

Article

# Crossing and Conversion among North Korean Refugee-Migrants

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**Abstract:** While pivotal in the lives of North Korean refugee-migrants, the role of religion has been largely neglected in most studies. After being exposed to Protestant missionary networks, either while dwelling in Northeast China or en route to the South, about 80 percent of North Korean refugee-migrants arriving in South Korea affiliate themselves with Protestant churches. This implies that they are exposed to Protestant missionary networks either while dwelling in Northeast China or en route to the South. Some who leave South Korea for other countries or seek asylum in non-Korean societies develop their religiosity in various ways and for various reasons, as part of their aspirations, adjustment to new homes, and search for meaning. The present study aims to address this literature gap. Based on long-term ethnographic research with North Korean refugee-migrants living in South Korea, China, and Europe, the two ethnographic vignettes presented in this article represent those who are in Germany and the United Kingdom by discussing the religious encounters and conversions through which North Korean refugee-migrants make their lives and futures. It draws attention to religion as a lens through which the migrants' negotiation of meanings, new selves and homelands, and hopes for the future can be better illuminated. The findings of this study suggest that when North Korean Christians experience religious conversion during their perilous journeys, it not only helps them to negotiate a new sense of belonging in their host societies, but it also mobilizes them to contest the existing order of things.

**Keywords:** North Korean refugee-migrants; crossing; religious conversion; aspirations

## 1. Introduction

North Korean refugee-migrants have witnessed dramatic progress in the Korean peace process since the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. A series of inter-Korean summits and unprecedented North Korean-US meetings were both sensational and (partly) substantial. Yet, it is generally acknowledged that about seven decades of antagonisms and international power dynamics are likely too complicated to allow any major structural changes to be accomplished easily. Moreover, we have learned from the German case that the reunification of a divided nation is not merely a dramatic one-time event, marked in that case by the collapse of the wall. It is rather a long-term process of negotiating new subjectivities and a new sense of belonging (an *Innere Einheit*<sup>1</sup> or inner unity)—as an invisible but strongly felt cultural border can last much longer than expected (Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States (FGC) 2019).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The German term *Innere Einheit* is translated into Korean as *Maŭmŭi t'onghap*, or the integration of mind, signifying that the social integration of a once-divided nation is not merely a matter of politico-economic reforms but rather a process of mutual understanding and recognition among peoples who have been accustomed to different cultural systems.

<sup>2</sup> "Dissatisfaction is palpable in the new federal states regarding political matters. According to a survey recently conducted for the Federal Government, 57% of eastern Germans feel like second-class citizens. Only about 38% of those surveyed in

In this respect, North Korean refugee-migrants have been often understood as the first unifiers whose resettlement process in the South might foretell what a reunified Korea or North-South Korean social integration would and should look like.<sup>3</sup> South Korean government has improved its policy and social welfare system to support the northerners from a socialist country as they resettle in South Korean neo-liberal capitalism. However, preceding studies have documented how they face and try to overcome unexpected social discriminations in everyday interactions with South Koreans (Jeon 2000, 2007; Lee et al. 2000; Suh 2002; Yoon 2002; Chung 2004, 2008; Kim 2004; Choo 2006; Chung et al. 2006; Kang 2006; Lankov 2006; Yoon and Lim 2007; Kim 2009). While their economic and social assimilation is given priority, the roles and effects of religion in their migration and resettlement process have rarely been discussed in both practical and scholarly discourses.

Yet, previous statistical surveys uncovered that, startlingly, more than 80 percent of North Korean refugee-migrants identified themselves as Protestant Christian when they arrived in South Korea, and more than 60 percent of them continue to attend the church (Jeon 2007). Given the fact that religion in general and Christianity in particular are unpopular, though not officially prohibited, in North Korea, it is fair to say that they have religious experiences en route to South Korea. In this respect, I argue that their migration from China through neighboring countries to South Korea should be seen as a “Christian passage” in which the North Korean refugee-migrants interact with humane institutional and divine powers (Jung 2015). My empirical data suggest that it is mainly evangelical missionaries and churches that provide secret shelters for the refugees in the Sino-North Korean border area and help them escape from China through other countries to South Korea. As newborn followers, they tend to be positioned lower than established South Koreans in church hierarchy. However, my ethnographic study suggests that religion empowers the born-again North Koreans to claim leadership roles in a national evangelization project (*minjok bokŭmhwa*), which is believed to be a God’s calling to Korean Protestant churches, and further extend their transnational mobility (Jung 2015, 2016). In this respect, this essay sheds light on the religious encounters and experiences of North Korean refugee-migrants. It draws attention to religion as a lens through which the migrants’ negotiation of meanings, new selves and homelands, and hopes for the future can be better illuminated.

By the term of “passage” (Austin-Broos 2003; Hefner 1993), I want to highlight North Korean migration as an ongoing process of what Thomas Tweed (2006) calls “dwelling” and “crossing” in spatiotemporal dimensions, in which various social actors, institutions, and the divine are involved. This passage is not only the migrants’ geographical relocation from one place to another, but also ideological-spiritual transformation from Juche Idea, the North Korean official ruling philosophy, to evangelical Christianity. North Korean society tends to associate this form of Christianity with the imperial US in particular and an opiate of the masses in general. Indeed, it is mainly evangelical right-wing Protestant churches and missionaries in South Korea that provide the second largest material and emotional/affectionate supports after the government in South Korea, operate secret rescue projects from China to the South, and collaborate with some of them to organize anti-North Korean campaigns. Given the tension between North Korea and the United States, North Korean migrants’ religious conversions to Christianity are likely to be intertwined with a political connotation. It does not mean, however, that North Korean migrant Christians follow South Korean form of religiosity without a doubt. I argue, as briefly aforementioned, that North Korean migrants negotiate their own religiosity while criticizing South Korean “hypocritical” self-centric spirituality, reinterpreting their “perilous journey” with biblical knowledge and vocabularies, syncretizing a Cold War inflected binarism with Christian

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the east perceive reunification to be a success” (Federal Government Commissioner for the New Federal States (FGC) 2019, p. 13).

