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TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AMONG NORTH KOREAN REFUGEE-MIGRANTS: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Society

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Zusammenfassung

Ungefähr 80 Prozent der in Südkorea ankommenden nordkoreanischen Migranten schließen sich protestantischen Kirchen an. Vermutlich kommen sie mit protestantischen Missionsnetzwerken entweder während ihres Aufenthaltes in Nordostchina oder auf dem Weg in den Süden in Kontakt. Als Teil ihrer Bestrebungen sich an eine neue Heimat anzupassen und auf der Suche nach Sinn entwickeln besonders diejenigen, die Südkorea verlassen und in nichtkoreanischen Gesellschaften Asyl suchen, ihre Religiosität auf sehr unterschiedliche Weise. Basierend auf langfristigen ethnografischen Untersuchungen und Tiefeninterviews mit Menschen in Großbritannien und Deutschland werden in diesem Artikel religiöse Aspekte erörtert, mit deren Hilfe nordkoreanische Migranten ihr Leben und ihre Zukunft gestalten.

Abstract

About 80 percent of North Korean migrants arriving in South Korea affiliate themselves with Protestant churches. This implies that they are exposed to Protestant missionary networks either while dwelling in Northeast China or en route to the South. Some who leave South Korea for other countries or seek asylum in non-Korean societies develop their religiosity in various ways and for various reasons, as part of their aspirations, adjustment to new homes, and search for meaning. Based on long-term ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with individuals in the United Kingdom and Germany, this article discusses the religious encounters and conversions through which North Korean migrants make their lives and futures.

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Transnational Migration and Religious Conversion among North Korean Refugee-Migrants: Comparative Perspectives

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1. Introduction

This article sheds light on the religious encounters and experiences of North Korean migrants in Northeast Asia and Europe. It draws attention to religion as a lens through which the migrants' negotiation of meanings, new selves and homelands, and hopes for the future can be better illuminated.

North Korean migrants have witnessed dramatic progress in the Korean peace process since the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. A series of inter-Korean summits and unprecedented North Korean-US meetings were both sensational and (partly) substantial. Yet it is generally acknowledged that decades-long antagonisms and international power dynamics are likely too complicated to allow any major structural changes to be accomplished easily. Moreover, we have also learned from the German case that the reunification of a divided nation is not merely a dramatic, one-time event, marked in that case by the collapse of the wall, but rather a long-term process of negotiating new subjectivities and a new sense of belonging (an *Innere Einheit* or inner unity)—as an invisible but strongly felt cultural border can last much longer than expected. The German term *Innere Einheit* is translated into Korean as *Maŭmŭi t'onghap*, or the integration of mind, signifying that the social integration of a once-divided nation is not merely a matter of politico-economic reforms but rather a process of mutual understanding and recognition among peoples who have been accustomed to different cultural systems.

In this respect, North Korean migrants have been often understood as the first unifiers whose resettlement process in the South might foretell what a reunified Korea or North-South Korean social integration would and should look like.¹ In fact, the adaptation of North Korean migrants has become a governmental and social project in the South. Thus, their migration has long been called the “Seoul Train,” as a documentary film was entitled, implying an assumption that their ultimate destination can be no other place but South Korea.

I have argued elsewhere, however, that North Korean “Underground Railways” have been intimately tied to South Korean evangelical missionary networks, and that the conversion of North Korean migrants to Christianity can thus be understood as a cultural project that empowers them to claim

¹ North Korean migrants' subjectivities have changed according to the political characteristics of South Korean state regimes. The shifting names, from *kwisun yongsa* (defecting heroes) to *t'albukja* (escapees from the North), *pukhanit'al jumin* (residents fled North Korea), *saet'ömin* (new settler), and *t'albukmin* (North Korean defectors) all have particular political connotations, closely related to the ways in which the governmental compensation scales have changed over the years. See Byung-Ho Chung (2009) for more discussion.

leadership roles in envisioning a reunified, and Christianized, Korean nation (Jung 2015). Such transnational and interactive perspectives reframe North Korean migration as an ongoing process of what Thomas Tweed (2006) calls “dwelling” and “crossing” in spatiotemporal dimensions, in which various social actors, institutions, and the divine are involved.

