



## Manufacturing Kinship in a Nation Divided: An Ethnographic Study of North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Markus Bell

To cite this article: Markus Bell (2013) Manufacturing Kinship in a Nation Divided: An Ethnographic Study of North Korean Refugees in South Korea, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, 14:3, 240-255, DOI: [10.1080/14442213.2013.789070](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.789070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.789070>



Published online: 22 May 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 767



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Manufacturing Kinship in a Nation Divided: An Ethnographic Study of North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Markus Bell

*The South Korean government continues to practice variants of what Stephan Castles (1995) calls 'differential exclusion', in which citizenship in the nation state for North Koreans does not confer membership in civil society. For new arrivals from North Korea, many of whom have developed a distinct distrust of anything governmental, interaction with representatives of the South Korean state bares a chilling resemblance to that which they left behind in the North.*

*This article argues that for newly-arrived North Koreans the failure at state level does not mean they are entirely cast adrift, as religious and secular institutions within civil society are shouldering more of the burden of adaptation for the newcomers. This article endeavours to further our understanding of the significance of these groups as spaces where, for persons in exile, the meaning of home is recreated through acts of intimate exchange and relationships are formed that have the potential to become a form of pseudo-kinship.*

*Keywords: North Korean refugees; Adaptation; Pseudo-kinship; South Korean Civil Society*

I was promised [by a man I met on the China-North Korean border] that if I worked for three years, they would give me money and I would be helped to go to America or South Korea. It wasn't easy for me and at first I didn't even know how to use a computer. My friend told the owner she didn't want to work there so he sold her to a Chinese man. My friend and I wanted to kill ourselves. Then another woman working with us was sold, that's when I realised, 'Ah, we are not even humans'. The owner of the Internet chatting business [a form of online prostitution] told us, 'If you don't do what I tell you, I'll sell you too'. I was terrified. I decided I had to leave, I decided to go to South Korea.

---

Markus Bell is a PhD candidate in the anthropology department of the College of Asia and the Pacific, the Australian National University. Correspondence to: Markus Bell, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, Coombs Building 9, The Australian National University, Acton ACT 0200 Australia. Email: [mpsbell@gmail.com](mailto:mpsbell@gmail.com)

I was so excited to arrive in South Korea, but this soon turned to disappointment as we were yelled and sworn at by the government handlers when we arrived. It was as if we were the Jewish prisoners you see in [Second World War] movies. We were interrogated for two months to find out if we were spies or not, following this we were moved to Hanawon<sup>1</sup> and our education began. In Hanawon I learnt a lot of things that shocked me. Everything I had learned about Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il was a lie, everything I had believed for twenty years fell apart.

Finally, after three months, the time came to leave the centre, I couldn't wait to leave, to eat what I wanted to eat, live the way I wanted to live ... but I was alone. Others had family, some had friends, but I had no one (Interview with Jin-hee Park<sup>2</sup>; arrived in South Korea in 2009).

Jin-hee Park<sup>3</sup> never intended to leave her family, friends and hometown forever. But, after crossing into China from North Korea, her plans to stay for a short time to make some money turned sour when she was coerced into a form of Internet-based prostitution run by a Chinese man and his North Korean wife. Further to this, arrival in South Korea was not the fairytale ending she had envisioned.

The South Korean government continues to practise variants of what Stephan Castles (1995) calls 'differential exclusion', according to which citizenship in the nation state does not confer social membership in civil society. This insight is particularly applicable to *talbukin* or North Korean refugees.<sup>4</sup> For new arrivals from North Korea, many of whom have developed a distinct distrust of anything governmental, interaction with representatives of the South Korean state bears a chilling resemblance to that which they left behind in the North. The adverse reaction of Jin-hee towards a cold and unfamiliar state settlement process that she likened to the treatment of the Jewish population in Nazi Germany highlights the shortcomings of the institutional modes of resettling North Korean refugees into the host society.

The South Korean state settlement process commences with long periods of interrogation that take as a starting point the assumed guilt of the interrogated. Combined with re-education in the state-operated Hanawon facility that attacks the foundations of their identity while stressing that they discard emotional and actual ties to the past and assimilate, the process falls short of creating a strong basis for the resettlement of North Korean refugees. This 'crisis of resettlement' continues to worsen, as financial support is cut and *talbukin* are repeatedly held accountable by South Korean society for the actions of the North Korean government on the world stage. Underlining Jin-hee's feelings, a recent survey by *New Focus Media* reported that 80 per cent of the North Korean refugees interviewed feel dissatisfied with the settlement system—including medical care, employment and pressure to assimilate. Indications of the level to which dissatisfaction has reached among the *talbukin* population are manifest most poignantly by the recent phenomena of 'return migration' and 'remigration' reported in the media and online academic sites.<sup>5</sup>

North Korean refugees in South Korea also experience difficulties fashioning a new life in a context separated from their families, an issue that has affected many if not most Koreans.<sup>6</sup> In the last ten years, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea as refugees has increased dramatically. As of March 2012, it surpassed 23,200

people (*The Korea Herald*, April 18, 2012). Cases of depression, psychological distress, family breakdown and unemployment are disproportionately high among the *talbukin* population (Haggard and Noland 2011; Jeong 2009; Kim 2007; Yi et al. 2007, 2009). These problems arise both from extensive periods of time spent hiding in unstable, dangerous conditions in China, and difficulty adapting to life in South Korea.

