


Study Series 15-03



The Experiences of Crossing Boundaries and Reconstruction of North Korean Adolescent Refugees' Identities

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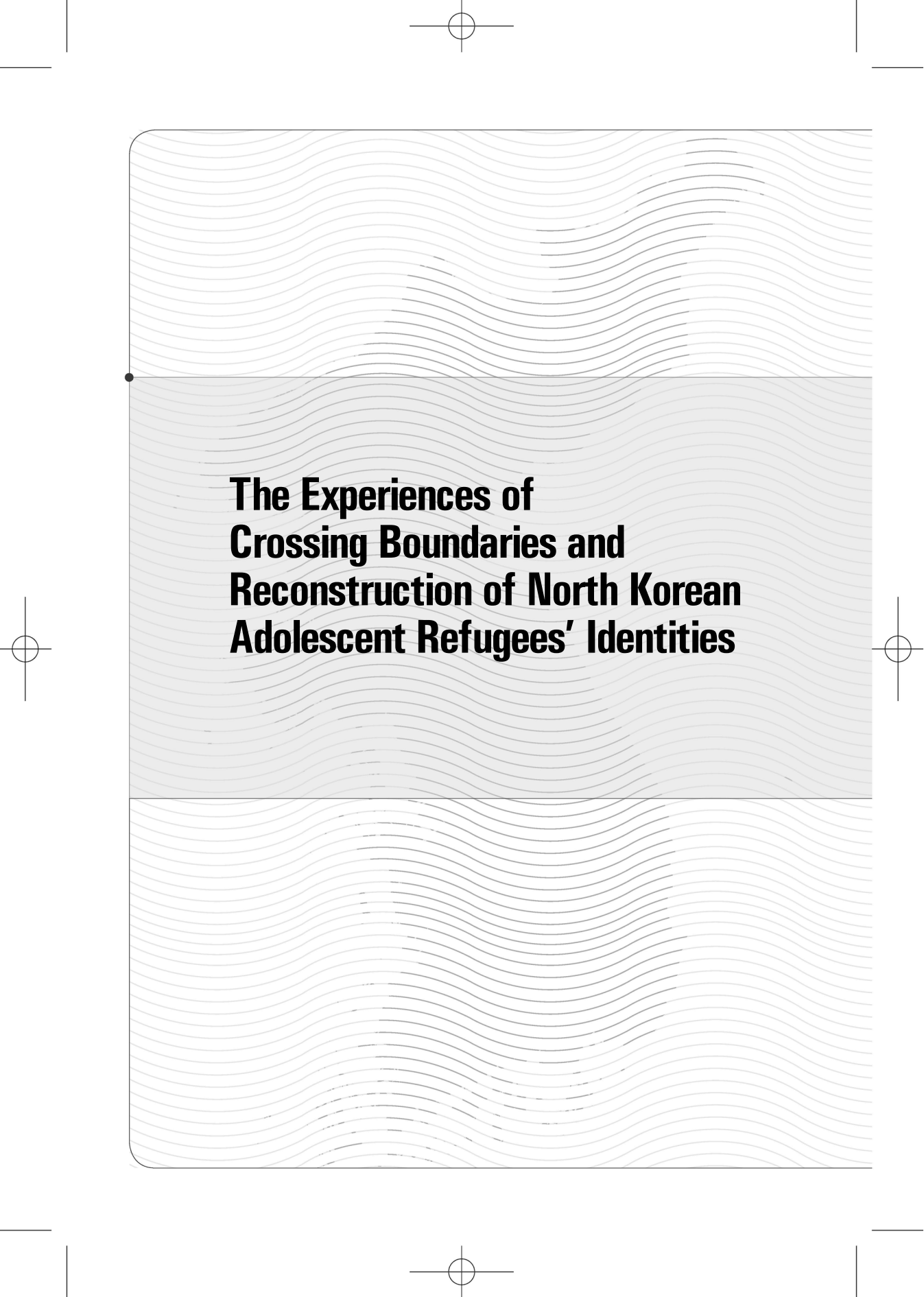
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**The Experiences of
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1

Introduction

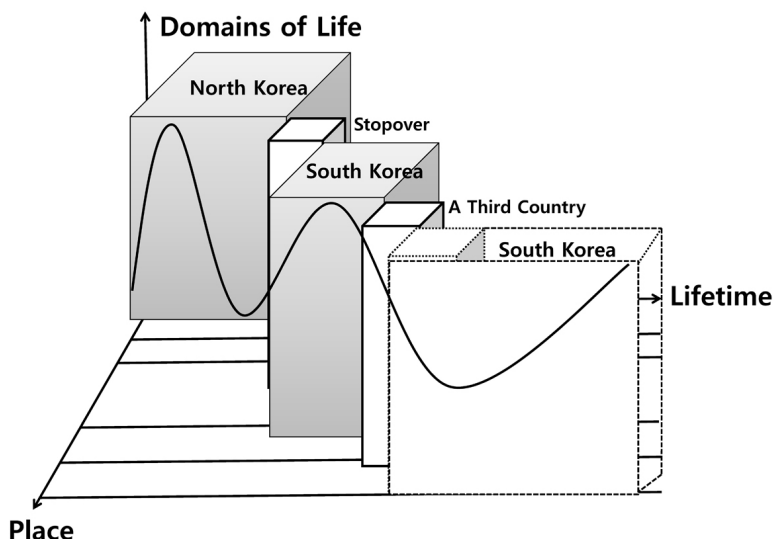
1. Introduction

This research investigates how North Korean adolescent refugees experience territorial and sociocultural boundaries as they undergo the process of migration. The process of North Korean adolescents' departing from spatial, social, and cultural territories of North Korea, entering into those of China or a third country, and settling in South Korea is interpreted in this research as a process of cross-boundary experience. As boundaries, by its very nature, differentiate oneself from others, boundary crossing inevitably entails a reconstruction of identity. This research explores how North Korean adolescent refugees experience and react to various boundaries, and how these experiences influence the process of growing into adults as well as the reconstruction of their identities.

