

Together but Separate: Relationships and Boundaries between North and South Koreans in Multiethnic Britain¹

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Abstract

The United Kingdom hosts the largest North Korean immigrant community in Europe, and the majority have settled in New Malden, London's Koreatown. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this study examines the relationships North Korean immigrants have established with their South Korean counterparts in the course of secondary migration from South Korea to the UK, focusing on how the shift from a majority–minority relationship between the two communities in ethnic-hierarchical South Korea to a minority–minority relationship in multiethnic Britain has influenced the North Koreans' perceptions of and boundaries with South Koreans. Faced with language barriers and many other disadvantages in the host society, North Korean immigrants in the UK make pragmatic use of commonalities they share with their South Korean counterparts as well as of previous experiences and skills learned in South Korea. However, instead of fully assimilating into the South Korean immigrant community, they freely acknowledge the differences in the post-partition era, resulting in an enduring invisible boundary between the two groups. In doing so, they perceive that the two groups are in a relatively equal position as respective minorities vis-à-vis broader society, and the sense of ethnic stratification and hierarchy between them is largely dissolved. This study thus offers insights into how ethnic relations are contingent on social contexts and how migrants as transnational agents use and navigate their experiences, resources, and relationships to position themselves

in the host society and shape their everyday life practices in a complex migration context.

Keywords: North Korean migrants, South Korea, Britain, ethnic relations, labor relations

Introduction

Jina (pseudonym) went from North Korea to South Korea through a broker in 2007 and lived there for eight years before she moved to the United Kingdom, where her husband's family was living. Thanks to her husband, who had arrived in South Korea six years before her, she thinks she had relatively little difficulty adjusting to South Korean society compared with her peers. She became close to some South Korean mothers at her daughter's kindergarten but never revealed her North Korean identity to them. She did not want to move to the UK, but her husband and his family were very persuasive. For her it was much more difficult to adapt to the UK than to South Korea because of the language barrier and her unfamiliarity with the society. They initially got help when they needed it from some South Korean immigrants they met in Korean churches or through other personal networks, especially for translation of paperwork, interpretation when using public services, and their children's school issues. Although she attended a Korean church for a while and works for a Korean restaurant run by a South Korean Immigrant, her social connections are limited to North Koreans and she usually has no relations with South Koreans beyond her workplace.

Youngmi (pseudonym) crossed the border from North Korea into China in 1997 then moved on to South Korea in 2002 and the UK in 2006. Her family was well-off in North Korea, where she had studied clothing design. She had a very hard time in South Korea, where most people expressed very stereotyped perceptions of and prejudices against North Korean refugees. Youngmi feels much better in the UK, where she can work for a decent salary as a Korean restaurant manager. She thinks South Korean immigrants in the UK discriminate against North Korean immigrants much less than in South Korea, even if she does not socialize with them outside of work, except for one couple she met in the Korean Catholic church. Apart from this couple, who had been student activists in South Korea and had learned to understand North Korean immigrants well, she has never met South Koreans with whom she can freely talk about her North Korean past, as they do not seem to be able to relate to her opinions, ideas, and experiences rooted in that past.

From 2018, I was in the very privileged position of being able to forge close relationships North Korean immigrants in London, as a volunteer teacher in a North Korean school. One thing I noticed about the North Korean immigrants I met through the school is that while they work with South Korean immigrants, they seem to limit their interactions to that context and do not tend to socialize with South Korean immigrants beyond it, whether they had negative experiences with South Koreans previously or not. I began to reflect: How do North Korean immigrants intersect with and shape their relationships with South Korean immigrants? How do they perceive South Koreans in multiethnic Britain? What makes it too difficult for them to construct close relationships with South Korean immigrants in London even if they live in the same neighborhoods and work together?

The UK has taken in over a thousand North Korean refugees, comprising one of the largest North Korean communities outside of Northeast Asia.³ Most first migrated to South Korea and then claimed asylum in the UK. Although in South Korea they are considered ethnically homogeneous with the locals and are granted full citizenship upon arrival there, North Koreans do not feel that they are treated as equals.⁴ They are required to acculturate and assimilate in order to qualify as full members of South Korean society, and failure to do so labels them as second-class citizens. Those who re-migrate to the UK express that they do so in part due to experiences of disadvantage and isolation resulting from cultural and linguistic difference and social marginalization, in addition to other motivations such as the political flexibility and the attractive refugee systems in European countries, and the social and cultural mobilities they anticipate due to their children's educational opportunities and from adapting to the capitalist West.⁵

The largest South Korean community in Europe is also in London, numbering over thirty thousand. North Korean immigrants in London are concentrated particularly in New Malden—so-called Koreatown—on the southern outskirts of the city, where South Koreans had already previously settled. There, they usually work in low-paid, low-status jobs offered by South Korean employers, such as Korean restaurants, supermarkets, or moving companies, a labor situation quite similar to the one they had faced in South Korea.⁶ While numerous studies have addressed the discrimination and prejudice encountered by North Koreans in South Korea,⁷ none has examined how the experiences and relations between the two groups have been reshaped after migration to the UK. By taking into account the particular settlement patterns of North and South Korean immigrants in London, this research aims to examine this question in multiethnic Britain.