The anthropologist Byung-Ho Chung (2014) draws our attention to the frequent border crossings of North Korean migrants across Asia, America, and Europe. Using the term “penetrant transnationalism,” Chung sheds light on “the illegal transnational movements of people, information, and goods that penetrate strictly controlled borders and, as a result, induce changes in the involved countries” (Chung 2014: 330). The concept of transnationalism typically refers to the multiple territorial ties of people on the move, regulated mainly by state authorities and apparatuses. Yet North Korean migrants’ crossings are accompanied by a generative force, which seems to push both the international refugee regime and the migrants themselves into a liminal space: a spatiotemporal zone where nothing is precisely determined. It is an ambivalent and often precarious space, where gradual or radical changes can take place in individuals’ lives, which might, in turn, trigger larger social transformations. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, these transformations are multilayered and multilateral. Transnational migration inherently coincides with continuity and discontinuity in all respects of the daily lives of migrants and communities.

My research is thus engaged in larger theoretical, theological, and practical discussions about the religious conversions often associated with the border crossing of North Korean migrants. More specifically, it focuses on the role played by religion in the migrants’ meaning-making in Asia and Europe. Based on long-term relationships with and follow-up research on North Korean migrants who have left their homes since the mid-1990s, this research documents the life trajectories of those who are currently in the United Kingdom and Germany, from a comparative perspective. I began carrying out field research among North Korean migrants in the early 2000s in China and South Korea, and have continued to interact with some of them to the present day, while establishing new relationships with other migrants now in Europe.

In this paper, I will first briefly consider the key concepts of home, aspiration, and religion; second, I will present ethnographic vignettes portraying two of my North Korean interlocutors and their life trajectories, one now living in the United Kingdom and the other in Germany. I admit that these individual narratives can only afford us partial truths—and yet they can also give us a deeper sense of the ways in which vulnerable refugee-migrants have struggled and searched for meaningful homes and identities while interacting with both secular regimes and discourses of faith.

2. Home, Future and Religion

This article pays attention to the ways in which North Korean migrants come to reconceptualize and reconfigure their understanding of home while interacting with local refugee policy, the international human right regime, and religious conversion in different registers. The concept of home is thus discussed in both spatiotemporal and sacred dimensions. Geographically speaking, the home and homeland in migration and diaspora studies appear to be both mobile and sedentary.

Yet spatiality is inseparable from temporality. It may be right to say that homes or homelands tend to be colligated with the past, with a nostalgic memory. While living in their present homes in a host society, migrants and diasporas, either as groups or as individuals, tend to imagine returning to an unchanged home, affectionately calling to mind memories of their native country. In other words, as migration and diaspora studies have shown, an imagined home is nearly always rooted in the past.²

Yet uprooted refugees, exiles, and stateless people may claim that their home or homeland exists in the future. For example, Korean-Japanese students at Korean ethnic schools (*Chosŏn hakkyo*) in Japan tend to locate their sense of national belonging neither in present-day Japan nor in divided Korea, but rather in a reunified Korea of the future (Ryang 2009). Locating a homeland in the future differs from imagining possible changes in the present landscape. Namely, the former emotion partly stems from nostalgia, a longing for a past home, whereas the latter can imply a resistance against or a will to change the present conditions in which the migrants and diasporas are situated.³ The future-oriented plans and visions of migrants are products of ongoing interactions between their learned intellectual and affective behaviors and sets of new ideas and material cultures they encounter while crossing borders and adjusting to new host societies.

Following Arjun Appadurai (2004), I refer to such interactive and generative cultural activities and behaviors as aspiration. Aspiration amounts to more than isolated, individual dreaming and hoping. It is rather a project and process of collective and multilateral negotiation. In my research, aspiration is conceptualized as a frame of mind that is nurtured through social and religious interactions between individuals from different faiths and cultural dispositions, or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). I take religion especially seriously as an institution through which North Korean migrants encounter and negotiate

² Following Safran (1991), Steven Vertovec (1997) defines diaspora in terms of triadic relationships, which include (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.

³ Modern Korean history observes the rising various aspirations among Korean nationalists against the imperial Japan. Korean religious leaders and revolutionists alike fostered provocative visions and commitments that were pursued in various activisms in and outside of the Korean peninsula. See Chŏng Un-Hyŏn's *Ahan Jung-kŭn ka saramdŭl* (2017) for the influence of Catholicism, Lee Man-yŏl's "3.1 undong kwa hankuk kyohoy" (2019) for that of Protestantism, and Hyun Hee Lee (2006) for *Ch'ŏndokyo* (the Heavenly Way).

new meanings for their perilous journeys and identities, and come to imagine what a return home could or should look like from both secular and sacred perspectives.

