign by the Park Administration to bolster interest by using the term *t’ongil taebak* (unification bonanza) (Korea Opportunities 2015). By all accounts, it did not succeed, as there was a significant decline in interest over the last three years across the generations. Significantly, those in their 20s no longer felt that North Koreans were

part of a shared bloodline (Denney 2015). A significant change was evident in their thinking about differences — in addition to political and economic differences, most of those in the younger generation stated that the “values” of North and South were incompatible. Even amongst the older generation, which historically has been most invested in unification, there was a decline from over 90% interested in unification in 2010 to under 60% in 2014.

On the surface, unification makes practical political and economic sense. North and South Korea have been artificially separated for many decades. “Ten million families separated by division” (Kim 1988) long to see one another and to communicate with one another. Unification is envisioned as the melding of the North, with its mineral resources, and the South, the traditional breadbasket of the nation, to create a more powerful and balanced country. It is a single people, a common culture, and a return to a natural state of things. As the song says, it is a way to “save the people” or “save the nation.”

Yet the issues surrounding unification are complex. Seven decades later, most close family members who were separated are now dead, and their stories are ancient history to their descendants. North Korea has almost depleted its mineral resources — most of it exported to China. South Koreans estimate the cost of unification at U.S. \$500 billion over 20 years, a staggering figure in a state that already suffers from a poor welfare system. Some wonder how similar the two nations are after seven decades of living in separate economic and cultural systems.

The common narrative of unification advocates is that Korea's development as a nation was interrupted by Japanese colonization and, later, by division. The narrative states that Korea was in the beginning stages of imagining itself as a connected people through print media (Anderson 1991) when Japanese colonization prevented Korea's growth into the strong and valiant nation it should have become. Korea was then liberated from Japanese colonization in 1945, but the nascent nation was again (and tragically) thwarted by the intervention of the communists,¹² who savagely split the nation into two. For the last 70 years, division has been tearing "the nation" apart, and unification needs to happen to return Korea to its glory so that it can take its rightful place as a whole nation and leader in the world.

There is a small minority that disagrees with this common narrative, some in academia. It is now widely accepted that the idea of "Korea" as a modern imagined community only emerged during the late Chosŏn Dynasty at the end of the 19th century (Eckert 1996; Em 2001; Schmid 1997). This was the time during which Korea was emerging from a feudal system and opening to the West. Greater contact with the outside world lead Koreans to begin to see themselves as a people distinct from other nations. Whether or not this developed into an Andersonian sense of a nation imagined through printed literature is a matter of great debate (Em 2001; Schmid 1997; Shin 2006). It was only when Korea after liberation was split into two that Koreans were able to have a nation — but separately — with different histories, different state narratives (North Korea counts the years starting with Kim Il-sung's

¹² Notably, the intervention of the United States is never questioned in this narrative.

birthday), and now, with vastly different cultures. North and South Korea, much like East and West Germany, were imagined and defined against each other, although Germany was a nation much longer before division (Berdahl 1999; Borneman 1992; Grinker 2000).

To complicate the issue of unification further, South Korean Protestants have their own version of an interrupted Korea. For them, North Korea is more than the mythical birthplace of Korea – it is also the birthplace of Korean Christianity. In 1907, Pyongyang, the current capital of North Korea, experienced what is known as the Great Revival, during which an estimated 50,000 people converted to Christianity over a period of approximately three years (Kang 1997; Chung-shin Park 2009). Missionaries from the West welcomed the Pyongyang Great Revival as part of a world revival of Christianity and marveled at Koreans' religious fervor, remarking that “they are ready to die for their faith” (Moffett 1962).

Christian as well as non-Christian historians have pointed to the significance of the Pyongyang Revival to Korean nationalism (Choi 1997; Clark 2003; Kang 1997; Lee 2000; Chung-shin Park 2009; Wells 1991). These scholars argue that the Revival happened at a moment when Korea was a dynasty but beginning to imagine itself as a nation, prior to Japanese colonization. Some assert that the spread of Korean Christianity was an indigenous movement. In other words, it was not part of an imperial or colonial project: Korean Catholics¹³ converted in China, and Koreans

¹³ The link between Catholicism and Protestant Christianity is unusual in that South Korean Protestants are notoriously anti-Catholic; they do not consider themselves part of the same Christian religion.

themselves spread Christianity in Korea. What these scholars indirectly (or, at times overtly) argue for is a uniquely “Korean” Christianity (Kang 1997; Lee 2000; Chung-shin Park 2009). Moreover, citing the links between Korean nationalism and Protestantism, they point to heavy Christian involvement in the Korean Independence Movement, and the Christian influence over modernization movements relating to medicine and literacy.

Therefore, they conclude that Christianity was introduced at a time when Korea was a dynastic monarchy, when it was beginning to imagine itself as a nation for the first time. Thus, they make a link between Christianity, modernity, and nationalism. Christianity, in other words, brought modernity and education, and those educated Korean Christians led the development of the nation (Choi 1997; Clark 2003; Kang 1997; Lee 2000; Chung-shin Park 2009). The combination of these arguments leads to a sense that recovering North Korea is an integral part of a return to an indigenous and whole nation. The link between Christianity, nationalism, and Korean essence is repeatedly made in post-liberation scholarship as well as by church leaders themselves, particularly those involved in North Korean and defector aid.

Regardless of one’s position on Korean unification, these debates about Korea point to a deep-seated insecurity of what Korea was, what it is now, and what it will be in the future.¹⁴ The most accurate mirror for this debate is the fact that no common, agreed-upon term for Korea exists in the Korean language. South Korea is called

¹⁴ Depending on one’s position about Korea, *t’ongil* can be translated as unification (for the first time), or reunification (an assumption that there was a unified nation prior). Following the South Korean government of using the term “unification,” as well as my own personal belief that a common notion of “Korea” never existed, I use the term “unification” for this dissertation.

han'guk in South Korea, a term that did not exist before division. The South Korean term for North Korea is *bukhan* (a abbreviated term for northern *han'guk*), making the central referent themselves. In North Korea, they call themselves *buk chosŏn*, or North *Chosŏn*, and South Korea *Nam Chosŏn*. For the North, *Chosŏn* is their reference to a common idea of Korea. One's use of term represents a political choice, an assertion of one state's sovereignty over the other. Those in defector aid have tried to be sensitive to this issue by calling South Korea *namhan* while still retaining the term *bukhan* for North Korea, which minimizes the dominance of South Korea as the central *han'guk*. Outside defector aid circles, even this minor change can be cause for suspicion, as the casual use of the term *namhan* draws strange looks in public places. Controversy over what to call "Korea" leads some in the South to refer to the country as *uri nara* (our country) or *uri minjok* (our people) instead of referring to a specific term.

A small minority has turned to use the English term *K'oria*, such as the authors of *Waelk'ŏm T'u K'oria* (Chung, Chŏn, and Chŏng 2006), an edited volume on various aspects of defector adjustment in South Korea.¹⁵ Using the transliterated phrase "Welcome to Korea" is the authors' way of ironically acknowledging the lack of a common idea of "Korea," but also neutralizing the politicized nature of the terms for Korea. By using it, however, the authors unintentionally point to an aspect of Korea that cannot be explained by another fashion: *K'oria* is a concept that only exists in English. Like the South Korean Protestants who believe that Christianity is

¹⁵ Korea originated as an exonym of Goryeo: "calli," which was later changed to Coreia, and then to Korea during Japanese colonization (Haw 2006).

the answer to a unified nation, so too, the authors believe that the promise of a unified Korea comes from the West.

The Long Path to South Korea and Defector Aid

In the case of North and South Korea, the shortest or easiest path between two points is not a straight line. The two capitals of North and South Korea are only 120 miles apart, separated by the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The distance from Seoul to the border is only 35 miles. Despite its name, the four-kilometer-wide DMZ is the most heavily militarized border in the world, with almost a million landmines and a million soldiers on either side (E. Kim 2014).¹⁶ The heavy military presence makes it virtually impossible for anyone to cross the border from North to South, or vice versa.

Instead of crossing the border into the South at its closest point, the majority of North Koreans cross into China first and go to the South via a third country. In the early years of the famine in the mid-1990s, North Koreans crossed the border into China and begged, stole, or worked illegally for food. The first migrants were mostly men or orphaned children. In China, they relied on the largesse of Chinese or Korean Chinese for shelter and work. By the late 1990s, the number of North Koreans in China began to swell, and more women came across the border, often sold by brokers as brides to Chinese farmers or to work in the sex trade.

For most North Koreans, the route to South Korea involves traveling at risk of discovery through two different countries, and many months of waiting. There are

¹⁶ At its widest point.

three main routes to South Korea, two of which are now virtually closed. The routes through Mongolia involved crossing the unforgiving Gobi Desert and often ended in tragedy, as represented in the movie *Crossing* (Tae-gyun Kim 2008). At one time, this route was as popular as the route that ended in Thailand, but due to the high fatality rate and lack of cooperation by the Mongolian government, this route has virtually been abandoned. A less popular route involved crossing into Russia, but was less frequented due to North Korea's warmer relations with Russia (and therefore a greater risk of being deported if caught), the harsh winters, and the expense of flying to South Korea from Russia.

The route through Southeast Asia is currently the only viable route to South Korea. This involves crossing through Laos, Vietnam, or Burma. Once in Thailand, North Koreans contact the South Korean Embassy. North Koreans spend between two weeks and six months in the detention center in Thailand while they await processing and permission to enter South Korea. While in detention, North Koreans undergo preliminary questioning by the South Korean government to establish that they are defectors and not spies. North Koreans, however, spend the largest portion of their time in Thailand simply waiting, watching South Korean television and news and dreaming about their future.

The number of North Koreans waiting in Thailand has reached such great numbers that the South Korean government has funded a new detention center outside of Bangkok. Until the new detention center was built, North Koreans were in a special section of the immigration center that had special high-definition televisions

and higher quality food and snacks (compared to other detainees), much of which, I was told, was provided by Protestants who visit them regularly. In crude and crowded facilities, defectors were packed into large rooms with up to 60 people living together, and were only allowed outside once a week in a compound surrounded by barbed wire. It is unclear if the new detention center allows greater freedom of movement while they wait for official permission to go to South Korea. It is rumored that the South Korean government has unofficially capped the number of detainees granted entry into South Korea at 3,000 a year, despite a large number of North Koreans waiting. The rumors are substantiated by numbers from the Ministry of Unification, which show steady figures of under 3,000 for the years 2006-2011, with a marked drop from 2012 to about 1,500 a year.

Some of the drop in numbers can be attributed to the fact that there are fewer North Koreans leaving their country because of starvation; North Korea has recovered since the devastating famine of the late 1990s, and business with China is booming. Moreover, with many defectors in the South sending money to family members, North Koreans are less willing to take the dangerous journey to the South where they are unsure of their welcome. Stories of hardship they hear from family members in the South, as well as the North Korean government's campaigns that depict defectors returning home have acted as a powerful dissuasive force. A few of the defectors I met in the field told me they had offered to bring their family members south, but while younger relatives came for educational or economic opportunity,

older family members sometimes refused. As long as their relatives in the south continued to send money, they were happy to stay in North Korea.

Another change that has happened in recent years is that North Koreans with access to more resources are taking safer routes to Thailand, often funded by family members in the South. An increasing number of human traffickers are North Korean defectors—they are ideal because they are familiar with the routes and the dangers, and have some measure of protection with South Korean citizenship. With more North Koreans settled in the South sending for their family members, there are a minuscule but growing number of people with the resources to fly directly to South Korea via China. These North Koreans often have relatively wealthy family members in the South who pay higher prices to reduce the risk of trauma and deportation by having them fly directly to South Korea.

While the method of coming to South Korea is changing quickly, the majority of defectors I met during my fieldwork underwent the process that I have just described. The following is a broad generalization for defectors after 2000, as the government began to institutionalize the processing of defectors.

Once their applications are processed in Thailand, North Koreans are flown to South Korea where they await questioning at the Joint Interrogation Center (JIC), a government agency that is in charge of cross-examining all North Korean defectors when they first arrive in South Korea. However, it is not until they arrive in South Korea that they are subject to intensive grilling at the JIC, a relatively unknown division of the secretive National Intelligence Service (NIS). The details of the

interrogation are considered a matter of national security; therefore the information below cannot be confirmed independently. However, it is important to note that the government workers at JIC are mostly Protestant. One defector aid organization was made up of retired government workers from JIC who openly proselytized and led prayer groups in the early years of interrogation, before there were regular established visits by a variety of religious organizations.

It is during this interrogation at the JIC that spies and Chinese citizens posing as defectors are distinguished from “real” defectors. According to defectors, they are routinely placed in solitary confinement at the Interrogation Center for a period of a couple of weeks and up to many months.¹⁷ While in solitary confinement, defectors are asked to write down every detail of their lives in North Korea, including names, dates, maps of their neighborhood, and organizational affiliations. The information they give is then cross-referenced by defectors with South Korean citizenship to weed out potential spies or Korean-Chinese posing as defectors. Their confinement is broken only by weekly visits by one of three religious organizations: Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist, and occasional prayer meetings with JIC officials, who are usually Protestant.

Once they are officially cleared of being spies and deemed legitimate “defectors,” North Koreans are sent to *Hanawŏn*, or the “Institute of Oneness.” The name *Hanawŏn* is used to refer to a physical center, a school-like facility located in the countryside with dorms, its own cafeteria, and classrooms. It is surrounded by a

¹⁷ Since the information about JIC is highly secretive, I base this information on conversations with my informants.

large fence with barbed wire and is “protected” by police with guns. Started in 1999, *Hanawŏn* was a single physical center located in Kyonggi Province, but a second facility, with a larger capacity, was built in Kangwon Province in 2012. The facility in Kangwon houses males only, while the original facility is used exclusively by women and children.

In addition to the physical center, the term *Hanawŏn* is also used to refer to the three-month adjustment program that defectors are given before being released into South Korean society. During this three-month training, defectors are required to wear uniforms and follow the rules of *Hanawŏn*. The facility is heavily guarded and no visitors are allowed except for teachers and volunteers for specific classes. No defector can leave the center unless it is under an official *Hanawŏn*-sanctioned event. During the period of my fieldwork, there were three such programs: the City Tour of Seoul, a homestay program where defectors were allowed to sleep in Protestant volunteers’ homes, and an outing to Lotte Department store. With donated gift certificates from upscale store, defectors were allowed to shop in South Korea for the first time.

The *Hanawŏn* training covers a large number of topics geared to prepare defectors for their new life in South Korea. An immediate need for defectors is to learn computer skills, particularly the Internet, which is not accessible in North Korea; and English, which most South Koreans learn from an early age and which is

important for daily life.¹⁸ English classes for North Korean defectors in *Hanawŏn* often begin with the alphabet, and computer classes are similarly basic. Other classes include [South] Korean history, banking systems, job skills, and even classes for women about how to apply makeup. When defectors enter and “graduate” from *Hanawŏn*, they have a *Hanawŏn* “class” number that is often used to identify the year and month they entered South Korea. For example, *Hanawŏn* class number 1 refers to the first group of North Koreans who entered South Korea in 1997. When aid workers met North Koreans for the first time, they often asked, “What *Hanawŏn* class number are you?” Similarly, defectors asked other defectors this question to situate their journey or to make connections with people they knew.

Upon graduation, defectors were met at the *Hanawŏn* Center by various agencies such as church organizations, the Red Cross, or more recently, Hana Centers. Hana Center is the name of a two-week adjustment program that is often housed in non-governmental organizations, run by social welfare agencies, or by the Red Cross, depending on the “Center.” The Hana Center program is the product of the institutionalization of disparate programs that helped defectors with the day-to-day difficulties of a new country. For example, Hana Center staff picked up defectors and took them to their city of choice. Seoul, as the center of economic, social, and political life in Korea, was often the favorite and also had a waitlist for apartments, but defectors asked to be placed in cities throughout the provinces as well based on

¹⁸ According to the Akamai Index (<http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2482327,00.asp>), South Korea is the most highly connected country in the world, with the highest Internet speed in the world. As such, having Internet and the latest technology is important for everyday life.

family relationships or perceived opportunities. Immediately upon arrival to their new cities, defectors were taken to a police station to register themselves and meet their assigned police detective. They were then taken to get a cell phone and open a bank account.

Over the next two weeks, defectors were shown how to take public transportation, given information on basic laws they had to obey, taught basic computer skills, toured around the city, taken to “cultural” events such as movies, and went shopping for essentials. At the conclusion of the two-week program, defectors were given the option to sign up for job training programs, “volunteer” for various events organized by the NGOs working on defector aid (these were often paid), or find jobs through their own networks of churches and North Korean friends and families. NGOs also offered specialized programs including tutoring, leadership programs, and daycare for children.

Government subsidies to defectors included an initial cash settlement given in installments,¹⁹ a modest monthly stipend, and small stipends for attending job-training programs. The monthly stipends were not enough to live on, so defectors needed to attend job training programs or find jobs right away. Once hired by a company, the state paid for the first three months of a defector’s salary as incentives to hire them. Finally, defectors were given preferential entrance to universities in South Korea, which meant that they did not have to take the highly competitive

¹⁹ These subsidies, along with apartment size, varied according to the number of people in one’s family.

university exam. Tuition, a source of stress for many middle-class families with little recourse for scholarships or student loans, was also free for defectors.

History of Protestant Aid to Defectors

As mentioned in the section above, North Koreans were exposed to Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism through programs or services during the state-organized three-month adjustment program called *Hanawŏn* (The Institute of Oneness). Moreover, most of the *Hanawŏn* staff was Protestant, and Protestant groups aggressively worked to convert North Koreans while they were still in *Hanawŏn*. The Protestant leaning of state workers was so strong that the state agency in charge of interrogating defectors was jokingly called “The Church” by defector aid workers. “Church” workers conducted prayer meetings with defectors during interrogations, and gave aid support after they left *Hanawŏn*. Moreover, Protestants dominated social welfare institutions, conveniently putting them in touch with North Korean defectors.

While the state gave generous settlement aid to North Korean defectors, the practical day-to-day aid necessary to handle the specific needs of defectors’ trauma, health, and money problems was lacking. Up until and during the time of my fieldwork, Protestants filled a major gap left by the lack of a well-organized state social welfare infrastructure able to handle the specific and general adjustment issues of living in a new society. These services offered by Protestants – virtually the only significant source of settlement support outside of state monies – made affiliation

with Christianity appealing, if not essential, to survival once North Korean defectors were released into general society.

Previous to the establishment of Hana Centers, social welfare agencies utilized Protestant volunteers who picked up defectors from *Hanawŏn*, accompanied them to get state identification cards, registered their children in school, and helped them buy necessities for their house. Social welfare was dominated by Protestants, and these Protestant social workers often referred defectors to their churches for more support. The establishment of Hana Centers helped to institutionalize the settlement process, but some of the Hana Centers are housed in social welfare agencies, and even the “secular” Hana Centers relied on Protestant volunteers to give aid to defectors both materially (i.e., in the buying of food and gifts) as well as psychologically (through counseling, developing friendships, etc.).

Church aid came in the form of cash money and material benefits for attending church, as well as important social networks through churches and psychological support for those suffering from trauma and having difficulties in adjustment. While some of these programs are now coordinated by an NGO that acts as a coalition for the various churches working with defectors, most churches offer additional support according to their resources.

In addition to media stereotypes and personal experiences of prejudice, North Korean defectors are on the margins of society in economic terms, and depend on aid for survival. Although North Koreans receive a substantial amount of cash through a government “resettlement fund” as a reward for defection, most of these funds are

used to repay *bŭrok'ŏ* (human traffickers who are often Korean Chinese, sometimes South Korean missionaries, and a growing number who are North Korean defectors) who have smuggled them out of China, or to bring family members to South Korea in the future. With few marketable skills that apply in South Korea (most come from the rural North, and have little education), adult North Koreans have extreme difficulty surviving economically in a new society ruled by competition and capitalism. In a time of recession, there are public worries in South Korea about the cost of unification, and whether the government support to Northerners is straining the resources of the economy. As a result of the growing numbers, the amount of resettlement money for defectors decreased substantially from sensationally rumored amounts of millions of dollars²⁰ to approximately U.S. \$20,000 from 1993, in addition to special entrance privileges for college and other types of government welfare and employment support. Some aid workers estimate the total cost of all government programs and subsidies at approximately one million won per defector,²¹ an amount that is unsustainable if the number of North Korean defectors continues to increase.

Despite the resources being poured into defector settlement, both North and South Koreans agree that North Koreans have not successfully adapted to their new society. In 2006, unemployment rates for employable North Koreans varied between

²⁰ Speculation about how much settlement money is paid to high-level defectors is the source of much conflict within defector communities. Grinker (1998) reports that North Korean defector Yi Ung-pyong, who flew to South Korea on a fighter jet, received about U.S. \$300,000 and Yi Cholsu, who defected in 1996 flying a MiG jet, received a settlement roughly equivalent to U.S. \$537,000 at the time, but sensational rumors put those numbers in the millions of dollars.

²¹ Equivalent to approximately U.S. \$100,000.

14.7 and 36.5%,²² much higher than the national average of 3.5%. Crimes committed by North Koreans are also rising, and a small but growing number are immigrating to other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the two sides cite different reasons for the failure of adjustment: while both agree that lack of education and skills are two of the top reasons for unsuccessful economic adaptation, South Koreans point to North Korean “culture” tainted by communism as the source of the problem – a tendency to be too proud and hierarchical, which makes it difficult for them to adjust to low-paid jobs; a naïve belief in making fast and easy money; violent behavior; and despair that leads to high rates of alcoholism, crime, and domestic violence. Phrases such as “lack of discipline,” “lack of patience,” and “gives up too easily” were commonly used to describe the failure of younger North Koreans to adjust to school despite numerous after-school tutoring programs and special summer school programs to “catch them up.” In one of the longest and most popular vacation “schools” (a live-in camp of up to four weeks), programs included “being a new citizen,” in which students were challenged to think creatively. Notable was a twelve-week job-training program during which numerous classes on “business manners” and “business values” as well as “time and personal management” and changing “fixed ideas” were part of the training. For South Koreans, North Koreans are subjects that need to be remade in order to become full and contributing citizens in South Korean society. And many South Koreans working with defectors were starting to lose patience and hope that this was possible.

²² Database Center for Human Rights Report “2013 Trends in Economic Activity of North Korean Defectors – Employment, Unemployment, Income.”

South Koreans were not the only ones feeling fatigued with the process of domesticating North Koreans: North Koreans pointed to aid relationships that felt like charity rather than the development of intimacy, and many said they did not want to stay in South Korea, citing China as a place they would like to resettle eventually. “I can be invisible in China,” stated one North Korean college student who pretended he was Korean-Chinese when South Koreans asked him about his accent and ability to speak Mandarin. Defectors expressed their disappointment with unfulfilled promises of wealth and riches by missionaries and the government, difficulty with the competitive nature of South Korea, and discrimination within society. Others stated their hope to someday study or emigrate to the United States or another Western country. Regardless of where they settle permanently, it was clear that most North Koreans did not feel welcomed in South Korea.

What’s in a Name? The History of Categorization of North Koreans

The names given to North Korean refugees in South Korea are reflective of the history I have outlined above. In the early stages of my fieldwork, I became confused by the plethora of names used for defectors. Although *t’alpukcha* (defector) was the most common, *saet’ōmin* and *t’alpukmin* were also used frequently. There was a lot at stake in the words used, and defectors themselves bypassed all of them when they used *uri saram* for “our people,” a term that excluded South Koreans. I discuss below the various types of categorization: what they reveal is history and politics, and are highly contentious.

Bowker and Starr write that categories, like names, have an invisible force: “each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another” (Bowker and Star 2000:5). For the South Korean state, the commonly used term *t’alpukcha* valorizes the “heroic” aspect of North Koreans. Touted as “freedom fighters,” the term insinuates that defectors left because they were dissatisfied or rejected the North Korean regime. In reality, however, most came to South Korea out of desperation or as a way to seek new economic opportunities. Thus, the term “defector” is both a way for North Koreans to access benefits and a categorical trap. It demands that defectors have no allegiance or nostalgia for North Korea or North Korean culture. As such, the category of *t’alpukcha* has what Hacking (Hacking 2000) describes as the power to impose the realities they only describe. *T’alpukcha*, like many of the names that I describe below, can become prisons of identity for defectors. Yet they also reveal the politics and the history of North and South Korean relations.

For those Northerners who came to the South by choice or who simply were caught in the movement of borders between Division in 1945 and the end of the Korean War in 1953, two terms were used to designate what I refer to in this dissertation as “early Northerners”: *wōlpukmin* and *silhyangmin*. *Wōlpukmin* means “those who fled the north,” and *silhyangmin* means “people who lost their hometown.” Early Northerners are thought of as those who fled the North regardless of whether they left by choice or by accident. In other words, the early Northerners, like defectors, have constructed themselves as victims of the Korean War. Many of the early Northerners who chose to leave the North after Division were Protestant

Christians and successful merchants in Pyongyang. Pyongyang was the capital of the *Chosŏn* Dynasty and a center of commerce in Korea at the time. When rumors of communist retaliation against “enemies” of the regime spread after division, these early Christian Northerners escaped to the South and settled in cities such as Busan, Seokcho and Seoul. Their business savvy was instrumental in rebuilding South Korea after the Korean War, and they set up influential markets and eventually businesses, some of which became *chaepŏl* (conglomerates).

The founder and late CEO of Hyundai is the most renowned of these early Northerners, and his longing for his homeland was realized when he spearheaded a cooperative government-business effort to provide economic and food aid to North Korea in 1998 in conjunction with the Sunshine Policy.²³ Similarly, this group of first generation defectors was influential in establishing Protestant churches and proselytizing to Southerners. Many of the so-called mega-churches in Seoul were formed by *silhyangmin*, and they form the backbone to the Protestant religion in South Korea. These early Northerners are also the economic and moral force behind the North Korean Mission Project to return North Korea to its holy place as a center of Christian revival. The first step in this process is to convert and save North Koreans to become crusaders for this cause. Defector aid has been influenced greatly by *silhyangmin*, if only indirectly through the churches, and this group is the one that provides the impetus to the North Korean Mission’s work. For the most part, it is

²³ The founder of Hyundai, Chung Ju-yung, sent 500 cows to North Korea, along with a massive amount of corn and other food aid in 1998. Called “cow diplomacy,” his donation paved the way for the historic 2000 presidential summit between the two Koreas (Kim and Kirk 2013).

virtually impossible to distinguish *silhyangmin* from South Koreans unless they identify themselves as such, because of the length of time they have been in South Korea. From the perspective of North Korean defectors (and myself), *silhyangmin* are not culturally or linguistically distinguishable from South Koreans.

The phenomenal economic success of these early Northerners overshadows a lifetime of discrimination that most faced in South Korea. Early Northerners recall how they were discriminated against in jobs, put under police surveillance, and faced daily prejudice from Southerners. According to one *silhyangmin*, her parents were forced to fly in separate planes because the government was worried about them defecting either to a foreign country or back to North Korea. This was despite the fact that her father was the CEO of a mid-level conglomerate and was required to frequently travel overseas for business. Considering the close government-business collaborations of the time, these restrictions were an insult to the businessman and underscored the lack of political power he wielded, despite his obvious economic wealth, recounted the woman.

Since the Korean War up to the early 1990s, there was a trickle of North Koreans who defected to South Korea for political reasons. These defectors were called *t'alpukja*, or defector. *T'alpukja* literally means, "one who escaped the north." Among this number were a few high-profile cases of true *t'alpukja*, or people who left the North for political rather than economic reasons. This group includes the defection of high-level government officials or intelligentsia such as Hwang Jangyop in 1997, considered the second most powerful person in North Korea at one time.

Others were North Korean spies who were caught by the South Korean government and given the option to stay in the South in exchange for valuable military information. Up until the beginning of mass defection of North Koreans in 1997, the number of these political defectors was fewer than 700, or approximately 10-15 per year.

The trickle of North Koreans began to turn into a steady stream after 1997, and public discourse on North Korea began to change with the election of a rapprochement-oriented President in 1997, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1. As relations with North Korea warmed, the presence of defectors in the south became contentious. North Korea called defectors criminals who were running away from state punishment, and felt their defection was being used politically. In an attempt to mitigate conflict with the North, the South Korean government introduced the category *saet'ŏmin* (new settlers). In response, some high-profile North Koreans living in South Korea were critical of the term, saying it de-emphasized the political motivations for leaving the North (even if they left to get food, some claimed the lack of food was a political problem). Moreover, the term could apply to anyone who migrated, they argued, and was not specific to North Koreans. In other words, the term denied the special place that North Koreans had as brethren to South Koreans.

As such, the term *t'alpukja* has been used consistently by both North and South Koreans, but not without some controversy. The ending of the term, *ja* means “person” or “fellow,” and connotes a person separated from community. It is also often pejorative. It is used in terms such as *pŏmchoeja* (criminal) or *kananhanja*

(someone who is poor). As a result, some feel the *ja* reflects North Koreans' lower social and class standing in South Korea. As a result, some people have begun to use the term *t'albukmin* instead. *Min* means "person" or "subject," which implies membership in the nation. This gives the term a sense of community and inclusion. However, because *t'albukmin* is harder to pronounce, *t'alpukja* is much more widely used.

In the midst of confusing term changes, prominent North Korean defector activist and anthropologist Chung Byung-ho coined the term *ijumin*, meaning migrant, to more accurately reflect that most North Koreans traveled to South Korea for food and survival rather than because they harbored any real political disagreement with the regime (Chung 2008). The term *ijumin* has become even more relevant in the post-famine era, as most defectors are crossing into the South for economic or educational opportunities. The use of the term has caused and continues to trigger outrage in the North Korean human rights and defector communities because of the seeming emphasis on "choice" of migration. Critics argue that defectors did not leave out of choice; it was a necessity brought about by the corruption of the North Korean regime. More importantly, this term could be easily applicable to other groups such as the *tamunhwa* (multicultural) community in South Korea. This group is made up of mostly marriage migrants from Southeast Asia and China. Marriage migrants especially are perceived by defectors as major competitors for state benefits; some North Koreans believed that *tamunhwa* were receiving greater benefits than defectors, which was patently untrue. Other defectors shun being included in the category

tamunhwa because it denies their unique positions as part of the ethnic nation, which could also negatively impact the special benefits they are given.

The term *nanmin* (refugee) or *mangmyŏngja* (asylum seeker) is strongly opposed in many sectors because it implies the sovereignty of North Korea as a separate state. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, a refugee is defined as someone who, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”²⁴ The small number of North Koreans leaving their country for political reasons would fall under this definition, except that under South Korean law, North Korea is an “enemy organization” rather than a sovereign state. As such, the term refugee is rarely if ever used to describe North Koreans. However, there is increased recognition that refugee aid is where the future of defector resettlement lies. For example, in October 2011, the Daegu Hana Center sponsored a conference on North Korean defector aid entitled, “Sharing Korean and American Experiences on Refugee Resettlement,” and was attended by the most important North Korean resettlement groups. During the conference, the work of U.S. refugee agencies was compared with the efforts to resettle North Korean defectors. The use of the word “refugees” in English is notable because it is recognition that refugee is the more appropriate term to discuss the settlement issues of defectors, at least in English.

²⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html>

Finally, the government introduced yet another term in 2008: *pukhanit'aljumin* (North Korean defector citizen). The new term was introduced in 2008 during the hard-line administration of Lee Myung-bak. Many complain that the term is too long, and in practice, even government officials use the term *t'alpukmin* or *t'alpukja*. A new foundation set up under the Lee administration uses the terms *saet'omin* or *t'alpukja* interchangeably, but the English translation of their name is North Korean Refugee Foundation, which shows that there is confusion on many levels, even from the government, about how to define North Koreans living in South Korea.

There have been attempts by North Korean groups to create new terminology. These include neologisms such as *chayuin* (one who is free) or *pukhanminjuin* (democratic North Korean), among others, and have obvious political implications. None of these terms have gained widespread usage, and the term *t'alpukja* is still used most commonly in both North Korean circles as well as among South Korean aid workers. For the purpose of this dissertation, I use defector, the English translation of the term *t'alpukja* and *t'alpukmin*, to denote North Koreans living in South Korea and abroad. This choice reflects North Korean preference for this term, as well as common international usage of the term defector.

As stated above, *t'alpukja* can be both a category with benefits as well as a space of violence. Because of this, North Koreans are acutely aware of their border status, and one way they respond to these attempts at classification is to do what they have done best – escape. In fact, the key character in the Korean word for defector is

t'al, which means *t'alchul*, or “escape from a fixed environment or confinement” (Naver Dictionary). In *Escape Routes*, a study of social change around the world, the authors write, “escape is a betrayal of existing forms of representation, forms of representation that regulate everyday life...” (Papadopoulos and Stephenson 2008:xv). After escaping the North, defectors once again escape from social controls after experiencing broken promises of being able to join the South Korean nation. Many of them escape to the West, where they dream of being able to be “free” from these categories and perhaps join another nation—a powerful, multicultural Western nation. Once when a North Korean defector told me about her experiences of discrimination in the South, I commented that her experiences sounded similar to racism in the U.S. She told me the difference was that in South Korea, they were supposed to be part of the same *minjok*. She stated, “Here, we look the same and speak the same, and tell you we are the same. It's harder this way.” The constant surveillance and forms of discrimination lead many to say, “I wish I can go somewhere I can be invisible.” To be invisible for these North Koreans does not mean to be unseen, but to be seen as more than a representative of a category. As Bowker and Star (Bowker and Star 2000) would argue, the invisible is the place of power. As a constant representative of category, one's personhood is occluded. In other words, defectors, as a representative of North Korea, can never be typical South Koreans.

The desire of North Koreans to escape constant evaluation and categorization of identity leads some desperate defectors to return to China or Thailand to defect again—this time as refugees to western nations. What is surprising is that they are not

the first group of North Koreans to do so—the first wave of Korean immigrants to the U.S. included many early Northerners who wanted to escape the discrimination of South Korea during that time. These early immigrants now play a role in Korean American churches working for North Korean Mission. Some dissatisfied defectors have gone so far as to return to North Korea in protest of their treatment in the South.²⁵ Wherever they go, it is clear that they are defying categories until they can find a place of invisibility, or a place where they have more control over their own representation.

Domestication and Belonging

My dissertation examines the aid relationship between South Korean Protestants and North Korean defectors living in South Korea through the lenses of domestication, strategic belonging, and national identity. Domestication, I argue, is the process of converting and transforming North Korean defectors into South Korean Christians and future unification leaders. I show that South Korean Protestants are invested in aid to defectors as a part of the larger project of the North Korean Mission, with its stated goal the Christian takeover of North Korea. To South Korean Protestants, North Korea's roots as the birthplace of Korean Christianity make them "gifts from God for unification," yet as part of the "evil" state of North Korea, they must be domesticated by becoming part of a Korean Christian family. The

²⁵ Officially, 13 defectors have returned to North Korea, although NGOs estimate there are more (Williamson 2014). In 2015, a defector woman publically announced she came to the South "by accident" and wants to return, but she has been denied permission by the South Korean government (Choe 2015b).

domestication of North Koreans happens through relationships of intimacy that involve kinship and gift-giving, but also includes surveillance that accompanies the unequal power relations inherent in any domestication project. I argue that the project of transforming defectors is not limited to successfully assimilating North Koreans into South Korea; it is also about domesticating South Koreans to adopt the “purity” of North Koreanness and produce a new, Christian nation ruled by God to temper capitalism. This dissertation examines how the interactions between North Korean defectors and South Korean Christians are redefining what it means to be Korean.

For North and South Koreans, North Koreans are a vital part of the *minjok*, the ethnic nation bound by blood ties and culture (Shin 2006). In this racialized version of nationalism, Koreans are thought a race distinct from Chinese or Japanese, and descended from a god that lived on the northernmost tip of the Korean peninsula (Pai and Tangherlini 1999). However, despite the rhetoric of being from the same blood and the same nation, real differences in culture, history, and institutions separate the two countries and people. While recent scholarship on defector relations have focused on North Korea and its defectors, this dissertation focuses primarily on the South Koreans who aid them. Because of their difference, because of their alienness, North Koreans are a marked and almost always visible category in South Korea. But South Koreans remain invisible in the aid relationship. My aim is to make the invisible visible. I explore how South Koreans are transforming North Korean defectors as well as themselves in a process of taming their closest Other: North Koreans.

This process of taming, of domestication, is an inherently fraught and at times violent process. It is the practice of bringing something from the outside into the fold of the domestic or the local; Caldwell (Caldwell 2004b) describes it as a process of imbuing a foreign object with personal meaning, and making it familiar. She writes that through domestication, the foreignness of McDonald's was transformed into a familiar and a local space. Caldwell shows the agency of Muscovites in the way they "actively manipulated McDonald's by refashioning the eating experience to reflect their own ideas of what constitutes private space and personally meaningful activities" (20). As such, McDonald's became a space of intimacy, trust, and familiarity.

While Caldwell explores how an international chain restaurant was domesticated and made familiar, the negotiations inherent in any domestication process were less visible in her account. If institutions are made of people, then what kind of conflicts happened in the process of making the "foreign" a place of the "familiar?" In other words, what was the agency of McDonald's staff in contributing to or fighting against the domestication of the space? I argue that the process of domesticating a group of people is a complex process that reveals unequal power relations, particularly when aspects of the "foreign" are seen as dangerous or unwanted. In contrast to a space, the attempted domestication of a group of people from another group, without their express consent, can cause conflict and misunderstandings, as it did in the case of North and South Koreans.

The domestication of North Koreans represents a conundrum. On the one hand, North Koreans are thought to be part of the same *minjok*, yet after 70 years of

separation under a totalitarian regime, they are fundamentally different in culture; making them alien and unsettling, a topic I discuss in further detail in Chapter 2. Domestication, then, seeks to transform the alien into family, the dangerous into the safe, and adults into children. Since South Koreans also see communism as a disease, passed down by family, domestication is a cleansing of the blood. It is precisely because this process is so difficult, perhaps even impossible, that it is thought of as only being possible through God's grace. For Protestants, domestication is a rebirth that cleanses North Koreans of their evil past. It is only through being reborn that North Koreans become safe as well as deserving of love, gifts, and the legacy of a future unified nation. The process of domestication is a process of salvation, and involves acts of intimacy such as showing love, giving gifts, creating family, and converting to Christianity.

At the same time, while North Koreans are being domesticated, South Koreans are also seeking to domesticate themselves by incorporating the "purity" of the north into their own national culture. Through the transformation of North Korean defectors, South Korean Protestants aim to cleanse and purify their culture, which they see as tainted by the blind acceptance of U.S. culture and English, and the corruption of unfettered development. Moreover, with the influx of foreigners marrying South Koreans and producing mixed race children, there is a crisis of "pure blood" that dominates national ideology. This crisis is what North Koreans are seen as addressing. As the descendants of the original Christians, as well as holders of Korean tradition and language, North Koreans are vital to the "cleansing" of South

Koreans from the corruption of capitalism and of foreign influence. Thus, both groups are being domesticated through their mutual relationship.

While South Korean Protestants aim to domesticate North Koreans to help achieve a unified Christian nation, what motivation do North Koreans have to submit to domestication? As I show in Chapter 3, by strategically identifying with Protestant Christianity, North Koreans are able, in certain times and places, to move out of the spaces of marginality. This movement happens through the physical travel from their marginal neighborhoods located on the borders of Seoul, to churches in upper-class neighborhoods, as well as figuratively from broken or chaotic family lives into an intimate and loving space as part of the “family” of God. This is not to say that North Koreans are not sincerely trying to understand Christianity; some have become faithful believers and even pastors who have started their own churches for defectors. At the same time, it is clear that being or pretending to be Christian provides many material benefits that cannot be found elsewhere.

I draw upon Melissa Caldwell’s (2004) concept of “strategic intimacy” – the social solidarity that comes from “performances” of the Self and Other – to argue that North Koreans are converting to Christianity for the purpose of finding belonging in South Korea. According to Caldwell, strategic intimacy is a way of strategically aligning oneself with one group (religious or otherwise) in order to access important material resources. Cautioning against a view of this practice that seems self-serving, Caldwell asserts that relationships are always mutually constituted by economic and social relations. Particularly in South Korea, gifts of money and food are commonly

given as a way to develop social relationships, and the immense amount of gifts given to North Koreans are one example of how intimacy can be strategic.

I expand on Caldwell's concept of strategic intimacy to explain how intimacy can be strategic despite the lack of material promise. I use *strategic belonging* to encompass practices of religious affiliation, cultural intimacy, and the learning of other values of cultural citizenship that illustrate how both North and South Koreans are searching for belonging in South Korea. For South Koreans, the belonging they seek through North Koreans is a sense of completeness, as well as a stepping stone to the rest of the world. Aid to North Koreans, then, is a way for them to belong and be "at home in the world" (Hannerz 2005).

In the case of North Koreans, I argue that despite the material resources given to them, they seek community with Christians as a way to belong emotionally and culturally in South Korea, regardless of material benefits that are involved. Strategic belonging addresses the emotional sense of isolation and difficulty of "being oneself" that most defectors feel, separated from their birth homes and families. W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African American sociologist, sheds light on this duality of identity when he describes the state of being categorized merely by the color of one's skin as leading to a state of "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1994). He describes double consciousness as the difference between how one is perceived by the powerful, and how one perceives oneself. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldua describes this duality of identity, particularly as a woman, as a space of terror. She writes, "Alienated from her

mother culture, ‘alien’ to the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self” (Anzaldua 2012:42).