<sup>3</sup> North Korean refugee-migrants’ subjectivities have changed according to the political characteristics of South Korean state regimes. The shifting names, from *kwisun yongsa* (defecting heroes) to *t’albukja* (escapees from the North), *pukhanit’al jumin* (residents fled North Korea), *saet’ŏmin* (new settler), and *t’albukmin* (North Korean defectors) all have particular political connotations, closely related to the ways in which the governmental compensation scales have changed over the years. See Byung-Ho Chung (2008) for more discussion.

dichotomy (i.e., good vs. evil), or envisioning an alternative future with rather “global” perspectives, to name a few.

North Korean refugee-migrants’ crossings are accompanied by a generative force, which seems to push both the international refugee regime and the migrants themselves into a liminal space: A spatiotemporal zone where nothing is precisely determined. It is an ambivalent and often precarious space, where gradual or radical changes can take place in individuals’ lives, which might, in turn, trigger larger social transformations. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, these transformations are multilayered and multilateral. Transnational migration inherently coincides with continuity and discontinuity in all respects of the daily lives of migrants and communities.

My research is thus engaged in larger theoretical, theological, and practical discussions about the religious conversions often associated with the border crossing of North Korean refugee-migrants. As part of an ongoing follow-up research project, I continue carrying out multi-sited fieldwork in China, Korea, America, and Europe. This article pays a particular focus on the migrants’ meaning making in Europe. Based on long-term relationships with North Korean refugee-migrants who have left their homes since the mid-1990s, this research documents the life trajectories of those who are currently in the United Kingdom and Germany.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The ethnographic vignettes documented in this essay stem from an ongoing research project on North Korean migrant’s life trajectories with focus on religion and nationalism. Such anthropological methods as participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations are employed to acquire the lived experiences of my interlocutors in South Korea, China, and Europe from the late 1990s on. I have interacted with more than 200 individuals in diverse gender, age, and social statuses in different regions. Such anthropological encounters resulted in my earlier works and further guided me to follow up with some individuals. Over time, I came to establish long-term relationships with these people. It was worthwhile to better grasp the processes of their life transformation—and the meanings they come to negotiate and articulate, though often ambivalent—while crossing physical and cultural borders. It is equally valuable to develop a trustful relationship, beyond that of a temporal researcher–informant contact, with such vulnerable people as North Korean refugee-migrants.

Many of them worry about a possible disadvantage (e.g., political persecution) that their family members left behind in the North would receive. In particular, those who are in Europe are afraid of being deported back to South Korea when the local authorities discover that they became naturalized already in South Korea. For their safety, I did not tape-record our conversations without permission but wrote them down during or after the interviews, only when the participants felt it was convenient. As following sections show, my interview data can be seen as a product of long-term relationships and multiple conversations, which are discussed in larger social and transnational contexts. In this article, I will present ethnographic vignettes portraying two of my North Korean interlocutors and their life trajectories, one now living in the United Kingdom and the other in Germany. I admit that these individual narratives can only afford us “partial truths” (Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 7)—and yet they can also give us a deeper sense of the ways in which vulnerable refugee-migrants have struggled and searched for meaningful homes and identities while interacting with both secular regimes and discourses of faith.

## 3. North Korean Migration and Post-Multicultural and Post-Secular Europe

North Korean migration cannot be discussed without considering the national partition between North and South Korea. Unlike German division, which was implemented as a punishment for war crimes, it was Korea, instead of the imperial Japan, that the Big Powers occupied and divided into North and South Korea in 1945. The consequence was devastating. The Korean War (1950–1953) destroyed the peninsula and separated families. It only ceased with the Armistice Agreement between North Korea and the United Nations led by the United States, meaning that even after seven decades,

the peninsula still technically remains at war. The inter-Korean border, the so-called Demilitarized Zone was dubbed “the scariest place on earth” by one of the US presidents, as it is indeed fully armed and hardly permeable. Except for the Sunshine Policy period (ca. 1998–2007) and the recent summit meetings (2018), the flows of people, goods, letters, TV programs, and so on across the border are nearly frozen. Yet, both states have fostered a myth of Korean ethnic homogeneity.

Soon after the socialist states collapsed in Europe, North Korea began suffering a great famine that took about 1 million lives in the mid-1990s. North Korean people crossed the Sino-North Korean border, not the inter-Korean border, in search of food and a better life. Among them, the number of those who took a perilous journey out of China to South Korea increased at a rapid pace. With fake passports or no documents, they followed broker-missionary networks or a mysterious “light,” “wind,” “voice,” or “instinct,” that functioned like a compass, as some of my interlocutors testified, one place to another: Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Mongolia, Russia, and finally to South Korea. South Korea is prosperous (as seen in Chinese TV or DVDs smuggled to North Korea) and provides South Korean IDs and social welfare packages with which they are expected to assimilate into the South Korean capitalist system. Yet, “discontent” characterizes their life in the South (Song and Bell 2019). As of today, among about 34,000 newcomers from the North, around 3000–4000 have remigrated from the South to other countries, mainly in the West, and more than 100 returned via China to the North (Chung 2014).

