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North Koreans' public narratives and conditional inclusion in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on the public testimonies of North Koreans living in South Korea (*t'albungmin*) and analyzes the role that these narratives play in South Korean society as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. North and South Korea technically remain at war, with South Korea claiming sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula. While *t'albungmin* are eligible for South Korean citizenship, they describe feeling excluded from full social membership. Although some *t'albungmin* seek anonymity, this paper considers those who gain social status by speaking publicly about their lives and denouncing the North Korean regime. In so doing, they distance themselves from North Korea and align themselves with the “good” discourse of human rights. However, their actions reinforce a logic of exclusion, implying that *t'albungmin* who prefer anonymity are “sympathizers” of the North and consequently restricting their access to social benefits and resources. This case of conditional inclusion illuminates tensions that arise when a sovereignty claim entails the incorporation of people from an enemy state. It also highlights the carefully delineated boundaries of publicly acceptable behavior within which “suspect” citizens must remain as a condition for positive recognition.

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Introduction

In October 2014, a young woman named Park Yeonmi¹ stood in front of the One Young World Summit in Dublin, Ireland to offer testimony of her life in North Korea.² Wearing a traditional Korean dress and fighting back tears, Park spoke of her childhood under dictatorship, her family's harrowing escape to China, and her arrival in South Korea. “North Koreans are desperately seeking and dying for freedom,” she explained. Park's speech was impassioned, compelling, and struck a chord with the audience. It has since been viewed online over eighty-two million times.³

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This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

¹In this article we follow the convention of writing Korean names surname first.

²Throughout this article, we refer to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as North Korea, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) as South Korea.

³One Young World 2014, 2017.

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In this article, we consider the experiences of a group of people we refer to as *t'albungmin*⁴ – North Koreans living in South Korea who left their country following a nationwide famine in the 1990s and migrated through China to South Korea.⁵ In particular, we draw on the public narratives of *t'albungmin*, including testimonies of those like Park who address international audiences or speak on national and local platforms. We argue that these public narratives illuminate certain conditions which North Koreans more broadly must meet to gain acceptance in South Korean society.⁶

We explore the performative dimension of the politics of belonging.⁷ We specifically focus on the role that the performance of public narratives plays in mediating access to resources and status, drawing attention to the contingent nature of belonging, particularly for naturalized citizens. While naturalization in certain countries requires prospective citizens to prove they are earning above a certain wage (e.g. Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom),⁸ the case of North Koreans in South Korea highlights how naturalization can also require displays of conformity, which may be political, religious, or ethnic, and can change depending on the political climate. In such cases, consequences for non-conformity can range from imprisonment in internment camps (for Japanese Americans during World War II and Uyghurs in modern-day China), to governments revoking citizenship (such as for British citizens suspected of affiliation with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIS), to surveillance, discrimination, and marginalization.

We draw on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2019, comprising semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions with *t'albungmin* living in Seoul, as well as participant observation in schools, churches, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work with *t'albungmin*. During our respective fieldwork periods, we used qualitative methods to understand the everyday, lived experiences of North Koreans who had settled in South Korea.⁹ The majority of the *t'albungmin* we interacted with were concerned about protecting their privacy and security. Why, then, do a small minority of *t'albungmin* choose to publicly identify themselves as North Korean, whether

⁴There are numerous Korean-language designations used to refer to North Koreans in South Korea, including their official title, *Pukhan it'al chumin* ("residents who have escaped North Korea"), and the commonly-used terms *saet'ömin* ("new settler") and *t'albukcha* ("North Korean escapee/defector"). None of these labels enjoys wholehearted support among North Koreans in South Korea, who strongly oppose any implication that they have abandoned or betrayed their country, or that they are simply migrants to be treated on a par with non-Korean resident foreigners. As a result, there remains no consensus on how to refer to them. In this article we primarily refer to them as "North Koreans in South Korea" or *t'albungmin* – a relatively neutral term that many use to refer to themselves, which distinguishes them from North Koreans more generally (including those who live in North Korea).

⁵For more on the North Korean famine see Haggard and Noland 2007.

⁶We wish to make clear that we are encouraging critique of a system that utilizes North Koreans for various purposes, and our criticism is not of individual *t'albungmin*. On the contrary, both authors owe a significant debt to the many *t'albungmin* who have facilitated and supported their research over the years.

⁷Bell 1999; Butler 1990; Yuval-Davis 2006.

⁸Stadlmair 2018.

⁹Jennifer Hough conducted three years of ethnographic fieldwork between 2013 and 2015 and between 2018 and 2019 with *t'albungmin* living in Seoul. During this time, she interacted with over 120 *t'albungmin* primarily aged between eighteen and forty, who had arrived in South Korea between 1991 and 2014. She conducted thirty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews and carried out participant observation in a wide variety of locations, including five primary field sites, comprising two alternative schools catering to *t'albungmin*, two *t'albungmin* university student groups, and at a weekly *t'albungmin* football training session. Markus Bell carried out two years of ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2012, supplemented by annual follow-up visits, including a further three months in 2013 and 2014. His research primarily involved volunteering with three NGOs and two churches that work with *t'albungmin*. He attended meetings, taught English, translated documents from Korean to English, and acted as the media spokesperson for one of the groups. He also lived with a young *t'albungmin* man for a year, participated in the various groups of which he was a member, and contributed his skills whenever required.

on an international stage, in the South Korean national media, or at local events organized by NGOs and churches? What might incentivize such behavior, given how frequently *t'albungmin* voiced to us their concerns about anti-North Korean discrimination in South Korea, and what compromises does such a decision entail?