However, for newly-arrived North Koreans such as Jin-hee, the failure at state level does not mean they are entirely cast adrift, as religious and secular institutions within civil society are shouldering more of the burden of adaptation and integration. One example is the Catholic girl's home that Jin-hee eventually joined after leaving the state processing centre. Recent estimates put the number of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in South Korea working with *talbukin* at over thirty,<sup>7</sup> although there are also many unofficial organisations that are not registered. There are also many religious institutions in South Korea that work with individuals and groups of *talbukin*. Informal groups within civil society have since come to play an influential role in the 'emplacement' (Korac 2009) of many *talbukin* in South Korea, compensating for the failure of official state-sponsored settlement programs.

Research, advocacy and material support offered by such groups contribute in a real way to making life in South Korea more tolerable for those who struggle in the settlement process. There is no doubting the importance to a new arrival of a monthly stipend received in exchange for attending a church meeting, or of weekly English lessons organised by an NGO. Having said this, what often goes unnoticed are the intangible benefits conferred by membership of such organisations. These are elements which go beyond the financial or educational aid these groups provide, or indeed the efficacy of these secular and spiritual spaces in 'normalizing the host culture' (Ong 2003, 80) for *talbukin*. The intangible benefits of these groups include those referred to loosely by my *talbukin* friends as 'meeting people and making friends'. That valued social relations are developed through these organisations is obvious; less well understood are the forms of relatedness they entail. What sense of belonging comes with affiliation to such organisations? Through what idioms and what kind of mundane events is relatedness produced? Do North Koreans come closer to achieving a sense of inclusion in South Korea through such means?

This article endeavours to further our understanding of the significance of secular and religious groups as spaces of belonging where, for persons in exile, the meaning of home is recreated through acts of intimate exchange. Furthermore, this article aims to make a contribution to theories of kinship within the field of Korean studies. By deploying concepts of 'processual kinship' (Carsten 1997, 2000, 2004) to a society where a rigid patriarchal bloodline is understood to structure the family, new possibilities of incorporation become apparent for individuals who are declared insiders by the official narrative but outsiders according to lived reality. Through an exposition of linguistic familiarity, commensality, visiting and exchange, this article will demystify the central role of these groups in the lives of new arrivals from North Korea.

I conducted research with *talbukin* from late 2009 until mid-2012. The people with whom I worked and conducted interviews were diverse; however, several overriding similarities could be drawn. Most had come from the northern border areas of North Korea, North Ham-gyeong Province or Yang-gang Province.<sup>8</sup> Most had also spent more than six months in China before travelling through Southeast Asia and on to South Korea. Because I tended to associate with people and groups around my own age, most were in the 19–35 year age bracket. Furthermore, many whom I interviewed were females, reflecting the gender bias of North Korean arrivals in the last ten years.<sup>9</sup> I located interviewees through a process of ‘snowball sampling’; as a result, the individuals whom I interviewed tended to be known to each other. With most of my interviewees I spent over two years developing a rapport and I feel we had reached a point of mutual trust.

### **The South Korean Social Landscape and North Korean Refugees**

During my fieldwork I was most actively involved with two NGOs and two churches, the first of these being PSCORE.<sup>10</sup> Located just outside central Seoul, PSCORE (People for Successful COrean REunification), describes itself on its website as ‘Striving for mutual understanding and harmony between the two Koreas ... We hope to bridge the gap between South Korea, North Korea and the international community’ (<http://www.pscore.org/>). This organisation was established in 2006 by ‘Young North Korean refugees, South Korean university students, and foreigners interested in improving human rights in North Korea and reunifying the Korean peninsula’. Soo-min Jeong, *talbukin* and employee of PSCORE, explained:

The primary focus of PSCORE is offering education opportunities to *talbukin*. The second goal of the organisation is to change the attitude of South Korean people in regards to both the constantly changing political situation with North Korea and the lives of *talbukin*. (Interview with Soo-min Jeong; arrived in South Korea in 2003).

The second NGO, known as Young Han Woori (YHW), was started in 2010 on a volunteer basis by young North Korean refugees and South Koreans with ties to the Catholic Church in Seoul. This group was smaller in size and scale than PSCORE and although funding was received from the church congregation, Seo-jin Ahn, a South Korean member of the group and the coordinator throughout 2011 explained, ‘YHW is not a religious group, our focus is on inclusion of all different types of people. It doesn’t matter where you are from or what your background is, everyone is welcome to come along and exchange their ideas and culture’ (Interview with Seo-jin Ahn, January 29, 2012: see Figure 1). Both YHW and PSCORE offered tutoring for *talbukin* in English, maths and science. YHW further offered a small stipend to high school and university-age *talbukin*, on the proviso their grades were maintained at a satisfactory level.



