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**Article:**
Son, S.A. (2016) Identity, security and the nation : understanding the South Korean response to North Korean defectors. Asian Ethnicity, 17 (2). pp. 171-184. ISSN: 1463-1369

https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2016.1151236

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Asian Ethnicity on 24th February 2016, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14631369.2016.1151236.

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# Identity, Security and the Nation: Understanding the South Korean Response to North Korean Defectors

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From the Cold War era of the "veteran heroes" to the present view of escaped North Koreans in terms more akin to "refugees" and sometimes even just "migrants", perceptions of North Korean defectors in South Korea have changed as swiftly as the number and origins of Northerners entering the South have expanded. At the same time, government policy for these ethnic "brethren" has evolved considerably, particularly as South Korea has seen fundamental shifts in its independent identity, with important repercussions for the way its citizens view themselves as a collective. This article explores some of the key influences behind changes to policy and perceptions regarding North Korean people in South Korea over the period from 1997-2012, by applying international relations theory on national identity and its role in policy formation and change through the need to secure different parameters within that identity.

Keywords: North Korea; South Korea; defectors; refugees; nation; identity; security; immigration

With the March 2014 publication of a report by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (UN COI) on Human Rights in the DPRK, the lives of North Korean defectors have come under greater scrutiny than ever before in the spotlight of international media attention. Since the division of the Korean nation into two states, South Korea has been the default destination in terms of a legal settlement solution for many of the thousands of North Koreans who have sought to escape their home country and claim the automatic citizenship and settlement support offered by the South Korean state. As their numbers began to increase in the mid- to late 1990s, both public and official anxiety emerged over how to manage these ethnic "brethren", who were facing manifold challenges of adjustment in what has become, in reality, a "foreign" land. Perceptions of North Korean defectors in South Korea have changed as swiftly as the number and origins of Northerners entering the South have expanded. At the same time, government policy for defectors has evolved considerably, particularly as South Korea has experienced fundamental changes in its independent identity, with important repercussions for the way its citizens view themselves as a collective, aside from their ethnic and historical origins. This article explores some of the key influences behind changes to policy and perceptions regarding North Korean people in South Korea from 1997-2012, which covered the period from when the Act on the Protection and Resettlement Aid for North Korean Defectors was introduced in response to the sudden rise in their numbers, to the end of the last presidential administration, under Lee Mung Bak. Drawing on constructivist literature form the discipline of international relations (IR), it explores national identity and its role in policy formation and change through the need to secure different parameters within that identity.

This article problematizes two aspects of the defector settlement phenomenon over the chosen time period: 1) The shift from a *policy response* to North Korean defectors as heroes, to a perception of them as welfare-dependent migrants who, while sharing the same ethnicity as

South Koreans, require high levels of government intervention in their settlement process and daily lives; 2) The change in *public perceptions* towards North Korean defectors from brothers or compatriots, to something more akin to foreigners. The study on which this article is based considered both the policy and public responses to growing numbers of North Korean arrivals in order to determine the motivating forces behind these responses through an understanding of the identity politics evident in the discourses surrounding the policy area. Taking a constructivist perspective, it is argued that problematizing perceptions at these two broad levels (official and non-official) provides insight into both the identities of the perception-forming agents, as well as the influence of these identities in terms of maintaining their stability through a process of negotiation with the nation's policy-makers.

The findings presented in this article are the result of an analysis of the discourses on the integration of North Korean defectors in South Korea, an important identity-building project of the South Korean state within its overall unification policy framework. Taken into account are the continual references in the sources to the settlement of North Korean defectors as a "micro-unification" of the two Koreas, on the basis of the continuing relevance of ethnicity and blood as central to an "imagined" pan-Korean national identity, through which the settlement system is seen as an important litmus test for the future of North and South Korea. However, in light of increasing challenge to the idea of the ethnic nation, or *minjok*, as sufficient for engendering a secure sense of "oneness" between the people of the two Koreas, unification is considered not just in terms of the practicalities of bringing two parts of the ethnic nation together under a single system, but also in terms of merging two peoples psychologically, and forging the joint, multi-dimensional identity necessary for a single nation-state to function effectively.

