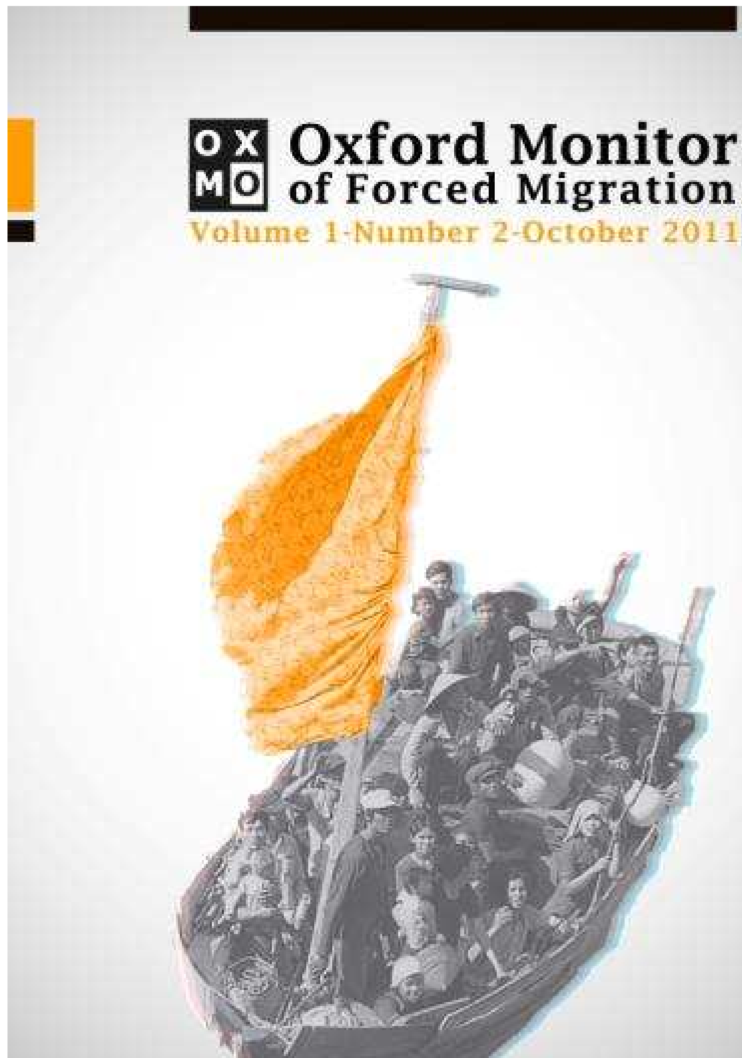

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Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration Volume 1, Number 2, 51-57.
The online version of this document can be found at: www.oxmofm.com

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Ethnic Bretheren and the National 'Other': North Korean Refugee Youth in South Korea

By Sheena Choi

Introduction

As of December 2010, the number of *sae-ter-min* (North Korean refugees in South Korea)[45] who had arrived in South Korea, their preferred destination, reached 20,360, including 1,300 youths (Haggard and Norland, 2011).[46] This influx of sae-ter-min youths poses significant challenges to South Korea's educational system. At the same time, the integration of sae-ter-min youths into South Korea's education system holds the potential to contribute to increased levels of communication and understanding between the two Koreas.

This paper explores the challenges faced by North Korean youths in their integration into South Korea, particularly the education system. First, in order to demonstrate the significance of the adjustment youths experience when arriving in South Korea, brief background information about the North Korean system and socio-economic situation will be offered. Second, in order to show how South Korea has further complicated the transition for sae-ter-min youths, the historical role of the South Korean education system in contributing to the construction of the North Korean "Other" will be explained. Third, the structural challenges inherent in integrating North Korean youths in South Korea will be explored. Finally, it will be argued that although challenges to integration remain, as long as the stories of sae-ter-min youths are heard and respected, education has the potential to be a stabilizing force between South and North Korea.

Background

Sae-ter-mins who arrive in South Korea face numerous problems adjusting and adapting to South Korea. In spite of 1,500 years of history as a unified country, shared ethnicity, language, and culture, sixty years of living apart in a different political and economic system has created a gulf between the two Koreas. Until 1990, North Koreans who came to South Korea were considered *gwi-soon-ja* (defectors from an enemy camp/state) or *gwi-soon-youngsa* (defecting heroes from an enemy camp/state). These defectors, who came primarily from the elite, left the country for political reasons and offered political propaganda value for South Korea, as well as the practical value of serving as an access point to military or political information. In the 1990s, however, when North Korea experienced a great famine, famine stricken refugees began to cross the Sino-North Korean borders, eventually arriving in South Korea (Haggard and Noland, 2008). These refugees have largely come from the peripheries of North Korean society, representing a politically and socially marginalized group with little social and cultural capital (Lee, 2006; Together, 2005).

[45] Historically there have been different names for North Koreans who came to South Korea, reflecting political positions between South and North (See Heller, 2011). In this article, I will refer North Korean refugees in South Korea as *sae-ter-min* meaning new settlers, as this is how they are referred to in South Korea. North Korean refugees outside of South Korea will be referred as North Korean refugees.

[46] A survey of North Korean refugees in China and South Korea found that the most common countries North Korean refugees wish to go to are South Korea (64%) and the United States (19%).

