

Migration Trajectories of North Korean Defectors: Former Returnees From Japan Becoming Defectors in East Asia

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From 1959 to 1984, over 93,000 Koreans moved to North Korea from Japan as part of a repatriation project conducted during this time. Among them were people who had escaped from North Korea and immigrated to Japan and South Korea as well as the descendants of such people. This research examines the immigration trajectories of North Korean defectors related to the repatriation project and its effects on international relations in East Asia in a migration systems context. Specifically, it focuses on 26 North Korean defectors who have connections with Japan and settled in Japan and South Korea. It argues that the migration pathways of North Korean defectors linked with the repatriation project have been constructed with the cooperation of and amidst conflict between East Asian countries. To respond to the situation, North Korean defectors used their connections with Japan in amicable relations between Japan and China. However, after the relations went sour, defectors turned to informal transitional networks. If these strategies were unavailable, the defectors faced difficulties, unless they received social or capital support from the destination countries. After entering the destination country, those who settled in Japan have experienced different situations due to the inconsistency in administrative proceedings, while those in South Korea have been treated equally as other defectors. In this sense, some defectors have faced precarious situations in their immigration.

Keywords: North Korean defectors, repatriation project, migration in East Asia

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1. Introduction

The term *North Korean defector* refers to a person who has left North Korea without the government's permission with the desire to settle in a new country or a person who has already successfully done so. Most North Korean defectors moved to South Korea, where they were treated as South Korean nationals following thorough questioning. However, it is not a well-known fact that some North Korean defectors have also settled in Japan. According to a Japanese NGO official, the number of North Korean defectors who had settled in Japan was greater than 200 (Kato, 2019). While the Japanese government did not recognize the defectors as refugees, it allowed them to enter Japan by discerning whether they or their ancestors had participated in a *repatriation project*. It is also estimated that over 400 North Korean defectors related to the repatriation project have settled in South Korea as part of this project (Ishimaru, 2019). Despite the fact that these North Korean defectors have links with Japan through the project, they have not been distinguished from other defectors and their migration trajectory has not been given much attention academically.

The *repatriation project* refers to the mass migration of ethnic Koreans, called *Zainichi* Koreans, who had lived in Japan. Through this project, over 93,000 *Zainichi* Koreans moved to North Korea between 1959 and 1984 (Morris-Suzuki, 2007). To explore why this mass migration had happened, it is important to understand the modern history of Korea and Japan. From 1910 to 1945, Japan colonized its neighboring country, *Joseon*, which was later divided into North Korea and South Korea. During the colonial time, countless Koreans moved to Japan, but after Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945, a number of *Zainichi* Koreans returned to their homeland. However, 550,000 Koreans still remained in Japan for economic and political reasons (Mizuno & Mun, 2015). Since the two Korean governments, North and South Korea, had yet to normalize diplomatic relations with Japan at the time, *Zainichi* Koreans had no nationality and could not be protected from discrimination as a minority in Japan. Meanwhile, the North Korean government, which had begun to reorganize its internal system, declared that it would accept *Zainichi* Koreans in North Korea, claiming that it would fully guarantee their prosperous lives and education (Kim, 1995). Under this promise, the *repatriation project* had begun.

In spite of the scale of this project, there is a considerable lack of data on how these returnees from Japan lived in North Korea. What can be inferred from the defectors' testimonies is that they were classified as hostile people coming from a capitalist society. Entering the 1990s, the international situation surrounding North Korea changed rapidly. The Soviet Union, which had previously supported North Korea, was officially dissolved in 1991 and North Korea experienced a food crisis in the mid-1990s when several massive disasters such as famine and floods occurred. The food rationing system and other social systems supporting North Korean society were destroyed (Lankov, 2015). The food triage, in particular, caused massive damage to people in the northern part of North Korea bordering China where many returnees from Japan had been sent.

The collapse of such a social system also forced North Korean people to move beyond national boundaries illegally.

The former returnees who had moved from Japan to North Korea are currently unable to immigrate directly from North Korea to Japan due to the absence of diplomatic ties between the two nations. It is therefore necessary to investigate the status of international relations in East Asia surrounding defectors. This study thus attempts to analyze the migration trajectory of North Korean defectors connected to the *repatriation project* based on Fawcett and Arnold's (1987) immigration system theory. Since the migration system perspective highlights the diverse links between the sending place and the receiving place (Fawcett & Arnold, 1987), it becomes possible to simultaneously view the migration policy, political economy, and international relations of the sending and receiving countries. Through the lens of the migration system, this study aimed to demonstrate that the migration trajectory of the defectors had been constructed by international relations between the sending country, North Korea, transit area (e.g., China), and the receiving countries, Japan and South Korea.

To achieve this research purpose, interviews with North Korean defectors ($n = 26$) in Japan and South Korea were conducted. The interview data was collected between October 2017 and January 2020. The participants were either the persons directly involved in the repatriation project or the descendants of such people. As the migration pathways of the defectors had been constructed under cooperation and conflict between East Asian countries, defectors revealed several strategies they had used to arrive to their new destinations. Some defectors used their connections with Japan during the periods when there were peaceful relations between Japan and China, while others turned to informal transitional networks after the relations went sour. If these strategies were unavailable, still others personally hired illegal brokers. However, in this case, it was not easy to succeed without financial support from the destination country.