The contingent nature of belonging

Over 33,000 North Koreans have arrived in South Korea since 1953, more than seventy percent of whom have been women, with the annual number of arrivals peaking in 2009.¹⁰ Although relations between North and South Korea remain tense, the South Korean government welcomes North Koreans who successfully reach the South, offering them citizenship on the condition that they undergo intensive investigation and are not deemed a threat to national security. However, despite being naturalized South Korean citizens, *t'albungmin* often speak of feeling marginalized in their new home.

While naturalized citizens in general may face pressure to conform, the need to demonstrate alignment with the majority group can be stronger for people whose right to belong is questioned on other grounds, including members of “suspect communities.”¹¹ First used to describe mainland Britain’s treatment of Irish residents during the 1968 to 1998 period of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland known as “the Troubles,” the term “suspect community” targets other minority communities, such as Muslims in the United States since 9/11. One effect of this treatment is a perceived need for members of these groups to conspicuously demonstrate their commitment to the values of the dominant group through particular forms of political performance, or risk being viewed with suspicion. In other words, “good Muslims” are expected to vocally condemn violence and terrorism, and are held responsible for preventing the radicalization of others.¹² What is unusual about the Korean case, however, is that North Koreans in South Korea are treated as members of a suspect community while enjoying certain privileges, such as legal equality and access to financial resettlement packages, as ethnic return migrants.

Ethnic return migrants are often granted extended rights compared to non-ethnic foreigners, particularly in countries which have historically emphasized an alleged homogeneous ethnic identity, such as Greece, Japan, and South Korea.¹³ Yet, even countries that ostensibly welcome co-ethnic foreign nationals also draw legal and social distinctions between the majority population and returning co-ethnics, whether formally with differentiated citizenship rights or informally through discrimination. Such tiered structures of belonging within a national community are notably dynamic. Within a vertical system of belonging, the positioning of immigrant co-ethnics is dependent on both geopolitical and domestic considerations at any given time.¹⁴ Co-ethnic returnees might be assigned a sub-altern position that reflects both imaginaries of the country from which they arrived, as well as the perceived cultural distance that members of the majority society imagine between themselves and the new arrivals.

¹⁰Ministry of Unification 2019a.

¹¹Hillyard 1993.

¹²Breen-Smyth 2014, 237.

¹³Seol and Skrentny 2009; Shipper 2010; Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002; Tsuda 2003.

¹⁴Seol and Skrentny 2009.

For example, ethnic Japanese return migrants from Brazil (*nikkeijin*) have encountered a mismatch between their own behavioral expectations and those of Japanese society. Upon their arrival in Japan, from the late 1980s onwards, many *nikkeijin* experienced a sense of disappointment when not welcomed by local Japanese, who in turn were surprised at how different the newcomers were, in spite of their shared ethnic and cultural heritage. In this case, feelings of rejection prompted ethnic returnees to resist pressures to assimilate by performing a hybrid Japanese-Brazilian identity, or an “ethnic counter-identity.”¹⁵ Such performances included conspicuous displays of Brazilian music and dance.

Ethnic Koreans from China (*chosŏnjok*) who have migrated to South Korea to fill low-skilled jobs have voiced similar feelings of alienation. Much like returning *nikkeijin*, *chosŏnjok* labor migrants’ initially positive perceptions of their host society have soured as a result of a growing feeling that they are discriminated against, and that their economic value to their new country is more important than ethnic kinship. Consequently, *chosŏnjoks*’ sense of a shared ethnic identity has given way to an ethnic nationalism that embraces a Chinese, rather than Korean, identity.¹⁶

However, unlike *nikkeijin* or *chosŏnjok*, *t’albungmin* who face discrimination have limited recourse to cultural practices from their region of birth, in a South Korean context where North Korean identity markers often attract unwanted attention. Indeed, many of our *t’albungmin* interlocutors felt a need to completely hide their identities, fearful of discrimination resulting from seventy years of hostility between the two Koreas. Interlocutors spoke of practicing a Seoul accent after their arrival in the South, most commonly by repeating phrases aloud as they watched television, including imitating the phrasing and intonation of news broadcasters in the privacy of their own homes.¹⁷ But maintaining such a façade can exact a toll on the mental health of new arrivals.

Resettlement in South Korea is experienced differently according to the age, gender, education level, and skill set of an individual. Nonetheless, ease of resettlement is affected by depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which are highly prevalent among *t’albungmin*.¹⁸ Newly arrived *t’albungmin* can find everyday life in South Korea challenging, as they need to learn how to manage finances, develop social networks, and survive in a technologically advanced, consumer-capitalist society. Despite being naturalized South Korean citizens, our interlocutors spoke of feeling excluded from South Korean society. “When South Koreans hear North Korea, they don’t think of me as a Korean person,” said one twenty-three year-old female interlocutor, who had arrived from North Korea less than a year before. “Many South Koreans are good-hearted people ... [but] what I’ve slowly noticed is that I feel slightly ignored. They tend to look down on us as inferior to them and naturally feel sorry for us.”

Further, upon arrival in South Korea, many *t’albungmin* lack recognized credentials or skills and struggle to find employment.¹⁹ In spite of policies designed to facilitate their integration into the South Korean economy, the unemployment rate among *t’albungmin*

¹⁵Tsuda 2000, 56; Tsuda 2003.

¹⁶Freeman 2011; Song 2009, 282–283.

¹⁷For those with some degree of confidence in their South Korean manner of speaking, a common strategy is to claim to be from the southeastern Kyŏngsang region of South Korea.

¹⁸Lee, Lee, and Park 2017.