Drawing on ethnographic research—interviews and participant observation—conducted with North Korean immigrants in London, the research addresses the

following questions: (1) How do these immigrants define the boundaries that divide them from South Koreans? (2) What underlying factors have hindered the building of close relationships beyond labor bonds between the two groups in London? (3) What explains the ongoing sense of separation North Koreans feel from South Koreans in the course of their secondary migration from South Korea to the UK?

Because of the high concentration of North Korean immigrants in London and their particular settlement patterns, their secondary migration to the UK has attracted broad interest from scholars from diverse disciplines. Song and Bell explore the motivations for North Korean secondary migration and the role of transnational networks in the migration and settlement trajectory.⁸ They argue that North Koreans who had felt socially and politically excluded, stigmatized, and blocked from opportunity in South Korea undertook secondary migration in hopes of escaping their marginalized status and achieving the upward mobility that eluded them in South Korea. Shin examines the adaptation and transnationalism of North Korean refugees through their daily encounters and interactions with South Koreans in London and thus provides useful information for analyzing the relationship between these two groups.⁹ According to Shin, while North Korean immigrants in London have adapted to South Korean contexts through their experiences in South Korea and their employment with South Korean ethnic businesses in London, they have maintained their own identity as North Koreans. Based on extensive field research in the UK over several years, South Korean anthropologist Soo-Jung Lee approached the topic of North Korean migration in the UK from several different angles, including a sense of well-being,¹⁰ homeland politics,¹¹ British refugee policy and its implications,¹² and male migrants' experiences through the lens of gender.¹³

All these studies have contributed to the understanding of North Korean immigrants in the UK, but their experiences, perceptions, and relations vis-à-vis South Korean immigrants in the new context have not been closely examined. Drawing on first-hand information I obtained through ethnographic fieldwork with North Korean immigrants in London, I particularly address how the shift from a majority–minority relationship between the two communities in ethnic-hierarchical South Korea to a minority–minority relationship in multi-ethnic Britain has influenced North Koreans' perceptions of and boundaries with South Koreans. This study thus offers insights into how ethnic relations are contingent on social contexts and how migrants as transnational agents use and navigate their experiences, resources, and relationships to position themselves in the host society and shape their everyday life practices in a complex migration context.

Methodology

The data I present in this article was collected during my field research in the form of interviews and participant observation conducted with North Korean immigrants in London from March 2018 to March 2023. I quickly realized why the topic of the relationships between North and South Korean immigrants has not been thoroughly studied: North Korean immigrants were very reluctant to openly discuss their negative experiences with South Korean researchers. In 2018, after familiarizing myself with the general features of the North Korean community with the help of community leaders, I started volunteering as a teacher for London Korean Hankyoreh School,¹⁴ originally established by North Korean immigrants, and eventually became a member of its advisory committee. I not only worked with school parents and teachers but also socialized with them, such as going out for meals and attending social events. In this way, I managed to build an effective rapport with them and gain a much better understanding of their lives and experiences. This closeness and the privilege of being considered a quasi-insider granted me access to valuable information that I have been allowed to use in this research. Beyond my research I continued to help the school with their difficulties and served on its committee. I maintain many of these relationships today and have regular contact with them as friends. Although some research participants may have felt an imbalance in terms of researcher-participant relations and positionalities, many expressed that their interviews and conversations with me felt much more comfortable than those with previous researchers, whom they had only met once or twice for formal interviews.

In total I carried out in-depth interviews in coffee shops or restaurants with fifteen North Korean immigrants in 2019. Most were parents of children at London Korean Hankyoreh School. As many previous researchers had paid honoraria for interviews, the interviewees had a similar expectation of me. Instead, I offered to make a donation to the school, which was in need of financial support. The participants were happy with this arrangement as they were joining my research voluntarily and also felt they were doing something good and meaningful for the school and for their children. In addition, my strong rapport with the school helped significantly not only in the recruitment of interviewees but also in their ability to feel comfortable talking to me about their thoughts and perceptions in relation to South Koreans, including issues around discrimination, prejudice, and other difficult topics. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, I was involved in the school's online activities and kept in personal contact with several North Korean immigrants. Many of the interviewees also granted me follow-up interviews and conversations, especially in 2022. All were clear in their desire for their identity to be kept confidential, so

for this article I assigned them numbers to avoid using identifiable information (e.g., Interview 1).

I also interviewed a few South Korean immigrants, such as the former vice-president of the Korean Association in London and the director, teachers, and board members of London Korean Hankyoreh School, most of whom have constant contact with North Korean immigrants. Although this small sample cannot be taken as a thorough representation of the complex perceptions of South Korean immigrants, it does help understand general tendencies in terms of relations between North and South Korean immigrants in the UK.

Theoretical framework on ethnic relations

“The first fact of ethnicity,” writes Eriksen, “is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them.”¹⁵ Ethnicity, he adds, “refers to the enduring relationship between more or less bounded groups or social categories that perceive themselves a being culturally different from each other” and occurs when “cultural differences are made relevant in interaction,” so if their mutual contact increases, their perception of difference or similarity may increase as well.¹⁶ “Groups may be objectively quite similar but perceive themselves as very different, and the converse is equally true.”¹⁷ In interactions between or among groups, there is always a structure of ideas and images through which a particular community perceives its differences with respect to social, ethnic, or cultural “Others.”¹⁸ Thus, ethnic groups are social creations wherein ethnic differences are basically a matter of group perception.