This article presents evidence of two key identity frames at work in the South Korean national narrative: a positive collective identity with North Korean people (North Koreans as "Us") rooted in the discourses of ethnic oneness, shared historical experience and responsibility for Northern brethren; and a negative collective identity with North Korean people (North Koreans as "Them") engendered over decades of political antagonism and the very real hybridisation of the two societies away from each other in a great many ways. This article argues that the co-existence and contestation of these two identity frames, particularly since 1997 when the current settlement law was enacted, along with fundamental changes to the identity narrative of the South Korean nation over this time, has led to competing ideas and outcomes in policy and in society about the acceptance and integration of North Koreans as citizens and members of the South Korean national collective.

## Defector movement and settlement policy over time

Although there has been growing popular interest in recent years in the lives and experiences of North Korean defectors, the available analysis on the South Korean response to this group and the position of this policy area within the South's North Korea policy framework remains limited and largely descriptive, rather than explanatory. In addition, the IR literature on inter-Korean relations has left the North Korean defector phenomenon relatively unexplored, despite the utility of IR theory on identity and nation-building in understanding and interpreting the South Korean response to the North and its people in policy. In other disciplines, North Korean defector settlement processes and the experiences of the individuals concerned have been the subject of a modest but growing body of research, while also being investigated in reports by domestic and international organisations.[1]

Existing studies describe how the settlement support system for North Korean defectors coming to South Korea has demanded significant attention from the South Korean authorities since the sudden rise in their numbers began in the mid-1990s. Prior to that time, there were a mere handful of North Koreans in the South, and for them, defection meant wealth, accommodation and security.[2] The situation for the many more ordinary North Koreans coming to the South today is rather different. Indeed, some have preferred to seek political asylum as far afield as the United Kingdom, rather than face the confusion of living in a society which should be familiar and comforting, but which can present manifold challenges of social adjustment. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification (MOU) there are now approximately 27,000 North Koreans in the South.[3]

As defector numbers increased, researchers noted inconsistencies in the government response to North Koreans, where they were sometimes been welcomed with fanfare, while at other times they have been quietly discouraged from seeking help at South Korean missions in China and elsewhere.[4] This has been concurrent with the contrasting approaches to North Korean engagement under the "Sunshine Policy" of Presidents Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moon Hyun (1998-2008), and the return to a conservative and "pragmatic" North Korean policy under President Lee Myung Bak (2008-2013). At times defectors have been at the centre of crises in inter-Korean relations and on occasion, spies have been found in their midst and some have become caught up in criminal activities. By contrast, others have achieved success in business, media and in academia.[5]

Significant changes have taken place in the settlement support system since 1997, when the enactment of the Act on Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea took place**.** As a number of studies document, including Nora Kim's contribution to this issue, the primary aspects of change in settlement provision since the 1997 law was instituted have been a deepening of services aimed at making their integration more comprehensive and contingent on individual agency, while ensuring they are monitored to pre-empt any threat they may pose to society.[6] While the large, lump sum cash settlement payments of the Cold War era have been phased out since 1997, newer provisions have included recognising some qualifications obtained in North Korea, creating a purchase preference system for goods made by North Koreans, the granting of a funded job-search period, making available extra funds on application for things such as additional medical expenses, and extra funds for undertaking tertiary and vocational courses.[7] At the same time, an increasing amount of the resettlement work on the ground has been handed to government-sponsored organisations, private NGOs and voluntary groups.[8] Within all of this, the voice of defectors has ranged from modest to actively repressed at times, raising important questions as to the forces at play in the process of policy formation and change.

While the response of the South Korean government to this group of people has featured in a descriptive sense in this literature, there has remained a lingering question as to *why* the government has tended to respond to this group in the way that it has, and how this is connected to its relationship with the North. Furthermore, given that researchers on immigration policy in other contexts have found that "a nation's institutional responses to newcomers generally contribute more to integration outcomes than do the actions of immigrants and their collective communities,"[9] an investigation into the motivating forces behind such policy has value in terms of understanding its past and future direction and how it might be designed and executed in a way more commensurate with the realities of national collective identity on the peninsula.

## Theoretical framework: Identity and policy in discourse

In order to understand the shifts in policy and public perceptions of defectors over time, IR theory on the construction of national identity and its role in influencing, and being influenced by the policy programme of the state was applied to the context. This was done on the basis of the argument that knowing more about how South Korean society understands itself as a *nation* can tell us a great deal about how it responds to newcomers.