I assert that North Koreans experience double consciousness in South Korean society, but use strategic belonging to Christians to overcome the despair of these moments. Christian churches are often the few places that defectors are openly “out” about their identity, while most choose to hide their origins in their daily lives. Even defectors who are open about their origins must be careful about expressing their longing for home due to the stigma of saying anything positive about North Korea. As such, strategic belonging to South Korean Protestants who are more understanding and accepting of such expressions is a way for North Koreans to overcome the emotional and economic isolation they feel in the South. Etienne Balibar describes “a sense of belonging” as “both what it is that makes one belong to oneself and also what makes one belong to other fellow human beings” (Balibar 1991:96). Similarly, Holland writes that belonging is a mediator between public and personal worlds (Holland et al. 2001:3). By belonging to a Christian community, North Koreans can “be themselves,” finding emotional as well as material support for their new and often lonely lives.

Strategic belonging is also a useful lens to understand South Korean motivations for aiding North Koreans. The personal sacrifices of time and money of individual South Korean Protestants were immense, leading to much burnout amongst aid workers. Yet many of the aid workers I met also spoke of the purpose it gave them in life, working for a greater good in society. South Korean aid workers often

received high praise and support from both individuals and institutions around them. A few had dedicated their lives to North Korean Mission, going to graduate school in the U.S. as well as South Korea for the purpose of contributing to NKM in the future. I would argue that societal recognition, and the forms of community that were created between aid workers gave South Korean Christians a sense of purpose and belonging in South Korea and also the world. For example, churches working on North Korean Mission created networks with other South Korean churches as well as western churches, NGOs, and international aid organizations. These networks were invaluable in a country where any association with the West was a sign of prestige and cosmopolitanism. Materially, it also meant being able to access resources through government grants as well as becoming leaders in a global movement for the downfall of North Korea.

Finally, while strategic belonging could create welcome and warm spaces, I examine how these spaces of intimacy were also a place of control and surveillance. Stoler (Stoler 2002) argues that Dutch colonial authorities were heavily invested in monitoring intimate relationships between Dutch citizens and Javanese subjects in order to maintain control of its colony. While North Koreans are not colonized in South Korea, they are similarly objects of state control. In the case of North Korean defectors, intimacy was both the space of domestication as well as the method through which power was realized. It was on the level of intimate relationships that attempts were made to monitor and transform defectors. Their presence in South Korea was interpreted by Protestants as a rejection of all things [undesirably]

Northern, but also in service of a future nation. South Korean Protestants gave aid to “help” North Koreans excise undesirable elements of their culture as well as transform them into God’s Warriors, without ever asking their permission. The violence of monitoring was made more insidious because of the intimate talk of love and family that surrounded defectors.

Recuperating the Nation: Defectors, Christianity, and Unification Politics

The theme of nation runs throughout this dissertation, and nation continues to be a salient category of analysis for South Korea. Critical scholars of Korean history have noted that nationalism is one of the most important themes of Korean history and identity in the twentieth century (Palais 1991), and that Korean Studies in North and South Korea has been largely motivated by nationalist ideologies (Pai 2000) (Pai and Tangherlini 1999). As South Korean funds have greatly influenced the development and growth of Korean studies in the United States as well as other countries around the world, this assertion can be expanded globally. The sheer number and scope of studies on Korean nationalism support these claims (Em 2013; Grinker 2000; Kendall 2001; Lee 1963; Nelson 2000; Pai and Tangherlini 1999; Shin 2006; Wells 1991).²⁶

Unification politics extend to gender, as women have been symbolic of North Korea and men of South Korea. Sheila Miyoshi Jager writes that in romantic images of division, the nation is a couple that has been torn apart by division. The woman is a

²⁶ The works cited are merely a few of many on nationalism.

symbol of resistance against historical forces that drive the “couple” apart. She writes, “the longing for reunification was identified with the romantic urge to come together as one people, one family, much like a wife who wishes to reconcile with her lost husband” (Jager 2003:61). The wife is steadfast and loyal to the husband, and therefore the national family. In a new version of women as symbol of the North that I discuss in Chapter 2, South Korea is considered to be more modern and technologically advanced, while North Korean women are praised for their natural beauty and the importance they place on the family.

Finally, my dissertation explores the role that Protestant Christianity plays in mediating or constituting the Korean nation. Aihwa Ong discusses a similar question through her work on how religious groups and non-profit organizations play an important function as “mediators of the state” in teaching newly arrived Cambodians how to be American (Ong 2003). For Ong’s interlocutors, Mormonism taught certain values that were helpful in surviving in the United States in addition to the material support that was provided to the refugees. The common practice of Cambodian women marrying (white) Mormon men gave the women a sense of integration and belonging. For Cambodian refugees in Ong’s account, Mormonism is integral to their imaginings of what it means to be American and modern, while Buddhism is linked to a traditional, Cambodian past that is no longer of value. For North Koreans, Christianity is vital to learning what it means to be South Korean and modern. According to the Ministry of Unification (June 2015), North Korean women make up

70% of the defector population, their marriages to South Koreans are becoming the symbolic and literal battleground for the reproduction of the nation.

In sum, I argue that South Korean Protestants are engaged in a project of domestication of North Korean defectors to convert and shape them into *sahyŏkcha* (God's warriors) in a future-oriented project of unification. While South Korean Protestants attempt to domesticate North Korean defectors, they are simultaneously engaged in a project to domesticate themselves – that is, to become more “Korean.” North Korean defectors acquiesce to this process of domestication due to strategic belonging – in order to access the resources, support, and also emotional belonging that the church offers. Similarly, South Koreans engage in strategic belonging with North Koreans to achieve their vision of the future, but also become leaders in a worldwide Christian movement to work for the downfall of North Korea. Both of these processes are important to the overall project of national belonging for not only North Koreans, but also the South Korean Protestants who work on their behalf.

Research Summary: The Road to North Korean defectors

Similar to North Koreans' journey to the South, my journey to find defectors was circuitous rather than direct. My fieldwork began and ended in Seoul, the megapolis that is the capital and political, economic, and cultural center of South Korea. Conducted between October 2010 and May 2012, I began by taking an advanced language course at the elite Yonsei University for three months, and continued in a hodge-podge fashion of short-term volunteer opportunities and visits to

various organizations over the course of the 19 months that I spent in South Korea. One of these was a short-term volunteer opportunity at a non-governmental organization outside of Seoul, which gave me the perspective of North Koreans at the physical margins of South Korea.

When I arrived in Seoul in October 2010, having conducted preliminary research a few months prior, I found that one of my main field sites — a job training center run by a Christian organization — had abruptly closed for reasons I could not ascertain. This unexpected closure left me at a loss as to the day-to-day work of fieldwork, and subsequent attempts to find a field site were surprisingly difficult. Despite having conducted preliminary fieldwork the summer before at a non-Christian NGO, I struggled to break through the barriers of “protectiveness” that South Korean Protestants erected around North Korean defectors in my new focus on South Korean Protestant aid.

For example, “Peace Church,” one of my fieldsites, was unexpectedly unfriendly to newcomers and asked me pointed questions about my personal and religious background, as well as detailed questions about my research. Unfortunately, this type of guardedness permeated almost all of my interactions with South Korean “gatekeepers” of North Korean defectors. In the name of “protection,” a theme I develop in Chapter 5, South Koreans were extremely suspicious of anyone who was not Christian and did not have a traceable “lineage” of church attendance — either in South Korea or overseas. Luckily, my presence was more warmly accepted when I was asked about my parents’ religious leanings. Once it was established that my

parents were Christian, I was deemed to have *mot'aesinhang* (faith in my mother's womb) and provisionally accepted as a member of the church. This acceptance was based on the belief that God had "called me" to do this research and would convert me to work for North Korean Mission. The concept of belief in the blood and the womb is an argument that I discuss in Chapter 4 on family where I argue that North Koreans are constructed as blessed children who were born into faith as part of the birthplace of Christianity in Korea.

The difficulty of accessing North Korean defectors, and the suspicion and occasional hostility that was directed towards me led to a shift in my research questions. Instead of exploring the personal worlds of North Korean defectors, I began to ask, what was at stake for South Koreans to "protect" and give aid to defectors? What did the hostility directed towards me reveal about South Korean society? In other words, why and how were North Koreans so important? Finally, I asked, how did my own experience as someone who could "pass" as South Korean reflect the experiences of North Koreans who were also trying to "pass" as South Koreans, albeit with higher stakes?

Despite the extreme reluctance of many organizations to accept me as a volunteer, I was able to secure a volunteer position at an alternative school for North Korean high school students, where I taught English twice a week for a period of six months. I also attended Peace Church on Sundays, and attended other special events that the church organized, including a weekly prayer meeting for unification. I joined a number of NGOs working on defector aid and was a part-time intern at a regional

Hana Center for six months. Finally, I met with some international organizations, mostly from the United States, doing projects on North Korean defectors.

Serendipitously, my movement around the country volunteering for a number of NGOs and churches closely mirrored the movement of a typical North Korean defector optimizing resources and spaces of belonging.

Research is rarely about one moment; they often have “life histories” (Brenneis 2006). In addition to my formal fieldwork period, I include my experiences living in South Korea for approximately seven years between the period of June 1994 to 2002, before I began graduate school. When I first arrived in South Korea in 1994, I was an international exchange student who could not speak Korean fluently. In later years, I worked as an English teacher, part-time reporter, and staff member at a human rights organization, improving my Korean fluency and understanding of culture over time while also being constantly policed on my transformation to South Koreanness. By the end of my stay in South Korea, I could “pass” as South Korean, or at least as Korean Chinese, who are the main minority in South Korea and are usually fluent in Korean, albeit with a slight accent. My experience of being able to “pass” as Korean was key to my observations of North Koreans and their ability to go undetected in South Korean society.

I use Dorinne Kondo’s idea of “being a conceptional anomaly” (Kondo 1986) to situate my subjectivity as a Korean American at various stages of linguistic and cultural fluency in Korea as part of the evidence presented in this dissertation. As someone who looked and acted like a South Korean, but was not, I presented a

challenge for South Koreans around me. One defector commented that I was a “South Korean with a disability.” Moreover, my outsider status as someone who was not Christian also aligned myself with North Korean defectors. This was in contrast to the welcome and access that white foreigners, regardless of their religious leanings, were given by the same groups. Similar to North Korean defectors, I was a stranger, but with a crucial difference — my integration to South Korea did not have the heavy symbolic meaning that was attached to the integration of North Korean defectors. Instead, my association with the United States often gave me privileges that North Koreans did not have, a theme I further explore in Chapter 2.

During the period of what I call my “pre-dissertation fieldwork,” I experienced firsthand the effects of two *seggyewha* (globalization) campaigns, national disasters, the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997, and the new Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae-jung. This was the period, I argue in Chapter 2, when discourse around North Korea shifted dramatically from the enemy into a potential partner for reconciliation. The state-sponsored change in the image of North Korea was crucial in setting the stage for later attempts to domesticate North Korean defectors into the South Korean Christian nation by South Korean Protestant aid workers.

When I started doing preliminary research in 2008, not many academics were researching North Korean defectors. During this period, I met many western reporters (Harden 2013; Kim and Falletti 2015; Lee and John 2015; K. Lee 2012), western NGO staff, and fledgling academics such as myself from the west who were researching the topic (Bell 2012; Choi 2010; Jung 2010; Hyeon Ju Lee 2012). By the

time I left Seoul in May 2012, it was an extremely crowded field. It is clear that the issue of North Korean defector adjustment is not only important for the South Korean state, but also geopolitically, given the amount of funding and attention paid by North Korean human rights organizations around the world. While much of the geopolitical factors are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is an issue that deserves exploration in future research.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 of the dissertation, “The Promise of the Stranger,” explores the two Others that have shaped South Korean national identity since division: the United States and North Korea. I show how South Korea’s relationship with the United States has been strategic in order to boost its military and economic strength as well as protect itself from North Korea. North Korea, on the other hand, has been an enemy that is also long lost family. I argue that South Korean national identity has been constructed around the fear and desire of the two strangers of the U.S. and North Korea, relationships that are defined by both distance and closeness. The chapter examines the change in discourse on North Korea following an identity crisis in the late 1990s, when South Korea faced a series of national disasters. This shift in discourse was the first step in the process of domestication that is discussed in the next chapters.

In Chapter 3, “Unification and the Charismatic Gift,” I introduce one of my main field sites, Peace Church, while discussing the immense amount of aid given by

Protestants to North Koreans. Protestant aid included cash money, material goods, jobs, and educational support, as well as emotional support, made up the majority of defector settlement aid during the time of my fieldwork. The idea that “North Koreans are a gift from God given for unification” was a refrain that was often repeated in churches and NGOs working on defector aid. Similar to Coleman’s (2004) idea of the charismatic gift, the gift relationship between North and South Koreans involved a tripartite relationship with God. North Koreans, on the other hand, were enticed to the church with promises of the good life. I argue that different ideas of the gift relationship from North and South Koreans led to conflict and dissatisfaction on both sides.

Chapter 4, “Suffer the Little Children,” explores how North Korea is constructed by South Korean Protestants as a place without familial love, and defectors, by extension, as orphans who are in desperate need of love. I argue that love was used as a “call to relationship” (Zigon 2013) by South Korean Protestants to remake North Koreans as children in need of the family of Christianity. I show how the structure of Peace Church deliberately mimicked the “family” of God, in which South Koreans were the adults who needed to show North Koreans, the youngest and sacred children, Christian love.

“The Lives of Others: North Korean and the Intimacy of Surveillance” (Chapter 5) examines the intimate monitoring of North Korean defectors that happened in the name of “protection” and aid. While North Koreans were under obligation to report their activities to police officers and state representatives, these

practices were couched in terms of “protection,” even if defectors actively opposed them. Through an examination of the National Information Service and the National Security Law, I show how surveillance was normalized in South Korea in order to “protect” South Koreans. Similarly, I argue that surveillance is a normalized practice of intimacy and an integral part of the domestication of North Korean defectors. The surveillance nature of monitoring was revealed when a well-liked young defector was arrested for being a North Korean spy. His case reveals how the talk of “protection” merely disguised the violence of surveillance practices.

I conclude my dissertation by discussing the recent Sewol Ferry tragedy and how citizen outrage to the event is leading South Koreans to redefine their relationship to the state. I explore two opposing ideas of citizenship that are salient in South Korea – one that is defined by people’s obligation to the state, and another defined by the state’s obligation to its citizens. Next I turn to how North Koreans are being included in the “we” of Koreanness in opposition to the influx of marriage migrants and their mixed Korean children. In an effort to counter the trend of South Koreans as mixed rather than “pure” blood, the state is encouraging marriages between South Korean men and North Korean women. I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of how the citizenship debates are playing out in contemporary society, with many South Koreans wanting to leave what they are calling a “hellish” place to live. Similarly, North Korean defectors are “voting with their feet”: some are returning to North Korea, while many others are attempting to go west to the United States or the United Kingdom.

The fact that North Koreans do not feel they belong in South Korea despite the various types of aid and inclusion that Protestants attempt shows the contradictions of how North Korea is imagined in the South. Many of these problems stem from the Unending War, and the unwillingness of many South Koreans to acknowledge those contradictions – the surveillance that comes with intimacy, the expectations that come with gifts, and the violence of eradicating North Koreanness through love. This dissertation shows that through the lens of North Korean belonging, much light can be shed about the aspirations of South Korean Protestants and South Korean society in general.

Chapter 2

The Promise of The Uncanny Stranger: The United States and North Korea

Having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth.

– Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*

As a non-Korean speaking Korean American living in South Korea in the mid 1990s, one surprising difficulty in learning the Korean language was the use of personal pronouns. As an English speaker, I was used to saying “my” in front of almost all objects and institutions in my life, while South Koreans used the word *uri* (we, our) to refer to groups or institutions one was a part of. For example, instead of saying “my school” or “my country,” Koreans would say “our school” or “our country,” regardless of whether the listener was included in the category. It would be rare for a Korean to say *hanguk mal* (Korean language), as I was taught in language school, because it implied that the language was foreign to the speaker. Instead, they would use the term *uri mal* (our language). As I became an intermediate and eventually fluent Korean speaker, I was confused by this use of *uri*. I was told by my Korean interlocutors that all Koreans were connected through blood, and that I was part of “Korea.” Yet as a citizen of the United States, I felt strange using the terms

that Koreans used for Korea and Korean: *uri nara* (our country) or *uri mal* (our language). Was it inauthentic of me to use these terms when my legal country of citizenship was the United States? Or when “my language” was English, and not Korean? On the other hand, would not using the term *uri* imply a rejection or separation from people with whom I felt an affinity, and they to me, as a fellow Korean “in my roots,” as South Koreans told me? The comment that I belonged to *uri minjok* (our people), often accompanied small lessons in Korean history, culture, and language. While it was important for me personally to be included in the “we” of Korea, I wondered what was the benefit to South Koreans to include me in the “we” of South Korea. In my inclusion, who was excluded from the “we” of [South] Koreanness?

Edward Said argues that national identity “involves the construction of opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (Said 1979:125). Similarly, I assert that South Korean national identity has been constructed against its two most important Others: North Korea and the United States. Through a brief overview of events following the division of Korea, I examine how South Korea separated itself from its closest brethren and allied itself with the United States. Through state institutions and legislations such as the National Security Law, the state invested an immense amount of work to maintain the image of North Koreans as enemies. Conversely, the United States, despite being a foreign power, was constructed as a “friend” of South Korea. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the shift in

geopolitics with the end of the Cold War, South Korea had a crisis of national identity with increased globalization and a series of disasters that led to a crisis of Korean “culture.” To resolve this crisis, the new South Korean government’s policy of rapprochement with North Korea led to a new trope of North Korea – as a victim that needed to be saved – and recoup the lost masculinity of South Korea. This new trope was absolutely vital to setting the stage for the influx of North Korean defectors and domestication through North Korean Mission, the Protestant movement to save and convert North Korea.

In this chapter, I examine the relationships between South Korea, the United States, and North Korea through the lens of the uncanny. Freud states that the uncanny is not merely the strange, but “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud and Haughton 2003:124). Freud asserts that the uncanny can be applied to a situation in which one cannot discern between reality and imagination; for example, a doll that appears alive falls in the realm of the uncanny because it makes viewers doubt their perception of the doll as either animate or inanimate. Moreover, this doubt can trigger a sense of deep unease or even disgust. The inability to distinguish between real and fake is key here, as North Koreans are considered both family and the mortal enemy. As part of the same ethnic group, North Koreans are the “double” of South Koreans, but also uncanny in that South Koreans do not know what lies beyond a phenotypically ethnic Korean exterior. There is always the potential for betrayal. However, using Trnka’s interpretation of Freud, I argue that the uncanny is also apparent in situations which

are at once familiar and also absurd (Trnka 2011). In the case of South Korean identity, what was familiar became strange (North Korea, and communism), and what was strange became familiar (the United States and capitalism). In this chapter, I show how the categories of enemy and friend, while having grave consequences, are so fragile that they border on the absurd.

The Construction of North Korea as the Enemy and the U.S. as “Big Brother”

At the conclusion of World War II in August of 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to administratively divide the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel, with the U.S. in the south and the U.S.S.R. in the north. With no one anticipating that it would be permanent, an arbitrary line was drawn, thus dividing the ex-colony of Japan into North and South Korea. Between 1945 and 1948, the United States operated a full military government under the guise of “trusteeship.” This meant that the “people’s committees” and the fledgling Korean government, which called itself the Korean People’s Republic, was quickly disbanded by U.S. authorities who saw them as part of a “Soviet master plan to dominate all of Korea” (Cumings 2005:191). Instead, the United States appointed staunch anti-communist Syngman Rhee as the leader of the South, and left many Japanese collaborators in power.

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve deeply into the events of this time period,²⁷ I want to emphasize the overall sense of illegitimacy of the southern ruling authorities during this time period. Rhee, who had lived in the U.S for many decades and received his PhD from Princeton University, was placed into power by the United States, and it was with the help (if not the impetus) of the United States that South Korean national identity was constructed. Moreover, there was an enormous amount of work needed to transform Northern brethren into enemies in order to legitimize the rule the South. The southern population did not accept this illegitimate state lightly; the populace reacted with anger and there were a series of rebellions up until the Korean War began. The most important of these was the Jeju Uprising of 1948.

On March 1, 1948, a large protest on Jeju Island, the southernmost island in Korea, resulted in 2,500 people arrested and one person found tortured to death. Led by the South Korean Labor Party, the protest was against the election that would cement the division of North and South that immediately followed liberation from Japan in 1945. The anger over the death led to an outpouring of frustration against state violence, and quickly grew into a full-scale rebellion. Although it was officially acknowledged that only 550 were armed insurgents (Lee 2009:60), by the end of the rebellion a few years later, 30,000 people had been killed, half of the villages destroyed, and approximately 40,000 islanders fled to Japan. Unofficially, Jeju islanders claimed up to 60,000 people died (Cumings 2005).

²⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of this time period, see (Cumings 1981) or (2005).

The South Korean government authorities at the time justified the massacre through claims that the Labor Party was taking direct orders from the North Koreans and the Soviets. The attempt by the Labor Party was thus viewed as an attempt to overthrow the provisional South Korean government, or at the very least, undermine its legitimacy. After the Massacre, the Rhee government suppressed most of the information surrounding it, and it was not until 2003 that the South Korean government officially apologized.²⁸ To date, however, no reparations have been paid (Dong-Choon Kim 2010).

The Jeju Massacre was the first major step in South Korea's long and continuous campaign to rid the country of the "enemy" of North Korea and communists. The irony is that communists had popular support from the populace. Suzy Kim argues that at the time of liberation from Japan, "people's committees" were organized by Koreans in order to replace Japanese forms of governance (Suzy Kim 2013). Much of the leadership of these committees were left-leaning and favored over others due in large part to the strong stance they had against colonial Japan (Cumings 2005; Lee 2009; Suh 1967). As such, communism was equated with the good fight — to overthrow the Japanese and attain Korean sovereignty. The Jeju Massacre was significant in that it was the first case of a massacre of those designated the "enemy within" (Kim 2006). Those who sympathized with the North or with communism in general were considered "subversives" and objects of eradication.

²⁸ In 2003, then-South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun officially apologized for the massacre, stating, "many innocent people of Jeju suffered many casualties and destruction of their homes" (Song 2010).

Many massacres followed the Jeju Massacre as the Southern state fought for control and domination against the North, with some estimates as high as 100,000 dead from the collective purge (Halliday and Cumings 1988). Many decades later, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Korea has found that most were victims of communist labeling, and paid with their lives (Dong-Choon Kim 2010).

The designation of the enemy as communist was fruitful for the South Korean government. Backed by the U.S., the southern state needed moral authority to legitimize its government and found its legitimacy in creating an enemy. The beginning of the Korean War in 1950 gave Rhee the tools to link the constant threat of North Korea to the foundation of South Korea, as well as the lives of its citizens. Following the Korean War and the armistice in 1953, his presidency was marked by ruthless campaigns to root out communists that led to many more massacres and the destruction of his political opponents until he was overthrown in 1960.²⁹

It is important to note that the United States had operational authority over the Korean military and police until 1949. During the Korean War, this authority reverted back, and ultimate authority of the South Korean military remains under the U.S. to the present day. Thus, the U.S. was complacent – if not the actual impetus – behind the many massacres that Rhee and future dictators carried out in the name of anti-communism (Johnson 2000). With the help of the United States, South Korea attempted to rid the country of all communist elements and construct a national identity that was in opposition to North Korea. Thus, what began as a military

²⁹ Some scholars claim that Kim Ku, a popular nationalist leader, was assassinated by orders from Rhee in 1949 (Cumings 2005).

relationship defined by “coloniality” (Paik 2000) became characterized as one in which the United States served as a benevolent “big brother” and the economic and cultural model for South Korea (Lee 2002).

The National Security Law

One of the key legal instruments that Rhee (and later South Korean leaders) used in his campaign to transform North Korea and communists as the enemy of the South was the National Security Law (NSL). Enacted in 1948, the law defined North Korea as an “anti-state organization,” and criminalized anyone who praised North Korea or questioned South Korea’s stance on issues relating to North Korea. It also made anyone who believed in communism a criminal, regardless if they took any violent action based on their beliefs. For this reason, human rights advocates dubbed these political prisoners “prisoners of conscience.”³⁰ In practice, the NSL was used to target any state opposition, on the grounds that it was sympathetic to North Korea’s interest. The law was widely used against communists in South Korea in the 1950s, against labor activists in the 1960s, and against democracy advocates in the 1970s and 1980s (Lee 2009; Won Soon Park 2004). The perceived threat of North Korea gave legitimacy to successive ruthless dictators, and stymied calls for human rights

³⁰ Amnesty International defines prisoners of conscience as “people who have been jailed because of their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, color, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other status, provided that they have neither used nor advocated violence” (<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/prisoners-and-people-at-risk/prisoners-of-conscience>).

throughout the period of South Korea's intense economic development from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Another important way in which the NSL has been used has been to stop political threats to the ruling party. One of the highest profile examples of the NSL used for political purposes was the case of Kim Dae-jung. Elected the eighth president of South Korea (1998-2003) and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000, Kim was a long-time opposition leader during military rule for decades, starting from the 1960s. He was sentenced to death, but not executed, under the NSL for allegedly fomenting rebellion in 1980 (Kraft 2006). His popular support prevented his death, and after spending years in exile living abroad, he returned to South Korea to resume his political career.

Since its inception in 1948, the NSL has been responsible for the arrests of at least 200,000 people and thousands of deaths. The reach of the NSL was not limited to South Korea – diasporic Koreans were also affected by the draconian law. Korean Americans,³¹ Korean Japanese,³² and Korean Germans³³ have all been implicated in “spy” cases under the NSL that were later proven to be fabricated (Kim 2006). These cases had the benefit of spreading fear amongst the South Korean population that

³¹ In 2001, American citizen Song Hak-sam was imprisoned for two months under the NSL (Kraft 2006), and the NSL was evoked in the deportation of Korean American author Shin Eun-mi in 2015 (Choe 2015a).

³² Suh Sung was a Korean Japanese student who studied at Seoul National University when he was accused and convicted of being the leader of a spy organization in the Zainichi Spy Incident in 1971. He was designated a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, and served 19 years in a South Korean prison (Lee 2014).

³³ Song Du-yul was a German philosophy professor who visited North Korea 18 times while living in Germany in exile. When he returned to South Korea in 2003, he was arrested and convicted for spying for the North with questionable evidence. He was released in 2004 and returned to Germany (Macintyre 2003).

communism was insidious and had a far reach. This fear of North Korea was the Other against which South Korean society defined itself.

In addition to the National Security Law, anti-communist educational campaigns in the South increased in 1961, following the popular overthrow of Rhee and the coup by the new dictator Park Chung-hee. Mandatory anti-communist education worked in conjunction with the NSL to induce fear of North Korean invasion. In elementary, middle, and high schools, there was a separate course called “Anti-Communist Ethics,” and military training in high school and universities were mandatory as well. One South Korean told me that she was taught from an early age that all North Koreans were monsters, and read cartoons with North Koreans depicted as pigs with red skins during these mandatory classes. When she met defectors for the first time as an adult, she was shocked that North Koreans didn’t have red skin, despite her rational understanding that it was not possible.

These classes gave specific instructions on how to detect and report North Korean agents. Even college students were required to take an anti-communism class in order to get their degree (Lee 2009). In the mid-1990s, air raid drills were still frequent – a city-wide siren would go off for a period of approximately one minute while traffic stopped. I was told that we were supposed to practice hiding under our desks, but everyone in my office ignored the drill. Nevertheless, it was an effective reminder of the imminent threat of North Korea. These drills, combined with reports of missile attacks or the possibility of another war with North Korea, taught South

Koreans to fear deeply anyone who was North Korean or communist. At stake was the destruction of their homes, their lives, and the nation of South Korea.

Living with Communism: Communism as a Disease

In her study of the South Korean democracy movement, Namhee Lee (2009) gives an account of a South Korean man who was sentenced to death for planning the arson of the U.S. Information Service building in Busan in 1982 as a form of protest. Rather than being concerned about the fact that he was sentenced to death, the prisoner Mun was more focused on being called a communist. He stated: “If only I could be cleared of the dishonor of being called a communist, I would be willing to forgo a final testimony” (Lee 2009:71). Mun’s testimony showed that for South Koreans, nothing was worse than being called a communist. Communism, for them, was more than an ideology; it was a viral disease that punished one long after death.

What does it mean to be a communist? The label *ppalkaengi*, or communist, literally means “one who is red.” It is a derogatory term, the ending *aengi* used for people who are engaged in disreputable types of livelihood, such as *cheomjaengi* (fortune teller) or *noreumjaengi* (gambler). It is a term of immorality and incited fear, and is not limited to the act of gambling or fortune telling, but is also read as a reflection of a person’s innate character.

Discrimination against *ppalgaengi* was not limited to jail sentences. Those who survived the massacre in Jeju can testify to the difficulties of living with the label *ppalkaengi*, which some say continue to this day. Because communism was seen

as being in the blood, not only communists but their families were tainted by birth and association. Through the *yeonjwajoe* (guilt-by-association) system, not only were “communists” punished, but their families and friends were also brought in for questioning, placed under police surveillance, and ostracized in society (Kane 2011). Ironically, the types of punishment for being a communist are similar in nature to how North Korea deals with its “capitalist” or Christian criminals.³⁴ Both North and South Korea assume that the crimes of ideology are contagious, passed along by family and environment. The idea that morality lies in kinship is a remnant of Confucian ideology, where lineage, class, and morality were linked. Those coming from high-class lineages, such as *yangban*, or scholar-elites, were assumed to be of higher moral character, partly because of their access to education (Deuchler 1967).

The belief that criminality is contagious or passed along through kinship meant that descendants of communists were seen as likely communists. In practice, the family members and friends of those who were arrested under the National Security Law were also questioned by authorities and placed under surveillance. Thus, those who were arrested by the NSL, regardless of conviction, were marked by the taint of communism. The diseased nature of communism was apparent in the case of Moon Geun-young, a popular and critically acclaimed actress in South Korea, whose grandfather was a North Korean guerrilla during the Korean War. Moon’s hometown is also Kwangju, which is a city located in a province with “leftist” leanings. Moon

³⁴ *Sŏngbun* is a system of ascribed status based on one’s “origins.” Many North Korean defectors have reported discrimination based on family histories of Christianity, politics, or criminal history (Collins 2012). Demick claims the system is a remnant of the Confucian caste system combined with Stalinism (Demick 2009).

was publicly noted for giving large sums to charitable causes. Instead of being commended for her donations, she was heavily red-baited by the public and by journalists. One critic even claimed that her donations were an attempt to “promote communism in North Korea” (Park 2008).

The idea of criminality as being contagious or transferred through contact is striking when placed in contrast with the idea of *minjok* (national people), South Korea’s brand of nationalism as based on kinship and blood. If communism (and in North Korea’s case, Christianity and capitalism) is inherited through kinship, then how can one be “cleansed” from the disease? How does the taint of communist ideology affect North Korean defectors adjusting to their new lives in South Korea? I argue that South Koreans have been in a war within, trying to purge itself of communist infiltrators or sympathizers in an unending battle that can never be won.

A Crisis of South Korean Identity

“South Korea is behind,” many South Koreans told me when I first arrived in Seoul in 1994. It was a refrain that I heard whenever I complained about small inconveniences such as the lack of toilet paper and soap in public bathrooms, or larger issues of discrimination against women and foreigners. It was used to criticize the inability of South Koreans to queue in a straight line, or to express anger over tyrannical bosses who demanded long hours and did not care about the health or well-being of their workers. It was a way to express South Korean frustration with the fast pace of life, and the ever-increasing competition that led to both adults and children

enduring 14-hour workdays. In the following years, I heard many South Koreans voice “being behind” and “undeveloped” in their criticisms of Korean “cultural traditions” such as shamanism,³⁵ squatting toilets, and government corruption. In addition to feeling economically backwards, South Koreans felt they were *culturally* backwards. But if South Koreans felt they were backwards or behind, to whom were they comparing themselves?

For the most part, South Koreans compared themselves to the United States. Much of this had to do with South Korea’s unique relationship with the country; many books used the phrase “Big Brother - Little Brother” to characterize the relationship between the two countries (Lee 2002; Young Kim 2010; Kim 2015). The impression of the United States as a benevolent big brother is due to the fact that Protestant missionaries who came to Korea at the turn of the 20th century were seen as benefactors – they brought with them education and technology in a civilizing mission that seemed charitable to Koreans (Choi 2009; Lee 2010; Wells 1991). A large part of the positive relationship with the United States, however, can be attributed to the post-Japanese colonization period and the ensuing division, when the U.S. military presence was seen as the only barrier between South Korea and attack by North Korea. This military relationship continues to the present. The United States currently has 26,500 troops in South Korea, along with 15 military bases (Hayoun 2013).

³⁵ The government banned shamanism in the 1970s. While it is socially considered a low form of fortune-telling or fraudulent spiritual activity, it is an integral part of Korean society. See the documentary *Mudang* (Park 2003) for the social implications of this ban, and (Kendall 1985); (Tangherlini 1999).

South Korean society has undeniably been influenced by the United States in its legal institutions and the economy as well. The Constitution of Korea is modeled on the U.S. Constitution, as is many of its legal institutions. Economically, South Korea has been shaped and influenced by American aid and leadership. From the 1960s, South Korea went through a series of economic development plans based on export-oriented growth that had earned it the nickname, the “miracle of the Han River.”³⁶ The tiny country of 20 million people (in 1953) rose from the literal ashes of the Korean War to become one of the four Asian Tigers with a rapidly growing economy.³⁷ While some academics argue that the “miracle” of South Korea’s transformation was due in large part to massive foreign aid grants from the United States (Woo-Cumings 1991; Toussaint 2006) and the slave-like labor of workers (Pak 2005), to South Koreans the important fact was that their country was able to surpass North Korea’s GDP by the late 1970s.³⁸

Throughout these various periods of economic growth, South Koreans were asked to sacrifice for the sake of the “nation.” Citizens endured slave-like labor conditions, moved in large numbers from the countryside to the growing megalopolis of Seoul , and obediently heeded calls for less consumption – all in the promise of future returns for a better life. Human rights suffered the most, and the country tolerated almost four decades of military dictatorships before South Koreans finally

³⁶ The phrase was borrowed from the “Miracle of the Rhine River,” used to describe West Germany’s recovery after World War II.

³⁷ The Four Asian Tigers include Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

³⁸ Because the northern part of Korea was the industrial center with natural resources, and the southern part was the “rice bowl,” North Korea’s GDP until the early 1970s was much higher than South Korea’s (Woo-Cumings 1991).

overthrew the military government in the June Uprising of 1987.³⁹ As a result of this struggle, the country held its first direct presidential elections in 16 years and a new, more democratic civil society was born (Koo 2002). It is not an exaggeration to state that all of the current major organizations in the civil and human rights movements were established in the period directly following the June Democratic Uprising. Despite gains in democracy focusing on electoral politics, the post-1987 South Korean government continued its tradition of stigmatizing any opposition by claiming they were either spies from North Korea or sympathetic to the cause of North Koreans (Katsiaficas 2012; Minns 2001).

In addition to its influence in the economy and legal institutions, the U.S. has had a great cultural impact on South Korea. American art, fashion, and popular culture enjoy a popular following by most South Koreans. Television shows and movies from the U.S. were so popular that a Korean movie quota was needed to ensure that South Korean movies were shown in theaters.⁴⁰ The cultural image produced by the United States has led South Koreans to imagine the U.S. as a place for the “good life.” Over the years, I have heard the United States described to me as the land of safety, natural beauty, less competition, and where one can live a humane life. It is a place, people have told me, that invests in its people and education, and where safety is the number one priority. Nowhere is the cultural presence of the U.S. and hopes for the good life felt as keenly as the adoption and ubiquitous presence of

³⁹ Also known as the June Democratic Uprising. Many activists from this period state that it was the closest South Korea has come to a revolution; i.e., a complete overthrow of the established military dictatorship.

⁴⁰ The quota system exists today in limited form, although South Korea’s movie industry has entered a “Golden Age” since the early 2000s (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008).

English in everyday life in South Korea. It is not only the language needed to become a part of the “global,” but the key to individual and national success.

English as a New South Korean Identity

In January 1995, Kim Young-sam, the first civilian president in 30 years, launched the *seggyewha* (globalization) campaign. The stated goal of the campaign was to make South Korea an advanced nation through financial liberalization, increased flexibility of workers, and global competitiveness (Lim 2011). There were six specific areas that were identified as in need of globalization in South Korea: education, the legal and economic system, politics and press, public administration, environment, and culture and attitudes (Kim 2000). Despite the fact that government policies mainly focused on economic deregulation, President Kim claimed from the beginning that *seggyewha* would entail “rationalizing all aspects of life,” and would be a “sweeping transformation of society” (Kim 2000:38). This transformation of society was felt most obviously in the linguistic effect of *seggyewha* – policies promoting English as the language of globalization and the key to a new South Korean identity.

Although *seggyewha* was a specific campaign initiated by Kim Young-sam, it was also a neologism and a new discourse unleashed upon South Korea with multiple meanings and uses. The abstract nature of the term *seggyewha* gave it an impressive power – a power for everyone to interpret the nature of the word itself. Virtually overnight, *seggyewha*, like culture, became a new buzzword that was used to evoke criticism of the government and South Korea’s lack of modernity and civilization –

and was as ubiquitous in everyday conversations as the flashing slogan that graced the tallest building in downtown Seoul. While the term is a translation of “globalization,” *seggyewha* was often used as a code word for the United States and other advanced countries. In fact, sociologists claim that the claim has its origins in the United States’ pressure on the Kim government to liberalize certain markets in South Korea (Kim 2000; Moon and Mo 1999). Kim promised reforms that included social safety nets and protection against disease, but the “sweeping transformation of society” was not fulfilled in government terms. Instead, South Koreans took it upon themselves to use *seggyewha* to fill the gaps they felt in society.

By far the most important effect of the *seggyewha* campaign on everyday life was on language. The Kim government instituted a new education policy that introduced English listening tests as part of the already challenging national college entrance examinations (Jin-Kyu Park 2009). This immediately impacted English instruction in middle and high schools, making a notoriously competitive college exam even more cutthroat. Soon after, the government initiated nation-wide drives to have English-only classrooms, necessitating the recruitment of an unrealistic number of qualified “native” English teachers⁴¹ in a short period of time (Shim and Park 2008).

While the promotion of English as a global competitive language had its roots in government policy changes, the way in which South Koreans embraced English

⁴¹ In practice, “native speaker” meant a white English speaker. For private institute owners, whiteness was more important than being a fluent English speaker. As a part-time English teacher in Seoul from 1995-2002, I was openly told that white English teachers were more desirable than Korean American ones, even if the teacher was French or Russian.

education was nothing short of transformative. Through English, many felt their perceived gap in “culture” could be filled. The public desire to learn English turned into a social phenomenon known as “English fever” or “English frenzy.” The scope of Koreans’ embrace of the language has been the topic of popular as well as academic attention in terms of its creation or maintenance of class distinctions, and the staggering lengths (and sums) that are used to learn it (Jin-Kyu Park 2009; Joseph Sung-Yul Park 2009; Park 2011; Park and Abelman 2004; Seth 2002; Song J.J 2011). English loan words began to saturate the language, even replacing Korean words. In my first years of learning Korean, I was repeatedly told to speak English instead of Korean, inferring that Korean was not as important as English.

It is estimated that English education brings in an annual revenue of U.S. \$10-15 billion (Ruffin 2010). The sheer amount of money that is spent by the average Korean middle-class family is staggering. While English is now a mandatory part of the public school curriculum, South Koreans spend a great deal of money on extracurricular English cram schools⁴² and private tutors (Koo 2014:201). Monthly fees for cram schools can range from U.S. \$300 to \$500 per class, and most students take at least two English classes: grammar and composition, or grammar and conversation. In my own experience teaching English conversation in the mid-1990s to students ranging from 3 to 40 years old, with the majority in middle and high school, I was paid an average of U.S. \$75 to \$100 an hour to have one-on-one conversations and correct pronunciation. In 1994, this was an immense amount of

⁴² Called *hakwŏn*, these are an extremely important part of the education system. Every student in South Korea, with few exceptions, attends a *hakwŏn* to augment their public school education.

money, and one of the most lucrative jobs I could get as a recent college graduate with little job experience and low Korean language skills. For the families of the students I tutored, that meant a minimum of U.S. \$8,000 a year per child per English class. For a family with two children, private English tutoring could run up to U.S. \$32,000 a year. In addition to expensive English cram schools and conversation classes, families regularly sent children to seasonal language programs. One scholar reported that some middle class families were paying U.S. \$1,000 to send five-year-old children to short seasonal English immersion programs (Park 2009).

While not all English learning programs were prohibitively expensive, the difficulty of finding inexpensive classes made English, for all intents and purposes, the language of the wealthy and upwardly mobile.⁴³ Since entrance to colleges depended on English, and college degrees were extremely important in getting and maintaining a white-collar job, English was not only the language of globalization but also the marker of an educated person. Fluency in English marked one as global in the eyes of other South Koreans – as a person who had the means to spend some time abroad, or someone with great intelligence and savvy to be able to learn it on their own. Yet English was more than just a tool for success, as people of all ages wanted to learn it. English classes were regularly offered to senior citizens. The attempts of people from all ages to learn English show that it was not simply a matter of upward mobility; it was about not wanting to be “behind.” Yet even those who spoke English

⁴³ Some NGOs offered English tutoring for little to no money; there were free or inexpensive online English classes available, and I and other English speakers taught English to low-income students without monetary compensation.

well expressed shame about their “bad English,” despite my repeated protests to the contrary.