Ethnic identity and boundaries have become significant in a situation of intensified intergroup contact and economic exchange.¹⁹ Most North Korean immigrants in London live around New Malden and work for businesses run by South Korean immigrants. This particular settlement pattern of North Korean immigrants provides an ideal case for observing and analyzing more closely how an immigrant group has delimited the boundaries between “Us” and “Them.” This research thus centers on examining how North Korean immigrants in London perceive their South Korean counterparts and construct them as “Others,” by paying attention to the conscious manifestation, transformation, and social uses of cultural symbols and meanings.

Another important aspect of this research is ethnic stratification between the majority and minorities in a multiethnic society. In their migration from South Korea to the UK, the relationship between North Koreans (as secondary migrants) and South Koreans (as primary migrants) underwent a dramatic shift from minority-majority to minority-minority. According to Marger, “modern

societies are stratified along several dimensions,”²⁰ such as class and, in multi-ethnic societies, ethnicity; and, like other forms of stratification, ethnic stratification is “a system of structured social inequality.”²¹ In most multiethnic societies, “a hierarchical arrangement of ethnic groups emerges in which one establishes itself as the dominant group, with maximum power to shape the nature of ethnic relations,” and “other, subordinate ethnic groups exert less power, corresponding to their place in the hierarchy, extending down to the lowest ranking groups, which may wield little or no power.”²² Thus, the concept of ethnic stratification, in explaining majority–minority or dominant–subordinate systems, helps in understanding changes in the relationship between North and South Koreans in a new migration context. I pay particular attention to how the multiethnic and multicultural environment of the host country have led to better relationships for North Koreans with South Koreans in Britain than they had experienced with South Koreans as native residents in South Korea.

The notion of *minjok* or the Korean ethno-nation remains a key element of national discourse in both North and South Korea today. In *minjok*'s emphasis on the importance of a shared bloodline, language, cultural heritage, history, and customs, the belief in an ethnically distinctive and uniquely homogeneous nation has been assumed and promoted,²³ and the cultural and linguistic differences between the peoples of the two countries shaped in the post-partition era have often been overlooked. Social interaction between the two groups may expose not only differences but also similarities between them; ambiguous gray zones, located in the space straddling categories and boundaries, may be visible.²⁴ In this context, negotiation, renegotiation, transcendence, transformation, and reframing to shape a boundary may have occurred in complex and multifaceted ways. Furthermore, as Bauman says, “if the *modern* ‘problem of identity’ was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open”;²⁵ recent scholarship has emphasized the flexible and fluid character of human identity formation while eschewing essentialism.²⁶ Thus, it is meaningful to examine how and why North Korean immigrants shape their boundaries and construct Others beyond the concept of *minjok* or Korean co-ethnicity while partially assimilating into the South Korean immigrant community and drawing on commonalities they share with their South Korean counterparts in the course of their secondary migration from South Korea to the UK.

Previous experiences with native residents in South Korea

The case of North Korean immigrants in the UK as a case of secondary migration is distinctive because it was preceded by a move to the other part of the divided

nation, and because after secondary migration they settled in a community where immigrants from that same other part of the divided nation had already settled. Thus, their previous experiences in Korea shaped in important ways their relations with South Korean immigrants in the UK.

Numerous studies have pointed to the difficulties and hardships experienced by North Korean migrants in South Korea, such as unemployment, non-recognition of qualifications, insufficient government support, and isolation.²⁷ As Song and Bell argue,²⁸ their marginalized and stigmatized status and their difficulties in achieving upward mobility have been a strong factor in their decision to on-migrate to the UK. My interviewees' previous experiences in South Korea were quite diverse, some not having experienced even indirect discrimination and prejudice and others having had strong negative direct experiences, such as verbal aggressions from work colleagues or neighbors. Yet most indicated they had felt or perceived at least indirect and subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice from South Koreans, rooted in negative stereotypes and stigma toward North Korean refugees, leading to feelings of difference and isolation. Because of the prejudice and bias expressed toward those labeled as North Korean, many of my interviewees expressed that they had felt reluctant to reveal their real identity as North Korean. One North Korean woman reflected on this issue:

I lived in a neighborhood in Kimhae [southern South Korea] where there were many new apartment buildings. In some of these buildings the rental apartments were very small, less than 20 *p'yŏng* [about 700 square feet], and were occupied by North Korean migrants. Fortunately, my husband settled there earlier, so we didn't live in one of those buildings where North Korean migrants were concentrated. I became close with some [South Korean] mothers at my daughter's kindergarten. They often talked about the area where North Koreans live in negative terms, so I couldn't reveal my real identity. I lied and said I came from Kangwŏn province [bordering on North Korea], and they believed it as they have a strong Kyŏngsang province dialect and for them it's hard to tell the difference. (Interview 1)

As this account illustrates, many of my interviewees revealed that the main reason for hiding their identity as North Korean was to avoid being stigmatized and discriminated against by the native residents in South Korea. They found what they experienced as pervasive prejudice and stereotyping difficult to bear. Consequently, it tended to be tough to develop close relationships with South Koreans. The following is an example of the negative experiences and hardships experienced in this regard:

I lived in Taegu [southern South Korea], where at first I found it really difficult to understand even very basic conversations because of their strong

accent. [...] Mothers at my daughter's kindergarten got together regularly, but I was anxious about my accent and origin. I wanted to join them so that my daughter wouldn't be left out, but I thought that if I joined, they would figure out where I was from. The idea of close relations with South Koreans made me very uncomfortable. That's why I only hung around with North Koreans in South Korea. [...] When I was with North Koreans, I felt at ease. I could say anything about myself and my background. It was much easier to communicate and I didn't feel stress. But it was just impossible to form a bond of sympathy with South Koreans, as the environments in which we grew up and lived were totally different. (Interview 4)

This story was typical: the North Koreans I interviewed in London had faced prejudice or discrimination on the part of native residents in South Korea because of their different manner of speaking, thinking, and acting. In particular, language constitutes a highly conspicuous marker of a person from North Korea as well as a major obstacle to their integration into South Korean society and their ability to establish close relationships with South Koreans. While the language in North Korea has remained relatively static since partition following Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, in South Korea the language has evolved rapidly due to exposure to foreign culture and technology.²⁹ Because of differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, North Korean sounds very different and old-fashioned to South Korean speakers.³⁰ It is easily detected by South Koreans, who often confuse it with the dialect spoken by Chosŏnjok, the Korean immigrant community in northeast China, as indicated in the following comment:

It was not our appearance that made us stand out but our accent. South Koreans would usually ask "Are you Chosŏnjok?" first, and if I said "no," then they would ask, "Are you North Korean?" They never asked me first whether I was from North Korea. I didn't want to hide my identity as a North Korean, but I always felt negative attitudes and views from people, even though they were not direct verbal aggressions. (Interview 12)

As this interview demonstrates, the language and accent are one of the main issues that differentiate and marginalize North Korean migrants in South Korea. Despite the ideology of an ethno-nation (*minjok*) that remains a crucial aspect of nationalist discourse in both North and South Korea in the present day, South Koreans are resistant to the social incorporation of North Koreans, who are often identifiable through their accents and language.³¹ In a context where North Koreans are physically indistinguishable from South Koreans and are granted almost automatic South Korean citizenship, linguistic differences contribute greatly to the exclusion and marginalization of North Koreans.³²

Many interviewees said that in South Korea they did not reveal their real identity as North Koreans, instead saying that they were Chosŏnjok or from

Kangwŏn province when attention was drawn to their accent. They tried hard to adopt South Korean linguistic and cultural traits, as any linguistic and cultural differences from North Korea made them seem deficient and inferior in a society where the South Korean majority dominates in terms of power, culture, and ideology in a co-ethnic stratification. Many admitted that this hierarchy among co-ethnics made it much more difficult to adapt than they had anticipated, as they had expected to be seen as co-ethnic equals. In addition, there was a second layer of discrimination that was connected to their lower social status. They could only get the lowest-paying and the least-skilled jobs in the host society and thus were working-class or poor, a group that also suffers discrimination in South Korea. These issues taken together ensured that North Koreans, with very few exceptions, were second-class citizens in South Korea.

As discussed in this section, despite the *minjok* ideology, the linguistic and cultural differences that developed between North and South Korea in the post-partition era served as strong markers to position North Koreans as low in status in a system of co-ethnic stratification. In the following sections I analyze how these negative experiences vis-à-vis South Koreans evolved with re-migration to the UK.

Experiences working for South Korean employers

The labor sector is the primary setting where North Korean immigrants interact with South Korean immigrants in London. Faced with a language barrier, discrimination, unfamiliarity with the host society, and limited access to job opportunities, immigrants usually rely on ethnic ties and solidarity and cooperate in co-ethnic businesses that provide them with employment opportunities, especially in the early stage of migration.³³ Most North Korean immigrants settled in the UK are neither fluent in English nor familiar with the local labor market, so they tend to find work in Korean restaurants, supermarkets, moving companies, construction companies, or other small- or medium-sized businesses run by South Koreans. Because of the common language and cultural affinities between the two groups, the labor relationship that North Korean immigrants establish with South Korean employers seems similar to the mutual benefit that many employers and employees draw from co-ethnic relationships in the migration context.³⁴ The jobs usually taken by North Korean immigrants in London are low-paid and low-status, quite similar to those they had in South Korea.³⁵ Despite having similar types of jobs and their economic status not having changed after migrating from South Korea to the UK, my interviewees seemed to feel more comfortable working with and less discriminated against by South Koreans in Britain than in South Korea.