Indeed, the relationship between migration and religion is intimate in the contemporary transnational context. Even economic migrations or political exiles are nearly always implicitly and explicitly linked with religious issues like cultural citizenship, identity, humanitarianism, human rights, and other forms of meaning-making. Religion enables people on the move to claim new home-like places through material and performative practices in their host societies. In this respect, migration studies scholars refer to religion as a kind of cultural luggage that the migrants carry across borders. It enables transnational communities to “continue” their cultural identities in various, heterogeneous ways. And it is also “believed to provide a sanctuary and space of relief for vulnerable people,” to be a “compass” and “itinerary,” in the words of Thomas Tweed (2006), and to be “a lens for understanding the kinetics of homemaking in often hostile environments” (Horstmann and Jung 2015).

What is specific among North Korean migrants, however, is that they are seen as atheist or as disenchanted from Kim Il-Sung cultism, a pseudo-religious ideology according to the evangelical view.⁴ From their accounts they do not usually seem to carry any kind of religious belief or practice with them across the Sino-North Korean border. Instead, they encounter and often convert to Christianity, particularly evangelical Protestantism, while staying in the Sino-North Korean border area, moving to third countries, or settling in South Korea or elsewhere. This essay thus demonstrates the ways in which some of my North Korean interlocutors, who identify themselves as Christian, prefer to locate their homes in the future rather than in the present, in their host societies. In other words, I want to highlight how their religious conversion helps them find meaning in their lives while envisioning a reconciliation of the Korean nation.

3. Post-Multicultural & Post-Secular Europe

In Europe, North Korean refugee-migrants are nearly invisible in comparison with the large number of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. It is hard to estimate how many North Korean refugee-migrants are wandering the world in search of safety and better opportunities for themselves and their children. Moreover, the number of those who are successfully recognized as

⁴ Worshipping Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il appears to be a form of religion, but Korean evangelists are hesitant to accept religious pluralism. In addition, they continue to reproduce the ill-famed Red Complex, an anti-communist preoccupation rooted in a series of such bloody conflicts as the Jeju Uprising (1948), Yösu-Sunchön Incident (1948), and the Korean War (1950-1953). Those possessed by this form of hatred tend to show radical antagonism toward liberal progressive people and activism. In recent years, South Korean conservative evangelicals have irrationally referred to homosexuals as *chonbuk gei*, or pro-North Korean gays.

refugees is quite low. Around the time when the Bush administration in the United States issued the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004, European Union countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, and Belgium began to witness the arrival of migrants who claimed status as North Korean asylum seekers. This section focuses on the ways in which North Korean migrants negotiate the meanings of the resettlement process in Europe, in particular the United Kingdom and Germany. More specifically, I shed light on the ways in which they adjust to or contest local socio-political predicaments, such as the increasing conservative backlash against the post-secular tendency (Habermas 2010) and emergence of “super-diversities” (Vertovec 2007) that have accompanied the influx of migrant-refugees into Europe.

Jürgen Habermas (2010) uses the term “post-secular” to describe both the shifting social order under which religion has retreated from the public sphere and the ways in which religious and secular people and cultures can peacefully coexist. “Post-secularism,” however, makes sense especially in the context of a European mode of modernization that is believed to be at once teleological and universal. As Peter van der Veer (2015) convinces us, this sort of modernization-secularization theory should be understood as a peculiar historical product of Europe and cannot be assumed to be true of most Asian modernities. As mentioned in the previous section, some North Korean migrants tend to rationalize South Korean wealth as a consequence of the Christian God’s sacred blessing, rather than the result of merely human endeavors mobilized by anti-communist nationalism. In this theological view, Europe has become secularized, and is now “stained” by non-Christian religion (i.e., Muslim specifically) and materialism. Thus, it is not unusual to hear claims from current South Korean migrant churches and missionaries that one of their sacred callings is to revive Christian spirituality in Europe. The following case studies will show, however, the religious differences that can develop among North Korean migrants who have resettled in host societies with divergent refugee policies.

In the context of the European refugee regime, I introduce two male migrants: Peter currently resides with his wife and children in New Malden in the United Kingdom, while Mr. Kim and his family live in a southern city in Germany. In order to protect their privacy, all the names appearing in this essay are pseudonyms and some detailed information is omitted.

4. Peter in England: “Be Ready!”

“I believe that North Korean evangelization can revive spirituality in England and beyond... North Korean migrants are now awakening the United Kingdom, which has been dying.”

The soft yet convincing voice of Peter, in his late forties, delivers this idea, which he came to have while living in England. In his account, North Korean migrants are no longer “fake refugees” who have made a “secondary migration” from South Korea to the United Kingdom (Song and Bell 2018), helpless victims of the North Korean “dictatorship,” as claimed in the refugee application form—mere newcomers positioned low in the class and ethnic hierarchy of the Korean ethnic enclave of New Malden. Instead, he has come to view himself and his fellow North Koreans as missionaries who have been called to revitalize the Holy Spirit in both his host and home countries.