Neither the Japanese nor the South Korean governments have made any clear official announcements concerning the defectors involved in the repatriation project. However, considering the possibility of the collapse of North Korea, it is essential to remember that over 93,000 people have moved from Japan to North Korea and that many of these people's descendants were born in North Korea. If the North Korean regime collapses, many will likely wish to enter Japan or South Korea. Considering this possibility, understanding the migration of these defectors in terms of the relations between East Asian nations would help prepare the surrounding nations for accepting defectors as new members of society both in Japan and South Korea.

2. Literature Review

There has been considerable literature on North Korean defectors living in South Korea. This section includes a literature review on North Korean defectors living in countries other than South Korea, migration and international relations, and the migration system approach, followed by an analysis of international relations in East Asia that affect North Korean defectors.

2.1 Existing literature on North Korean defectors, migration and international relations, and the migration system approach

Thus far, a number of empirical studies have been conducting regarding the living conditions of North Korean defectors outside of South Korea. Yoon (2009) discussed the human rights abuse North Korean defectors in China have faced, and some researchers have paid attention to North Korean defectors' migration to Western countries. Oh (2011) analyzed the social structure of North Korean defectors' migration to the UK and argued that the defectors moved to UK after failing to integrate into South Korean society. Jun (2012) also shared a similar view regarding the defectors' migration to the US, explaining that defectors who had been influenced by the Christianity in China were often disappointed by the perceived lack of religiosity in South Korea and decided to migrate again. However, many of these past studies have only dealt with those defectors who had moved to South Korea and later emigrated to Western countries.

In the 2000s, some researchers began to focus on the North Korean defectors who had migrated to Japan. Fahy (2015) interviewed North Korean defectors in Seoul and Tokyo and conducted an anthropological study on the famine in North Korea in the mid-1990s. Bell (2016) studied the relationship between North Korean defectors in Japan and the NGO activists supporting them, and Sakanaka (2009) discussed the process of North Korean defectors returning to Japan in his book. In spite of these attempts to bring attention to the North Korean defectors' experiences in other East Asian countries, no academic attempts have been made to explore the migration trajectories of North Korean defectors involved in the *repatriation project*.

In terms of international relations (IR) within migration studies, some scholars have highlighted the significant role of IR in facilitating movements. Castles and Miller (2009) explained that economic theories of migration neglected historical causes of movement and devalued the role of the state, while paying inadequate attention to human agency. Hollifield (2012) also argued that it was a mistake to eliminate the states from migration analysis and emphasized the need for global governance, especially pertaining to the international migration regime facilitating effective migration flows, by examining various IR theories within immigration research. However, it has been difficult for East Asian countries, many of which have strong nationalism and relatively weak democracy, to practice these recommendations. Furthermore, on the issue of forced migration, Betts stressed that "refugee issues are inherently political rather than humanitarian (Betts, 2014, p. 65)." He noted that there has traditionally been little work done on the impacts of IR on refugees, despite the political and international nature of forced migration.

Meanwhile, Fawcett and Arnold proposed “a migration system paradigm as a heuristic device, a loosely structured set of concepts that could provide some stimulation and guidance for future research efforts” (Fawcett & Arnold, 1987, p. 456). Through the migration system approach, both migrant-receiving countries and sending countries could be included in the international migration analysis, and various associations between regions or countries could be considered. In addition, Kritz and Zlotnik held that the migration system approach presented “an analytical framework to explain international migration, demonstrating that migration flows were caused by national contexts at the political, economic, social and demographic levels, and feedback and coordination by the migration flow itself affected migration” (Kritz & Zlotnik, 1992, p.2).

Given the aforementioned context, an investigation of the international migration issue surrounding North Korean defectors should consider the political economy and IR. Furthermore, international relations between the sending country, North Korea, transit areas, such as China and Southeast Asian countries, and the receiving countries, Japan and South Korea, should be considered with links to the historical, political and economic contexts of each country. Although “a complete matrix of state-to-state relations and comparisons is neither necessary nor feasible” (Fawcett & Arnold, 1987, p. 462), an effort to view these aspects more comprehensively is likely to add essentially to the understanding of immigration flows in a migration systems context.

2.2 International relations surrounding defectors in East Asia

Most North Korean defectors have been forced to take a detour through China to eventually go to Japan or South Korea. South and North Korea are technically still at war, and most North Koreans are not able to travel to Japan due to the absence of diplomatic ties between two countries. Thus, it is essential to explore the IR among North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and China. In addition, each nation’s policies specific to movement and migration should be examined in order to better understand North Korean defectors’ migration trajectories.

2.2.1 China

China became a signatory for the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol in 1982 (UNHCR, n.d.). Article 33(1) stipulates that “No Contracting State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, n.d., p. 12). Even so, China has consistently argued that the North Koreans defectors in China are not refugees, but economic migrants who had crossed the border primarily for financial reasons and often stayed for only a short time before returning to North Korea with goods and money for their families (Greenhill, 2010) when in fact, most defectors have not returned to North Korea for fear of facing harsh punishments for their illegal crossing of the border. Upon their arrival in China, many defectors have come to realize the

oppression of North Korean society, which they had not known before due to the lack of an external perspective. This has usually led to them deciding not to return to North Korea. In fact, in the case of North Korean defectors, the difficulty in defining a *refugee* and *economic migrant* becomes apparent. Motivations often overlap and migration is not always a pre-planned decision. It is possible that some defectors realize they want to permanently leave North Korea only after seeing the outside world.