Besides the self-reflexive criticism that tends to view the northerners as victims of social discrimination in the South, some anthropological studies pay attention to their transnational or global strategies to acquire social capital, enhance economic opportunities, and further trigger larger social changes. By the term “penetrant transnationalism,” Chung sheds light on the ways in which “the illegal transnational movements of people” like North Korean migrants, along with information and goods, can “induce changes in the involved countries” (Chung 2014, p. 330). In a similar vein, their aspirations to acquire “cosmopolitan habitus” or “global citizenship” are appreciated beyond the nationalist framework (Jung et al. 2017; Park 2020). Yet, those who remigrated to such western countries as the United Kingdom come to face both another set of opportunities and problems. English education for themselves and their children would be one of the most substantial benefits, whereas, on the other side of everyday encounters, they face uncertainty if they are not granted refugee status and in the job market (Song and Bell 2019). In such alternative perspectives on North Korean migration, what is still understudied is how migrants negotiate a new meaning-making system, in particular religious or ideological stances, in the process of migration and cultural adaptation in host societies.

In Europe, North Korean refugee-migrants are nearly invisible in comparison with the large number of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to estimate how many North Korean refugee-migrants are wandering the world in search of safety and better opportunities for themselves and their children. Moreover, the number of those who are successfully recognized as refugees in Europe is quite low. Around the time when the Bush administration in the United States issued the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004, European Union countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, and Belgium began to witness the arrival of migrants who claimed status as North Korean asylum seekers. This section focuses on the ways in which North Korean refugee-migrants negotiate the meanings of the resettlement process in Europe, in particular the United Kingdom and Germany. More specifically, I shed light on the ways in which they adjust to or contest local socio-political predicaments, such as the increasing conservative backlash

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<sup>4</sup> Eurostat (<http://ec.europa.eu>) provides European statistics in which numbers of asylum applicants in the European Union are well documented. In 2019, about 676,000 asylum seekers applied in the 27 member states of the EU; one can recognize that the number of those who fled Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Columbia is higher than any other countries in the table, and North Korean asylum applications are too small to be listed in the table. See [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Citizenships\\_of\\_first-time\\_asylum\\_applicants\\_\(non-EU-27\\_citizens\),\\_EU-27,\\_2018\\_and\\_2019\\_\(thousands\).png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Citizenships_of_first-time_asylum_applicants_(non-EU-27_citizens),_EU-27,_2018_and_2019_(thousands).png).

against the post-secular tendency (Habermas 2010) and emergence of multilayered diversities that have accompanied the influx of migrant-refugees into Europe.

Jürgen Habermas (2010) uses the term “post-secular” to describe both the shifting social order under which religion has retreated from the public sphere and the ways in which religious and secular people and cultures can peacefully coexist. “Post-secularism,” however, makes sense especially in the context of a European mode of modernization that is believed to be at once teleological and universal. As Peter van der Veer (2015) convinces us, this sort of modernization-secularization theory should be understood as a peculiar historical product of Europe and cannot be assumed to be true of most Asian modernities. Not surprisingly, some North Korean refugee-migrants who converted to evangelical Protestantism tend to rationalize South Korean wealth as a consequence of the Christian God’s sacred blessing (Jung 2016), just as a South Korean Protestant discourse juxtaposes between a poverty-driven suffering in the past and a blessed prosperity in the present (Harkness 2014). Empirical studies and some field practitioners discover that South Korean and Korean–American missionaries enthusiastically disseminate in their mission fields, such as Africa or Southeast Asia, a repertoire of Korean modern history in which the poverty of a painful past vanished through Christianization of the society (Han 2015). In this theological view, Europe has become secularized and is now “stained” by non-Christian religion (i.e., Islam specifically) and materialism. Thus, it is not unusual to hear claims from current South Korean migrant churches and missionaries that one of their sacred callings is to revive Christian spirituality in Europe. The following case studies will show, however, the religious differences that can develop among North Korean refugee-migrants who have resettled in host societies with divergent refugee policies.

In the context of the European refugee regime, I examine individual North Koreans’ life trajectories: Peter currently resides with his wife and children in New Malden in the United Kingdom, while Mr. Kim and his family live in a southern city in Germany. In order to protect their privacy, all the names appearing in this essay are pseudonyms, and some detailed information is omitted.

#### 4. North Koreans in England: “Be Ready!”

“I believe that North Korean evangelization can revive spirituality in England and beyond . . . North Korean refugee-migrants are now awakening the United Kingdom, which has been dying.”

The soft yet convincing voice of Peter, in his late 40s, delivers this idea, which he came to have while living in England. In his account, North Korean refugee-migrants are no longer “fake refugees” who were once naturalized as South Korean citizens but escaped the South (*T’alnam*) in pursuit of better economic opportunities, overcoming social discrimination and acquiring “cosmopolitan habitus” (Jung et al. 2017), nor helpless victims of the “dictatorship,” as claimed in the refugee application form—mere newcomers positioned low in the class and ethnic hierarchy of the Korean ethnic enclave of New Malden (Song and Bell 2019). Instead, he has come to view himself and his fellow North Koreans as missionaries who have been called to revitalize the Holy Spirit in both his host and home countries.

His empowered subjectivity is tied to his spiritual map in which North Korea and England are interconnected and diffused into one another, as if the physical territories have been made liquid by the Holy Spirit. His account seems to illuminate that he and his fellow North Korean converts are positioned in the epicenter from which “religious impulses are decentered and float like dandelion seeds in the breeze of the cultural imaginary” (Csordas, p. 4). Although their asylum applications are still pending on the desk of an immigration officer in UK, and they are perceived as national traitors in their home country, in reality, Peter stresses that they are serving both lands in the name of God. In the same vein, time for Peter is not linear but rather parallel and interactive. The present-day spatiotemporal realm of his host country is inseparable from that of the future home that thrives in his imagination. The distinction between home and host countries becomes ambiguous in the context of his aspirations, an ambiguity that cannot be simply attributed to a kind of flexibility in practicing transnational citizenship (cf. Ong 1999). Instead, his religious conviction should be understood in light of his life-changing encounters across borders.