This research defines adolescents broadly as those who are in their mid-teens to mid-twenties. The target group are North Korean adolescents and adults who have, in their adolescent years, traveled from North Korea to China, from China to South Korea via a third country, from South Korea to North America or Europe. In the process of remigration to South Korea, they will have experienced various

socio-cultural boundaries associated with crossing spatial boundaries. The scope of analysis is presented in the following picture.

<Picture> Scope of analysis for North Korean adolescents' experiences of crossing boundaries



In order to understand North Korean adolescent refugees and the process of their identity formation in entering adulthood, one needs to be aware of the numerous boundaries they face. They have not merely crossed a physical boundary from North to South Korea. Their cross-boundary experiences are social, cultural, and also symbolic. While they experience numerous boundaries in their journey, they also create new boundaries in their behaviors and minds. In this context, boundaries can be likened to veins that constitute their identities. Therefore, their cross-boundary experiences cannot be simplified as a mere case of

crossing state borders or nationalities. From this perspective, in studying how cross-boundary experiences shape one's identity, it is necessary to question the complex relationship among one's biographical and present context, the implications of their cultural practices, and the desires or institutions that make crossing state borders possible.¹⁾

“In recent years, the idea of ‘boundaries’ has come to play a key role in important new lines of scholarship across the social sciences. It has been associated with research on cognition, social and collective identity, commensuration, census categories, cultural capital, cultural membership, racial and ethnic group positioning, hegemonic masculinity, professional jurisdictions, scientific controversies, group rights, immigration, and contentious politics, to mention only some of the most visible examples.”²⁾ The number of boundaries that can be experienced are innumerable; from daily boundaries which restrict a social group or individual's freedom of movement and communication; to political and geographic boundaries of “state borders”; to representative “boundaries” as a *habitus* that reveals the cultural or class differences; and to imagined boundaries that affect the subconscious and conscious minds of the members of society. Furthermore, these boundaries also expand/contract, or combine/divide depending on the

1) Kim Yae-rim, “Changing Nationality, Transnational Subject and Border-Crossing Cultural Capital-Identity Politics and Cultural Practice of the Young Generation of Jaeil Joseonin in South Korea” (in Korean), *Sanghur Hakbo*, no. 25 (2009), p. 353.

2) Lamont, M., and V. Molnar, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Science”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 28 (2002), p. 167.

circumstances or the position of those faced with the cross-boundary experience.³⁾

From the perspective of an individual's cross-boundary experience, boundaries can be considered as a physical and social reality made up of complex signs and symbols, institutions and common sense, and science and standards which reveal their existence and form who they are. "Boundaries are therefore both symbols and manifestations of power relations and social institutions, and they become part of daily life in diverging institutional practices."⁴⁾ In order to understand an individual, it is necessary to observe the boundaries that operate in his/her physical and psychological self. Conversely, in order to understand a society, it is necessary to grasp the *modus operandi* of various boundaries that form the reality of the society's members. When we refer to a specific person as a "North Korean adolescent refugee," the term "North Korean refugee" already designates them with a certain identity and also requires them to behave in a certain way. Thus, they become swept into an institution corresponding to language. Boundaries become a vehicle which "coordinates" appropriate linguistic system accompanied by corresponding legal and institutional realities. Therefore, boundaries are cognitive, communicative, and politically

3) Kim Song-kyung, "Experiencing North Korea-China Borderland and Routes of Mobility: "Border Crossing" of North Korean border-crossers and the Expanding of Transnational Ethnic Spaces" (in Korean), *Space and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2012), p.118.

4) Newman, D. & Paasi, A.. Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography, *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1998), p.194.

multi-tiered. This is because boundaries are systems which enable human to cognize objects and communicate, and are of a political nature bifurcating between the inside and the outside, the internal and the external, and the exclusive and the inclusive.

Observing North Korean adolescent refugees from the perspective of “boundaries” means to observe how their identity is formed or forced through their cross-boundary experiences. A “boundary” is the separation of an object in physical, symbolic, or conceptual terms. It separates states and communities, differentiates “us” from “them,” thereby acting as factors constituting identities and groups. Boundaries are “the ‘points of contact or separation,’ and ‘usually creates an ‘us’ and an ‘other’ identity.’”⁵⁾ Boundaries pose the permanent question of what defines “us” and “others” who exist beyond the boundary. Therefore, boundaries not only exist along state borders or national community, but also exist in society among various ethnic or cultural communities, or between the mainstream who enjoy their vested rights and the minority who are often marginalized.⁶⁾

This study observes North Korean adolescent refugees’ experience of leaving North Korea and entering South Korea via China or a third country. Their experience of different spatial, social, and cultural

5) Jon Anderson, *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Trace* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). Translated by Lee Young-min and Lee Jong-hee, *Culture, Place, and Trace* (in Korean) (Seoul: Hanwool, 2013), p.87

6) Olivier Razac, “Political history of barbed wire and wall” (in Korean), no. 57 (June 2013), pp. 10-12.

territories will be considered as a cross-boundary process. This study reviews their spatial and socio-cultural cross-boundary experiences.

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 49 North Korean adolescent refugees who left North Korea from 1998 to 2012. Out of the 49 refugees, 37 have lived in South Korea for periods ranging from two to fifteen years; three have migrated abroad via South Korea, and nine have entered a foreign country directly from North Korea. Most of the interview subjects have defected and experienced spatial boundary crossing during their adolescent years. The researchers have come into contact with some of the North Korean adolescent refugees after 2009 while conducting various research projects. Numerous interviews which were conducted over a period of time were analysed so as to grasp how the duration of residence changed one's experience and identity. In order to understand the general context of North Korean adolescent refugees who migrated abroad, in-depth interviews were also partially conducted on adult North Korean refugees who have migrated abroad.