This article follows the work of constructivists who consider national identity as being connected to policy through a sense of "We-ness" found within the collective constituting the nation, which they will protect through their interaction with the policy development process.[10] William Bloom writes on the power of what he calls the "national identity dynamic", which he defines as the potential for action which resides in a mass which shares the same national identification.[11] From this understanding of national identity and its dynamic potential, Bloom derives what is meant by the national interest: the sum of things that government policy is designed to protect, uphold and defend. If experiences concerning political events are presented to the mass public in such a way that either 1) national identity is perceived to be threatened, or 2) the opportunity is present to enhance national identity – then the identification imperative will tend to work through the mass public as a national whole, as they seek to secure, protect and enhance their general national identity.[12]

Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger and Anthony Giddens, Felix Berenskoetter writes that a coherent "national biography" or "narrative" helps a collective to formulate its boundaries, while also providing this "Self" with knowledge about its place in the world in the past, present and future.[13] On the basis of the idea that the national Self seeks stability of its own identity, among other aspects of its "ontological security," a shared national narrative can come to serve as what Giddens calls an important "anxiety controlling mechanism," about the inherently unknowable future of the national collective.[14] If the narrative is perceived as being under threat, the national collective will seek to secure and defend it through their interactions with the policy process. Crucial to this interaction are discourses, which can be seen to link representations of identity and policy, particularly when those discourses "securitize" aspects of the nation's identity by describing threats to it, which then demand "desecuritizing moves" through the actions of the political establishment in order to return to a sense of safety and stability.[15] This approach, as expounded by Barry Buzan et.al. thus sees the "securitization" of different parameters of national identity as influential in the grand strategy of the state.

In order to describe different parameters of national identity in the Korean context and the threats posed to them via securitizing moves of different agents observing and involved either directly or indirectly in guiding the policy process, it is necessary to distinguish the primary identity discourses which describe different aspects of positive and negative identification as laid out below. To achieve this, the research on which this article is based undertook collection and analysis of a range of official and non-official texts, including government promotional materials, speeches and policy documents, as well as media articles, reports of concerned NGOs and interviews with officials and academics with expertise and/or experience with defector settlement policy. With an emphasis on exploring the construction of social reality through discourse, and following the discourse analysis approach of Lene Hansen and Ruth Wodak et.al.,[16] the analysis sought to uncover the beliefs and values relating to South Korean national identity and the ways in which these could be seen to be manifest in, and influential upon policy.

## "Us" or "Them"? Identity frames in tension

Understanding how identity is securitized in relation to North Korean people and their membership in South Korean society requires an understanding of the different types of "Self" and "Other" which have been constructed through differing experiences and beliefs over time. These experiences include the shared suffering of Korea under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), the subsequent division and war, largely at the hands of foreign "Others", and also from the loss and shame accompanying the reality of unrealised unification of the two Koreas, all of which have served in the construction of a single, reified pan-Korean national Self. At the same time, this pan-Korean Self has been divided into a South Korean Self and a North Korean Other, over decades of tension and competition in spite of supposed ethnic unity. From this a positive-negative identity spectrum emerges, along which different degrees of positive or negative identification with North Korea and its people can be positioned.

*North Koreans are "Us"*

First, it is possible to identify a number of ways in which the South Korean national collective can be seen to identify positively with North Koreans, in terms of upholding and deriving a sense of security from a persistent belief in the imagined, ostensibly ethnic pan-Korean nation as distinct from foreign "Others". At the centre of this national construction are discourses which seek to remind the collective of, and memorialise the events that preceded and led to the "national tragedy" of the division, and the lingering trauma of the past. It is widely recognised that one of the most powerful effects of the 35-year long Japanese colonisation of the peninsula was the way that it provided fertile ground for the various branches of the independence movement to revive and in some aspects rewrite the narrative about the origins of the Korean "race" and the "unique" history of the Korean people.[17] Nationalist historians swept aside the work of Chinese and Japanese historians, citing a lack of truly "Korean historical consciousness."[18] This project of narrative construction was seen as having important healing and confidence-building effects for a people in a state of deep physical and emotional uncertainty. In 1947 Korean historian Son Jintae wrote:

> The history of Korea is the history of the Korean nation (*minjok*). Since the beginning of history we have been a single race (*dongil-han hyeoljok*) that has had a common historical life, living in a single territory…sharing a common culture, and carrying out countless common national struggles under a common destiny. [19]