¹⁹Most *t’albungmin* work in low-skilled and service sector jobs. As of 2018, 22.5 percent were employed as laborers, 18.1 percent as service workers, and 11.7 percent as industrial assembly workers. See Korea Hana Foundation 2019, 123.

has fallen only slightly over the last decade and remains higher than the South Korean average: as of 2018, 6.9 percent of *t'albungmin* were unemployed,²⁰ compared to four percent of the general South Korean population.²¹ Between 2008 and 2018, the proportion of *t'albungmin* receiving income support declined from 54.8 percent to 24.4 percent,²² yet remains significantly higher than the 3.2 percent of South Koreans who rely on state benefits.²³ Moreover, 62.7 percent of *t'albungmin* live in state housing issued to them upon arrival,²⁴ while only seven percent of South Korea-born citizens reside in such accommodation.²⁵ Although the situation is improving, by these measures many *t'albungmin* are second-class citizens – living among, but not equal to, South Koreans.²⁶

Yet, not all *t'albungmin* struggle to survive in South Korea, and a small proportion, including Park, have gained comparatively high profiles and improved social status as a result of speaking publicly about their lives in North Korea. Although North Koreans continue to reach South Korea, the rate at which they arrive has slowed since 2011.²⁷ However, during the same period the North Korean diaspora has become more visible, as growing international criticism of human rights violations within North Korea has presented more opportunities for *t'albungmin* to speak about conditions inside the DPRK. Many of the *t'albungmin* who appear at international events and forums around the world first become public figures in South Korea.

A desire to improve one's position vis-à-vis co-ethnics in a hierarchical system suggests a key motivation for public performative acts that reproduce dominant discourses and signal allegiance to the majority group, particularly when these performances are a means of acquiring social capital. In this case, public narratives by *t'albungmin* are a mechanism to potentially position themselves higher in a system of "hierarchical nationhood."²⁸ In contrast to co-ethnics such as *nikkeijin* or *chosŏnjok* who have responded to their marginalization by more closely adopting identity practices associated with their country of birth, the public narratives of *t'albungmin* align with South Korean renderings of North Korea as a wholly negative place, while also offering speakers a means of acquiring improved social status.

In the sections that follow we consider the kinds of public performances that *t'albungmin* are invited to give, the content they discuss, and the reward structure surrounding these performances. We suggest that the decision by an individual to publicly identify as North Korean marks their entry into a space in which inclusion and exclusion are

²⁰Ministry of Unification 2019a. The *t'albungmin* unemployment rate in 2008 was 9.5 percent.

²¹Ministry of Unification 2019b, 11.

²²Ministry of Unification 2019a.

²³Statistics Korea 2018.

²⁴Korea Hana Foundation 2019, 92.

²⁵Pong and Choi 2019, 22.

²⁶A growing volume of scholarship discusses how *t'albungmin* respond to these forms of exclusion, including re-migrating from South Korea to third countries. See for example Jung, Dalton, and Willis 2017; Kim and Jang 2007; Song and Bell 2018; Watson 2015; and Yoon 2001.

²⁷Fewer than ten North Koreans defected to South Korea annually before 1994, at which point famine was driving North Koreans to leave the country in large numbers in search of food and work. Approximately 1,350 North Koreans arrived in South Korea between 1994 and 2001, since which time the number arriving annually has consistently exceeded 1,000, with more than 2,000 North Koreans arriving each year between 2006 and 2011. Numbers peaked in 2009 with 2,914 arrivals, before a significant drop to 1,502 in 2012. Since this time the number of arrivals has remained relatively consistent. This has been connected to the stricter border controls which accompanied the change of leadership in North Korea in December 2011. See Ministry of Unification 2019a.

²⁸Seol and Skrentny 2009.

negotiated. In the process, we seek to identify the characteristics and underlying logic of the conditions structuring their inclusion into public spaces. We argue that, by and large, these structural, normative, and institutional conditions allow for only a conditional inclusion of *t'albungmin* in South Korea. Denouncing North Korea's human rights abuses performs the dual function of highlighting both personal distance from the North Korean state and alignment with the "good" discourse of human rights. By reproducing particular discourses as a condition of acceptance, *t'albungmin* may gain in social status as a result of direct payments, educational opportunities, or social prestige. However, their actions reinforce the logic of exclusion, restricting access to these benefits to those *t'albungmin* who perpetuate these specific narratives. Further, by self-identifying as good citizens, they reinforce the binary logic that stigmatizes *t'albungmin* who fail to do so as potential North Korea sympathizers, thus making it harder for members of this latter group to successfully integrate into South Korean society.

Sites of negotiation

For the majority of *t'albungmin*, their arrival in the South marks the end of a period of extreme precarity. Most leave North Korea overland via China, during which time they live in hiding, avoiding Chinese state security services and relying on networks of predominantly Christian religious groups, secular non-governmental activists, and people smugglers.²⁹ Arrival in South Korea is the beginning of a different set of challenges, as new arrivals must learn and then navigate the demands of the host society. One such demand is a desire for information; *t'albungmin* are not only required to verify their identities by providing South Korean state representatives with detailed life histories, they also find themselves invited by human rights organizations, religious groups, and popular media outlets to speak about life in North Korea.

The first years that a *t'albungmin* spends in South Korea are characterized by a power dynamic evident in their relationships with both state officials and non-state actors. According to our interlocutors, *t'albungmin* are interrogated by the National Intelligence Service upon arrival in the country, during which time they are required to write about their life histories and journeys out of the country – both as a means of gaining information about North Korea and to confirm their identities. This is followed by a twelve-week "re-education" program in the state facility known as Hanawon ("House of Unity"), during which time *t'albungmin* are equipped with practical skills, provided with medical support, and taught subjects including South Korean history and English.³⁰ Only at this point may they leave custodial care and enter South Korean society, aided by a resettlement benefit of up to seven million won (approximately USD \$6,000), access to vocational and educational support, and a "protection officer."³¹ Regular meetings with state representatives, including social workers and healthcare professionals, provides the government both a means of monitoring new arrivals and an avenue through which to offer support and advice during the initial years of resettlement. State surveillance and institutional re-education is ostensibly designed to protect national

²⁹Bell 2016; Han 2013; Jung 2011.