**Figure 1** A smaller group discussion ('My biggest challenges in South Korea') during a YHW meeting.

'X Church', a Korean Reformed Protestant church south of the Han River in Seoul, and 'Heaven Church', a small Protestant church located in the shadow of one of South Korea's most prestigious women's universities, were the primary 'spiritual sites' of my research. X Church had a congregation numbering in the hundreds and a reputation among *talbukin* as offering large stipends of up to 450,000 won<sup>11</sup> every three months. It was also well known that this was a 'strict church' and simply turning up to a Sunday service would not be enough. As with Heaven Church, the congregation was a mixture of North and South Koreans and everyone was expected to participate in the 'extra-curricular' activities. In X Church this meant regular bible-reading groups, picnics, home visits and sports days. The nature of the services further acted to weed out the less committed; in the tradition of American evangelism, singing, dancing, crying and speaking in tongues were ritualistically part of approaching a communal climax in the sight of God. In contradistinction, the congregation of Heaven Church was smaller, numbering between twenty and thirty, and more moderate in its sacred communications; bible readings were interwoven with singing, the pastor strumming a guitar while a congregation member played the electric piano. In a small room at the back, parents with children too young to participate would watch the service through a glass window, entertaining their tots when required. Services were followed by a group meal, at which time conversation moved to more personal matters, outside the realms of faith and God.

North Korean refugee-focused organisations and church groups such as X Church and Heaven Church are structured and derive much of their effectiveness as venues for the reconstitution of kinship, and not simply advocacy work. Of primary importance to *talbukin* is the position of these groups to act as a bridge expediting emplacement within their new home. At the heart of the bridging process is the provision of a sense of belonging within a South Korean society that has barriers to the incorporation of outsiders.

In South Korea, as in many societies, there exists a hegemonic discourse demarcating 'normal' relationships from 'abnormal', and 'insiders' from 'outsiders'. Outsider status is applied to any individuals who differ from the 'normal' societal expectations and are without the social networks and social capital required for negotiating the competitive environment. This status is most often applied to foreigners, members of the gay and lesbian community, ethnic Korean-Chinese and, inevitably, people from North Korea. Jae-yeol Yee (2003, 505) explains, 'There is a strong tendency [in South Korea] for people to use regional, school and family ties as a means of doing business, getting information and making important decisions.' Yee underlines the exclusionary characteristics of social networks in South Korea, explaining that *yeonjul*<sup>12</sup> 'built upon close and personal trust relationships ... tend to become a barrier to those who do not share the link' (506). Yee clarifies that these types of social ties usually transcend institutionalised rules and formal prescriptions; in some cases companies even require job applicants to state a list of friends and acquaintances prominent in either politics or government. Jaehyuck Lee (2003, 582) adds to this understanding, pointing out that '*Yeonjul* refers to an exclusive network, with strong connotations of serving its members ... [through] backdoor rent seeking'.

*Yeonjul* networks place restrictions on marriage, employment and socialising opportunities for those who have not been able to build up and integrate themselves into these social groups. For *talbukin*, many of whom are alone in South Korea, it is a mammoth task to gain insider status and 'become' South Korean in this way. It is necessary, therefore, for *talbukin* to situate themselves into other modes of belonging. This is done through the processes of rituals, language and other quotidian acts of socialisation to actively *manufacture* relationships (Carsten 2004), in both secular and spiritual spaces. Each relationship has the potential to become something encompassing both instrumental and emotional support, as something approaching a kind of pseudo-kinship, ascribing a sense of belonging to those on the periphery. It is useful to offer an understanding of kinship theory as it applies to North Korean refugees, their attendance of these groups and reconstituted familiarity.

Korean kinship has been repeatedly put under the microscope by specialists applying the analytical lens of genealogical theory, which takes as its starting point the significance for those studied of consanguine and affinal ties (Janelli and Janelli 1982; Kim 2003; Lee 1997). Song-Chul Kim (2003, 147) explains that 'research on Korean kinship has concentrated on the local lineages and anthropologists have formulated a paradigm of Korean lineage on the basis of Chinese and African lineage systems'. Kim proposes that studies of Korean kinship might also consider 'what people actually "do" with kinship, and regard individuals as the primary agents of kinship activities' (153). In this, Kim appears to offer a new, flexible approach to Korean kinship studies and yet he ends up with a distanced view of what the people are 'actually doing'. There has continued to be a focus on ties that extend on a temporal, vertical axis, from ancestors to the living and from the living on to their descendants.

During my research, I identified other forms of relatedness that use the idiom of kinship as a foundation<sup>13</sup>: ‘She is my sister, we are like family to each other’ or ‘I care about her, I have known her for a long time and she is important to me’. The physical expressions of intimacy that accompanied these statements—the stroking of hair between friends, locked arms and clasped hands—represents a different kind of intimacy, invested feelings in relationships that are neither friend nor family, in relationships that have long lasting emotional significance: a pseudo-kinship. These social and linguistic practices of pseudo-kinship are of great significance, materially and emotionally, to individuals for whom South Korea is often a hostile environment.