Peter crossed the Sino-North Korean border, the Tumen River, with his family in 1999 when the great famine devastated his hometown. I met Peter and his family for the first time in the summer of 2000 at a Christian church in Yenji, China. His family attended Sunday worship while staying at a secret shelter provided by the church with monetary support from overseas Korean churches. Our second encounter took place at the Hanawon, the South Korean facility for newly arrived North Korean refugee-migrants in Ansŏng (or Anseong) city. As he later told me, his family made their “secondary migration”—a journey to “escape the South” (or *t’alnam*)—in 2007, when about 300 North Korean refugee-migrants left for Europe without notice to South Korean authorities and friends. I still remember, when I came across him in China, the mixed feelings evident in his face—full of worry, as well as some curiosity, about South Korean life—brighter when he considered the prospect of safety in the South, less so when he was reminded of the uncertainty of his new life. Religion was not an issue that much concerned us in our informal conversations.

However, he later said that his faith became sincerer during the first five years of the long initial resettlement period in England. He was sent to reside in a neighborhood near Manchester where Muslim refugee-migrants were concentrated, and thus he “felt awkward,” as if he did not belong there. Also, there was no Christian church nearby. Instead, he listened to CDs of a South Korean pastor, meditated and prayed daily with his family, and came to deepen his understanding of the Bible.

He now understands this “temporary” settlement period as a liminal situation in which he was sent to encounter a non-Christian community as a spiritual challenge to religious pluralism, a challenge he later acknowledged to be God’s providence. He believed that God led him to become familiar with the Muslim population in order to develop a sense of how to evangelize them in the near future. With this conviction in mind, he moved to secure better economic opportunities and his children’s education in New Malden, where about 500 North Korean refugee-migrants had joined the existing Korean ethnic community. As preceding studies have elaborated, when the British government reduced social welfare benefits for refugees—a strategy to reduce the number of refugee applications that caused a substantial number of Korean ethnic Chinese migrants employed by South Korean entrepreneurs to return to China—North Korean newcomers joined the labor force and became active contributors to the Korean ethnic community. HaeRan Shin (2017) documents the dynamics of increasing diversity negotiated and enhanced by the arrival of North Korean newcomers in the existing transnational Korean ethnic enclaves in New Malden. In the words of Steven Vertovec (2007), their presence contributes to the “super-diversity” of England. The Korean ethnic community has become more heterogeneous in terms of countries of origin, immigration backgrounds and consequent entitlements, restrictions to their rights, divergent legal, social, and economic status, and religious practices, to name a few.

For Peter, such internal diversities within the same ethnic community and the multicultural landscape a British city like New Malden exhibits are likely experienced in a different manner, so to speak, from secular and spiritual points of view. First of all, he states that North Korean refugee-migrants are not especially worried about being discriminated against as “North Korean” by the “native” British people, by whom they are all treated as either Korean or Asian (Lee and Lee 2014). In other words, they come to acknowledge that racial and ethnic distinctions are relational. While North Koreans encounter social discrimination in South Korea, in western societies, they tend to be lumped in with other Asians as one of many ethnic minorities. Also, despite the internal dynamics of the Korean community, within the super-diversity of UK society at large, the British people see Koreans as a model minority. At the same time, as aforementioned, North Koreans contribute to the existing Korean community by actively participating in church and other socializing activities (Shin 2017). In this respect, North Korean refugee-migrants like Peter and his family find their self-esteem improved.

More significant is his increasing role in his religious community. Since moving to New Malden, he hosts a biweekly Bible meeting of North Koreans who serve as core members of their own community and actively participate in a street ministry, together with a group of younger North and South Korean Christians, in districts where Muslims are concentrated. Korean street ministries are not always welcome in South Korea or overseas because of aggressive tactics that often violate

local regulations for behavior in public places. Nonetheless, Peter's Korean street ministry seems effective, both to the participant worshippers and to British people. Peter told me that he and the young people feel more empowered and blessed every weekend when they finish the street ministry. While Muslim missionaries hold a counter-ministry near the Korean church group, Christians who have been unchurched for a while approach the Koreans to applaud, some with tears of joy in their eyes. Thus, whenever they "go out for street ministry," Peter says, "we become more convinced that God is with us" in the quest to revive Christianity in the United Kingdom.

Peter does not shy from criticizing "scholars and researchers from South Korea, England, Germany, and the like [who] come to interview me, mainly focusing on human rights in North Korea, current living conditions [as refugees in England], and so on. But none of them ask me about religion, which I believe is the most important in considering North Korea." What he meant to point out is how most social scientific projects are bounded by a secular framework. He identifies himself, however, as a servant of Jesus Christ, and believes that he is called to be prepared for the reformation of his homeland. Here, his religious belief and practice allow him to amalgamate his present host society (i.e., England) with his future homeland (i.e., North Korea).

"North Korea is no longer the same place where I was treated like less than an animal [*jimsŭngboda motan*]," he says. "Now the people have gotten to know the taste of money [*donmasŭl dŭrida*]. The market is everywhere, and thus society is ready to change at a rapid pace when Christianity arrives." Unlike many North Korean refugee-migrants' testimonies, in which North Korea is depicted as fixed, unchanged, and uncivilized, Peter admits that there has been radical change in his home country since he left about 20 years ago. Its economy relies on the market instead of the central distribution of goods. Such marketization is for him a sign that a fundamental transformation can be accomplished with the arrival of Christianity.

One might ask what form of Christianity he means. First, his belief in the intimate relationship between the market economy and Christianity is one of the shared discourses among some North Korean converts on spiritual warfare on North Korea. This Weberian perspective is still disseminated by conservative churches in South Korea (Harkness 2014). In this view, capitalism and democracy as a politico-economic structure can only be completed with the people's spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit.

However, North Korean society does not necessarily have to transform itself according to a South Korean form of evangelical Christianity. Instead, my ethnographic findings suggest that Peter and his fellow North Korean refugee-migrants aspire to develop and bring with them to their homeland a diasporic, heterogeneous form of religiosity. Peter distinguishes himself from some conservative right-wing anti-North Korean activists and evangelists by saying that he supports the inter-Korean summit meetings and prays for a successful outcome from the North Korean–US relationship as well. What he aspires for in faith can be called borderless and peaceful interactions and relations among the various states and groups of people.