His empowered subjectivity is tied to his spiritual map in which North Korea and England are interconnected and diffused into one another, as if the physical territories have been made liquid by the Holy Spirit. In the same vein, time for Peter is not linear but rather parallel and interactive. The present-day spatiotemporal realm of his host country is inseparable from that of the future home that thrives in his imagination. The distinction between home and host countries becomes ambiguous in the context of his aspirations, an ambiguity that cannot be simply attributed to a kind of flexibility in practicing transnational citizenship (cf. Ong 2003). Instead, his religious conviction should be understood in light of his life-changing encounters across borders.

Peter crossed the Sino-North Korean border, the Tumen River, with his family in 1999 when the great famine devastated his hometown. I met Peter and his family for the first time in the summer of 2000 at a Christian church in Yanji, China. His family attended Sunday worship while staying at a secret shelter provided by the church with monetary support from overseas Korean churches. Our second encounter took place at the Hanawon, the South Korean facility for newly arrived North Korean migrants in Ansŏng (or Anseong) city. As he later told me, his family made their “secondary migration”—a journey to “escape the South” (or *t’alnam*)—in 2007, when about three hundred North Korean migrants left for Europe without notice to South Korean authorities and friends. I still remember the mixed feelings evident in his face—full of worry, as well as some curiosity, about South Korean life in Yanji, brighter when he considered the prospect of safety in the South, less so when he was reminded of the uncertainty of his new life. Religion was not an issue that much concerned us in our informal conversations.

However, he later said that his faith became more sincere during the first five years of the long initial resettlement period in England. He was sent to reside in a neighborhood near Manchester where Muslim refugee-migrants are concentrated, and thus he “felt awkward,” as if he did not belong there. And there was no Christian church nearby. Instead, he listened to CDs of a South Korean pastor, meditated and prayed daily with his family, and came to deepen his understanding of the Bible.

He now understands this “temporary” settlement period as a liminal situation in which he was sent to encounter a non-Christian community as a spiritual challenge to religious pluralism, a challenge he later acknowledged to be God’s providence. He believed that God led him to become familiar with the Muslim population in order to develop a sense of how to evangelize them in the near future. With this conviction in mind, he moved to secure better economic opportunities and his children’s education in New Malden, where about five hundred North Korean migrants had joined the existing Korean ethnic community. As preceding studies have elaborated, when the British government reduced social welfare benefits for refugees—a strategy to reduce the number of refugee applications that caused a substantial number of Korean ethnic Chinese migrants employed by South Korean entrepreneurs to return to China—North Korean newcomers joined the labor force and became active contributors to the Korean ethnic community. Hae-Ran Shin (2017) documents the dynamics of increasing diversity negotiated and enhanced by the arrival of North Korean newcomers in the existing transnational Korean ethnic enclaves in New Malden. In the words of Steven Vertovec (2007), their presence contributes to the “super-diversity” of England. The Korean ethnic community has become more heterogeneous in terms of countries of origin, immigration backgrounds and consequent entitlements, restrictions to their rights, divergent legal, social and economic status, and religious practices, to name a few.

For Peter, such internal diversities within the same ethnic community and the multicultural landscape a British city like New Malden exhibits are likely experienced in a different manner, so to speak, from secular and spiritual points of view. First of all, he states that North Korean migrants are not especially worried about being discriminated against as “North Korean” by the “native” British people, by whom they are all treated as either Korean or Asian (Lee and Lee 2015). In other words, they come to acknowledge that racial and ethnic distinctions are relational. While North Koreans encounter social discrimination in South Korea, in western societies they tend to be lumped in with other Asians as one of many ethnic minorities. And despite the internal dynamics of the Korean community, within the super-diversity of U.K. society at large, the British people see Koreans as a model minority. At the same time, as aforementioned, North Koreans contribute to the existing Korean community by actively participating in church and other socializing activities (Shin 2017). In this respect, North Korean migrants like Peter and his family find their self-esteem improved.