Besides the in-depth interviews, short-term participant observations were made by visiting the living spaces of North Korean adolescent defectors such as the shelters for North Korean adolescent refugees. Especially, researchers conducted participant observations on North Korean refugee camps and living spaces residing for several months with links between the international networks that support North Korean refugees settlement.

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2

Crossing Physical Boundaries and Spatial Experience

2. Crossing Physical Boundaries and Spatial Experience

This chapter looks into the process of how North Korean adolescent refugees cross spatial boundaries. It has been reconstructed based on interview materials of the thoughts they had of North Korean society and the “outside” whilst in North Korea; reason or motivation behind leaving North Korea; experience of crossing the North Korean border; the long journey from China to a third state in Southeast Asia; the wait in a relocation camp in the third state; first impressions upon reaching South Korea; attempts at remigration to a Western society and their corresponding experiences.

North Korean adolescents have been unable to view the space surrounding their lives from a relative point of view because they have not observed societies other than North Korea. Although they could see the outside world through a limited “window” such as movies or dramas, these merely existed as images, owing to the fact that they have never been actually experienced. The process of how these obscure images of the outside world led one to “cross over” vary in time periods. As it is generally known, cases of crossing over before 2000 were mostly due to economic reasons. The period after 2000 saw cases

of family reunification immigration where more North Koreans left to seek better lives and were invited by family or relatives who had already settled in the region. This is more evident in the cases of adolescents. Whereas adult refugees' motivation for leaving North Korea was an attempt to "disconnect the past from the present" after experiencing political oppression and economic hardship, adolescents' decision to leave North Korea had more to do with their attempts to "determine their own future." Adolescents who possessed a sense of self-cognition came to this realization by themselves; in the case of young children, their parents made the decision to leave on their behalf so as to provide them with a chance for the future.

The degrees of fear or hesitation when crossing the border from North Korea to China vary in time, their companions, the living conditions in North Korea, who were waiting at the final destination, whether the plans were carried out smoothly, etc. In the cases of adolescents who left after 2000, they generally traveled through a relatively "safe" route which their mother or father, or their relatives had planned beforehand. As escape routes developed, escape became a product which could be bought at a price. The amount of adult's payment and degree of preparation would correspondingly reduce the hardship that the children would have to experience. At the time it seems that these adolescents were more "excited" than "resolute." The route from China to South Korea crosses through Vietnam and Thailand, or Myanmar and Cambodia. Distinctive features mark the process of their long

travels and the route from their last stopover into South Korea.

These adolescents view and experience a new world through their long travels on land. In this process, they are able to grasp some criteria needed to view North Korean society from a point of relativism. After a final stopover at a relocation camp in Thailand or Cambodia, they arrive in South Korea by plane. The final travel to South Korea is different from the linear modes of travel that had been experienced in a purely spatial dimension; rather, it is a point movement in which they arrive at a new location within just a few hours. This point-to-point movement not only takes place on a spatial dimension but also involves jumping 30 to 40 years of economic and cultural gaps. While their migration from North to South Korea can be seen as a long “process” of spatial relocation, from the perspective of living space, it is also a case of “parachuting” from one society to another without “due process.” On the one hand, this method of migration has made adaptation to South Korean society difficult. However, the migration itself has also functioned as a learning experience. They knowingly or unknowingly harbor thoughts of swiftly departing for a different society in a similar manner and in the case of leaving South Korea for the West, they parachute themselves to another world, transcending time and space.

To come to South Korea means to be protected and managed by the state system. After a long period of living without any protection, they become protected by the state system and begin to have their time

managed by the state. Upon arriving at home after three months in Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees, they begin to experience the South Korean society laid bare which will form the stage of their future lives.

Some North Korean adolescent refugees choose to leave South Korea and relocate in the United Kingdom or another European country or Canada. They erase their identity as a South Korean and capitalize on their identity as a North Korean to seek asylum status. This process has at times been done “experimentally” without serious consideration. The “experience” that they have abroad is the “re-categorization” of the self as a Korean or Asian, or as an “individual,” after having deconstructed the group category. This self-discovery enables one to overcome inferiority and pressures of being a North Korean. Nevertheless, they are again labeled as a “North Korean” in Korean communities abroad.

North Korean adolescent refugees are able to grow from the experience of crossing the borders in North Korea, China, a third country in Southeast Asia, South Korea, and a Western state. First, adolescents who cross the Tumen River become emboldened to cross future borders with ease because they have already crossed the “forbidden” border. All North Korean refugees have crossed the river, and “whoever crosses the Tumen River are capable of going anywhere.” This is because the strength to cross the Tumen River is “‘*homo sacer*’ yearning for ‘qualified life’ to survive or the embodiment of human

vitality per se.”⁷⁾ This strength pushes them to continue their paths to pursuing fulfilling lives in a different space, whether it is in China, a third state, South Korea, Europe, or North America. For example, after having crossed the most violent and forbidden space, they are not particularly afraid or reluctant to use the international refugee system to cross the borders of the Korean Peninsula.

Second, as these North Korean adolescent refugees experience spatial cross-boundaries, they also go through a “maturing experience.” For adult refugees, their process of escaping North Korea took place when they were already mature; as such, this spatial cross-boundary experience did not bring about the growth of a child into an adult. From this perspective, it is important to take note of the particular experiences that North Korean refugees had whilst they were “adolescents.” This cross-boundary experience can be an opportunity for growth, but it depends on how it is interpreted and received by the adolescents. When North Korean adolescent refugees come to South Korea, they are at times disheartened because their South Korean peers are physically better built and know more than they do. Other times they view their peers to be too immature. Also, they have a sense of pride in the fact that the hardships of crossing borders have made them more mature.