³⁰Ministry of Unification 2018, 22–24.

³¹Ministry of Unification 2018, 15–16.

security and promote assimilation into South Korean society, balancing the twin goals of monitoring and protection.

The hierarchical dynamic between *t'albungmin* and South Korean state representatives is mirrored in their relationships with the civic organizations that support their resettlement in South Korea. These same human rights and Christian organizations often move North Koreans out of China, resulting in relationships of heightened obligation. Christian organizations such as the Manmin Church, Yaksu Church, and SaRang Presbyterian Church pay *t'albungmin* monthly stipends of up to 200,000 won (approximately USD\$170) to attend services and demonstrate their commitment to God.³² The manifestation of their commitment often takes the form of a ritualistic religious conversion narrative, publicly detailing their divine (i.e. Protestant Christian) journey from damnation to salvation and verbalizing their gratitude to demonstrate their sincerity.³³ Secular groups in Seoul also pay new arrivals. For example, during our fieldwork we witnessed leaders of Young Han Woori, a social group for both North and South Koreans, present North Korean members with monthly “pocket money” (*yongdon*). One of the organization’s leaders, Ahn Seo-jin, explained that stipends were an incentive for high school and university-age *t'albungmin* to work hard at their studies.

When a North Korean arrives in South Korea, their understanding and subsequent use of public space becomes central to their ability to manage their “North Korean-ness,” performing aspects of their ethnic and cultural identity on demand, while hiding it from public view at other times. Given the hierarchical relationship between *t'albungmin* and a South Korean public that includes both state bureaucrats and civil society actors such as medical professionals, the media, religious groups, and NGOs, these public performances subject *t'albungmin* to a disciplinary “gaze,”³⁴ entailing an extension of formal systems of surveillance that result in the internalization and subsequent self-regulation of their behavior. While giving many South Koreans their first glimpse of someone from North Korea, these occasions also encourage northern-born participants to craft a performance of North Koreanness that is agreeable to South Korean audiences.

Popular television programs are one prominent site where the South Korean public is encouraged to encounter *t'albungmin*. These include the panel shows “Now on My Way to Meet You” (*Ije Mannarō Kamnida*, abbreviated to *Iman'gap*) and “Moranbong Club” (*Moranbong K'üllöp*), and the reality show “Love Unification! Southern Man, Northern Woman” (*Aejōng T'ongil! Namnam Bungnyō*).³⁵ These programs predominantly feature North Korean women and South Korean male hosts, reflecting the gender disparity among *t'albungmin*. They offer viewers a window into the lives of the aesthetically pleasing, young *t'albungmin* they feature, supposedly bridging the gap between North and South Koreans by emphasizing elements of shared culture. However, the editing and conversational tone on these shows present a domestic audience with representations of North Koreans that reinforce difference, emphasizing particularly tragic, attention-grabbing elements of their stories, dire conditions in the North, and a need for North Koreans to

³²Power 2016.

³³Jung 2015.

³⁴Foucault 1995, 2003.

³⁵Park Yeonmi first gained national prominence as a contestant on *Iman'gap*. She was also a regular speaker at events in Seoul organized by the group Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR), before later attracting international attention.

be taught how to live in South Korea.³⁶ These representations suggest that South Koreans extend protection to their northern-born pupils, whom they consider to lack full decision-making capacity, but at the expense of their independence.³⁷ The performances of *t'albungmin* on these programs are inflected with gendered and political characteristics designed to confirm viewers' preconceptions of the DPRK as a backward, failed socialist state.³⁸

The public performances of *t'albungmin* on international stages present a similarly singular narrative, whether at explicitly political events – such as human rights forums, commissions of inquiry, or the One Young World Summit where Park Yeonmi spoke in 2014 – or at popular events such as TED talks. Lee Hyeonseo's 2013 TED talk on her escape from North Korea has received over eleven million views.³⁹ Four months later, Joseph Kim gave a TED talk on his experiences of famine in North Korea.⁴⁰ These individuals have since contributed to the growing genre of harrowing biographies on life and escape from North Korea, with titles including *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*,⁴¹ *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*,⁴² *Under the Same Sky: From Starvation in North Korea to Salvation in America*,⁴³ and *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom*.⁴⁴ The titles of these texts illustrate the overarching themes of the public narratives that *t'albungmin* are invited to perform to audiences, both local and global.⁴⁵ They reinforce a hegemonic discourse that reduces North Korea and its people to a monolithic touchstone of suffering and creates a simplistic, singular narrative that is both digestible and agreeable to the disciplinary gaze of domestic and international audiences. *T'albungmin* who accept such opportunities are offered a public platform but are restricted in the topics they can discuss. These predominantly humanitarian narratives perpetuate a "chain of exclusion,"⁴⁶ effectively suppressing a diversity of *t'albungmin* voices in the process.

The benefits of public status

T'albungmin are not blind to the reductive images with which they are associated and voice their frustration about victimized representations promoted by television shows such as *Iman'gap* and reinforced by images used in humanitarian campaigns.⁴⁷ Many *t'albungmin* we met emphasized that *Iman'gap* was an entertainment show, offering sensationalized rather than reliable information about North Korea. They urged us not to trust

³⁶Epstein and Green 2013.

³⁷Schiocchet 2017, 12.

³⁸Cho 2018, 27.

³⁹TED 2013a.

⁴⁰TED 2013b.

⁴¹Kang and Rigoulot 2001.

⁴²Harden 2012.

⁴³Kim and Talty 2015.

⁴⁴Park and Vollers 2015.

⁴⁵Our experiences working with and interviewing *t'albungmin* highlight that civic groups, the government, and the military also offer them opportunities to give talks to the South Korean public. Meanwhile, international speaking opportunities are offered by, for example, human rights-related events, political fundraisers, and corporate motivational training days.