With little doubt, there is a schism between Peter's aspirations and realities. He can neither visit his homeland anytime soon nor freely interact with North Korean embassy officers in the streets, malls, or restaurants of New Malden; he experiences a language barrier with his children, who speak English more and more and are starting to lose their North Korean identity; and, similar to his previous life in South Korea, he must work hard to live, though racial and social discrimination is thankfully rare.

Nonetheless, he believes that all these lived experiences in the United Kingdom are part of God's plan, according to which he and his friends are being prepared to return to their homeland at some point in the future. By his account, Yenji in China, Seoul in South Korea, Manchester and New Malden in the UK, the places where he has been moving to search for a new life with his family, appear to be temporal yet special fields of sacred training for God's greater plan, one in which his future home and current host society play vital roles and his return home is determined.

## 5. “Genuine” North Korean Refugees in Germany: State and Christian Morality

“I just passed the exam!”

This short message was delivered with a photo of a new German driving license, on which a birthplace—Hamgyong-Namdo in North Korea—and a new host German city’s name were printed. It was from Mr. Kim, a migrant in his mid-40s living with his wife and three children in the southern city of Baden-Wuerttemberg, where all North Korean refugee applicants are sent upon arrival in Germany. We had been exchanging text messages via Kakaotalk, a popular South Korean messenger app,<sup>5</sup> for about three years after meeting for the first time.<sup>6</sup> He still shares photos and text messages with me on special occasions, including the birth of his third baby, getting a job, obtaining a driving license, his children’s birthdays, and New Year’s and Christmas greetings. In a sense, I have witnessed his family’s *Soziale Integration* (social integration) process in Germany. Also, at this moment, he wanted to celebrate with me his successful driving test, which meant he could drive anywhere until 2034.

His driving license seemed to mean that his “genuine” North Koreanness was finally fully recognized by German authorities, for the first time in his seven-year stay in the country. Besides the refugee screening process, more crucial evidence proving Mr. Kim and his wife’s “genuineness” would be their homemade meals. Whenever I visited, they served northeastern Chinese dishes. In addition, their dialect is only lightly mixed with a South Korean accent. However, it is fair to say that I was not fully convinced of their “legitimacy”—a term I find problematic—in the first place.

As mentioned in Peter’s case in the previous section, nearly all North Korean asylum seekers in Europe first obtain South Korean passports, a fact they largely keep concealed in their new host societies. If they come to feel uncertain or fail to be accepted as refugees, they are able to use these passports to return to South Korea or to migrate somewhere else (Jung et al. 2017). Those who come through South Korea tend to remain there for some time and often adopt South Korean hair and fashion styles, not to mention the most advanced smart phones. One of the social workers in charge of managing a refugee camp in Stuttgart told me that German authorities are increasingly surprised by the behavior, skills, and even appearance of North Korean refugee applicants. As he explained, many North Koreans in the camp “don’t look like they came from North Korea, a dictatorship where they were oppressed. They are not hesitant to request what they want, and they seem well-educated. And even the young couples [in the camp] speak fluent English!” This account implies some prejudice about North Korean society and people, along with a certain degree of suspicion about their place of origin.

In fact, a large number of those who were granted asylum as North Korean refugees earlier in the 2000s were indeed ethnic Koreans from China, namely Ch’sönjok. Thus, the difference between “fake” and “genuine” North Korean refugees is relational; previously, Korean–Chinese migrants who pretended to be North Korean refugees were considered “fake” because their place of origin was China rather than North Korea. In recent years, however, the category of “fake” came to include North Korean refugee-migrants who became naturalized as South Korean and then claimed refugee status in Europe or elsewhere. Among North Korean refugee-migrants in Germany, the distinction between “fake” and “genuine” is more likely to be made between North Koreans and non-North Koreans such as Korean–Chinese and is rarely used to differentiate among North Korean refugee-migrants themselves.

Meanwhile, the distinction between “genuine” and “fake” refugees is relevant to any discussion of migrants’ differing proximities to their imagined homes, which is in turn affected by the contents of their aspirations and the differing approaches to religion among divergent North Korean refugee-migrants. One hidden reason for migrating to European countries is the assumption that, as one of my North Korean interlocutors in Germany told me, “Europe is relatively neutral or less negative in its relationship

<sup>5</sup> Nearly all North Korean refugee-migrants use this Kakaotalk app in Europe.

<sup>6</sup> I could not often make the long-distance trip to his home, about 650 km from Berlin, so Kakaotalk or phone calls were the main communication means for us.

with North Korea. So, when we return to the North, we assume we will be safe." Here, the physical distance is less salient than the ideological distance that was produced in the Cold War period between their new host societies and their homeland.

Mr. Kim and his wife have a similar perspective, stressing that "unlike South Korea or the United States, Germany used to be perceived as a good and allied country in the North." The positive impression of Germany among North Koreans stems from frequent economic and human resource exchanges with the former East Germany (DDR), the popularity of socialist German films screened in the North, and familiarity with German technology. Thus, Mr. Kim expects that his German affiliation will help his homecoming go well (*ilöpsül köda*), when the situation in the Korean peninsula improves. In addition, Mr. Kim feels more confident in his positive anticipations than those who have undertaken a "second migration," mainly because he is a "genuine" North Korean refugee who has never gone to South Korea. In order to return home in glory someday—while allowing his children to stay in Germany—he has been doing his best to integrate into German society. The following is a brief summary of his life trajectory, which will give a sense of how his experiences have differed from those of Peter in the UK.