Third, these adolescents are in the process of self-healing the

7) Yi Hee Young, “(Post) Division and Actor - Network of International Migration - Case Study on the Life and Human Rights of “Traveling” North Korean Refugees,” *North Korean Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2013), pp.384-385.

trauma incurred in the process of crossing spatial boundaries. Not all experiences of hardship are opportunities for growth. Depending on what the experience was, how time was spent afterwards, and on the emotions of the individual, it may require more time for the experience to translate into opportunities for growth. At times, these adolescents may also fail to transform their experience of hardship into a positive memory.

Fourth, as these North Korean adolescent refugees cross spatial boundaries, they begin to absorb standards of the outside world to assess their communities back in North Korea. They also begin to have a discerning eye for their surrounding environment. Traveling in general, entails experiencing a new world in an unfamiliar place, and realizing the relative nature of their world in the past. When they were in North Korea, they had barely any knowledge of the outside world. Even if they knew of the outside world, most of it was fragmented images of what they saw in movies or dramas. Their long travels to South Korea via China and a third state were a full-on process of encountering the outside world which they had experienced through limited channels of media, at most. By living in the new space “on their own,” they are able to add to their image of the outside world attained through media, new impressions based on their experiences.

The North Korean refugees mentioned in this paper have all crossed a physical border and entered South Korea in their adolescent years. With the support from their family members or relatives, they

have crossed the borders either alone or with their members of the family for their future dreams. Crossing boundaries always carries feelings of ambivalence. Fear is accompanied by excitement, and anxiety coexists with happiness. There are also feelings of annoyance as well as conflict from having to take on adult roles when they are still children. Things that were unseen before become noticeable on their travels and they are able to reflect on their lives from different perspectives. How one remembers their past depends on how and with whom it was experienced, how much time elapsed since the experience, and one's emotions. Therefore it is difficult to discuss the extent of their "adaptation" based on a single criterion or standard. Nevertheless, many experiences were during their impressionable adolescent years (with high "plasticity"), and with many new experiences yet to come, it is clear that they are in the process of changing. This change is not linear; it may be a spiral change, or it may be a curvy one fluctuating between highs and lows. Fortunately for these adolescents, they have the ability to introspectively reconstruct their lives and honestly reveal and address their emotions and feelings. This is probably because most of them are university students who are leading their own lives. The North Korean adolescent refugees studied in this research are clearly "growing." However, the same may not be said for adolescent refugees who, despite having crossed the border at a similar age, did not receive social support or encouragement.

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3

Experience of Cross-Cultural Boundaries and Its Reconstruction

3. Experience of Cross-Cultural Boundaries and Its Reconstruction

In many cases, boundaries in one's everyday living space are not clear. This is particularly true for cultural boundaries, as culture is already understood to be personal and diverse. However, a new subject emerging in an existing space and culture will expose the boundaries imbedded in that particular society and space. North Korean adolescent refugees too have an effect on exposing and reconstructing boundaries in South Korean society. This chapter observes the cultural boundaries existing in South Korean society through the experiences of North Korean adolescent refugees in their everyday lives. It also observes how their emergence reveals the society's cultural boundaries and how these boundaries are reconstructed in the adolescent refugees' lives.

North Korean adolescent refugees come into contact with new culture in various spaces. Since their residence in North Korea, they have already been exposed to other cultures through media and views of the outside world. Foreign movies or dramas circulating in North Korean society are the type of foreign culture that these adolescent refugees have been in contact with for the first time. The adolescent refugees also perceive the differentness through the view across the

border. The new culture that they experienced in North Korea creates a sense of curiosity and admiration for the outside world and leads to an assessment of their North Korean society. They confirm the economic status of the society they belong to and begin to perceive the level of culture. North Korean adolescent refugees' direct experience of other cultures begins at the moment they arrive in China. The new culture that they come across while living in China is different from that of their past, and is perceived to be a form of advanced and developed culture. These cultural experiences become an opportunity for them to perceive the economic conditions and situation of North Korean society that they belonged to with a fresh eye.

The first cultural difference North Korean adolescent refugees experience after leaving North Korea is the language. Unable to speak Chinese, these adolescent refugees perceive themselves as the “others” and make efforts to learn Chinese or use Korean fluently. Even when they arrive in South Korea, language is an important factor which creates a sense of differentness. The language used by adolescent refugees directly indicates that they are not from South Korea and that they are from “poor” North Korea. Due to the negative image of North Korea and the discrimination against North Koreans, the adolescent refugees try to change their dialect so as to hide their place of origin. Another cultural difference in terms of language occurs when the adolescent refugees cannot choose words which contextually fit or when they are unable to understand words used in everyday lives, such

as those that have been taken from foreign languages. Considering that language represents various cultural aspects, to use and understand language in an appropriate manner means to have understood that culture. Therefore, the differentness that North Korean adolescent refugees experience through language also indicates the lack of cultural capital.

Next, North Korean adolescent refugees experience cultural difference arising from appearances. Specifically, it is said that they can be distinguished from South Koreans based on their skin color, clothing, and hair styles. In relative terms, adolescent refugees are said to have an unnatural style and are less fashionable than South Koreans. In this case, perceptions of North Korean society's economic or cultural inferiority have transcended to judgment towards North Korean refugees' appearances. This is not regarded as external stylistic differences, it leads to a cultural hierarchy between North Korean refugees and South Koreans.