My interviews suggest that several factors contribute to this better working relationship. North Koreans believe that South Korean employers, especially owners of Korean restaurants and supermarkets, need their North Korean employees and try to maintain good working relationships with them as it is more convenient for them to hire North Koreans than other immigrants. In addition, the working conditions and pay are slightly better than those in South Korea. Many of my interviewees also expressed that their previous experiences living and working in South Korea and their familiarity with South Koreans also helped them settle down better within the South Korean community in London, easily find jobs in businesses run by South Koreans, and feel more at ease working for them (with a few notable exceptions, who strongly denied the usefulness of their past work experience in South Korea). This is reflected in the following comment:

I came to South Korea directly from North Korea through a broker that my aunt got for me. Although we had a television and refrigerator at home in North Korea, everything was so modern and complicated to operate in South Korea. When I arrived in South Korea, I did not know even how to use an electronic rice cooker, let alone a mobile phone. Fortunately, I was able to ask my husband about everything, as he had settled there six years earlier. He helped me a lot in terms of understanding the capitalist system and accessing public services. I believe that previous experience in South Korea helped me a lot in the UK in terms of understanding things, from the basics to the complicated services and systems. Without it, adapting in the UK would have been much more difficult! (Interview 1)

Moreover, the multiethnic setting in workplaces and in broader society is one of the main reasons why North Koreans feel they constitute the favored employee pool for South Korean employers. The following interview provides good examples of how this translates into securing better positions:

In the restaurant where I am working currently, most of the waiters and waitresses are South Korean, and in the kitchen there are two people from North Korea and two from Romania. Those guys from Romania have been working there for five years, so they prepare Korean food quite well. However, they are very slow and lazy. In addition, they can't come up with new dishes, sauces, or flavors. As Koreans, only we can do that. They never can take the position of chef, so we North Koreans get those better positions. (Interview 13)

As this suggests, North Korean immigrants expressed the view that among employees from different countries, South Korean employers prefer them because of their cultural affinities as well as their diligent work ethic, and this helps them gain the better positions. Previous studies suggest that just as immigrant employers

can benefit from a large pool of cheap, trustworthy, and diligent workers with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, their co-ethnic employees obtain benefits such as better pay, job training, and prospects for managerial positions;³⁶ indeed, in this case study North Korean employees and their South Korean employers seem to mutually benefit from their work relationship. Several interviewees also expressed pride at having obtained higher positions than their South Korean co-workers, as these accounts illustrate:

In the restaurant where I work there are many employees from different countries: South Korea, North Korea, China, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Malaysia ... We [North Koreans] are equal to the rest. We are nothing special in the eyes of our employers, just part of the staff. However, when it comes to the quality of my work, my employer likes me better than he likes his South Korean employees. I'm not judged for my origin but only for the quality of my work. In South Korea, it's totally different. Their first consideration is where you are from, and Chosŏnjok and *t'albukcha* [North Korean defectors] always rank lower than South Koreans. (Interview 5)

North Korean immigrants are often chosen to manage Korean restaurants. We work much better than immigrants from other countries. One of my friends is a manager of twenty waitresses in a large Korean restaurant in London's city center. She manages people from many different countries, including South Koreans. (Interview 4)

South Korean employers are thus seen as holding North Korean employees in high regard due to the quality of their work and strong work ethic. In addition, because they came as refugees, most North Korean immigrants in the UK hold permanent residency or citizenship, which gives them better access to managerial positions compared with South Korean employees, who tend to be temporary migrants as, for example, international students or those on a working holiday visa. South Korean immigrants who have permanent residency or citizenship in the UK do not usually work as employees as they tend to be affluent and have the capital to buy or start small- or medium-sized businesses. In this way the immigration status of North Koreans in London seems to favor them attaining better positions in their workplaces. Employers' positive perceptions of North Korean immigrants can also be attributed to the multiethnic work environment in the UK, wherein employers demonstrate a much better attitude toward North Korean workers than they do toward their other employees.

Prejudice and discrimination on the part of South Koreans against North Koreans also diminished significantly in the UK. In addition, North Koreans expressed relief about escaping the social pressure to assimilate into South Korean society, which made their adaptation in the new country much easier, as these interviews make evident:

When I was in Korea, I felt uncomfortable and pressured as South Korean people looked at me and treated me differently whenever I revealed my identity. Here I don't need to hide it or change my accent. In New Malden, it is common to come across people from North Korea. Here I don't feel discriminated against like I felt in South Korea. (Interview 11)

I think South Korean immigrants here are more open as they work and live with many immigrants from different countries. They just treat North Koreans like other immigrants, so I've never felt discriminated against or treated with prejudice by them. I freely say to them that I am from North Korea. Although I had difficulties because of English, the adaption process here was much easier than in South Korea. (Interview 14)

In London they perceive much less identity- and language-based discrimination on the part of South Koreans and see the latter as more open-minded in the UK than in South Korea. Because South Korean immigrants have frequent contact with North Koreans in residential areas around New Malden and at work, they may feel more comfortable interacting with North Korean immigrants. In this environment, North Koreans do not need to hide their identity or feel uncomfortable because of their origins, as illustrated in these interviews:

I had a very difficult time in Korea, especially because of the language difference. Because I had a strong North Korean dialect and accent, people seemed to reject me and keep their distance from me. I felt discriminated against, not because of any concrete actions against me but instead a kind of unapproachable boundary. [...] But here in New Malden, I don't feel this strong level of rejection. It's normal for South Korean immigrants here to come into contact with North Koreans, and I have felt their mind is much more open than Koreans in South Korea. (Interview 3)

When people in South Korea asked me about my hometown, I always answered "Kangwŏn province" and hid my identity as North Korean. But here I don't need to do so. There are many North Korean people in London and South Koreans here are used to meeting and working with North Koreans here. (Interview 15)