There are two reasons why the Chinese government has been taking severe action against North Korean defectors. The first is to maintain friendly relations with North Korea. China has deported defectors back to North Korea under the Agreement on absconders and criminals between China-North Korea, signed in 1960, and the Protocol of Mutual Cooperation for National Security and Maintenance of Social Order in the border area, signed in 1986 (Lee, 2018). China's presence in North Korea's modern history has been strong since the Korean War. Wada (2012) remarked that North Korea used a strategy to draw aid from China and the Soviet Union alternately during the Cold War. However, after the Soviet Union's official dissolution in 1991, China became the only ally capable of providing North Korea with considerable aid. Moreover, cooperation with China has become stronger recently due to China's precarious ties with the US, as the US sanctions against North Korea have been getting stricter.

Conversely, China's need for North Korea is linked to the second reason that China has deported defectors: China does not welcome the influx of mass refugees from North Korea. According to Li Bin, the Chinese ambassador to Seoul, "Beijing is concerned that a flood of asylum bids by thousands of North Korean defectors hidden in China could create instability in the region and strain its relations with the two Koreas and the international community" (as cited in Greenhill, 2010, p.246). This statement is in line with Weiner's (1993) suggestion that migration is a threat to security and stability when refugees or migrants are seen as a political risk to the host country. In order to keep security and stability in East Asia, China has perceived North Korean defectors as a threat to relations between the sending countries and receiving countries.

2.2.2 South Korea

According to Article 1(3) of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, the territory of the Republic of Korea, also known as South Korea, is defined as "the Korean Peninsula and its annexes." Additionally, Article 1(2) stipulates that the state is obliged to protect overseas Koreans as prescribed by law. Under this constitution, North Koreans residing in North Korean territory are also citizens of the Republic of Korea. Moreover, North Korean defectors staying in China are entitled to the South Korean government's protection. In spite of this, in reality, the South Korean government has not provided official assistance to the defectors in the Chinese territory.

One of the reasons for this lack of official assistance is to sustain positive ties with China. South Korea has been attempting to cooperate with communist countries since the late 1980s and established diplomatic relations with China in 1992 (Oberdorfer, 2001). Since 2003, the trade

volume between China and South Korea has gradually increased and China has taken over Korea's largest trading partner and importers from the US (KITA, 2020). However, due to the controversy over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense on the Korean Peninsula in 2016, the Chinese government has implemented a prohibition of Korean-made content or advertisements featuring Korean celebrities in China. The ban led to a boycott of Korean goods, which has disadvantaged Korean companies in China. According to Han (2017), South Korea estimated that the amount of damage caused by this retaliation was around 8.5 trillion won per year. Therefore, South Korea, which has a high level of trade dependence, has been unable to actively respond to China's official position, which defines North Korean defectors as illegal border-crossers and which forcibly repatriates them.

Furthermore, the South Korean government's view of North Korean defectors has changed (South Korea's Unification Ministry, n.d.). In the 1960s, when the number of North Korean defectors to the South was extremely small, the South Korean government first enacted the Special Assistance Act for national meritorious men and those who defected to the South. It had been less than ten years since the Korean War had ended in a truce, and the government designated North Korean defectors as *national meritorious men* who promoted the regime's superiority. However, in the early 1990s, with the Soviet Union disbanded, South Korea established diplomatic ties with China. There was no need to use North Korean defectors to promote the regime. This led to the enactment of the Act on the Protection of North Korean Repatriates in 1993, which transformed the defectors from their positions as *national meritorious men*, to those who lacked the means of sustaining a livelihood. This ironically led to a drastic reduction in the amount of support that defectors were given, including the lowering of settlement money. Upon viewing the number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea, the rationale for reducing the South Korean government's aid becomes clearer. Over one thousand have continued to enter South Korea annually (Ministry of Unification of Korea, 2020) and they have become a burden to the nation.

Therefore, South Korea and China have shared the view that the sudden collapse of North Korea would negatively impact each of their respective societies, given that sudden international population movements can have a dramatic effects on the security and sovereignty of states (Weiner & Russell, 2001). North Korea's neighbors have thus been more concerned about the short-term consequences of an influx of refugees than the long-term prospect of nuclear proliferation (Greenhill, 2010). Both South Korea and China see North Korea as a useful buffer zone that contributes to their national security (Lee, 1996).

2.2.3 Japan

Japan was the starting point for the repatriation project, yet had not commented on North Korean defectors until the 1990s. In 2002, however, various issues related to North Korea attracted Japan's attention, which led to a shift in attitudes toward North Korean defectors.