More significant is his increasing role in his religious community. Since moving to New Malden, he hosts a biweekly bible meeting of North Koreans who serve as core members of their own community and actively participate in a street ministry, together with a group of younger North and South Korean Christians, in districts where Muslims are concentrated. Korean street ministries are not always

welcome in South Korea or overseas because of aggressive tactics that often violate local regulations for behavior in public places. Nonetheless, Peter's Korean street ministry seems effective, both to the participant worshippers and to British people. Peter told me that both he and the young people feel more empowered and blessed every weekend when they finish the street ministry. While Muslim missionaries hold a counter-ministry near the Korean church group, Christians who have been unchurched for a while approach the Koreans to applaud, some with tears of joy in their eyes. Thus, whenever they "go out for street ministry," Peter says, "we become more convinced that God is with us" in the quest to revive Christianity in the United Kingdom.

Peter does not shy from criticizing "scholars and researchers from South Korea, England, Germany, and the like [who] come to interview me, mainly focusing on human rights in North Korea, current living conditions [as refugees in England], and so on. But none of them ask me about religion, which I believe is the most important in considering North Korea." What he meant to point out is how most social scientific projects are bounded by a secular framework. He identifies himself, however, as a servant of Jesus Christ, and believes that he is called to be prepared for the reformation of his homeland. Here his religious belief and practice allow him to amalgamate his present host society (i.e., England) with his future homeland (i.e., North Korea).

"North Korea is no longer the same place where I was treated like less than an animal [*jimsŭngboda motan*]," he says. "Now the people have gotten to know the taste of money [*donmasŭl dŭrida*]. The market is everywhere, and thus society is ready to change at a rapid pace when Christianity arrives." Unlike many North Korean migrants' testimonies, in which North Korea is depicted as fixed, unchanged, and uncivilized, Peter admits that there has been radical change in his home country since he left about twenty years. Its economy relies on the market instead of the central distribution of goods. Such marketization is for him a sign that a fundamental transformation can be accomplished with the arrival of Christianity.

One might ask what form of Christianity he means. First, his belief in the intimate relationship between the market economy and Christianity is one of the shared evangelical discourses on spiritual warfare on North Korea. This Weberian perspective is still disseminated by conservative churches in South Korea. In this view, capitalism and democracy as a politico-economic structure can only be completed with the people's spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit.

However, North Korean society does not necessarily have to transform itself according to a South Korean form of evangelical Christianity. Instead, my ethnographic findings suggest that Peter and his fellow North Korean migrants aspire to develop and bring with them to their homeland a diasporic,

heterogeneous form of religiosity. Peter distinguishes himself from some conservative right-wing anti-North Korean activists and evangelists by saying that he supports the inter-Korean summit meetings and prays for a successful outcome from the North Korean-US relationship as well. What he aspires for in faith can be called borderless and peaceful interactions and relations among the various states and groups of people.

With little doubt, there is a schism between Peter's aspirations and realities. He can neither visit his homeland anytime soon nor freely interact with North Korean embassy officers in the streets, malls, or restaurants of New Malden; he experiences a language barrier with his children, who speak English more and more and are starting to lose their North Korean identity; and, similar to his previous life in South Korea, he must work hard to live, though racial and social discrimination is thankfully rare.

Nonetheless, he believes that all these lived experiences in the United Kingdom are part of God's plan, according to which he and his friends are being prepared to return to their homeland at some point in the future. By his account, Yanji in China, Seoul in South Korea, Manchester and New Malden in the UK, the places where he has been moving to search for a new life with his family, appear to be temporal yet special fields of sacred training for God's greater plan, one in which his future home and current host society play vital roles, and his return home is determined.

5. Mr. Kim in Germany: The Welfare State and Christian Morality

"I just passed the exam!"

This short message was delivered with a photo of a new German driving license, on which a birthplace—Hamgyŏng-Namdo in North Korea—and a new host German city's name were printed. It was from Mr. Kim, a migrant in his mid-forties living with his wife and three children in the southern city of Baden-Wuerttemberg, where all North Korean refugee applicants are sent upon arrival in Germany. We had been exchanging text messages via Kakaotalk, a popular South Korean messenger app, which nearly all North Korean migrants use in Europe, for about three years after meeting for the first time. He still shares photos and text messages with me on special occasions, including the birth of his third baby, getting a job, obtaining a driving license, his children's birthdays, and New Year's and Christmas greetings. In a sense, I have witnessed his family's "Soziale Integration" (social integration) process in Germany. And at this moment he wanted to celebrate with me his successful driving test, which meant he could drive anywhere until 2034.

His driving license seemed to mean that his “genuine” North Koreanness was finally fully recognized by German authorities, for the first time in his seven-year stay in the country. Besides the refugee screening process, more crucial evidence proving Mr. Kim and his wife’s “genuineness” would be their homemade meals. Whenever I visited, they served northeastern Chinese dishes. In addition, their dialect is only lightly mixed with a South Korean accent. However, it is fair to say that I was not fully convinced of their “legitimacy”—a term I find problematic—in the first place. This was mainly because other North Korean migrants I met at refugee camps in Germany all claimed that they had not migrated via South Korea, although they in fact had.