As examined in this section, the relations between the two groups improved significantly in the course of secondary migration from South Korea to the UK, with my interviewees confirming a substantial decrease in discrimination and prejudice from South Koreans in the UK. Faced with language barriers and many other disadvantages in the host society, they make practical use of commonalities they share with South Korean counterparts as well as of previous experiences and skills learned in South Korea. They draw benefit from those experiences and resources as needed and establish labor relations with South Koreans, without feeling pressure to fully assimilate into the South Korean community, with which they share a minority position in multiethnic and multicultural Britain. But what

about the social relationships between the two groups? Is there any improvement in the UK? Do North Korean immigrants socialize or have close relationships with South Korean immigrants beyond a working relationship, and why or why not? In the following section I take a closer look at the social relations established between the two groups in London.

Invisible boundaries: “We still can’t relate with South Koreans, mainly because of a lack of shared experiences and memories”

In 2017 the Korean news channel YTN Korean made a documentary, *One Minjok, Two Schools*,³⁷ about two Korean schools in London, one for children of South Korean immigrants and one for children of North Korean immigrants. The documentary makes clear that it is not easy for the two communities to mingle harmoniously, and they feel a kind of boundary that they cannot define exactly. In fact, most of my North Korean interviewees in London said that at the social level they only mix with fellow North Koreans. With very few exceptions, they have no close relationships or friendships with South Koreans in London. The following excerpts suggest why:

I have never experienced discrimination in Korea or here. However, I’ve never socialized with them outside of the workplace. There’s just a feeling that they don’t understand us, and we can’t form a bond of sympathy. I don’t want to have to make the effort to explain myself, my background, and my experiences. Even if I explained these things they wouldn’t understand. (Interview 8)

They don’t have the same memories or experiences we had in North Korea. They don’t understand us and we don’t understand them. As we grew up in a totally different environment and culture, we don’t have interests and issues in common. We don’t make the effort to approach and get together with South Koreans. (Interview 12)

As these cases illustrate, most North Koreans in London have no close friendships or relationships with South Koreans as they feel themselves to be culturally different and understanding and relating to them would require too much effort. While a few interviewees mentioned negative experiences with South Koreans in Korean churches, most said they did not feel discriminated against by South Koreans in the UK; their social distance from South Koreans is mainly due to the cultural chasm they feel between the two Koreas that developed in the post-partition era. The following statements suggest why establishing close relationships with South Koreans is difficult:

There is a huge sense of difference. It's the same as what we feel with British people. We're both Koreans, but Korea has been divided for a long time and the social and cultural environments [in which we grew up] are totally different. We can approach them only with a lot of effort. As they don't make the effort, there is no reason for us to do it either. (Interview 6)

When we were young, we didn't watch the movies and TV shows as the South Koreans did. The other day we were talking with North Korean friends about our memories of playing with friends outside and going on dates in the sorghum fields. It was a lot of fun to talk about those things. But how could South Koreans understand or share those experiences of ours? In the same way, I can't share or enjoy their past experiences. (Interview 7)

These sentiments were echoed by most of my North Korean interviewees when talking about their inability to socialize or establish closer relationships with South Koreans, as they feel the social and cultural environments in which they grew up were extremely different, exacerbated by the prolonged lack of contact between the two in a divided Korea. Many clearly demonstrated that even though they speak the same language as South Koreans, they find it difficult to get close to them; in fact, they feel as distant from South Koreans as they do from other immigrant groups or from British people, perceiving an invisible boundary between the two groups. In addition, whereas North Koreans feel inferior and marginalized within an ethnic hierarchy in South Korea, where the cultural and linguistic differences shaped in the post-partition era strongly manifest themselves, in multiethnic and multicultural Britain, they perceive the two groups as being in a relatively equal position as respective minorities vis-à-vis broader society, with the sense of stratification and hierarchy between them largely dissolved.

Moreover, unlike in South Korea, where any differences perceived by the South Korean dominant majority position led to North Koreans feel marginalized and discriminated against and relegated to a position of subordinate status in the social stratification, in multiethnic and multicultural Britain they tend to freely reveal their identities and express their cultural and linguistic differences, allowing them to feel comfortable and connected with other North Korean immigrants from their homeland. In the UK they do not want to make any particular effort to assimilate into the South Korean community or have close relationships with them, instead freely acknowledging the differences in the post-partition era. The result is an enduring invisible boundary between the two groups. Fully assimilating into the South Korean community, they feel, would position them as lower and inferior in status to South Koreans. Thus, North Koreans feel it is important to delineate the differences and boundaries and dismantle the concept of *minjok* in the new migration context, even if the similarities and commonalities are still useful to them in the process of settlement and working with South Koreans.

Nevertheless, some interviewees are aware that negative images of North Korea may color the way broader society in the UK sees them. For instance, on some occasions my interviewees just say “I am from Korea” or “I am Korean” instead of specifying which part of Korea to avoid seeming to be sympathizers of the North Korean government or having to explain their status as refugees in the UK. Yet I have never seen any North Koreans who say they are from South Korea. They feel it is more comfortable and easier to reveal their identity and recognize the differences from the beginning in dealings with South Koreans as well as other minority groups and the broader society.

