

## **Starting Anew: Challenges in Self and Identity Making among North Korean Mothers in South Korea**

Jeongeun Lee

University of Iowa

### **1) Introduction: Mere “Cultural Difference”?**

Approximately thirty thousand former North Koreans now live in South Korea, the majority of this population women. One of these women, Kim, is the mother of two children. Her first child, a daughter, was born in North Korea and came to South Korea with Kim when she was five years old. Kim has been in South Korea for more than ten years now. Having started her own business, she is one of the relatively successful former North Korean women living in South Korea, but she has made many sacrifices to get where she is. When I asked her about the most memorable incidents or events she had experienced since her arrival in South Korea, Kim told me the following story, one of many similar stories that I encountered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul during 2014-2016 among former North Korean mothers who have settled in South Korea.

One day, my daughter told me that her school was going on a field trip, with her entire grade visiting an amusement park. She also said that she needed to bring her lunch. I did not know what to make. We didn't have the Internet at that time. I watched other [South] Korean mothers buying

seaweed rolls [a typical lunch item for school field trips in South Korea] from a local restaurant. I bought the same one. They gave it to me wrapped in foil and then put it into a black plastic bag with disposable chopsticks. I simply gave the bag to my daughter as her lunch! Can you imagine how she felt?

Kim, a forty-three-year-old mother, chuckled when telling me about this “seaweed roll in a black plastic bag” incident. What this North Korean mother did not know was that a nicely decorated lunch box is a very important part of school field trips in South Korean culture. Many South Korean mothers make seaweed rolls themselves, decorating their children’s lunches with beautifully carved fruits and vegetables, and producing what are, literally, works of art. A field trip lunch is not just food, but more of a testimonial to the amount of time and care a mother devotes to her child – that is to say, no child would take along food bought from a store in a plastic bag as his or her lunch. Many years later, she still feels profoundly embarrassed whenever she thinks about this incident.

The North Korean mothers in South Korea that I met often used the term *munhwa ch’ai* (cultural difference) when referring to this kind of issue, rationalizing among themselves that things were different in North Korea. However, behind this homogenized and somewhat dismissive term lie multiple layers made up of personal strategies and rationalizations developed by these former North Korean mothers in their effort to adapt and survive in South Korea. It is well known that North Koreans who have settled in South Korea have been, and continue to be, subjected to discrimination and suspicion (Ryang 2012a). But just how do North Korean mothers cope, beyond simply deeming such practices as the product of “cultural difference”? And what lies behind this rather generalizing term? In this article, I would like to disentangle the

circumstances that generate “cultural difference” for North Korean mothers living in South Korea, identifying four broad sub-areas related to identity, multiculturalism, sense of self, and relation to freedom. I begin by examining the way in which North Korean defectors are initially introduced to South Korean society via the government-run rehabilitation program, paying particular attention to how the personal histories of North Korean mothers are treated – or disregarded – the moment they reach South Korea. Through this analysis, I hope to create a window into the daily reality faced by these women in South Korean society and the obstacles that they endure in everyday parenting. Concluding the article, I argue that the current system by which South Korea receives, processes and provides assistance to former North Koreans is complicit in creating obstacles for these North Korean mothers.

## 2) Strategizing Identity

Let us return to Kim’s story. Why does this seemingly trivial incident remain a shocking memory for Kim? Apart from the everyday struggles faced by this former North Korean mother, it is necessary to analyze this event within a broader context that includes the social meaning of the boxed lunch in order to understand its embedded significance.

In her study of Japanese mothers’ preparation of *obentō*, or boxed lunches, in the 1990s, Ann Allison explains that Japanese “mothers tend to expend inordinate time and attention on *obentō* in efforts both to please their children and to affirm that they are good mothers” (2000: 81). Allison also argues that the preparation of an *obentō* is a routine task as well as an art form

for mothers with children at nursery school in Japan, and she deciphers in the *obentō* culture the embedded meanings of a dominant ideology that is materialized through the “ritualization and subjectivity of being a mother” in Japan (Allison 2000: 96).

The importance of lunch, however, does not stem from the nutritional value of food. In Denmark, as Martha Sif Karrebæk (2012) describes in her study of the notion of healthy foods and food socialization as practiced via boxed lunches in Danish classrooms, health is closely connected to respectability, and she depicts how certain traditional food items, such as rye bread, are regarded as healthier, and therefore superior to, food items brought to school by children from minority groups.