In sum, when I arrived in South Korea in the mid-1990s, English, which had been a language of upward mobility since the early 1900s,⁴⁴ had begun a steep upward climb as a marker of social status and material success in South Korea — success that was and still is elusive for those without economic resources. Regardless of one’s age, economic or social status, English has come to define South Koreans in what has become a national obsession. Learning English, being able to speak English, and using English to move abroad, has become a way to access the good life that is available only in the United States. It is also the biggest linguistic barrier to North Korean adjustment to South Korean life.

Crisis of Korean “Culture”: The Backlash against the U.S. and Development

Part of the rise in English fever in South Korea had to do with the crisis in identity that South Korea faced after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. Since North Korea was seen as threatening because of the perceived military backing of the communist bloc, the loss of the largest Cold War enemy sent shockwaves to South Korea as well. As former Soviet states began to declare independence and trading blocs dissolved, politicians and scholars began to predict the downfall of North Korea (Rosen 2012). The now-weakened North Korea slowly began to lose its standing as

⁴⁴ At the beginning of the 1900s, when American missionaries began establishing schools in South Korea, poor students who were able to learn English became translators, some of whom were sponsored to study in the United States.

the evil enemy, and with this change, South Koreans began to question their own identity.

The crisis of South Korean identity was only magnified by three major successive disasters in the mid 1990s: the successive collapses of the Seongsu Bridge in October 1994 and the Sampoong Department Store in June 1995, and the Daegu Gas Explosion in April 1995. All of these “disasters” were man-made and caused by unreported or flagrant violations of safety regulations. In each case, the victims were portrayed as “innocents” – men, women, and most heartbreaking of all, children who had their lives cut short through no fault of their own. In the Seongsu Bridge Collapse, a bus taking children to school fell into the water and everyone on board was killed. In the Sampoong Department Store tragedy, young women workers in their early 20s made up the majority of the victims, and in the Daegu Gas Explosion, a busload of schoolchildren were killed. In every case, gross negligence of safety measures, combined with corruption, caused the disaster.

The Sampoong Department Store Collapse was notable for being the largest peacetime (and non-terror-related) disaster in contemporary history.⁴⁵ The collapse of the building was attributed to many causes, including the illegal development of a residential building into a department store, shoddy construction, and violation of safety protocols, which involved the bribing of government officials. The building collapse led to the death of 502 people, most of whom were part-time or irregular female employees. In the case of Sampoong Department Store, shock throughout the

⁴⁵ Until the collapse of the 2013 Savar Building in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 people.

country was multiplied by the fact that the store was located in Kangnam, a wealthy area of Seoul. The patrons and subsequent victims were the families of the upper-middle class, a class that was believed to be “safe and protected.” The Sampoong disaster made it clear that wealth could not protect anyone from the deadly side effects of development. It was equally clear that wealth was more important than saving lives: news outlets reported that when the roof first began to show signs of strain, top executives and expensive goods were evacuated from the building (Marshall 2015). In contrast, part-time or low-paid female employees of the store made up the majority of those who lost their lives. Some were the sole breadwinners of their families.

Moon (Moon 2011) argues that the Seongsu Bridge Collapse was the first “crack” in South Korean faith in speed and technology. This crack was widened with each disaster to become a chasm. The combined effects of these incidents led many South Koreans to question decades of single-minded economic development, and the ways in which South Koreans cut corners to achieve that development. It has become known as the *ppali ppali* (hurry hurry) culture – a phrase that can be heard almost daily on the streets, and felt in the pace of walking in daily life or the speed by which buildings are built and torn down (Klassen 2014).

In the midst of this “hurry hurry” culture, South Koreans occasionally reminisced fondly of the slower pace of life in the past, of extended families living together under one roof, and the communality of small village life that was no longer present in the big city. Many talked about how values such as helping one’s neighbor

and taking care of one's parents had been sacrificed in the rat race. Women were no longer staying at home to raise children, which meant that since South Korea's shift from extended to nuclear family structure, children were being raised by strangers. Added to this was South Korea's shameful past of being the biggest exporters of babies to the Western world (E. Kim 2010). Common decency and manners were disappearing, while crime and violence were on the upswing.

One particularly appalling criminal case involved a group of seven men from the countryside who called themselves the *Chijonp'a*. The *Chijonp'a* killed and cannibalized five people in 1994, and their victims were specifically chosen from the upper class. The *Chijonp'a* acquired a list of elite clientele from an upper-class department store, then proceeded to find their targets, kill them, and eat their flesh. What was even more horrifying to the South Korean public was that they did not show any remorse after they were caught. One of the members even expressed regret at not being able to kill more of the rich (Söng 2008). Unfortunately, two years later, another copycat group called the *Makkap'a* began killing those who drove expensive foreign cars. They killed nine people in 1996 before they were caught (Ch'oe 2011). The deliberate and targeted nature of these crimes turned these chilling murders, combined with the successive disasters and the economic crisis, led to a national identity crisis for the country, with many again questioning what had gone wrong in South Korea's development.

For many South Koreans, countries like the United States seemed to respect safety over profit. This respect for safety and human life came from being a

“developed” country, Koreans told me. The word for developed country, *sŏnjinkuk*, means “a country that is more advanced materially, culturally, or economically than other countries” (Naver Dictionary). The term always references a comparison. From the perspective of most South Koreans, their country was undeveloped: a *hujinkuk* (country that is behind in material or cultural development). Thus, the term “development” was used in place of civilization, and implied a hierarchy of superior and inferiority of materials (economy) and culture (society). South Koreans used the tropes of development and *seggyewha* (globalization) more generally to express their dissatisfaction with government corruption and unchecked economic growth, at the sacrifice of “civilization.” For most South Koreans, being “behind” meant being behind the West: their country (and their culture) needed to catch up.⁴⁶ For South Koreans, “development” was not only economic; it was in the realm of culture.

It is also clear that within this discourse of South Korean being “undeveloped” was a real and grounded fear of being a victim like those who died in the disasters discussed above. It was not just their lives that were at stake, however, but the everyday costs that competition was taking on people’s lives. There was a sense that there was no place for those who did not fit the mold. Kyu, a South Korean in his 40s who immigrated to Canada in 2010, told me that he thought of himself as an asylum seeker. While living in South Korea, he fought with his boss, his teachers, his friends, even taxi drivers. These fights surrounded issues of human and workers’ rights, and the inhumanness of the working and educational environment. What was frustrating

⁴⁶ These debates about modernity and development can be traced to late-20th century Enlightenment discourses (Em 2013, Wells 1990).

for him was that everyone thought he was crazy for having unrealistic expectations. Exhaustion from the stringent demands made upon everyday people led Kyu to emigrate. Sentiments like Kyu's were apparent when people talked about obligatory office dinners, working on weekends, and not having any time to spend with family or friends.

The discussion of being "behind" was perhaps most focused as a criticism of educational standards in South Korea. For example, in 1997, I taught an English reading class to high school seniors at a popular cram school in Seoul. I was surprised that it was scheduled at 11pm at night, when many of the students were sleepy and could not focus. The shocking part was that their night was not over with my class; most of those students went immediately to a late night "study room" to do their homework. Cram schools such as the one where I taught were ubiquitous in South Korea. As mentioned above, English was one of the most difficult subjects that South Korean students had to master in order to succeed in South Korea. And the pressure and strain of adjusting to a new English standard was mostly borne by students. It was not uncommon to hear students in high school staying up until 2 am studying, and then getting up at 6 am the next day to go to school. The reports show that students are getting less sleep than ever, with an average of 5.5 hours a day, affecting mood, school performance, and perhaps even suicide rates (Shim 2015). According to a survey by the Korea Herald, 70% of those in high school are sleep deprived, and most report high levels of stress relating to their grades and concerns about their future (Ock 2014).

Corruption was also rampant in schools, as there were regular reports of students cheating on their exams, teachers demanding cash or expensive gifts⁴⁷ for “helping” students, and officials selling tests to the highest bidder. At the aforementioned cram school I worked for, one of the teachers bragged to me that his friend sold him the college entrance exam test, which was why his classes, and his school, were in such high demand. With educational pressure too great to bear, parents were colluding with teachers to help their children cheat on tests. For South Koreans, it was another sign that morality and culture was being corrupted in their country.

As a direct result of the intense pressure that students experienced, along with increased incidents of violent bullying in schools, the teen suicide rate in South Korea began to rise, and is now the highest in the world. It is not limited to only teenagers; in 2005, South Korea had the highest rate of suicide in the industrialized world, a record that it holds to this day (Yoon 2015). Currently, suicides are the fourth highest cause of death in the country, with one group of academics calling it an “epidemic” since the late 1990s (Kim et al. 2010).

Certain forms of adult suicide have been considered understandable under limited circumstances in South Korea – for example, when the person brings shame to the family through an immoral or illegal act, such as going bankrupt or committing a horrendous crime. The shock of suicide has even been used as an act of fatal protest (Kim 2002). One of the reasons why the South Korean democracy movement was

⁴⁷ See Chapter 3 on gifts for a more in-depth discussion the centrality of “gifts” in business and in the workplace.

considered so successful was the mobilization of shame and guilt after the suicide of protesters. From 1970 to 1997, 88 activists committed suicide, many young college students. Those who commit suicide as an act of protest are now considered “Martyrs for Democracy” (Kim 2002). One of the most famous suicide protests was during the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Cancun, when a South Korean farmer stabbed himself in protest of trade policies. He held a sign that said, “The WTO kills farmers” as he died (Watts 2003).

In some ways, the suicide of young children and teenagers can be interpreted as a form of protest, but one that is individual in scope. However, the prevalence of suicide amongst children and teenagers is considered tragic by everyone in South Korea. As Malkki asserts in her ethnography of refugees, women and children are the ultimate victims, as they “embody a special kind of powerlessness” (Malkki 1995:11). The high suicide rates of youth in South Korea has been a cause for national shame as they are seen as symbols for the future, and their deaths are a further sign that the South Korean nation has failed in its responsibility to its citizens.

The breaking point of South Korean confidence in the nation’s fast-paced development was the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. The first shocks began in early 1997 and lasted for almost two years. Overnight, the stock market plummeted, banks began to fail, and interest rates rose with a vengeance. South Korea was forced to accept a U.S. \$55 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a result of the bailout, the crisis was known colloquially as the “IMF.” The IMF Crisis was an earthquake shock to South Koreans’ belief in development as well as to

society as a whole. Jobs that had previously been thought of as virtually guaranteed lifetime employment were suddenly destroyed with mass layoffs in both the white and blue-collar sectors. Frontline, a television show, estimated that there were 10,000 layoffs per day at the height of the crisis in February 1998. Virtually daily, newspapers reported on yet another prominent businessman who committed suicide, or on a new trend called “family suicide,” in which a recently bankrupt family member, usually the father, killed his wife, children, and then himself.

It was shortly after the economic crisis in 1997 that suicide rates began to skyrocket (Young-ha Kim 2014). Suicide rates for men rose by 94%, and for women by 124%, mostly affecting people in their 40s (Kwon, Chun, and Cho 2009). In addition to high rates for men and women hardest hit by the crisis, senior suicide rates also rose steadily to become the highest in the world. Reports on this phenomenon show that senior citizens who do not want to be a burden on their families choose to commit suicide due to the lack of feasible alternatives such as state-sponsored care. The economic crisis and the social and economic restructuring that followed, including cuts in social welfare programs, were partially responsible for high rates of suicide that continue today.

The economic crisis also marked a growing disillusionment with the United States, South Korea’s “big brother.” If the United States was the big brother, then South Korea was and would always remain the “little brother.” While in the past, the U.S. was looked upon favorably by the population as well as the government, it was believed that Kim Young-sam’s globalization campaign, which was implemented in

response to U.S. demands to deregulate the nation's banking and financial sectors, led to the financial crisis. Some critics openly blamed the United States. The crisis, along with increased publicity about unchecked and unpunished U.S. military crimes, coincided to start a popular backlash against the U.S. The backlash reached a boiling point at two different moments: in 2002 when two U.S. soldiers responsible for the accidental killing of two high school girls were acquitted; and in 2008 when millions took to the streets in protest against U.S. imported beef believed to be tainted with bovine spongiform encephalopathy, otherwise known as mad cow disease. As one reporter asserted, the protests had as much to do with tainted beef as with distrust of a once-important ally (Borowiec 2012). Protests continue today about the building of new U.S. bases, particularly around Pyeongtaek and Jeju Island. Thus, while the shift from the U.S. as a vital ally to one in which North Korea became the long-lost brother or future wife of the South Korean nation was an instance of "defensive domesticity" (Herzfeld 2004), the switch could also be characterized as a "remasculinization" of South Korean identity through the act of feminizing North Korea (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008).

In sum, the fall of the Soviet Union, the combination of the three successive disasters and the 1997 economic crisis led to great disillusionment with a speedy development process that did not value human life over profit. The sacrifices that many South Koreans made to contribute to the growth of the economy had not brought about a better quality of life for everyday citizens. South Koreans thus latched onto the idea of "culture" as the culprit of the myriad ills of society. For many

segments of South Korean society, the problem of “culture” was the popular national obsession with the United States and English. Moreover, the image of the United States, the model of South Korea’s cultural and economic development, began to shift from ally to abusive older brother. Like the traditional tile-roofed *hanok* buildings that were razed to accommodate western style apartments and skyscrapers, there was a sense that South Korea had lost its sense of self and tradition. The sense of loss was soon to be filled by a new discourse on North Korea. The cumulative effect of the major disasters that led to a desire for change was directly responsible for the surprise election of long-time opposition leader Kim Dae-jung in December of 1997. His presidency would mark a change in South Korean discourse about North Korea that was symbolized by the intimacy between the strong Southern man and the submissive Northern woman. This new intimacy between North and South would result in the birth of a new nation.

Domesticating the Uncanny: Namnampuknyŏ

North Korea occupies a complicated place in the South Korean imaginary. North Korea is seen as both a place of evil and menace, and tradition and Korean purity. In this section, I argue that discourses about North Korea and unification shifted dramatically with the election of Kim Dae-jung and his Sunshine Policy of engagement with North Korea. This shift was a form of defensive domesticity: what Herzfeld defines as the effort of a government “to try to co-opt the language of intimacy for its utilitarian ends of commanding loyalty under what seems to be the

most unpropitious conditions” (Herzfeld 2004:4). I argue that the South Korean government used a new discourse on North Korea to shift attention away from the economic and cultural crisis of South Korea, but also in response to the changing conditions of a world order no longer dominated by the Cold War. The new language of domesticity came in the form of the joining of the ideal couple: a beautiful and pure North Korean woman in need of a strong South Korean man. I argue that this defensive domesticity laid the groundwork for the project of domestication that came later with North Korean defectors.

Kim Dae-jung, known as the “Nelson Mandela of Korea,” was a long-time opposition leader who was imprisoned, kidnapped, sentenced to death, and lived abroad in exile. Due in part to the disillusionment of South Koreans recovering from a series of national disasters, and facing a looming economic crisis, Kim was finally elected president in 1997 in a close and divisive race. His election was also considered a massive victory for his hometown region of Cholla, which has faced discrimination because of its history of resistance against ruling powers. This history of discrimination was compounded by the experience of the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, when a brutal suppression of democracy activists by the government turned into a massacre of over 2,000 people. The uprising compounded historical discrimination against the region, and it suffered economically and politically as a region of “communists” (Shin & Hwang 2003). Kim himself was often called a communist during his many years as an opposition leader, an epithet that continues today.

Kim's presidency marked a new interest in and exposure to North Korea, one that took some national attention and despair from the pain of the economic crisis. Kim's Sunshine Policy sought to "lay the foundation for peaceful Korean unification by breaking the vicious cycle of negative, hostile actions and reactions through peaceful coexistence and peaceful exchanges and cooperation" (Kwon 2014). One of the hallmark acts of the policy was to establish the first Inter-Korean Summit in June 2000, during which Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il, the respective leaders of North and South Korea, met and agreed upon key issues such as future family reunions, economic and cultural cooperation, and the building of mutual trust to move toward unification.⁴⁸

The summit coincided with the beginning of massive food and economic aid to North Korea.⁴⁹ North Korea desperately needed this aid, as they were undergoing a period of great famine called the Arduous March. The famine would continue to devastate the country over the next few years and led to the on-going migration of North Koreans to South Korea. Critics of the Sunshine Policy claimed that Kim had "bought" the Summit through promises of food and economic aid that was later substantiated in the so-called Cash-for-Summit Scandal of 2003. However, before the scandal erupted, in 2002 South Korean investments funded the construction of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in North Korea so that companies could take advantage of cheap North Korean labor. The establishment of KIC necessitated

⁴⁸ Kim's role in orchestrating the summit would lead him to win the Nobel Peace Prize the same year.

⁴⁹ It was also revealed in 2003 that the South Korean government paid 2 trillion won (U.S. \$1.7 billion) to North Korea to attend the summit in what became known as the Cash for Summit Scandal (Lee 2003).

regular visits to North Korea by the managers of these companies, in addition to other opportunities for politicians, economists, and the media to visit through state-sanctioned events. A surprising number of people I knew, including two journalists in my extended family, visited North Korea for one or more of these events.

In addition to economic and political events, there were opportunities for South Korean civilians to go to North Korea. During Kim's administration, tours for South Koreans to Mt. Kumkang in North Korea commenced in 1998, enabling South Koreans to visit North Korea legally for the first time. Between 1998 and 2000, 16,019 South Koreans visited North Korea, six times the number who visited between 1989 and 1997 (Suk Young Kim 2007). Although the tours were later heavily criticized as less economic exchange than economic aid, for many years it was a popular gift destination for older South Koreans who had nostalgia for the north or family ties to there, despite the limited scope of the tours. In 2007, one-day tours to Kaesong, the ancient capital of Korea, commenced, and took Southerners by bus across the border the short distance into North Korea.⁵⁰

The effectiveness of the Sunshine Policy in shifting popular discourse speaks to the fragility of the categories of enemy and family. The shift was also able to give South Koreans hope for the future, but also resolved the perceived problem of South Korean "culture." The new discourse of North Korea can be seen through the lens of what Chatterjee calls the two parts of post-colonial nations: the "material" and the "spiritual" domains (Chatterjee 1997). The "material" domain is the outer or public

⁵⁰ The distance between Seoul and Kaesong is less than 54 kilometers, or 36 miles.

sphere, encompassing social institutions and practices, and the “spiritual” or inner domain is the realm of culture and national consciousness. While the material domain may contain similarities to Western institutions, the spiritual domain is the domain of “tradition,” untainted by Western thought. It is within the inner realm of the “spiritual” that the nation is imagined into existence, and this represents the essence of the nation. In South Korea’s case, social and legal institutions were created to mimic the United States. But many South Koreans had begun to feel the loss of “tradition” – a space that North Korea could fill.

Namnampuknyŏ is an old Korean proverb that means “a Southern man and a Northern woman make the best couple.” In a national reformulation of this idealized marriage, South Korea could recover its Koreanness and achieve the good life that it was seeking. Revived during this period, the phrase had a double meaning for unification: the technology and economic resources of the South, combined with the purity and tradition of the North, held the potential to create a new, unified, and strong nation. By domesticating the image of evil North Korea and changing it into the image of a malleable, and submissive woman, South Korea could find the perfect partner to recover their roots lost through its embrace of the United States and English, and “remasculinize” the South (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008).

The image of the submissive Northern female was not limited to state policy – it also began to permeate mass culture. Notable movies about North Korea included the blockbusters *Swiri* (Kang 1999) and *J.S.A.: Joint Security Area* (Park 2000). *Swiri* was the first movie to deal with the issue of unification, and was the highest grossing

film in South Korea at the time. The film dealt with the love between a North Korean spy and her South Korean intelligence officer fiancé. The following year, *Swiri*'s box office record was replaced by *J.S.A.*, a mystery involving DMZ guards from North and South Korea who strike up a clandestine friendship. One film critic called it “the first film to defuse the stereotype of North Koreans as South Korea’s less-than-friendly Other” (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008). One scene from *J.S.A.* was particularly poignant, and was discussed often through the period following its opening. In the film, the guards would meet and exchange food products, cigarettes, and music in the evenings. North Korean guards, upon hearing the music of a famous South Korean folk singer for the first time, states, “Why did he have to die so young?” This line evoked a burst of sad laughter from the South Korean audience when I watched *J.S.A.* in the theater. It was a thought almost universally shared by South Koreans, and the line in the movie was extremely effective in establishing how similar North Koreans could be *in sentiment*. Both movies were pivotal in humanizing the people of North Korea, and seeing Koreans from both sides as helpless victims of geopolitics.

The theme of the possibility of unification, expressed through North-South romance, was further explored in movies such as *Love Impossible* (Jung 2003), *Spy Girl* (Han-jun Park 2004), and *North Korean Guys* (Ahn 2003). As with the blockbusters *Swiri* and *J.S.A.*, these movies were also extremely popular. The theme of *namnampuknyŏ* (Southern man and Northern woman), the original Korean title of *Love Impossible*, was present through most of the new movies on North Korea. Two of the three early romances, and many more to follow, featured South Korean male

and North Korean female protagonists who overcome cultural differences to fall in love. A total of 20 feature films on the theme of North Korea were made between 2000-2007. These films helped shift North Korea from a list of “fictive villains” into humane people, and sparked a commercial fad for North Korean dialects and North Korean restaurants, a trend that quickly passed (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008).

The drastic shift in public discourse on North Korea, however, was more than merely movies and elements of “foreign” policy. In many ways, it felt like the entire country was released from a burden they did not know they carried. When I visited Seoul in July 2000, a month after the summit, I was shocked to find people openly discussing North Korea for the first time. North Korean products, the owning of which might have warranted an arrest under the NSL in another time period, were sold in specialty stores in Seoul, and I had my first taste of North Korean soju (rice liquor) at a political event that summer. There was hope for the future of unification, and I cried with millions of South Koreans as we watched the televised reunion of North and South Korean families in August of that year. The first family reunion in 55 years was followed by 15 more reunions during the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and his closely allied successor Roh Mu-hyun.

Some could argue that Kim’s Sunshine Policy and the resultant cultural changes were drastically *new*. However, the evidence points to a longing for unification that has never been fully quieted, despite the best efforts of oppressive governments. Korean division was imagined as the division of ten million families (Grinker 2000; Kim 1988). These separated family members, and North Korean

refugees from the war, are those who desperately want to return to their homeland. It is also an extremely conservative population that was most affected by anti-communist education in the South. Ironically, they were the least likely to vote for Kim and his biggest critics, as their goal is unification through absorption of the North. For these groups, North Korea is the hated enemy, and the “foreign” element of communism must be eradicated in order for Korea to return to its natural state.⁵¹

Others, however, wanted to see unification on more equal terms, and these efforts for balanced unification were initiated by citizens. Some of the most famous NSL cases were precisely about unification. The case of Lim Su-kyung, dubbed the “Flower of Reunification,” was based on illegal contact with North Korea in 1989. As a representative of the student organization *Chondaehyup*,⁵² Lim attended the World Federation for Democratic Youth Festival held in Pyongyang. Upon her return to Seoul, she was arrested under the NSL and sentenced to five years in jail before being pardoned by special amnesty by Kim’s administration.

Another high profile case of the NSL surrounded Reverend Moon Ik-whan, a Protestant independence activist under Japanese occupation. After liberation, his independence activities shifted to opposing the successive dictatorships and promoting democracy, and he was jailed 10 times under the NSL. His most publicized arrest was when he traveled to North Korea in 1989 to discuss unification

⁵¹ See my discussion of Korean Christian *silhyangmin* in Chapter 3.

⁵² The massive and influential student organization was branded a pro-North organization and hunted by the South Korean intelligence officials for many years, during which the student leaders went into hiding. In 1995, the organization was officially disbanded.

and religion with North Koreans. He was also eventually released by special amnesty during Kim's administration.

There are many such cases of South Korean citizens reading about, discussing, or promoting unification in settings outside the control of the state. Some of the so-called "prisoners of conscience" were those who could not wait for unification, and went to North Korea on their own to visit family members in the North. Others who discussed North Korean ideology were arrested for "fomenting rebellion." The thread connecting these numerous cases is citizen effort: they were all initiated by private individuals and groups who longed for unification and so pursued it outside the parameters of state control. Thus, they were criminalized and seen as subversive for the larger population. The shift in the Kim administration toward the north, then, was that the sentiment around unification and North Korea had swung from danger into desire. During the Kim administration and subsequent Roh administration, the number of NSL cases decreased dramatically, and many of the most egregious NSL abuse cases were given amnesty.⁵³ In this new environment of openness and hope about North Korea, not only was it possible to discuss North Korea without fear, but also many common citizens were able to travel and see North Korea for themselves. Thus to many South Koreans, the shift in categorization of North Koreans as victims was a welcome one.

⁵³ Unfortunately, not as many political prisoners were amnestied as expected by human rights groups. Kim bowed to opposition by conservative politicians, and human rights watchers were disappointed by what they saw as his lack of courage.

The civilian tours of Mt. Kumkang, especially, were seen as a “symbol of Korean solidarity” and the only way that average South Koreans could see North Korea other than waiting endlessly for an official reunion. During the period that the tours were running from 1998 to 2008, over two million South Koreans visited the mountain (Kyung Hyun Kim 2008). At the time, the tour was a popular gift for parents for birthdays or New Year’s. Average South Koreans who travelled to Mt. Kumkang were amazed by the beauty of the land, serene and untouched by tourism, in contrast to South Korean destinations that were often overcrowded and filled with motels, with disregard for the environment. In addition to the land, the media reported on the beauty and graciousness of North Korean women. Unlike modern (and “too feminist”) South Korean women, they were “traditional” and deferential to men, and their beauty was touted as untouched by plastic surgery that is so common in South Korea. Unfortunately, the popular tours were stopped when a South Korean tourist was killed by a North Korean soldier in a bizarre incident.⁵⁴

If South Koreans felt that decades of unbridled development had resulted in losing their “culture,” then the ideology of *namnampuknyŏ* was the perfect solution to its crisis. With new information about North Korea coming through the media everyday, South Koreans openly marveled at what North Korea had managed to preserve. North Korean isolation, which was ridiculed by the press worldwide, had resulted in the preservation of the Korean language in a form that was virtually untouched since Japanese colonization. While South Koreans had transliterated and

⁵⁴ A South Korean female tourist was shot and killed by a Northern soldier for wandering into a restricted military zone.

absorbed English words into their language, North Koreans created new words using Korean. One example is that South Koreans use the transliterated word “juice,” while North Koreans use a term that translates to “sweet fruit water.”⁵⁵ The implication was that North Korea held on to their pride at being Korean, while South Koreans had blindly followed the United States.

In sum, Kim’s Sunshine Policy was seen as both shining a light onto North Korea as well as bringing hope for unification that would solve the development side effects present in the national disasters mentioned above. Economically, North Korea could provide cheap labor for South Korean companies. But North Korea also represented a return to tradition and emphasis on “family” that South Koreans had lost with the development of nuclear families, working women, and declining birth rates. Finally, some secretly admired the ability of the North to be “independent” and free from the influence of the outside world. The new discourse on North Korea emphasized a true Korean spirit and a pride in Koreanness that South Koreans had lost through division. The new vision was of a marriage of the best of both worlds to bring about the ideal nation.

The Uncanny Enemy or Long-Lost Family?

In theory, and as part of public and state discourse, defectors are “Korean,” or part of the “we” of Koreans. The Ministry of Unification handles all administrative matters relating to North Korean defectors. In contrast, matters relating to overseas

⁵⁵ See (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/11/korean-peoples-comprehensive-dictionary>) for more examples.

Koreans are part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is clear that legally and theoretically, North Koreans are considered part of the same nation; they speak the same language and share the same culture. Despite the shift in state policies and public discourse in the late 1990s, North Koreans have not, for the most part, been warmly welcomed into the family of South Korea. Both North and South Koreans question whether they can ever be truly South Korean citizens, as it says on their legal papers.

Despite the rhetoric that North Koreans could easily blend into South Korean society, the reality was much different. On the realm of the sheer physical, defectors were often distinct from the average South Korean. While they may be of the same *minjok*, defectors have regional accents that mark them as different. Older adults from the farthest North were on average darker, shorter, and thinner than Seoul residents, revealing their rural origins and lack of abundant food. Younger defectors who experienced the worst effects of the famine while undergoing puberty were significantly shorter and smaller than their well-fed Southern counterparts. Most of the North Korean college students I met in while doing fieldwork were very insecure about their height, and North Koreans were susceptible to schemes that promised to help them become taller. The difference in height was more of a disadvantage for men, since women were able to wear high-heeled shoes to make up some of the difference.

Most importantly, defectors were lacking in the most important linguistic arena in South Korea – knowledge of English. Since English use, as described earlier

in this chapter, was so widespread, defectors were at a severe disadvantage compared to South Koreans who now learn English from primary school. English and transliterated English was everywhere, from signs to menus to manuals on how to use your cell phone. The inability of defectors to understand English was one major marker of difference. For North Koreans who were already “behind” in education due to the breakdown of infrastructures in the farthest Northern region, English seemed an impossible language to master. Since most defectors lived in the lowest socio-economic spaces of South Korea, private English education was outside their means. As a result, many aid organizations offered free English classes to help them “catch up.” With the exception of the linguistically gifted, many defectors stated that English was the hardest part of their adjustment to South Korea.

Most defectors with slight regional accents or other discernable features pretend they are Korean Chinese. Their visibility in schools and workplaces is a negative one. The most important reason that North Koreans hide their identity is that they have the shared experience of being accused of being a North Korean spy. One of my interlocutors admitted to being called a spy by a taxi cab driver; another was called a spy by a person she met at a computer class. Newly arrived defectors learned quickly not to broadcast their status because of the high degree of suspicion they were met with. If not direct accusations of being spies, defectors were subject to uncomfortable questions about the “insanity” of the government or embarrassing questions about North Korean society. Overall, the level of attention is often unbearable for North Koreans. One high school defector came out to her fellow

students on the first day of school. The kids followed her home, wanting to see where she lived, but would not go inside her home. “I felt like an animal in a zoo,” she sighed.

Those defectors who can blend in often choose to hide their identity. Of the informants I knew, there were very few who were “out” to the people around them. The majority was open to varying degrees – if the situation arose, they would tell someone in confidence that they were defectors. Others hid their identities to the extreme, only out in spaces that required them to reveal their origins, such as churches, aid organizations, or workplaces. Defectors who arrived in South Korea at a very young age were the most likely to pretend they were South Korean – their youth meant that they could easily adjust to the new accent, attain cultural and technological fluency, and physical markers of South Koreanness. Those who were most successful at being South Korean paid a high price. One young student I met said he could never invite his friends to his home, because his mother was too obviously different, and lived with the stress of having his origins revealed. The psychological toll of “passing” as South Korean has been the source of teen depression and even suicide amongst North Korean defectors, prompting one organization to start a “coming out” campaign to encourage defectors to reveal their identities.

For the majority of North Koreans who cannot hide their origins, the Chinese community offers them a “home” in South Korea. Many of them spoke Mandarin fluently, a result of staying in China for many years. Some confessed they would return to China if they had a choice. China was where many defectors met people

who generously gave to them and did not judge them for their communist origins, they told me. It was a place where North Koreans felt they could, for a moment, not be defectors. “I can be anonymous in China,” one defector confessed to me when I asked why she wanted to return there.

For North Korean defectors who were tired of being seen as the uncanny enemy, being with *oegukin*, or [white] western foreigners, was a comfortable alternative. Most foreigners, particularly those from the United States or Europe, did not assume they were spies. Thus, while North Koreans were strangers, they were desirable and interesting strangers. Many of these Westerners, most from the United States, worked in advocacy for North Korean human rights, or were reporters on issues relating to North Korea. Some of these foreigners have now built their careers by publishing books or advocating for their North Korean friends. Some, like myself, came with the intent to conduct research. At times, the intentions of the foreigners lined up with the ambitions of the North Koreans themselves — to recreate themselves through witnessing or writing books about their lives, with the goal of living abroad (in the West) and living “the good life” they imagined when watching South Korean dramas in North Korea. For defectors, the West was imagined as a place where their pursuit of the good life was unfettered by the contamination of Korean communism.

Rooted Cosmopolitans

This chapter has argued that a shift in public discourse around North Korea and communism happened in the late 1990s, mainly through Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy and the "defensive domestication" (Herzfeld 2004) of North Korea from the uncanny stranger into the "we" of Korea. Yet the policies of the South Korean state to domesticate North Korea was by nature incomplete. It was the first and most important step in changing the discourse, but the work of embracing North Korean defectors was one that average South Koreans were not willing to take on. Instead, the work of domestication happened on a day-to-day level between North Korean defectors and South Korean Christian aid workers. In the next chapters, I discuss how South Korean aid workers attempted to domesticate North Koreans through the giving of gifts in order to convert them to Christianity and bring them into the "family" of Korean Protestantism. As my dissertation will show, one important barrier to complete domestication was the willingness or consent of the objects of domestication.

Contrary to the idea that South Korea might be moving away from the United States by moving towards unification, I believe that at least the Protestant Christians involved in defector aid see the domestication of North Korean defectors, and future unification, as the path to becoming an advanced country. Appiah calls this "rooted cosmopolitanism" (Appiah 1997), or what Hannerz called "being at home in the world" (Hannerz 2005:210). It was a sense that becoming more rooted to a sense of Koreanness, that Korea could solve the problem of culture and finally join the ranks

of the advanced and culturally civilized countries. The move towards cosmopolitanism through the domestication and integration of the North can be seen in the practices of South Korean Protestants who worked with overseas Christians and human rights groups in a project to work for the downfall of North Korea.

The Sunshine Policy lasted throughout Roh's administration, but was abruptly reversed with the election of Lee Myung-bak. One of his first acts was to call the period of the Sunshine Policy the "lost decade" of North-South relations, and put a hold on all aid to North Korea. While much of these funds were channeled to defector aid, his actions had the intention of shifting discourse back to North Korea as the enemy. The success of his discourse can be seen in the decline of interest in unification and a quick upswing of NSL cases in South Korea, a trend that continues with force in the administration of Park Geun-hye, Lee's successor and daughter of ex-dictator Park Chung-hee.

Despite the resurgence of anti-communist rhetoric and policy in the past few years, the discourse of *namnampuknyŏ* has been unleashed in society and moving in unexpected ways. New television shows include *Now On My Way to Meet You*, a popular variety show featuring a dozen young North Korean women, a South Korean male and female host, along with a panel of four South Korean male entertainers. The show covers various topics such as North Korean children's games or songs, with flirting between the Southern men and Northern women, and ends with a tear-jerking story by a defector about his/her journey to South Korea (Channel A 2011). Recently, the format changed with the ending story highlighting a successful defector. Epstein

and Green (Epstein and Green 2013) argue that despite the show's intention to break down barriers between North and South, it inevitably represents North Korea as Others. Yet I would argue that the presence of media programming creating empathy with North Koreans is, at the very least, preventing a resurgence of fear of North Koreans as the evil enemy. Regardless of how the image of North Korea is promoted by the current government, one thing is clear: the shift of the image of North Korea as enemy to victim in the late 1990s, and the attempted move from victim to enemy again ten years later, shows the fragility and absurdity of the category.

I have argued that South Korea's relationship with North Korea can be seen through the lens of the uncanny. North Koreans were constructed as enemies throughout the Cold War while the United States was seen as the "big brother." After the fall of the Soviet Union and a number of national disasters, South Korea underwent a crisis of national identity. With the Sunshine Policy, North Korea was re-cast as feminine victims in need of saving by South Korean masculinity in the national imagination. A shift in discourse on North Korea from evil empire to victims in need of aid was a crucial first step in the process of domesticating North Korean defectors who began entering South Korea in the mid 1990s. Due to the lasting vestiges of state education that taught communism was a communicable disease, South Korean Protestants have taken upon themselves the practical work of domestication in their project of North Korean Mission. If communism is a disease that is passed through family, as many South Koreans have been taught in the past, then how can defectors ever be truly South Korean? What features define successful

adjustment to South Korea? How can North Korean defectors be domesticated in everyday practices? In the following chapter, I show the process of domestication that happens through Protestant aid and conversion of North Korean defectors, in an attempt to cleanse the danger of North Koreanness through the love of a Protestant God.

Chapter 3

Unification and the Charismatic Gift: Protestant Aid to North Korean Defectors

“North Koreans are a gift from God given for unification,” explained a church staff member to a group of prospective South Korean congregation members at Peace Church. Their successful assimilation into South Korean society, the staffer continued, is a test case for unification. He implied that because God had given South Koreans the gift, they needed to reciprocate it by giving back to North Korean defectors.

At the time of my fieldwork, South Korean Protestant aid made up the vast majority of non-governmental aid to North Korean defectors. Institutional Protestant aid came in the form of cash, material goods, jobs, and educational support in the forms of alternative schools and volunteer tutors. Moreover, individuals gave directly to defectors in informal ways — gifts of food, money, and clothing were extremely common. Despite an immense amount of giving to defectors, however, both North and South Koreans were resentful of one another in their gift relationship.

In this chapter, I argue that the conflict between North and South Koreans has to do with their different ideas of the gift. South Koreans were taught to return the gift given by God (defectors) in the form of a spiritual gift relationship, the purpose of which is the downfall of North Korea. In order to “return” the gift, South Koreans needed to engage in a project of domesticating North Koreans: by converting them and turning them into God’s Warriors. They enticed North Koreans to the church

through promises of the good life that awaited them if they allied themselves with the Christian church. Without understanding the project of North Korean Mission and their role, defectors were given the “gift” of domestication; that is, South Korean Protestants felt they were giving defectors the means to rid themselves of the “bad” elements of North Korea that South Koreans found undesirable. Further, when church attendance did not result in close relationships with South Koreans or the good life, North Koreans felt a sense of resentment.

I begin this chapter with an overview of my field site, Peace Church, and discuss the gifts that were given to North Korean defectors, as well as how they were given. Next, I situate the gifts given in the context of a pervasive gift-giving culture in South Korea,⁵⁶ and assert that gifts given by South Koreans to North Koreans were charismatic gifts: gifts given to and reciprocated by God (Coleman 2004). The gift relationship had to be explicitly taught to South Koreans: the church instructed them to give to North Korean defectors as part of the North Korean Mission, a political and spiritual project working for the downfall and Christian takeover of North Korea. Divergently, North Koreans looked upon the gift relationship with South Koreans as *kibok* (prosperity gospel) that came with a promise of a middle class life that contrasted against the harsh economic reality of their lives. Finally, I examine expectations of reciprocation on both sides, and how North and South Koreans attempted to resolve the dissonance of two different ideas of the gift.

⁵⁶ While gift-giving culture is also pervasive in North Korea, the specific ways it manifests are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

From Margins to the Center: Situating Peace Church

Hanna⁵⁷ was a college student in her early 30s at the time of my fieldwork. Petite in height and build, she looked much younger than her age. She attended a prestigious college in Seoul, and was a very bright and resourceful woman who had been attending church for several years. We bonded over our shared love of hiking and travel, and I occasionally gave her English lessons. Like many North Korean defectors, Hanna lived on the economic, social and spatial margins of South Korean society. Her government-subsidized apartment was near one of a handful of remaining industrial areas in Seoul, which means that the neighborhood was dusty and depressed – one of the few remnants of the 80s. There were no modern, air-conditioned 7-Elevens or FamilyMarts⁵⁸ that were ubiquitous in other parts of Seoul. Instead, there were a plethora of family-owned businesses and open-air fruit and vegetable markets boasting cheap produce.

To get to Peace Church on Sundays, Hanna would travel over an hour to a vastly different world. The contrast between her residence and her destination in Kangnam was visually and audibly different. Her home was located on subway line #2, one of the oldest routes in Seoul, and the socio-economic status of its ridership was reflective of the age; riders were predominantly lower-income people who plodded through endless stairs and dirty walls to take this line. When Hanna transferred to the brand-new express train, the change was almost shocking: there were escalators everywhere, drip-coffee vending machines, and automated electronic

⁵⁷ All names are pseudonyms.

⁵⁸ A convenience store similar to 7-Eleven.

transportation card swipers replaced outdated analog ones. This express train would take Hanna to her destination, Kangnam, one of the most popular and affluent shopping centers in Seoul.⁵⁹

This was the Seoul that is featured in almost every news report about Korea – crowded, fast-paced, and filled with neon lights, expensive restaurants, and beautifully-dressed people. Flanked by three subway lines and hundreds of buses, Kangnam is arguably the most transportation-friendly area in all of Seoul: it has three subway stops within a ten-minute walking distance. It is also one of the most chaotic, with shops blaring loud music and ultra-crowded streets. Peace Church lies in the heart of the district, one of a number of megachurches in Seoul.⁶⁰ As is common for megachurches, the church is not housed in a single structure, but a complex of buildings that spread over a large area. Every Sunday, church buses shuttle people from nearby apartment complexes, and volunteers in fluorescent vests direct cars to nearby parking lots and control pedestrian traffic. With a purported congregation of 100,000, the number of people attending the church was one indication of the economic and political power that the church held in South Korean society. Some of the church leadership were CEOs of large companies, and the head pastor was one of a few church representatives asked to participate in a special Easter ceremony

⁵⁹ This neighborhood was popularized by the singer Psy in the international hit song, “Kangnam Style.”