⁴⁶Bauman 2004, 77.

⁴⁷Allen et al. 2018, 231–232; Oh 2013.

what people said on the show, criticizing it for perpetuating a stereotype of all North Koreans as poor, helpless victims. This raises the question of why *t'albungmin* participate in public appearances which perpetuate this undesirable image. Moreover, given their desire to protect their privacy and security, why would *t'albungmin* choose to publicly identify as North Korean or appear on South Korean national television programs watched by millions of viewers?

A key reason why some *t'albungmin* speak publicly is financial insecurity. Monetizing one's story is an opportunity to earn income – particularly given that almost a quarter of North Koreans in South Korea rely on state welfare.⁴⁸ Compounding their financial difficulties, *t'albungmin* we interviewed told us that migrants routinely arrive in South Korea in debt and often use early welfare payments to repay the brokers who facilitated their journeys through China. A single appearance on a program like *Iman'gap* can be worth hundreds of dollars, with *t'albungmin* who become popular on these shows offered additional revenue-generating opportunities, such as contracts to write autobiographies. Their “trauma stories” become symbolic capital that they can exchange for material resources.⁴⁹ Although not every *t'albungmin* successfully auditions for television, NGO public speaking events are open to any Korean from the North and offer similar cash rewards. The *t'albungmin* we met conceded that these benefits attracted them to attend such events.

Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR) is one such group. It runs regular English speech contests, and in 2018 paid every finalist between 100,000 and one million won (approximately USD\$890).⁵⁰ The group also holds “language matching sessions,” where *t'albungmin* are paired with native English speakers who provide free English tuition, which would otherwise cost upwards of 50,000 won (approximately USD\$45) per hour.⁵¹ Public speaking engagements of this kind offer the potential for *t'albungmin* to earn much more than they would as a low-skilled employee, while further incentives include the possibility of publishing contracts and educational support exceeding that offered within the South Korean education system.

In addition to providing a source of income, these speaking opportunities offer *t'albungmin* a chance to engage in strategic essentialism: accepting the premise of prominent mainstream discourse as a means of accessing a public platform which allows them to counter and humanize the narrative with their own stories, albeit on a circumscribed range of topics. The online talks of Park Yeonmi, Lee Hyeonseo and Joseph Kim, for

⁴⁸Ministry of Unification 2019a.

⁴⁹Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 10.

⁵⁰TNKR 2017, 2018.

⁵¹The case of TNKR raises an interesting question about supply and demand, given the organization's activities and sources of funding. Since 2015 TNKR has been financially supported by the Atlas Network, an American libertarian organization that promotes free-market principles and limited government intervention (Atlas Network 2014a, 2015b). Atlas Network think tanks throughout the world receive funding from the U.S. State Department and the U.S. government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (Fang 2017). The language training that TNKR offers North Koreans includes a specialist stream dedicated to public speaking, and all English-speaking volunteers applying to coach *t'albungmin* are expected to help them prepare at least two public speeches. TNKR's ninth English speech contest in February 2019 invited contestants to prepare a ten-minute speech on the topic of “My TED talk about North Korea,” with TNKR promising the paying audience “moving” speeches which would “open your eyes to the struggles, experiences and challenges facing North Korean refugees” (TNKR 2019). TNKR co-founder Casey Lartigue campaigned for Lee Hyeonseo to be included in TED, while two of TNKR's self-appointed “special ambassadors,” Cherie Yang and Park Eunhee, have given recent TEDx talks (TEDx 2017, 2019). One interpretation of TNKR practices is that the organization satisfies a demand by training *t'albungmin* to present their stories; alternatively, it could itself be generating this demand.

example, have received millions of views from around the world, indicating the degree of public interest in their stories and the potential for them to garner social capital.

However, these opportunities also constrain what they are able to talk about. For example, in return for receiving a scholarship from the Wooyang Foundation, one interlocutor was required to give presentations to South Korean schoolchildren on the topic of unification, which he described as one of “many opportunities for this kind of unification lecturing work.” He interpreted this as an invitation to talk about his personal experiences in North Korea. We witnessed other interlocutors recounting similar stories when invited to talk about peace, human rights, and intercultural exchange. On the documentary series *Unreported World*, one female *t'albungmin* said, “In North Korea no one would listen to me but here [in South Korea] people listen, and everyone is shocked.”⁵² Rather than normalizing their past experiences and suffering, South Koreans potentially offer *t'albungmin* sympathy in a forum that intensifies the emotional responses of both the audience and the *t'albungmin* speaker. These examples show the role of media platforms in shaping the portrayal of *t'albungmin*, given the limited opportunities for a South Korean to meet a North Korean in person.

It is not difficult to understand the appeal of opportunities that improve one's socioeconomic position, despite the potential negative consequences. North Koreans in South Korea are predominantly seen by South Koreans as low status, and they commonly speak of experiencing discrimination in the form of underemployment, social exclusion, and stigmatization.⁵³ Like Korean-Chinese (*chosŏnjok*) migrant workers, *t'albungmin* occupy an ambiguous position in South Korea: they are ethnic kin but also individuals who lack financial and social capital. Perhaps most significantly, *t'albungmin* are representatives of an enemy state in a system of hierarchical nationhood, according to which geopolitical imaginaries are mapped onto the bodies of ethnic returnees. In such an environment, particularly once an individual becomes cognizant of the unspoken social hierarchy, it becomes difficult to conceive of one's self as an equal member of society.