According to Marger,³⁸ in a multiethnic society, group rank is determined mainly on the basis of distance from the dominant group in terms of culture and physical features: those most like the dominant group are more highly ranked and those most unlike it are ranked correspondingly low. Thus, a system of ethnic stratification is a ranking of groups, each made up of people with presumed common cultural or physical characteristics interacting in patterns of dominance and subordination, referred to as majority–minority or dominant–subordinate systems.³⁹ Despite discourses of *minjok* emphasizing a single Korean ethno-nation, in practice, in South Korea the native population strongly focus more on the differences rather than the similarities with North Koreans, viewing themselves as the dominant group and North Koreans as subordinate in a majority–minority relationship. However, in the new migration context in Britain, which is highly multiethnic and multicultural, both North and South Koreans are considered equally as ethnic minority groups as they are both very distant from the British dominant majority. Thus, the majority–minority relation between the two in South Korea becomes a minority–minority relation within larger British society, as intimated by this North Korean interviewee:

I feel South Koreans here are also immigrants and a minority like us. I think we have the same status from the perspective of the British people. Although we use the same language, South Korea to us is a foreign country. In South Korea, we had to try to interpret and understand their way of thinking, but here we don't need to. (Interview 2)

In addition to the dominant ethnic group's greater economic and political power, its norms and values prevail in society as a whole, and the cultural characteristics of the dominant group become society's standards.⁴⁰ The interviewee above stated that North Koreans in South Korea, where the South Korean majority is culturally and linguistically hegemonic and diversities and differences are much less tolerated, felt extremely pressured to conform to the way South Koreans think and live, much more so than in multicultural and multiethnic UK. As Marger claims, “the cultural supremacy of the dominant ethnic group in a multiethnic

society applies to major norms and values”;⁴¹ in the UK, North Korean immigrants perceive both groups as having a similar status from the perspective of the host society. While North Korean immigrants felt highly anxious and marginalized in South Korea, in the UK they expressed a “sense of well-being” in various ways when discussing their present lives, which they tended to represent in a highly positive light.⁴² Thus, the shift from a majority–minority to a minority–minority relationship was a key factor in North Koreans feeling much more relaxed and comfortable in expressing cultural and linguistic differences freely and not making any additional effort beyond their practical use of common cultural and linguistic traits, such as in working for South Korean employers.

Another key aspect suggested by many of my interviewees was the economic disparity between the two groups. They are also aware of differences in educational levels and backgrounds. Most South Koreans run their own businesses, and most of the North Korean workforce is employed in those businesses. In addition, South Korean expats sent by large Korean companies usually enjoy high salaries and other benefits. Not surprisingly, the lower labor status of the North Koreans contributes to the formation of invisible boundaries between the two groups, as illustrated in the following interviews:

There are huge gaps between South Koreans and North Koreans here. South Koreans spend lots of money on their children’s education that we can’t do. They seem to compare the differences in our financial means, and I feel those differences, too. (Interview 9)

We’ve tried to send our kids to the London Korean school where many sojourning employees from Korean large companies send their kids. As many of those children came from Korea recently, they speak Korean much better than ours do. In addition, we feel a huge economic disparity between them and us. (Interview 10)

Worsley suggests that class divisions reinforce ethnic divisions.⁴³ For instance, if class divisions and ethnic divisions overlap, such as when most workers in a specific economic class are also of the same ethnic background, ethnic solidarity is further strengthened by mutual reinforcement. Cornell and Hartmann express a similar view: that labor markets are a common site of ethnic and racial identity construction, since the division of labor in every society offers a ready-made categorical framework with associated statuses.⁴⁴ Thus, the concentration of North Korean immigrants in a lower economic stratum as a particular source of labor for South Korean employers has influenced the creation of collective images as well as the construction and reinforcement of the boundaries between the two groups.

Yet they are aware that these boundaries based on the economic differences will eventually diminish as some North Koreans also start their own businesses

and gain more economic power. Their children will also be better educated and incorporated into mainstream society, like those of the South Korean immigrants. Therefore, discrimination based on lower economic and educational status influences them much less in the UK than in it did South Korea, where upward social mobilities were much more difficult. Although they are aware of the low status and negative image of North Korea among Western countries as well as their own lower economic and educational levels compared with South Koreans in the UK, they still believe it is important to maintain boundaries with South Koreans, as a separate immigrant minority in Britain.

Although close relationships between North and South Koreans have not tended to develop at the individual level, there have been attempts to remedy the consequences of perceived ethnic boundaries at the institutional or community level. For instance, although London Korean Hankyoreh School (Figure 1) was originally established by North Korean immigrants so that their children could learn Korean on Saturdays, most of its teachers are now from South Korea, and its South Korean and multicultural student body has been growing. Another example is the Korean Culture and Arts Centre in New Malden,⁴⁵ which provides a variety of classes taught in Korean, such as guitar, cooking, Pilates, Zumba, Korean traditional dance, Korean poetry, calligraphy, and knitting. As the participants include both North and South Koreans, they interact through those classes. Some North



Figure 1 Peace Day street parade in New Malden, organized by London Korean Hankyoreh School, 18 June 2022

Source: Photo provided by Jeonghoon Jang.