⁶⁰ The Hartford Institute for Religious Studies defines a megachurch as a Protestant church with more than 2,000 members who regularly attend worship service (<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>).

sponsored by the government during Lee Myung-bak's presidency.⁶¹ While Korea was historically Buddhist or shamanistic, Christianity has become one of the most important religions in South Korea, making up 31.6 percent of the population in 2010, and Protestants, the most highly educated, making up the great majority of that number.

In contrast to the impersonal and anonymous nature of the main service, the North Korean Ministry was housed in a small back alley about a ten-minute walk from the main chapel. Each Sunday, approximately 250 people crowded into a small, semi-circular room in a basement separated by pillars and filled with folding chairs. Despite the best efforts of the church staff to mix the two groups, the room was divided by age, origin, and class — older and well-dressed South Koreans tended to sit to the right of the stage. Their class status was evident in their flashy jewelry and designer handbags, and it was not uncommon to see South Korean congregation members wearing furs in the middle of cold winters. North Koreans, in contrast, tended to be younger and more casually-dressed, and less well-groomed in general. Even the younger South Koreans who were mostly Bible study leaders were marked by their middle-class life — subdued but expertly applied makeup, nicely groomed and clean-cut hair, and expensive and well-fitted clothing. For North Korean defectors like Hanna, going to Peace Church was literally and figuratively traveling from the margins to the center of Seoul life.

⁶¹ Before becoming the mayor of Seoul and later president of South Korea, Lee Myung-Bak was and continues to be a deacon at his megachurch in Seoul. His presidency has been marked by a series of scandals surrounding his unbridled favoritism to Protestants and Protestant churches.

Gifts to North Koreans

At the time of my fieldwork, the giving of gifts by Protestants began in China for some defectors, but for the majority started in *Hanawŏn*⁶² and continued through the early years of settlement. Outside of state settlement funds and housing, the majority of aid to defectors came directly from Protestant churches. Among the first gifts given to those who graduated *Hanawŏn* were a rice cooker, blankets, and some basic household items. They were given by a Protestant coalition for defector aid, and Peace Church was part of this coalition.

At Peace Church, North Korean defectors were additionally given a wide variety of gifts for holidays and special occasions, and as rewards for participating in trainings or Bible study. The most common form of gift was the giving of cash “scholarships” in exchange for church attendance. While the amounts varied from church to church, the North Korean Ministry at Peace Church gave each qualified defector 200,000 won (approximately U.S. \$200) a month, the sum equal to a typical part-time job for a student. In addition to attendance scholarships, the church provided academic tutors through their fledgling alternative school,⁶³ and paid for tuition at expensive academic institutes where defectors could learn English, prepare

⁶² *Hanawŏn* is used interchangeably to mean the 3-month adjustment program that is mandatory for all new defectors arriving in South Korea and the physical location of the program.

⁶³ At the time of my fieldwork, the school was in essence a one-on-one tutorial program to help defectors pass their high school equivalency exam or receive tutoring assistance in college topics. Soon after my fieldwork concluded, an official school with a dormitory was established.

for important tests, or improve their reading and writing skills.⁶⁴ The church also provided wedding gifts, hospital care, and emergency funds to defectors who were part of the congregation. During major holidays, defectors were given gifts through the church as well. Much of the gift-giving was on a case-by-case basis, and were considered a part of the overall work of “caring” for the congregation. More attention and gifts were given to defectors who were showing signs of “true faith” or transformation.

One of the most sought-after rewards available to defectors was the gift of travel. The North Korean Mission sponsored regular mission trips abroad for the congregation during major vacation periods. While I conducted fieldwork at the church, destinations included Indonesia, Russia, and China. These trips, while low in cost compared to tourist travel, still involved substantial amounts of money due to the high price of airfare. A mission trip to Russia, for example, cost two million won at the time (approximately U.S. \$2,000). South Koreans were required to pay the full costs, perhaps even subsidizing defectors, while North Koreans who had “proven their faith” through regular church attendance and special “trainings” could get full scholarships. Economically disadvantaged North Koreans, particularly those in college, had few opportunities to travel abroad (with the exception of a handful of defectors involved in giving testimony for human rights organizations). Because travel, particularly to an English-speaking country, is an important marker of a

⁶⁴ South Koreans use *hanja* (Chinese characters) in addition to *hangul* (simplified Korean script) in their writing, while North Koreans only use *hangul*. For any defector going to college or reading a newspaper, it was essential that they learn *hanja*, as it is used in most academic and legal writing.

middle-class cosmopolitan lifestyle in South Korea, mission trips through churches were often coveted opportunities for average North Koreans to go abroad, a crucial step to joining the ranks of globalized South Koreans.

The giving of gifts to North Koreans was orchestrated carefully in a system of discipline and reward that encouraged conversion to Christianity. The giving of gifts also blurred the line between institutional and personal gift-giving. While some individuals gave gifts directly to North Korean defectors (for example, buying individual presents or meals), most of the giving was funneled through the institution of the church, and happened behind the scenes. The church staff carefully controlled the ways in which gifts were distributed, thus obscuring what was given personally. For example, unlike all other churches I have attended over the years, there was no collection plate passed around the congregation; rather, donation boxes were discreetly set up at the back of the chapel. Instead of being openly collected, funds were collected through back channels. The majority of funds for the Ministry, I was told, came from the Peace Church central administration, particularly those used for scholarships. At various times, special collections would occur for specific purposes, such as emergencies, but would happen behind closed doors through the South Korean church membership. Since many in the North Korean Ministry leadership were wealthy older deacons, I assumed that the collection of funds happened through their largess. Individual recognition, however, was eschewed in favor of thanks given openly and often to God. Even a given congregation member's personal wealth, gifts, and money were attributed to being given by God.

I was a member of the congregation for a year, but rarely saw people giving gifts openly or heard money being discussed, unless it was to mention different payment structures for South and North Koreans. There were a few collective gifts where money was collected equally among the participants, such as birthday gifts, and the collection of funds happened through personal communication with the Bible study leader. Smaller gifts such as presents for major holidays or weddings were given openly, but without discussing who contributed. Money for church attendance was not given in public; it was given discreetly to defectors through bank transfers and rarely openly discussed. As it was a common practice to give scholarships for attendance, I was only able to confirm the giving when I asked.

Additionally, the North Korean Ministry maintained a strict division between givers and receivers. Older wealthier deacons were in charge of a few Bible study groups, and would occasionally buy gifts or host dinners at their houses or in restaurants. Bible study groups were formed with a combination of younger North Koreans and older South Koreans, usually long-term believers or those who had proven their faith. The institutional giving by the church, combined with the practice of giving in South Korea, created a structure in which older people paid for those younger than themselves in a continuous cycle of pay-it-forward. The structure was reinforced by the fact that most North Koreans were in precarious financial circumstances. The structure of older South Koreans being assigned to Bible study groups with younger North Koreans ensured that defectors rarely paid for anything. The only time I saw funds collected from North Koreans in a church setting was

when a nominal amount was needed for a collective birthday gift. All other social settings — even occasional coffee outings — were paid for by the church directly, or by older South Koreans.

For church retreats or other outings, modest funds were collected from South Koreans but not defectors. While birthdays were celebrated collectively, the single cake that was bought for the singing of the birthday song was always given to a North Korean afterwards. Even insignificant events were divided according to the givers and the receivers. During lunch distribution, for example, South Koreans were given less food than North Koreans — particularly meat. Once I made the mistake of asking for more, and I was given a cold and shaming glance by one of the older South Korean women who was distributing the food. She reluctantly gave me a small additional piece, while heaping a pile of meat for the North Korean standing next to me. Ironically, North Koreans often ate less than the average South Korean, which meant they often had leftovers on their plate. Once, when our Bible study group had run short of *kimchi*, we discussed sending someone to get more from the food distribution line. Quickly, a South Korean closest to the food stood up to get some. “Wait!” one person in the group shouted. “We need to send a North Korean, otherwise they won’t give us much.” The group reacted with surprise and then nods of agreement. Both North and South Koreans agreed that sending a North Korean was a strategic way to get extra food, so a North Korean volunteered and came back with a heaping plate of *kimchi*.

South Koreans were not eligible for scholarships, regardless of the personal state of their finances, another way in which North Koreans were privileged in the allocation of financial resources. I once asked if there were any reduced fees for college students. The person gently chided me, saying, “*Defectors* need the scholarships.” The message was clear: only North Koreans were disadvantaged in this scenario. The focus and target of the gift-giving was North Korean defectors; they were the youngest children in the family of God that needed to be taken care of. Everyone else was there to give.

In many ways, the giving structure of the church did not differ greatly from typical South Korean gift-giving practices. Usually, the person who pays for dinner does so quietly, without fanfare, and often out of sight. However, there is a verbal distinction made between gifts given by institutions and gifts given privately by individuals within any given institution. For example, at an organization I worked for, we collected money for a gift for a co-worker who had a baby. The co-worker in charge of collections stated baldly, “*This* gift is from the organization. And *this* [other] gift is from us.” These verbal categorizations of private and public gifts were made to ensure that the givers of the gifts were properly acknowledged, and also likely to ensure reciprocation at a later date. Peace Church was unusual in that the institutional giving obscured and perhaps even limited private giving. As such, most gifts appeared to be coming from the Church (or God), and that these gifts needed to be reciprocated to the Church (or God).

The Gift in South Korea

The giving of gifts to North Korean defectors needs to be understood in the context of gift-giving in South Korean society. Mauss (Mauss 2000) writes that the gift is a total social fact; it is an activity that has implications throughout society. Similarly, in the economic, legal, political, and religious spheres in South Korea, gift-giving permeates all forms of social life. In South Korea, this gift-giving is a skill that requires cultural knowledge, tact, and calculation. Similar to Japan and China, gifts of goods or cash are given at all major and minor social occasions – to family members, to friends, and to acquaintances (Rupp 2003). Gifts in the form of cash are given for weddings, major holidays, funerals, or simply as “pocket money” to younger family members, while gifts in the form of material goods are more common for birthdays, dinner parties, celebrations of any sort, etc. The commonly-used phrase, *pinsonŭlo kamyŏn antoenta* (one can’t show up with empty hands) signifies that it is socially unacceptable to visit a friend’s house or place of business without bringing a gift.

The most common gift in South Korea is the buying of a meal. Similar to China, where banquets are a ritualized form of gift-giving (Yan 1996; Yang 1994), gifts of food can be ritualized for special occasions. However, in South Korea, the buying of food is an everyday practice. These gifts of food are reciprocated in a delayed or cyclical fashion: receivers may pay it forward by buying for others younger than oneself in another setting, or reciprocate directly by giving material goods, doing small favors, or through displays of deference or friendship.

It is rare that gifts are given spontaneously, although the giver will often claim that they were “thinking of you.” In that sense, the gift can be seen as what Patico (2002) notes is a spontaneous “sign of attention.” Signs of attention are what Patico’s Russian informants referred to as unpremeditated expressions of gratitude for someone who had “done a good turn” (Patico 2002:351). Calling gifts “spontaneous” was a way to deny its obligatory or strategic nature, and make a moral claim. Close examination of such gifts by Patico, however, revealed that they were used as a strategic means of fostering social relationships. It is unclear how spontaneity and strategy work together in South Korea, but it is clear that at key life events, the giving and reciprocation of gifts is carefully measured. The amount that a friend gives for one’s daughter’s wedding, for example, is recorded in a ledger, and the ledger is stored carefully and referred to on the occasion of the friend’s children’s wedding, when the same amount will be reciprocated as a gift. Gifts can be a complex reflection of one’s past and present relationship, or an investment into a future relationship. The lack of a gift, or a smaller than expected gift, can also be interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with a relationship or an unwillingness to invest in maintaining one. Of course, gifts are modified by factors such as inflation and financial circumstances, or even in defiance of personal troubles to maintain an illusion of wealth. Most importantly, gifts are given in return for past favors or in anticipation of future ones. Smaller favors are repaid with the buying of an inexpensive meal, while larger favors are reciprocated with expensive meals, material gifts, or cash.

The nature of gift-giving becomes more complex when it crosses scales; gifts between individuals and institutions straddle the public-private divide. Since the giving and receiving of gifts is so common in social life, it naturally permeates business and politics. For example, a firm may offer a new client a gift as a way of symbolically cementing their relationship, or a manager going abroad for a business trip would be expected to return with gifts for his subordinates. However, the line between the “personal” (*gong*) and the “public” (*sa*) is thin, as is the line between gifts and bribery. Thus, gifts-as-bribery have been the subject of social outcry over government and business corruption. The types of abuses that have been uncovered in the past relate to gifts of cash, luxury goods, or expensive “entertainment” — in the form of food, alcohol, and sex — in exchange for lucrative contracts, inside information, the hiring of friends or relatives, or preferred treatment in schools. As a result, the South Korean government has taken steps to regulate the receiving of gifts by public institutions. One of the more extreme measures is a recent proposed law regulating gifts given to public officials, private schools, and news outlets and their family members — limiting them to receiving gifts valued at less than 30,000 won (approximately \$30) only. If passed, it is estimated that it could affect between 6 and 20 million people — up to 40% of the entire population. The societal havoc it could potentially wreak caused one newspaper headline to warn, “Big changes coming in law that makes millions of people potential criminals” (Hwang 2015).

The continuing necessity of new laws and regulations on public gifts alludes to the difficulty of distinguishing gifts from bribes. Particularly in the realm of giving

to government officials or business partners, the line between gifts and bribes is often unclear, and there are regular reports of outrageous “gifts” given to public officials. The separation of public and private spheres is an on-going debate in a country rife with regional and class discrimination. It is a common belief that *ppaek*,⁶⁵ (social network) is more important than personal skills or ability in achieving success or getting anything done in complex and non-transparent bureaucracies. Even for those not actively giving or accepting bribes, the separation of one’s private and public life is a tricky prospect. For example, having an older friend buy you dinner, a commonly accepted social practice, can be an ambiguous gift in an institutional context if one is a public official and the friend works for a firm vying for a government contract.

Prosperity Gospel and The Charismatic Gift

Critics of evangelicals in South Korea claim that the growth of Protestantism is related to the impressive business acumen of churches and the economic and social networks that churches provide. Protestants in South Korea are known for promoting a version of the prosperity gospel called *kibok*, or “this-worldly blessings.” Lee defines *kibok* as “the belief that one’s faith — once properly lived out — will enable one to obtain not only otherworldly blessings but also this-worldly blessings, such as material wealth, cure from diseases, and a resolution of personal problems” (Lee 2010:122). What makes Korean Protestants unique, Lee argues, is the zealotry with which they seek *kibok*. For many Protestants, particularly the majority of South

⁶⁵ *Ppaek* is the transliteration of the English word, “back.”

Koreans whom Lee calls evangelicals,⁶⁶ one's material wealth and success are often thought of as a badge of faith. If gifts are a total social fact, then gift culture naturally extends to the church, where it is understood that being devout will result in God rewarding you with riches.

In a country where one's *ppaek* is perceived to be the most important factor for any type of business or social success, attending church, particularly one with powerful people, can be a way of creating a new social network — one that is based on faith in God. Christians are notorious in South Korea for favoring other Christian business—many will deliberately choose Protestant vendors or businesses over non-Protestant ones. Some megachurch websites even have links to Christian business directories, further cementing the link between business and church (Kirsteen Kim 2007). The practice of attending church to promote one's business is so common that it has led to non-Christian skeptics, and even other Christians, to remark that many attend megachurches for the business opportunities it brings rather than for personal belief. Critics of megachurches would joke, “They are going to work” as they observed people going to church on Sundays.

The most infamous advocate of *kibok* is the founder and ex-lead pastor of Yoido Full Gospel,⁶⁷ Cho Yonggi, who advocated for the “triple meter faith” — that all followers of God would gain material prosperity, bodily health, and spiritual faith.

⁶⁶ The term “evangelicalism” in South Korea encompasses both Fundamentalism and Pentacostalism, and is defined as “a species of Protestantism characterized by a literalist bent in biblical interpretation, a soteriology that values the individual over society, fervent advocacy of evangelism, and a piety that emphasizes conversion experience and personal relationship between God and believer” (T. S. Lee 2007, 331).

⁶⁷ Yoido Full Gospel is considered the largest church in the world with over one million members.

For the majority of Protestants in South Korea, financial success is a badge of faith. If riches were God's blessings, then Cho was the ultimate believer: he turned Yoido Full Gospel Church into the largest church in the world, with a reported congregation of one million people. The scale of Yoido's collection plates, with over 250,000 people attending per week, necessitates a special branch of Kukmin Bank to be open on Sunday for the deposits. Yoido Full Gospel Church currently runs a large retreat center, a Christian university, a television station, and a "welfare village." It is a landmark and tourist destination, and even has its own subway stop and bus stops. In other words, it is easy to see that megachurches are, in many ways, institutions similar to business conglomerates. And similar to conglomerates, Yoido faced problems of succession when it was time for Pastor Cho to retire. Internal fighting forced Cho out of retirement, only to face allegations of tax fraud and embezzlement. In 2014, Cho was found guilty of embezzling 13 billion won (approximately U.S. \$12 million) from church funds, and his son was also found guilty of colluding with his father.

Caldwell (Caldwell 2005) asserts that religion in post-socialist Russia can be seen as a commodity in that it offered resources for citizens. She advocates for a more complicated view of religion than personal belief, and explores economic motivations for church attendance. I argue that the South Korean concept of *kibok* further complicates the divide between religion as personal belief and religion as commodity; it reflects a blending of the two. For South Korean Christians, prosperity does not come to those who merely attend church; it is a badge of their relationship with God.

Yoido Pastor Cho's wealth was a reflection of his faith; not everyone could become as successful as he did, regardless of the corruption that was recently revealed. The wealth and connections that megachurches brought led critics to charge that many came to do business rather than participate for the purpose of belief. Advocates for *kibok* might argue, however, that one cannot succeed financially without spiritual faith.

For many Christians, embezzlement cases like that of Pastor Cho were yet more proof that South Korea had become corrupt: even Christianity was not safe from the disease of South Korean culture. As such, *kibok* was not the answer. Instead, Protestants had to learn to give, and give to North Korean defectors as well as to North Korea. It was not about economic return, but an investment into a future nation. In order to distinguish from the concept of *kibok*, I use the term "charismatic gift," defined by Coleman (2004) as gifts given to and from God.

In his ethnographic research on giving in a Protestant church in Sweden, Coleman (Coleman 2004) argues that words and money are forms of gifts that are given by Christians to establish direct relations with God. While in some cases these gifts are given in order to establish social solidarity, in others, gifts are given in order to participate in an "economy of salvation." In Coleman's field site, this economy was global if non-specific in its goals: money was given by church members to a global economy to help spread the Gospel through television. Coleman argues for an idea of the charismatic gift as one that is in contrast to the economic aspect of the prosperity gospel. Rather than a pure economic exchange, he examines how "people

create and maintain spiritual ideals *through* the exchange of goods and the construction of spaces” (Coleman 2004:424 italics in original). In other words, Coleman claims that congregants gave to churches as a way to maintain their belief and establish a relationship with God, not as a way to become rich. The expectations of return were from God, to be repaid in the divine realm. As such, it is an investment in a future beyond death.

Similarly, charismatic gifts given by South Korean Protestants were given to be closer to God. The gifts had a specific target (North Korean defectors) and a specific goal (unification). Unlike *kibok* (prosperity gospel), the gifts were not given for the purpose of direct economic return. On the contrary, gift-givers were expected to give immensely of their own economic resources for the purpose of converting defectors, who were seen as necessary for a new nation and the Second Coming of God. It was also not a binary relationship, but a tripartite one, involving North Koreans, South Koreans, and God. In a sense, the gifts given by South Korean Protestants at Peace Church were given as a means to counter this national trend of corruption. Unlike the more openly materialistic emphasis on the prosperity gospel touted by many megachurches, the giving they espoused was seemingly altruistic. In other words, Peace Church (as the mouthpiece of God) did not promise material wealth to its congregants, at least not its South Korean ones, in exchange for belief. For South Koreans, the gift relationship was an explicit giving to and from God in a project that *God* himself had initiated. Trainings emphasized that God had not only initiated the gift; he had called the trainees to participate in the North Korean Mission

Project. Now that the gift had been given, South Koreans had to reciprocate by giving to North Korean defectors, without expectations of material gifts in return.

While South Korean Christians were involved in developing a spiritual contract with God in their efforts to give gifts to North Korean defectors, their economy of salvation was urgent and specific – to give, to see North Koreans transform, and to achieve unification through the North Korean Mission Project. In many ways, it was a gift that came with responsibility – to use and take care of the “gift” that was given to them. This meant domesticating North Koreans and transforming them into moral South Koreans. Protestant Christians believed that the problem of Korean culture could be solved by giving to defectors and eventually bringing about the downfall of North Korea. Nor was social solidarity the motivation for the gift; instead, domestication and conversion was the ultimate goal of the charismatic gift. The gifts came from God, the church continuously claimed, and in return God wanted defectors to become a part of his “family.” Salvation for oneself and for the nation as a whole was the promised reward for South Korean gift givers. The promise of Christianity for North Koreans, however, was very different, and lay at the heart of conflict in the gift relationship.

The Promise of Christianity

At a Protestant-sponsored city tour in 2011 for newly arrived defectors in *Hanawŏn*, a representative from Peace Church blatantly promised, “If you are Christian, your vocational, educational, medical, spiritual needs will be solved.” This

amazing pronouncement was followed by a get-to-know-you period, when defectors met with South Korean Protestants for the first time, many of whom were wealthy and made promises to help them if they attended their church. When the actual tour commenced, North Koreans were introduced to the successful projects of then-President of South Korea and church elder Lee Myung-bak,⁶⁸ which included Chonggye Stream – an impressive oasis that crosses through downtown Seoul.

At events such as the City Tour and a subsequent Homestay Program, Protestants continuously made promises to defectors about the benefits of attending church and becoming Christian. When defectors left *Hanawŏn*, the first gifts given to them as South Korean citizens was through a coalition of Protestant NGOs. Each North Korean defector was given a rice cooker, blankets, and basic cookware—all considered the basics required to start a new life. While not all defectors heard the exact phrase above, the image of the good life was shown to defectors in interactions with middle-class Christians who bought them expensive food, gave them gifts, and told them that their wealth came from believing in God. These interactions told defectors that through God, they could attain the wealth, status, and lifestyle that they were being exposed to by Protestant Christians. Ironically, instead of being taught about the charismatic gift that defined South Korean relationships with God for North Korean Mission, North Koreans were being taught *kibok*, the prosperity gospel.

The reality of North Korean lives in South Korea was shockingly different from the dream they envisioned before they arrived. Unlike middle-class South

⁶⁸ Lee is an elder at an influential megachurch in Kangnam.

Koreans whom they met in programs during their stay in *Hanawŏn*, defectors immediately entered marginalized spaces upon leaving the three-month orientation program. Since most defectors were granted a modest government-subsidized *apat'ũ* (apartments),⁶⁹ those lucky enough to get placed in Seoul found themselves placed in lower-income areas. In South Korea, the location of one's *apat'ũ* was often a telling indication of one's income or class. Residents of Kangnam were often the wealthiest, as real estate prices were extremely high. Similarly, those who lived in parts of Seoul that were easier to access by public transportation, or closer to the center of Seoul, were wealthier than those who lived on the outskirts. Even worse were those who lived in cities adjacent to Seoul, although these cities were themselves also divided by class and wealth. For example, those who lived in Incheon, near the airport, were much lower in income than those who lived in Bundang, a new satellite city in the southern part of metropolitan Seoul. Most of the defectors in my Bible study group lived on the outskirts of Seoul; one lived in a relatively centralized but low-income neighborhood near what used to be an industrial factory complex, while another lived farther away in yet another industrial neighborhood. In comparison, most of the staff and leaders of North Korean Ministry lived in Kangnam or in a middle-class suburb of Seoul.

Adult defectors were heavily dependent on government subsidies and welfare programs when they first arrived in South Korea. Some were thrown into poverty immediately, with their government settlement funds going to pay for their own

⁶⁹ Most apartments functioned as condominiums that one would buy; the government-subsidized apartments, however, were rentals only.

human trafficking fees or fees of a family member. Others settled gradually into poverty and only qualified for low-paid and low-status labor due to their lack of education, lack of familiarity with modern technology, and most importantly, their lack of English proficiency. Most descended into poverty despite the existence of a Christian network of employers who hired defectors and provided an important outlet for jobs in a country with cutthroat competition and rampant discrimination against foreigners. North Korean defectors were not only foreign to South Korea, but had the stigma of being potential spies. Unfortunately, the types of jobs available to unskilled defectors were factory work and lower secretarial positions, often supervised by people younger than themselves. In the strict age hierarchy of both North and South Korea, defectors found taking orders from those younger than themselves demeaning. Cultural differences also played out in the workplace and lead to many misunderstandings and conflicts. I was told about one particularly dramatic work conflict at a coffee shop employing defectors that ended when the woman angrily quit her job, shouting to her South Korean manager, “You are worse than Kim Jong-il!”

The promises of an easy life contrasted painfully with the realities of hierarchical and unforgiving workplaces in South Korea, and South Korean aid workers complained of defectors frequently quitting their jobs. One teacher at an alternative defector school stated, “Early on, they are given dreams of a middle-class life, and that life is not available to them. They really need to be prepared for a life of poverty.” Even those with marketable skills faced difficulty in getting recognition for their training. One North Korean member of my Bible study had taken a cooking

course in China under a false name, since he was residing there without papers, but his certification card included his picture. When he applied as a chef in South Korea, employers refused to recognize his training and he could not get a job. Similarly, other defectors with credentials found that they were not recognized in South Korea. As a result, many defectors could only choose between precarious or low-paid employment, or take the risk of starting their own companies in an economy that they did not fully understand.

Finally, as newcomers to a capitalist society, defectors were notoriously easy targets for get-rich schemes or con artists looking to take their money. Fraudulent money-making opportunities were so common that it was one of the priorities of the Hana Center orientation program to warn defectors about these schemes. A few that were discussed included expensive drugs claiming to help make you grow taller, and pyramid schemes that “guaranteed” a big return on investment. As defectors fell into the lower classes of the capitalist system, the swindling of new arrivals by fellow North Koreans desperately looking to make easy money occurred with increasing frequency.

Most North Koreans did not understand the charismatic gift, and their role in it as human “gifts given by God for unification.” While they might not have been aware of the specific idea of the charismatic gift, North Koreans were taught about the prosperity gospel through church; that believing in God would lead to economic reward. One direct way that defectors made money was through church attendance. Since most defectors were low-income, and had few skills to get decent paying jobs,

the scholarships that churches offered were extremely attractive opportunities to supplement their or their families' income.

As stated above, the North Korean Ministry at Peace Church gave defectors 200,000 won (approximately U.S. \$200) a month in “scholarships” to attend church, the sum equal to working 50 hours at a coffee shop.⁷⁰ The largest scholarship I heard given at a Protestant church was 500,000 won a month (approximately U.S. \$500), particularly in the early years of the famine when there were fewer defectors. The ability of defectors to collect funds from churches led some savvy North Koreans to attend two or more churches, thus making it a great part-time job. For example, a Catholic organization for defectors held their meetings and services on Saturday evening, making it easy for the same defectors to attend a Protestant service on Sunday. One defector I knew attended three different services — a Catholic service, a Protestant service, and a Buddhist temple, and collected funds from all three institutions. Since most of these scholarships were offered in overt exchange for church attendance, most defectors did not feel any guilt for attending multiple churches. In fact, some churches were in open competition with one another: one church member would inquire about the amount of scholarships available at a competing church, and counter with a higher scholarship to attract more defectors. In this struggle over North Koreans, defectors were made to feel as if they were valuable commodities.

⁷⁰ The minimum wage in South Korea was 4110 won in 2010, and 4320 in 2011 (T. S. Lee 2010, 201).

One way in which defectors directly showed their awareness of their commodification was their use of the phrase, “my face is being sold.” At various functions, defectors would be introduced in a way that made them feel they had to “sell” their attendance. For example, at one NGO event, defectors were introduced to officials in a way that made them feel on display. For the NGO, it was proof that they were able to bring defectors that would guarantee future funding. For defectors, however, it was humiliating to be shown around and their stories told to total strangers. While defectors were often unaware of the complexities of how their attendance was being used to pay for the gifts they received, they showed their assessment of the situation when they complained, “I’m sick of my face being sold.” To my knowledge, incidents of this magnitude did not happen at Peace Church, but the commodification of defectors continued through the buying of church attendance.

Defector awareness of their own commodification answered a puzzling trend that I witnessed in my interviews. When I asked defectors how and when they received “aid” from Protestant organizations, most stated they received little to no “help” from anyone. Almost no defectors stated they received help from churches, even the ones who were obviously benefiting from it. This is despite the fact that I observed the aid directly, and that the scope of aid is acknowledged by researchers and government alike. For defectors who believed they were being “sold” in some way, the aid that they received from Protestants was transactional: their presence was bringing prestige or benefit to the churches, which was why there was so much competition for their attendance. Thus, in some sense, the scholarships that were

being given were being “repaid” by their regular presence at church. For some defectors, Christianity was rarely about belief; instead, it was a place where they gained economic benefit in exchange for being commodified. In another sense, it was one of the few places where defectors could be open about their identity and their longing for home. The tension of these two desires – material benefits and belonging – led to confusion about their belief in Christianity. When I asked a defector friend about his faith, he answered, “I don’t know yet,” a response that was echoed by other defectors I spoke with.

Hanna, an outgoing and well-liked North Korean defector at Peace Church, was surprisingly negative when speaking of her impressions of South Koreans at the North Korean Ministry. She recalled one unfortunate instance in which she received a bag of used clothing from a well-intentioned woman at the North Korean Ministry. Since it was not “her style,” she decided to give the clothing to a South Korean staff member who was less picky. The staff member gratefully accepted the likely expensive clothing and promptly wore some of the clothing the following Sunday. When the donor saw the staff member with the clothes, she chided Hanna for giving her gift away. Hanna became upset and complained, “If she gave me the clothes, I should be able to do with it what I want.”

In Hanna’s case, she received something that she did not like nor ask for from the older South Korean church member. In addition, she felt she was being monitored when she gave it to someone else who would use the clothing. Similar to the food that was given to defectors that was often wasted, North Koreans were not being given

gifts that they wanted or appreciated. The most common complaint that North Koreans had about the gifts they received from church members was that the intention was not to build relationships. As a result, lonely and socially isolated North Koreans did not see the gifts as building social solidarity, but alternately interpreted them as charity or commodification.

Mary Douglas writes, “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Douglas and Mauss, Marcel 2000:vii). The fact that the gift relationship between South Koreans and North Korean defectors led to conflict showed the contradictions in their idea of the gift: the difference between the charismatic gift and the prosperity gospel. Coleman writes that in the charismatic gift, “donations neither generate any kind of social tie between individuals, nor create indebtedness to the giver on the part of the ministry or any individual person” (Coleman 2004:432). For South Koreans, the goal of their gift was not to “enhance solidarity” with North Korean defectors, but to enhance solidarity with God. Because North Korean defectors were operating under the concept of gifts as prosperity gospel, they did not understand this lack of attention on relationships.

In addition to class differences between North and South Koreans, there was also an age and spiritual hierarchy (i.e. those with proven faith) within the church. The power hierarchy between the two groups meant that defectors interpreted the gifts as charity. For example, when I asked Hanna about the gifts she received, she bitterly pointed out South Koreans’ general air of superiority, saying: “They only help us to feel better about themselves. They don’t really want to develop a relationship

with us.” She expressed her feelings of frustration and disappointment with South Koreans who spoke of one *minjok*, or national people, but could not cease to treat them as “different” and objects of pity. As a result, instead of feeling grateful for the gifts she received, she felt resentment.

The relationships that North Korean defectors wanted to develop with Protestants should also be put into the context of South Korean society, where everything is dependent on social networks. Without these networks, it is extremely difficult to get a job, conduct business, or access valuable information. Therefore, North Korean complaints about not being able to develop personal friendships with South Koreans was also about economics — access to the “good life” depended on vital social networks through which they could attain jobs and resources they could not get on their own. Whether intentional or not, Protestants who “helped” North Koreans while not including them in valuable social networks as friends ensured that defectors remained economically and materially dependent on the institution of the church to meet their needs.

This resulted in North Koreans feeling frustrated and resentful of Protestants who seemingly stood in their way of achieving the South Korean Dream. Unfortunately, dreams of quick economic success were continuously fostered by Protestants through the gifts they gave and the lifestyle they showed defectors. Protestants either deliberately or inadvertently taught North Koreans the prosperity gospel, despite the fact that they themselves were engaged in a different kind of gift relationship involving God.

This is not to say that all defectors looked at church as a place of consumption or a place of commodification. Most attended with sincere intentions. One newcomer to my Sunday Bible study group told me many months later that she hated the culture of being paid to attend church. Hee Young confided in me that she attended out of a desire to understand Christianity. She refused the scholarship and only attended a few weeks. Like Hee Young, some defectors were alternately curious, lonely, or sought friendship *and* resources in a safe space where they could be open about their identity. Unfortunately, friendship and intimacy were hard to find in church settings focused on transforming defectors.

The North Korean Mission Project: Teaching to Give

Some South Korean Protestants were naturally inclined to commit to the North Korean Mission Project through their family connections in the North. For this small minority, unification is about family — the reuniting of close or extended family members who were separated when the borders between the two countries were officially closed in 1953, following the Korean War. While those who were directly related to those residing in North Korea are now deceased or in their 70s or 80s, the longing to see missing family members has been passed to some of the next generation. It is unclear how many people working for North Korean Mission have family members in the North, but it is notable that most of the main churches involved in North Korean Mission were either started by or had a significant number of *silhyangmin* (literally, “people who have lost their hometowns” – the first

generation of refugees around the time of the Korean War) in their leadership. These *silhyangmin* were those who either fled North Korea for fear of persecution – for being Christian, for being wealthy merchants, or for being afraid of communism – or were on the wrong side of the border when the borders were permanently established. Their name evokes the image of those trying to return to their origins and families, or at least gain the right to visit. While Peace Church was not started by *silhyangmin*, there were *silhyangmin* in the leadership and unification was an important goal of the church. A visual reminder of its goal was made apparent to everyone who attended a sermon: behind the podium of the main chapel was a large folding panel painting of Paekdusan, a mountain at the furthestmost part of North Korea and a widely recognized symbol of reunification.

For the majority of South Korean Protestants, however, the dream of unification did not come naturally; it was planted through church sermons and trainings on the importance of unification for the nation and for Christianity. For those dedicated to the North Korean Mission Project, the dream of reunification was more than a dream about the future. It was about redemption from South Korea's corrupt capitalist culture and a return to a time of purported spiritual purity. As argued in Chapter 1, South Korea had undergone rapid economic development over the past 50 years. Despite its successes, many in South Korea have begun to question the social and spiritual costs of that success, which included rampant materialism, growing inequality, and the perceived moral breakdown of society. By the end of the 1990s, South Koreans began to question decades of single-minded economic

development – and the ways in which corners were cut to achieve that development. For Protestants, what was missing in corrupt South Korea was a pure form of Christianity that was lost after Japanese colonialism and subsequent division of Korea. The return to the essence of Korean Christianity that started with the Great Revival in 1907 is the impetus behind the North Korean Mission project.

A return to pure Christianity was also about a return to origins — of what existed before North and South were divided. The goals of North Korean Mission were outlined during preliminary trainings for new prospective congregation members at the North Korean Ministry. Because of the sensitive nature of North Korea and defectors, church staff took care to prepare new church members to meet North Koreans during the trainings, which were separate from the trainings given to prospective new members who came from the North. Two-hour training sessions were held in a small room while the church’s main service was going on in the central hall, and church staff covered topics such as the history of Christianity in Korea, the human rights situation in North Korea, and the need to work for unification.

Planting the dream of unification in defectors involved counteracting much of the popular South Korean media images of North Korea that portray the country as evil, traitorous, and inhumane. One speaker in the training stated that to Christians, North Korea was also considered a zone of “zero spirituality.” This term referred to the ban on Christianity, or any religion for that matter, by the North Korean state. While the negative images of North Korea naturally extended to North Koreans, the speaker reassured attendees that they were special in that they were God’s children,

born into sin but capable of being saved. Their conversion and successful assimilation to the South was portrayed as a test of unification and conversion. Moreover, defectors would be strategic evangelists for the conversion of North Koreans post-unification. As one church deacon put it, “North Koreans will be able to convert North Koreans so much better than we will. They understand their mindset.” Trainings for new members of the North Korean Ministry, as well as follow-up weekend trainings, were therefore an important strategy to counter prejudice towards North Korean defectors and recast them from enemy monsters into God’s blessed children.

When teaching history, the staff highlighted that western missionaries in the early 20th century hailed Korea the “Jerusalem of the East” – one of the only success stories of Protestant missionaries in East Asia. One of the most-evoked historical moments by the North Korean Ministry was the Pyongyang Great Revival of 1907, during which a reported 100,000 people were converted to Christianity in Pyongyang. The time of the revival is key: it was before Japanese colonization (in 1910) and a period when Koreans were beginning to imagine themselves as a nation. This historical moment evokes a national timeline that was stifled in its infancy and never allowed to blossom into its full potential, or fulfill its destined greatness as a center for Christianity in Asia. “We cannot rest until ‘Jerusalem’ is Christian,” the lecturer stated emphatically. The strong message that was conveyed to trainees was that they were being called to begin the work of unification and simultaneously restore Korea to its former state of Christian glory.

In later trainings and sermons, North Korea was explicitly talked about as the gateway to the Silk Road; once it was opened, South Korean Protestants could go to the Silk Road and eventually reach Jerusalem, where the 10/40 Window was located. The 10/40 Window is a rectangular area between 10 and 40 degrees latitude that is used to delineate the region most in need of Christianity. Over the past two decades it has become a popular evangelical to depict a place “where humanity suffers more than any region in the earth” and centers around Islamic countries that are most opposed to Christianity.⁷¹ A church elder explains, “when Jerusalem returns to Jesus, when Jews finally accept the Gospel, then we will know that the time has come for the Second Coming of Christ our Savior” (Han 2010:184). The North Korean Mission Project was not only about this world; it was also about the next – the future Second Coming of God and the ascension of believers into heaven.

During the four-week training, church staff urged newcomers to hear God’s calling to work for unification, of which North Korean defectors played a central role. Speakers emphasized the amazing “gift” of defectors that South Koreans had been given by God. Those who “heard” the calling were asked to attend the special service regularly and serve defectors. Serving defectors meant giving without expectations of receiving — giving their time, their money, and their emotional labor — in the hopes that defectors would convert and understand God’s love. As such, South Koreans were urged to give as God gives. Similar to Zigon’s (Zigon 2011) Russia, where patients living with HIV considered their health status to be God’s blessing because it

⁷¹ Opening address of Luis Bush, head of the “AD 2000 & Beyond Movement,” in 1995 in Seoul (<http://www.ad2000.org/gcowe95/lbwelcom.html>).

became a motivation for self-transformation, the famine that led to the defection of North Koreans was considered God's gift to South Koreans to also domesticate themselves.

Kim was a model example of someone who was successfully taught to give to North Koreans. A pretty and sociable South Korean woman in her 30s, Kim worked as a pre-school teacher in affluent Kangnam, and got married soon after I began attending the church. Her husband, also a devout Christian, eventually transferred to Peace Church due to the importance of her work as a Bible study leader there. Kim recounted how she was called to work for the North Korean Ministry that eventually led her to become one of the ministry's most successful Bible study leaders. Initially, she had been attending the Youth Ministry at Peace Church, which had sponsored a training session on the North Korean Mission project. Having grown up under an educational system where children were taught that North Koreans were the evil enemy, she said she felt a strong "discomfort" hearing about North Korean defectors. This discomfort was a combination of pity and animosity, she told me. The pastor encouraged those who felt the "calling" to attend the North Korean Ministry, to show God's love to North Korean defectors in the congregation. Interpreting her feelings of discomfort as a calling by God,⁷² Kim decided to attend the four-week training for new prospective members of the North Korean Ministry.

⁷² In shamanism, bodily pain or bad luck is a sign of a spirit in need of attention. It is believed that those who ignore the signs will experience increased bodily pain or continued bad luck (Kendall 1985). Scholars agree this tradition has been absorbed into Christianity (Oak 2010).

Unlike Kim, not everyone who attended the four-week training became a member of the congregation. Some were emotionally unprepared for working with defectors. During one training session when a defector gave a lecture on North Korea, a South Korean trainee yelled at her, “You people were not here [in South Korea] during the difficult time of the 60s and 70s, when the country was developing! Why should we help you now?” After her explosive comment, the person left and never returned, and would have been likely barred from attending. Similarly, of the six people who attended my training in the spring of 2009, I saw only one or two afterwards during the service, and after a few months, I was the only person remaining. One church staff recalled that some who finished the training and stayed in the congregation had problems once they fully realized that their relationship was solely about giving. As such, South Korean spiritual concerns or problems about their everyday lives were almost always relegated to the wayside, in favor of the more urgent problems of defectors. “South Koreans are ignored for the most part, so those that want attention end up leaving for other ministries,” stated the official.

