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Strategic Use of ICTs among North Korean Women Resettled in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the migratory experiences of North Korean women who crossed the Sino-Korean border and found their way into South Korea. Transposed from the world's most digitally-disconnected societies to one of the most digitally-oriented societies, these North Korean migrants make an interesting case for scholars in the field of ICTs for Development (ICTD) regarding the role of ICTs in the course of their escape and resettlement. Based on qualitative interviews with North Korean women settled in South Korea, this study analyzes the extent to which mobile phones facilitate their resettlement process. We found that North Korean migrants use ICTs strategically to avoid direct interaction with South Koreans by hiding behind computer-mediated communications. ICTs assisted their strategic use by enabling their behaviors of 1) seeking help online anonymously; 2) hiding their identity via text-based communications; 3) managing a manipulated identity on social media. Consequently, this can lead to further segregating themselves from the host society. The paper argues that empowering migrants via ICTs is not a sufficient condition and further efforts should be made to change how the host society embraces new settlers.

General Terms Migration, ICTs, Qualitative Research

KEYWORDS

North Korea, defectors, migrants, resettlement, ICT, mobile phones, social stigma, discrimination, reunification

INTRODUCTION

Every year hundreds of North Koreans make a perilous attempt to cross the *Tumen River*, which flows along the Sino-Korean border, in the search for a better life elsewhere. To this day, it is unclear how many North Koreans have fled the country departing from economic hardship and limited political and social freedom. Estimates vary from 50,000 to 300,000 with Amnesty International estimating approximately 100,000 [1, 2, 3]. Among those border-crossers, 1,422 North Koreans have obtained official refugee status [4] while about 30,000 people managed to settle in South Korea [5]. The rest stay in a precarious life as illegal migrants in China, Russia and other Southeast Asian countries, hiding their identity in the fear of repatriation. Some, especially women and children, are reported to have been trafficked and sold for forced marriage and modern slavery [6, 7, 8, 9].

This study focuses on North Korean women who made their way from the North to the South and started a new life as South Korean citizens. In fact, the conflict in the Korean peninsula is the last legacy of the Cold War era. Since the armistice agreement and the resulting division of Korea in 1953, the two Koreas are still on ceasefire allowing no communication or exchange of goods and people except sporadic negotiations between the governments. Over the last 65 years, the two Koreas have evolved into highly distinct countries with contrasting political and economic systems, despite the same ethnicity, language and culture they shared throughout the thousands-year long history as one country.

The migratory stories of these women from the North to the South call for scholarly documentation and analysis as they made a dramatic transition from the oppressive authoritarian society with a Communism-branched social system of the North to the democratic but highly competitive Capitalist society in the South. From the perspective of technology, moreover, they are transplanted from the world's most digitally-disconnected society to one of the most digitally-oriented societies. Indeed, the migratory experiences of these North Koreans make an interesting case for scholars in the field of ICTs for Development (ICTD) to examine how ICTs, in particular mobile phones, were used and assisted their escape and adjustment in their new homes in South Korea.

Based on the qualitative interviews with 20 North Korean women settled in South Korea, the study examines how these women are currently using mobile phones and analyzes the extent to which mobile phones facilitate their resettlement process particularly as coping strategies to bypass the existing socio-cultural barriers or social stigma against North Koreans within South Korean society.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Labeling is a communicative practice which encapsulates forced migrants in a static status while it affects how we legally and socio-culturally identify them [10]. The term North Korean ‘defector’, a legacy word from the Cold War era with a connotation of military or political betrayal, is widely used by popular media to refer to those who escaped from North Korea. Yet, the term not only misrepresents who they actually are, but also is disconnected from the changing social labeling practices of North Koreans by South Korean society.

Over the last 60 years, the demographics of North Koreans who take refuge in South Korea have changed considerably from a handful of political or military defectors until the 1990s to the influx of ordinary people living near the border, mostly women seeking better economic conditions or family reunion. Since the North Korean food crisis in the late 1990s, the number of North Koreans in South Korea has increased steadily from 1,990 in 2001 to 30,490 in 2017 with over 70 percent of them being women [5]. This feminization of North Korean migrants reflects the changing socioeconomic conditions in North Korea where women are less tied to place, less state-controlled and have higher motivation to flee as they increasingly became the family breadwinner after the economic crisis [11, 12].