In addition to such visual and explicit cultural differences, North Korean adolescent refugees experience cultural differences also in forming relations in their everyday space. These adolescent refugees experience a sense of differentness at school and the workplace, and in their peer relations; this is referred to as dualism whereby such unfamiliar culture felt in relations with South Koreans becomes visible. To these North Korean adolescent refugees, practices familiar to South Korean society, such as the formalities associated with greetings are

regarded as pretentious and dishonest. Although they admit that South Koreans treat all people in this manner, they think that such behavior is particularly distinct towards them, as they are North Korean refugees. The thought is that people are always generous to them and treat them with smiles because they are North Korean refugees. From these ways of interaction, North Korean adolescent refugees experience cultural differences and also feel a sense of “otherization.”

Another cultural difference felt in relationships is the dating culture, which has become normalized in South Korean society. North Korean adolescent refugees are unfamiliar with the roles that they need to take on in order to maintain relationships with their partner. Although this is partly due to the fact that they have not experienced something similar in North Korea, it is also because South Korea’s dating culture does not reflect the patriarchal structure that exists in North Korea. These cultural differences felt in the processes of forming relationships present another difficulty in the North Korean adolescent refugees’ lives in South Korea, who seek to find stability through new relations with people.

On the one hand, various cultural differences felt in everyday lives allow North Korean adolescent refugees to become aware of their position in South Korean society; on the other hand, it also constructs group identities pertaining to North Korean refugee groups and South Koreans. These adolescents regard the causes of such cultural differences to be associated with group identities, and also form specific

impressions of South Koreans and North Korean refugees based on their experiences. In their interaction with their peers, North Korean adolescent refugees also experience cultural shock when they see their peers clearly articulate their opinions. They also think they are “falling behind” for not being able to do the same. The reasons for these differences are sought in the differences in the North and South’s education and ways of thinking, and they discover a North Korean style of culture and education. North Korean adolescent refugees distinguish themselves from their South Korean peers when seeing their spending habits, their usage of swear words on a daily basis, the lack of respect for their teachers, the practice of “going-Dutch,” etc. South Korean adolescents are regarded as inhumane and individualistic as well as immoral, whereas North Korean adolescent refugees regard themselves as humane, collective, and moral. Based on their experience of cultural differences, North Korean adolescent refugees prescribe a group identity on themselves and South Korean adolescents.

North Korean adolescent refugees are in the process of identifying differences between the culture that they were previously accustomed to and the new culture surrounding them. It allows them to perceive the economic and cultural capital that they lack and confirm their position in South Korean society. It also becomes the criteria that can determine how much they have “adapted.” In these various experiences, North Korean adolescent refugees attempt to assess their past culture, the culture that they are learning, and the culture that

exists in South Korea. Based on their experiences of cultural differences, they formulate their own cultural criteria and reproduce cultural, economic, and social hierarchies in terms of what is developed and under-developed, moral and immoral, and fashionable and unfashionable. On the one hand, these experiences of cultural boundaries allow one to perceive the boundaries themselves or reconstruct such boundaries; on the other hand, it becomes the basis for the formation of group identities pertaining to “South Korea,” “North Korea,” and “North Korean refugee.”

Perception of cultural differences, experience of cultural boundaries, and construction of group identities ultimately lead to a reconstruction of existing cultural boundaries. Specific courses of action are formed in order to transcend such boundaries, and the boundaries become reconstructed through them. In order to “adapt” to South Korean society, North Korean adolescent refugees sever themselves from their past culture and actively internalize and imitate the new culture. At the same time, they assign new meaning to the culture that they already possess and use it to distinguish their culture from that of others. In addition, through experience of other cultures, they distance themselves from South Korea’s mainstream culture and in the process, form new boundaries and create fissures in the existing boundaries.

However, if their attempts to transcend various boundaries are not followed by changes in economic or societal structures, their actions cannot but have a limited effect. Taking advantage of the existing

culture will result in the reconstruction of the North Korean refugee group's culture and identity at the expense of one's participation. This is because, from the perspective of distinguishing the North Korean adolescent refugee group from the South Korean adolescent group, constructing new boundaries may also come to a halt with the development of another group identity pertaining to North Korean adolescent refugees. Nevertheless, North Korean adolescent refugees' experiences of crossing cultural boundaries and corresponding strategies are important given that it reveals much about how South Korea's cultural particularities are able to mass produce or persist discrimination, or how culture is linked to economics and society. In addition, it demonstrates that the problem of the "otherization" of new subjects will not be resolved by the efforts of North Korean adolescents alone, but will only be possible when South Korea's discriminatory structure, culture, and perceptions are modified and transformed.

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4

**Experience of Social Boundaries
and Reconstruction of Identities**

4. Experience of Social Boundaries and Reconstruction of Identities

This chapter addresses social boundaries—a social mechanism which appears in the form of social categorization such as class, gender, sexuality, place of origin, race, and age—and how they distinguish and draw boundaries between groups and individuals. A social boundary is a concept that looks at the operation of everyday exclusion or inclusion of an individual or a group, based on social, legal, institutional norms and regulations, perception and categorization, and common knowledge and technology.

The social boundaries which operate in the North Korean adolescent refugees' lives in South Korea are manifested in ways of inclusion and exclusion in various fields. This chapter observes the production and content of the social boundaries experienced in South Korean society and how they have affected North Korean adolescent refugees' reconstruction of their identities. This chapter also analyzes how they face various boundaries as well as how they respond to them and the strategies they form.

The moment these adolescent refugees leave North Korea, they are crossing various physical boundaries (national borders, regions). At

the same time, they are facing social boundaries which exist in that particular society. These boundaries are closely related to how that society symbolically labels and perceives the North Korean adolescent refugees. In effect, perception cannot but be interlinked with power. Viewing a particular subject means to otherize the subject, and thus “perception” connotes a certain power dynamic. These perceptions have the effect of labeling the adolescent refugees in a particular way, either including or excluding them in/from the scope of the boundary.