Figure 2 The Unification Kitchen team from the Korean Culture and Arts Centre at the 2022 World Korean Festival during the Premium Jubilee organized by the Korean Restaurants and Supermarkets Association in the UK, 4-5 June 2022

Source: Photo provided by the Korean Culture and Arts Centre.

Koreans are also regular members of the Korean Senior Citizens' Association and have forged close relationships with South Korean members over many years.

Attendance at activities aimed at the North Korean community is very high, a testament to the community's vitality. Some events and activities, such as end-of-year parties and traditional festivals, have been jointly organized by the two community groups, offering opportunities for interaction. Although many of these events and activities are one-offs, they still help open the door for communication and relationship-building between the two communities. For instance, the Korean Culture and Arts Centre's Unification Kitchen team (pictured in Figure 2), led by two chefs from North and South Korea respectively, continuously organizes a variety of events that attract both South and North Koreans in the New Malden area.

Conclusions

North Korean immigrants to the UK have primarily settled around New Malden in London, where South Koreans have also been highly concentrated. Because of the language barrier and other disadvantages that make it difficult for them

to find jobs in the host society, most North Koreans work for restaurants, supermarkets, moving companies, and other businesses run by South Koreans, as they had done in South Korea. However, even as they occupy low-paid positions in these businesses, North Koreans in the UK feel much less discriminated against than they did in South Korea. Multiethnic work environments, along with South Korean employers' preference for North Korean employees, contributes to better relationships with South Koreans in the UK. This study's findings also demonstrate that the majority–minority relation between the two in South Korea became a minority–minority relation within multiethnic British society, also contributing to the significant reduction in prejudice and discrimination on the part of South Koreans against North Koreans in the UK. This change in North Koreans' position in broader society vis-à-vis South Koreans after on-migration to London has highly influenced the labor relationship between the two communities. Nonetheless, subtle cultural differences and a lack of shared experiences and memories have influenced the establishment of invisible boundaries between them: North Korean immigrants find it difficult to socialize or develop close ties with South Koreans in London, and their rapport largely remains limited to labor relationships on a practical basis. While there are attempts at the institutional or community level to increase interaction between the two groups, and the situation may eventually improve, it will not happen quickly.

A common feature of concepts of nation has been the notion of the imagined community, whereby the holders of perceived shared history, ideas, culture, and behaviors are seen as bound together as a nation, operationalized by a sense of connection to a set of symbols or cultural markers taken as representing the nation and a concomitant sense of belonging.⁴⁶ A sense of a shared bloodline and ancestry and a common language and the belief in a racially distinct and ethnically homogeneous nation is commonly expressed in a discourse of Korea as a single ethno-nation,⁴⁷ with the concept of *minjok* as a single Korean ethnicity often invoked. In both Koreas, daily discourses promoting the importance of reunification have emphasized linguistic, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity across the two countries. However, as examined in this article, in the course of the secondary migration of North Koreans to the UK, this discourse has been invoked only in very limited situations, mostly on a pragmatic basis, to help them settle and obtain jobs within the Korean community. In the new migration context in the UK, where they are not familiar with the dominant language, culture, and society, North Koreans make use of the aspects they share in common with South Koreans as well as the linguistic and cultural competence they gained during their time in South Korea.

In South Korea, North Koreans discovered that the cultural, social, and linguistic differences that developed between the two countries over time in the post-partition

era manifested themselves strongly, and these subtle differences led to them feeling isolated, marginalized, and discriminated against by the dominant South Korean majority. In this co-ethnic stratification, where any difference can serve as a marker of inferiority, North Koreans had to adapt and assimilate to South Korean language and culture in order to be seen as “proper” South Korean citizens.⁴⁸ However, in multicultural and multiethnic Britain, these differences are not necessarily seen as markers of inferiority attracting discrimination on the part of South Koreans. On the contrary, instead of fully assimilating into the South Korean immigrant community, they maintain and continuously reinforce the boundaries between the two groups due to cultural differences and lack of shared memories, feeling that they occupy a relatively equal position as respective minorities vis-à-vis broader society and that the sense of stratification and hierarchy between them is largely dissolved. This social formation process of transforming themselves and being transformed in the new host context shows the power of social agency enacted “within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society.”⁴⁹

As discussed in this study, the same features and practices of ethnic groups can be presented and interpreted very differently depending on social contexts and interactions. Thus, this case study significantly illustrates that ethnic relations are contingent on social contexts and that ethnic boundaries are relational and situational. This study also offers insights into how migrants as transnational agents use and navigate their experiences, resources, and relationships to position themselves in the host society and shape their everyday life practices in a complex migration context.

Nevertheless, we cannot draw thorough conclusions about the meanings and consequences of the ways in which North Koreans shape the boundaries of “Us” and “Them” in the UK. In particular, how they relate to and shape boundaries vis-à-vis other immigrant minorities as well as the British people, and how British people and other immigrant minorities view North Koreans, should be fully incorporated and assessed for a more comprehensive analysis of the relational dynamics involved. Since ethnic relations generated, established, and maintained between or among groups of people are not straightforward, a more thorough analysis of discourses about Others will contribute to a better understanding of the ambiguity of nation, ethnicity, and ethnic relations as well as issues around prejudice and discrimination in migration contexts.

Notes

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