Accordingly, social labeling practices by the South Korean government have also continuously changed [13, 14]. In the old days, North Koreans who defected to South Korea were praised as ‘Heros’ or ‘Returned Brethrens’ by South Korean propaganda and, with the changing demographics of North Koreans, the government adjusted their legal title and social label to ‘Residents escaped from North Korea’ or ‘New Settlers’ and recently ‘North Korean Residents out of North Korea’. In this study, we use ‘North Korean migrants’ to reflect their agency exercised in their moves and in the ongoing efforts to settle down in South Korean society as the “other” to the locals.

The South Korean government tends to perceive North Korean migrants as a proxy population of the North to be integrated in the process towards the reunification of the two Koreas. Unlike other migrant groups in South Korea, all North Koreans entering South Korea are automatically endowed a citizenship. Through the Ministry of Unification, the government provides various social support and resettlement programs for North Korean migrants such as the initial adjustment education and the resettlement package including lump-sum cash, housing, healthcare, vocational training, school tuition supports, etc.

Despite the government’s continuous effort for social integration of these new citizens, North Korean migrants seem to struggle to settle into South Korea. Recent survey reports that the average monthly income of North Korean migrants (1,370 USD) was significantly lower than the average South Koreans’ (2,020 USD) while only 54.6% of the total North Korean migrants are employed, mostly as low-skilled laborers (29.8%) or service sector jobs (28.1%) [15]. Moreover, as studies on migrants show, there

can be a considerable degree of socio-cultural and psychological challenge in the course of adjustment and acculturation such as language barriers, social discrimination, loneliness and homesickness [16, 17]. A study [18] points out that, while there is no clear ethnic difference between North and South Korea, North Korean migrants are given a ‘pseudo-ethnic marker’ which pinpoints any marginal differences and distinguish them as the “other” to the local.

In this context, several researchers have suggested that ICTs play important roles in supporting migrants by providing information, building social support network, and maintaining ties with family or even parenting children in the home country [16]. Hence, it is necessary to examine the role of ICTs in the course of North Korean migrants’ adjustment to South Korea. In particular, these women have migrated from North Korea where using ICTs was out of reach or fraught with danger to South Korea where digital technologies are deeply integrated into people’s quotidian life. However, there is a paucity of research on how migrants, including North Koreans and refugees, use ICTs to assist their resettlement in new communities. This study delivers the voices of North Korean migrant women in their experiences of using ICTs in the process of resettlement in South Korea. In doing so, it proposes a concept of ‘strategic use’ of ICTs as a coping strategy to bypass or overcome the existing constraints.

METHOD AND DATA

The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 North Korean women migrants currently living in South Korea. The interviews were conducted between August and December 2016 in Seoul. Questions were centered on their use of mobile phones but also explored their migratory journeys and resettlement stories such as working, learning and socializing in South Korea. Each interview was transcribed in Korean and later translated into English. Following the Grounded Theory approach, both Korean and English transcripts were examined for themes that emerged from the material. The interview participants were identified using Snowballing sampling through other North Korean migrants as intermediaries who helped to lessen distrust and unwillingness to tell personal stories to others.

All interviewees came from Northern provinces near the Sino-Korean border (e.g. *Musan*, *Hyesan*, *Chongjin* and *Onsung*). Indeed, this is a common characteristic for most North Korean migrants since internal mobility is only possible with travel permits or bribery. However, it was easier for residents in these cities to use smuggled mobile phones with Chinese subscriptions to contact human smugglers or family members living outside North Korea. The average age of the interviewees was 37.5 ranging from 24 to 58 years old. The point of their departure varies ranging from 1996 to 2015 while the majority of the participants left after 2008. Most interviewees had graduated or dropped out of high school. Only one had graduated from college in North Korea while four young women proceeded to university in South Korea. Only three women were full-time employees in the South. The majority are currently unemployed staying at home with childcare or studying to prepare for their next career although almost all have previous work experiences at factories, restaurants or shops.

ANALYSIS

Once North Korean migrants arrive in South Korea, they are sent to the National Intelligence Agency (NIS) for political and health screenings. Upon the clearance, they are handed over to *Hanawon*, a government-run resettlement training programme providing the A-Z education on how to survive in the democratic capitalist society of South Korea, for about six months in the exclusive shelter. After *Hanawon*, North Korean migrants are allocated to nationwide *Hana Centers* which offer initial resettlement supports for two weeks. From there, North Korean migrants are left alone to begin a new life as a South Korean citizen.