The process of “otherization” begins when the adolescent refugees cross the border over to China; the political and legal boundaries categorize them as illegal migrants with no citizenship. As soon as the adolescent refugees cross the border, the otherization or institutional/political objectification consistently works to imprint social boundaries in their bodies and minds. The perception that categorizes them into boundaries of illegal/legal, abnormal/normal as well as the otherization of the North Korean adolescent refugees has a significant effect on the formation and reconstruction of their identities. It can be said that their identities are continuously being reconstructed as they face and perceive these boundaries.

Meanwhile, North Korean adolescent refugees experience a more complex and multifaceted set of boundaries in South Korean society. These boundaries go beyond the boundaries of “citizenry,” such as classifications of illegal/legal and abnormal/normal. For example, the overlapping and conflicting thoughts and emotions associated with the

division of the Korean Peninsula, with its space/history, ideology/nation, ultimately structure a more complex boundary experience. The division on the Korean Peninsula requires adolescent refugees to, first and foremost, prove that they are “genuine” refugees and not “fake” refugees in order to receive legal citizenship. Through self-censorship, they come to reconstruct their identities by playing the game and proving that they are indeed genuine refugees. This game is played by answering a series of repetitive questions in an honest and consistent manner. Even after the procedural and formal necessities of acquiring citizenship are met, they must continuously prove that they are genuine refugees in the face of contradictory public discourses on ideological hostility and national acceptance. They must also demonstrate their national homogeneity to be able to live within the society. Although they are inside the boundaries of nationality and citizenship, they also experience exclusion through the various social boundaries at work. This means that North Korean adolescent refugees end up experiencing the dual natures of both inclusion and exclusion on a daily basis.

On the one hand, through these boundary experiences, they learn, imitate, and act out the identity that the society wants. On the other hand, they also seek strategies to avoid, reject, and escape from such identities. In most cases, at school or within one’s peer culture, the North Korean adolescent refugees appear to be conscious of the boundaries of other North Korean adolescent refugees and act accordingly. These

boundaries are manifested in different ways depending on one's age at the time of escape, the degree of socialization or education in North Korea, whether one was accompanied by family members, one's social class in North Korea, etc. The practice of drawing boundaries among themselves can be said to differ based on how much capital one possesses. The younger their age at the time of escape, the more likely they are to employ a strategy of concealing their North Korean roots. This is also because their long period of adapting to South Korea means that their North Korean roots are less visible in terms of appearance. It appears that they are more likely to deny their North Korean roots if they have been less socialized in North Korean society or if their period of education in North Korea was relatively shorter.

Adolescent refugees are more likely to conceal their North Korean roots if they have the following conditions: escaped at a young age; have a long adaptation period in South Korea; possess sufficient resources; escaped together with family members who they can turn to for psychological comfort; and have a less need for a social network. On the other hand, those that employ a strategy of actively networking and affirming with other people from North Korea generally tend to lack resources and networks, and family members or a place to rely on. They might have recently escaped, or was at an older age at the time of escape. However, affirmation cannot be interpreted as a strategy of proactive exposure. Their need for a North Korean refugee network is more related to their need to acquire resources, such as comfort and the

information necessary to adjust to South Korean society. It is difficult to interpret this as a proactive showing of their North Korean roots. It can be said that lack of capital and support, and an initial network lead one to pursue an affirmative strategy with the purpose of creating a space for psychological and livelihood reliance. In these ways, based on the form and amount of one's capital, their strategies of denying or affirming their North Korean roots end up creating various boundaries among the North Korean refugees.

Their strategy of denying or avoiding people of the same place of birth is very different compared to those of other foreign migrants. Whereas other foreign migrants are eager to express their nationality and fellowship, North Korean adolescents tend to choose avoidance. This difference can be attributed to South Korean society's perception of "North Korea" as well as the realities of a divided Korea. The premise of being the same race as well as external and linguistic similarities appears to "include" the North Korean adolescent refugees in the same boundary as "us." However, given that they are from the otherized "North Korea," a closed off space that is the subject of threat, they are also outside "our" boundary.

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5

**Reconstruction of Citizenship
through Separation and
Crossing Boundaries**

5. Reconstruction of Citizenship through Separation and Crossing Boundaries

This chapter focuses on the experiences of North Korean adolescent refugees who have migrated to China or South Korea and then re-migrated to another country. North Korean adolescent refugees' experience of migrating to China, and South Korea, as well as a third or fourth country is not a linear passing of geographic locations. Rather, it is a process of coming into contact with various people and objects, exchanging and forming new relations. At this stage, each state's policies on migrants/refugees, and transnational migrant policies and organizations (EU, UN, and various international NGOs) are manifestations of power surrounding modern nation-states and their categorizations of citizens and non-citizens. North Korean adolescent refugees who illegally or secretly cross national borders are recognized by the states that they want to enter, and experience various negotiations and conflict in order to become a citizen of that country. In this context, the following examines the experiences of North Korean adolescent refugees who recently migrated to Germany and their processes of acquiring citizenship.

This paper defines citizenship as “one's rights and obligations, or

the institutions and norms that guarantee such rights, which form the qualities needed to become a member of a political community.” This definition included the recent debate concerning the need to expand the qualifications required to be a member of a political community to include residents of the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, if an individual is an actual resident of a particular region in a particular state (regardless of whether one is legal or illegal), it is understood that he/she possesses citizenship as a member of the respective political community. An important aspect of such definition is that even if an individual becomes a national of a particular state, if his/her rights are not actually guaranteed by the society, it sees that he/she has not been granted “citizenship.” Moreover, it overcomes the limitations of statutes or nationality in that it guarantees the rights of actual residents in the region regardless of the residence status. Such definition of citizenship also becomes a foundation which allows one to understand those with refugee status, such as North Korean adolescent refugees, and their behavior from a wider perspective.