Kinship may be viewed as given by birth and unchangeable or it may be seen as shaped by the ordinary, everyday activities of family life (Carsten 2004, 6). Carsten develops the concepts of ‘processual relatedness’ and ‘manufacturing kinship’ in order to acknowledge the intense labour that is a part of making fluid, pseudo-kin relations. Familiarity, built up over a long period through a process of investing and exchanging time, money and emotions lies at the heart of relationships that, for those who are without family support, are vital for adapting to their environment. Carsten’s approach is extremely useful when looking at *talbukin*, as the fabric of their lives—kinship—has been torn in the process of relocation.

In what follows, I illustrate the processes of forming pseudo-kinship ties. I begin each section with words offering insight into the experiences of Woo-sung, a young man from the northeast of North Korea. Woo-sung arrived in South Korea in 2004. Prior to leaving North Korea he was studying to become a doctor, achieving high social status and hoping for a bright future in his hometown near the border with China. When I met Woo-sung, he was in the final stages of his university degree and volunteering in several organisations.

### A Language of Belonging

The MokSah Nim<sup>14</sup> in this church is very kind and always wanting to help me, he is like my family, he is a really good man. (Woo-sung; arrived in South Korea in 2004)

Woo-sung had arrived in South Korea without family. His understanding of the relationship between himself and the South Korean minister of the small church he attended as being ‘like family’ is representative of similar sentiments observed at X Church, a South Korean operated church well known for its large *talbukin* congregation.

This was the common manner in which the language of the church was framed: requests and expectations of support couched in familial terms. As was often the case, with regard to religious groups in particular, there were often impositional statements aimed at *talbukin*, requests to attend bible-study meetings and weddings, for example, couched firmly in familial language. On one occasion, a couple shuffled nervously up to the front of the group and announced, ‘Next weekend we are getting married and we would like everyone to come. We want to share this time with you’.

The pastor reiterated the invitation, 'I hope to see as many people as possible at this wedding next weekend. After all,' he added, 'we are all kin here.' (field notes, March 27, 2011).<sup>15</sup> The imposition to attend the young couple's impending nuptials was firmly couched in the idiom of kinship. The language used by *talbukin* lays the ground for individuals to become closer and create relationships that go beyond mere friendship to something more intimate. In pronouncing 'we' as well as other incorporating and equalising language, participants in each of the sites were contributing towards binding individuals together.<sup>16</sup>

As Woo-sung further emphasised in reference to the other members of the small congregation, 'When we get together it's very much like a family'. In explaining that it felt 'like family', Woo-sung was emphasising a deeply felt connectivity that had been built up between him and other church members over a period of five years since he had left Hanawon. For Woo-sung, the pastor and other members of Heaven Church were people who played an important role during his settlement in South Korea and with whom he had developed a strong sense of mutual trust. Woo-sung did not invoke the familial idiom lightly when expressing his thoughts on Heaven Church; rather, he was referring to a kind of intimacy approaching feelings of kinship. Expressions of intimacy, pointing to the development of pseudo-kinship relations, were not limited to individuals from North Korea. On one occasion, a South Korean NGO volunteer informed me that she wanted the North Koreans in the group to think of her as family. Having said this, my fieldwork suggested that, for the most part, *talbukin* found it easier to relate to and form strong relationships with others from North Korea.

### **Commensality**

Hye-jin's mother would often emphasise the fact that we were about to enjoy North Korean-style food. I took a couple of potato pancakes from the centre of the table and loaded up my bowl, hiding the still steaming rice beneath. Hye-jin's mother, dissatisfied at the quantity I had taken, then added three more to my plate. Hye-jin tried one herself and exclaimed, 'These are not delicious'. Her mother looked at her scowling and replied, 'Go back and live in North Korea for a month and tell me that's not delicious' (field notes, April 10, 2011).

Woo-sung and I would regularly eat in the home of Hye-jin and her mother (Mrs Lee), who had arrived together in South Korea not six months prior and were living in government-supported housing on the outskirts of Seoul. Hye-jin's sister and Woo-sung had met in Hanawon and had maintained their friendship since. Although Hye-jin's sister was rarely around these days due to her heavy work schedule, Woo-sung had a standing invitation to evening meals. Dinner would be served around seven, we would arrive and hand over whatever we had brought for that evening, Korean custom demanding that one not turn up empty handed.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, dinner would be accompanied by beer and sometimes one of Hye-jin's mother's friends would join us.

Feeding, according to Carsten (1997, 4), creates shared substance while talking together; exchanging news and information during and after the meal contributes to the process of manufacturing kinship. Meal times were for asking questions about events and problems that had arisen. Mrs Lee would often put Woo-sung's experience into practice in her ongoing manoeuvres with representatives of the South Korean state—the knowledge that Woo-sung had accumulated in regards to their new environment was indispensable—‘How do we fill out this form for Hye-jin's school? What happens when Hye-jin has to go on school trips? How do I deal with the social worker when she comes to visit?’. Dinner would usually be followed by coaching on what to say to the social worker in order to give the best impression possible and ensure that maximum financial support was always forthcoming. Stories were often exchanged about ‘Mrs So-and-So’, who had fallen victim to local confidence tricksters—a stark warning to all newcomers that this was not a time to let their guard down.