First, the embassy crashing in Shenyang, China on May 8, 2002, during which five family members of North Korean defectors attempted to enter the Japanese Consulate General, but were captured by the Chinese police, sparked criticism that Chinese police had entered the Japanese Consulate General territory without permission. The Chinese side claimed that the entry into the consulate was carried out with the consent of a Japanese consulate employee. In contrast, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (n.d.) condemned the Chinese for having entered the building without Japanese permission. Kyodo News (2002), however, later reported that all staff members of the Japanese Embassy in Beijing were instructed to consider all North Korean defectors entering the Japanese Embassy as suspicious people. Regardless of the conflicting claims, a series of sensational photographs of two men entering the consulate, but later being violently dragged back out, and two females and a young child crying outside of the embassy stirred not only Japan but also the rest of the world. In response to international criticisms, the Chinese government relocated the families to South Korea in accordance with the defectors' wishes. This particular incident became a basis for covert cooperation between China and Japan regarding North Korean defectors later.

In November of the same year, Yomiuri Shimbun (2002) reported for the first time that several North Korean defectors and their Japanese wives had returned to Japan. Although the article stated that the entry process for the defectors was carried out in secret to avoid provoking China, who had friendly relations with North Korea, many of defectors in this research testified that the defectors had flown directly from China to Japan before 2010, demonstrating Beijing's cooperation in their movement.

In sum, the studies on North Korean defectors outside of South Korea have focused on humanitarian issues or the defectors' failure to adapt to the host country. Recently, some studies (Bell, 2016; Fahy, 2015; Sakanaka, 2009) have emerged targeting North Korean defectors involved in the repatriation project, but no earnest attempts have been made to analyze defectors' immigration trajectory. Furthermore, migration studies conducted from an IR perspective have mainly been conducted with a West-centric focus, utilizing Western countries as case studies. Usually, after North Korean defectors flee North Korea, they aim to enter South Korea or Japan via China. However, the immigration process is challenging when the interests of East Asian countries are complicated. It is also important to identify the actual migration trajectory and difficulties that the defectors face in the migration process through systematic qualitative research, not simple reviews of the literature.

3. Data and Methods

To carry out this qualitative study, 26 North Korean defectors were interviewed in both Japan ($n = 21$) and South Korea ($n = 5$). Here, defectors were defined as people who had moved from Japan to North Korea through the repatriation project or their descendants born in North Korea. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2017 and January 2020. For the protection of participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used in place of the interviewees' names.

Regarding the defectors' families that still remained in North Korea, the participants were extremely reluctant to provide information. Therefore, it was vital to establish a strong rapport before requesting the interviews. To do this, since 2017 the author has joined a Japanese NGO called Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, which has supported North Korean defectors in Japan. After a good rapport was established with the target population, participants were recruited using snowball sampling; participants were first recruited by introduction from NGO activists and later, participants introduced other participants not related to NGOs. Each interview lasted between one hour and two-and-a-half hours. Most interviews were recorded with and transcribed with the consent of the participants, but when consent to record was not given, notes were taken instead.

To supplement the data, testimonies given in seminars and press conferences, as well as interviews with NGO activists were also included in the research materials. Finally, data provided by the Ministry of Unification of South Korea, the Immigration Services Agency of Japan and the Ministry of Justice were also used to provide additional insights into the data.

4. Migration Trajectory of Defectors Related to the Repatriation Project

This section presents analyses of the causes of border-crossing, migration trajectories, and administrative difficulties after settlement from interviews with North Korean defectors.

4.1 Border-crossing

The general image of North Korean defectors is that they are economic refugees who have crossed the border in search of food while on the brink of starvation. This has much to do with the fact that the sharp increase in the number of North Korean defectors began in the mid-1990s along with massive disasters, such as famine and floods. However, despite the food crisis in North Korea, the country did not collapse, but there continues to be a flow of people crossing the border for various reasons.

Responses regarding the reasons for crossing borders could broadly be classified into three types: defecting as a form of survival, defecting in the hope for freedom and involuntary defection. Of the 26 participants, four claimed to leave North Korea as a form of survival, constituting the smallest percentage of participants. These participants had crossed the border between 1997 and 2002, around the time when the food crisis had occurred. Exactly half of the participants ($n = 13$) claimed the second reason as being what drove them out of North Korea, expressing dissatisfaction with the North Korean system and a hope for freedom elsewhere. This group included both people who had decided to leave permanently from the beginning, as well as people who had initially intended to temporarily leave North Korea for China, but lost the desire to return after crossing the border. For example, in the case of In-jae, he crossed the border into China to meet his uncle who

lived there. He reminisced that he had never thought of leaving North Korea and living elsewhere. However, seeing China's development, he felt no desire to return to North Korea.

When I went to China, my eyes almost popped out. Chinese people were living a very prosperous life. When my mother asked me, "Do you want to go back to North Korea?" I answered, "Why go back?! We don't need to go back there" (personal interview, March 11, 2019).

He did not comment negatively on his life in North Korea and had never experienced discrimination there. However, he did not wish to return after seeing how developed China was. He wanted to migrate to a country considered more advanced than the place in which he used to live. In this case, North Korea was "no longer favorable as a place for permanent residence" (Oakes, 1997, p.526). For him, *home* included the numerous places one may visit.