As mentioned in Peter’s case in the previous section, nearly all North Korean asylum seekers in Europe first obtain South Korean passports, a fact they largely keep concealed in their new host societies. If they come to feel uncertain or fail to be accepted as refugees, they are able to use these passports to return to South Korea or to migrate somewhere else. Those who come through South Korea tend to remain there for some time, and often adopt South Korean hair and fashion styles, not to mention the most advanced smart phones. One of the social workers in charge of managing a refugee camp in Stuttgart told me that German authorities are increasingly surprised by the behavior, skills, and even appearance of North Korean refugee applicants. As he explained, many North Koreans in the camp “don’t look like they came from North Korea, a dictatorship where they were oppressed. They are not hesitant to request what they want, and they seem well-educated. And even the young couples [in the camp] speak fluent English!” This account implies some prejudice about North Korean society and people, along with a certain degree of suspicion about their place of origin.

In fact, a large number of those who were granted asylum as North Korean refugees earlier in the 2000s were indeed ethnic Koreans from China, namely Ch’sŏnjok. Thus, the difference between “fake” and “genuine” North Korean refugees is relational; previously, Korean-Chinese migrants who pretended to be North Korean refugees were considered “fake” because their place of origin was China rather than North Korea. In recent years, however, the category of “fake” came to include North Korean migrants who became naturalized as South Korean and then claimed refugee status in Europe or elsewhere. Among North Korean migrants in Germany, the distinction between “fake” and “genuine” is more likely to be made between North Koreans and non-North Koreans such as Korean-Chinese and is rarely used to differentiate among North Korean migrants themselves. Mr. Kim referred to one of his acquaintances—who had originally come from the same hometown but had spent years in South Korea—simply as “my friend.”

Meanwhile, the distinction between “genuine” and “fake” refugees is relevant to any discussion of migrants’ differing proximities to their imagined homes, which is in turn affected by the contents of

their aspirations and the differing approaches to religion among divergent North Korean migrants. One hidden reason for migrating to European countries is the assumption that, as one of my North Korean interlocutors in Germany told me, “Europe is relatively neutral or less negative in its relationship with North Korea. So, when we return to the North, we assume we will be safe.” Here the physical distance is less salient than the ideological distance that was produced in the Cold War period between their new host societies and their homeland.

Mr. Kim and his wife have a similar perspective, stressing that “unlike South Korea or the United States, Germany used to be perceived as a good and allied country in the North.” The positive impression of Germany among North Koreans stems from frequent economic and human resource exchanges with the former East Germany (DDR), the popularity of socialist German films screened in the North, and familiarity with German technology. Thus, Mr. Kim expects that his German affiliation will help his homecoming go well (*ilŏpsŭl kŏda*), when the situation in the Korean peninsula improves. In addition, Mr. Kim feels more confident in his positive anticipations than those who have undertaken a “second migration,” mainly because he is a “genuine” North Korean refugee who has never gone to South Korea. In order to return home in glory someday—while allowing his children stay in Germany—he has been doing his best to integrate into German society. The following is a brief summary of his life trajectory, which will give a sense of how his experiences have differed from those of Peter in the UK.

Mr. Kim and his wife have three children, all of whom were born in Germany after the couple submitted their refugee application to the local authority. Before Germany, they lived for about fifteen years in China. According to their account, they left Hamgyŏng-Namdo as a newly married couple, as they saw no hope there after their parents passed away. “We were lucky to be hired at a lumber factory in a mountain area” in China, Mr. Kim recounted. “A Korean-Chinese man was running the factory, and the *Sajangnim* (CEO) treated me like a son, because he had lost his own son, who was about the same age as me. My wife was working at the factory restaurant.” Thanks to his “foster father,” the CEO of the factory, the couple was able to live in the same place for a long period. However, like most North Korean undocumented migrants in China, they were vulnerable to the omnipresent threat of the police, who could arrest and deport them anytime, despite the foster father’s protection. When the threat of arrest became imminent, the foster father hired a reliable (but expensive) broker, who arranged for them to be sent to Beijing. From there they traveled with fake Chinese passports, pretending to be members of a tourist group to Europe. Upon arrival at an airport (he did not remember which one), a driver gave them a ride to a building and told them, “Just walk inside and report that you are from North Korea.” It was, explained Mr. Kim, a door-to-door brokered migration provided by his foster father.