The few who remained were those who were willing to give – of their time, their wallets, and their energy. Attending Peace Church and giving aid to defectors required a huge level of commitment. Yet even those who were extremely dedicated to giving suffered from burn out. Kim mentioned to me a few times during the course of my fieldwork how difficult her work was at the North Korean Ministry. Only one of about 20 or so dedicated South Korean “youth” in the Ministry, Kim led her Sunday Bible study group, had weekly meetings with the other Bible study leaders, a

weekly meeting with the pastor of the Ministry, and led a one-to-one Bible study with a defector in the group. She also met with defectors in the Bible study group regularly, celebrated their birthdays, called them, and bought them food when needed. It was difficult for me to imagine that Kim could have any other social life outside of her work as a Bible study leader; this was confirmed when she said her husband complained about her schedule. When Kim moved to another city because of her husband's job, she cautiously expressed relief at being able to rest after the intensity of the past few years. However, she said she did not have regrets. She had been "called by God" at a difficult time when she was not sure about her purpose in life. During her time working with North Koreans, she had strengthened her faith, converted her mother, gotten married, and found a community of belonging.

The Return Gift: Becoming Domesticated

One of the greatest sources of conflict within the gift relationship between North and South Koreans was the expectations of domestication that came with South Koreans' gifts. During the training for new members, staff members spoke of the goal of transforming North Korean defectors into God's warriors. The four obstacles to this transformation as stated in the early training were physical trauma, emotional trauma, economic instability, and social adjustment. The traumas were a result of hardships in North Korea and crossing to South Korea, while economic instability and social adjustment were related to their ability to economically and culturally assimilate to life in South Korea. Once these obstacles were overcome, with the help

of South Korean Protestants North Koreans would become “complete social persons.” In other words, North Koreans in their raw state – before conversion and assimilation – were incomplete socially. They were not acceptable in their current form; they had to be rehabilitated before they could become *sahyŏkja* (God’s warriors) working for the North Korean Mission Project. The giving of gifts was to be the platform through which defectors would experience God’s love and transform.

The key to becoming “complete social persons” was vague, but it mainly involved “sincere” conversion and evidence of faith. Domestication was urgent because the return gift to God was not complete without the full domestication of defectors. When I asked Pastor Cho, the lead pastor of the North Korean Ministry, what he expected from defectors, he responded:

We want them to accept our hearts. To understand our hearts. If they can accept our hearts, then they can change.... To recognize that we are giving this much material resources to them. If they recognize this, the attitude that follows is “thank you,” or “when I am grown up, I will repay this,” or “change the life” [sic].

A key aspect of “changing the life,” according to Pastor Cho, was “to stop drinking, stop smoking, and attend church zealously.” For many South Korean Christians, not only Pastor Cho, an important sign of Christian morality was refraining from drinking and smoking. Alcohol is considered so dangerous that many Protestant churches choose to conduct communion with grape juice rather than wine. Even one sip of alcohol is considered a sin; evangelical pastors often preach fervently about the sins of drinking, smoking, and gambling.

Perhaps the Puritanism of the South Korean Christian church is related to the fact that drinking, and to a lesser degree, smoking, is the basis for much sociality in South Korean society. It is one of the most common bonding activities amongst all age groups, and is encouraged to promote teamwork in schools, offices, and any other institutional or social group. As such, *hoesik*, or office dinners, are considered a necessary and regular expense for any organization. For South Korean men, in particular, smoking is a marker of masculinity, a habit often picked up during mandatory military service. While in recent years, a health boom has resulted in a decline in unhealthy drinking and smoking in the general population, it is still a common practice that will likely not disappear in the near future. In contrast to the general population, the Protestant Church has had an extremely stern stance towards drinking from the turn of the 20th century when the first American missionaries preached teetotalism (Ryu 2001). A strong moral (and often vocal) opposition to *all* drinking and smoking is considered the mark of a “good” Christian by most Protestants in South Korea.

During Bible study, Kim, our leader, spoke of the difficulty she had in going to office dinners and having to refuse alcohol, a common and borderline mandatory activity for office sociality. She was often pressured by her superiors and made to feel guilty, she stated, but felt strongly that it was a show of her faith to refuse alcohol. She told the story in a not-so-subtle attempt to encourage the rest of us not to drink or smoke, ending her story with a small admonishment. This attitude was echoed by almost everyone I knew who was Protestant in South Korea. In defiance, some North

Koreans told me in private that they did not understand the Protestant attitude toward smoking and drinking alcohol.

Drinking and smoking did not carry the same religious or moral significance for North Korean defectors. For North Korean men, especially, drinking and smoking were prevalent and an expression of masculinity. Similar to the experiences of South Korean men, North Koreans picked up these habits in the military. Many defectors recounted that despite food shortages, alcohol and cigarettes were always readily available. To a lesser extent, some North Korean women also drank alcohol, sometimes even heavily – particularly those who had been traumatized on their journey to South Korea. Abuse of alcohol amongst North Koreans was common enough that South Korean Protestants, already sensitive to such issues, were extremely concerned. Because North Koreans often drank and smoked heavily, South Koreans looked at quitting these habits as proof of their commitment to Christianity, as Pastor Kim stated above. The pressure to abstain, however, came from many different people and was a subtle pressure upon defectors at all times. Strangely enough, the church did not seem to offer programs for people to stop alcohol abuse such as Alcoholics Anonymous; rather, it was through prayer and church attendance that people were to stop drinking.⁷³

An aspect of this pressure to change North Korean defectors needs to be understood in the context of Cold War politics. While all non-Christians were

⁷³ Attending church in South Korea can and is encouraged to be a daily practice. Lee describes how the practices of *saebiyok kido* (early morning daily prayer) and Wednesday evening services means that it is possible (and encouraged) for Protestants to attend church every day. The idea was that church socialization makes it possible to avoid the temptations of alcohol and smoking, as well as other evils of non-Christian society.

considered sinners, defectors were especially tainted by the perceived immorality of the North Korean socialist regime. Their origins lay in a nation that was illegitimate and lacking in human rights. In addition to the stigma of North Korea being a place without love and respect for human rights, defectors had to deal with the moral stigma of their crossing. Defectors are believed to have engaged in what many in the church deemed “morally questionable” behavior to survive in China and come to South Korea, including stealing, sex work, violence, and drugs. Sex work and/or being sold as wives to Chinese farmers, particularly in the early years of defection at the height of the famine, was a common experience of many defector women. One North Korean man told me that he assumed all North Korean women had engaged in sex work; they were thus considered “dirty” and undesirable. South Koreans, similarly, considered sex work an immoral act under any circumstances. Even *chongsindae* (comfort women) were considered morally impure after returning from forced sexual slavery such that many did not tell anyone of their experiences until 1991, 46 years after the end of Japanese colonization.⁷⁴ In the 1990s, these *halmonis* (grandmothers) were suddenly embraced as symbols of national victimization and given living stipends by the South Korean government. However, some academics speculate that there were many women unable to claim comfort woman status due to the stigma of their continued sex work (Moon 1997; Soh 2009).

Within these rigid standards of sexual purity, defector women suffered the double stigma of having originated in “inhumane” North Korea, and also having

⁷⁴ Koreans made up the majority of the estimated 50,000 to 200,000 “comfort women” forced into sexual slavery by the military during Japanese expansion into Asia during World War II.

engaged in “immoral” behavior before arriving in the South. South Koreans interpreted the breakdown of defectors’ moral behavior not as a necessary tactic for survival, but rather from their intrinsically immoral North Korean origins. Thus, national culture was inscribed onto the bodies of North Korean women and needed “disciplining” in the form of Christian conversion (Shaw 2007). The discipline imposed by South Korean Protestants was a new form of sexual morality, in which the “sins” of North Koreans would be washed away by God’s love. South Koreans believed that by accepting the true gift of God’s love and salvation, North Koreans would be saved and transformed into proper and assimilated South Koreans, and sever any lingering nostalgia for their lives in North Korea.

Pastor Cho was, by all accounts, an effective and successful pastor. In his early 40s, he was young but flexible in his ideas, which was helpful in dealing with a diverse congregation. A charming and cosmopolitan man who had received his Ph.D. in the U.S., he said his experience with other immigrant groups there helped him understand North Koreans better. He approached them as a different culture, when most South Koreans did not. When I asked the pastor whether his expectations for North Koreans to “change the life” might be unrealistic, the pastor immediately became thoughtful. “I will have to think about what you said,” he stated sincerely and almost apologetically. However, For Pastor Cho and others like him, domestication was incomplete without change. Regardless of whether these changes were realistic or not, the duty of South Korean Protestants was to produce God’s Warriors, otherwise the reciprocation of the gift was incomplete.

Reciprocation of the Gift by Defectors

Despite South Korean Protestants' claims that their gifts were coming from God, and their best intentions to mimic God and give "unconditionally," their gifts to North Korean defectors did indeed come with expectations of return (Mauss 2009), whether in the form of expressions of gratitude, material improvements in their own lives, or a greater commitment to Christianity and the North Korean Ministry. If sincere conversion and assimilation to South Korean society was the return gift that was expected from North Korean defectors, they failed miserably in reciprocating. The perceived lack of reciprocity by North Korean defectors was a source of strain and conflict for many Protestant aid workers. The claim that Pastor Kim made that South Korean "hearts" were not being accepted was one indication of the dissatisfaction of Protestants involved with aid work. Most South Korean gift-givers shared stories of "betrayal," a moment when defectors stopped contacting them for a period of time, or openly accused South Koreans of lying, cheating, or giving for their own personal gain.

One curious tale of betrayal was told to me about a North Korean who had become a serious Christian. The defector had taken to studying the Bible very seriously, and had a more fundamentalist approach to interpreting the Bible than the South Korean aid giver, a high-ranking official at his church. At one point, the defector accused the aid giver of not understanding God's Word. This, to the South Korean, was the ultimate form of betrayal: having a different understanding of God

and even forming separate churches separate from the South Koreans that had brought them to his altar. Currently, there are a handful of North Korean-led and attended churches, and a number of North Korean defectors attending seminary school. Although at least one defector-led church was involved in human rights advocacy against North Korea, they had direct relationships with western human rights organizations. None that I knew were directly involved in the coalition of churches working on the North Korean Mission Project that Peace Church was involved with.

Regardless of the charges of non-reciprocation by South Koreans, North Korean defectors were careful about giving a return gift. One defector told me, “all gifts need to be reciprocated,” in the vein that gifts cannot be free. Many defectors spoke about their thankfulness to kind people in the church who helped them, and reciprocated by doing what the giver seemed to want them to do most – attending church and converting. Jung, a young defector and college student who attended Protestant and Catholic churches regularly, recounted the kindness of Christians around him. As a way of giving thanks, he converted. “They want me to go to church and convert, so I do what they want. It’s the least I can do,” he told me. But for Jung, conversion was undergoing a ceremony, not an internal change in self. Thus, he could convert to both Protestant Christianity as well as Catholicism, while admitting that he did not believe in nor understand God. For Jung and many others like him, the return gift was not immeasurable faith, but rather the act of attendance. Unfortunately, the

mere act of attendance was not enough for Protestant givers. Instead, Protestants such as Pastor Cho expected seismic life changes as proof of conversion.

The Gift of Non-Domestication

Despite the many complaints on both sides, there were also South Koreans who were successful in building relationships with North Koreans. In the case of Kim, this meant moving away from an institutional relationship to a more personal and affective one. Soon after joining the North Korean Mission, Kim had been asked to become a Bible study leader. She was considered one of the most “successful” Bible study leaders in the church in terms of her ability to develop close relationships with her group members. But her initial period, she recalled, was terrible. North Koreans refused to talk to her, and one person complained about her and asked to be moved into a new Bible study group. She was also naive about giving: she freely gave money to defectors who asked for help – and not insignificant amounts. One day, however, a defector she had repeatedly given money to asked her for money again, and she refused. After an unpleasant argument, she realized he was testing her to see how much she would give. She also realized that she was more critical of the defectors to whom she gave money, thus preventing her from developing deeper relationships with them.

Following this incident, she never gave money to a defector again. She would give her time and energy, she resolved, but not money. This led to a crucial turning point in her aid to defectors, she told me. She focused on showing compassion

through frequent phone calls, remembering significant dates such as birthdays, and the buying of food. Her relationships with defectors began to change, and soon, Kim began to receive public recognition for being a model Bible study leader. By all accounts, she was loved and respected by her North Korean charges.

It is important to note that Kim did not have unrealistic expectations of transformation for her charges, nor did she openly discuss the goals of North Korean Mission. Like many other church members, Kim pressured defectors to stop drinking and smoking, but she also was open in her ability to listen and give of her time. It was clear that Kim wanted to develop relationships with defectors, rather than to teach or transform them. The intimacy she created with defectors was key to her success as a Bible study leader. Perhaps her greatest success was letting go of urgency and looking at the long-term production of the return gift. For Kim, transforming North Korean defectors into God's Warriors was not an easy task, and it required much patience as well as acceptance. When asked what advice she would give those working with North Korean defectors in the future, Kim replied, "Don't have expectations, don't look down upon them from a superior place. Just come with a willingness to do whatever you can."

The Promise Fulfilled?

For a small number of defectors, the promise of Christianity was indeed fulfilled. These were young defectors who attended church long-term and showed their "transformation" into proper South Korean Christians. These lucky few were

rewarded through mission trips, entrance into a good college, and even opportunities to study abroad. One woman I knew was able to win a scholarship through a Christian NGO to learn English, and stayed at an expensive apartment in New York City while being treated to nice restaurants and trips through the U.S. during her year-long stay. A young male defector was given an opportunity to learn English through sponsorship of U.S. churches, and another did an internship in Washington, D.C., supported in part by church funds. Without exception, all of these defectors were required to witness about their terrible lives in North Korea as part of their obligations. For these few defectors, the promise of Protestant Christianity was fulfilled; God had provided them with opportunities and benefits that they would probably not have been able to access on their own.

For the majority, however, the gift relationship between South Koreans and North Korean defectors resulted in conflict and resentment on both sides. I have argued that the core of this conflict is about misrecognition of the gift relationship. For South Koreans, social solidarity was not the goal of the relationship; the goal was converting and transforming North Korean defectors into God's Warriors. The return gift to God would ensure return in the future through unification, or in the divine realm. When North Koreans did not convert or transform, South Koreans showed disappointment. For many North Koreans, the gifts given by church members came with unrealistic expectations of transformation without developing relationships. This was despite the fact that North Koreans were often called "family members" of God. For North Koreans who were learning about faith through prosperity gospel, the gift

relationship was confusing and contradictory. I have argued that these fundamental differences in the gift relationship were the cause of much conflict in these relationships.

The gift relationship was only the beginning of the transformation of defectors into God's Warriors. In the next chapter, I discuss how the South Korean church was structured to place North Koreans at the center as God's children. These attempts to construct North Koreans as the "innocent children" of God was crucial to maintain giving as well as to cleanse North Koreans of communism and fulfill their role as the people who would lead South Koreans into the promised land of unification.

Chapter 4

Suffer the Little Children: Taming the Foreign through God's Love

Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.

—*Mark 10:14-15*

Shin Dong-hyuk is a North Korean without a family. He was born in a political prison camp, “bred” by prison guards who selected his mother and father to marry and have children as a reward for good behavior. While he had a biological mother, father, brother, and sister, they were not a family in a traditional sense. Shin’s family did not live in the same quarters at the prison camp – his father lived separately from Shin and his mother and was only occasionally allowed to visit. Shin describes his father as cold and having little affection for him. Similarly, his mother was not warm and Shin grew up not knowing the meaning of love, states his biographer, Blaine Harden. Harden writes, “Many years later, after she was dead and [Shin] was living in the United States, he would tell me that he loved his mother. But that was in retrospect. That was after he learned that a civilized child *should* love his mother” (Harden 2013).

The biography of Shin's life, *Escape from Camp 14*, highlights the total lack of affective relations between Shin and his family. The lack of love between family

members in a prison camp is presented as a symptom of the larger problem of basic human rights in North Korea – an inhumane place that imprisons and starves innocents like Shin. It is a place where hunger violates the most sacred of all family relationships – the love between a mother and child. That Shin saw his mother as competition for survival is not as shocking as the fact that she beat him for stealing her food. While Shin's story is unique in its spectacular tragedy, his story represents an all-too-familiar discourse surrounding defectors – that they do not understand the importance of family, and therefore are in desperate need of love.

Protestants working in defector aid constantly repeated the idea that defectors needed love, particularly by one aid worker who was considered the “mother” of North Korean defector aid. Park Hye-won, who was the first person to discover and publicize the issue of North Koreans in the early 1990s, asserted that Christianity is the sole solution to North Korean family problems. Called the "mother" of North Korean defector aid, Park was also responsible for the earliest smuggling of defectors through China to safe houses in Thailand and Mongolia. After being arrested and tortured in China, she decided to focus her work in South Korea. Along with her husband, Park founded a number of North Korean defector organizations – most notably Great Light School,⁷⁵ one of the first North Korean alternative schools to be officially certified by the South Korean government. She is the leader and spiritual center of the Christian school and is highly respected by the defector aid community.

⁷⁵ Pseudonym.

I met Park through the introduction of a mutual friend, and she reluctantly accepted me as a volunteer English teacher at Great Light School. I interacted minimally with her on a weekly basis before I asked her for an interview, and it took a few weeks to arrange because of her busy schedule. In one of the small downstairs classrooms, I asked Park about the main barrier to North Korean defector adjustment. Park asserted that the problem of North Korean defectors is essentially a problem with the family. “In North Korea one cannot trust family members,” she explained. “This is because they are taught from an early age to report each other to authorities.” For Park, the lack of trust between family members was caused by communism. Communism meant the absence of God and an absence of true love. When asked what defectors needed the most, she replied, “love, love, love.” Because she believed that only those who know and understand God’s love are capable of giving it, her most important criterion for hiring staff at her school is that they are Christian. The reason for her reluctance to accept me as a volunteer was for this reason – I was not Protestant Christian, and she normally only allowed Protestants to teach and volunteer at the school.

Jarrett Zigon (Zigon 2013) in his ethnographic work on HIV-positive former drug users in Russia, asserts that love is the demand through which moral experience takes shape. Love, he writes, “shapes how people think of and live their lives” by making those in “normal” love relationships strive for emotional self-control and responsibility (201). Zigon asserts that former drug users thought of love as a way to rehabilitate themselves and live normal lives. In other words, to Zigon’s interlocutors

in post-Soviet Russia, love was about the struggle to ethically *remake oneself* and build a new life.

I draw attention to how love was a call to relationship by South Korean Christians to *remake North Koreans*. The perception that North Koreans lacked love recast South Koreans as the “adults” who needed to show defectors a specifically Christian love and bring them into the family of Christianity, a place where God’s love ruled supreme. The new family of Christianity constructed around the defector “children” was crucial to raise the unsaved (and immoral) children into full, moral, Christian adults. The moral subjectivity that was aimed for was the reborn, saved, and morally and economically responsible adult who was capable of returning love. Love was not only a way to transform children into adults, but also a way to create a new family of God and a new nation ruled by God.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which North Korean defectors are constructed as people without family and love by South Korean Protestants. As people without an understanding of love, North Koreans were perceived as needing God’s love, the only love that could rebuild the perceived broken family of North Koreans as well as the divided family of Korea. Focusing on the aid provided by Peace Church's North Korean Ministry, which had the largest population of defector youth in Seoul at the time of my fieldwork, I show how the institutional structure recast the subjectivity of North Koreans as the youngest children in need of a new family and God’s love. Constructing North Koreans as children, I argue, was a crucial part of domestication – of placing North Korean defectors into the center of a new

family of South Korean Christianity. It also changed the subjectivity of South Korean Protestants, transforming them into the “parents” and teachers of North Korean children. As the basic building block of the nation, the attempt to build a new family was about raising God’s Warriors, who would go on to build a new nation.

North Koreans without True Family

Many church and NGO programs focused on the troubles in North Korean families and behavioral problems of North Korean defector youth. The perception that North Koreans do not understand the importance of family was in large part produced by the very real problems that faced many defector families. Typical defector family problems included divorce, alcoholism, poverty, domestic abuse, and in some tragic cases, suicide. These family troubles manifested through behavioral problems with North Korean defector youth, the focus of many church and NGO programs.

Violence was a theme of defector “culture” as interpreted by South Koreans, with domestic violence being one of the most common problems. Domestic violence by North Korean defector men towards their female partners was reported to be extremely common and an accepted part of North Korean “culture.” One older defector woman insinuated that the reason she left North Korea was to flee an abusive relationship with her husband. This is a common finding in defector research (Choi 2014; Han 2013). Child abuse was another heartbreakingly familiar story told by defectors. One teenager I knew whose parents were killed in North Korea before their

escape was physically abused by her grandmother. Another youth was physically and mentally abused by her North Korean stepbrother and stepfather. Her mother, who knew about the violence, could not or did not protect her daughter for reasons that were unclear.

Non-traditional family formations were the norm for defectors. Due to the common practice of North Korean women being sold to Chinese farmers as brides in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was not unusual for a defector youth to have multiple “mothers” or “fathers.” A typical North Korean woman might have been married two or three times – once in North Korea, once in China, and once (or twice) in South Korea. The children of these unions were sometimes stranded either in North Korea or China, with parents struggling to bring their children to the South once they settle. Since North Koreans stay in China without documents, these children are stateless as they cannot be officially registered. Some NGOs estimate the number of stateless children in China at around 20,000, although they acknowledge it is impossible to have an accurate count (Park 2014).

Finally, South Korean aid workers spoke of North Korean sexual immorality. Many North Korean men and women did not get legally married but simply lived together for a period of time before breaking up, and had children out of wedlock. In South Korea until recently, those who were divorced or single mothers were objects of shame. In my own family, one cousin rarely attended family gatherings due to the stigma of his divorce. Coming from middle-class Christian families where nuclear families without divorce were the norm, South Korean aid workers saw these

alternate family formations as signs of immorality or an immoral “culture.” South Koreans themselves had relatively recently stopped their own practice of polygamy, an option that was only available to elites who could afford to support additional family members. The practice was prevalent at the end of the *Chosŏn* Dynasty in the late 20th century (Deuchler 1967). During Japanese colonization and beyond, there were informal practices of having second or third wives. The practice of calling mistresses of Korean men *ssae-k'on-dū*⁷⁶ is likely a remnant of polygamy.

South Korean aid workers shared stories about “problem” defector families with surprising ease. Without much prompting, they would share the hardships of a given defector’s personal life. In contrast, very few defectors I knew openly talked about their family problems. While family problems are common in traumatized refugee communities around the world (Haines 1996), it is noteworthy that they were interpreted as problems rooted in North Korean culture and communism. Most South Korean Protestant aid workers, who made up 90% of all defector aid workers, felt that the only solution to this “problem” of North Korean families was God's love and the ensuing integration of defectors into the family of South Korean Christianity. The new family of God was also an intervention into the traditional family of South Korea, which is seen as immoral and corrupt.

⁷⁶ Transliterated from the word “second,” as in “second wives.”

The Family in South Korea

Confucianism is the most common system of thought used to explain Korean society and culture (Baker 2008; Deuchler 1967; Deuchler 1992; Haboush and Deuchler 2002; Kendall 1996; Robinson 2014). In the hierarchy of a Confucian society, children are expected to obey their parents, a wife is expected to obey her husband, and [male] subjects are expected to obey the king. In Confucian thought, these relationships form the foundation of a virtuous and moral society. Whether or not Confucianism is, in fact, the basis for Korean society may be under current debate, but it is commonly referred to in conversations about Korean culture, and how notions of age, status and gender inflect Korean families and society (K. 2013). For example, the cultural preference of a father's lineage or "blood" over a mother's lineage is explained through Confucianism. In South Korea, the blood of the father determines one's place in the world, while the mother's blood is thought of as impermanent in legal institutions, and less valuable in practice. Moreover, age is a determining factor in social relations – those who are older in the family are treated with deference and respect, while those younger are expected to obey.

The family, as defined by the *Hoku* Family Registry System, is the basic building block of the nation (Nam 2010; Yune 2005). The *Hoku* Family Registry System is a system of recording individuals as part of families, with men listed as the head of household. The *Hoku* System shows how blood remains a structuring rhetoric for both the family and the nation, and thus poses a dilemma for North Koreans who do not have institutional lineage.

Hoju Family Registry System

The government-controlled Hoju Family Registry System arose in the second half of the *Chosŏn* Dynasty.⁷⁷ The institution remained remarkably unchanged over the course of Japanese colonization and national division. Only recently has the system been revised to allow women legal rights as heads of households. Lineages were traced through the husband's relatives. When the male head of household died, the eldest son, regardless of age, became the head of the household. Attributed to Neo-Confucian ideology, the family registry system was similar to a birth certificate but carried greater significance – it revealed one's ancestors, social class, and place of origin (Kim 1994). It was also used for the purpose of taxation and military service (Nam 2010), two of the only “duties” of citizens listed in the South Korean Constitution.

Throughout South Korea's political and social changes, the *Hoju* System remained virtually intact until 2005. It was a civil institution and an effective way for the state to “see” its population – it was a requirement for citizens to conduct any legal or business matters. For example, when one bought a house or applied for a passport, a copy of the family registry was needed. Having a traceable family lineage was the basis for citizenship in South Korea. Since the family registry system meant

⁷⁷ Around the 17th century, see (Yune 2005).

that one could trace her ancestry back to hundreds of years, it also certified membership in the nation of Korea.

The *Hoku* System also privileged the family unit as the central building block of the nation. In this system, the individual was subsumed first by the family, and then again by one's place within the family hierarchy. Women were secondary in importance to men, and played a functional role in providing and raising children. When a woman married, she was moved from her father's registry to her husband's registry, and none of her descendants were noted on her father's registry. Similarly, the woman's relatives were not legally recognized as being part of the family of her children. The registry mirrored the idea that an outsider, a woman, moved into the domain of the male family. The concept of inside/outside in family relations has been important since pre-modern times. During the *Chosŏn* dynasty, upper-class women were strictly secluded from the outside world and limited to the walls of the household compound (Bishop 1970). A common saying in Korea says that women rule the inside domain, while men rule the outside. Even in today's society, the notion that women rule the (inside) house and men's domain is (outside) society/business is commonly accepted.

On the father's side, relatives are known by the pronoun *ch'in*, which means close or intimate. On the mother's side, all relatives are referred to by the pronoun *e*, meaning outside, the same pronoun used for foreign or foreigner. In contrast, in contemporary practice both the mother's and father's relatives are recognized and visited during holidays. At times when the two compete, the father's side usually

takes precedence. The relative importance of the father's side is reflected in familial terms of “little” or “big” father or “little” or “big” mother, to refer to uncles or aunts on the father's side (*chakŭn appa/omma, k'ŭn appa//omma*). Relative importance, however, does not mean intimacy. Fathers are rarely involved in familial affairs, which are considered the mother's domain; nor do they play any kind of role in the household due to South Korea's long working hours. As such, fatherhood is equated with respect and importance, but also physical and emotional distance. Moreover, as mothers tend to seek help with children from their immediate family rather than their new in-laws, the mother's side of the family is often far more intimate with children while paradoxically being called “outside” relatives (Deuchler 1967).

Due to the importance of the male in this longstanding lineage system, there has been a strong preference for male offspring in the past that is now starting to abate. In the past, not being able to conceive a son was considered a woman's failure, and could be grounds for divorce or abandonment. In practice, blame for not conceiving a son is still placed on women (Larsen, Chung, and Gupta 1998; Peterson 1983; Westley and Choe 2007), a theme that reoccurs often in Korean family dramas. The pressure to have a male child was so prevalent that it led to high rates of abortion and resulted to the current predicament where males outnumber females at a rate of 1.07:1, and 1.13:1 in the 15–24 category (according to the CIA World Factbook). Moreover, the fertility rate is low at 1.25, hitting an all-time low in 2005 at 1.08.⁷⁸ Considering the optimal birthrate for a country is over 2, the combination of

⁷⁸ Korean Statistical Information Service, <http://kosis.kr/eng/>.

imbalance and low fertility caused the government to intervene. The state now promotes the current trend of importing brides from East and Southeast Asia to marry men in the countryside, and further supports the marriage of North Korean women to South Korean men.

The *Haju* System was criticized and targeted by women's groups in South Korea for discriminating against women, and was finally abolished in 2008. One of the main problems with the system was that a woman could never be recognized as the head of a household. Single mothers or divorced women who had custody of their children could not have their children placed under their registry; children were legally tied to their former husband's or father's lineage. This meant that power over one's children were in the hands of a woman's ex-husband or father, who had the ability to make all legal decisions pertaining to them. Considering that family registry systems are used in countries where the family or household is legally viewed as the fundamental unit of a nation, the position of woman as secondary to the man meant that women did not belong to the nation unless they were connected to a male figure. Moreover, as people who do not marry are considered children, even once they reach the age of majority (Kendall 1996), unmarried women in particular are targeted as a "growing problems" who are not fully participating in the nation (Single Women a Growing Problem 2012). Part of the "problem" of unmarried women is due to alarming statistics that South Korea will become "extinct" by the year 2750 unless it boosts its current low birth rate of 1.19 per woman {Citation}.

In the end, the *Haju* System proved discriminatory to more than just women: for North Korean defectors who have no family registry that can be accessed (the North has a similar *Haju* System but these documents are unavailable), not having a family in the South means they are legally orphans. For North Koreans who come south without parents, the family registry lists parents as “unknown” – a similar practice with orphans in South Korea. Not having parents, and not being able to trace one's family origins is considered a sign of questionable moral character, and has led to much discrimination for orphans in South Korea. It also targets North Korean “children” as objects of domestication – to bring them into a new family lineage, one ruled by God.

Christianity as a Solution to the Immoral Korean Family

Protestants in South Korea view Christianity as an important departure from “tradition.” “Tradition” is connected to religions such as shamanism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, while Christianity represents a way of being modern. In addition to abstention from alcohol and smoking, Christians are actively encouraged to engage in practices that differentiate them from non-Christians. These practices including the use of the term *chuil* (God’s day) instead of the standard *illoyil* (Sunday), refusing to see fortune tellers for marriage suitability, doing yoga, or even seeing acupuncturists. Instead, Christians consult their pastors for marriage suitability, see western medicine doctors, and shun all traces of Buddhism or shamanism.

One of the greatest distinctions that Christians make is through the deliberate departure from “traditional” rites and rituals associated with family, including marriage, ancestor rituals, and funerals. One significant break from custom was marriage ceremonies. Distinct from traditional weddings, during which the bride and groom wear *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing), western customs of white dresses and suits have become the norm for this newly-educated population (Kendall 1996). There are remnants of tradition, however, in the retention of the *p’aepaek* ceremony, when the new couple receives blessings from the elders of the family, and the carrying of the groom’s mother and then the bride around the *p’aebaek* room. In recent years, there has even been a mini-revival of the traditional wedding ceremony, in which bride and groom wear *hanbok* instead of the western wedding outfits (Kendall 1996). These traces of “tradition” are shunned for the most part by Protestants. Even the wearing of modified *hanbok*, a modern and more comfortable take on traditional clothing that has become more popular in the last decade, is frowned upon by Protestants as a return to Korea’s nefarious roots.

Another family ritual that has been altered by Christians is *chesa*, or ancestor worship. This Confucian ritual to remember one’s ancestors, particularly close family members who have recently passed away, has been the source of much strain within families as the burden of the food preparation goes to women, but women are not allowed to participate in the ritual (or play a secondary role). Protestants that I knew did not practice *chesa* for their ancestors, instead choosing to hold a prayer service in the home for a close and recently passed loved one. In one humorous alteration of the

ritual, my aunt went to my grandfather's grave, and instead of the common *chesa* ritual of pouring a cup of *soju* (Korean alcohol) for him, she poured him a cup of Sprite.

Finally, funerals can be markedly different for Christians and non-Christians. At traditional funerals, grieving families and friends wore beige hemp cloth rather than black. In recent funerals, particularly Christian ones, the attendees wore black in the western tradition. Moreover, Christians eschewed traditional gravesites for cremation. At one influential mega-church in Seoul, congregants were encouraged to cremate their loved ones and spread their ashes at a designated area of a church retreat center. Instead of visits to graves during the death of anniversaries, one would instead visit a church retreat, another way of altering family practices to be closer to God.

While many of the practices of family rituals have affected mainstream society due to the influx of Western culture, what I want to emphasize is that Protestants thought of these differences as being representative of their faith and of their modernity. For them, it was a reordering of the social world according to Christian principles, many of which came from the West, and a way to redeem South Korea's corrupt past in relation to family, such as its history of overseas adoption. A "proper" Christian family was strikingly similar to the image that conservative missionaries brought with them – nuclear, with no divorce, and with no children born out of wedlock.

Children without Lineages

South Korea has the longest history of international adoption in the world, as well as the greatest numbers of relinquished children. The origins of this adoption history lie in the Korean War and ensuing division. With a weak social welfare system and stigma against orphans, particularly mixed race children (the offspring of male U.S. military personnel and South Korean women), South Korea quickly became the biggest exporter of babies to the Western world. Between 1953 and 2001, over 148,000 children were sent abroad for international adoption (Ministry of Welfare 2002). Over 75% of this number went to the United States (Kim 2011).

Critics blame South Korea's adoption history on the *Hojiu* System (Kim 2011, Nam 2010). Given that citizenship in South Korea was heavily dependent on the father's blood, and single mothers could not be heads of household, children born out of wedlock, those of mixed race, or orphaned children faced great discrimination in South Korea. Many of the children given up for adoption during South Korea's rapid economic development in the 1960s and 1970s were from young female factory workers living outside of their homes who could not face the stigma of being a single mother nor had the resources to support their children (Kim 2011).

Children without families were and continue to be considered unsettling if not dangerous: since family is the basis of all moral education, those without lineages could not have their moral character accounted for. Moreover, lineages can tell others about one's status in the past — those who come from *yangban* or elite stock, for example, are considered of higher moral character (mainly due to the importance of

education) than those who come from a lowly or servant class. As such, orphans or those with mixed heritage face stigma due to their lack of traceable lineage. Mixed children, in particular, faced terrible discrimination as they were often assumed to be the offspring of U.S. military and Korean prostitutes.

Since the early 1990s, Korean adoptees began returning to Korea to find their birth families. With their stories highlighted regularly in the media, adoption became a mark of national shame. While the South Korean government attributes its much-critiqued history of overseas adoption to the hardship of development (Kim 2010; McKee 2015), the adoption of South Korean babies continues at a rate of about 2,000 per year, despite the fact that South Korea has joined the ranks of developed countries. Moreover, social welfare programs for single or widowed mothers have not significantly improved, nor has the stigma of being a single mother eased. The irony is that South Korean birth rates are at a historic low and causing a crisis of state family management.

In the initial years of the famine,⁷⁹ the image of *kkoch'chaepi* (homeless North Korean children) scrounging for food on the streets of China was pervasive in the media. While there are North Korean orphans, they make up a small percentage of the overall population. The perception that most North Koreans are orphans, and thus in need of a replacement family, can persist due to the fact that many have family members far away.

⁷⁹ The famine that led to the start of North Koreans to defect to the South in large numbers began in 1994 and continued until 1998.

Special Children with Special Needs

Children occupy a special space in the humanitarian imagination. They are the ultimate victims. Malkki calls refugee children “bare humanity,” or those who have lost connection with their culture and identity (Malkki 1995). Similarly, Shin, the North Korean prison camp “orphan” discussed at the beginning of this chapter is also bare humanity, seen as a child, “a powerless being with no consciousness of history, traditions, culture, or nationality” (Malkki 1995:11). To many South Korean observers, Shin was the ultimate victim because he was born into a prison camp in North Korea. As someone without real family, he escaped North Korea alone and arrived in South Korea alone. Up until 2014, when North Korea aired footage of his father in an attempt to discredit him, Shin thought he was an orphan, and was even “adopted” by an American family who was touched by his story (Harden 2013). This is despite the fact that Shin escaped as an adult in 2005 and is now 32 years old.

The powerful image of the child, along with the belief that adults were not redeemable or malleable, led to a focus on youth in defector aid. At the time of my fieldwork, there were a total of seven alternative schools for youth, and a new one opened right before I left. Five of the seven schools were run by Christians, and most received minimal funding from the government. This meant that most of their operational expenses came from churches or from private Christian donors. Due to irregular employment or family problems at home, students took advantage of the optional dormitories available at most of these schools. As a given in South Korean society, but more so in the alternative schools for defector youth, students were

provided two or three meals a day, as well as snacks, clothes, and optional extracurricular activities. The food was necessary, I was told, because many students were not properly fed at home.

At Great Light School, one of my field sites, a simple breakfast of *kimpap* (Korean sushi) or pastry was provided, and lunch was made by church volunteers. A total of six churches rotated the responsibilities of bringing and cooking a nutritious meal for the 70 or so staff and students who ate at the school everyday. Similarly, when there were external visitors, they often brought food for the students. The bringing of food is typical for a visit to any office or NGO – usually one brings a few snacks or drinks, and if it is a particularly large office, then it is understood that the drinks or snacks are given in a quantity for only the immediate co-workers. Visitors at the school, however, often arrived with enough food or presents for the entire school. For example, one visiting South Korean Christian businessman who owned a bakery brought enough bread to feed 70 or more people. When I came into the office, there was a small mountain of individually-wrapped pieces of bread in one corner. The buying of food was a common practice of showing affection or furthering social relations in South Korea, but for the Protestants who volunteered and gave money to schools, food provisioning was one important way in which South Koreans showed their Christian love.

There were also a plethora of “leadership” activities targeted at youth, including summer camps, history trips, recreational outings, and leadership trainings. The term “youth” applied to a diversity of ages; for programs focusing on college

students, it could apply to those who were up to 35 years of age. The inclusion of those much older was due to the fact that many defectors were older than the typical South Korean college student. Many needed to “catch up” with their schooling in South Korea and took many years to finish high school. In addition, delays in schooling from living in China and the long journey to South Korea, as well as trying to adjust to a competitive education system led to differences averaging between five to ten years. Once accepted into a college program through a special admissions process that was much less competitive than for South Koreans, defectors found it difficult to adjust to college life. Therefore, many defectors I knew took leaves of absence from school, which sometimes became permanent. A few savvy defectors took time off to boost their English language studies by going abroad or taking classes from English institutes. Thus, “youth” programs applied to a variety of ages.

One factor to note is that many defectors looked much younger than their real ages. The appearance of youth can be attributed to nutrition shortages in North Korea that made the average North Korean shorter than their Southern counterparts. It was also a deliberate tactic — most North Koreans did not want South Korean students to know they were much older, a fact that would surely attract unwanted attention as well as pressure to pay for food and drinks. Appearing younger than their age had the added benefit of making North Koreans appear malleable and open to change. Age was important in the hierarchy of aid – in NGOs, churches and schools, North Koreans were younger than the South Koreans who ran the programs. In some rare cases, South Koreans who were younger than their North Korean charges had to

pretend to be older. At one NGO, a particularly young staff member was told to lie about her age in order to create a hierarchy between the staff and the North Koreans.

One way in which the paternalism of the NGO programs was made apparent was the terminology used to describe North Koreans. There was the overt use of the word *aetŭl* (children) to discuss them. The word *haksaeng* (student) was rarely used. While this can be attributed to the fact that the South Koreans were often significantly older than the students, there were other signs of paternalism that could not be ignored. One aid worker who was touted for his “skill” at working with defector youth, used the word *k’iwooda* (raise) when discussing his work with successfully assimilated North Korean youth. In talking about one defector’s achievements, the aid worker proudly stated, “I raised him.” The aid worker was well-recognized for his work with defectors, and I do not doubt that he helped defectors in significant ways. But I was startled by the sense of ownership implied in his use of the phrase. Later, he said, “I hope to send a defector to graduate school in the United States to study within five years.” The content and tone of his voice was one of a proud parent. Because of his work, I knew that he did not tutor or help them directly, but served more in the role of supportive friend. I also knew that through his connections, he could help a qualified defector apply for scholarships. Yet he seemed to imply that he, like a proud parent, would be sending a defector abroad.

The prevalence of youth programs in Christian NGOs, as well as significant Protestant investment into schools for youth speak to the importance of “raising” youth to become morally responsible and Christian adults. Yet not all defectors are

thought of as children. The range of ages of North Korean “youth” was from those who were 10 up to the age of 35. By using the word “raise” to describe the progress of those who were over 20 was unusual in South Korea. It had the benefit, however, of constructing the person as malleable. One NGO worker told me that older defectors are too set in their ways, and that it is too late to help them. The comment was directly reflective of the number of NGO and church programs available for youth versus a sparse number for adults.

Due to the status of defectors as orphans in South Korea’s family registry system, defectors are legally and symbolically seen as children without families – and as such, exist in a state of moral and legal ambiguity in the eyes of South Korean citizens and the state. It is in this space that conversion to Christianity becomes crucial to their movement from the space of the immoral into the space of moral citizen. As people without ancestors and parents, North Koreans have no lineage and no way to trace themselves to the original family of Korea.

However, their status as “the gift for unification given by God,” a phrase repeatedly used in the church, provided them with special status as the “children” leading to the kingdom of God, as the epigraph at the beginning of the chapter illustrates. North Korea’s status as the birthplace of Christianity in Asia, and the idea that it is also the mythical birthplace of all Koreans, makes the lineage of all North Koreans special. *Mot’aesinhang* (belief that comes from the mother’s womb) is a common idea amongst South Korean Christians. It meant that if one’s parents were Christians, then one was predestined to become Christian. For North Koreans, then,

their birthplace made them predestined to not only convert, but to become God's warriors for unification.