Making a boxed lunch is a typical form of domestic labor for women in both North Korea and South Korea (Sohn 2010, Bae 2008, Kang 2008). In contemporary South Korea, however, as in Japan and Denmark, there is a general expectation that the boxed lunch reflects social status and class-affiliation. As can be seen in Kim’s case, the importance of her daughter’s lunch is based squarely on its presentation, since in South Korea, children compare their lunch boxes and engage in competition as to whose mother is better at making a lunch box look prettier, viewing the finished product as a measure of that mother’s level of attention and care. It would be extremely embarrassing and painful, therefore, for a child to bring a black plastic bag to school instead of a colorful, pretty, and fancy lunch box. According to Kim, “my daughter did not tell me about it until her fourth year at the school. And she just told me that no one brings a picnic lunch like she does. So I asked other North Korean mothers who came to South Korea before me, and found out that it was not the way they do it. At that time, I was so busy trying to put food on the table that I thought just feeding my kids was enough.”

For Kim, the entire episode was beyond her comprehension, and it has stayed with her as a vividly shocking memory. She had not imagined that the same food, presented differently, could have social implications. The incident involving her child's picnic day lunch, as well as other such occurrences, were too trivial for Kim to worry about. She could deal with the unbelievably rude customers at her supermarket. She could try to stay on top of the changes in welfare policy applying to North Korean refugees in South Korea. She could put up with anything and everything. However, when it came to decorating her daughter's lunch boxes, tying up her hair beautifully, color-coordinating her daughter's outfits, purchasing extra school supplies decorated with popular brand names, and checking her daughter's homework – that is to say, all of the things that her daughter's classmates' South Korean mothers did every day – she could afford to take the time to do such things. Running her small supermarket, her first and foremost priority was survival. “I was just so ignorant about my daughter's life at school. I just thought that once she entered school, the school would take care of everything,” Kim told me.

Still, Kim is one of the relatively lucky mothers who were able to leave North Korea with their children. The vast majority of the mothers that I met had escaped North Korea alone or with another adult family member. Only later did they manage to be reunited with their children after paying enormous fees to brokers who firstly located their children and then smuggled them out along dangerous routes – via Thailand or Mongolia, for example. But, even after they were reunited with their children, these mothers continued to face challenge after challenge, coming to realize that simply “feeding your kids” was not enough in South Korea. Further, as in Kim's case, the real issues that they had to confront in their everyday lives were so removed from the more immediate problem of survival that they simply did not have time to attend to them at first.

When thinking about Kim's experience, one might wonder why Kim did not simply ask the other (South Korean) mothers for advice on how to pack her daughter's lunch. There was a reason why she was not able and, more importantly, not willing to do so. If Kim had asked for guidance regarding the field trip lunch, the South Korean mothers would have immediately realized that she was some sort of outsider, despite Kim having a similar appearance to their own and Korean language skills that seemed too perfect for her to be a foreigner. "If you said that you were from North Korea," Kim said, "that would invite total disaster. People want to know how much I suffered in North Korea, asking stupid questions like 'Were you hungry all the time?' 'Is it true that North Koreans eat dirt to survive?'"

Lee, a thirty-seven-year-old mother with a son at pre-school, also explained that she never reveals her origins to South Korean mothers. Once, after accidentally mentioning that she was from North Korea to the mother of her son's best friend, she had to deal with repeated, intrusive questions from this woman. At the beginning, it all seemed like healthy curiosity, but the woman soon started giving her leftover food. "She thought I would be pleased with the leftovers, because I used to starve back in North Korea. It upset me, and I decided not to contact her anymore." Later, Lee's family moved to another town after her husband was transferred there for work. Now, she never tells anyone that she is from North Korea, instead claiming that she is from Gangwŏn Province, the northernmost province of South Korea, adjacent to North Korea.

Other North Korean mothers that I met had had similar experiences, and were quite sure that if they revealed their identities as North Korean escapees, many South Korean people would view them as inferior, turning them into objects of pity or, worse still, treating them as outsiders

who did not belong in South Korea. It is common practice among the North Korean mothers that I met not to tell anyone that they or their children are from North Korea or that their children have North Korean mothers. They even hide this fact from their own children. “I’ve never told my son that his parents are from North Korea. I am afraid that he might tell other people. I do not want him to be discriminated against. His classmates might make fun of him or he could be hurt by prejudice against North Koreans in general,” Lee told me.

Chang, the mother of two children, was among many North Korean mothers making similar comments. Once, her son said that his teacher had told the class that North Korea was a horrible country without any freedom, and Chang did not know what to tell him. Her son did not know his own mother was from North Korea, because she had married a South Korean after escaping North Korea. She could not tell her son that she herself was from North Korea, instead simply telling him that North Korea had some good aspects, such as beautiful scenery. For her, being a North Korean escapee in South Korea puts her in an extremely insecure position when in public. More painfully, even at home, she is still searching for the best way to relate to her own child concerning her own origins.