This narrative became vital to the legitimisation efforts of successive post-Korean War leaders. Shortly after the Korean War and with no evident remedy for the division in sight, then President Rhee Syngman's policy of *Ilmin Juui* (One People-ism) claimed that "As a unitary nation [*tanil minjok*] that has a long history, we are always one and not two. As one nation, we have to be one always."[20]

In addition to the legacy of shared suffering, and as also noted by the other contributors to this issue, the idea of the Korean nation as defined by blood in particular has been consistently summoned throughout the years since liberation at all levels of public discourse, with clear consequences for the inclusion and exclusion of citizens.[21] Unification as a policy imperative continues to "be sought from the realisation that the Korean people have been a single ethnic family from time immemorial, sharing a common descent, history, culture and tradition."[22] On returning from his ground-breaking Presidential summit in Pyeongyang in 2000, Kim Dae Jung said in his address to the South Korean people, "Korea is once country with one ethnic family. Koreans of both South and North have the same behaviour and lifestyles… We must consider

North Koreans as our brothers and sisters." [23] Applied to North Korean defectors, the implications are clear, as a *Chosun Ilbo* editorial from the research sample said, "defectors are not just refugees, they are co-ethnics. They will hasten unification and they are messengers for the day of unification."[24] In reference to the practical challenges of defector settlement, one academic author wrote in 2010:

> No matter how you call them, defectors or new settlers, there is no change in the fact that we are the same nation. Now we have to understand their current situation and embrace them with our hearts instead of our head.[25]

In this way, North Korean defector acceptance and settlement is a natural and right process which is an important step towards a common destiny. In other words, it is securitized in the face of the many challenges of the past and present in failing to overcome the division and re-establish the ethnic nation.

Yet despite such descriptions of ethnic and historical "oneness" and its enduring importance projected into the future, there are aspects of negative identification which also populate these broadly positive North Korea as Us-oriented discourses. In an interview for this research, Yi Ae Ran, a prominent North Korean defector and winner of the 2010 International Women of Courage Award said, "The major cultural difference between North and South Koreans has to do with hierarchy, whereby it is hard for South Koreans to see North Koreans as equals."[26] The discourse of North Korea as a part of the Self but also lower in the internal national hierarchy was found to be a very common representation of the ontology of the North in the sources, and is one which distances North Korea slightly from the "pure" Self, emphasising the members of the South as superior.[27] This is not to say, however, that North Koreans are viewed as permanently in such a position: rather emphasis is placed on the need to level the hierarchy through education and socialisation into the ways of the people of the South.

In these discourses, two key methods are presented for overcoming the perceived inferiority of North Korean people, while moving towards unification: Through economic investment in their socio-economic development and by giving time for necessary adaptation to occur naturally under the right (preferably reconciled) conditions. By way of example, the defector settlement programme was framed in a government pamphlet in the following way in 2011:

> We dream of national unification that unites "people." North and South Koreans are one people… we must remember that North Korean refugees have given us an opportunity to live that dream…When North Korean refugees successfully integrate into our society, we open the door to national unification.[28]

Here we see the construction of a necessarily vague, but appealing future, using words like "brothers," "dream" and "opportunity" in relation to the presence of North Koreans in the South. No detail is given of what it means to "successfully integrate," yet defector settlement is painted as key to bringing unification closer. In this light, caring for defector brethren is South Korea's "responsibility" as the modern, developed half of the pan-Korean nation. Then Director of the former North Korean Refugees Foundation (NKRF, now the Korea Hana Foundation), Kim Jung Soo, argued in 2012 that "the ultimate objective in helping North Korean refugees is…to support a stabilised settlement in the beginning as a preparatory lesson to achieve a cooperative atmosphere among citizens." [29] He alluded to the need to remedy the inferior Self in the statement, "Seeing the North Korean refugees settle in South Korea and achieve their dreams and lead a better life, North Korean citizens will start to develop dreams of their self-betterment."[30]