Regarding involuntary defection, the remaining nine participants responded that they had not wanted to leave North Korea. Nevertheless, they crossed the border because of requests from their family members who had already settled in South Korea or Japan. Furthermore, some of them had been deceived by brokers. In fact, returnees from Japan were often targeted by brokers due to their connections with Japan. In other words, the connection with Japan that former returnees had were being exploited for the brokers' businesses. This structure stemmed from the strict control of the border between China and North Korea, which had been a result of their close diplomatic ties. To cross borders with such strict constraints, one had no choice but to commit an illegal act. This illegal act required the help of people with the necessary knowledge to perform it. Therefore, the majority of North Korean defectors used brokers who had access to the borders between North Korea and China and who acted as guides for the defectors. This in turn caused North Korean defectors to be placed in a state of insecurity led to their exploitation.

4.2 Strategies to escape from China

Even if a defector crossed the border and arrived safely in China, it was impossible to travel directly to the destination country, such as Japan or South Korea. As mentioned above, Chinese law enforcers searched for and monitored North Korean defectors and forced them to return to North Korea. China is a temporal destination among their journey. Since North Korean defectors were treated as illegal immigrants in China, they were forced to hide their identities, which made it difficult for them to conduct economic activities. To account for this, defectors developed several strategies to pass through China. These strategies have been outlined in Table 1 and will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 1*Migration Trajectories Based on Strategies of Escaping from China*

Strategy	Details	Route	Notes
Utilizing links with Japan	Contacting the Japanese Red Cross or relatives in Japan	NK → China → Japan (cooperating with the Chinese government)	Impossible since around 2010
Seeking helps from transnational networks	Pursuing guidance from Japanese NGOs linked to ethnic Korean-Chinese churches in China and supported by South Korean missionaries	NK → China → Southeast Asia (mainly Thailand) → Japan or SK	Needed to be under the protection of the churches first
Hiring brokers individually	Using personally-hired brokers or brokers hired by family members in the destination country	NK → China → Japan or SK (with forged passports) NK → China → Southeast Asia → Japan or SK	Required social and capital support from the destination

Note. NK=North Korea, SK=South Korea

4.2.1 Utilizing links with Japan

One unique strategy that defectors involved in the repatriation project have used was to take advantage of their relations with Japan. For example, some defectors sent letters to the Japanese Red Cross, an organization involved in the repatriation project, or contacted their relatives in Japan. In some cases, this led to the Japanese Foreign Ministry taking action for the defectors in China. Nakamura, a defector in her 40s, explained that her grandmother was a Japanese woman who had

moved to North Korea with her Japanese son (Nakamura's father), who had been born between her and her Japanese ex-husband. Nakamura had yearned to go to Japan because she had heard about Japan from her father from a young age. After her father passed away due to illness, Nakamura decided to go to Japan without any specific plan. Although she did not know how to get to Japan, she defected with her father's family register, which had been issued in Japan and which he had brought to North Korea. After having struggled for years in China, she sent a letter to the Japanese Red Cross for help.

It was really disturbing to live day to day in China. A few years later, I wrote a letter to the Japanese Red Cross. I sent a copy of what my father brought from Japan as evidence. Then, the Red Cross contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan, and they contacted the Japanese Embassy in China. I revealed that my father was Japanese (personal interview, November 19, 2017).

Fortunately, her relationship with her father was deemed legitimate and thus, she was allowed to enter Japan. She was also granted Japanese nationality after entering Japan. In the case that a defector did not possess documents to prove his or her participation in the repatriation project or that he or she was the descendent of a participant, the Japanese Ministry of Justice would check the passenger list from the project for either the defector or his or her ancestor's name. If the defector's relatives remained in Japan, DNA tests were also conducted.

Aoki, a male North Korean defector in his 70s, also used his links with Japan to escape from China. When he defected from North Korea, he was guided by a broker. However, a few days later, he was arrested by the Chinese police.

At first, the police just kept beating me. I told them I was originally from Japan and asked them to send me to Japan, not North Korea. Then, they kicked me even harder saying it's bull shit. A few minutes later, they ordered me to speak Japanese. So, I did. They started believing me. One of them said they would let me go to Japan if I called my relatives in Japan and asked them to send money to China ... After I gave them the money, the Chinese police snuck me to the Japanese Embassy in Shenyang (personal interview, July 22, 2019).

Aoki's anecdote was from his experiences in 2007. This was before relations between China and Japan had reached a critical stage of the conflict regarding the dispute on Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Asashi Shimbun, 2010). In his case, however, his strategy may have been effective due to the timing because it is assumed that defectors would have been unable to fly directly from China to Japan around 2010. In fact, the chief director of a Japanese NGO noted that from some point, the Chinese embassy has stopped cooperating with the Japanese government on issues regarding defectors. Although there was no specific legal agreement between China and Japan even before 2010, the ease of passage from China to Japan has depended on the diplomatic relations between the two countries at the time (Kato, 2020). Considering this, if Aoki had defected from North Korea after 2010, even if the Chinese police had secretly sent him to the Japanese

Embassy in China, it would have been nearly impossible for him to travel directly from China to Japan. Aoki might have had to cross China and travel to Southeast Asia, which would have been tremendously difficult given his age. The fact that the strained ties between China and Japan have made the immigration process to Japan more difficult has also affected the migration of defectors to Japan.