In fact, this government-led early resettlement takes place so fast that most North Korean migrants are overwhelmed by the rapid transplantation to the South Korean society. As Youngmi (in her 20s, left North Korea in 2010) describes, it was like she “*stepped out of a time machine*” as they followed around the *Hana Center* care-workers to spend “*a day to get used to things, a day to get a mobile phone, and then a day to get a job*” (Donghee, in 20s, left in 2012). For those who had to pay back the fee to the human smugglers or support their children who came together, they started to work at restaurants or factories in less than a week of the arrival. In this process, access to mobile phone is granted. A smartphone is the first thing they buy once allocated in a local *Hana Center*. Most participants were bewildered by their first smartphone. Several older women felt inadequacy and self-doubt to use such a fancy technology asking herself ‘*when would I able to use that kind of thing?*’ while younger women tended to feel more comfortable finding it “*so liberating to be able to own a mobile phone and do what I want with it*”. Except the initial difficulty with English loanwords (e.g. store, games, shopping, etc.), they did not find learning to use smartphones particularly challenging and picked it up naturally by themselves.

Like ordinary South Koreans in their ages, the participants were using their phones in everyday life to connect their friends, family and coworkers, reading online news, searching information, navigating with the map, watching videos or getting social or emotional supports. However, when we took a deeper look at their use behaviors, we found certain tendencies unique to North Korean migrants. And, as demonstrated later in the section, such behaviors seem to originate from deeper socio-cultural barriers they face in South Korean society, including social stigma and discrimination against North Korean migrants.

Socio-cultural Barriers and Frustrated Agency

The initial allocation of North Korean migrants by the South Korean resettlement policy scatters them across the country, often leaving them alone in a government housing and separate from their *Hanawon* colleagues whom, in many cases, are the only social contacts they start with in South Korea. This initial segregation creates a greater need of mobile phones to connect with *Hanawon* colleagues and seek for emotional and social support via calls and messengers. Yet, such mobile-based communications tend to be used for bonding with other North Koreans rather than bridging with South Koreans. In fact, we found that their engagement with South Koreans is by and large limited. Except the two women who purposively avoid North Koreans, most participants did not socialize with South Koreans, both online and offline, beyond a handful of coworkers they had to maintain contact with.

Indeed, participants expressed considerable discomfort and distrust against South Koreans. Engaging with South Koreans was described as “*difficult and shallow*” as they find South Koreans

“*different, cold-hearted, two-faced, pretentious or insincere*”. One participant describes the barrier as an “*invisible wall that is hard to break*” which makes it impossible to be completely comfortable with South Koreans. Further, several participants stated repeatedly that South Koreans look down on them. Interestingly, when we ask them to recall any events of such discrimination, all participants did not have direct experiences but they knew that they were generally perceived as the inferior others. Here, it seems that social stigma and discrimination against North Korean migrants exist at the level of implicit perceptions than direct encounters as one participant describes how she felt by the look:

“I came to South Korea thinking that we were one nation and, as I had a South Korean ID card, and I could say ‘I’m a South Korean citizen’. However, other people did not look at us the same way. They treated us like foreigners from the 3rd countries. People didn’t say it out but anyone can feel it from the look they gave us...It made me feel like a stepchild.” (Myung-hee, in 30s, left in 2003)

One frequently mentioned episode triggering such perceived discrimination surrounds their North Korean accents. While South Korea is a small and ethnically homogenous country, it has at least five different local accents and, to most South Koreans, North Korean accent is unfamiliar and easily noticeable. Participants explained “*the accent makes it hard to approach*” South Koreans as it often prompts a chain of uncomfortable questions on their origin. These experiences resonate with their internalized fear of being discriminated against, which leads North Korean migrants to withdraw voluntarily from further engagement with South Koreans as in the case of Gyeongmi (in 30s, left in 2013) who stopped attending a mother’s group to avoid the questioning triggered by her accent.

Strategic Use of Mobile as Coping Strategies

Facing the barriers, we found that North Korean migrants use mobile communications strategically to avoid direct interaction with South Koreans and to hide their accent and identity. Three cases emerged from our data: 1) seeking help online anonymously; 2) hiding her accent and identity via text-based communications; 3) managing her identity on social media.

