Labeling of North Korean Refugees in the Post-Cold War Era: A Quantitative Analysis of the South Korean Academic Literature

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Summary

In the (South) Korean language several terms have been coined to define North Korean refugees, but there seems to be a lack of consensus on the most appropriate label to define this group. This seems to apply also to scholarly communication. Although in recent years South Korean researchers have increasingly contributed to expanding our knowledge of North Korea and North Korean refugees, there is still little knowledge about the usage patterns of labels to define North Korean refugees among scholars. The main purpose of the current study is to identify such patterns in the context of scholarly communication. Specifically, this quantitative analysis will focus on the patterns of the three labels for North Korean refugees that have been more commonly used over the last two decades: “t’albukja” (Escapees from the North), “pukhan it’al chumin” (Residents who left North Korea), and “saet’ŏmin” (New Settlers).

Keywords: North Korean Refugees; Escapees from the North; Residents who left North Korea; New Settlers; Labeling
I. INTRODUCTION

South Korea has constructed an enduring myth of ethnic homogeneity, but that myth is increasingly in discordance with the reality of life in modern South Korean society, where increased immigration and interracial marriages are slowly turning the country into a modern multicultural society. North Korean refugees represent a unique minority group within this new trend of migration towards South Korea over the last few decades. Although, their defection to South Korea is not a new phenomenon and several cases of defection occurred since the end of the Korean War, the dynamics of their arrival to South Korea have changed both quantitatively and qualitatively since the 1990s. While arrivals used to be very sporadic, and not more than 607 North Koreans arrived during the period 1953-1989 (Kim 2012), since the end of the Cold War the number of refugees rose constantly and by the end of 2016 more than 30,000 North Korean refugees were residing in South Korea according to the Ministry of Unification.

The image associated with their arrival has not been static, but it has shifted from “heroes” whose defection and collaboration with the South Korean government represented an extreme act of defiance against the oppressive communist regime established in the North, to “economic migrants,” who left their country with the main purpose of finding a better life in South Korea (Kim 2012). As soon as North Koreans arrive in South Korea, they receive South Korean citizenship and are entitled to become recipients of government subsides. Nevertheless, such inclusive government policies do not necessarily reflect the wide spectrum of attitudes that South Korean citizens hold toward North Korean refugees. For instance, according to survey data from the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, the opinion of the Korean public towards the admission of North Korean refugees is still very divided, and in recent years there has been a general trend toward negative views of an uncontrolled flow of North Koreans refugees into South Korea. While the percentage of respondents who supported the arrival of North Korean refugees has decreased from 52% to 42% during the period 2007-2013, the percentage of South Koreans who supported a selective arrival increased from 37% to 45%, and those opposed