As policy has shifted over the years from "protection" during the Cold War to "independence and self-sufficiency"[31] today, the government-sponsored message on defector settlement has become one which emphasises the belief that the degree of difference between North and South Koreans is easily remedied if everyone is prosperous together and if North Korean defectors work hard to overcome their poverty. Likewise, editorials in the newspapers examined frequently expressed variations of the view that "[i]t is necessary to give them bread to satisfy their hunger, but teaching them how to make bread should be far more useful."[32] The non-official sources in particular provided detail on the challenge ahead by describing what the North Korean defector Self actually looks like from the perspective of South Korean society. This was done through editorials, investigative reports and articles on life in the South, often with headlines along the lines of: "The distance is large for North Korean defectors who want to live in South Korea: defectors must shed their identity in order to join South Korean society."[33] In response to the frequency of such media coverage, in 2009, the then Director of Resettlement Aid at the MOU went so far as to ask the national media to "carefully weed out negative features of North Korean migrants," while urging North Korean defectors to achieve the "Korean dream" through "self-supportive and independent efforts."[34]

This discourse of a Self with an inherent hierarchy is thus linked to the articulation of two-pronged policy responsibility: on the one hand, admittance of defectors remains unconditional and necessary, if not desirable; on the other, the state is also responsible for addressing and levelling the hierarchy, primarily by lifting North Koreans to the level of sophistication and economic standing enjoyed by their counterparts in the South. The nature of policy responsibility located in this discourse is prescriptive and largely absent of agency on the part of North Korean defectors, who are constructed instead as passive actors in a process which, despite acknowledged difficulties, should still feel relatively natural. The pan-Korean nation is securitized here in terms of its defining characteristics largely according to the blueprint of the South. Though still inclusive in orientation, the awareness of part of the Self as being inferior suggests that there is ongoing concern about the continuity of the cultural identity of South Korea – from language to myriad aspects of behaviour in modern daily life – as it has hybridised away from that of its Northern brothers over the years of separation, and that this presents an inherent security concern for society. Only when this disparity is corrected according to the more sophisticated and advanced Southern model, will all members of the collective be able to feel secure in a single, united identity.

*North Koreans are "Them"*

Moving now towards the negative end of the identity spectrum, it is possible to see a number of ways in which negative "Othering" has created greater distance than mere hierarchy and a failure to identify with North Koreans as their presence has grown. The first area of negative identification relates to more conventional national security discourse, which positions defectors as a possible threat to South Korean society because of the potential that they might be engaged in subversive activities, including spying for the North. The South Korean media has been relatively cautious in making accusations over the national security threat that North Korean defectors may present, focussing more on their experiences of settlement over time. However, revelations of North Koreans found to be spying during the 2000s provided opportunities for the media to voice concerns over how much of a threat they may actually pose. An opinion article published in 2005 demonstrated concern by saying,

> The possibility that North Korean defectors in the South may be conducting espionage for the Pyeongyang regime, which most people do not want to believe, seems to be a reality that we must face up to. In light of… the recent flood of North Korean defectors in the South, such a situation is always feasible.[35]

Another opinion article responded to a 2008 spying incident saying,

> There is no knowing how many North Korean agents and sympathisers are roaming the country even at this moment looking for intelligence information… South Korean intelligence authorities should wake up and get to work.[36]

North Korean defectors at the time interpreted the media frenzy over the 2008 story as an "attempt to paint defectors as spies" and the "beginning of a witch hunt."[37] During 2012 a number re-defections to the North served to heighten the national-security footing of the South Korean Government regarding its defector population. In reporting on the re-defections, *Yonhap News* took the position that the problem was one of insufficient surveillance by the authorities.[38] The MOU was quick to deflect responsibility and instead blame the North Korean regime for forcing the re-defections by coercing the individuals concerned.[39] Yet despite the blame for re-defections being levelled at the North Korean regime, the events were a blow for defectors struggling to achieve acceptance, as the official and media responses to the events highlighted the systemic failings in terms of monitoring defectors, who were thus by default constructed in threatening terms.

With sentiments of tension, distrust and animosity on the rise in inter-Korean relations after the end of the Sunshine Policy of engagement and the return to conservative government in 2008, the atmosphere was more conducive to discursive treatment of North Koreans in South Korea as presenting a real security threat. North Korean defector groups stated in the media that South Korean anger at North Korean provocations at the time, which should have been aimed at Pyongyang, was taken out on them instead.[40] The subsequent active response of MOU-associated institutions to counter negative sentiment was further evidence of such perceptions having penetrated the national narrative, posing a challenge to the rationale for existing policy. In evidence of efforts to combat negative identification with North Koreans, the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) claimed that it is "time for South Koreans to accept North Koreans as neighbours." It complained of "media distortion" and the "tendency of South Koreans to equate North Koreans with the North Korean regime, as if its faults were their responsibility".[41] The solution to this problem, however, was framed by KINU in terms of their "refugee characteristics": that it is important for South Koreans to understand the risks taken to get to the South, and help defectors to build an "ownership mind set".[42] The presence of statements urging Southerners to demonstrate a positive connection with defectors is powerful evidence that the prevalent identity construct these statements aim to counteract is one of negativity, distrust and wariness, which has had manifold consequences for their integration into South Korean society.