Several participants in our study use mobile phones actively seeking information online and they prefer to get support anonymously from online sources rather than asking people via face-to-face interactions. This is partly due to the tendency among North Korean migrants to be self-reliant as they “*have a long experience of putting food in their family’s mouth all alone*” in North Korea. It is also grounded in the fear of being looked down on by South Koreans for not knowing the basics of everyday life. Yoo-jin (mid-20s, left 2009) did not want her South Korean classmates to think that she “*didn’t know how to handle such easy tasks*” and tried the internet as asking them in person would be the last resort. Mi-sun (late 20s, left 2012) also frequently asks questions on a popular online Q&A service hiding her identity as a North Korean:

“I think it’s better they don’t know me. People can say anything because they don’t know who I am. Once I asked something a woman and she looked down on me saying “don’t you even know this?” which baffled me...If it is personal, it is just easier to ask on the internet.”

Facing the social stigma against North Koreans, some participants decide not to disclose their identity as a North Korean. Here, online communications make it easier for them to hide it behind mobile phones. In face-to-face interactions, some would selectively disclose their identity only after they decide to stay close with them (Dowon, mid-20s, left 2009). Others completely hid their identity by telling that they came from Gangwon province or Yeonpyeong Island which are near the South Korean border, or foreign countries like China. However, for younger women in the 20s, mobile-based or online communications make it easy to find freedom in engaging with South Koreans without the social stigma against North Koreans. Sunhee (late 20s, left 2012) used to enjoy chatting apps and dating apps to freely engage with South Koreans without telling them she came from the North:

"I was very curious about how people in South Koreans were different. So I downloaded a chatting app to ask questions. Gradually, by chatting with the app, I learned about the culture and people here....I also used dating apps...there were so many men on the app. There were foreigners as well and I thought I could improve my English."

In some cases, North Korean migrants hide their identity completely both online and offline, and use mobile communications as a coping strategy to avoid interactions with South Koreans. Mee-ok (in 40s, left 1996) has not yet told her 10 year old daughter or anyone in her school that she came from the North out of the fear that her daughter can be discriminated against. To hide her identity, she avoids all kinds of face-to-face engagement with her school and only participates through text-based communications in a group chatroom on a mobile messenger:

"I haven't told her that I am from North Korea yet... It is because the children might get made fun of...There aren't enough North Koreans in her school. So I don't even go to the parent meetings. I just participate in Kakaotalk chats."

Social media services, such as Facebook, are also an important avenue to manage one's identity. Sung-un (mid-20s, left 2012) did not tell her university friends that she came from the North due to the fear that other South Korean students would be jealous and criticize the government benefits she received on tuition and living costs. She told every South Korean that she has lived abroad and maintained her Facebook profile as a South Korean by refusing a friend request from other North Korean friends.

"On my Facebook, I have more South Korean friends because I didn't tell my university friends about where I came from....Many of my North Korean friends use Facebook these days and they sometimes sent me a friend request. But I didn't accept it, on purpose. Because, if I accept their friend requests, the notice would appear on my page and my other friends (South Koreans) can go and check out my new (North Korean) friend's page."

DISCUSSION

This study found that North Korean migrants in South Korea experience certain social labeling and discrimination, which are often insinuated by the local or perceived by the North Korean migrants. Such experiences of the socio-cultural barriers trigger

voluntary withdrawal from engaging with South Koreans. Facing these barriers, North Korean migrants use mobile phones as a means of coping strategies to avoid direct interactions with South Koreans by hiding their identity behind mobile-based communications.

Despite the granted access to ICTs in South Korea, along with the government's generous resettlement package, we found that such access does not automatically lead North Korean migrants to empower themselves to participate in the new society by utilizing the information and resources available through the digital networks. The problem lies beyond the access, skills or cost of using ICTs as the government supports them to equip themselves with a smartphone as well as basic IT trainings. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the above analysis, the North Korean migrants in our study are withdrawing themselves from the host communities due to the socio-cultural barriers expressed by the host society and ICTs are indirectly facilitating this withdrawal process. Hence, empowering migrants by access to ICTs is not a sufficient condition. Further attention should be paid to how the host society perceives and embrace the new settlers.

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