However, since North Korea was corrupted by the "sin" of communism, defectors are also tainted by this sin. But when symbolically and practically treated as children, defectors are rendered blameless for the mistakes of their "father," Kim Il-sung and his North Korean state. Like anyone, they have the ability to be reborn and cleansed of the sins they came into the world with. Yet their status as gifts from God and as children gives them a special place in the family of South Korean Christianity. They are the youngest child, with a new father – God the Father. The family of God, with God as the Father, supersedes all other lineages. It is this family that can unite North and South into a single nation. Similar to the father in the stereotypical South Korean family, God the Father is outside and distant. He provides, but from afar. He is all-knowing, all-deserving of respect. His love is all-encompassing, but not intimate. He provides in invisible and incomprehensible ways. Similarly to children who must obey without question, one cannot fully comprehend both God the Father or the father of the household until one is an adult. The members of the household – in this case, the church, are responsible for "raising" the child with a moral and spiritual education.

Unfortunately, God the Father as taught by South Korean Protestants was eerily similar to the image of Kim Il-sung, the father of the North Korean nation. South Korean Protestants themselves promoted this idea – the pastor of Peace's North Korean Mission wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the similarities between *juche*

ideology⁸⁰ and Christianity, stating that Kim Il-sung, who had come from a Christian family, had replaced God with himself. This wrong had to be righted by the South Korean church, he told me in an interview, an idea that was repeated in sermons and trainings for North Korean defector aid. The similarity in ideology and even structure of the South Korean Protestant church and North Korean culture was commented upon regularly. It was also a barrier to North Korean understandings of Christianity, because of its similarity to a belief system that they were taught to abhor. The similarities are perhaps the reason why so many North Koreans I knew answered, “I don’t know yet [what I think] about Christianity” when asked about their belief. Another factor may have been the fact that North Koreans did have family, and did not want another one.

Defector Orphans and the Replacement Family of Church

Far away from the main complex of buildings that made up the bulk of Peace Church, the North Korean Ministry was located in the basement of a four-story building that also housed the administrative offices for the ministry. The sign was almost invisible to those not looking for it to discourage potentially hostile or generally unwanted attention. Indeed, many Peace Church members did not know of the special service's existence, a deliberate tactic. It was carefully exclusive: all new members were required to attend a four-week “training” in which the purpose and

⁸⁰ North Korea’s ruling ideology that is based on the principle of self-reliance.

goals of North Korean Mission were outlined. Those who were not in line with the goals of the church were weeded out during these sessions.

The Ministry was a relatively intimate setting of about 250 people in a small space. Ushers greeted each person warmly as they entered the room, making sure to note first-time visitors. Birthdays were celebrated once a month with a collective cake, and lunch was always served after the Bible study that immediately followed the service. The overall atmosphere was one of a small and close-knit church abroad with little resources, or what South Koreans called *kaech'ŏk kyohoe*. *Kaech'ŏk* means “to cultivate, or to clear, or to claim,” and the closest translation to English would be “settler church.” The term is used to refer to a new mission church in an area that is hostile to Christianity, such as in an overseas mission context. Settler churches “break ground” in a new country, thus the term gives a sense of adventure or exploration. Since North Korea is the final goal for the ministry, settler church is a fitting description for the Ministry.

The service was both startling and comforting in its physical intimacy: it was a small space filled with folding chairs and neighbors in uncomfortable touching distance. One initially felt overwhelmed by the bodies and noise. The small stage at the center of the circular room had a “praise team” – a group of singers and musicians playing for the praise portion of the service. The service was proceeded by a long period of song led by a team of 5-6 people who sang, played instruments, held their hands up in supplication, and cried along with many members of the congregation as they reached a state of ecstatic praise. Throughout the service, there were moments

where everyone was asked to pray out loud (*t'ongsŏngkito*), leading to a sudden increase in the level of noise as well as frequent and startling sounds of wailing and crying.

Despite the noise, one felt welcomed into the fold by the warm greetings, smiles and general expressions of concern. It was not a place where one could easily come and go in anonymity. For example, at every service, new people were immediately identified and asked to stand in front and introduce themselves. After the introduction, everyone sang while holding their hands in a welcoming gesture with the words, “We welcome you with Jesus' love.” At another point in the service, the congregation was asked to turn to one another and say phrases (which changed weekly), such as “I love you in Jesus' name.” New members were not permitted to attend the service beyond the first one; they were required to attend a four-week training on Sunday during the time of the service in order to understand the “mission” around giving love to North Korean defectors.

Sarang, or love, was a major theme in the service and at the Ministry in general. *Sarang* is a modern concept. *Sarang* in its *hanja* (Chinese character) form originally meant to think, or to respect. It was considered the domain of men; the male space of the house was called *sarangbang* (room to think). To talk about bonds of affection, Koreans would use the term *chŏng*, a bond between people that develops over time. While *chŏng* is still referred to regularly, the verb *sarang* is now used similarly as in the West – to say, “I love you” to family, friends, and lovers, although with much less frequency. In North Korea, *sarang* was almost exclusively used for

love of the nation. The name of the Ministry was occasionally referred to as the Love Ministry due to its focus on love, which was interpreted positively by North Koreans as “Ministry to give love to North Korea[ns],” one reason given by the Pastor as to why the Peace Church was popular.

Like many other public spaces in South Korea, the Ministry was organized around gender, with the male pastor at the top of the hierarchy. Most public speaking was done by older men – even the praise group that led the singing of gospel songs was led by a man, although most of the singers were women. In fact, the majority of the church attendees were women of all ages. Young women staffed the front table and greeted people at the entrance to the church, taking attendance and giving out copies of the latest church bulletin and service agenda. Older women, along with some young women, were in charge of food distribution, while older men directed people to eat or set up tables and chairs. While the majority North Korean defectors were college students in their 20s and 30s, the minority of South Koreans were slightly older. The South Korean “youth” were not casual attendees – most had been recruited from other Sarang Church departments to work as Bible study leaders or helpers. The large number of wealthy, older South Koreans who attended the North Korean Ministry held positions of power and contributed their resources to the church.

Any potential for anonymity is mitigated by a practice of eating lunch with assigned Bible study groups. These Bible study groups are assigned according to age after new members complete a mandatory month-long introductory training session.

The Bible study group I was assigned to was made up of North and South Koreans in their 20s and 30s. Most of the South Koreans in our group were older than the North Koreans, a deliberate tactic of the Ministry to pair younger North Koreans with older South Koreans who could act as older siblings and spiritual and cultural guides to South Korean society as well as to Christian belief. While South Korean social relations are typically structured by age and familiar terms such as *oppa/hyōng* or *nuna/ōnni* (older brother and older sister, respectively), the church hierarchy was especially so. In the church family, God was the father; the pastor and church elders functioned as surrogate parents; and younger South Koreans were older siblings. The family of God was realized through the church structure with the North Korean defectors situated as the youngest, most problematic children who needed love and attention.

The perception that North Koreans needed to be welcomed into the family of God was perhaps felt more urgently because of the fact that some of the defectors were orphans or de-facto orphans. Hanna, one member of my Bible study, had both parents in North Korea, and only she and her sister were in South Korea. Another Bible study member had lost his parents and was saving money to smuggle his only sister to the South. Yet another lost his mother during the year that I attended the church, and spoke often of a pregnant sister whom he was trying to smuggle to China. The perception of North Korean youth as orphans allowed South Koreans to see them as needing not only God's love but also the family of the church. While the subject of family came up occasionally during the Bible study, it was almost always in the

context of loss: missing or losing a family member. As the youngest and newest sibling, these losses made North Koreans the object of pity but also care. Unlike traditional South Korean families, these children were sacred and privileged – they came from the birthplace of Korean Christianity, which put them at the center of a complex system of discipline and high-stakes reward.

The church as surrogate family was apparent during major holidays. As with any church, there were always celebrations for major church events. However, during the actual day that was often spent with biological family, many defectors were alone. This is when church members stepped in to support those without family in the country. In my Bible study, the church official “in charge” of our group invited us to a special lunch at his posh home on New Year’s Day, a day normally spent with family members. In addition to other kinds of material support, church officials and Bible study group leaders served as an important source of emotional support for lonely defectors. My Bible study leader did not understand how lonely her group members were until one defector told her he had no one to celebrate his birthday with. She immediately invited him to dinner and celebrated his birthday with him. After that, she began regularly calling defectors on their birthdays or holidays as part of her work.

The North Korean Family

Selling My Daughter for 100 won

The woman was emaciated / The sign hung from her neck / “Selling
my daughter for 100 won” / With the little girl standing next to her /
The woman stood in the market place.

The woman was a mute / She gazes at her daughter / Her maternal
feelings are being sold / Cursed at by passers-by / The woman stares
only at the ground / The woman has no more tears.

Clutching her mother's skirt / “My mother's dying,” cries the daughter
/ The woman's lips tremble / The woman knows no gratitude / The
soldier gave her 100 won, saying / I'm not buying your daughter, I'm
buying your motherly love” / The woman grabs the money and runs
off.

The woman is a mother / With the 100 won she received for the sale of
her daughter / She hurries back, carrying bread / She shoves the bread
into her daughters mouth / “Forgive me,” wails the woman.

— Jang Jin-sung⁸¹

“I sell my daughter for 100 won” is the most popular North Korean poem in South Korea. I have heard it used in at least three different events for North Korea, and it was written by Jang Jin-sung, who used to be an elite poet in Pyongyang (Jang 2009). The shocking title of the poem seems to speak to the discourse that South Korean Christians are promoting – that North Koreans do not know how to love, or do not know the meaning of family. However Jang’s poem tells a different story: the mother sacrifices the daughter for the sake of keeping her alive – to give her food. The bond between mother and child might have been intentionally broken, but the love between the mother and child is intact. Instead of lack of love, starvation is the

⁸¹ Poem translated by Kevin Kim in 100 won is roughly equivalent to 73 U.S. cents or 47p (Jin-sung n.d.)

reason behind the dissolution of the family. Thus, the lack of family ties implicates the regime, rather than something innate to North Korean culture.

In sharp contrast to Shin Dong-hyuk, the protagonist at the center of *Escape from Camp 14*, most of the North Korean defectors I met during my one-and-a-half years of fieldwork in South Korea all had immediate or extended family members in South Korea or strong ties to remaining family members in the North. Similarly, those with family members in North Korea strategized about how to bring their family members to the South, often at considerable cost to their personal lives in terms of working many jobs or living in poverty.

One North Korean man I met at church repeatedly asked us to pray for his pregnant sister to make it safely across the border. Despite his precarious employment, he paid over U.S. \$3,000 to traffickers in a failed attempt to bring her over and immediately began to save for another expensive attempt. One college student defector told me he offered to bring his parents to South Korea, but they did not want to leave the North because of the dangers of crossing and the difficulty of adjusting to a new life. They preferred to stay in North Korea with money he sent them regularly. Similarly, every defector I knew regularly sent money to family members in the North regardless of their dire financial circumstances, contributing to a thriving underground economy of remittances (Lankov 2013).

North Koreans with and without family members in South Korea also formed networks with both South and North Koreans, which Bell (2013) calls “pseudo-kinship” ties. While some of the defectors in his study felt intimacy with South

Korean churches in NGOs, Bell found the kin networks between North Koreans were more affectionate and long lasting than with South Koreans (Bell 2013:20).

North Korean Defiance against the Family of God

North Korean defectors in the Peace Church familial structure reacted with occasional moments of defiance and rebellion. Small acts included not showing up to Sunday service despite the fact this could mean no scholarship funds (monies were only given to those who attended three out of four services a month) or skipping Bible study after eating lunch. As a result of widespread ditching, the Bible study was restructured so that it was held *before* lunch. Other acts of defiance included playing with their cell phones, coming to service very late, or fidgeting during prayer. Most of the “Bible study” sessions at the church involved no reading of the Bible, and often had a component of scolding from the leader about being late, not bringing a Bible, or not paying attention during service.

On a larger scale, resistance to conversion was perhaps the greatest act of defiance. A common phrase heard among North Koreans when asked about their belief in Christianity was, “I don't know yet.” While the phrase could be taken as meaning, “I don't understand Christianity yet,” there was another aspect of its widespread use. It connoted a lack of commitment, a way to signify defectors’ lack of enthusiasm for a religion and an institution that sought to restrict them even as South Korea was touted as a land of freedom. In conjunction with this resistance was the regular disappearance of defectors from social life – for a period of a few months, a

defector would stop answering phone calls or coming to church, without much explanation. Later, s/he would reappear nonchalantly as if nothing happened. This was referred to by Southerners as “acts of betrayal,” as often there was little explanation by Northerners about the lack of contact. North Koreans were acting out their roles as children as they were expected to – by being defiant to the “parents” that were oppressing them.

South Korean Resistance

Defectors were not the only group in the church to feel the constraints of love. Due to the various practices outlined above, there was a high level of burnout in the church amongst the South Korean congregation. Particularly amongst the young Bible study leaders who had the most direct contact with defectors, and gave an incredible amount of their personal time, money, and energy. They also had the least power over church policies, which were in the control of the church elders. Their frustration was apparent in their lack of control over practices they felt were divisive or offensive to defectors. One such divisive policy was the practice of asking defectors and South Koreans to introduce themselves differently, marking North Koreans as others. Defectors were asked to introduce themselves by their *Hanawŏn* numbers,⁸² while South Koreans gave their previous church or church department affiliation. Although the South Koreans often complained to the church

⁸² The “class” numbers marking the year of “graduating” *Hanawŏn*, the 3-month adjustment program for all new defectors.

administration, they had little power as they were low in the church hierarchy.

Although they ranked higher than defectors, they were merely the older siblings, not the parents in the figurative church family. As such, their responsibility was both to protect their younger siblings and bear the brunt of the work of the family.

Most, if not all the South Korean youth members were heavily involved in the North Korean Ministry, which required an enormous time commitment. South Korean youth were responsible for the day-to-day administering of the Ministry – organizing the praise team, running the Bible study, and taking care of setup and cleaning. They were also on the front line of teaching the foreign language of Christianity to defectors, often literally translating foreign concepts of “heaven,” “God,” and “amen” to confused North Koreans. In addition to Bible study, the leaders held one-on-one disciple trainings with one or two defectors in her or his group that were identified as having potential, and attended weekly meetings with the pastor. As Bible study leaders and older siblings, they played the crucial role of giving the most direct love to defectors – by visiting their homes, by calling them, by sharing meals and knowing the details of their lives. The details of defectors’ lives, as well as their spiritual progress, would then be conveyed to the church leadership. For a person with a full-time job, as my Bible study leader had, the amount of time that was demanded by the church was tremendous. By my rough calculations, the Bible study leader had church-related outings, Bible studies, or informal meetings with defectors at least four or five days a week, in a country famous for its long working hours and regular office dinners.

Perhaps the greatest reason for burnout was the feeling of betrayal that many South Koreans reported. After giving of their affection, time, and money, many church members had experiences of sudden loss of contact, or hurtful accusations of “using” defectors in some way. Because most of the church members were volunteers untrained in social welfare or dealing with a traumatized refugee population, these incidents would drive South Koreans to quit the Ministry and transfer to other departments. North Koreans, in turn, felt guilty or hurt that their South Korean friends no longer attended the Ministry, and did not understand why South Koreans left.

As a result of frequent “trainings” conducted by the Ministry pastor in other church departments, which emphasized God’s calling to help North Koreans, there was a steady trickle of new congregation members wanting to serve. However, once they realized the enormous effort demanded of them, most stopped coming. “South Koreans also need guidance and love,” Kim explained. “If they can’t get it, they will turn to another division or church that can give it to them.” For the small number of South Korean youth working for the Ministry, this meant that there were never enough people to relieve some of the work burden, nor many people to replace them once they left. In the few moments when North Koreans were not present, South Koreans in my Bible study expressed fatigue or hinted at wanting to transfer to other departments that demanded less from them. It was clear from these various practices that the South Korean youth had to act as the older, wiser, and self-sacrificing sibling. This was evident about the complaints they made about church hierarchy to me in private, while asking North Koreans to obey the same policies they complained about.

They were forced to model behavior that they did not necessarily agree with, a position in which many older siblings are placed. Patience and total commitment was demanded from them, while North Korean defectors were treated as wayward but precious children.

Families versus Friends

Hanna complained a number of times about the ways in which she felt South Koreans saw her as an object of pity, but not as an equal. “They look down on us,” Hanna asserted, “They don't want to have a relationship with us. They just want to feel better about their lives.” Hanna and many others like her often asserted that South Koreans were not interested in long-term relationships. This core conflict between friendship versus family can be illuminated by a difference in language between North and South Korean. In South Korea, as mentioned earlier, all social relationships are delineated by familial terms. Older/younger sister and older/younger brother are also commonly used for friendships. The only people who would be called *ch'ingu* (loosely translated to friend) are people who are of the same age group. Although the word contains the character for intimacy, *chin*, the term can be used to describe a relationship between newly acquainted strangers. In other words, rather than a signifier of intimacy, *ch'ingu* merely denotes a lack of hierarchy between two people. In contrast, in North Korea, family relationships are limited to family, and social relationships are signified by the terms *tongmu* or *tongji* (comrade, but use

varies according to age). The root of this word, *tong*, means similar or equal. In other words, when North Koreans complained about South Koreans not wanting to be friends, they were complaining about the monitoring and disciplinary aspects of the new “family” of God that was missing a key component – intimacy. Or, perhaps they were making claims that the kind of intimacy that they were accustomed to (based on equal relations) could not be possible under this type of hierarchy. It is clear that defectors did not want new types of discipline or a new family, especially with the hierarchy and restrictions that came from it. Instead, they longed for the intimacy that came with close friendships. Moreover, they wanted to feel they were accepted as they were – not for how they needed to change, or what they might do in the future.

The New Korean Family: Overcoming Barriers of Division

The new Christian Korean family that South Korean Protestants attempted to create with North Korean defectors was one that was brought together by God’s love. God’s love was seen as the glue that could bind together differences in culture that were acknowledged by both sides. But God’s love was also seen as a way to motivate South Koreans to love North Koreans, a love that did not come naturally as a result of years of anti-communist propaganda. Pastor Cho stated, “By nature, North Koreans love North Korea. Even without God. But South Koreans love North Korea because of God.” For church officials, God’s love was the only way to move beyond the walls of hatred and fear that had been constructed against North Korea over 70 years of division.

Another barrier to creating a unified family came from South Korean emphases on background, education, class, and possessions. The value that South Koreans placed on these things led North Koreans to feel inferior. The differences were most apparent during Bible study prayer requests. During these times, North Koreans would share their requests, which were usually grave in nature, such as “keep a family member safe as they cross the borders of China and Thailand,” “help me raise money to bring a family member to South Korea,” “help my sick parent or relative,” “help me find a good-paying job,” etc. South Korean concerns were relatively minor: “help me find a good love match,” “help me get a raise at my job,” “help me be a better Christian,” etc. The differences in life situations were so great that North Koreans rarely turned to South Koreans in times of trouble. Similarly, South Koreans did not open up to North Koreans in times of hardship. Pastor Cho mused, “Because the issues are so different, it’s hard to have conversations. And if it doesn’t work once or twice, people shut their hearts.”

One of the biggest problems of creating unity within the church was that South Koreans often served out of pity. It was something that church officials quickly realized could not sustain the ministry. Therefore, the church shifted focus to helping North Koreans through mission and training. The main purpose of the church family was to raise *sahyŏkja* (God’s Warriors) to eventually convert North Koreans after unification. As such, the “leaders” of the church needed to shift from feeling pity to acting as parents, harshly scolding when defectors misbehaved, and showing affection when they did well. Pastor Cho stated, “When we are harsh, North Koreans accept it.

They see it as a sign of affection.” Like wayward children, North Koreans were seen as needing the occasionally strict guidance of a family to raise them.

Unfortunately, there were conflicting signals on the changes that South Koreans expected from North Koreans. While changes in morality, in behavior, and belief were espoused by the pastor and the South Korean congregation, defectors also needed to maintain their “North Koreanness.” Pastor Cho stated, “We want them to maintain their northern mind, so that they can go back to the North. There is an urgency here.” In other words, if defectors became too assimilated to the South, like first generation defectors from the Korean War, then they would not be able to relate to and convert North Koreans in the future. The statement illustrates that Protestants were aiming for a different church family than one that existed already in South Korea.

The New Christian Nation Already Divided?

About six months before I left the field, a North Korean defector was newly named a youth pastor in the church. A professional athlete in North Korea, the man was tall, well-spoken, and handsome. He was also markedly different from the South Korean leadership in his blunt style and his pleas to South Koreans to be lenient with defectors’ smoking and drinking. It was apparent that the church leadership was not happy with these declarations, which was confirmed when the pastor told me in an interview that the North Koreans who had become “leaders” in the church were lacking in knowledge about the Bible and faith. It was apparent that even the North

Koreans who had become successful according to church standards were still not fully trusted by the South Korean leadership. Their development, like their faith, was lacking. They were still not fully adults, and likely would never be in the eyes of the church.

In this chapter, I have explored the way in which love became the call to create a new Christian family with North Koreans as the youngest children. Despite the efforts of the church to create bonds of intimacy in a hierarchy of God, the father, the pastor as his representative, and the longer-term Protestants as the adults or older siblings, not many North Koreans felt the “love” that the church attempted to give. As Sara Ahmed (2004) asserts, we need to pay attention to the work that emotion does, rather than try to define the emotion itself. Instead, she asks, how do emotions “stick” and move? How does it change our orientation with our bodies, with others? How does it change our subjectivity, as Zigon explores? This chapter has been about how love is used to break down Cold War barriers, or what Koreans call “division of the mind.” Christian love is used to evoke sympathy and love for North Korea, and to work for unification by creating a new national family with North Korean “children” at the center. Love is at the center of creating a new nation and a new world order.

In the context of the North Korean Ministry at Peace Church, *sarang* (love) worked to interpellate North Koreans as sacred children in a new family of God. Since family is considered the basic building block of the nation, and also the discourse of the nation and division, the creation of a new, unified family under God was part of a larger goal of building a new nation. The idea that the church family

was a “test case for unification” was repeated in sermons. Unfortunately, that test case was one that was not successful by most accounts.

It seems the biggest misunderstanding between the North and South Koreans at Peace Church were the goals of North Korean defector aid. While South Koreans wanted to create a new family of God for the purpose of teaching North Koreans how to become “true believers” and create the proper Christian family, North Koreans were looking for friendship and intimacy that was not disciplining and hierarchal. Ultimately, with these two goals at odds with each other, the “family” of God was not successful – there were few North Korean “leaders” that emerged from the church, and even those were not trusted by the South Korean leadership. For these reasons, North Koreans began forming their own churches. One I attended was led by the first defector ordained as a pastor. At one North Korean-led church that I visited, the congregation was made up of about 20 North Koreans, and a handful of South Koreans. “We cannot afford to give “scholarships” to our members like South Koreans do,” the pastor stated, “but the people come out of a sincere belief and desire to understand God,” he asserted. Some South Koreans claimed that North Korean interpretations of the Bible was even more fundamentalist than South Koreans. With regular visits by U.S. dignitaries such as Kathleen Stephens, then ambassador to South Korea (2008–2011), as well as international NGOs, it remains to be seen how North Koreans form their own “nation” in alliance with the United States. These North Korean churches did not provide “scholarships” for attendance, but they offered something else instead – a place where they were not the objects of

domestication. Similarly, there was less need to measure and evaluate the progress of North Korean “growth” into adults, which was annoying to defectors at best, but had nefarious consequences when combined with state surveillance, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

The Lives of Others: North Koreans and the Intimacy of Surveillance

Always eyes watching you and the voice enveloping you. Asleep or awake, indoors or out of doors, in the bath or bed — no escape. Nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters in your skull.

— George Orwell, 1984

In the award-winning German film, *The Lives of Others* (Donnersmarck 2007), a highly efficient Stasi official is assigned to monitor the lives of a popular playwright and his actress lover. The official is tasked with listening to the most intimate details of their lives through recording devices placed throughout their apartment. As time passes, the Stasi agent becomes enthralled with the couple and plays a crucial role in setting off a chain of events that ends in both tragedy and liberation. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the depth and breadth of Stasi surveillance in East Germany has been the topic of widespread analysis in both the media and in academic scholarship (Berdahl 1999; Borneman 1992; Bruce 2003; Pfaff 2001; Sperling 2011; Stein 2008). Much attention has been given to the fact that surveillance in East Germany was profoundly intimate: friends and even family members were involved in reporting one another to the authorities for “subversive” activities. Similar types of surveillance have been discussed in relation to North Korea through the testimonies of a handful of defectors (Armstrong 1995; Byman and Lind 2010; Noland and Haggard 2011; Lankov 2008; Lankov, Kwak, and Cho 2012). The assertion that

North Korea encourages friends and family to turn on each other at any moment is often used to delegitimize the North Korean government.

While North Korea is seen as a totalitarian state for its reported use of surveillance, little attention has been paid to the systems of surveillance in democratic South Korea. Unfortunately, the specific details of South Korea's surveillance systems are unknown due to national security concerns, and there is no equivalent to the Freedom of Information Act in the United States. Since information about surveillance systems is notoriously difficult to uncover, particularly in South Korea, I discuss the methods of South Korean surveillance of defectors in this chapter; the exact scope of these monitoring activities remains unknown to the public. What is known is that surveillance is an important and socially-accepted tool used by the South Korean government in its fight against communism and the threat of annihilation by North Korea. It is also seen as vital to keeping track of North Korean defectors in order to detect the presence of spies, as well as to maintain a culture of fear between North and South Koreans.

Close monitoring of defectors was accomplished through intimate relationships between defectors, police officers, and non-governmental aid workers, and was shrouded under the terms "care" and "protection." In this chapter, I begin by examining the practices of intimate monitoring that North Korean defectors were subject to through their relationships with police and NGOs. I then turn to an overview of the National Intelligence Service, the key institution of surveillance in South Korea, and show how surveillance as protection was normalized in South

Korea. I argue that surveillance, or monitoring, is a practice of intimacy and an integral part of the domestication of North Korean defectors. By collecting personal information through relationships of intimacy, surveillance works to sort North Korean defectors into one of three categories: dangerous spies, those not deserving of domestication, and those who are worthy of entering into the “family” of South Korea. Finally, I examine the case of Yu Woo-seong, a North Korean “defector” who was arrested as a spy. His case shows how surveillance worked to purify the category of defector by weeding out both spies and Korean Chinese.

Surveillance in Anthropological Perspective

In industrialized countries around the world, surveillance is a part of daily life. Often, surveillance by governments is accepted as morally legitimate under certain legally-defined conditions, although it differs from society to society. Academics have looked at surveillance as a historically-produced category, with cultural variation (Lyon 2002b; Marx 2002). The limiting of surveillance under certain legal parameters is commonly seen as a sign of a strong democracy, while an unfettered use of surveillance is the mark of a totalitarian society (Moran 2008; Sperling 2011). As such, the word surveillance is often used in conjunction with “totalitarianism” to discuss countries such as East Germany, the former U.S.S.R., or North Korea, whereas it is rarely used to describe democratic countries such as the United States and South Korea. Sperling (2011) argues that what is considered tolerable and intolerable surveillance is remarkably similar. Thus, he argues, society is “trained” to

recognize some forms of surveillance as acceptable, and others as not (398). Drakulic echoes this when she writes about her experience with surveillance in the former Yugoslavia. Looking over a neighbor's shoulder at the post office and taking note of their mail was commonplace and even expected, she remembers; the concept of privacy did not even exist. It was only after communism that she learned that this was called surveillance (Drakulic 1993).

Ericson and Haggerty (2006), in their introduction to *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*, define surveillance as “the collection and analysis of information about populations in order to govern their activity” (Ericson and Haggerty 2006:3). From this definition, it is apparent that surveillance is performed by states for the purpose of governing or control, and it is undertaken through the collection of information. It is intricately linked to the idea of seeing, as it makes some parts of a population more visible than others. Lyon takes the idea of surveillance a step further by asserting that surveillance is ultimately about categorization. He writes, “Surveillance today sorts people into categories, assigning worth and risk” (Lyon 2002a:1). In other words, those who are considered criminals or a threat to the state are surveilled, while those who are not considered a threat are not. For Lyon, surveillance is about discrimination, personal privacy, and social justice.

These varied definitions of surveillance show that what is considered surveillance, and what is not, is continually shifting. Even the categories of surveillant, their accomplices, and those who are the surveilled are moving categories,

as Daphne Berdahl (1989) shows in her discussion of East Germans after the fall of the Wall. Similarly, in post-communist Latvia, how one was categorized in his or her surveillance file was a matter of great contention. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Latvian citizens fought to get official recognition as “victims” of the regime. This showed categories of subjectivity not only had implications about how the past was remembered, but were vital for future compensation (Skultans 2001).

For North Korean defectors, state and NGO surveillance has many implications. It is used to identify criminal activity, possible North Korean spies, and the presence of others posing as North Korean defectors – for example, those who are Korean Chinese trying to take advantage of benefits. It also has the added effect of distinguishing the “good” defectors from the “bad” – those who are making sincere efforts to change into South Koreans, and those who are not. Regardless of the purpose, surveillance reveals unequal power relations between North and South Koreans and the limits of North Korean belonging in South Korea.

State Surveillance or Protection?

The first thing that defectors are required to do when they leave *Hanawŏn* and arrive in their new city of residence is to register with their local police station. At the police station, they are given their official South Korean papers, and assigned to a *hyŏngsa* (police detective).⁸³ At this initial meeting, defectors are told to report to

⁸³ Discussed in the introduction, *Hanawŏn* is the 3-month mandatory training program and facility that all defectors are subject to before officially receiving South Korean citizenship.

their *hyǒngsa* for a period of two years upon release from *Hanawǒn*, notifying them about their movement abroad as well as any changes of residence in South Korea.

The relationships that defectors have with *hyǒngsa* were defined by intimacy. *Hyǒngsa* bought defectors meals while they talked about their adjustment in South Korea and major and minor changes in their lives, such as graduation, marriage, or employment. While they are technically called *hyǒngsa*, I also use the term “police minders” to show the dual function of their work: they ostensibly “protected” defectors from possible North Korean retaliation, while also monitoring them for illegal activity, which included watching for the presence of spies. The relationship was also unique in that *hyǒngsa* rarely have warm relationships with people they are investigating; these relationships tend to be adversarial in nature.

In contrast, most defectors I knew spoke fondly of their police minders. Minders were often the first “friends” North Koreans made in South Korea, and many were kind and generous – buying them gifts of food or goods, helping them get jobs or making important social connections. It was not uncommon to hear of police minders giving presents and cash “gifts” at various celebrations for defectors. The nature of gift-giving in South Korea blurs the line between the personal and the professional, and it was unclear to the defectors I spoke with, and to me, whether this help was provided in an official capacity or if it was of a private nature. This ambiguity was productive in making the work of the *hyǒngsa* seemingly benevolent.

In the early years of North Korean migration to South Korea, *hyŏngsa* also administered some of the day-to-day adjustment aid. Minders taught North Koreans about their new society as well as made sure that defectors did not unwittingly break the law in South Korea. During the time of my fieldwork, much of this work had shifted to nongovernmental organizations, with minders closely collaborating with them. The transfer of aid work from *hyŏngsa* to NGOs did not seem to affect the friendships that arose between the police and defectors, and this intimacy was crucial to the successful monitoring of defectors' lives.

Belatedly curious about the legal relationship between minders and defectors, I emailed "David," a staff member at a defector aid organization, a few months after my fieldwork concluded in 2012. Since David was fluent in English, I wrote an email in English telling him that I was researching surveillance, and could he tell me the official requirements for defectors to report to their *hyŏngsa*. The response of the aid worker was immediate and rebuking: he emphatically denied that the work of the police officers was surveillance. They are friends with defectors and often help them, David told me, confirming what I heard from defector friends. He wrote, "The main mandate of these police officers is guiding and protecting each defector from any identified or potential dangerous factors such as threats from North Korea and several extreme pro-north Korean groups or sometimes being assassinat[ed]." David demanded that I tell him how and why the information would be used before he would answer any more questions. When he was satisfied with my response, David told me that police officers did not require defectors to check in; instead, they called

defectors for updates on their welfare and well-being and also provided “assistance and help.”

It is unclear if *hyǒngsa* provide care of their own accord, or if it was part of their job. According to the North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act, defectors are required to register any change of address within 14 days of moving, but there is no official legal listing of *hyǒngsa* and their role, likely due to the fact that they are considered part of the security services. In fact, most defectors I spoke to were under the impression that *hyǒngsa* were, in fact, National Intelligence Service (NIS) agents, and not police. Considering the close relationship that the police and the NIS have had in the past, and continue to have for the investigation of domestic espionage, this is not surprising. Defectors I spoke with stated they were told to report to *hyǒngsa* for a period of two years upon release from *Hanawǒn*. The North Korean Support Law does not state the period of registration, only that they have to report every six months.

In Korean, the word for surveillance is *kamsi*, which means to watch or observe. The term has two definitions in the Naver Dictionary – one is “to look from a high place to a lower place.” The second is “to look from a distance.” The Korean meaning is close to the definition of surveillance in English, which means, “to watch over, especially a spy or a criminal.” In South Korea, *kamsi* has an institutional meaning – of the police or state official watching a person who is a criminal or potential criminal. It also has supremely moral overtones – someone who is being watched, usually by authorities, is someone who is suspect and unworthy. Because of

the unique circumstances of a divided country under a state of constant war, the object of *kamsi* is the potential North Korean spy, or one aiding and abetting North Korea by being a government subversive.

David might have rejected my use of the word surveillance because it implied *kamsi*. *Kamsi* meant that North Koreans are suspects, when, from his perspective, they are those who need *boho*, or protection. The word *boho* has roots in the character *bo*, to look after, to take care of, to watch after, or to oversee, and *ho*, to help or aid. Inherent in the use of the word is one's positionality – to protect someone is to look after someone weaker, or in a lower position than oneself. The commonality in the two terms *kamsi* (surveillance) and *boho* (protection) is that both those who are suspect and those who need protection are watched, and watched closely, and that those who are watching are more powerful than those who are watched. Since it is never clear whether any given North Korean defector is in need of protection or in need of containment, the act of monitoring fulfills both purposes.

In some ways, the minders fulfilled the role of a social worker, particularly ones who monitor the welfare of children. Social workers are charged both to give care and also punish institutionally as they see fit. Monitoring by the state can mean the taking away of one's primary care giver. Similar to the situation with *hyōngsa*, the work of social work is considered aid or care, not surveillance. In fact, the literature

on social work rarely uses the word surveillance in relation to aid unless it is specifically in the realm of health, which brings the added factor of danger.⁸⁴

In many ways, the acceptance of monitoring as a part of everyday life again shows the similarities between North and South Korea, but the deeming of surveillance as protection had the effect of legitimizing South Korea, while keeping intact the image of North Korea as a totalitarian state. In order to maintain the image of the South Korean state as protector, there were constant reminders of the threat of North Korea and the need to be vigilant against North Korean communists. One example was regular air drills in the city during the late 1990s that mimicked an attack from North Korea. During these drills, all traffic was stopped, and I was told that people were supposed to hide under their seats. Although no one I knew actually practiced hiding under their seats, it was a reminder that one's busy and seemingly safe life could be destroyed in any second.

Another way in which low-level surveillance has been normalized in South Korean society is to remind citizens of the need to protect themselves and report spies. Until a few years ago, signs on the subway warned for citizens to be "vigilant" against spies who may be hiding in their midst. Identification card checks by police happened with regular frequency in public areas such as subway stops to catch North Korean spies who would not have access to these cards. And while anticommunist education in schools was no longer mandatory, conservative politicians and the media continuously warned against "pro-North subversives." The citizenry, for the most

⁸⁴ Inquiries into social work literature did not result in any findings linking surveillance with social work outside of public health care concerns.

part,⁸⁵ has accepted these methods as necessary protection against the threat of North Korea. In this way, surveillance has become a commonplace, accepted part of everyday life.

The word “protection” is front and center in the most important law for North Korean defectors: the Law on the Protection of North Korean Refugees. The word is peppered throughout the law, emphasizing the benevolent character of the South Korean state. It is notable that many of the implementations of the law fall under the mandate of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), which underscores the dual nature of monitoring and surveillance. It is no coincidence that the NIS also monitors espionage or any “anti-state activities” covered under the National Security Law.

The NIS and Normalized Surveillance

This section on South Korea’s intelligence agency augments the uses and abuses of the National Security Law discussed in Chapter 2 in order to illustrate the depth and scope of surveillance in South Korea. I give this overview to show how surveillance in South Korea has become an accepted part of everyday life. Since South Koreans have accepted surveillance as a necessary evil for their protection, even the more open monitoring of North Korean defectors is not considered surveillance. Rather, it is the “natural” and logical price of their presence in South Korea.

⁸⁵ Human rights organizations have protested the random checking of resident registration cards, and conducted campaigns asking citizens to refuse to show their cards when asked.

The main instrument of surveillance in South Korean society, and of North Korean defectors in particular, is the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Because of the secretive nature of the organization, much of this information is pieced together from a few academic articles (Doucette and Koo 2013; M. Kim 2004; I. Kim 2014; Moran 1998) and newspaper reports. This is mainly due to the fact that South Korea does not have anything equivalent to the Freedom of Information Act in the United States, which means access to information is actively prevented (see D. Kim 2010). What is important in this sketch is the scope and depth of extra-legal surveillance and political influence that the agency has had over the years. The justification for most of this activity was the real and fabricated threat of North Korea, the threat of spies, and South Korean domestic support for North Korea. In effect, however, the agency was responsible for reminding South Koreans of the fear of North Korea in everyday life.

The Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) was established in 1961, after the overthrow of South Korea's first president, Rhee Syngman. The predecessor to the KCIA was the ruthless Army Counter Intelligence Corps. The mandate of the KCIA was to guard against the threat of North Korea, and it was mainly under the power of then-president Park Chung-hee. By 1964, the KCIA had 370,000 employees. In the late 60s and 70s, the agency had developed political power independent from the government. In 1979, the head of the KCIA assassinated Park, who was still president at the time. When Chun Doo-hwan took command of the country through a military coup d'état in 1980, the agency came under the president's power and was renamed the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP).

The incredible and unfettered scope of the ANSP reached into all aspects of society. It was infamous for the disappearance and torture of many civilians, and had influence over criminal and supreme courts, prosecutors, and even agents in the parliament. Moreover, the intelligence unit had close ties with the military and police, and actively surveilled and intimidated political parties, student activists, and media personnel (Moran 1998). It also played a key role in deciding the outcome of presidential elections.

After the 1987 Democratic Struggle, the ANSP underwent some major changes, with agents moved out of the court system and out of Parliament. Legally, it was deemed subject to parliamentary scrutiny as well as budgetary review, which in 1993 was 2 percent of the national budget (Moran 1998). Moreover, the agency was stripped of its authority to investigate “crimes” involving domestic political and social groups, defined in Article 7 and 10 of the National Security Law. Above all, it became open to public scrutiny by the media as well as politicians. These reforms were initiated by the presidency, and were significant in limiting the scope of its power, as well as putting its actions within legal limits. Despite these legal reforms, the ANSP continued warrantless wiretapping and meddled in presidential elections (Insoo Kim 2014). After the election of opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who had also been under heavy ANSP surveillance, the organization went through some further changes. The first happened in 1998, when the former ANSP director was found guilty of conducting a massive disinformation operation to prevent Kim from

being elected. The misinformation included allegations that Kim's campaign had been supported by funds from North Korea.

After Kim Dae-jung was elected in 1997, he proceeded to limit the functions of the newly named National Intelligence Service (NIS) away from domestic politics and towards international security and counter-espionage. Kim and his successor Roh were responsible for significantly limiting the scope and scale of the agency, which is unsurprising considering Kim's history of persecution by the KCIA⁸⁶ and the fact that he was promoting engagement with North Korea through his Sunshine Policy. These new limitations were not enough to prevent an illegal wiretapping scandal by the NIS, or the complete loosening of its political power, but it did result in a significant decrease in the number of National Security Law cases during Kim and Roh's administrations. It is also worthy to note that there was much discussion of abolishing the National Security Law, which punished those who were considered pro-North. Moreover, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2005 that addressed wrongdoings of the intelligence agency and cleared the names of many who were falsely accused of being spies (Dong-Choon Kim 2010). In other words, it was during this ten-year period that discourse around North Korea shifted, and surveillance ceased to be a pervasive part of everyday life.⁸⁷

However, with the return of conservatives to power with the election of Lee Myung-bak in 2007, there was a significant surge in NSL arrests and spy cases.

⁸⁶ In 1973, Kim was kidnapped and almost killed by the KCIA after "losing" an election to Park Chung-hee. In the two decades following this incident, Kim was arrested, tortured, and sentenced to death under KCIA allegations that he was a pro-North subversive.

⁸⁷ Ironically, when Lee Myung-bak took power in 2008, he called this period the "lost decade," a slogan that has been taken up by right-wing conservatives (Mahr n.d.).

During Lee's administration, the number of new NSL cases doubled from 46 to 90, and 31 people were arrested under suspicion of being North Korean spies (compared to 14 under the previous president Noh) (Red-Handed 2014). In addition to the resurgence of spy cases, there was renewed outcry over NIS meddling in the 2012 election of Park Geun-hye, the first female president of South Korea. Soon after her election, the NIS was found to have produced 1,900 online posts and 22 million tweets over a period of two years in order to slander Park's opposition (Doucette and Koo 2013). Soon after Park took power, opposition lawmaker Lee Seok-ki was arrested and found guilty of sedition (in February 2013) and plotting an armed rebellion, based on questionable evidence that included him singing "revolutionary" songs from North Korea and a transcript of a recording by the NIS, while the original recording mysteriously disappeared (Doucette & Koo 2013).