Just like Chang and Lee above, most North Korean mothers avoid revealing their identities, especially when dealing with issues related to their children, in order to protect the latter from potential discrimination and stigma. Although Kim refers to her lunch box incident simply as something that happened due to cultural differences, it was also connected to a fear of discrimination and stigmatization among North Korean escapees. Kim and many other North Korean mothers told me that when their accent becomes an issue, they sometimes present themselves as members of *Chosŏnjok*, an ethnic Korean minority from China, many of them

having spent extended periods in China before reaching South Korea. Alternatively, they might tell others that they originally come from Gangwŏn province, the northernmost province of South Korea that adjoins North Korea. More than seven hundred thousand *Chosŏnjok* live and work in South Korea today. Since the first arrivals in the late 1990s, South Koreans' initial curiosity about them has diminished considerably. Many of the former North Korean mothers in South Korea would prefer to be treated with such lack of curiosity as opposed to the pity or even prejudice accorded to those known to have come from North Korea.

It should also be noted that the North Korean mothers that I met in South Korea do not share a homogeneous background, either, whether in terms of their former political class or educational background. To the contrary, these women held a varied assortment of statuses and positions in North Korea. Lee H, the mother of a two-year-old daughter, complained during her interview: "It seems that so many South Koreans think that they are superior to anyone from developing countries. When I was in North Korea, I was a lot richer than I am now and my family led a great life until my dad got into political trouble. So I tell South Korean people that I am from North Korea, and I also tell them my family was rich and powerful." Unlike many of the mothers that I met, Lee H prefers to reveal her identity as a North Korean refugee, but also never fails to add that she never suffered from hunger, that she comes from a high-ranking family in North Korea, and that she was not exposed to poverty before coming to South Korea. Thus, when a North Korean mother is willing to reveal her identity, it is in order to challenge stereotypes of North Koreans widely held by South Koreans. But, it would be fair to say that a more common strategy deployed by North Korean mothers in South Korea is to pass as a South Korean from a different province or as an ethnic Korean from China, hiding their North Korean



origins. This strategy, while perhaps based on pragmatic considerations, nonetheless generates years of emotional stress that involve feelings of embarrassment, insecurity, and often pain.

### **3) The Paradox of the Multicultural Society**

When former North Korean mothers encounter the oft-used national rhetoric of multiculturalism in South Korea, the complexity involved extends beyond the realm of the lunch box, the issue now being placed in close proximity to public perceptions of North Korean defectors as a population group. South Korea has rapidly become a multicultural society, with more than a million foreigners living in the country as of the early 2010s. This increasing ethnic diversity is reflected in the government-sanctioned rhetoric of multiculturalism found in a diverse and wide array of publications produced at local and central government level. Scholars have pointed out that the use of this term in South Korea is based on an inadequate understanding and digestion of the meaning of multiplicity, becoming an empty slogan or, even worse, causing difficulties for many minority populations (E.Kim 2010, Ahn 2012).

Some government policies that have been introduced on the basis of the notion of multiculturalism continue to be viewed with deep ambivalence. For instance, in South Korea, it is difficult to enroll children in pre-school programs in urban areas due to a shortage of pre-schools (Chung 2015). The South Korean government has a policy of prioritizing the enrollment of socially disadvantaged children. A similar type of prioritization exists for enrollment in certain higher educational institutions as well as job placements. According to a list produced by the South Korean government, socially disadvantaged groups include multicultural households,

households with children raised by grandparents, and low-income families. Sometimes, such lists have a separate category for North Korean defectors, but in many cases, the families of North Korean mothers and other escapees fall into the subcategory of multicultural families. Although the Ministry of Unification defines North Korean escapees separately from multicultural families, this is often not the case at the level of local municipal bureaucracies.

The version of multiculturalism found in South Korean government rhetoric is derived from the logic deployed for the purpose of integrating ethnic minorities in the Anglo-American world, especially in Canada. Since the 1970s, this notion has been diffused to other countries via cultural diplomacy organizations dealing with multicultural phenomena established by central and local governments (Nagel 2009). The situation in South Korea reflects recent trends toward globalization, as well as the influx of new migrants. South Korea has experienced a steady influx in new migrants from various (mainly Asian) countries since the early 2000s, with the United Nations officially declaring South Korea a receiving country of immigrants in 2007. In South Korea, multicultural discourse is approved and heavily promoted by the government, yet this discourse does not support the idea of establishing equality between Korean citizens and immigrants. Multicultural discourse in South Korea is mainly led by the government, most of its representatives continuing to lack real experience in communicating directly with immigrant communities, and ambivalent about them (Yoon, Kim, & Eom 2011). Moreover, the rhetoric of South Korea as a multicultural society has been disproportionately focused on women from Southeast Asia married to Korean men. There has been a surge in the marriage broker industry for rural men and/or male divorcees, and a national campaign has been waged to emphasize the importance of welcoming Southeast Asian wives and their children into mainstream society (Chun 2008).