4.2.2 Seeking helps from transnational networks

For those who could not use ties with Japan, there were informal transnational networks available, such as NGOs. After direct movement from China to Japan became impossible, NGOs tried to provide safer routes for defectors. According to the activists from the Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, the Japanese NGO is linked to some ethnic Korean-Chinese churches that help defectors in China. The activists would inform defectors involved in the repatriation project that they could go to Japan if they wished. Then, the NGO groups would send a trustworthy guide to take the defectors to Southeast Asia.

Suk-young and her husband crossed the border to China for some business to make money in 2005. However, their plan failed, and they were unable to return to North Korea and did not know how to exit China.

We were stranded in China and lived in a church in China for five years. Ethnic Korean-Chinese people run the church, and South Korean missionaries supported it. In China, we couldn't go out and work because we would get caught by the Chinese police, and we couldn't go back to North Korea either because we would be killed. One day, a Korean pastor came and said he could take us to Korea soon. While waiting for another year, I met this guy sent by the NGO from Japan. After I told him that I was the child of the returnees who had come from Japan, he said there was a way for me to go to Japan. I decided to do it (personal interview, November 3, 2018).

Initially, Suk-young had not intended to emigrate, and she had no idea how to go to South Korea or Japan. However, thanks to the help of the NGO, she learned that she could immigrate to Japan. Interestingly, she chose to go to Japan instead of South Korea even though her relative who lived in Japan refused to be her guarantor. As having a guarantor was mandatory for immigration to Japan, one member of the NGO agreed to become her guarantor, she was able to arrive in Japan. From this example, it is clear that without these NGOs, some defectors would not have even known that they could go to Japan. Their immigration into Japan was possible because churches in China were supported by Korean religious groups, which cooperated with Japanese NGOs.

For the defectors who have settled in South Korea, it was difficult to derive a general migration pattern as the number of participants was too small. However, none of them was aware

of how to go to Japan after defecting from North Korea. As mentioned above, the South Korean government has not officially supported North Korean defectors in China. Therefore, Korean religious groups in China and NGO groups have been playing a crucial role in protecting defectors by providing vital services in the place of the government.

4.2.3 Hiring brokers individually

As mentioned in the previous section, some defectors did not know how to get support from NGOs. If they wanted to go to South Korea despite having ties with Japan, they needed to use different methods. The most frequently chosen strategy to escape China was to use brokers. It was highly risky because defectors were unable to select their brokers, as the broker business is illegal and thus does not conform to regular business practices. Both Ja-hyeong and Chan-il, used brokers to move out of China. While Chan-il arrived in South Korea in a month with relative ease, Ja-hyeong spent three years in prison in Myanmar trying to cross over to the destination.

I paid a broker to cross the border. The broker told me to go to Myanmar with another non-professional broker saying he wanted to pioneer a new route. But on the way, I was arrested in Myanmar and was put in prison for three years. I contacted the Korean Embassy at that time, but they refused to take me right away (personal interview, December 27, 2019).

Unfortunately, when Ja-hyeong entered Myanmar, Myanmar was reconsidering diplomatic relations with North Korea. Myanmar and North Korea had formed diplomatic ties in 1975, but Myanmar broke off the relations in 1983 because North Korea was suspected as the culprit of a terrorist attack in Myanmar. Myanmar and North Korea were moving to resume diplomatic relations and re-establish diplomatic relations in 2007 (Wertz, Oh & Kim, 2016). As a result of this poor timing, Ja-hyeong underwent forced repatriation. He was yet another example of how individuals are affected by the shifts in diplomatic ties between nation-states.

Chan-il, however, bought a forged Chinese passport from a broker and arrived in Korea by boat. Even though Chan-il also used a broker, it did not take him long time to reach his destination, mostly thanks to his daughter, who arranged a successful settlement in South Korea. When defectors with ties to Japan wish to go to South Korea, they are unable to use the resources they have in Japan and thus must start anew. As such, having social and capital support from South Korea is often the deciding factor for success.

In sum, North Korean defectors who were former returnees from Japan utilized their ties with the country to return again. This route was relatively smooth when relations between Japan and China were stable, but when the relations soured, informal transnational networks, such as NGOs, were utilized instead. However, if defectors could not use either of the above two strategies, they turned to brokers to escape, and success was dependent on the defectors' social capital in the destination country.

4.3 Entering to the destination

After arriving at their respective destinations, the North Korean defectors' adaptation patterns were completely different in South Korea and Japan. Those who went to South Korea entered the country as South Korean citizens. Even the defectors who had originally come from Japan were not distinguished from other defectors. Meanwhile, those who defected to Japan experienced a vastly different adaptation process due to the inconsistency in the administrative procedures. For a time, defectors had been considered stateless upon entry into Japan, but the policy changed at some point, and defectors can now select their nationality from several options (e.g., stateless, *Chōsen*, and South Korea).

Before the relationship between Japan and China turned sour, defectors could move directly from China to Japan. However, around 2010, the route was shut and some defectors were forced to stay in China for over two years (Kato, 2020). Today, many defectors pursue their destinations via Southeast Asia. Thailand is particularly favored because of its laws, which treat defectors as refugees and thus do not forcibly deport them to North Korea. According to Korean civic activist Hee-tae Kim (2019), 90% of defectors entering to South Korea used this route through Thailand even though Thailand does not border China. Regardless of the final destination, defectors have been forced to undertake a series of perilous border crossings to China's neighboring countries, such as Laos and Vietnam, both of which are socialist countries friendly to North Korea. The alliance between the socialist countries, even in the Southeast Asian region, continues to cause a precarious situation for defectors wishing to settle in a new destination.