Speaking publicly about human rights potentially elevates a North Korean's social status through affiliation with a morally worthy cause, given the dominant conception within discussions about North Korea of human rights as “an unqualified good.”⁵⁴ Indeed, *t'albungmin* who speak publicly are now routinely referred to as human rights activists or advocates. As human rights activists, personal experiences that might formerly have been considered shameful now serve as social currency, constituting the evidence upon which claims of human rights violations are brought forward in prestigious arenas, such as the United Nations. For example, the UN Commission of Inquiry into North Korean human rights called more than eighty *t'albungmin* and experts to offer public testimony in 2014.⁵⁵ *T'albungmin* can draw international attention to injustices they have personally faced, publicly highlighting the torture, forced disappearances, hard labor, and capital punishment committed by the North Korean regime. In the process, they emphasize their personal distance from the North Korean state. Moreover, in the current geopolitical context, their calls for justice are in line with contemporaneous demands by members of the international community for North Korea to be held to account for crimes against humanity.

⁵²*Unreported World* 2017.

⁵³Kim and Jang 2007; Korea Hana Foundation 2019, 103; Yoon 2001.

⁵⁴Hong 2013, 517.

⁵⁵United Nations General Assembly 2014, 10.

The hidden parameters of inclusion

Given the themes common to the public narratives of *t'albungmin*, we identify three unspoken conditions structuring their inclusion into such public spaces: they must be prepared to talk publicly about personal experiences, accept that they may be primarily framed as victims, and publicly identify as North Korean.

The first condition is a willingness to talk – in public – about what often are traumatic, highly personal experiences. When *t'albungmin* are invited to talk about their pasts, they are commonly asked how they escaped from the North and subsequently reached South Korea. Most North Koreans leave the DPRK overland, via China. The Chinese government does not recognize North Koreans as persons seeking asylum but classifies them as economic migrants, and repatriates them if caught. North Koreans are thus forced to cross China and claim asylum in a third country, typically Thailand. Many journeys involve forced confinement and a constant fear of capture and repatriation. Moreover, North Koreans are highly vulnerable as undocumented migrants, with women at particular risk of rape, sexual assault, and being sold into human-trafficking networks or forced into marriages with Chinese men.⁵⁶ They are also expected to speak about the trauma of their lives in the DPRK. Numerous *t'albungmin* have spoken of public executions, widespread starvation, and extreme psychological control in the North. They do so in TED talks, public speeches, and television appearances, as well as at NGO and religious events.

These themes are unsurprising, given South Korean public curiosity about the DPRK and the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder reported in *t'albungmin* after arrival in South Korea.⁵⁷ However, these themes of persecution and trauma distort the general image of all North Koreans, reducing the complexity of their experiences to a specific, generic framing.⁵⁸ *T'albungmin* must not only be willing to answer personal questions in public forums, but also accept that their inclusion in public space as North Koreans is primarily as victims. This perpetuates a social asymmetry by falsely promising acceptance while simultaneously preventing it.

When primarily framed as victims, the ways in which North Koreans demonstrate agency is overlooked or ignored.⁵⁹ Such depictions are evident in reports by NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and in legislation including the North Korean Human Rights Acts of both South Korea and the United States.⁶⁰ This framing also reinforces an overly simplistic binary distinction between North Korean “perpetrators” (the North Korean state) and “victims” (ordinary North Koreans, whose freedoms the state restricts). This fails to capture the complexities of people’s behavior when placed in desperate situations, which Primo Levi, writing about the Holocaust, has described as the “gray zone.”⁶¹ Conveying his guilt at having survived Auschwitz and the moral compromises he needed to make to stay alive, Levi challenges

⁵⁶For more on the trafficking of North Koreans who flee to China see the U.S. State Department’s *Trafficking in Persons Report* 2019, 274–275.

⁵⁷Jeon et al. 2005; Shin, Lee, and Park 2016.

⁵⁸Schiocchet 2017.

⁵⁹Choi 2014, 274, 277; Song 2013, 163.

⁶⁰Amnesty International 2018, 226; Human Rights Watch 2002; Ministry of Unification 2016; United States House of Representatives 2004.

⁶¹Levi 1988, 31.

expectations of circumscribed behavior thought appropriate for a “victim.” These expectations can silence trauma survivors who engage in morally compromising behavior. For example, North Korean women who are trafficked risk being judged as immoral or degraded, rather than as individuals deserving of sympathy and support.⁶² This distinction is perpetuated in the Korean context by the initial security investigations that *t’albungmin* face, which explicitly treat them as a threat to South Korea’s national security until proven otherwise.

A further consequence of a framing that prioritizes victimhood is that it focuses attention on individual North Koreans and their journeys, drawing attention away from the wider geopolitical implications of the situation. For example, the trauma North Koreans suffer in China is attributable to their undocumented status, based on the Chinese government’s definition and treatment of them as economic migrants rather than refugees.⁶³ The South Korean government is also directly implicated in this process. Despite claiming sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula, the South Korean government does not routinely offer North Koreans consular protection in China. This suggests that it prioritizes its bilateral relationship with China over both its responsibilities to its purported citizens and its international commitments as a signatory of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the 1951 Refugee Convention). South Korea’s contradictory position also highlights the conditional inclusion of *t’albungmin* in South Korean society; while the ROK Constitution designates them citizens, they must typically be on South Korean soil and have successfully passed the state’s security investigation in order to claim this right.

Finally, these policies also support American geopolitical interests, as evidenced by U.S. foreign policy initiatives. These have focused on sustaining pressure on the North Korean regime by promoting a particular image of the country through the use of human rights narratives. U.S. aims have walked “the fine line between destabilization and democracy promotion.”⁶⁴ Recognizing and questioning the perceived neutrality of the “humanitarian reason”⁶⁵ predominantly framing the narratives of *t’albungmin* draws our attention to underlying international power relations in this geopolitically sensitive area.