Before discussing the broader context faced by North Korean mothers, it is necessary to point out the dilemma posed by multiculturalism and its practice in general. Giuliana B. Prato's work (2009) on the paradox of the multicultural society provides a good starting point. Prato draws our attention to a common myth of the multicultural society, which presupposes that the host society is an undifferentiated cultural entity, and that a minority group, moving into this "egalitarian" host society, presents an unchanging cultural object that simply requires some measure of cultural protection. These assumptions, Prato argues, are faulty, because they rest on an incomplete and one-sided understanding of culture. "Culture," according to Prato, refers to learned behavior, and is not genetically inherited. If it is learned and changeable, there is no need to place emphasis on preserving incoming cultures, because the society is already multicultural. Moreover, simply celebrating difference, as in multiculturalism, can be an obstacle to integration, as it does not break down cultural barriers, on the contrary reinforcing them. Such is indeed the case for North Korean families in South Korea.

Most of the North Korean mothers that I met think that labeling their families as multicultural creates obstacles for them, rather than helping them integrate into South Korean society. While appreciative of some of the advantages accorded to them in terms of access to public resources, such as prioritization when enrolling in certain schools, they are also uncomfortable with this label, because, for them, the term multicultural is already one which stigmatizes. In a society such as South Korea, where the highest value is accorded to those considered to be 100% Korean, being multicultural implies inferiority. Moreover, as stated above, in the current South Korean context, being multicultural usually means having a Southeast Asian mother or wife, with no attention given to North Korean families. In fact, it is

already an oxymoron to use this term in relation to North Korean families or families with a North Korean member. They are Korean, no matter how different they may be, and calling these Korean families “multicultural” presupposes a rejection of their Korean-ness.



*Image 1: A concert that was performed by North Korean defector women who appear often on certain TV shows as entertainers. This project was planned by a North Korean mother to promote South Korean understanding of North Korean defector women.*

This does not mean that North Korean mothers perceive themselves as unproblematically (South) Korean, either. In her study of North Korean escapees and the absence of concrete ethnic differences between North Korea and South Korea, Hae Yeon Choo asserts that the two postwar states have produced two different state-based definitions of nationhood, or, to use her term, pseudo-ethnicity (2006). According to this logic, North Korean escapees in contemporary South Korea are regarded as part of a distinct ethnic group that represents the North Korean nation-state, and are therefore “other” to South Koreans, even though all are ethnic Koreans. Upon entering South Korea, North Korean escapees are often expected to get rid of ethnic markers, such as accents and mannerisms, transforming themselves into modern citizen-subjects of South

Korea. During the crash course at, Hanawŏn, the government-run rehabilitation facility, they are exposed, for example, to South Korean socio-cultural norms and practices of everyday life. This can be seen as a process of re-ethnicization as (South) Koreans, since ethnic markers, as analyzed in Daphne Berdahl (1999), not only involve accent, but also a wide range of additional characteristics, such as the way people dress, how they behave, and how they groom themselves.

Going back to Kim's lunch box episode, it was the presentation of the food, rather than the actual food itself, that mattered, due to the presumption that preparing attractive lunch boxes for their children is what "South Korean mothers" do. Kim's inferior presentation was seen as a mark of both foreignness and inferiority. Ethnicity, just like class, is perceived hierarchically, with South Korean ethnicity ranked top. To be like a South Korean mother is to become "Korean" (again) for mothers from North Korea. For example, while some North Korean mothers tend to be inclined toward vividly colorful clothing, wearing such clothing is something that causes many other North Korean mothers to cringe, since this reveals the incomplete South Koreanness of the wearer. Many of them pay special attention to their clothing, shoes, makeup, and hairstyles, each trying to present themselves as just like any other middle-class South Korean mother. They try to ensure that their children's belongings, such as their school backpacks and stationery, are just like those used by other South Korean kids, since any variation revealing ethnic difference would imply inferiority when compared to mainstream South Koreans. This situation leads to a further deepening in the ambivalence felt by North Korean mothers in South Korea toward the government discourse of multiculturalism.