Mr. Kim and his wife have three children, all of whom were born in Germany after the couple submitted their refugee application to the local authorities. Before Germany, they lived for about 15 years in China. According to their account, they left Hamgyong-Namdo as a newly married couple, as they saw no hope there after their parents passed away. "We were lucky to be hired at a lumber factory in a mountain area" in China, Mr. Kim recounted. "A Korean-Chinese man was running the factory, and the *Sajangnim* (CEO) treated me like a son, because he had lost his own son, who was about the same age as me. My wife was working at the factory restaurant." Thanks to his "foster father," the CEO of the factory, the couple was able to live in the same place for a long period. However, like most North Korean undocumented migrants in China, they were vulnerable to the omnipresent threat of the police, who could arrest and deport them anytime, despite the foster father's protection. When the threat of arrest became imminent, the foster father hired a reliable (but expensive) broker, who arranged for them to be sent to Beijing. From there they traveled with fake Chinese passports, pretending to be members of a tourist group to Europe. Upon arrival at an airport (he did not remember which one), a driver gave them a ride to a building and told them, "Just walk inside and report that you are from North Korea." It was, explained Mr. Kim, a door-to-door brokered migration provided by his foster father.

At the German refugee camp, they were interrogated individually, over and over. One of the painful questions they were asked was why they did not have even a single child during their long stay in China. Mrs. Kim spoke at this point with intense emotion. "I explained to them our situation in China. We didn't even take our shoes off to sleep at night because of the fear. How could we even think of having a baby in such a dangerous situation?" She continued to describe this moment in the interview; since it was a sensitive topic, a female German social worker came into the office to make her feel more comfortable. "But I couldn't hold back my emotion anymore. Tears were pouring from my eyes, and I could not stop crying as all these past negative memories vividly replayed in my brain in just a few seconds." A female Korean-German translator, a former nurse volunteering for the refugee applicants from North Korea, was present, but even without her translation, the German social worker seemed to understand and sympathize with Mrs. Kim's emotional stories.

Germany began receiving the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers in EU's Schengen Area when the chancellor, Angela Merkel, declared an "Open Door" policy in 2015. However Germany shows local diversities in realizing this ambitious plan. The city district to which North Korean asylum seekers are all sent is relatively generous, thanks to support from the city mayor (a member of the Green Party) and local civil organizations, including volunteers mobilized by online campaigns. The South Korean church community in the city proper also takes part in social support networks for migrants, providing substantial services like Korean-German translation for the refugee application process, grocery shopping, and helping to meet various needs of North Korean newcomers during

the initial stages of resettlement. Mr. Kim and his wife went to church with other North Korean refugee-migrants who were staying at what they called the “money” camp—apartments or rooms either newly built or leased by the government for refugee-asylum applicants. Mr. Kim came across another North Korean, about his age and from the same hometown, and they became friends. However, Mr. Kim and his wife found it strange that other North Korean refugee-migrants did not look like them; although they claimed to be North Koreans, they all had the most advanced smartphones and wore stylish clothes with fashionable hairstyles. “I first thought, how is this possible? Are they all from elite backgrounds in the North?” says Mr. Kim, who later came to realize that these other North Korean refugee-migrants, including his hometown friend’s family, had all arrived via South Korea.

Quite a few of them actually ended up returning to South Korea when they realized they could not expect a good result from their refugee applications. The reality they encountered in Germany turned out to be quite different from what brokers had led them to expect. First, the refugee application process took much longer than expected; second, German authorities, similar to other western countries, encouraged them to go to South Korea instead; third, the German language, which is a key requirement in the social integration process, is indeed difficult to learn; and last but not least, unlike North Korean refugee-migrants in New Malden, South Korean migrants have not established a so-called “Korea town” where newcomers can find job opportunities, not only in Baden-Wuerttemberg but also elsewhere in Germany. Thus, North Korean refugee applicants must rely on the German social welfare package equally provided for all refugee-asylum seekers.

Those who had lived in South Korea seemed to be disappointed by seemingly worse conditions in Germany than in South Korea. Meanwhile, some of my interlocutors, especially single mothers with teenaged children, tended to endure the uncertain situation for the sake of their children’s education. Even one of the mothers whose son spoke fluent English—evidence of South Korean afterschool programs—told me, “Here they [her son] can learn German, English, and another European language at school.” This account implies that the mothers wanted their children to become more competitive in globalized capitalism but preferred the less stressful environment of German schools to the high-pressure approach of South Korean education. In other words, one of the essential motivations leading North Korean refugee-migrants to “escape the South” was to help their children build successful careers in western countries. The mothers, however, were not certain how many years they would have to wait until their refugee applications were accepted—or rejected. Thus, returning to South Korea remained a viable option for them.

In the meantime, Mr. Kim and his wife did not consider going to South Korea themselves, deciding to adjust to Germany instead. They started having children and took advantage of all the available resources provided by government social welfare programs for housing, healthcare, children’s education, and job training, along with local volunteer networks and the local offices of international organizations. While relying on governmental subsidies, they finished the basic German language courses required for *Soziale Integration*, and then Mr. Kim took a job training program (*Ausbildung*) to become a certified skilled worker, while his wife attended driving school. One notable example of local civilian support was the family-like care provided by an elderly German woman, who committed herself to help Kim’s family as if she were the “foster grandmother” of Kim’s three children. In addition to helping them during the refugee screening process, helping them learn German, bringing the children to regular health checkups and so on, shortly after Mrs. Kim passed the driving test in 2018, she bought the family a secondhand minivan.

What is significant at this local level of the collaborative governance of refugees and asylum seekers in Germany is the relatively minor role of the church for Mr. Kim’s family. Secularization theory describes a historical power change in Europe in which the public functions of the church were taken over by the state, as religion retreated to the private sphere and became a matter of individual choice (Casanova 1994, 2006). The German people largely became unchurched as well. However, religious organizations are financed by church or worship taxes imposed on the members of religious congregations and are tasked by the government with providing social welfare for people in need.