The defectors who pursued South Korea could enter South Korea with the cooperation of the Thai government following an identification check. During this process, the defectors involved in the repatriation project are treated in the same way as other defectors. According to South Korea's Unification Ministry's (n.d.) website, the entry and settlement process begins with thorough questioning by officials of the National Intelligence Service upon arrival in South Korea. This is done to prevent camouflaged defectors from entering the country. When the interrogation is complete, the defectors are transferred to Hanawon, a social adaptation education facility, where they receive socialization education for three months before they can begin living in the capitalist society. When they leave the facility, defectors are awarded certain benefits from policies specifically for defectors, such as residence, education, and job consulting support. Due to the diverse support policies, most of the participants in this study who had settled in South Korea, including those who wanted to go to Japan at first, were satisfied with their decisions to cross to South Korea. Furthermore, some of the defectors involved in the repatriation project have established their own associations in South Korea and, utilizing their connections with Japanese NGOs, some also visit Japan regularly to participate in seminars on repatriation projects.

Compared to when defecting to South Korea, the movement of defectors destined for Japan was much more covertly conducted. In fact, the Japanese government has not disclosed the exact number of North Korean defectors who have entered the country. When entering Japan, the Japanese government would provide a certificate for passage to defectors who could prove their relation to the repatriation project. This certificate of passage could replace a visa or passport (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2002). According to the participants' testimonies, if proven to be a descendant of an ethnic Japanese person who had moved to North Korea through the repatriation project, a defector could acquire Japanese nationality after entry into Japan. For former *Zainichi* Koreans who were directly involved in the repatriation project and the descendants of these people, permission to reside in Japan with a *long-term resident visa* was granted. This long-term resident status must be renewed every five years or less (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019).

Although the immigration statistics on the Ministry of Justice of Japan's website include data from 2006 to 2019 for new foreign entries, sorted by nationality or region and by residency status, it is difficult to judge the exact number of defectors who have entered Japan due to the lack of systematic processing. It is especially important to note that this data shows the number of *new* foreign arrivals but does not provide the number of *current* foreign residents in Japan by nationality or region and residency status. Also, this data only indicates where the foreigners had originally come from when they entered Japan and thus does not reveal whether the defectors changed their nationality after entering the country. Furthermore, the data for new arrivals includes North Korea written in parentheses, indicating that the new arrivals had come from North Korea. However, the data for current foreign residents in Japan shows only the word *Chōsen*, a Japanese word for *Joseon*, which refers to the Korean Peninsula region before it was divided into North and South Korea. This is partly due to the fact that North Korea and Japan have yet to establish normal diplomatic relations. Although *Chōsen* is similar to the Japanese word *Kita-Chōsen* meaning North Korea, *North Korea* and *Chōsen* should not be perceived as identical.

Table 2*Data for New Foreign Entry Numbers by Nationality/Region and by Residency Status*

Year	New Entry from North Korea with Long-term Resident Visa	New Entry as Stateless with Long-term Resident Visa	Notes
2006	5	(2)	
2007	10	(6)	
2008	5	(4)	
2009	1	(3)	
2010	0	0	Three participants entered in 2010, but were not recorded here
2011	0	0	One participant entered in 2011, but was not recorded here
2012	2	0	
2013	0	1	
2014	0	0	
2015	0	0	
2016	0	0	
2017	0	1	One participant entered in 2017 and was assumed to be recorded as stateless
2018	0	7	
2019	0	13	

Note. This table was reconstructed by the author based on the data from 2006 to 2019 for new foreign entries, sorted by nationality or region and by residency status on Ministry of Justice of Japan website.

A number of new arrivals from North Korea with a long-term resident visa have been recorded prior to 2009. As Table 2 clearly shows the number of new entries from North Korea, it is unclear whether some of the Stateless new entries were also from North Korea. In spite of several participants claiming to have arrived in Japan between the years of 2010 and 2011, no new arrivals

in either category had been recorded in either of those years, which demonstrates the loss of data somewhere along the line, possibly due to a change in classification system around this time. To further support this hypothesis, no new arrivals from North Korea have been recorded since 2013, but one stateless new arrival was recorded in 2017, the same year that one participant claimed to have entered Japan. However, because of the uncertainty surrounding the 2010 and 2011 data, the data cannot be interpreted with certainty. Moreover, some participants claimed to have entered Japan with forged Chinese passports and some defectors came to Japan using a spouse visa after their spouse had settled first and changed their nationality. Thus, it is impossible to discern the exact number of defectors unless the Japanese government discloses the data. Nevertheless, Japanese NGOs such as Life Funds for North Korean Refugees estimate that there are over 200 defectors currently living in Japan.