A third condition to inclusion into public space is a willingness to publicly identify as North Korean. To access the potential benefits associated with public speaking opportunities, *t’albungmin* must be willing to publicize their faces and potentially their names, a decision which carries a risk of retribution against themselves and their families. North Koreans have legitimate reasons to avoid publicity after they arrive in South Korea. North Korea is suspected of involvement in assassination attempts on high-profile defectors in South Korea and numerous cyber-attacks, including on South Korean government institutions.⁶⁶ In South Korea, *t’albungmin* also face potential

⁶²Choi 2014, 274; Kempadoo 1998, 137.

⁶³The 1961 Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty guarantees mutual support between the two countries, including repatriating undocumented border-crossers.

⁶⁴Song and Hong 2014, 43.

⁶⁵Fassin 2011.

⁶⁶North Korean agents in South Korea are believed to be responsible for the assassination of Kim family member Yi Han-yong in 1997 and the attempted killings of former politician Hwang Jang-yop in 2009 and activist Park Sang-hak in 2011. See Fifield 2017. North Korean hackers are suspected to have been responsible for a security breach on a computer at a South Korean government-run resettlement center in December 2018. The attack resulted in the leaking of the personal data of 997 *t’albungmin*. See BBC 2018.

ostracism or discrimination when applying for work. Consequently, the majority avoid publicly identifying as North Korean if at all possible, with some going so far as to refuse to be photographed by friends. NGOs such as Liberty in North Korea (LINK) and TNKR commonly pixelate the faces of *t'albungmin* in photographs.

The cases of Shin Dong-hyuk and Park Yeonmi highlight the implications of public scrutiny, in addition to drawing attention to wider geopolitical considerations related to North Koreans' testimony. Shin Dong-hyuk came to prominence among *t'albungmin* due to his particularly difficult circumstances, being born into and escaping from a high-security North Korean prison camp. The subject of a 2012 biography, Shin attracted further attention as a key witness in the United Nation's 2013 Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea (COI). However, in November 2014, the North Korean authorities released a video of Shin's father contradicting parts of his testimony, and Shin admitted misrepresenting elements of his past, including his claim to have been solely detained in the infamous Camp 14.⁶⁷ Shin has said he believes his father was "coerced" into denouncing him.⁶⁸

Park Yeonmi has also been accused of fabrications and inconsistencies. When she first began to speak publicly, she described her privileged former life, but now details her mother's rape by a broker and food shortages so extreme that she resorted to eating insects. When pressed, she has attributed these discrepancies to miscommunication and mistranslations. In the wake of these controversies, fellow *t'albungmin* have criticized both Park and Shin, accusing them of undermining the credibility of them all and weakening the international campaign against the North Korean government for human rights abuses.⁶⁹ Speaking in 2015, one of our female interlocutors said, "She [Park] is very young so she doesn't know better, but she is lying about a lot of things in order to make money. And when people realize she is lying, they won't believe what other North Koreans say." Moreover, Park's association with the American libertarian Atlas Network raises questions about the motivations behind the particular narrative she now promotes.⁷⁰

The testimonies of *t'albungmin* are difficult to verify for a number of reasons. These include fact-checking challenges, the potential distorting effects of paying *t'albungmin* to speak, the influence of possible fame or improved social status, and the difficulty of following up when speakers have used pseudonyms to mask their identities, for the reasons noted above.⁷¹ Shin's biographer Blaine Harden, and Michael Kirby, Chair of the COI and former Justice of the High Court of Australia, have both emphasized that UN COI members deemed his testimony credible and consistent with what other North Koreans had told them, despite the inconsistencies.⁷² The physical scars that Shin has on his body are also consistent with the torture he claims to have undergone while incarcerated in a North Korean prison camp.⁷³ Moreover, psychological trauma is consistently found to

⁶⁷Kaech'ŏn internment camp, known as "Camp 14," holds political prisoners and their relatives in the DPRK. It is located in South P'yŏngan province.

⁶⁸Harden 2015.

⁶⁹Harden 2015; Jolley 2014.

⁷⁰In addition to Park's association with TNKR, the Atlas Network hosted Park in New York for public appearances and book-signings in 2014, 2015, and 2018 (Atlas Network 2014b, 2018). In 2015 it also held speaking events with *t'albungmin* Cherie Yang in Florida and North Carolina, as part of the William Sumner Event Series, focusing on promoting "organizations that share its vision of a free society" (Atlas Network 2015a, 2015c).

⁷¹Song 2015.

⁷²Harden 2015; Kirby 2018, 315.

⁷³Harden 2015.

impair memory, suggesting that the expectation that the narratives of *t'albungmin* be coherent may be unrealistic, which is itself a legitimate problem.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the links between North Korean defector-activists and external actors, together with Pyongyang's efforts to discredit Shin and the entire UN COI process, highlight the broader influence that *t'albungmin* have as activists tied to transnational networks.⁷⁵

Wider consequences of conditional inclusion

We have argued that the performance of public narratives is a means by which *t'albungmin* in South Korea acquire social capital, which potentially allows them to elevate themselves above co-ethnic immigrants – including *chosŏnjok* and other *t'albungmin* – and transcend their suspect status as arrivals from North Korea. In contrast to co-ethnics migrating to, say, Germany or Japan, who conspicuously perform divergent identities that reflect the sending society, we have shown how *t'albungmin* are encouraged to respond to their marginalized status within a system of hierarchical nationhood in South Korea by consciously adopting the political rhetoric of the ROK. We have highlighted, however, that while there are tangible benefits for individuals who reproduce this rhetoric as a condition of acceptance, their actions have the unintended consequence of reinforcing the logic of exclusion that stigmatizes *t'albungmin* who fail to self-identify as “good citizens.” Consequently, it becomes harder for *t'albungmin* who do not reproduce such rhetoric to successfully integrate into South Korean society.