One cannot disagree with the impression that Christian norms and virtues are embedded to various degrees, according to the regions, within the daily culture of Germany.

Interestingly, Mr. Kim identified his family as self-converted Christians, as he decided to bring his children to a local German church for moral education. They attended Korean church from time to time—a long-distance trip by train—with other North Korean refugee-migrants in Stuttgart during the initial period of settlement. The church played the role of an ethnic center, a contact zone where North Korean refugee-migrants could see each other and obtain local information and useful bits of help while interacting with South Korean migrants. However, it did not go well in every respect for the northerners. The physical distance to attend church was one of the fundamental obstacles. More serious were issues with social relationships. Although some volunteers helped the newcomers from the North considerably, Mr. Kim developed a negative impression of the church pastor. When his friend from the same hometown asked the pastor to issue a kind of church document, the pastor not only rejected the request, but also expressed some prejudiced attitudes toward North Korean refugee-migrants. Mr. Kim was so disappointed with this reaction that he stopped going to the Korean church. Instead, he is currently attending a German church in the district.

“I understand neither what the pastor’s sermons are about, nor the Korean translation of the Bible,” Mr. Kim says. “We pray in our own ways. It is difficult for us to follow, but I think it’s all good for my children.” It is not surprising that he encounters a language barrier when trying to understand the contents of the Bible in German. However, the fact that he finds it difficult to grasp the Korean translation of the Bible seems to prove that he was not exposed to South Korean missionary networks while in China. Korean Bibles are widely distributed in Northeast China, particularly in Yanbian, the Korean–Chinese Autonomous Prefecture (Han 2013). During my fieldwork in that area, I witnessed North Korean border crossers in secret shelters run by Protestant missionaries struggling to understand the antiquated Korean language used in the Bibles they were given (Jung 2015). It would appear that, like them, Mr. Kim is simply struggling to understand the Korean translation of the Bible.

As time went by, my North Korean interlocutors perceived some similarities between what they had learned about Kim Il-Sung in the North and the way in which Jesus is presented in the Bible. As one of them said to me, “It is not difficult to understand the Bible when you replace Jesus or God with Kim Il-Sung.”<sup>7</sup> For his part, Mr. Kim believes that religion will help his children grow up with proper morality in Germany. “One day when I was passing through an underground passage on my way back home from work, I came across German teenagers. They have piercings and tattoos on their bodies, which for me look ugly and immoral,” said Mr. Kim. “So, I suddenly felt that I should take my children to church. The church would at least help them not go wrong, wouldn’t it?” He believes that church can be relied on to provide a moral education, while school might lead his children to be too individualistic, too liberal. Church strikes him as a communal place where the familial order and culture can be transmitted to the next generation, albeit in a cosmopolitan, heterogeneous form, as their children will grow up in Germany.

Mr. Kim and his wife stress that they would return to Hamgyong-Namdo whenever they got the opportunity, even in the last moments of their lives. However, they insist that their children should stay in Germany. In this respect, Mr. Kim seems to consider religion instrumental for his children to become moral and model North Korean–German citizens. For the parents, church provides a way to develop knowledge of German traditions and therefore signifies both their aspiration to satisfy the social integration policy of Germany and the cosmopolitan subject-making project they have undertaken in preparation for their homecoming in glory at some indefinite point in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> In the summer of 2000, when I was visiting a secret shelter in a mountainous area near Yenji, China, I spoke with a group of North Korean border crossers, who started talking about what they had come to know about Christianity. One of them remarked on the similarities between Christianity and Kim Il-Sung worship.

## 6. Discussion: Homemaking and Religion

I have documented two distinctive life stories among North Korean refugee-migrants in Europe; Peter in London and Mr. Kim's family in Stuttgart proper. Their life courses are still in the process of transformation through transnational migration from Far East to West, from the socialist to the liberal, from the famine-scarred homeland to the relatively prosperous foreign land, and so forth. Both Peter and Mr. Kim were in their 40s and committed to receiving refugee status so that they could secure both themselves and their wives and children. Given the fact that European countries have become reluctant to accept North Korean refugees, but instead prefer to deport them to South Korea, they are both uncertain whether they can continue to make their homes in the UK or Germany, respectively.

In Europe, as the so-called refugee crisis occurs, some recent studies discover that increasing numbers of Muslim asylum seekers convert to Christianity (Kéri and Sleiman 2017; Stadlbauer 2019). Whether their conversion is authentic or instrumental for securing their refugee applications is still debatable as shown throughout religious history. Religious encounters and conversion experiences for refugee-migrants are inherently complicated and never separable from politico-economic reasons and contexts (see cf. Austin-Broos 2003; Hefner 1993; Rambo 1993; van der Veer 1996). Drawing on the preceding literature on religion as a lens, my ethnographic vignettes above try to give a sense of how North Korean refugee-migrants come to reconceptualize and reconfigure their understanding of home while interacting with local refugee policy, the international human rights regime, and religious conversion in different registers.

The concept of home is thus discussed in both spatiotemporal and sacred dimensions. Geographically speaking, the home and homeland in migration and diaspora studies appear to be both mobile and sedentary: Mobile because individual migrants can claim their place through religious rituals and symbols in the host societies (Hoskins 2015), while sedentary because the home and homeland are believed to be in a specific location. Yet spatiality is inseparable from temporality. It may be right to say that homes or homelands tend to be colligated with the past, with a nostalgic memory. While living in their present homes in a host society, migrants and diasporas, either as groups or as individuals, tend to imagine returning to an unchanged home, affectionately calling to mind memories of their native countries. In other words, as migration and diaspora studies have shown, an imagined home is nearly always rooted in the past.<sup>8</sup>

Uprooted refugees, exiles, and stateless people may claim that their home or homeland exists in the future. For example, Korean-Japanese students at Korean ethnic schools (*Chosŏn hakkyo*) in Japan tend to locate their sense of national belonging neither in present-day Japan nor in divided Korea, but rather in a reunified Korea of the future (Ryang 2009). Locating a homeland in the future differs from imagining possible changes in the present landscape. Namely, the former emotion partly stems from nostalgia, a longing for a past home, whereas the latter can imply a resistance against or a will to change the present conditions in which the migrants and diasporas are situated.<sup>9</sup> The future-oriented plans and visions of migrants are products of ongoing interactions between their learned intellectual and affective behaviors and sets of new ideas and material cultures they encounter while crossing borders and adjusting to new host societies.