However, this emphasis on conventional national security concerns found in the public discussions on the "enemy" threat posed by defectors in the South sits alongside another form of negative collective identification which looks away from the North Korean "Other" and is characterised by the developed, democratic and internationally-involved state that South Korea evolved into over the years. The South Korea of today is vastly different from that of the immediate post-division period and the passing of time and generational change have facilitated the adoption of norms and developments of varying origin that have fundamentally transformed both the state and society. As a result, the presence of North Koreans in society, who appear in practice far more foreign than the original policy anticipated, has come to pose a threat to what

theorists describe as the "societal security"[43] of the South as an independent state, different economically, socially and politically from the North in a great many ways. The divided status quo has prompted South Korean scholars to note that "there are clear differences in backgrounds and cultural practices of North and South,"[44] and that "The younger generation sees North Korea neither as an enemy… nor as part of 'us'."[45]

In addition to internal shifts of this nature, identification with international norms of behaviour, particularly those related to human rights and the humanitarian response to refugee movements, as well as norms related to immigration policy, have facilitated the concurrent entry of other new ideas into policy discourse, including the value that defector settlement has in demonstrating the maturity and diversity of South Korean society. That this is an accurate description of the way in which defector settlement policy has come to be framed in response to the securitization of South Korean national identity in terms of newer identity parameters, was highlighted in a 2012 statement by the Director of the NKRF which positioned help for defectors as indicative of "consideration and tolerance of society's weak, and the developed status of society".[46] The acceptance of North Korean defectors has come to be framed as both a human rights and a humanitarian response rather than purely a filial responsibility perhaps because it represents help for an ostensibly "foreign" people genuinely in need, but in the conservative government era from 2008 onwards, it also represents disapproval of the North's human rights record, and the role of the South in giving defectors rights denied in the North. The Lee administration stated in its policy literature that, "Taking a humanitarian approach, we protect the human rights of North Korean refugees and assist their entry into the ROK".[47] In 2008 a special law was enacted which obliged the South Korean government to help stateless defectors overseas, "on humanitarian grounds".[48] In 2012, President Lee took the unprecedented step of taking the defector issue to the UN Human Rights Council, framing settlement in terms of "international norms" of behaviour regarding human rights.[49] This focus on a humanitarian and human rights-oriented justification is consistent with the belief that "supporting them in the best possible way is a testament to our high moral standards".[50] Hence, providing protection for defectors and helping them to start a "happy" new life in the South has come to be variously framed in terms of helping suffering individuals in need *without* overt reference to their political or ethnic connection to the South, or as a necessary human rights response in defiance of North Korea, which also reflects the moral superiority and distinct identity of the South.

*North Koreans as part of "multicultural Korea"?*

The final shift to be discussed in terms of the political outworking of the identity-derived forces described here is that of the hereto unprecedented move within government in more recent years to connect defector settlement activities with activities for multicultural families, albeit while retaining separate policy frameworks for the two groups. In 2012 the then Presidential Committee on Social Cohesion found that there was a serious problem of over-segmentation and lack of co-ordination among numerous bodies doing largely the same things for defector settlement and assistance for other foreign migrants in South Korea. One of its recommendations was to simplify and economise by grouping services together, while at the same time showing commitment to multiculturalism. One way it put these ideas into action was by setting up a school for children of both groups of people. The publicity for the school stated that "Multicultural families and defectors are all South KOREANS," and spoke of how people from different cultures need policy support, but also a change in society's perceptions, as well as a long term strategy for multiculturalism in order to "raise our competitiveness in the long term".[51]

Citing the problems for society arising from social friction when immigrants fail to settle, an article on the opening of the school said, "When foreigners don't settle well they become a permanent problem, it can cause social unrest, like in the case of the French riots. So a pre-emptive solution is needed".[52] The sentiment behind this move appeared to be consistent with the need to consolidate and ensure societal security for the majority, and is different from the automatic assimilation approach which was assumed for so long to be the natural result of having North Koreans in society. It focusses instead on a two-way process of social adjustment through recognition of diversity – a concept relatively new to South Korea, and certainly to the policy view of defectors. As part of this shift, regional governments have put defector settlement information together with information for multicultural families, TV programs have been made about foreign migrants including defector stories and the terminology used to describe them has drifted in the course of twenty years from comrade to defector to settler to migrant. The transferal of ideas about multicultural immigration, though complex to apply to defector settlement, have shown evidence of being seen by the authorities as offering possibilities for smoother integration than the assimilation approach which has been dominant so far.