The case study on North Korean adolescents who migrated to Germany shows that they constitute an important part of North Korean residents who, at times alone or with their family, migrate all over the world in order to seek “a new life.” Possessing a sense of motivation unique to youths in their twenties, as well as a sense of curiosity for their new lives, North Korean adolescent refugees migrate to other countries, sometimes with their families, other times alone,

representing their families. These cases of North Korean escapees migrating abroad are motivated by the increasing number of countries accepting “North Korean refugees” through various legislations such as the United States’ 2004 North Korea Human Rights Act. Thus, whereas border control against migrants has increased in the modern state system, “refugees” have become an exceptional group, having the freedom to become a citizen of a country of their choice. Their status in the international community has driven them to move anywhere around the world. Furthermore, it appears that numerous intermediary organizations that have emerged to accommodate refugees’ movements not only procure the costs of crossing boundaries from North Korea to China and China to South Korea based on South Korea’s “North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act,” but also provide costs associated with migrating from South Korea to a foreign country based on “illicit exchanges.” This is also a network which specifically realizes North Korean adolescent refugees’ desire to migrate across the world. The following are characteristics which define the experiences of adolescent refugees who have migrated abroad.

First, throughout twenty something years of one’s life, he/she experiences repeated movements across different spatial and cultural boundaries. Migrating from North Korea and China’s socialist community to South Korea or Europe’s capitalistic society involves considerable “danger” as one’s experience involves crossing political boundaries

pertaining to the (neo) Cold War system. At the same time, as they cross different linguistic and cultural space in China, South Korea, Germany, etc, they also experience different values and ways of life. Born in the most closed-off and collective society in the world, these North Korean adolescent refugees shoulder a lifelong task of possessing and interpreting, from their standpoint, the boundaries of different culture and the hostile societal structure experienced so far in their lives. On the other hand, by experiencing different systems both directly and indirectly, they will be able to have a brighter prospect of life. In the process of crossing national borders, North Korean adolescents have been able to “proliferate identities.” It can be said that this is a strategy to acquire a “flexible citizenship” in different societies. However, such “proliferate identities’ can also compete against each other in the adolescents’ everyday lives and threaten their citizenship as a whole. Specifically, it is uncertain whether they will pass the current refugee review process with these “proliferated identities.”

Second, unlike general cases of foreign migration, North Korean adolescent refugees’ migration does not take place in consideration of their or their families’ prospective plans. Rather, it is an “improvised and arbitrary” movement and migration, a decision made amidst state violence and threat to survival. In particular, after experiencing a brief period of institutionalized socialization, these adolescents repeatedly conduct “secretive and illegal behavior” in their process of migration,

continuing their “exceptional lives.” In other words, the values and norms which need to be learnt as well as possession of social capital required to (re)construct their identity in the respective society are relatively scarce. Instead, there is a tendency for them to overcome daily difficulties with arbitrary survival tactics (such as illicit exchanges) which have been acquired through networks with Chinese or North Koreans. The process of migrating abroad takes place through a similar platform. In order for North Korean adolescents who have sought refugee status in Germany to acquire rights as a Germany citizen, they must not only learn the language but also understand and uphold the democratic values and market mechanisms which form the basis of German society. It takes a relatively long period of experience and educational efforts to understand the order and values of a civil society which has been diligently built throughout a long history. In other words, it does not require the strength for one to traverse endlessly, but the efforts and experience to settle and become a constructive citizen. However, current North Korean adolescents relatively lack experience in social participation and the thought of settling. From this perspective, it is necessary to pay attention to these North Korean adolescent refugees’ potential after they acquire citizenship in Germany/European society.

Third, North Korean adolescent refugees lose a sense of attachment to a particular place due to their continuous migration abroad. In the process, they experience not only the loss of their significant others

such as family, relatives, and friends, but also lose places that they were particularly fond of, and instead routinely go through “placeless” experiences. From North Korea to China, China to South Korea, and South Korea to a foreign country, the size of North Korean refugee communities continues to shrink, and it appears that they experience isolation to a considerable extent. Meanwhile, they also form online networks (cell phone, e-mail, etc) with other North Korean refugees all over the world. As seen previously, these digital networks are not only used for sharing everyday knowledge, but also function as an “alternative community” by forming new relations among separated families and friends, at times forming intimacy through long-distance relationships. From this perspective, digital modes of communication are emotional and cultural contents themselves, and tools for North Korean adolescent refugees to reconstruct a North Korean refugee community. In other words, after having experienced famine and isolation in North Korea, these adolescents have ironically come to possess a cutting-edge digital culture.

Fourth, adolescent refugees who re-migrate to South Korea from a foreign country “retrospectively” interpret their attempt as an “important foreign/abroad experience.” Study abroad programs or language courses are thought of as being important social capital in South Korean society. Instead of this, these adolescents understand that they had lived in a so-called developed country and learned English or another foreign language as such experiences based on their “physical capital.”

In addition, in the cases where intermediary agents are hired for their migration abroad, they incur financial losses including a housing deposit received pursuant to South Korea's "North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act." However, it is also seen as an opportunity to reside in a third country and to understand both South and North Korean in a new light.

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6

Growth and Identity Reconstruction through Cross-Boundary Experiences

6. Growth and Identity Reconstruction through Cross-Boundary Experiences

This chapter discusses the process of reconstructing and accumulating cross-boundary experiences through the lens of “maturity.” The following are characteristics of North Korean adolescent refugees’ growth through cross-boundary experiences. First, during their specific period as an adolescent, they encounter a variety of experiences in a compact time period. Their cross-boundary experiences are not homogeneous with their life experiences prior to their departure from North Korea. Rather, these experiences challenge their previous ways of thinking and living; such differences encourage North Korean adolescent refugees to question and reflect upon their knowledge, values, and ways of thinking. As a result, their previously held values and thoughts are changed, and integrated, and they develop cognitive/ affective skills, expanding their scope of understanding. Compared to cross-boundary experiences which occur in adulthood, those which occur in one’s adolescent years are able to strongly influence the direction of the rest of their lives, particularly because this is when dramatic physical, cognitive, emotional changes take place.