Following Arjun Appadurai (2004, 2013), I refer to such interactive and generative cultural activities and behaviors as aspiration. Aspiration amounts to more than isolated, individual dreaming and hoping. It is rather a project and process of collective and multilateral negotiation. In my research,

<sup>8</sup> Following Safran (1991), Steven Vertovec (1997) defines diaspora in terms of triadic relationships, which include (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.

<sup>9</sup> Modern Korean history observes the rising various aspirations among Korean nationalists against the imperial Japan. Korean religious leaders and revolutionists alike fostered provocative visions and commitments that were pursued in various activism in and outside of the Korean peninsula. See (Chŏng and Chŏng 2017) for the influence of Catholicism, (Lee 2019) for that of Protestantism, and Hyun Hee Lee (2006) for *Ch'ŏndokyo* (the Heavenly Way).

aspiration is conceptualized as a frame of mind that is nurtured through social and religious interactions between individuals from different faiths and cultural dispositions, or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977). I take religion especially seriously as an institution through which North Korean refugee-migrants encounter and negotiate new meanings for their perilous journeys and identities and come to imagine what a return home could or should look like from both secular and sacred perspectives.

Indeed, the relationship between migration and religion is intimate in the contemporary transnational context. Even economic migrations or political exiles are nearly always implicitly and explicitly linked with religious issues like cultural citizenship, identity, humanitarianism, human rights, and other forms of meaning-making. Religion enables people on the move to claim new home-like places through material and performative practices in their host societies. In this respect, migration studies scholars refer to religion as a kind of cultural luggage that the migrants carry across borders. It enables transnational communities to continue their cultural identities in various, heterogeneous ways. It is also “believed to provide a sanctuary and space of relief for vulnerable people” to be a “compass” and “itinerary,” in the words of Thomas Tweed (2006), and to be “a lens for understanding the kinetics of homemaking in often hostile environments” (Horstmann and Jung 2015).

What is specific among North Korean refugee-migrants, however, is that they are seen as atheist or as disenchanting from Kim Il-Sung cultism, a pseudo-religious ideology according to the evangelical view.<sup>10</sup> From their accounts, they do not usually seem to carry any kind of religious belief or practice with them across the Sino-North Korean border. Instead, they encounter and often convert to Christianity, particularly evangelical Protestantism, while staying in the Sino-North Korean border area, moving to third countries, or settling in South Korea or elsewhere. This essay thus demonstrates the ways in which some of my North Korean interlocutors, who identify themselves as Christian, prefer to locate their homes in the future rather than in the present within their host societies. In other words, the life stories of the individual North Koreans I introduced above highlight how their religious conversion helps them find meaning in their lives while envisioning a reconciliation of the Korean nation.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The life trajectories of the North Korean refugee-migrants introduced above are very complicated, often beyond what one can imagine. The number of government reports, essays, books, and theses on the subject is likely equivalent to the number of refugees themselves. The interests and topics in this discourse are diverse, but refugees are still almost always depicted as the victim-survivors of human rights violations by the “evil dictatorship” in the North.

However, the lives of North Korean refugee-migrants tend to penetrate, disturb, and/or reproduce existing boundaries and spaces in both territorial and cultural terms. The role of religion is pivotal but largely neglected in most studies and approaches. As I argue, it is clear that when North Korean Christians experience religious conversion during their perilous journeys, it not only helps them to negotiate a new sense of belonging in their host societies, but also mobilizes them to contest the existing order of things. Religion enables them to search for another place where they can realize their sacred calling—a place nearly always located in the future and in their imagined homeland, even though this may still be fraught with late-Cold War sentiments.

This article tells a partial truth, just as other ethnographers could participate in and observe only part and parcel of their interlocutors’ everyday lives. In particular, the life trajectories of refugees

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<sup>10</sup> Worshipping Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il appears to be a form of religion, but Korean evangelists are hesitant to accept religious pluralism. In addition, they continue to reproduce the ill-famed Red Complex, an anti-communist preoccupation rooted in a series of such bloody conflicts as the Jeju Uprising (1948), Yösu-Sunchön Incident (1948), and the Korean War (1950–1953). Those possessed by this form of hatred tend to show radical antagonism toward liberal progressive people and activism. In recent years, South Korean conservative evangelicals have irrationally referred to homosexuals as *chongbuk gei*, or pro-North Korean gays.

and migrants are complicated as much as their movements. Further, religious accounts and practices of the newly converted refugee-migrants are worth continuing follow-up research. In this respect, primary research like this would be enriched by interdisciplinary approaches to the lives of North Korean refugee-migrants in Europe. Inter-Korean relations are pivotal in regional security, and there are seemingly larger concerns like North Korean nuclear programs, the economic sanctions of the United States against the Kim regime, Peace Treaty implementation between the two for which South Korean government plays a mediating role, and ultimately a peaceful reconciliation between North and South Korea. With all these concerns and more, the hope is to foster mutual prosperity. Only when both the ruling elites and grassroots movements work inclusively together can these geopolitical environments be transformed into what the majority of people aspire to. This article aimed to bring North Korean refugee-migrants and their religious-ideological aspirations into fore, further envisioning what trans-border Korean citizenship would look like.

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