#### **4) Presentation of the Self**

I try to buy designer-brand clothes for my son. People usually compare each kid with another nearby. I do not want other people to think that my son is from the lower class or from a blue-collar laborer's family.

Cha, a 38-year-old North Korean mother, pays extra attention to her son's clothing. Whenever she shops for her son, she tries to buy items that cost more than she can afford. Her husband is a South Korean born in Gyöngsang Province in southeastern Korea. He works as a laborer on construction sites. She insists that her son is 100% South Korean because he was born and raised in South Korea with a South Korean paternal lineage. But she does not want other people to know that he has a North Korean mother or that he comes from a relatively low-income family. Referring to a North Korean relative who recently arrived via China, she said: "She [her relative] looked awful. The hair was messy and she was dressed like a poor wanderer. Her skin condition was horrible, so dark and dry and rough. She would not stop looking around like a country bumpkin."

This less-than-kind depiction of her "poor" relative can be better understood if one considers the level concern in South Korean society with material possessions and physical appearance. Such concern begins with clothing, footwear, and accessories, extending upward to housing, for example. It is important not only to purchase and own such items, but to display them as well, ensuring that others see them (Y.Kim 2011, Gelézeau 2015).

Lee, another North Korean mother, also criticized the appearance of a cousin who had recently arrived in South Korea, although added that she herself used to be like that when she had first arrived. Once in South Korea, she consciously tried to learn how to dress and use

cosmetics in order to look like a South Korean woman. Of course, one of the most important tasks was “correcting” her North Korean accent. More than anything else, however, Lee strived to align herself with a tendency in South Korean society to accord disproportionate attention to one’s personal appearance. Using the South Korean media as a reference point, she deliberately adopted popular fashions and accents, thinking that being able to “perform South Korean” would elevate her sense of self-esteem.

The process of becoming South Korean also involves attention to skin care. South Korean men and women spend twice as much of their income on beauty products and make-up as their American counterparts. Every day sees new cosmetic products with enhanced skin-lightening capabilities introduced to the market. South Korea also boasts one of the highest rates of plastic surgery in the world, its population heavily engaged in efforts to obtain an idealized body image (not just in terms of weight, but also height) (Im 2002, Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 2012, Park 2012).

Lee has been purchasing expensive skin care items for more than six years, this dedication to her appearance enabling her to be more confident in building relationships with South Koreans. She even had plastic surgery on her eyes a few years ago in order to conform to South Korean expectations in relation to beauty. “If I do not talk for a long period of time, people cannot tell that I am actually from North Korea,” Lee told me, almost proudly, lightly touching her stylish hair as she did so.

A similar level of concern regarding relative status (and its recognition by others) is applied to educational and financial matters. Bae, who is in her late forties and therefore a little

older than the women described above, is more concerned about her educational and financial status than her physical appearance. Once, not wanting to tell her daughter's friends that she had not attended college, she lied that she had a master's degree:

One of my daughter's friends mentioned that her mother was an alumni of one of the finest universities in South Korea. I did not want to make my daughter feel inferior, so I kind of exaggerated my educational background. I used to be a smart kid back in school. I could have pursued a master's if I had been born and raised here in South Korea anyway.

To a greater extent, North Korean escapees' understanding of the importance of looks or appearance, and, perhaps more importantly, other people's perceptions of them, needs to be understood as part of the process by which they re-create a sense of self. "How do I look to other people?" is one of the issues of utmost importance to North Korean escapees. To be fair, this type of concern is widespread throughout South Korean society as a whole. But, when raised among North Korean mothers, the question comes with an added twist: "Do I look young and healthy – like other South Koreans of my age?" "Do we look wealthy – like other South Korean families?" or "Do I look or sound well-educated – like other South Korean mothers?" Whatever the situation – whether in an anonymous public setting, such as the subway, or in the company of their children's friends' mothers – they re-create their own self-images in close comparison with their South Korean counterparts, hoping to emulate them. Many told me that they asked themselves these questions many times throughout the day, becoming very self-conscious about how they looked and sounded to others. They said that the reason that they did this was ultimately due to their desire to protect their children from being seen in a negative light. As seen in Bae's case above, former North Korean mothers are willing to lie in order to make their children feel safe and secure.



Does this mean that they are merely living their lives in order to be measured by others' standards? One may say so, but it is also possible to look at this situation from the opposite angle, i.e. by considering that it is, nevertheless, their strategy to start all over again by creating themselves anew as South Korean women. Granted, this is a trivial and frivolous obsession, yet, when a society is gripped by the desire to look and sound good, not participating in such a trend requires a strong counter-culture, a sense of conviction, access to robust internal resources, and, indeed, a measure of self-confidence that is drawn from alternative sources, such as education, spirituality, and so on. The former North Korean mothers that I met are resilient and determined in their attempt to make life easier for their children amidst the towering challenges posed by the need to adjust to South Korean cultural norms as well as operate within restrictive economic parameters. For now, they have charged themselves with the task of looking and sounding just like other South Korean women in order to make their children feel accepted in South Korea.