In addition to an upswing of spy cases, average South Korean citizens are feeling the sting of growing NIS presence in their lives. Recently, it was revealed that South Korea's three main telecommunications companies were funneling subscriber information to law enforcement agencies without demanding a warrant or informing customers. Information about more than six million phone numbers was released in the first six months of 2014 (South Korea Spy Kills Himself amid Hacking Scandal 2015). Considering the population of South Korea is approximately 50 million, this would make over 10% of the population under suspicion. The ensuing public outrage led to the rapid decline of South Korea's most popular chat app Kakao Talk; in late

2014, millions of users transferred to a foreign company called Telegram over fears of random surveillance (Brandom n.d.).

Between 2008 and 2011, the period immediately following the end of the Sunshine Policy, over 90 people were arrested under the NSL. In addition, the length of detention and interrogation for North Koreans has doubled, from 90 days to six months since 2010 (Red-Handed 2014). Furthermore, eight defectors have been arrested as North Korean spies since 2013. Human rights watchers accuse the NIS of fabricating security crises to deflect attention from its role in manipulating the presidential election in 2012. An increased security risk would only “justify an enhanced role for the agency” (Doucette and Koo 2013). The arrests of defectors as suspected spies serve this purpose and make surveillance a necessary part of daily life once again.

It is unlikely that the prevalence and necessity of surveillance is directly related to the number of North Korean spies in South Korea. Undoubtedly North Korea continues to send spies, but some question whether North Korea has the capability to send the number that South Korea claims. Further, there is little attention or public information on the scope of South Korea’s counter-intelligence in North Korea. A notable exception was the popular movie *Silmido* (Kang 2003). *Silmido* was released in 2003, and told the true story of Unit 684, a special forces unit formed in 1968 and trained to infiltrate North Korea and kill its leader. The unit mutinied when the mission was aborted during a temporary warming of relations in 1971. Of the 31 petty criminals and unemployed men that made up the unit, seven were killed in

training, 20 were killed in the mutiny, and the remaining four were executed. In 2009, the families of these men successfully sued the government for reparations (Onishi 2004).

Real and fabricated spy cases and the story of Unit 684 show how ruthless the secret agency can be in the fight against North Korea, as well as the fight for its own relevance. Unfortunately, the dearth of information makes it hard to verify what the spy agency does or does not do. What is clear is that North Korea is not the only surveillance state; South Korea has an extensive intelligence network that spies on its own citizens as well as on North Korea. This has led to a fear in general society about North Korea, and this fear extends to North Korean defectors as well.

The Protection of Defectors

One justification for defector surveillance was the danger of retaliation from the North Korean state by spies directly sent from North Korea. The idea that North Korean defectors were in danger of retaliation from the North Korean state, where they are considered traitors, is given credence by occasional reports of assassination attempts against high-profile defectors. One example was the alleged “assassination” of Hwang Jang-yop, the highest profile North Korean to defect to date. Hwang was the infamous author of the North Korean *juche* ruling ideology, and at one time was considered the second most powerful person in North Korea.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Alternately called Kim Il-sungism, after the founder of North Korea, it can be translated as “self-reliance,” or a Korean version of Marxist-Leninism.

Hwang's defection to the South delegitimized the North's claims of superiority, and his previous political position meant he could provide sensitive information to the South Korean government. Due to North Korea's threat "to take hundred- and thousand-fold revenge," Hwang was placed under 24-hour guard by South Korean police (Tensions with Seoul Mar Birthday Celebrations for N. Korean President 1997). He was outspoken against North Korea, as well as critical of South Korea's policy of engagement with North Korea during the early 2000s. Hwang's suspicious death of reportedly natural causes in his bathtub in October 2010 led to widespread speculation that he had been killed by North Korean agents.⁸⁹ This speculation continues due to the lack of specifics around his death, and despite the lack of evidence, to date, of foul play.

Because of these occasional reports of North Korean spies and assassination attempts, the idea that state monitoring is for the purpose of protecting defectors has gained legitimacy. The situation is not helped by periodic North Korean rhetoric that threatens retaliation against "traitors" to the regime. Shin Dong-hyuk, the most famous defector and outspoken critic of North Korean human rights, is now under 24-hour surveillance due to threats by North Korea. Similarly, North Korean defectors who have returned to North Korea or publicly said they want to return are thought to have done so because of threats against their remaining family members.

⁸⁹ While initially reported as a heart attack, no definitive cause of his death has been officially declared.

The Threat of Immoral Defectors

The protection that defectors needed was not limited to the vengeful North Korean state, or even clueless South Koreans who accused North Koreans of being spies; often, it was directed at the perceived necessity of North Koreans needing protection from themselves. Defectors were not only *in danger*; they were also *dangerous to each other*.

One way in which defectors were considered a danger was their lack of respect for the rule of law. The tendency of North Korean defectors to break laws was discussed extensively amongst aid workers, and often these statements were made in criticism of North Korea, a place seen as having no rule of law. Rather than seeing the lack of respect for laws as a condition of the extra-legal status they suffered in China, it was discussed as a problem of North Korean culture. Aid workers believed that North Korea did not have rule of law, and this lawlessness meant that it was an uncivilized society. In contrast, South Korea had rule of law, and North Koreans needed to learn how to respect these rules.

At one NGO “training” for newly-arrived defectors in 2012, I watched a long-time police minder give a lively one-hour lecture on the importance of obeying the law – particularly the law on domestic violence – and on the penalties for fighting. The simple message he repeated over and over during his engaging talk was, “Don’t break the law. If you break the law, you will go to jail.” Laws against domestic violence and fighting, he told me later, were the two laws that defector males, in particular, broke most commonly.

North Korean proclivity towards violence was another way in which North Koreans were judged dangerous – particularly towards women. Domestic violence was the most common law broken, I was told, but there were also hushed stories of male defectors attacking South Korean female aid workers.

One story was conveyed to me by an aid worker. The story began with a male defector showing up at a single South Korean female aid worker's house. When she let him in, he tried to rape her. "Never let a defector male into your house," warned the aid worker in the early stages of my fieldwork. "If you are too friendly to them, they will get the wrong idea." The moral judgment behind the accusation of male defectors being abusive or violent to women was ironic considering South Korea has had and continues to have high rates of violence against women, including sexual violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. In 2013, 45.5% of spouses reported being a victim of domestic violence (Lee 2015), and marital rape did not become a legal crime until 2013 (Won-chul Kim 2013).

The high rates of crime amongst defectors seemed to justify the notion that monitoring was necessary. The *Chosun Ilbo* reported in 2012 that crime rates of the defector population were ten percent of the total, more than twice the rate of the South Korean population. Crime was not limited to the male population: over 30% of North Korean women were reported to have turned to prostitution to make a living (More N. Korean Defectors Turn to Crime 2012). Women were also seen as dangerous; aid workers warned that Northern women were wily and manipulative. South Koreans were too innocent compared to North Koreans, they told me, and the

fact that many women were naturally prettier than their South Korean counterparts made them “dangerous.” The perception of North Korean women as dangerous might have been influenced by what was called the Korean Mata Hari Spy Case, in which a defector was found guilty of using sex to extract military secrets from a South Korean soldier in 2008. She served five years in prison, and questions have been raised about whether she was a highly-trained spy, or if she was coerced into confession by prosecutors. Most agree, however, that her spying was largely unsuccessful; she passed on very low-level military information to North Korea (North Korea’s “Mata Hari” Left out in the Cold 2014).

Political Surveillance

One important goal of police surveillance was to control or limit the political participation of defectors. As legitimizers of South Korea’s supremacy over the North, it was vital that defectors did not have a collective voice in politics that strayed from the official state stance. For many reasons, defector political participation has always been limited to advocating against North Korea. North Koreans have been active in conservative politics; in the 2012 elections, for instance, the first defector was elected to the National Assembly as part of the conservative Saenuri Party. The Saenuri Party, working closely with defector organizations, has been the force against the Sunshine Policy and any type of rapprochement with North Korea.

Notably, defector contact and participation with the South Korean left or even moderate civic groups has been extremely limited. The most obvious reason is that

since South Korean leftist groups are already targeted for being pro-North, conducting aid for defectors could place them under direct suspicion of “fomenting rebellion.” This real and grounded fear of being arrested under the NSL meant that there were very few South Korean leftist groups active in North Korean aid. It was only towards the end of my fieldwork that a couple of women’s organizations were established by progressive South Koreans, and they steered clear of any overtly sensitive issues, focusing instead on women’s education or women’s leadership.

One example of the limitations on defector political involvement happened in the late 1990s. At that time, I was active in a new, loosely-formed group called the Korea International Network (KIN). In early 1998, KIN organized a series of forums exploring topics that were relevant to the various groups of overseas Koreans that made up its membership. As one of the last of a series that covered Korean Chinese, Korean Japanese, Korean adoptees, mixed race Koreans, and Korean Americans, KIN invited a North Korean defector to speak about North Korea. En route to the talk, the speaker was intercepted by South Korean police and warned not to attend. He called 15 minutes before the start of the forum to convey his reasons, and apologized.

Why did the South Korean police prevent the North Korean from speaking at an innocuous and, frankly, small gathering of overseas Koreans? One reason was KIN’s association with a local civic group, People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD). PSPD was the second largest *simin* (civic) group in South Korea at the time, known for its moderate leftist politics and its strong stance against business and government corruption. PSPD would continue to grow and lead several

successful campaigns against a number of business conglomerates. The most famous of these was the small stockholders' campaign, in which PSPD members collectively bought stock in Samsung Corporation in order to gain a vote at stockholders' meetings, and thereby institute democratic change in the company. As a result of these and other successful campaigns promoting a democratic society, PSPD increased in membership and political influence. This culminated in the election of its executive director, Park Won-soon, as the mayor of Seoul in late 2011— a position that is one of the most politically and economically influential in South Korea, second only to the president.

At the time of the talk, however, PSPD was still relatively small, and two of its staff were founding members of KIN. Moreover, KIN had conveniently borrowed a space at PSPD to hold their forum, thereby cementing the connection between the two groups in the eyes of the government. In South Korea, being a leftist was and is still equated with being pro-North Korean. This is due, in part, to the fact that some factions of the left have been pro-unification, leaning towards a reconciliatory stance with North Korea. There have also been spy cases in which North Korean spies infiltrated leftist organizations, working to overthrow the government.⁹⁰ Therefore, having a North Korean defector associate with a pro-North group could have been seen by the government as dangerous and subversive. As such, the state took measures to limit this contact.

⁹⁰ Most of these cases have been decried by the international human rights community as fabricated spy cases that are used as tools to suppress democratic struggle (South Korea: National Security Law Continues to Restrict Freedom of Expression 2015).

The only time that I witnessed a North Korean openly state his dissatisfaction with police surveillance was when I met Mr. Bae, a defector who was at the forefront of efforts to send propaganda balloons to North Korea. Sponsored by an American church, the “missionary” sent balloons regularly to North Korea from the northernmost tip of South Korea – on the island of Kangwha, just a short 30-minute drive from Seoul. The practice of sending leaflets in these hot-air balloons was politically controversial. Often, the publicized release of balloons would be met with a strongly-worded statement from the North Korean government calling them “military provocations,” or “acts of war,” such as in a recent case in which 10,000 copies of the Hollywood movie *The Interview*, a comedy that made fun of the regime, were dropped in North Korea.⁹¹ Because of North Korea’s angry response to the controversial practice of sending leaflets and media stories via balloons, the South Korean government actively monitors and occasionally bans the release of balloons during politically sensitive times.

When I arranged to meet Bae to witness a balloon launching on behalf of a foreign reporter, he picked the reporter and I up from the subway station in a small sedan with two men in the front seats. The car was not a luxurious one, which made it unlikely that they were his chauffeurs, and they did not greet us as we entered the car. I was confused as to their presence, and the atmosphere in the car had an undercurrent of tension. After we arrived in Kangwha and the two men walked away to smoke,

⁹¹ *The Interview* is a Hollywood comedy that was released in 2014 and was controversial in its subject matter – the attempted assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jongun by the CIA. Sony Pictures, the production company for the movie, was hacked right before its planned release, and threats were made by the hackers that theaters showing the film would be attacked.

Bae revealed that they were police officers who followed him everywhere. The surveillance began when he started sending the balloons, he stated. Initially, he had tried to get rid of them, but to no avail. Bae was told by government officials that they were there for his protection, and not for surveillance purposes. Despite his repeated requests to stop the “protection,” the police continued to monitor him. In a desperate attempt to get rid of them, Bae deliberately crashed his car into theirs. Finally, he succumbed to their monitoring, and instead of having two cars to get to the same location, they became his *de facto* chauffeurs, albeit reluctant ones. From the moment we arrived at the location for the balloon launch, the policemen stood apart from us, and talked on their phones and wrote notes. Bae clearly did not want any police “protection” and had no concerns about being targeted by the North Korean government. But he had little choice in the situation. In Bae’s case, his police minders were not his friends and were an obvious and unwanted form of surveillance, yet one that he managed to use to his advantage.

Another incident was reported to me by a South Korean reporter at a leftist newspaper. New to working with defectors, the newspaper had organized its first forum on defector aid, and invited a female defector to speak about the subject. After the forum concluded and a story about it was published in the newspaper, the defector was warned by a government official that her eligibility for certain benefits might be affected by her continued participation with such groups. The story was conveyed to me by the reporter who had played a pivotal role in the forum. In an effort to help me with my research, he asked the same defector to join us for lunch. She declined the

invitation, stating she was “worried” about what would happen to her. Given the previous warning by a government official, it was clear she was fearful about repercussions of associating with a researcher who was being introduced by an openly leftist activist.

Most forms of monitoring of defectors are not as overt as in Bae’s case or in the examples above, but it is clear that surveillance happens in subtle as well as much more overt forms. It has become such an insidious but invisible part of everyday life that it is rarely mentioned. It was only when I met Bae that I realized that defectors were subject to unwanted surveillance, and began to pay attention to their everyday forms of surveillance.

Everyday Visibility

In addition to more obvious forms of surveillance, there were subtle forms of everyday surveillance and monitoring that happened through institutions and structures of power that were cast by aid workers as projects of care. These included monitoring defectors through keeping them visible, and indirectly, through their aid work. While much of this monitoring was done in the service of “aid,” it was obvious that defectors had little choice in the matter. Similar to overt forms of state surveillance, defectors had no say in matters of their monitoring and violations of privacy.

Anthropological research on aid and the state has examined the economic motivations of aid work, particularly religious aid (Allahyari 2000; Bornstein 2005;

Caldwell 2004a; Muehlebach 2012). Other academics have shown how discipline and power works in the context of intimate relationships (Constable 1997; FAIER 2007; Hochschild 1993). North Korean defector aid builds upon this literature by showing a different aspect of intimacy – the way in which strategic intimacy (Caldwell 2004) was used to gather information and monitor the adjustment of defectors. While intimacy was the method of surveillance, it was also part of the goal – to weed out the “impure” defectors and begin the process of domesticating North Korean defectors into the “we” of South Korea.

Despite the acknowledgement that North Koreans were monitored, the idea that defectors were not under surveillance was repeated to me by many South Korean aid workers in the field of North Korean defector settlement. In some ways, this was understandable: to admit surveillance or any limitation of human rights was politically dangerous to these groups. At stake was government funding, but more importantly, the moral legitimacy of the South Korean state. Admitting to surveillance of a victimized population was tantamount to placing South Korea on a similar level to North Korea. Human rights abuses were the purview of the North, while the democratic South was the legitimate government of the peninsula. If there were policies that discriminated against North Korean defectors, aid workers interpreted them as mere “mistakes” that were rectified soon after the problems were noticed. The benevolence of the government was central to the South Korean aid workers’ belief system, while defectors were alternately viewed as a social problem, as trauma victims in need of pity, or as ungrateful welfare recipients. The institutional

structures of aid promoted dependency on the state, but their surveillance was never acknowledged or discussed by the aid workers or by the South Korean media. The little attention that was given to the surveillance of defectors came from the foreign press (Bell and Sarah Chee 2013; Bell and Sarah Eunkyung Chee 2013; Fackler 2012; Harlan 2013; Williamson 2014). As such, the intimacy of surveillance was made more powerful through its “invisibility.”

Resident Numbers

The most effective form of surveillance happens in daily life through the simple process of making the object of surveillance extremely visible. In addition to some differences in accents and physical appearance, including height and skin color, defectors are marked by their place of origin, made obvious through commonly asked social questions of, “Where is your hometown?” or “What school did you attend?” These questions are such a common script in South Korean social interactions that defectors who did not want to reveal their northern roots were told by *Hanawŏn* officials to lie and say, “Gangwon Province,” when asked.⁹² One defector recounted that he dutifully memorized the name of the Southern province, but when the question was followed up with, “What city in Gangwon Province?” he was unprepared to respond and ended up running away in embarrassment.

⁹² Gangwon Province is the northeastern province of South Korea, and the closest culturally to North Korea and North Korean culture. Many *silhyangmin* have resettled in this area.

Until very recently, even those defectors who learned to answer these questions in a more prepared manner were still forced to reveal their identities through their resident registration numbers (RRN). Similar to a social security card in the U.S., these RRNs are given to all residents living in South Korea. Unlike a social security card, however, the numbers are used daily for a staggering number of both official and private transactions. Setting up a cell phone, going to the doctor, opening a bank account, or even setting up a customer rewards card at a store all used to require one's RRN. RRNs came into widespread use after a thwarted assassination attempt by a North Korean military unit on the president in 1968 in what became known as the Blue House Raid. In this attack, a 31-member elite unit of North Korean soldiers entered South Korea, posed as South Korean soldiers and were able to get within 100 meters of the Blue House.⁹³ As a result of this incident, RRNs were introduced to screen for the presence of North Korean spies and became an integral part of everyday life.

Resident registration numbers are 13 digits, and are in a format that reveals the birthdate and gender of the user. The first six numbers are one's birthdate, followed by a dash. The number that follows the dash is almost always a 1 or 2 depending on one's gender – a 1 signifies male, and 2 is for female. However, a different digit is used for certain special groups. For example, as a U.S. national and woman living in South Korea during the late 1990s and early 2000s, I had a 6 following my birthdate on my RRN, the number for foreign females living in South

⁹³ The South Korean equivalent of the White House in the United States.

Korea. Due to the small number of foreigners living in South Korea at the time, I experienced almost daily frustration at the incomprehension of many South Koreans when seeing my number.

The difference of my RRN made it impossible to register for a phone or use certain internet services. In a society dominated by information technology, the inability to use one's RRN for a variety of purposes, including signing up for Daum, South Korea's equivalent of Facebook, was inconvenient and hindered social life, since many organizations used Daum's virtual "café" for the sharing of pictures and notifying members of meetings. My unique RRN marked me as visible and different. Shop keepers and DVD rental shop workers looked at me in incomprehension, even when I explained that I was a foreigner and that my RRN was legally given to me. Some refused me service, because their computer systems simply did not have the capacity to input a number other than 1 or 2. I was looked upon with confusion and suspicion until I explained I was a Korean American; once they understood, I was then treated with exasperation and annoyance for causing trouble. Any exception to the rule was a cause for feeling shame or guilt; the extra time it took away from busy workers was considered my fault, rather than their inability to deal with diversity. My strange RRN made me uncategorizable in a society that highly values easy categorization.

For defectors, the digits on their RRNs following their birthdates were a 3 or 4. The numbers 3 or 4 did not come into use for South Koreans until the year 2000, and are now used for those born after the year 2000. Having a 3 or 4 on their RRNs meant

that defectors were met with confusion and suspicion whenever they were required to give their RRN. This suspicion increased when they were forced to reveal that they were North Korean to South Koreans who were always taught to be vigilant against attacks or spies from the North. The level of conformity and homogeneity in South Korean society meant that during the 1990s when I resided in Seoul, most of the people I met had never met an overseas Korean before, much less a bona fide “foreigner.” As such, meeting a North Korean was especially surreal, particularly considering the widespread popular perception of Northerners as spies and/or dangerous subversives (see introduction and Chapter 1). Even during fieldwork in 2010, when foreigners of all types were more common and stories of North Korean defectors were regularly in the media, my friends reacted with consternation when they met a North Korean for the first time. It was both the novelty of meeting a North Korean, combined with the years of “education” about North Korea they had experienced as children in school. One friend, normally engaging with newcomers, was visibly tense when I introduced her to a defector and we went hiking together. She only relaxed when she started drinking. Without exception, all the North Koreans I knew recounted being accused by random South Koreans of being spies.

A couple of major hacking scandals in 2012 resulted in increased restrictions on the use of RRNs; it is now illegal for RRNs to be given for mundane daily tasks or Internet transactions. However, it is still necessary for everyday life. Going to see a doctor, opening a bank account, and applying for a job all require a valid RRN. Thus, the different RRN immediately marks the applicant as an anomaly. One North Korean

spoke to me about the discrimination she faced when applying for a job. At one business, she passed through the initial resume phase and was asked to do an interview only to discover that it was given out of curiosity about North Korea rather than any serious consideration of her application. Needless to say she was not hired, and felt frustrated that the employer had wasted her time. As a result of difficulties finding employment, many defectors end up finding jobs through Christian networks, such as the Christian Employers Association, or through volunteer networks and people who are familiar with working with North Korean defectors. Even with the lucrative government subsidy, which pays for a defectors' salary for the first three months of employment, many South Korean companies are reluctant to hire North Koreans who are still considered aliens or spies. The prejudice against defectors, combined with their lack of skills and qualifications, relegate most adult defector men to the "3-D" sector with other migrant laborers, or women to restaurant work.⁹⁴

At the very minimum, North Koreans with different RRNs faced surprise and suspicion in their daily lives, and were forced to reveal their identity to perfect strangers. At another level, RRNs could be considered a mechanism of surveillance – having a different RRN marked North Koreans and foreigners as different, regardless of language or cultural fluency, and kept them visible.⁹⁵ When I asked an aid worker about the problem of RRNs and North Korean defectors, he responded that it was a government mistake, and one that was rectified recently, during the Lee Myung-bak

⁹⁴ 3D refers to "dirty, dangerous and demeaning." These would include jobs such as manual labor, work in industrial factories, or housecleaning.

⁹⁵ This visibility would not apply to North Koreans who are born after 2000. In addition to the same RRN, young North Koreans also have the ability to blend in with South Koreans with no trace of accent or physical differences that might mark them.

administration.⁹⁶ Due to the advocacy of NGOs and defector groups, the government changed the RRNs of defectors to be consistent with those of South Koreans. Those with old numbers could apply for new ones on a case-by-case basis.

The reason for not making the change earlier, one aid worker told me, was because the government wanted to restrict the number of defectors traveling back to China. Those with “strange” RRNs were rejected by the Chinese government or monitored while in China. In other words, it was a deliberate move by the South Korean government to restrict the number of defectors returning to China to get their families and bring them back to the South. Despite this assertion of government control of defector mobility, the aid worker continued to proclaim the benevolence and lack of surveillance of the South Korean state.

NGO Surveillance

The monitoring of defectors in non-governmental organizations happens through the passing of information about their lives between and amongst government officials and NGO workers. During fieldwork, I was often shocked by how the most intimate details of defectors’ lives were shared and discussed by the aid workers, with no thought of privacy or personal dignity. While some of the information was given in a generous effort to help me with my research, often I had no official relationship with the organization when they shared personal information. Details about defectors’ personal lives included mention of sensitive information such

⁹⁶ Lee Myung-bak was president of South Korea from 2008–2013.

as experience with trafficking and sex work, domestic violence or other difficult family relationships. Most often, I had just met or did not know well the person being discussed. At times the information was shared to counter a lie that was told by a defector; at others it was to reveal something that defectors were trying to hide. For instance, a young defector once told me about his well-off and happy family. He told me his brother was studying abroad in England, an unusual accomplishment in the defector community. Suitably impressed, I was later chagrined to hear from a South Korean aid worker that most of what he said was a lie. The young defector had a difficult family life, filled with violence and poverty. The aid worker told me all of it in a tone of sadness and empathy, yet I also felt embarrassed for the defector, who must have known that his lie would be easily exposed. As such, the aid worker became the monitor of truth – she was the source of more reliable information about the defector than the defector himself.

At the same time, information about defectors is often guarded against potentially dangerous outsiders – those who have a grudge against North Korea and by extension, defectors, and those who may potentially be spies working for the North Korean government. This back and forth between easily sharing information and guarding it caused great confusion. It was never clear to me when it was “safe” to share information about defectors, and when it was a violation of privacy.

For example, at a regional defector aid organization where I volunteered, one newly-arrived female defector told me she was looking for people from her hometown. The North Korean was in her late 30s and had crossed over alone; she

looked understandably disoriented in a strange new country. I approached the director of the organization about what I thought was a straightforward request: finding out if she could get in touch with other defectors from her hometown. His reaction was surprising in its vehemence: it was absolutely forbidden to connect defectors to one another. The reason, he told me, was that there was too great a danger of spies posing as defectors and trying to gather information to punish their families in the North. I felt embarrassed with my naiveté about the dangers within the community, but also confused. The director's perspective seemed to counter the objective of the organization – to help with the settlement and adjustment of defectors. For who would be able to help defectors better than those who came before them? I had assumed that defectors who had been in South Korea for a longer period would be the ideal people for new defectors to connect with and access information from. If defectors were fearful of other defectors, who exactly could they trust other than strange South Koreans who were accusing them of being spies? Or the South Korean Protestants who were offering them the family of God?

In line with this thinking, I often heard defectors say that they did not trust other defectors, that the community talked too much, or that they did not want to associate with other defectors. At other times, I heard defectors say that “our people” were kind and innocent, in contrast to South Koreans. Despite the talk and the measures taken by South Korean NGOs, however, many defectors found each other and created communities and networks of fictive kinship (Bell 2012). It is also equally true that defectors were supremely suspicious of each other, considering

many stories of defector-on-defector fraud and crime. It also benefited NGOs, for it made North Koreans more dependent on South Korean aid workers.

The discussion of the private details of a given defector's life happened under the shroud of intimacy and love. It was always assumed and often stated that South Korean aid workers cared deeply about defectors, and the sharing of information was for defectors' benefit. Given the low grade of pay and personal sacrifices one had to make to work in defector aid, this assumption was almost a badge of honor, particularly for those who were Christian. The care that aid workers had for defectors, similar to the police minders, masked the sometimes duplicitous nature of their work. It was an openly stated fact that aid workers were evaluated and judged on their ability to gain this personal information, and monitor the needs of defectors. For example, in one defector aid organization, the success of aid givers was dependent on their ability to become "friends" with defectors. Being successful in the field of defector aid meant having the *nŭnglyŏk* (skill, ability) to become close with defectors.⁹⁷ This meant meeting with them on their personal time, remembering birthdays and other major occasions in their lives, and becoming their friend. Although I am uncertain if the information was used in other ways, at the very least it was shared during staff meetings and used as a way to decide on a course of action for a given individual.

⁹⁷ *Nŭnglyŏk* is often related to competency or ability to produce, and is latent to the nature of a person. A person who has no *nŭnglyŏk* is a good-for-nothing, and a person with *nŭnglyŏk* can go anywhere and get a good job.

Being a successful advocate meant being the first person defectors turned to when they needed help; it also meant that the aid worker had a great deal of control and power over the defector. The aid worker would be the first to ascertain whether a defector was breaking the law or working in trafficking, and, as social workers, they were compelled to report abuses of the law. Even benign information such as whether a defector was adjusting well or not could be rewarded with the allocation of resources – those defectors who were trying to adjust (i.e., trying hard to become good South Korean citizens) were given first access to “volunteer” events in which they were paid cash, or to leadership camps, which could potentially lead to travel opportunities overseas. Similar to church rewards, defectors were constantly being monitored for their “progress” in assimilating to South Korean society, as well as their potential criminal or spy activity.

It is unclear if the information gathered by NGO workers were shared with the government. It is almost certain that some of it was, since NGOs had to report results to government agencies in exchange for their contracts. In some cases, aid workers went to work for government agencies, making their knowledge accessible to the state. Moreover, in the case of church aid workers, some church officials were already working for the government and referred North Korean defectors to their churches. There were also occasions for socialization, such as conferences and talks, and friendships amongst people within these groups. Since most official events almost always include the sharing of food and alcohol, with long periods of conversation, it is almost certain that information was casually if not formally reported to relevant

government agencies. It is clear, regardless of this relationship between the state and NGOs, that monitoring and sharing of information was a huge part of aid work.

At its most benign, NGOs monitored defectors to measure defector “growth” – to see how successfully North Koreans were assimilating to South Korean society. The successful assimilation of North Koreans was a reflection of aid workers’ *nŭnglyŏk*. For example, one aid worker who was widely recognized for having *nŭnglyŏk* in the field of defector settlement constantly referred to various young defectors as people he had “raised.” In addition to recounting extremely intimate details of the defectors he knew, he also proudly recalled how they turned to him in times of need. His ability to monitor North Koreans was a reflection of his *nŭnglyŏk*. Their successful assimilation was the result of his successful mentoring. On the other hand, he also spoke derisively of young defectors who had not succeeded, who chose to stubbornly cling to their North Korean identity. I was surprised by the anger the normally even-keeled worker showed; he attributed the problem to their refusal to become South Korean.

In NGOs, surveillance of defectors happened through intimacy. Intimacy was knowledge about defectors, and knowledge was ability, or power, in aid work. While the scope and method of NGO monitoring differed greatly from police surveillance, in one aspect it was similar: monitoring involved sorting the good from the bad, and identifying those who could be domesticated from the ones who were “hopeless.” In fact, depending on how much involvement a given defector had with an NGO, monitoring by NGOs was a much more invasive part of daily life than police

surveillance. Perhaps for this reason, some defectors chose not to get “help” from NGOs and relied instead on personal contacts. While most defectors I knew considered it a minor inconvenience and the price of living in their new country, for others like Bae, surveillance was a sign of limited citizenship in South Korea. The consequences of state surveillance can be seen in the case of a defector who was arrested as a North Korean spy in 2013.

Spies in Our Midst: The Case of Yu Woo-Seong

A few months after I left the field in May 2012, I received a startling message: a North Korean defector whom I met during my fieldwork had been arrested a month earlier for being a North Korean spy. The case was a sensational one. Yu Woo-seong, a model young defector in his early 30s, had graduated from a prestigious Seoul university and had been hired as a part-time civil servant at City Hall to help with defector aid. Authorities claimed that Yu used his access to sensitive information on defectors to give it to the North Korean government. Although quickly judged guilty by public opinion, he was eventually exonerated of the charges in court. During the trial, it was revealed that the National Intelligence Service, along with the police, fabricated information in order to strengthen their case against him. The spy case further illuminates that the relationships between defectors and their minders are, in fact, relationships of state surveillance that have far-reaching consequences. In this section, I discuss how I met Yu, his role in the defector community, and the

implications of his case in understanding North Korean defectors' limited citizenship in South Korea.

Background to Yu Woo-seong

I was introduced to the organization Younghan Uri, and subsequently Yu, in 2011 by a German named Luke, who was also conducting research on defectors. Younghan Uri was a Catholic-sponsored North-South youth organization located in the center of Seoul. Formed to promote friendship between North and South Korean youth, the group was unique in that the leadership of the diocese intervened very little in its affairs, and that it was Catholic – unusual in a sea of Protestant churches and NGOs working with defectors. At the time of my fieldwork, Catholics had begun conducting weekly religious services for defectors at *Hanawŏn* and at the Joint Interrogation Center; they also ran a handful of group homes for defectors. Compared to Protestant aid to defectors, Catholic efforts were modest, and they conducted most of this aid extremely quietly. In addition to the youth group, the diocese also managed a small shelter for male defectors in need of housing and support.

It was at Younghan Uri that I first met Yu Woo-seong. Out of the many friendly and thriving young North Koreans I met at this and other organizations, Yu was by far the most culturally well-adjusted defector. In 2011, Yu was in his early 30s, and had just begun a master's program in social welfare. Although he had been a doctor in the North, he decided to forgo the competitive medical school system in

South Korea needed to get a license to practice medicine.⁹⁸ Instead, he completed his bachelor's degree in business and Chinese at a prominent Seoul university in less than six years after entering South Korea – a remarkable achievement by defector (or any immigrant) standards.

After finishing his undergraduate degree, Yu decided he wanted to do work that would benefit his community, and enrolled in a social welfare master's program. He played key leadership roles in many defector groups, and was well-liked and respected by both North and South Koreans. Moreover, he was in demand as a “unification lecturer” – giving lectures about North Korea to South Korean government agencies. In addition to his local status, he was in-demand by international programs organized by western NGOs for defectors, including tours to Germany and Thailand. Friendly, diplomatic, and extremely socially astute, Yu was striking in the fact that there was no detectable difference – linguistically, physically, or in his behavior – that set him apart from South Koreans. Unlike many male defectors who tended towards being lean, short, or accented in their speech, Yu had the look and confidence of a typical middle-class South Korean man – clean cut, with smooth white skin, neat haircut, and even a slight beer belly.

Yu was also moderately fluent in English, I found out, when we attended a five-day NGO-sponsored trip to Thailand together. He had learned English from his German friend Luke, who had taught him English in exchange for Yu teaching him

⁹⁸ Educational credentials such as doctor's licenses were not recognized by South Korea, which follows a different system. Therefore, Yu would have been required to attend medical school again to become a doctor.

about (and introducing him to) defectors. The proposal for the exchange had come from Yu, a testament to his skill in figuring out a way to learn English, a difficult language for most Koreans but especially for defectors who had little exposure to it in their early lives. Yu's resourcefulness was evident in the way he coached Luke about gift-giving in South Korea. Luke, well-known in the defector community, was invited to many weddings and celebrations where it was common to give a cash gift. Yu, however, advised him not to give these gifts by telling him that he would never be "paid back" in the future on his wedding day. Therefore, he was not obligated nor was it expected that Luke give any money to them.

Although I saw Yu regularly, I never got to know him very well. He was friendly but strangely reserved. I felt an emotional distance that I did not feel with other defectors, who could be guarded at first but extremely warm over time. Many defectors have dark secrets, a natural result of having to survive in the harsh reality of North Korea and China, but most of the defectors I met were emotionally open and desiring of friendship.

Yu, on the other hand, was always friendly but detached. He had a ready smile and warm demeanor, but never revealed much about himself personally. After seeing him regularly during the monthly Catholic Younghan Uri meetings, Yu and I participated in the Thailand trip. Yu was on the only North Korean that I knew on the trip, yet we never had more than surface interactions. Furthermore, he kept himself aloof from the rest of the group by rarely joining the nightly socializing sessions that most of the others participated in. On the one occasion that he did, he did not say

much or drink any alcohol. His reticence was to the degree that he never revealed Luke was teaching him English.

It was not until the end of my fieldwork period, after I had known him for about a year, that I had my first intimate conversation with Yu. The setting was serendipitous – he and I were paired for a Younghan Uri friendship promotion task, and we had to meet for lunch. It was then that he mentioned he was sponsoring his younger sister to leave North Korea. He asked me if it would be better for her to seek asylum in the United States, where she could learn English. I told him frankly that the material benefits of coming to South Korea were much greater than any help she would get in the United States. He countered that if she went to the U.S. first, at least she would be respected in the South for her association with the U.S. and English – a respect that defectors would not be able to get otherwise.

Constructing a North Korean Spy

A few months after this discussion, after I had returned to the United States, Yu got the green light to bring his sister to South Korea. He had consulted with various other people, but most notably with his police minder, about bringing her there. A few months after our talk, Yu's younger sister Ga-ryeo arrived in South Korea. While undergoing the mandatory interrogation process that all defectors are subject to when entering South Korea, she implicated her brother as a spy. The news sent shock waves throughout South Korea. During the case, three truths were revealed. One, despite living his whole life in North Korea, Yu was a Chinese citizen (his

father was a Chinese citizen, but his mother was North Korean), so he could not legally be a North Korean defector. Two, the South Korean National Intelligence Service had fabricated much of the information against him. Three, Yu was not a spy.

The details of his case are complex. Yu was accused of giving information on defectors – including names, addresses and telephone numbers – to the North Korean government. His position as president of Younghan Uri and his job as the North Korean defector liaison to the Seoul City Government gave him access to defector databases. Because of reported retaliations against family members of defectors, this personal information was considered extremely sensitive and harmful. The threat of familial retaliation was the reason why many defectors prefer total anonymity. According to the prosecutor, Yu's visits to China, including a clandestine trip to North Korea for his mother's funeral service, was when Yu was arrested by North Korean authorities and recruited to pass information to the North Korean government.

Most of the evidence against Yu was based on his sister's testimony, gained from her 178 days of solitary confinement at the Joint Interrogation Center, a government agency that is in charge of interrogating all North Korean defectors when they first arrive in South Korea. As stated in the introduction, most North Koreans spend between two weeks and six months in detention centers in Thailand while they await processing and permission to enter South Korea. While in detention, North Koreans undergo preliminary questioning by the South Korean government to establish whether they are spies. However, it is not until they arrive in South Korea

that they are subject to intensive interrogation at the Joint Interrogation Center, a relatively unknown division of the secretive National Intelligence Service.

It is during this interrogation that spies and Chinese citizens are distinguished from "real" defectors. According to defectors, they are placed in solitary confinement at the Interrogation Center for a period of at least three days and up to many months. While in solitary confinement, defectors are asked to write down every detail of their lives in North Korea, including names, dates, and organizational affiliations. Their solitary confinement is interrupted only by questioning by NIS officials or weekend visits by religious organizations. The information they give is then cross-referenced by defectors located in South Korea to weed out potential spies. It was during an especially difficult interrogation that Ga-ryeo "confessed" that her brother was a North Korean spy and that she had aided him in giving information to the North Korean government.

Outside the interrogation center, Ga-ryeo's unusually long detention triggered her brother's worries and Yu began inquiring about her situation. Once she was released from the Joint Interrogation Center, mostly due to the advocacy of the Catholic human rights group, Yu's sister retracted her testimony. She stated that she had been forced to write it under conditions of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of NIS agents, including being kicked and hit on the head. In a special report by *News Tapa*, a Korean investigative journalism program, Ga-ryeo confessed that she was forced to copy a statement given to her by NIS agents into her own

handwriting. Eventually, she was released and sent back to China, but continues to maintain her brother's innocence.⁹⁹

Ga-ryeo's signed statement was supplemented by evidence from Yu's minder. Like other defectors, Yu's travels to and from China were being monitored by his *hyŏngsa*. At some point, Yu's travels raised the suspicion of government authorities. Those close to Yu speculated that when his minder gave him the green light to bring his sister from China, he was already under suspicion and the green light was a trap. The relationship of intimacy between Yu and his minder worked against him, and clearly showed the surveillance character of the police minder whom Yu trusted. Indeed, it serves as evidence that police minders are, in fact, NIS agents as many defectors believe.

The Aftermath

Approximately six months after Yu's arrest, in the summer of 2013 I visited Younghan Uri again. Similar to other defector organizations, the membership had changed drastically – I did not recognize most of the members there. Most of those I had met just a year before were gone. I was told by the leadership that they had been scared off after hearing of Yu's arrest. If the charges against Yu were true, then their names and addresses had been given to North Korea. That meant an immediate threat of punishment to their families. Moreover, if Yu had passed on information, Younghan Uri was responsible for this security breach. Most of the leadership and the

⁹⁹ South Korean NIS agents maintained that they received documents from China proving Yu's guilt, but the Chinese government has conclusively declared these documents were forged.

regular members, however, supported the diocese and Yu. They believed, as I did, that he was not a spy – a belief that was confirmed when Yu was found not guilty of the spying charges in August 2013. However, he was found guilty of breaking passport laws and charged with repaying 25 million won (about U.S. \$24,000) that he had used in defector benefits from the South Korean government.

After the trial concluded with a verdict of not guilty, I was told by other defectors that Yu's Chinese citizenship was an open secret in the North Korean community. As North Koreans were connected to one another through hometowns and work associations, it was easy for them to ascertain that he was part of a privileged group of Korean-Chinese merchants who had access to food and goods through their ability to travel – they were able to freely cross the border into China. It was rumored that more than a few people had reported this fact to the NIS. When the news of Yu's arrest came out, most defectors initially believed that he was a spy, since they had no reason to disagree with the South Korean government. Later, some of my defector friends privately reported that they were confused by the situation, and scared. The idea that Yu was a spy, while placing all of them under suspicion, was safer than the idea that Yu was falsely accused. If the South Korean government could fabricate a case against a stellar member of the defector community, what did it imply about the precariousness of their own lives?

If Yu was not a North Korean spy, then why was he targeted by the NIS? Considering the secretive nature of the organization, one can only make educated guesses. I believe the main reason that Yu was targeted as a North Korean spy was

because to reveal the fact of his Chinese citizenship would have been a major embarrassment for the National Intelligence Service. As stated earlier, Yu was a model defector: he had given numerous talks to government officials about life in North Korea; he was given a government position; and he had gone on many government and NGO-sponsored trips abroad relating to North Korea. His ability to look and act South Korean – and succeed despite his background – made him the poster boy for assimilation. His example gave hope to government officials that the successful integration of North Koreans into South Korean society was possible – on their terms, for Yu brought nothing of his “North Korean” self to the table. His background was almost incidental to his identity, other than the information about North Korea he could provide.