Eating together on such a regular basis for Woo-sung, Hye-jin and Hye-jin's mother was a time to renew ties, to discuss the week's events and to maintain a relationship in which pseudo-kinship roles were acted out. Woo-sung, having befriended the family's eldest daughter shortly after arrival in South Korea, was the source of advice deemed essential for learning about their new home. Although not made explicit, the relationship between Hye-jin and Woo-sung appeared to be one of daughter-father, with Hye-jin relying heavily on Woo-sung, asking for advice, help with homework and even pocket money. Further to this, between Woo-sung and Mrs Lee there seemed to exist a pseudo-marital relationship. That is not to say there was a sexual side to their relationship, rather that Woo-sung offered a strong male figure in the house, able to solve problems and proffer advice necessary for Mrs Lee to negotiate the everyday difficulties of her new environment. For Woo-sung, a young man without family in South Korea, it was both comforting and convenient to be part of this family atmosphere, with food prepared for him and a place to go and relax outside his own apartment. This kind of environment was not unique to the situation of Woo-sung and his neighbours, as I observed during ongoing fieldwork.

The significance of commensality in creating and maintaining ties can also be seen in the meetings that take place in NGOs and church groups. The sharing of a meal is an integral part of every meeting; it is a time to meet new people and a time for *talbukin* to share experiences in their new home. The process of cooking and eating is a way in which strangers and outsiders become incorporated into a group. In particular, for *talbukin* who live alone and who struggle to enter into mainstream society, the shared meal is a time during which new bonds can be formed and older relationships renewed. The special nature of food cooked in the North Korean manner lent an air of importance to each group meal. The tastes of home hold special significance for North Koreans. Food remains a symbol of identity for people for whom home is so close and yet out of reach.

## Visiting

Further to the more formal, structured and semi-structured meetings organised through church groups and NGOs, it is useful to cast an eye to the significance of informal meetings to the creation of self-made networks and sustainable relationships. Through visiting, relationships are given a more personal quality. Further to this, visits have the power to turn the impersonal, functional government-supported housing that *talbukin* are allocated upon completion of Hanawon into warm familial spaces.

Woo-sung had been preparing lunch for about an hour. He had also spent at least 30,000 won<sup>18</sup> purchasing the food to cook the meal. This included a variety of vegetables, noodles, seafood and chicken. He seemed a little uncomfortable about the impending arrival of the guests. Once the guests arrived, conversation revolved around his current job-seeking status, work related to the Church, the young North Korean girls from the Church-supported group home<sup>19</sup> and his plans for the future (field notes, April 22, 2011).

On this occasion, the visitors were South Korean members of the Catholic Church. Woo-sung had attended regularly since his arrival in Seoul. As mentioned above, the Catholic Church in South Korea runs several programs offering support to young North Korean refugees who arrive without family; this included the occasional home visit by members of the congregation. Arranged a week prior, the visit was significant because it required notable pecuniary investment and labour on behalf of the visitors and the host. The guests had travelled for over an hour to arrive at the outskirts of Seoul, while Woo-sung had spent his money, and the morning, preparing the meal.

The visitors, people with strong connections to the Catholic community in Seoul, were genuinely interested in how Woo-sung, a young man living without family in South Korea, was coping with his living situation: 'How are your studies coming along?'; 'Are you preparing to find a job?'; 'Do you need any help organising yourself?'; 'Do you have a girlfriend?'. Words of concern and offers of help were not empty gestures and information was relayed back to other members of the church, in particular those involved with organising support for *talbukin* and the church-sponsored children's home.

For South Koreans, home visits are a manifestation of a special kind of intimacy, a time when the mask is lifted and the inner world is exposed. For *talbukin* as well, a home visitation represents something more personal; it is a time when the cold spaces of the apartment, often devoid of pictures of friends, family or hometowns, is colonised by familiarity and a feeling of home.<sup>20</sup>

Janet Carsten (1997, 2004) describes the power of the home in promoting inclusion between strangers and expediting fundamental kinship exchanges. Certainly this was the case with the visitations I observed amongst *talbukin*. Further to the process of visiting and sharing meals, the importance of reciprocity in creating and maintaining connections between *talbukin* also needs to be considered.

### Exchanging Goods and Cycles of Debt

Marcel Mauss ([1950] 1990, 39–41) suggested that the gift is never ‘free’: three obligations—to give, to receive and to reciprocate—bind the giver and receiver into an unending cycle of obligation in which to refuse the gift is to reject the social bond. Ongoing strategic exchange within the *talbukin* community, manifest in the movement of small gifts such as food, plants and minor pecuniary transactions, creates overlapping, dense relationships between individuals, and individuals and groups.