There are several relatively benign explanations for this most recent set of developments. They include simple bureaucratic convenience and the relatively small number of defectors in administrative communities, especially in the regions. Another explanation is the assumption that for all practical intents and purposes, North Korean defectors really do display far more features of foreign migrants than native South Koreans, hence it is easier to categorise them as such when planning activities. Yet these explanations are far from divorced from issues of identity. To group defectors together with other foreigners requires *seeing* them as being sufficiently foreign to need be eligible for policies which cater for people of other national and ethnic origins and which are designed to facilitate a sense of belonging in a foreign land. The fact that they are being viewed as fitting within activities designed to facilitate the integration of multicultural families is in line with the position in some quarters of government that, "It is time to redefine a Korean." [53] Crucially, to look at defectors in the context of foreign migration and multiculturalism policy rather than the "micro-unification" of a supra-state nation defined by blood demands an entirely different justificatory framework and legal infrastructure. The experience of settling North Koreans is obviously key to this shift, as it has proven more like settling foreigners than was anticipated in the early stages, but it is perhaps also "convenient" to group North Korean "Others" with other "foreigners" as a result of a tendency among South Koreans not to identify with them as brethren in practice, at the same time as the psychological border between the two Koreas as two distinct social collectives has become increasingly tangible.

**Making sense of multiple identity narratives**

A 2010 statement on unification by former President Lee Myung Bak that "Our attitude will be pragmatic, not ideological,"[54] pointed to the growing prevalence of a conventional security approach in unification policy, with important meaning for defector settlement. This stance is in line with the natural responsibility of any state to protect both its sovereignty and the security of its citizens, but it has complicated repercussions when at the same time the government ministry charged with caring for defectors attempts to frame engagement with North Korea and settlement of North Korean defectors in terms of a fraternal connection which supposedly transcends state boundaries. It is equally problematic when public discourse frames the innate characteristics of the North as treacherous while at the same time telling the people of the South that they must

accept, employ and live next door to North Korean defectors. This is the focal point of the tension between the positive (Us) and negative (Them) identity discourses, particularly at the official level.

The persisting co-existence of these positive and negative identity frames is difficult to interpret and explain. Gilbert Rozman has described how with the end of the Cold War, "long frozen prospects for unification with the North reappeared suddenly on the political agenda," while at the same time, "a nation accustomed to high levels of economic and cultural autarky, protected by numerous barriers, precipitously faced a massive infusion of global and regional influences".[55] In this way, although South Korea has experienced significant change over the last twenty years leading to impressive speed of change in national identity, it has also led to confusion as old aspects of identity resurface and conflict with newer ones in the national and political and public debate.[56] Over time, the possibilities for unification, which demand positive collective identification with North Korea, have been standing in parallel with the possibilities for taking on international and globalising influences which necessarily pull South Korea away from the pan-Korean national Self which is stagnant in its pre-division state, rendering unification less meaningful or desirable.

Within this, settlement of North Korean defectors has come to be framed in two seemingly opposing, identity-derived ways, which have in fact persisted in coexistence under current political conditions: as a humanitarian and human rights-oriented obligation in the present context of difficult relations with the North, where they are viewed as more akin to foreign refugees in need, and secondarily as a precursor to unification at an undefined (and therefore "unthreatening") point in the future. How sustainable this dual approach will be remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to shed light on the prominent features of South Korea's national identity narrative in relation to North Korean defector settlement, by providing some much-needed explanation on the complex and often contradictory rhetoric surrounding South Korea's policy framework towards the North and its people, which garners the attention of numerous symposiums and conferences in both the government and NGO sectors in South Korea, and also abroad each year. It provided a description of national identity as wielding significant power over a broad range of policy planning, particularly in regard to this long-standing and sensitive area of government activity and public debate. The co-existence of positive and negative identity frames was shown to pose challenges to the coherent and precise articulation of unification policy in South Korea today, where the realities of an evolving national identity narrative that is exclusive of the North and less connected with an imagined pan-Korean ethnic nation, are demanding a re-thinking of just what unification means and how the presence of North Koreans in the South and the help owed to them is presented to an increasingly ambivalent public.