Second, after settling in the South Korean society, North Korean

adolescent refugees are able to heal their psychological wounds and satisfy various deficiencies incurred while growing up in North Korea, as well as ones incurred in the process of their escape. As a result, they are able to experience stable growth. This process does not occur in a single step. It takes years or decades for North Korean adolescents to transform their previous deficiencies and hardships into motivation for growth. In the process, they routinely experience setbacks. Although many adolescents are able to grow by healing their wounds and satisfying their deficiencies, there are also many adolescents who, even after coming to South Korea, are not given the opportunity to go through the process of healing.

Third, in the process of interpreting their cross-boundary experiences, North Korean adolescent refugees reflect upon and change their cognitive system. Based on such reflection, they then re-interpret themselves, others, and society. Opportunities for introspective reflection, provided through cross-boundary experiences act as a motivation for adolescents to grow. In case studies of North Korean adolescent refugees' lives, their escape from North Korea is an important turning point which is accompanied by reflection on the North Korean society and on their life. For these adolescents who escaped North Korea at a young age, reflections on North Korean society often take place through the South Korean school curriculum, or through the media's perspective on North Korean society. In addition, in the process of adjusting to South Korean society, North

Korean adolescent refugees interact with their South Korean peers or residents and reflect upon their ways of thinking, values, and forms of interaction. After they adjust to South Korean society, they come to critically reflect on South Korean society's characteristics as well as the people's way of lives. Rather than unconditionally accepting the dominant value system in South Korean society, North Korean adolescents reinterpret and critically accept it, reflecting on their experiences abroad and their cross-boundary experiences of escaping and migrating from North Korea.

Various factors affect North Korean adolescent refugees' growth. First, the fundamental element which affects their growth and process of adjusting to South Korean society is the experiences and conditions of their childhood years in North Korea, as well as the associated motivation and signifying process of their decision to cross spatial boundaries. Various factors affect the process of how these adolescent refugees respond to various boundaries faced in their escape from North Korea and in their adaptation to South Korean society. These factors include whether their basic desires were met during their childhood years in North Korea, whether they grew up in a safe and stable environment under the care and love of their protectors, whether they received appropriate school education, etc.

Second, family relations and relations with their significant other affect their growth. Stable family relations and home environment help transform their socio-cultural boundary experiences in South Korean

society into capital for growth. In particular, in the cases of adolescents who left North Korea on their own and live alone in South Korea, the presence of a psychological supporter plays a pivotal role in their growth. At times, these are “long distance” family members in North Korea, other times they are guardians whom they live with in shelters; they can also be teachers, South Korean peers or groups of North Korean adolescent refugees.

Third, increasing occasions of socio-cultural contact, and communication with South Korean peers or residents mean that there are more opportunities to experience the various socio-cultural boundaries that exist in South Korean society. Through new cross-boundary experiences, adolescents face challenges concerning their existing cognitive system and internal assimilation. When these challenges are successfully overcome, they are able to seek internal growth through the re-interpretation of their experiences and changes in their cognitive system. Therefore, actual opportunities to experience socio - cultural boundaries on a daily basis are important in the growth of North Korean adolescent refugees.

Fourth, from a macro perspective, South Korean society’s value system and culture, particularly the social perception and attitudes of acceptance towards North Korean refugees affect adolescent refugees’ growth. They become repressed by the “otherization” of North Korean adolescent refugees, discriminatory attention as well as a culture of exclusivity. In addition, in our adolescent culture, there are countless

areas of exclusion and discrimination such as economic capability, gender, appearance, and cognitive ability. North Korean adolescent refugees not only face boundaries concerning their “North Korean roots,” but also face these boundaries of exclusion and discrimination.

Meanwhile, growth through cross-boundary experience is followed by the reconstruction of one’s identity. From when they depart North Korea and make their way to South Korea through China and a third state, during their settlement in South Korea and adaptation to its way of life and throughout their return to South Korea from a third state as a refugee or a foreign student, North Korean adolescent refugees’ identities change and expand. Depending on their experiences and their interpretation of such experiences, their identities evolve and broaden. The complexities and paths for change of the adolescents’ identities vary significantly depending on each individual.



7

Conclusion

7. Conclusion

This study has explored how North Korean adolescent refugees experience physical, cultural, and social boundaries in the path of escape and migration. In addition, it has also analyzed how those cross-boundary experiences incurred in their adolescent years affect their growth and identity formation in their lives in South Korea or other country of migration.

North Korean adolescent refugees' cross-boundary experiences and the traces left behind show that their identities are a hybrid in nature. Rather than being a negative trait, this hybridity demonstrates a potential for them to create a new identity that goes beyond the standards associated with whether one is a South Korean or a North Korean. When the various forms of identities imbedded in the North Korean adolescent refugees are regarded as elements of coexistence, exchange, and communication rather than something which must be distinguished and selected, their various colors of identities will act as a potential for growth.

The Experiences of Crossing Boundaries and Reconstruction of North Korean Adolescent Refugees' Identities

This research investigates how North Korean adolescent refugees experience territorial and sociocultural boundaries as they undergo the process of migration. The process of North Korean adolescents' departing from spatial, social, and cultural territories of North Korea, entering into those of China or a third country, and settling in South Korea is interpreted in this research as a process of cross-boundary experience. As boundaries, by its very nature differentiate oneself from others, boundary crossing inevitably entails a reconstruction of identity. This research explores how North Korean adolescent refugees experience and react to various boundaries, and how these experiences influence the process of growing into adults as well as the reconstruction of their identities.