## **5) Freedom**

"I just thought that once she entered school, the school would take care of everything for my daughter." This comment by Kim was echoed by other North Korean mothers throughout my field research. Not only in relation to schooling, but also employment and welfare, the former North Korean mothers that I met said the same thing – that they thought that the system would take care of such matters. The North Korean mothers that I met were entirely capable of manipulating their identities and navigating their way through the power dynamics of modern South Korean society, but they found it difficult to understand why individual responsibility

continued to be required even after having gained access to public education or welfare. Here, they were explicitly referring to the individual responsibility involved in having to make choices – something that neoliberal Western society would call freedom of choice.

In their home country, North Koreans learn to uphold the dominant state within the individual body and mind through the technology of self-cultivation (Ryang 2012b). Through my encounters with former North Korean mothers in South Korea, I have come to appreciate their sense of self, their ability to re-create themselves, and the way in which they flexibly strategize the way in which they present their identities. Indeed, they are quite savvy when it comes to adopting South Korean “looks” or South Korean “accents” for the purpose of public presentation. What they find difficult to understand, however, is that public and governmental systems do not run solely on pre-established tracks, with individuals often required to make choices, as noted above, even after having gained access to welfare, public education, or other government-run systems. This is not the case in North Korea. Although the system in North Korea may be defunct, no individual needs to make sure that their welfare is getting paid or that their children are receiving a good education since, for better or worse, such issues are supposed to be taken care of by the government, i.e. the system. The North Korean mothers that I worked with are therefore often bewildered by the sheer amount of work that they have to undertake in order to ensure that they and their children are enrolled in the system and able to benefit from it.

In addition, this individual responsibility goes hand in hand with a set of pre-determined societal norms that everybody, as it were, seems to understand – that is to say, everybody except for the North Korean mothers. They are surprised by the number of implicitly understood assumptions and forms of consensus found among South Korean mothers, and also by the ways

in which these are communicated – or not communicated – to them. In the school setting in particular, where they might have expected the state-run public education system to simply take care of their children’s lunches, for instance, they discover that there are a whole lot of things that they have to be involved with. No one ever told Kim what kind of lunch she should prepare for her child for school picnics, and when she asked the school authorities, she was told that she was “free to bring anything.” However, almost all of the students brought along seaweed rolls in fancy lunch boxes. Here, the notion of freedom is inverted: one is free to conform to the social norm, but, in reality, freedom not to conform does not seem to exist unless one is willing to risk being ostracized.



*Image 2: A school that provides an afterschool program and childcare for North Korean defector mothers' children. The school is run by a foundation that consists of mostly North Korean defectors.*

After-school programs posed another challenge: For instance, Kim could not grasp the extent of after-school activities provided by private institutions, nor she could afford to pay the fees for them at that time. Unlike the standardized educational system and strong level of social control in North Korean schools (Shin 2009), South Korean schools offer too many variations of

after school programs for Kim to handle or even comprehend, demanding too great an involvement from parents. The school provides various options, saying that everyone has the “freedom” to select anything that their children are interested in. However, information about the quality of teachers in each program is shared among South Korean mothers through their own network. North Korean mothers have a hard time getting access to this, and end up choosing less desirable programs for their children. Moreover, the majority of South Korean mothers send their children to private institutions, which are not part of the public school system, for English and math classes,. Typically, information about private lessons and private institutions is exclusively circulated among those living in the same upmarket neighborhoods or those sharing close relationships based on the socio-economic standing of their families. The lack of information and access to these private institutions produces a gap, not only between mothers, but also between children. Even the fact that one is expected to send one’s children to private institutions in addition to a regular school in the first place was something that the former North Korean mothers found surprising, to say the least, most believing that schools should take care of everything concerned with education as was the case in North Korea. They do not understand the expectation on the part of society that children should receive additional education on top of that which is provided via the public school system.