Whether in a secular or spiritual setting, within the *talbukin* community, gift giving is an integral component of manufacturing pseudo kinship networks, tying participants into a difficult-to-escape web of obligation. It is possible to track the patterns of gifting within the *talbukin* community by freezing the frame and taking an inventory of the kinds of items that are being given, exchanged, bought and sold. This kind of examination reveals the material traces of gifting. The list below details fifteen of the thirty three articles recorded in an investigation into the ‘life histories’ of the objects in the home of Woo-sung, who kindly allowed his personal belongings to be laid bare.<sup>21</sup> Each object was tagged with a number and the following questions were then asked: Where did the object come from?; How long has it been in your possession?; What do you think you will do with it next?. This exercise was premised on the assumption that as well as eating together and visiting each other, the ties that connect members of the *talbukin* community are created and maintained through continuous exchange.

The history of objects in the household of Woo-sung (arrived in South Korea in 2004):

1. The television: ‘The TV came from my North Korean aunt’s house.’<sup>22</sup>
2. Large picture of a waterfall scene: ‘This is from when I came to South Korea. My police minder gave me this. He was very kind and gave me some other things as well.’
3. Low chest of drawers: From the North Korean aunt.
4. Stereo System: ‘This is from my friend, also from North Korea.’
5. Low foldaway table #1: ‘This is from my North Korean friend. Perhaps I’ve had it for five years.’
6. Low foldaway table #2: ‘This is from my Chinese friend. I’ve had it for five months.’
7. Large fridge/freezer and microwave: North Korean aunt.
8. Pots and pans: ‘Some I bought and some I got from the aunt’<sup>23</sup> from the Catholic Church.’
9. Bed: ‘From my Chinese friend. I have had it for about 4 months.’
10. Bookshelf: ‘It came from the same North Korean friend who went to the UK.’
11. Tea set: ‘Chinese friends gave this to me.’
12. Washing machine: North Korean aunt.

13. Laptop: 'I bought it from a North Korean friend at my university.'
14. Clothes: 'Some clothes are from church and some are gifts from friends.'
15. Books: 'Some books are from Church and some are from groups. Mostly they are gifts.' (field notes, May 13, 2011)

I was especially surprised, upon completing this exercise, with the volume of the continuous gift giving that was occurring between Woo-sung and other *talbukin*. In his home almost every large object had been received as a gift or purchased at a discounted rate from other *talbukin* or South Korean members of a group he attended. It is important to note that of the objects selected for investigation,<sup>24</sup> eighteen had been given by others while twelve were given by *talbukin* friends. 'Objects given by Chinese friends' included a tea set, a bed and a low foldaway table. 'Miscellaneous' constituted a printer that was a gift from an Internet company. 'Objects bought by oneself' totalled fourteen. If we make a comparison of the number of objects given by *talbukin* friends with the number of objects given by South Korean friends, we can see a difference of six to one, *talbukin* friends having given significantly more objects than South Korean friends. It is also important not to overlook the role of group support for *talbukin* as many of the books, pots and pans and clothes were given by members of the Catholic Church.

What conclusions can be drawn from these results? Firstly, it is clear that a majority of objects received were given by *talbukin* friends. We can make two deductions: that *talbukin*, with an awareness of the difficulties of each other's living situations, tend to exchange goods and gifts more frequently. In addition, if we compare 'Objects given by *talbukin* friends' and 'Objects bought with the help of *talbukin* friends' with 'Objects given by South Korean friends' and 'Objects bought with the help of South Korean friends', we can draw the conclusion that in the case of Woo-sung, and given that his case is not remarkable, there is greater cooperation and support within the North Korean refugee community than between *talbukin* and the wider South Korean community.

Many of the objects recorded were not going to rest long in the home of the owner. I was assured that most items would be passed on to others in the church groups and NGOs who needed them more. It is useful to consider what I term a 'material liminality'<sup>25</sup> characterising the situation of many *talbukin*. The majority of *talbukin* arrive in South Korea with very little in the way of personal items.<sup>26</sup> Money received from the South Korean government is enough to acquire a few personal belongings, but rarely enough for everything required in their new homes. Objects are constantly moving back and forth through networks within the *talbukin* community. Items borrowed and lent, exchanged and given away, comprise an ephemeral aspect; they do not belong to the user as such but are part of a state of becoming, in a similar way to how the skin of a snake is vital while it exists but will inevitably be shed—these objects are manifestations of the beginning of a new life in South Korea.<sup>27</sup> As such, the person neither considers these goods to be fully in his/her possession, nor are they so far alienated that they lose their value as items to be passed on and exchanged. The

gift is never free: a donated television, however outdated, retains the spirit of being given; it never forgets its origins.