## Notes

[1] Bleiker, "Dilemmas of Inter-Korean Relations"; Chang, "The Toil of Talbukja"; Ko, Chung, and Oh, "Life and Well Being After Defection"; Choo, "Gendered Modernity"; Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant"; Choi, *North Korean Refugee Policy*; *Strangers at Home*; Ha and Jang, "National Identity in a Divided Nation."

[2] Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant."

[3] "Data & Statistics." Ministry of Unification.

[4] Kim, “Status of North Korean Defectors.”
[5] “Data & Statistics.” Ministry of Unification.
[6] Suh, “Current Integrating Policies”; Chung, “Between Defector and Migrant.”
[7] Suh, “Adaptation and Resettlement”; *Strangers at Home*.
[8] Y.S. Yi, personal communication, 31 July 2011.
[9] Hagan, “Negotiating Social Membership.”
[10] Bloom, *Personal Identity*, 51-52.
[11] Ibid.; Sjöstedt, “Ideas, Identities and Internalization.”
[12] Bloom, *Personal Identity*, 52–53.
[13] Berenskoetter, “National Biography,” 9.
[14] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 50.
[15] Sjöstedt, “Ideas, Identities and Internalization”; Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.
[16] Hansen, *Security as Practice*; Wodak et al., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*.
[17] Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R Tangherlini, eds., *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*.
[18] Chizuko T. Allen, "Northeast Asia Centered around Korea."
[19] Quoted in John Duncan, "Proto-Nationalism in Premodern Korea," 336.
[20] Syngman Rhee, "What Is One-People-Ism?"
[21] Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*; Robinson, “Narrative Politics”; Em, “Sin Ch’aeho’s Historiography.”
[22] Chun, Doo Hwan, “Declaration.”
[23] Kim Dae Jung, “Remarks by President Kim Dae-Jung.”
[24] “Come up with a defector policy .”
[25] Kyung Hee Kim, "'Small North Korean Society'.“
[26] A.R. Yi, personal communication, 27 July 2011.
[27] Shin discusses this kind of phenomenon in his description of the in-group “black sheep effect” in Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*.
[28] “The ROK Government Helps North Korean Refugee Resettlement.”
[29] Kim, “Process of Change,” 128.
[30] Ibid.
[31] *White Paper on Korean Unification*, 110.
[32] Yoo, “Tasks for Hosting 20,000 North Korean Defectors.”
[33] Lee, “The Distance Is Large.”
[34] Seo, “The Direction of the Korean Government’s Assistance Policy,” 241–242.
[35] Kim, “Is Our National Security Being Compromised?”
[36] “How Many More Spies Are out There?”
[37] Lee, “N.Korean Defectors Report Difficulties.”
[38] “Seoul’s Resettlement Policy Questioned.”
[39] Fontana, “MoU Claimes Park Return Coerced”; “Spy Arrest Worries N.Korean Refugees.”
[40] Kim, “Is Our National Security Being Compromised?”
[41] Seo, “The Direction of the Korean Government’s Assistance Policy,” 237–238.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Waever, “Societal Security: The Concept.”
[44] Seo, “The Direction of the Korean Government’s Assistance Policy,” 298.
[45] “Younger Generation Sees North Korea,” 13.
[46] Kim, “Process of Change,” 129.
[47] Ministry of Unification, “The ROK Government Helps North Korean Refugee Resettlement.”
[48] Kim, “Ruling Party Proposes Citizenship Certificates.”
[49] “Lee Myung Bak: Defector Processing to Follow International Norms.”
[50] Ministry of Unification, “The ROK Government Helps North Korean Refugee Resettlement.”
[51] Yi, “Multicultural Families, Defectors Are All Koreans.”
[52] Ibid.

[53] Choe, “Demographic Shifts Redefine What It Means to Be Korean.”
[54] “Policy of Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity.”
[55] Rozman, “South Korea’s National Identity Sensitivity,” 72.
[56] Ibid.

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