*Image 3: A small classroom of an afterschool program provided by a foundation for North Korean defector mothers; children. In this classroom, the children learn math, art, English, and Korean. Since many of them were born in China while their mothers were staying in China after escaping from North Korea, many children cannot speak Korean properly on their arrival in South Korea.*

Unfortunately, in South Korea, private after-school education can form an essential part of children's social lives, with circles of friendship being formed within these private institutions. Obtaining good grades becomes even more difficult when one is competing with students who have taken extra classes or been tutored outside regular school hours. While tuition fees for private lessons vary, an additional cost is invariably involved. This financial aspect poses yet another challenge for the North Korean mothers in what is already a notoriously competitive South Korean education system (Park and Abelman 2004, C.Lee 2005, Dawson 2010, J.Kim 2011). Some North Korean mothers seek to make use of supplementary resources, such as volunteer tutors from NGOs, enabling them to avoid the burden of additional expenses. But, in the absence of any government body providing information about the availability of such services to the public, the mothers are forced to invest an enormous degree of effort in seeking out such information themselves.

“At least in North Korea the government tells you what to do, and what I should have to prepare. Here, in South Korea, I have to choose what to do first. And sometimes, no matter how hard or how carefully I chose what to do, I cannot ever come up to the level of South Korean families.” This is how Lee, the mother referred to above, described her feelings regarding the choices she has had to make since her arrival in South Korea. “They always tell you that you can go anywhere and choose anything... that you are free to do so. But I am already lost and do not know what is around. This does not feel like freedom at all,” added Lee.

## **6) Selves without Histories**

The former North Korean mothers in South Korea that I describe in this article are, first and foremost, strong and capable protectors of their children. This is why they re-create themselves in order to fit into South Korean society, thereby shielding their children from prejudice and distress. They dress not only their children, but also themselves, in proper (so to speak) fashion, so as to conform with the social norms in Seoul, and adopt the appropriate, standard Seoul accent in order to pass as “ordinary” South Korean mothers. When they cannot, they (falsely) identify themselves as ethnic Koreans from China or Gangwŏn Province, the northernmost province of South Korea. They do all of this while working hard to secure a livelihood for their families, agonizing over past mistakes such as giving their children the “wrong” type of lunches. While it is true that their escape from North Korea and their new lives in South Korea have opened up new possibilities for them, such possibilities always seem to remain, seductively, a few steps ahead down the road, subjecting them to a process of reinvention that can be very arduous and painful. For these mothers, this process involves what

are often deliberate attempts to hide or re-create their own pasts and personal life histories. What can we learn from this?

In my view, this type of attitude is related to the way in which the South Korean government imposes a brand new life on North Korean defectors upon their arrival in the South. When North Korean defectors/refugees are received in South Korea, they are sent to Hanawŏn, the government-operated reception center. At Hanawŏn, former North Koreans are provided with diverse types of re-education and training, transforming them into new citizens of South Korea, but this is not carried out by building on the life experiences they accumulated in North Korea or China, but by erasing these altogether and starting anew with a clean slate. They are told that they are now South Korean citizens who are free to choose their own lifestyles and parenting methods. This inevitably buries or negates their diverse personal histories, homogenizing them into the mold of standardized South Korean citizens. As can be seen in the foregoing, former North Korean mothers are indeed willing participants in this endeavor. Yet, the question remains: why can they not remain who they are while also becoming South Korean citizens? Furthermore, where does this image of the standard South Korean citizen that is imposed on them come from? As shown in this article, many North Korean mothers do rely on media portrayals and popular cultural resources in order to gain an understanding of what is deemed to be normal and good. But such efforts are a continuation of the way in which they are introduced to South Korean society at Hanawŏn immediately after their arrival, i.e., made into new citizens without personal histories. I find it problematic that no North Korean mother is given the option of staying who they are nor, more specifically, given a framework through which to think about their personal pasts as assets that they are bringing into South Korean society rather than a negative burden that it is necessary to either hide or erase.



After undergoing an official examination by a South Korean government agency, former North Koreans who have reached South Korea are required to spend their first twelve weeks in the country at Hanawŏn. Also known as the Resettlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees on the Ministry of Unification's organizational chart, Hanawŏn was established in Ansŏng, Gyŏnggi Province in July 1999. A second Hanawŏn, the Hwach'ŏn Branch, opened in December 2012. Currently, the original Hanawŏn is responsible for providing educational programs for women, while the Hwach'ŏn Branch provides educational programs for men. About 24,200 North Korean escapees completed social orientation programs and were settled in South Korea from 1999 through 2013, according to the above ministry's *Manual for the Resettlement Support for North Korean Refugees*, published in 2014.