Gifting occurs between individuals who have developed relationships in church groups and NGOs, and constitutes a material manifestation of the kind of mutual support that continues amongst *talbukin* in South Korea. The material liminality and the ongoing creation and repayment of debts among members of the *talbukin* community facilitates the development of a mutual trust and a heavy weight of debt between participants. This kind of mutual support, built up through the exchange of food, household objects and minor pecuniary transactions, is more than simply a way of helping *talbukin* 'survive and overcome vacillations in their means of livelihood' (Kibria 1993, 86). Exchange facilitates social solidarity, but its role in identity construction must also be kept in mind. The gift binds people together; the nature of each gift reflects the needs and desires of the givers and recipients of the group and contributes towards the progressive construction of the character of the group.

### The Pseudo-kinship of *Talbukin*

Let me tell you about our church; we are like a family. We don't distinguish between South Korean and North Korean. We celebrate each other's birthdays and help each other solve our problems. We all take care of each other and that's what makes it so great (Woo-sung; arrived in South Korea in 2004).

North Koreans in our organisation share with each other information needed for surviving in South Korea. For example, where we should study and where we can find the best financial support. It's a case of finding out what I can get there, what they give here, and what kind of stipend they offer at this church or that organisation (Sumin; arrived in South Korea in 2002).

This article has examined the ways in which North Korean refugees struggle to find a place within the mainstream narrative of South Korean society and, as Woo-sung and Sumin explain above, seek alternate methods of creating emotionally and instrumentally beneficial relationships. Where the South Korean government has failed to provide what is most necessary in terms of emotional and material support, church groups and NGOs offer intimate spaces of community and kinship. Within these corners of civil society it is possible to catch glimpses of the multifaceted dimensions of kinship and their significance for North Korean refugees as venues for transacted relatedness.

The feeling of displacement and of longing for those left behind can never be entirely compensated for by a church or NGO group; nevertheless, these groups are essential for expediting a sense of security and community that is absent from the inadequate state settlement project. A focus on the role that these groups play in the emplacement process of North Korean refugees offers a better understanding of the contribution made *vis-à-vis* government institutions and how, for nations with similar experience 'hosting' individuals in exile, civil society can play a vital role in expediting adaptation and settlement.

This article has also highlighted the significance of the concept of processual kinship to the field of Korean studies, offering new perspectives in our understanding of modes of incorporation in a society where networks of exclusion predominate.

The shared burden carried by North Koreans upon their arrival in South Korea provides a starting point for the creation of community and kinship between strangers, and a reworking of the meaning of home for persons in exile. The bonds among *talbukin*, that also extend to the wider South Korean society, can be observed each time they meet, in the discussions they share, the consultations and problem solving sessions in which they informally participate, the food they cook together, the linguistic code switching they employ and the jokes they make at each other's expense. These relationships, embedded in common feelings of loss and up-rootedness, differ from normal friendships in the intensity and depth of the relationship; the implications of the relationship as a lifeline to individuals negotiating the exclusionary socio-political landscape of South Korea; the deeply felt mutual dependence of participants; and the expectation that relations will remain strong, despite the possibility of infrequent contact. The pseudo-family extends the social reach of individuals from North Korea who are without consanguine kin, to compensate for unstable community identity and fragmented blood-based kinship in a nation divided.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research and writing of this article would not have been possible without the help of individuals from North Korea and the organisations that do such invaluable work in this community. I would also like to thank my advisor at Seoul National University, Professor Hyang-jin Jung, for her support and wise counsel.

### **Notes**

- [1] Hanawon is an educational facility operated by the government. Its purpose is to teach North Korean arrivals about South Korean society.
- [2] All Korean names have been romanised according to the 'The Revised Romanization of Korean'. I have presented the names of participants with family names following personal names.
- [3] All names of people and institutions in this article have been changed so as to protect the identity of participants.
- [4] For the purposes of this article, the terms 'refugee' and '*talbukin*' are used interchangeably. For more information on the politics of labelling migrants from North Korea see <http://www.nknews.org/2012/06/refugees-defectors-and-economic-migrants/>.
- [5] *Nknews*: <http://www.nknews.org/2012/11/WHY-DO-PEOPLE-KEEP-RE-DEFECTING-TO-NORTH-KOREA/>; *Chosun Ilbo Online Report*: [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2012/11/09/2012110901243.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/11/09/2012110901243.html); *Asia Rights Journal*: <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/blogs/asiarights/korean-diaspora-and-re-migration-the-ideal-and-the-reality-of-overseas-ethnic-koreans/>.