At the German refugee camp, they were interrogated individually, over and over. One of the painful questions they were asked was why they did not have even a single child during their long stay in China. Mrs. Kim spoke at this point with intense emotion. “I explained to them our situation in China. We didn’t even take our shoes off to sleep at night because of the fear. How could we even think of having a baby in such a dangerous situation?” She continued to describe this moment in the interview; since it was a sensitive topic, a female German social worker came into the office to make her feel more comfortable. “But I couldn’t hold back my emotion anymore. Tears were pouring from my eyes, and I could not stop crying as all these past negative memories vividly replayed in my brain in just a few seconds.” A female Korean-German translator, a former nurse volunteering for the refugee applicants from North Korea, was present, but even without her translation, the German social worker seemed to understand and sympathize with Mrs. Kim’s emotional stories.

Germany began receiving the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in EU’s Schengen Area when the chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared an “Open Door” policy in 2015. But Germany shows local diversities in realizing this ambitious plan. The city district to which North Korean asylum seekers are all sent is relatively generous, thanks to support from the city mayor (a member of the Green Party) and local civil organizations, including volunteers mobilized by online campaigns. The South Korean church community in the city proper also takes part in social support networks for migrants, providing substantial services like Korean-German translation for the refugee application process, grocery shopping, and helping meet various needs of North Korean newcomers during the initial stages of resettlement. Mr. Kim and his wife went to church with other North Korean migrants who were staying at what they called the “money” camp—apartments or rooms either newly built or leased by the government for refugee-asylum applicants. Mr. Kim came across another North Korean, about his age and from the same hometown, and they became friends. However, Mr. Kim and his wife found it strange that other North Korean migrants did not look like them; although they claimed to be North Koreans, they all had the most advanced smartphones and wore stylish clothes with fashionable hairstyles. “I first thought, how is this possible? Are they all from elite backgrounds in the North?” says Mr. Kim, who later came to realize that these other North Korean migrants, including his hometown friend’s family, had all arrived via South Korea.

Quite a few of them actually ended up returning to South Korea when they realized they could not expect a good result from their refugee applications. The reality they encountered in Germany turned out to be quite different from what brokers had led them to expect. First, the refugee application process took much longer than expected; second, German authorities, similar to other western countries, encouraged them to go to South Korea instead; third, the German language, which is a key

requirement in the social integration process, is indeed difficult to learn; and last but not least, unlike North Korean migrants in New Malden, South Korean migrants have not established a so-called “Korea town” where newcomers can find job opportunities, not only in Baden-Wuerttemberg but also elsewhere in Germany. Thus, North Korean refugee applicants must rely on the German social welfare package equally provided for all refugee-asylum seekers.

Those who had lived in South Korea seemed to be disappointed by seemingly worse conditions in Germany than in South Korea. Meanwhile, some of my interlocutors, especially single mothers with teenaged children, tended to endure the uncertain situation for the sake of their children’s education. Even one of the mothers whose son spoke fluent English—evidence of South Korean afterschool programs—told me, “Here they [her son] can learn German, English, and another European language at school.” This account implies that the mothers wanted their children to become more competitive in globalized capitalism, but preferred the less stressful environment of German schools to the high-pressure approach of South Korean education. In other words, one of the essential motivations leading North Korean migrants to “escape the South” was to help their children build successful careers in western countries. The mothers, however, were not certain how many years they would have to wait until their refugee applications were accepted—or rejected. Thus, returning to South Korea remained a viable option for them.

In the meantime, Mr. Kim and his wife did not consider going to South Korea themselves, deciding to adjust to Germany instead. They started having children, and took advantage of all the available resources provided by government social welfare programs for housing, healthcare, children’s education, and job training, along with local volunteer networks and the local offices of international organizations. While relying on governmental subsidies, they finished the basic German language courses required for *Soziale Integration*, and then Mr. Kim took a job training program (*Ausbildung*) to become a certified skill worker, while his wife attended driving school. One notable example of local civilian support was the family-like care provided by an elderly German woman, who committed herself to help Kim’s family as if she were the “foster grandmother” of Kim’s three children. In addition to helping them during the refugee screening process, helping them learn German, bringing the children to regular health checkups and so on, shortly after Mrs. Kim passed the driving test in 2018 she bought the family a second-hand mini-van.

What is significant at this local level of the collaborative governance of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany is the relatively minor role of the church for Mr. Kim’s family. Secularization theory describes a historical power change in Europe in which the public functions of the church were taken over by the state, as religion retreated to the private sphere and became a matter of individual choice. The German

people largely became unchurched as well. However, religious organizations are financed by church or worship taxes imposed on the members of religious congregations, and are tasked by the government with providing social welfare for people in need. One cannot disagree with the impression that Christian norms and virtues are embedded to various degrees, according to the regions, within the daily culture of Germany.