Hanawŏn provides 392 hours of education over a period of twelve weeks, in addition to 284 hours of elective and supplementary programs, including lessons in Korean (mostly concentrating on vocabulary and accent), driving, computer literacy, and basic accounting. The main curriculum has been developed around objectives such as helping the newly arrived North Koreans regain their emotional stability, overcome cultural differences, and find the motivation necessary to become both socially and economically independent. With respect to emotional stability and health, Hanawŏn offers forty-six hours of psychological testing and counseling, followed by a health check-up and treatment. The second longest program (138 hours) concentrates on promoting understanding of South Korean society, including an introduction to democracy and the market economy, as well as coverage of South Korean history and culture. It also teaches basic legal knowledge. In addition, this program offers hands-on activities, such as



trips to markets, visits to South Korean families, and urban experiences. Another program, lasting fifty-one hours and called initial resettlement support, focuses on helping participants become self-sufficient. In order to promote economic independence, 157 hours of sessions on vocational training and career guidance, as well as aptitude tests are provided, along with basic vocational training (Ministry of Unification 2014).

Nevertheless, in a 2015 survey, only 14.4% of North Korean escapees surveyed agreed that their education at Hanawŏn had been helpful in their day-to-day lives in South Korea. This figure was dramatically lower than was the case when they were asked the same question during their sojourn at Hanawŏn, with 70.5% responding positively (M.Kim 2015). Many North Korean escapees discover that the education that they were given at Hanawŏn more idealistic and general than practical. The Hanawŏn programs demonstrate to North Korean escapees how they should live, theoretically and ideally, as South Korean citizens. In reality, however, they fail to tackle what escapees actually face, experience and struggle with as people with backgrounds that differ from the mainstream population. More importantly, as can be seen in the objectives of Hanawŏn's curriculum, while overcoming "cultural differences" occupies a large part of re-education efforts, the programs offered by the institution offer no positive interpretation of the personal histories of each of the former North Koreans. On the contrary, it is assumed that their previous life experiences under socialism have nothing to offer South Korean society, and that, therefore, they need to be erased. Furthermore, the entire training course is carried out in an environment of surveillance, as described by one former Hanawŏn inmate:

There used to be a lot of quarrels, arguments, and fights among Hanawŏn members

(North Korean escapees). Imagine, there are so many different people with different backgrounds and personal histories, but they must be put together twenty-four hours a day without any privacy. We just hid from the officers that we were fighting each other because no one wanted to have penalty points imposed. At least we learned that we needed to behave well unless we wanted more trouble.

Many other former North Korean mothers recalled conflicts between former North Koreans as their first and strongest memories of Hanawŏn. Conflicts arose because different North Koreans were all of a sudden supposed to be reborn as brand-new and identical South Korean citizens. Failing to consider the diverse range of past experiences brought by former North Koreans to South Korea, simply telling them to be “Reborn as a South Korean citizen” (as promoted on the Hanawŏn banner) is counterproductive. This is because a short stay at Hanawŏn alone, albeit with intensive classes and training, cannot replace the decades of life built by North Koreans on their own before reaching South Korea. Without fully acknowledging the personal history of each North Korean, simply imposing a façade whereby they are supposedly re-born as new citizens, only augments the superficial and presentation-oriented aspects involved in becoming part of South Korean society.

## **7) Conclusion: More than Just “Cultural Difference”**

This research on the experiences of former North Korean mothers in South Korea illustrates how former North Korean mothers are forced or encouraged to re-create themselves in South Korea. I have drawn on my ethnographic fieldwork with former North Korean mothers in South

Korea to describe everyday experiences faced by North Korean escapees in South Korean society. Former North Korean mothers are expected to be re-born as South Korean citizens, but they create their own versions of their identities and reconfigure themselves in order to protect their children. They utilize diverse strategies to become “like” South Korean mothers, crafting various justifications for doing so. But ultimately, the lack of any institutional structure that acknowledges their diverse pre-defection pasts and allows them to rebuild their lives on the basis of such pasts, as seen in the “one-size-fits-all” nature of Hanawŏn’s curriculum, severely limits their productive integration into South Korean society. In many senses, therefore, the limitations that they endure go beyond what they see as “cultural difference.” It is not mere “cultural difference” that causes them to feel obliged to imitate the appearance of South Korean women or spend enormous amounts of money on designer outfits for their children. Neither is it mere “cultural difference” that leads them to feel ashamed when failing to provide their children with pretty lunch boxes. Behind this term can be found layers of factors that limit their self-expression and growth. In my view, of even more serious concern is the fact that these are also direct consequences of the way in which the government introduces these women into South Korean society as women with no personal histories.

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*Jeongeun Lee is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Iowa. Currently, she is working on her doctoral dissertation entitled An Incomplete Dream: North Korean defector mothers in South Korea, which is illustrates the North Korean defector mothers' reconfiguration of mothering practices in South Korean society.*