- [6] Kim (1988) explains that as a result of the partition of the Korean peninsula an estimated five million Koreans were separated from their family members.
- [7] The North Korean Strategy Centre 2010.
- [8] 함경북도. 양강도.
- [9] An article in the 2011 autumn edition of *Korea Focus* reported that ‘Women account for 80 per cent of all defectors and 70 per cent of the female defectors are in their 20s and 40s’ (Kim 2011, 12).
- [10] Seonggongjeogin Tongileul Mandunuen Salamdeul (성공적인 통일을 만드는 사람들).
- [11] Approximately US\$420.
- [12] According to Yee (2003) and Lee (2003), there are two main forms of social networks that exist among South Koreans—*yeon-gyeol* and *yeonjul* (연결과 연줄).
- [13] In this essay I use the terms ‘pseudo-kinship’ and ‘fictive-kinship’ interchangeably.
- [14] Pastor.
- [15] ‘우리는 친척입니다’.
- [16] Although beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that the North Korean state has long employed the family idiom in both the creation and retelling of its founding myth, and concomitantly as a means of solidifying the central position of the Kim family. For further reference see Kwon and Chung 2012, Martin 2004 and Kim 2010. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
- [17] ‘Do not turn up empty handed’ (‘Bin Sonuro gamyeon andwaeyo’).
- [18] US\$28 (as of May 2011).
- [19] The Catholic Church in South Korea operates many homes for children of North Korean mothers who have arrived in South Korea without any support networks.
- [20] Most North Korean refugees do not have pictures of their lives prior to leaving North Korea due to the danger of carrying these across the Sino-North Korean border.
- [21] This exercise was used by Carol Stack ([1974] 1997).
- [22] Woo-sung referred to two women in his life using the epithet ‘Aunt’. When asked how he would refer to these women in Korean, he explained that he would use ‘Ajumma’, a more neutral term than ‘Aunt’.
- [23] A different South Korean ‘Aunt’.
- [24] All items of significance were listed: furniture; television; computer; wardrobe; vacuum cleaner. Items such as foodstuffs, textbooks, toiletries and so on were not included.
- [25] Liminality, meaning ‘threshold’, is a concept developed by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and developed further by Victor Turner (1967).
- [26] A majority of *talbukin* I spoke with left North Korea with nothing more than the clothes on their back.
- [27] Although beyond the scope of this article, it seems reasonable to assume that as a *talbukin* becomes more settled in South Korea, the number of borrowed/temporary goods in their home would decrease, while the number of purchased goods would increase thus marking a change from a state of being ‘inbetween’ (transition), to a state of having ‘become’ (incorporation).

## References

- Carsten, J. 1997. *The Heat of the Hearth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carsten, J., ed. 2000. *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carsten, J. 2004. *After Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Castles, S. 1995. “How Nation-states Respond to Immigration and Ethnic Diversity.” *New Community* 21 (3): 298–308.

- Haggard, S., and M. Noland 2011. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*. Washington D.C.: Peterson Institute for Economics.
- Janelli, R. L., and D. Y. Janelli 1982. *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jeong, J. S. 2009. *Understanding the Contemporary North Korean Refugee Problem*. South Korea: Prima Books. [Hyujae Talbukja Munjaeui Ihae].
- Kibria, N. 1993. *Family Tightrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, C. S. 1988. *Faithful Endurance: An Ethnography of Korean Family Dispersal*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Kim, E. J. 2007. "Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Spectres of Foreignness and Family in South Korea." *Anthropological Quarterly* 80: 497–531.
- Kim, H.-K. 2011. "Support for Self-Reliance of North Korean Defectors." *Korea Focus* 19 (3): 12–13.
- Kim, S.-C. 2003. "Kinship in Contemporary Korea: Normative Model Versus Practice." In *Korean Anthropology: Contemporary Korean Culture in Flux, Vol. III*, edited by Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 141–157. Seoul: Hollym.
- Kim, S.-Y. 2010. *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Korac, M. 2009. *Remaking Home: Reconstructing Life, Place and Identity in Rome and Amsterdam*. Studies in Forced Migration Vol. 26. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Kwon, H., and B. H. Chung 2012. *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lee, J. 2003. "Society in a Vortex?: Yeonjul Network and Civil Society in Korea." In *Korean Anthropology: Contemporary Korean Culture in Flux, Vol. III*, edited by Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 579–602. Seoul: Hollym.
- Lee, Kwang-Kyu. 1997. *Korean Family and Kinship*. Korean Studies Series no.3. Seoul: Jipmoondang Publishing Company.
- Martin, B. 2004. *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*. New York: Thomas Dunn Books.
- Mauss, M. [1950] 1990. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Ong, A. 2003. *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*. California Series in Public Anthropology. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stack, C. [1974] 1997. *All Our Kin*. New York: Basic Books.
- The North Korean Strategy Centre. 2010. *The Present Condition of North Korean Defectors*. [Bukhan Juollyak Center, Bukhanitaljumin Danchoe].
- Turner, V. 1967. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage." In *The Forest of Symbols*, 93–111. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Van Gennep, A. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Yee, J. 2003. "The Social Networks of Koreans." In *Korean Anthropology: Contemporary Korean Culture in Flux, Vol. III*, edited by Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 505–530. Seoul: Hollym.
- Yi, S.-H., S.-C. Cho, C.-D. Kim, and M. Chin. 2007. *The Social and Psychological Acculturation of North Korean Defector Families*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press. [Talbuk Gajokui Jeokungwa Shimlijeog Tonghab].
- Yi, S.-H., C.-D. Kim, and M. Chin. 2009. *Family Dissolution and Reorganization of North Korean Refugees*. Seoul: Seoul National University Press. [Talbukminui Gajok Haechehwa Jaegu-Seong].