One can speculate that when the NIS began to receive increasing reports from defectors that he was Korean Chinese, Yu became an uncomfortable embarrassment for government officials. He had passed JIC interrogation and had lived for years without detection. He had been the model against which many other defectors had been compared, and he had won too many accolades. In other words, their mistake could not have been quietly covered up. Yu was too public and well-known – even internationally. Yu’s suspicious activities in China were likely an opportunity for the NIS to get rid of him without revealing their mistake. In order to do so, the NIS needed to cover their tracks; it was revealed in the trial that the NIS fabricated evidence relating to the case, and physically and mentally coerced Yu’s sister to corroborate the “evidence” (Choe 2014).

Yu's case also brings to light one of the best-known secrets within the North Korean defector community: that mixed in with North Koreans are Korean Chinese who pretend to be as defectors. Posing as North Korean defectors, gaining quick South Korean citizenship, and accessing benefits are great incentives for Korean Chinese who cannot easily access South Korean citizenship. The extent of this phenomenon is unknown, but common enough to be a problem. The fact that the Korean Chinese are passing the interrogation system is cause for great potential embarrassment to the NIS – an organization that has been under pressure to prove its necessity and worthiness in a softening climate towards North Korea over the decade of Kim and Roh's administrations (1998–2008). During this decade, often called the “lost decade” by conservatives, the decreased threat of a war, and an increased possibility for unification, the necessity of a huge NIS budget has come under public scrutiny. While there are few verifiable figures of the NIS budget when the organization was at its peak influence in the 1970s, an investigation by *Sisa Journal* into the structure of the NIS estimated that it employed some 60,000 employees across 39 headquarters- and regionally-based departments, spending an estimated 700–800 billion South Korean won (approximately 700 to 800 million U.S. dollars) per year.¹⁰⁰ With the replacement of the liberal governments with the conservatives Lee Myung-bak in 2008, the NIS had an opportunity to prove its worth and justify increased spending. The spy case was part of a ratcheting up of NSL cases

¹⁰⁰ What is notable about this figure is that this was an estimate for 1998, when relations between North and South were on the mend. At the height of bad relations between the North and the South, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, under South Korea's dictatorships, the scope and presence of the NIS was far greater.

since the inauguration of Lee Myung-bak. For the NIS, under attack from critics as being corrupt and irrelevant as North-South relations warmed in the previous decade, the high-profile spy case served the dual purpose of ridding themselves of an embarrassing mistake, as well as legitimating their needed presence for stability in South Korea.

The presence of Korean Chinese, and their need to remain invisible, explains why many defectors choose not to associate with other defectors. It was confusing because most North Koreans complained about their South Korean interlocutors, and often admitted that in comparison, North Koreans were better. It was only after this case that I began to understand the secrets within the defector community. For defectors such as Yu, who were Korean Chinese, to reveal their origins to other defectors was to invite exposure and deportation. However, there were other factors at play – the potential for North Korean spies to find one's true identity and punish one's remaining family in the North, or distancing oneself from the tactics that were necessary in order to survive the famine in either North Korea or China.

In addition to the monitoring by the state and NGOs, defectors inadvertently play the role of monitoring themselves. Unfortunately, this monitoring prevents the coming together of a growing population to advocate for their rights or even form comprehensive networks of information and mutual aid beyond the institutions of the state. In this context, it is understandable to hear that many defectors do not want to associate with other defectors – not only are they the object of suspicion by the South

Korean authorities and aid workers, but they are under suspicion from those of their own community. There are few spaces in which defectors can trust anyone.

North Korean defectors living in South Korea are subject to many forms of surveillance. These include having to report to police minders, who can report suspicious activities to the NIS and have them arrested. It is clear that NGO workers also help with the work of monitoring – their movement, their assimilation, and their possible legal and illegal activities. It is unclear how much of this information is shared with government authorities, but close collaboration with government officials makes some information sharing likely. Finally, there is surveillance that happens within the defector community – of authentic and inauthentic defectors, as well as potential spies. All of this monitoring happens through relationships of intimacy, and gives a sense that real intimacy and trust is impossible under the circumstances. It is perhaps understandable, then, that many defectors want to emigrate to a western country where they can be away from prying eyes and being visible, all the time.

The Future of Surveillance in South Korea

Drakulic (1993) asserts in her musings on life in communist Yugoslavia that most people did not have any idea that they were under surveillance – it was a part of everyday life that they accepted. It was only after the transition to democracy that Croats learned that they were under surveillance. Similarly, Sperling writes that it was only in post-unification Germany that East Germans learned to identify

themselves as victims of surveillance. Previously accepted *stasi* practices came to be seen, post-unification, as unacceptable forms of surveillance (Sperling 2011).

Similarly, I argue that South Korea is going through its own transition from a state under the constant threat of war with North Korea, to one in which citizens feel relatively safe and free from danger. What might have been accepted in the past is now resulting in resistance and vocal opposition from a small but growing number of citizens. This includes certain forms of illegal surveillance, such as the case of information being taken from private cell phones in 2014, or the meddling in the presidential election in 2012. As the South Korean government attempts to revive Cold War politics and the justification of increased powers of the NIS, they face greater civic opposition than ever before. This civic influence was absolutely key in preventing a miscarriage of justice in the case of Yu Woo-seong.

I have argued that Yu Woo-seong's case represents the greatest lesson to North Korean defectors: they are learning that their relationships with *hyöngsa* are, in fact, forms of surveillance, and that there is a risk that they can be arrested under false pretenses for political purposes. It is unclear if South Korean civil society will be able to prevent future unjust arrests and convictions of North Korean defectors as spies. One of Yu's lawyers was arrested under the NSL in 2013, seriously hindering his ability to act on behalf of the many defector spy cases that he was defending. Fortunately, there were other human rights lawyers who were able to take his place.

In 2015, Yu married a South Korean human rights lawyer and can now stay legally in South Korea while pursuing legal action against the state for their

infringement upon his rights. It is likely he will stay in South Korea and perhaps even become a human rights advocate for North Koreans. Whether North Koreans will stand behind him or distance themselves from someone who is not technically a North Korean defector is another question. Regardless if it is under Yu's leadership or someone else's, it is hopeful that in the near future, the North Korean defector community will soon begin organizing against the violation of their civil rights. Already, there are quiet grumblings about their treatment by the state, but no one has yet been openly vocal about their dissatisfaction.

In this chapter, I argued that surveillance of North Korean defectors is about the sorting of categories (Lyon 2002a). For NGOs, it is about sorting the "good" defectors from the "bad," through the prevention and monitoring crime. In the case of Yu, surveillance was about sorting "true" defectors from the spies, and finally, the spies from the Korean Chinese. This is not to say the surveillance of North Korean defectors is comprehensive or effective. A recent newspaper article declared, "Almost 700 defectors' whereabouts unknown," including 13 who have returned to North Korea, an issue I discuss in the conclusion. In this sense, "surveillance" of defectors is not necessarily about control. It is about purification of the category "defector" from those who are spies, Korean Chinese, or simply not willing to become South Korean. The separation of defectors from spies and Korean Chinese leads to the question: who will eventually be allowed to enter the "we" of South Korea and become full "cultural" citizens (Rosaldo 1993)?

Chapter 6

Citizenship and Belonging in South Korea

Stay Still (Tribute to Sewol Ferry Victims)

That morning,
The sky must have slanted down
And one by one,
Those friends must've cried
They must've called, "Mom and Dad"
Longing to see (their parents)
But (instead) the grownups shouted in whispers
Stay still, stay still
There, stay still
There, stay still
— Written and performed by Lee Seung-hwan

When I was living in South Korea in the mid 1990s, there was a poster of a cartoon lizard in all of the subway cars in Seoul. The lizard was sitting on a leaf; half its body was green and the other half red. The leaf camouflaged the green part of the body so that only the red part was visible. The caption read, "Look around, they are always around you," and was followed by directions on how to report spies. Similarly, Ju Hui Judy Han, a Korean American woman traveling in Seoul, writes of her experience looking at these signs: "Here I am, a visitor, a queer. (Looking suspect) Looking for suspects" (Han 1998). As someone who grew up in South Korea but now has a U.S. passport, Han is both foreign and local. When she sees the signs warning to watch out for those who are suspect, she wonders if they are looking at her.

Han's questioning proved to be an omen of what was to come. In 2015, the

term *jongbuk gay* (gay pro-North Korean) began to be used by South Korea Christian groups opposing homosexuality. The controversy and subsequent protesting against gays was focused around the gay pride parade in Seoul. Protestant groups organized against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups leading up to the parade, as well as during the parade itself. In the end, right-wing Protestant opposition to homosexuals was so strong that Pride, a parade meant to make the invisible visible, ended up being hidden behind a wall of protesting Christians.

Assuming that Christian conservatives did not uncover a secret North Korean plan to start a revolt in South Korea, what is the connection between being gay and being pro-North? The answer is that both are threats to the nation. For conservative protesters, being gay was “unnatural” and causing disorder in society. Not only were gays having sex, but they were having “unproductive” sex; that is, sex that would not result in the reproduction of the nation. Thus, homosexuality was weakening South Korean society. Anything that weakens South Korean society (or economy or culture) is considered by the state to aid North Korea. Han felt she was suspected as a communist because she was Korean American fluent in Korean but culturally different. More importantly, she felt her sexual identity made her suspect. Similarly, South Korean LGBTs are considered an overt threat to the nation. For the government and conservatives in South Korea, any danger to the nation is considered to be communist.

My dissertation has explored the attempts of South Korean Protestants to domesticate the uncanny stranger: North Korean defectors. The domestication process

that I have documented happens through relationships of intimacy, such as the recreation of the literal and figurative family, through gift-giving, and through intimate surveillance. I have argued that the treatment of North Korean defectors and their adjustment to life in South Korea shines a spotlight on the contradictions of South Korean citizenship in an imagined nation that is divided politically, economically, and culturally. Through the lens of defector aid, I have shown that South Koreans who give North Koreans aid attempt to find and create new definitions of belonging in a society that they see as simultaneously progressive and excessive, as capitalist and caring, and as lost and found.

The South Korean state has taught South Koreans that good citizens are anti-communist, and one of their duties is to be vigilant against the threat of North Korea from within as well as from without. Because communism and immorality are seen as being in the blood or passed through kinship, North Koreans are not able to escape the stigma of their origins. Their “blood” is the object of domestication and cleansing, but it is also something that cannot be cleansed. South Koreans are taught that they have blood ties to North Koreans, and yet, to South Korean Protestants and many others, communism and immorality are seen as being part of the blood. This leaves North Koreans in a bind: tied to South Koreans as family members, but also unable to escape the stigma of their North Korean origins. The fear of North Koreans as spies is apparent in the monitoring that all defectors are subject to as part of their cultural transformation into South Koreans. At times, this monitoring results in grave repercussions, as in the case of a “defector” who was arrested as a North Korean spy.

I have also shown that an important part of the domestication process is to recast adult defectors as “children” who have been chosen and blessed by God. Since the evils of communism are also in the blood, South Korean Christians uniquely see the opportunity for cleansing transformation through a Christian rebirth. Giving aid to North Korean defectors is done in the hope that pure (and newly converted) North Korean “children” will be the impetus for unification and the beginning of a new moral nation ruled by Christianity. Yet despite the scope and scale of aid, most defectors feel less like family and more like strangers in South Korean society.

In this conclusion, I give greater context to the contradictions that North Koreans live with through an examination of recent events in South Korea that revisit what it means to be Korean. I begin by exploring the recent Sewol Ferry tragedy in South Korea and the crisis of citizenship that followed in the aftermath. Through a discussion of various concepts of citizenship in South Korea, I show how North Korean defectors are limited moral citizens. Next, I compare North Korean defectors with another group that has limited citizenship in South Korea: multiculturals, the migrant brides who marry South Korean men. I argue that the changing demographics of South Korea, in relation to multicultural brides and their children, are challenging what it means to be Korean in the present day. Their presence, along with North Korean defectors, simultaneously challenges the myth of Korean homogeneity, as well as highlights what it means to be a moral citizen in this time period.

Sewol Ferry: The Boat that Overturned Ideas of Citizenship

On the morning of April 16, 2014, the MV Sewol, a long-distance passenger ferry traveling from Incheon, the port nearest to the capital city of Seoul, to the southernmost island of Jeju, a popular vacation destination, began to sink. Two and a half hours later, the ferry was submerged under water. Of the 476 people on board, 306 died. Most were middle and high school students from schools in working-class neighborhoods on school-sponsored holidays.

In the days following the disaster and futile rescue efforts, disturbing facts about the boat and its crew emerged. First, the ferry was overloaded beyond its capacity by 300%. Much of this was due to extensive illegal renovations, such as adding third- and fourth-floor cabins, but also the additional passengers these rooms provided for. In order to accommodate the extra freight, ballast water had to have been pumped out, which affected the balance of the boat and led to great instability. While the direct cause of the disaster was attributed to a fast turn, it was also found that the illegal additions and extra weight were decisive factors in the sinking (Campbell 2014). Media commentators stated that greed was the main cause (Choe et al. 2014; Hong 2014).

Second, the crew of the Sewol Ferry was completely unprepared for emergencies. Many of the crew were irregular workers, and had never been trained in proper procedures in case of an emergency.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the captain and crew told

¹⁰¹ In fact, a teenager on the ship made the first emergency call. Unlike other victims who called their parents to say goodbye to them, the “hero” called 119 and reported the sinking (Stevens 2014).

passengers to stay in their cabins while the ship sank. They then proceeded to abandon ship. The crew and those who ignored their instruction to stay in their cabins survived.

Third, the fact that the ferry was allowed to make illegal renovations and continue operating raised questions about the enforcement of safety regulations, as well as business and government corruption. In other words, there was widespread suspicion that government officials were bribed to look the other way.

Finally, the tragedy revealed that the South Korean Coast Guard was ill-equipped and untrained to deal with emergencies. Private fishing and commercial boats saved the majority of those who survived, as they arrived more than 30 minutes before the Coast Guard.

After the tragedy, the nation went into collective mourning. The fact that most of the victims were middle and high school students, and thus seen as innocent victims, made the disaster more tragic. Much coverage in the media highlighted video recordings of these teenagers in their last hours, as well as texts that were sent to friends and families of the victims. The deaths of these children were depicted in the media as a failure of society to protect the hope and future of the nation.

The cover for *Hankyoreh 21* magazine rhetorically asked, “Is this a nation?”¹⁰² while another cover for *Sisa Journal* magazine asserted, “A Broken Nation: Corrupt Growth, Incompetent Government, and Deplorable Media.”¹⁰³ While

¹⁰² My translation of “이것이 국가인가?”

¹⁰³ My translation at “고장난 나라: 비겁한 선장, 무능한 정부, 한심한 언론.” See covers at (<http://wanderingpoet.tistory.com/m/post/2185>).

institutional corruption was at the heart of these disasters, particularly the government officials who were bribed, the government tried to deflect attention by blaming individuals such as the CEO of the ferry company who approved the illegal construction, or the captain who abandoned ship.

Similar to other disasters in the mid-1990s, the Sewol Ferry Disaster led some to conclude that the mistakes made were a problem of Korean “culture.”¹⁰⁴ Yet South Korea’s position in 2014 was very different economically and culturally than in the mid-1990s. Since the 1990s, South Korea had joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a “club” for developed nations, and had become a leader of culture and music in Asia through the Korean Wave. It was also a lead investor in Asia, as well as a source of aid and development overseas. In other words, unlike in the 1990s, South Korea saw itself as developed, modern, and a benefactor to others. Therefore, in a departure from previous disasters, the problem of South Korean “culture” was placed more squarely on government and business corruption. As the family of the victims began to protest the bungling of the rescue operation, the inadequate apology of newly-elected President Park Geun-hye,¹⁰⁵ and the ensuing government cover-up of their role in the tragedy, it became clear to many in the population that the problem of Korean “culture” was precisely a problem of “staying still” and blindly following the orders of the government. Thus, the ferry tragedy, the

¹⁰⁴ These opinions were expressed in many personal conversations as well as in the media. See (Tudor 2012) and (Hoo-ran Kim 2014). For an alternate viewpoint, see “Korea’s Problem is Modernity” in the popular blog <http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2013/09/koreas-problem-is-modernity.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Park Geun-hye was elected President in December 2012, and is the first woman president in South Korea. She ran as a representative of the conservative Saenuri Party, and is the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee.

large-scale protests that followed, and the harsh government response to the protesters commenced a deeper questioning about the relationship of citizens to the state.

Citizenship in South Korea

What does it mean to be a citizen of South Korea in the past and present?

What rights and responsibilities do citizens have? There are a plethora of terms used to refer to citizenship and belonging in South Korea, with complex connotations and usages. The two most commonly used are *simin* and *kukmin*. The term *simin*, similar to the western concept of citizen, is closely linked with political rights and responsibilities given to an equal member of a nation-state. Previous to the turn of the 20th century, the term *simin* was used to refer to a “person of a city,” or urban dweller, but through intellectual exchanges with China and Japan, a new idea of *simin* was introduced. Instead of referring to people who were governed over, *simin* was a concept of people who were equal members of a nation with rights, although these rights were limited to property and life. The concept was elitist in nature – the masses were not seen as ready for civil or political rights, only the educated were (Moon 2013).

Shortly after the introduction of the term *simin*, Korea became colonized by Japan in 1910, and a new concept of citizenship was introduced through the Japanese. *Kukmin* was a translation of the Japanese term *kokumin*. While it was collective in nature, it was also a more authoritarian rendition of citizenship than the earlier *simin*, focusing on one’s loyalty to the nation. *Kukmin* stresses the duty of the people to pay

taxes and perform military service. The *kukmin*, as a collective, were not sovereign subjects but “objects to be mobilized to strengthen the state” (Moon 2013:12). It is important to note that this concept of *kukmin* has dominated politics in South Korea since its inception as a state in 1948.

It is ironic that the idea of *kukmin* continues to influence South Korea when it originated in Japan and was used by the Japanese to mobilize Koreans to sacrifice for the “collective” nation of Japan.¹⁰⁶ In fact, while some markers of collectively-detested colonial Japan have been eradicated,¹⁰⁷ others remain, such as *kukmin ch’echo*, or the “citizen’s exercise” that every student is required to participate in during public school. This military-like morning exercise routine is learned by every South Korean student, and often used in non-school activities, to warm up a group at an office retreat, for example.

The idea of *kukmin* is one that is used by the state and enshrined in the Constitution, which mentions the two duties of a citizen are to pay taxes and, for males, to protect the nation through military duty.¹⁰⁸ Unofficially, however, to be a good citizen required many things, including sacrificing for the greater cause of economic development through the intense period of industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s; eschewing consumption of foreign products through the 1980s and 1990s; and becoming “globalized” through the 1990s until today.

¹⁰⁶ The Japanese considered Korea as part of the “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” (Swan 1996). Thus, their mobilization was for a collective purpose.

¹⁰⁷ The Japanese General Government Building, a historic landmark, was destroyed in 1995. Also Japanese terms common in the Korean language were gradually purged, such as the term *kukmin hakyo* (citizen’s school) being changed to *chodeung hakyo* (basic school).

¹⁰⁸ In Korean Constitution, “Chapter II: Rights and Duties of the Citizens” (http://korea.assembly.go.kr/res/low_01_read.jsp?boardid=1000000035).

While women's duties as *kukmin* are not outlined by the Constitution, there is a *de facto* expectation for women to help the nation in the roles of support for men, the protectors of the nation, and the reproducers of the nation. For example, during the period of intense economic development in the 1950s and 60s, many young girls sacrificed their education and youth by moving to the capital and working in sweatshops while supporting their families in the countryside or funding their brothers' educations (Pak 2005). Women during the 1997 financial crisis were the first to be fired from their jobs, with appeals made by the government and business to sacrifice for men who were "heads of their families" (Chun 2008). In the present day, most women are expected or actively encouraged by their families or their companies to quit their jobs when they become pregnant. The lack of a comprehensive maternity leave system or adequate childcare facilities has led to a stark choice for most women – to have a career or to have children. Higher levels of education for women, along with increasing concerns about the cost of raising children, particularly sending them to private institutes that are ubiquitous in South Korea, have all contributed to the record-low birth rates in South Korea in the present day (Westley, Choe, and Retherford 2010).

The expectation for both men and women was that these duties were to be born without complaint. For example, despite extremely poor and unsafe conditions in the 1960s and 70s, it was considered being a bad citizen to advocate for improvements in the workplace. Since South Korea was in a race with North Korea to increase their gross domestic product (GDP), labor disputes were seen as a threat to

national growth and a sign of disloyalty to the state. Those who did organize were branded “subversives” helping North Korea to foment unrest in society, and labor activists are known by a majority of the population to be “communists” even today. One example includes a Korean American who joined the labor movement in South Korea. She was regularly warned by her relatives that the labor movement was full of communists, and if she continued her work there, she would become one also.

It was not until the period following the Great Struggle of 1987,¹⁰⁹ during the transition to procedural democracy, that the term *simin* was resurrected by progressive activists. The focus of *simin* in this new period was on political rights such as freedom of thought, expression, and assembly. Unfortunately, the *simin* movement remained elitist. Often, the role of *simin* in various campaigns was to contribute money, while policies that were to be advocated were decided by an elite group of activists. One example is the hugely successful citizen’s group, People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (discussed in Chapter 5). They ran an extremely successful “Small Shareholders’ Campaign” to try to gain enough votes to become a minority stakeholder in Samsung Corporation.

Another criticism of *simin* movements was that it focused on individual rather than collective rights, such as those involved in economic justice. In contrast to *simin* groups, historically oppressed groups in South Korea such as women’s and peasant organizations have promoted an alternate vision of citizenship encompassing social

¹⁰⁹ The Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987, also known as the June Democratic Uprising was the largest and longest set of nation-wide protests that began the transition from a military dictatorship into a civilian democracy.

and collective rights. Korean Women Worker's Associations United, for example, advocates for the collective rights of low-income, irregular workers who have been denied membership in labor unions due to their lack of full-time status. Often uneducated, middle-aged, and economically marginalized in society, women workers were able to create the first union for irregular workers across various workplaces. The irregular worker union model is now being used by traditional unions as full-time workers are becoming less of the norm in historically male industries (Chun 2009).

Despite the slow spread of *simin*, the concept of *kukmin* is most prevalent in society as well as in the field of North Korean defector aid. Since North Korean defectors have most social contact with the mainstream of society – conservative Christians, police minders, and government officials – they are taught to be dutiful towards the nation. *Kukmin* is what is outlined in the Constitution, and dominates the conservative mainstream. While South Korean aid workers emphasized the importance of obeying the law in South Korea as a duty of newly arrived North Korean defectors, at no time did anyone explain their rights as citizens. In other words, there was an expectation that North Koreans did not have rights; instead, they must be grateful to have been accepted by South Korean government and given citizenship.

The obligation of citizens to sacrifice for their nation without demanding anything in return is similarly asked of South Korean citizens. The South Korean state has and continues to ask for extraordinary sacrifices from its citizens: to “protect” the country from the threat of invasion by North Korea, to be good workers to support the

economy, and to accept these challenges quietly and without argument. Any forms of protest, or attempts to demand state accountability for rights violations has too often been met with accusations of being a communist.

The ethos of being a good and moral citizen is to sacrifice, but also to “be still” when things go wrong. Like the refrain in the song, “stay still” is a common admonishment for children in South Korean today. To “stay still” is to not fidget and be restless, as children often are, but particularly children who are required to study long hours in South Korea’s competitive education system. It is a phrase used by managers to white and blue-collar workers who are forced to work long hours. “Stay still” is also a phrase used by the older generation to admonish the younger generation, who they see as lacking patience. It is an ethos that is implicit in the government’s relationship with its citizens: wait for the good life that will come once our nation is developed. Although many South Koreans did wait, for many the good life has not been achieved. Instead, more and more sacrifices are asked of the population. In the song at the beginning of this conclusion, “stay still” is a refrain that the singer uses ironically. For those students who died in the Ferry Tragedy, and for South Koreans who have been waiting patiently while working hard for their government, staying still has only hurt the most innocent of its population – the children. Through the massive protests that have followed, the lack of government response to the needs of the victims’ families has led to a growing recognition that being a good *kukmin* is no longer enough. Instead, the people need a state that is responsive to its needs – for safety, for a brighter future for its children, and as a guarantor of the good life.

Unfortunately, in both senses of the concept of citizenship, North Koreans fall short – as individual *simin*, they have limited rights compared to South Koreans, particularly in terms of their unwanted surveillance and political activity. Furthermore, they are unable to fulfill their duties as *kukmin* citizens in the most important and sacred of duties (outside of paying taxes) for men in South Korea – serving in the military. For men, military service is seen as a necessary act of loyalty and the price of membership to the nation of South Korea. Those who do not serve in the military are subject to legal, social, and institutional discrimination, such as the approximately 600 Jehovah’s Witnesses a year who refuse to serve for their religious beliefs. Not only are these conscientious objectors jailed, once they are released, they are subject to a ban on public sector work for “criminals.” In addition, they are subject to other forms of formal and informal discrimination as they are considered “unpatriotic deviants” (Cho 2007:8).

If military service is the most crucial way for South Korean men to prove one’s loyalty and belonging to the state, it is an institution that is out of reach for North Korean defector men. In contrast, *tamunhwa*, or children of Koreans and foreign nationals with South Korean citizenship, have been allowed to serve since 2006, and thus have an opportunity to be good citizens in a way that North Koreans cannot. The fact that North Koreans have launched a campaign for the right to be conscripted and demonstrate their loyalty to their new nation shows the high stakes behind military service. While there has been no official explanation as to why North Koreans are banned from service, one academic speculates it is because of concerns over possible

spies (Struther 2011).

Tamunhwa and the Changing Demographic of South Korea

The successful domestication of North Korean defectors into the “we” of a specifically South Korean nation must be understood in the context of who the “we” excludes. In other words, who is being excluded from the “we” of Korea as North Koreans are becoming incorporated? What is at stake in the domestication of North Koreans (and South Korean Protestants)?

Foreigners in South Korea are broadly separated into three groups: *oegukin*, if they are white and from a Western country; *oegukin nodongja*, if they come from developing countries with temporary work permits; and *tamunhwa*, for migrant brides and their offspring. The term *tamunhwa* (multicultural), literally meaning “all cultures,” is defined by the Support for Multicultural Families Act as “a family consisting of a marriage immigrant or person with naturalization permission and a person with the nationality of the Republic of Korea.”¹¹⁰ The legal definition does not discriminate between foreigners who are from Western countries, migrant workers, or overseas Koreans. Yet it stipulates that one must be married to a South Korean in order to be a multicultural; those “foreigners” who are not married to South Koreans are not included in this definition. Being a part of a *tamunhwa* family means the

¹¹⁰ See the full Act at (<http://oneclick.law.go.kr/CSM/OvCnpRetrieveP.laf?csmSeq=645&ccfNo=2&cciNo=1&cnpClsNo=1><http://oneclick.law.go.kr/CSM/OvCnpRetrieveP.laf?csmSeq=645&ccfNo=1&cciNo=1&cnpClsNo=1>).

possibility of citizenship: automatic citizenship for children, and restrictions for applying for citizenship for foreigners married to South Koreans. All “foreigners” who are connected by marriage and blood to South Koreans can take advantage of language classes, subsidies for childcare and extra help with schooling for children that are available for *tamunhwa* families, regardless of economic background.

In contrast to the legal definition, the common use of the term *tamunhwa* is restricted to a gendered population that is visibly and linguistically marked as different: Southeast Asian women (often known as marriage migrants) who are married to South Korean men, and the offspring of these unions.¹¹¹ The influx of these marriage migrants was initiated by the government as a countermeasure to the low birth rate in South Korea (Hyun Mee Kim 2007). In the past 30 years, birth rates have decreased in South Korea, while divorce rates have increased. More South Korean women in their 30s choose not to marry, leading government and society to blame women for not fulfilling their “duty” as Korean citizens. The trend towards lower rates of marriage combined with a preference for male heirs has led to a shortage of marriageable women in the South Korean countryside that mirrors China's situation. By 2005, birth rates were at a low of 1.08, one of the lowest in the world and much lower than the 2.1 needed to reproduce the nation (Lim 2014).

In order to counter the low birthrate trend, the government began encouraging the importing of migrant brides from China, the Philippines, and Vietnam since the mid-1990s. By 2011, the number of foreign residents has reached 1.4 million, over 3%

¹¹¹ In daily usage, *tamunhwa* is not used to refer to men married to South Korean women.

of the population (Lie 2014). As of 2007, migrant brides accounted for 14% of the foreign population (Lim 2010). Unfortunately, these women face difficulties without proper Korean language skills and precarious legal residency, which is dependent on the largesse of their Korean husbands. There are reports of widespread domestic violence, with a number of tragic cases ending in death (Iglauer 2015). Unsurprisingly, divorce (accounting for 40% of all migrant marriages) and abandonment are common.

In order to create “citizens” out of multicultural brides, the South Korean government has responded by setting up multicultural centers where foreigners married to South Koreans can access language and culture classes to help them learn to be “proper” Korean brides. As divorces in this population become more common, so do the restrictions under which marriage migrants can apply for citizenship. One marriage migrant NGO staff member told me that the frequency of abandonment had led the South Korean government to change its laws so that brides would have to be married two years before applying for citizenship. The citizenship of marriage migrants is also contingent upon their ability to have children – it is increasingly rare that non-productive women are given citizenship (Hyun Mee Kim 2007).

The largest group of “foreigners” in South Korea is Chinese. As of January 2015, there were 950,000 Chinese nationals in South Korea, and over 70% percent of this number was *chosŏnjok* (ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship) (Eum 2015). Despite the fact that the two groups share Chinese nationality, the division is important to South Koreans. *Chosŏnjok* are still considered to be part of the imagined (ethnic) South Korean nation, albeit marginally as part of a country that South Korea

considers lower culturally and economically. Some have been in South Korea for generations, but their presence in South Korea is marked by discrimination (Schwartzman 2010). Korean Chinese can be found working in menial labor such as restaurant or factory work. Due to similarities of appearance and fluency in Korean, Korean Chinese are rarely, in common practice, included in the category of *tamunhwa*. This is despite the fact that they make up the majority of migrant brides in South Korea. Marrying South Korean men is one of the few ways that Korean Chinese can gain citizenship in South Korea. Yet, despite the numbers, their presence and their marriages to South Koreans continues the myth of Korean homogeneity.

All children born of *tamunhwa* marriages have Korean citizenship, unlike many of the women who bear them. Since many of them are born of South Korean fathers, they are considered Korean by blood. Yet difference of blood marks them as subjects of discrimination and racism from South Korean society. As a result, most of these so-called “Koasians” report hiding their identity from their South Korean teachers and even friends (Lim 2009), similar to North Korean defectors. As Koasians become adults and begin serving in the military in greater numbers as protectors of the nation, their presence challenges the myth of Korean homogeneity. *Tamunhwa* are distinct, also, from North Korean defectors who are rarely included in this category and do not want to be included. In fact, many North Koreans stated their frustration with government efforts to include *tamunhwa* into the nation of South Korea – efforts that they felt were greater than the incorporation of defectors into South Korea. “We are part of the same *minjok*,” many defectors told me, implying they needed to retain

their special status by distancing themselves from marriage migrants from Southeast Asia or China.

Namnampuknyŏ

Soon after I began my fieldwork, a South Korean friend gave me a card she had picked up on the subway. Like other cards that were slipped into the frames of advertising posters on the subway or bus system, this one was small, like a business card. Most often, these cards were advertisements for sex, or for clubs that offered sex. This one, however, had no lewd pictures, and stated simply, “*namnampuknyŏ*:¹¹² marriage brokers,” followed by a phone number. I stowed the card away, and promptly forgot about it until almost a year later when I was working as a volunteer for a singing group for North and South Korean women. The group had been formed by a new feminist organization in order to perform in a choral competition. Made up of North and South women ranging in ages from 20 to 60, members practiced for about three months and performed in a competition as the first “unification” choral group. After the choral ensemble’s final performance, the group went to eat dinner and I met a North Korean woman who was in her 50s who told me she was a marriage broker working to match North Korean women and South Korean men. In fact, another woman in the group, a regular, was also a marriage broker. She was living testament to the service – she had married a South Korean man.

¹¹² Southern man and northern woman. See Chapter 2 for additional discussion on this term.

When I asked other group members about the marriage brokers, the North Korean participants told me in derisive terms that they were there to recruit women for their service. Despite the brokers' promoting South Korean men as being good spouses, the group of North Korean women was skeptical that these marriages were ideal. Yet it was a growing trend, they told me, mentioning friends who had married South Korean men. South Korean men were nicer and easier than North Korean men, they agreed. Most importantly, South Koreans made a decent and regular income.

A few weeks later I visited the marriage broker, who told me about the matchmaking business. Her company was a marriage broker that specialized in foreign women, and North Korean women were a small and new part of the business. North Korean women were being marketed as a better alternative to migrant brides, since they could speak Korean. The relative value of a North Korean versus a Vietnamese bride was reflected in the income levels of South Korean men they were matched with: men with monthly incomes of two million won¹¹³ or less were referred to Vietnamese women, while men with incomes of more than 2.5 million won were referred to North Korean women. At the top of the hierarchy were South Korean women, who were only introduced to men making more than three million won a month.

While this is an area that deserves careful research, it is noteworthy that the marriage broker made a link between marriage and unification. She stated, "The work of having North and South Koreans marry is an important part of unification."

¹¹³ Approximately U.S. \$2000, considered a lower middle-class salary.

Similarly, the fact that the normal broker fee of three million won (approximately U.S. \$3,000) was paid for by the Ministry of Unification (MOU), as well as the costs for the wedding and a modest honeymoon in Jeju Island, shows that the South Korean government is invested in marriage between North and South Koreans as an important part of unification policy. Caren Freeman (Caren Freeman 2011) argues that transnational kinship making in the form of marriages between Korean Chinese and South Koreans, was thought of as “bringing the Korean people (*minjok*) one step closer to recuperating their idealized homogenous nation.” Freeman asserts that South Koreans viewed the marrying of Korean Chinese as the symbolic appropriation of the North by the South. I argue that nowhere is the symbolic nation more apparent than in the marriages promoted by the South Korean government between South Korean men and North Korean women. While defector men are blocked from becoming full citizens through their “failure” to protect the nation, defector women are offered one avenue to full citizenship in South Korea through the literal and symbolic reproduction of the nation.

As a result, marriages between North and South Koreans are regularly highlighted in the media, and movies and television shows overtly or subtly hint at the subject of *namnampuknyŏ*. One of the most bizarre is *Namnampuknyŏ*, a reality television show in which popular male entertainers are “married” to North Korean defector women for a day and a night. Every episode, the camera follows a new couple as they get to know each other, eat together, and “sleep” together while discussing family and dating rituals. The show is a way for South Koreans to see the

virtue (and beauty) of North Korean women as brides, while imagining the symbolic marriage between the two peoples. It is also a thinly disguised way for the state to promote interest in unification in a younger population that is increasingly disinterested in North Korea.

Belonging in the West, Belonging in South Korea

In August 2015, defector Kim Ryen-hi announced that she wanted to return to North Korea. Kim stated her defection was a “terrible mistake” (Choe 2015b). Kim had defected to South Korea in 2011 in order to get medical care for her liver. She was told that she could access benefits and have her medical care covered if she defected, but did not realize that she would not be allowed to return to the North. By then it was too late – her broker had taken her passport and would not return it to her. Soon after she arrived in the South, she began to demand to return to North Korea. The South Korean authorities refused, stating it is illegal for defectors to return to North Korea. Out of desperation, she tried to get brokers to take her back to the North. When that failed, she contacted the North Korean embassy in China, and began spying for North Korea. Instead of being deported as she hoped, she was sentenced to jail for two years. Although she admitted to spying, she vehemently denies going to the South as a spy. Her lawyer also agrees, stating, “Her conduct is too absurd to be a spy’s” (Choe 2015b).

Despite the unusual circumstances of her case, Kim is not alone in wanting to return to the North. According to the Ministry of Unification, there are thirteen

defectors who have returned to North Korea, although most aid workers during my fieldwork told me there are many more. Some have come out publically castigating the South Korean government for their treatment of defectors, such as Son Jung-hun, a successful defector who has lived in the South for twelve years. Son's motivation to go back to the North is to see his family again, but he asserts, "By going public with my desire to defect again [to North Korea] I hope to send a message about how badly South Korea treats defectors" (McCurry n.d.). While some human rights analysts claim the assertions made by returning defectors are a play to get in the good graces of North Korea, the movement of defectors to North Korea as well as the West, prove that there is something deeper happening.

A recent news article announced that the whereabouts of 700 defectors were unknown (Almost 700 N. Korean Defectors' Whereabouts Unknown n.d.), despite the surveillance that North Koreans are subject to. It is likely that most of this number are defectors who attempt what is known as "double defection," or the defection of North Koreans into a third country. For defectors disillusioned by the South, one option is to attempt a defection to a third country. In the United States, there are a handful of cases of defectors officially attempting to seek asylum, while others do so unofficially by throwing away their South Korean passports and pretending to have just crossed the border into Thailand. These cases are well known in the defector aid community, and talked about openly. In addition to official double defection are those who attempt to stay in the West through legal and illegal means – through overstaying tourist and educational visas. According to a Korean American working on defector

aid in the United States, these number in the hundreds (Lee and Chee 2015). Double defectors are in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, along with many returning to China and North Korea.

Even those who do not attempt to “double defect” are eager to go abroad to study or migrate. Wild rumors of North Koreans being welcomed socially and economically in the United States and Canada were rampant when I was doing my field research. I had more than a few conversations with defectors who wanted me to tell them about benefits and life in the United States. Joon, for example, had heard stories of people who were provided housing and monetary stipends from the U.S. government. I warned that these were not from the government, but through churches or NGOs, and there were few guarantees about getting these funds. Joon was puzzled to hear this information; he had heard seemingly solid rumors that they were true. I cautioned him to find out if the benefits were coming from the government or from informal channels, since a U.S. refugee organization staff member had assured me the benefits were absurdly minimal compared to the benefits available in South Korea.

When visiting defectors in Los Angeles in 2014, I was surprised to find that the defectors I met there were happy and well-adjusted, despite the lack of benefits and discrimination often faced by recent immigrants. One North Korean defector told me, “I like that the discrimination I face is similar to the Italian or Spanish guy next to me. We are all the same. And I can be invisible here” (Lee and Chee 2015). Her “invisibility” was about being able to say she was Korean without specifying North Korean, and not having to answer uncomfortable questions about her North Korean

identity. As I have discussed in my dissertation, despite the benefits available in South Korea through churches and the government, North Korean defectors were discontent with their treatment in South Korea. They may have symbolic importance, but they lack political or economic power. Like South Koreans, they turn towards the United States for English, but also to fulfill their dreams of a better life.

A handful of North Korean defectors I met in the field ended up studying in the U.S. short-term through the sponsorship of Christian NGOs, while others traveled there as part of human rights witnessing, sponsored by U.S. NGOs. One defector I knew later was sponsored for a TED talk and eventually had her autobiography published in English (Lee and John 2015b). She is now a minor celebrity in South Korea and travels regularly to the U.S. to promote her book. For the (lucky?) few who pursue the route of overseas witnessing, it is absolutely imperative that they do not share any positive memories of North Korea. Their purpose in the spotlight, much more than in South Korea, is to delegitimize North Korea. They are also a contentious group in the defector community. I heard many North Koreans commenting on one or another of these now-famous people, saying that they were lying or distorting the truth about North Korea. The hazards of relying on defector testimony for evidence, particularly in light of the practice of “paying” for testimony, is slowly being recognized by academics as well as in the media (Song 2013; Song 2015). Regardless of whether defectors choose to besmirch North Korea or try to hide quietly in South Korea, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. One defector sadly

summarized his predicament when he stated, “We are all pawns in the politics between North and South.”

Yet I argue that it is not just North Koreans who are pawns between North and South politics: South Koreans are similarly trapped. When Sewol Ferry victims’ families were imprisoned and called “communist sympathizers” for their protest of the devastating deaths of their children, they are similarly victims of North-South politics. The harsh action of the government is surprising considering the overwhelming popular support protesters are getting from popular entertainers and the general public.

The debate about citizenship is most mirrored in a new term spreading in South Korean blogs in recent months. “Hell *Chosŏn*” (South Korean Hell) emerged as a popular slogan in the past year for those in their 20s and 30s dissatisfied with living conditions in South Korea, asserting that living in South Korea is a “living hell.”¹¹⁴ The plethora of popular blogs and media attention has led to creation of a Wikipedia-like page,¹¹⁵ in which a long list of complaints are included about the injustices that citizens must endure, such as military service, competition in education, and long working hours. At the top of this list is the complaint, “a country where if you point out the contradictions of society, you become a communist/loser.”¹¹⁶ It is unclear how the Ferry Protests and the “Hell *Chosŏn*” online protests will conclude, but there are signs of hope that these protests will result in the emergence of a new South Korean

¹¹⁴ See Korea Expose (<http://www.koreaexpose.com/voices/korea-thy-name-is-hell-joseon/>) for one example.

¹¹⁵ See the full site at (<http://wiki.dcinside.com/wiki/헬조선>).

¹¹⁶ My translation of “사회의 모순을 지적하면 빨갱이/패배자가 되는 국가.”

identity that will include and embrace multiculturals as well as North Korean defectors.

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