Interestingly, Mr. Kim identified his family as self-converted Christians, as he decided to bring his children to a local German church for moral education. They attended Korean church from time to time—a long-distance trip by train—with other North Korean migrants in Stuttgart during the initial period of settlement. The church played the role of an ethnic center, a contact zone where North Korean migrants could see each other and obtain local information and useful bits of help while interacting with South Korean migrants. However, it did not go well in every respect for the northerners. The physical distance to attend church was one of the fundamental obstacles. More serious were issues with social relationships. Although some volunteers helped the newcomers from the North considerably, Mr. Kim developed a negative impression of the church pastor. When his friend from the same hometown asked the pastor to issue a kind of church document, the pastor not only rejected the request but also expressed some prejudiced attitudes toward North Korean migrants. Mr. Kim was so disappointed with this reaction that he stopped going to the Korean church. Instead, he is currently attending a German church in the district.

“I understand neither what the pastor’s sermons are about, nor the Korean translation of the Bible,” Mr. Kim says. “We pray in our own ways. It is difficult for us to follow, but I think it’s all good for my children.” It is not surprising that he encounters a language barrier when trying to understand the contents of the Bible in German. But the fact that he finds it difficult to grasp the Korean translation of the Bible seems to prove that he was not exposed to South Korean missionary networks in China. Korean Bibles are widely distributed in Northeast China, particularly in Yanbian, the Korean-Chinese Autonomous Prefecture. During my fieldwork in that area, I witnessed North Korean border crossers in secret shelters run by Protestant missionaries struggling to understand the antiquated Korean language used in the Bibles they were given. It would appear that, like them, Mr. Kim is simply struggling to understand the Korean translation of the Bible, and that he started attending church only after arriving in Germany.

As time went by, my North Korean interlocutors perceived some similarities between what they had learned about Kim Il-Sung in the North and the way in which Jesus is presented in the Bible. As one of them said to me, “It is not difficult to understand the Bible when you replace Jesus or God with Kim Il-

Sung.”⁵ For his part, Mr. Kim believes that religion will help his children grow up with proper morality in Germany. “One day when I was passing through an underground passage on my way back home from work, I came across German teenagers. They have piercings and tattoos on their bodies, which for me look ugly and immoral,” said Mr. Kim. “So I suddenly felt that I should take my children to church. The church would at least help them not go wrong, wouldn’t it?” He believes that church can be relied on to provide a moral education, while school might lead his children to be too individualistic, too liberal. Church strikes him as a communal place where the familial order and culture can be transmitted to the next generation, albeit in a cosmopolitan, heterogeneous form, as their children will grow up in Germany. Mr. Kim and his wife stress that they would return to Hamgyŏng-Namdo whenever they got the opportunity, even in the last moments of their lives. However, they insist that their children should stay in Germany. In this respect, Mr. Kim seems to consider religion instrumental for his children to become moral and model North Korean-German citizens; for the parents, church provides a way to develop knowledge of German traditions, and therefore signifies both their aspiration to satisfy the social integration policy of Germany and the cosmopolitan subject-making project they have undertaken in preparation for their homecoming in glory at some indefinite point in the future.

6. Concluding Remark

The life trajectories of the North Korean refugee-migrants introduced above are very complicated, often beyond what one can imagine. The number of government reports, essays, books, and theses on the subject is likely equivalent to the number of refugees themselves. The interests and topics in this discourse are diverse, but refugees are still almost always depicted as the victim-survivors of human rights violations by the “evil dictatorship” in the North. However, the lives of North Korean refugee-migrants tend to penetrate, disturb, and/or reproduce existing boundaries and spaces in both territorial and cultural terms. The role of religion is pivotal, but largely neglected in most studies and approaches. As I argue, it is clear that when North Korean Christians experience religious conversion during their perilous journeys, it not only helps them to negotiate a new sense of belonging in their host society, but also mobilizes them to contest the existing order of things. Religion enables them to search for another place where they can realize their sacred calling—a place nearly always located in

⁵ In the summer of 2000 when I was visiting a secret shelter in a mountainous area near Yanji, China, I spoke with a group of North Korean border crossers, who started talking about what they had come to know about Christianity. One of them remarked on the similarities between Christianity and Kim Il-Sung worship.

the future and in their imagined homeland, even though this may still be fraught with late-Cold War sentiments.

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