In closing, we would like to highlight the wider implications of North Koreans' position in South Korea for other cases of conditional inclusion. First, understanding the conditions under which *t'albungmin* are selectively included in South Korean society draws attention to the mechanisms by which people are simultaneously excluded, with the excluded salient in their absence. When social inclusion in South Korea requires that *t'albungmin* testify about abuses in the North using the language of human rights, recognition becomes contingent upon the presentation of narratives that emphasize redemption, gratitude, and condemnation of the DPRK, while reassuring the audience of their moral superiority. The grateful *t'albungmin*, in turn, ostensibly takes a step closer to social acceptance and the material and financial benefits that membership within this community provides. However, these conditions for inclusion also act as restrictions. *T'albungmin* who publicly condemn North Korea reinforce the binary of inclusion and exclusion, effectively excluding *t'albungmin* who refrain from speaking on such topics from being able to access potential benefits.

As a case in point, one interlocutor attended an English-speaking contest for *t'albungmin* in early 2015, telling us he had done so out of curiosity. When we asked why he had not entered the contest despite speaking English well, he said he did not want his photograph appearing in the media nor did he wish to publicize the details of his life in North Korea, both of which might risk his family's safety. Had he entered the event and been selected as a finalist, he would have received at least 100,000 won (USD\$85) with the chance to receive up to one million won (USD\$850) for the first prize. Instead, he and his friends worked in convenience stores and fast-food outlets for the minimum wage

⁷⁴Johnsen and Asbjørnsen 2008.

⁷⁵Song 2018.

of 5,580 won per hour (approximately USD\$4.50), to cover their living expenses and send remittances to their families in North Korea.

When *t'albungmin* are offered public forums to speak but encouraged to recount memories that fit into a paradigmatic narrative of “human rights violations,” there is little public space in which they can speak of experiences not reducible to a human rights framework. Taken as representatives of an enemy state and members of a suspect community within South Korea, North Koreans’ belonging in the ROK is tenuous and contingent on their ability to continuously prove themselves worthy. In private, *t'albungmin* we met recounted positive memories of life in North Korea, recalling, for example, their favorite meals, friends from school, sharing food with neighbors, festivals, and special occasions during which families gathered together. Yet, they avoided publicly discussing such recollections in an environment in which they were already keenly aware of their lowly social status, and where doing so could potentially jeopardize their chances of improving this.

“There are many good things in North Korean culture,” said one female interlocutor who had lived in South Korea for twelve years. She continued:

Adults are respected. The food culture is really developed. People love each other; they go on dates. There are childhood memories, beautiful married life ... there is all of this, because this is a world in which people live. But they don't recognize it here [in South Korea]. And if you said this, they would call you a *chongbuk*.

In contemporary South Korean politics, the polarizing rhetoric of *chongbuk* (“North Korea sympathizer”) is used to criticize anyone on the South Korean left and is commonly invoked to attack domestic South Korean political opponents.⁷⁶ *T'albungmin* fear the label in an environment in which they already face discrimination for simply being North Korean by birth, particularly those who fail to sufficiently distance themselves from the DPRK. As one *t'albungmin* man we met said, the prominence of media stories about North Korean defector-spies compelled him to demonstrate more overtly that he was *not* a spy, which he did by criticizing North Korea and the country's human rights record more vocally than he would have done otherwise. In this way, the polarized South Korean political landscape compels *t'albungmin* to participate in a set human rights discourse or risk stigmatization as “North Korea sympathizers.”

The conditions that circumscribe the social inclusion of *t'albungmin* are grounded in broader geopolitical and economic considerations, including North–South Korean relations and those between the North Korean state and the wider international community. Despite South Korea's nationalistic claim of sovereignty over the entire peninsula, North Koreans are only able to activate their right to South Korean citizenship if they successfully reach the South of their own accord. North Koreans' access to South Korean citizenship is also conditional on passing a national security investigation designed to prevent the entry of North Korean spies. Moreover, North Koreans who meet the requirements to obtain South Korean citizenship are further divided into desirable and undesirable types. When *t'albungmin* articulate the feeling that they are second-class citizens, they highlight tensions associated with socially incorporating people from an enemy nation and reflect the international standing of the North Korean state as projected onto their own bodies.

⁷⁶Doucette and Koo 2014.

Being accepted in South Korea is thus contingent on *t'albungmin* negotiating and, if possible, overcoming their suspect status. One way in which *t'albungmin* do so and access the social and material benefits outlined above is by submitting to certain conditions and accepting invitations to speak publicly on circumscribed topics, in human rights forums, churches, television programs, or as representatives of international organizations. However, their participation reinforces the idea of “good” and “bad” North Koreans, effectively silencing diverse *t'albungmin* voices and making it harder for others to integrate. The irony is that, although the public narratives of *t'albungmin* highlight human rights’ abuses in the North, the whole enterprise of these testimonies demonstrates restrictions on their freedom of expression in South Korea. Not only is access to such public spaces restricted to *t'albungmin* willing to talk about pre-determined topics, North Koreans directly employed as public speakers by the South Korean government or government-affiliated organizations are reportedly censored or silenced at times when North–South Korean relations have improved.⁷⁷ Moreover, South Korea’s conditional acceptance of North Koreans is not a humanitarian act; instead it is an act of selective inclusion that furthers its symbolic claim of sovereignty over all Korean people on the Korean Peninsula.

T'albungmin play a similar role internationally. A North Korean criticizing the North Korean government at an international event supports foreign policy initiatives that call for systematic reform in the DPRK. Individuals like Park Yeonmi present testimonies which praise the freedoms offered by democratic capitalist systems and criticize the failures of North Korea. The narratives of *t'albungmin* play a role on an international stage alongside state-level actors, whose motives are often hidden or underplayed. This case of conditional inclusion thus highlights the need to look beyond national contexts and consider how inclusion and exclusion at a national level play into wider international politics.

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⁷⁷Lankov 2019.

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