Whatever their recorded nationality at the time of entry, North Korean defectors could not and still cannot reside in Japan as North Korean nationals, as Japan does not recognize North Korea as a country. This is because it never established diplomatic ties with North Korea. If the defector was of Japanese descent, in theory, he or she would be granted Japanese nationality after entry into Japan. However, according to the participants in this study, this was not necessarily the case for all Japanese descendent defectors. Danbi, who arrived in Japan in 2004, had a Japanese grandmother who had married a *Zainichi* Korean. However, while Danbi was kept in stateless status for some time after entering Japan, another participant, Nakamura, gained Japanese nationality quickly after entry.

Before I arrived in Japan, I thought my nationality would automatically change into Japanese because the Japanese Embassy in China treated me as a Japanese child, so I got the certificate of passage to come to Japan. But I became an illegal immigrant, which I hadn't known for a while because no one told me what to do (Danbi, personal interview, February 24, 2019).

According to Nakamura, she was easily granted Japanese nationality, but was not aware of the details of the process. In contrast, Danbi became an illegal immigrant because no one had informed her of what to do after entry into Japan. This was most likely due to the absence of Japanese policies for North Korean defectors. Danbi changed her nationality three times because she wanted to apply for an exchange student program. She was told that a stateless individual was not permitted to go abroad, so she changed her nationality from stateless to *Chōsen* and then from *Chōsen* to South Korea. According to the Ministry of Justice of Japan (2016), anyone from the Korean Peninsula or a descendant of such an individual whose nationality cannot be identified is marked as *Chōsen*, but *Chōsen* is not considered a nationality. Although Danbi wished to change her nationality to Japanese immediately upon discovering there was a problem, North Korean defectors could only apply for nationalization after five years of residency in Japan. As the procedure for nationalization is also complicated and time-consuming, she chose to change from stateless to *Chōsen* and then to South Korean to expediate the process.

Interestingly, the defectors who arrived in Japan before 2005 did not mention that they were given the option to choose their nationality after entering the country while those who arrived later testified that they could choose their nationality between stateless, *Chōsen*, and South Korea. Seol-mae, who arrived in Japan in December 2006, testified that she chose to stay in stateless status because she did not want the word *Chōsen* on her identification card. In contrast, Eun-hye, who arrived in 2007, testified that she had chosen *Chōsen*, maintaining that the fact that she was from North Korea would never change. Based on these anecdotes, the Japanese government seems to have given North Korean defectors a chance to choose the option of *Chōsen* beginning around 2005.

The inconsistencies and lack of order and precision in the proceedings for defectors to Japan demonstrate the impact of diplomatic ties, or lack thereof, between Japan and North Korea. The fact that North Korea has not been recognized as a state manifested in the hardships in navigating legal categories that defectors experienced; in Danbi's case, the issue of nationality and obtaining a passport were illusory of this struggle. Such hardships in turn impact the standard of living and limit life opportunities of the individual. North Korean defectors who attempt to make a life in Japan are therefore frustrated, confused, and confounded by the extra layers of bureaucracy that they are forced to navigate, both internationally and nationally.

5. Conclusion

This paper argued that the migration trajectories of North Korean defectors related to the repatriation project were constructed by the cooperation and conflict between East Asian countries. China has had a policy of arresting and forcibly repatriating defectors to maintain friendly diplomatic relations with North Korea. Such policies have left defectors insecurely stranded in China. Meanwhile, South Korea has shared a similar position with China in that it has worked to avoid a massive influx of refugees in the case of a regime collapse in North Korea. South Korea has thus hesitated to officially help North Korean defectors in China, despite having recognized North Koreans as citizens of South Korea by constitution. This is mainly in an effort not to offend China, South Korea's most significant economic partner.

Meanwhile, Japan took no interest in the issue of North Korean defectors until the 2000s. In the wake of a series of incidents, Japan allowed only defectors who had ties with Japan to enter the country in cooperation with China. However, the decline in relations between China and Japan has eliminated the possibility of direct transport from China to Japan, which has made the migration of North Korean defectors more precarious. It has created a structure that increasingly prevents elderly North Korean defectors—participants in the repatriation project—from moving to Japan or South Korea.

Under these circumstances, the defectors have taken several strategies. The first option was to take advantage of connections with Japan to escape China. When cooperation between China and Japan was still useful, defectors attempted to enter Japan by proving that they were related to the repatriation project. Another strategy was to use transnational networks, such as NGOs from South Korea and Japan, that helped North Korean defectors cross China to a safe third country. North Korean defectors who were unable to use the first two strategies hired brokers individually, but the success rate of safe defection decreased with lack of social capital in the destination country.

While the defectors who had settled in South Korea were supported by governmental benefits, those who settled in Japan were affected by the absence of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Japan, leading to a lapse in legal and administrative procedures. With Japan refusing to recognize North Korea as a state, there was no consistency in its policies regarding defectors' nationality selection or the acquisition of Japanese nationality. This has in turn affected the living standards of North Korean defectors after settlement and limited defectors' opportunities. In this regard, the migration and settlement of defectors has been susceptible to the flux of international relations.

Until now, there have been various studies on North Korean defectors in general. However, there has been a lack of research on the immigration of North Korean defectors connected with the repatriation project. This study attempted to contribute to the research on North Korean defectors as well as the migration research in Japan by revealing defectors' immigration trajectories through interviews with defectors involved in the repatriation project. Also, it can be helpful to accept the defectors respectfully as new citizens in East Asian countries.

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