The Historical Role of the South Korean Education System in Constructing the North Korean "Other"

The trials of North Korean refugees are not over when they reach South Korea. Rather, they are presented with the challenge of making a successful transition to a new society. For youths, this transition takes place in the context of the South Korean education system. Educational systems play a crucial role not only in transmitting knowledge, customs, norms and rules, but also in (re)forming national subjectivities within particular visions of nationhood (Bourdieu & Passeron**,** 1990). By sustaining a national ideology and controlling images and narratives about North Korea and its people, the South Korean education system has played an important role in the development of a national identity that holds the North Korean as "Other".

As Korea was divided following independence, both Koreas strived for legitimacy. This legitimacy was (re)imagined through each country's construction of the other as the ultimate national "Other". In South Korea, this imagination began with the introduction of democratic ideals, independence, and anticommunism through the national educational system. During the military regime of Park Chung Hee, the formation of anti-communist consciousness was the principal goal of education and led to the creation of new subjects of study, including anti-communist morality (*pangong dodok*) and national history (*kuksa*) (Moon 2005: 35). During this period, 'South Korean schools prepared the younger generation to be mobilized to confront North Korea politically and ideologically' (Kim, 2009: 151). As such, common South Korean textbook depictions of North Koreans of the late 1970s include "spies", "terrorists" and "infiltrators" (Grinker, 1998).

The following administrations softened their ideological stance toward North Korea, but negative images of North Korea continue. As Grinker has observed, a poverty of information and discourse on North Korea in the South Korean educational system has resulted in the demonization of the North (Grinker, 1998: 167). According to Kim, sae-ter-min youths in the South Korean educational system have to confront 'ambivalent images of North Korean people as antagonists' and South Koreans' sense of superiority over North Koreans remains supported by images of 'starving refugees' (Kim, 2009: 155). It is in this context that sae-ter-min youths have been incorporated into the South Korean educational system.

Structural Challenges to the Integration of North Korean Youth

Structural differences between the North and South Korean education systems further complicate the integration of sae-ter-min youths into the South Korean system. According to studies, grade placement is the major issue for sae-ter-min youths in the South Korean school system (Kim, 2009; Together, 2005). As Kim notes, 'The variations between the two systems make it unreasonable to place students in classes merely by considering their age and grade designation in North Korea' (Kim, 2009: 158). Further, 'many youths missed months or years of education while living as refugees before entering South Korea' (Kim, 2009: 154; Lee, 2006). This situation places students two or three grades lower than their age level, leaving them to study with younger South Korean students. The fact that malnourished sae-ter-min youths are often noticeably smaller than their South Korean classmates further contributes to their being considered outsiders and different from their classmates (Kim, 2009; Kim and Jang, 2007; Together, 2005).

Adjusting to a significantly different learning culture is another challenge sae-ter-min youths must face in South Korean schools. Educated under the strict and regimented North Korean school system, the free and student-centred instructional style that characterizes the South Korean educational system is alien to them (Kim 2009; Together, 2005). In addition, as communication

between North and South has been minimal in the past 60 years, language diversion has occurred, with English frequently inserted into colloquial speech in South Korea (Kim, 2009; Together, 2005). The combination of differences in academic preparation and cultural norms results in the isolation and alienation of sae-ter-min youths in South Korean schools. Under such conditions, many sae-ter-min youths eventually drop out of the formal educational system, leaving their future prospects for social mobility in South Korea bleak (Laurence, 2011; Kim 2009). In fact, statistics demonstrate that 3.5% of elementary students, 12.9% of middle school students, and 28.1% of high school sae-ter-min youths drop out of formal education, compared to 0.8% in middle school and 1.8% in high school for other students (Schwartzman, 2008, citing from Moon, 2008).

Education for Understanding

Although the rhetoric of Koreans as ethnic brethren who came from the same womb (*dongpo*) with five thousand years of history persists, this rhetoric alone is not enough to help recent sae-ter-min to adjust. The successful integration of sae-ter-min youths into the South Korean school system must be viewed from a larger perspective of successful integration into South Korean society, which will require the re-imagination of a collective future together. Social institutions, especially educational institutions, need to be rearticulated and reorganized to reflect the collective views of both Koreas. Equally important is identifying the different psyche of South Koreans and sae-ter-mins that derives from living and being educated in different social systems. More inclusive representations of North Korea in the educational setting may be one way to combat the development of an image of sae-ter-min youths as the "Other".

More extensive training of sae-ter-min youths prior to entry into South Korean schools and society may be another step that South Korea can undertake. The testimonies of sae-ter-mins about what happened during their migration helps to give power to the individual experiences and must be heard. Indeed, since the life story, as a representation and interpretation, is a cultural vehicle that allows people to make their individuality visible and enhance their reflexive consciousness, it is vital that the life stories of sae-ter-min youths be recognized (Cain 1991; Desjarlais 2000; Middleton & Hewitt 1999; Myerhoff 1982). Educational settings are an ideal location for such enterprises. The voices of refugees communicated to the mainstream will contribute to the generation of a collective voice and begin the process of a mutual imaging of the future of a unified Korea. Forging mutual understanding between South Koreans and North Korean refugees in South Korea is of prime importance in order to mend the physical and moral wounds and restore sae-ter-min youths' life trajectory and eventual integration into South Korean society.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, the primary challenges to integrating sae-ter-min youths into South Korea arise from the difficult circumstances they experienced in North Korea, the historical role of education in "othering" North Korea(ns), and the structural differences between the two education systems. The maladjustment of sae-ter-min youths in South Korea poses significant ideological and practical challenges to South Korea, particularly the education system. Yet at the same time, the education system holds the potential to be a source of positive change in the lives of these youths. If the South Korean education system provides more inclusive representations of North Korea and commits to providing opportunities for sae-ter-min youths to share their stories and opportunities for South Korean youths to listen openly and honestly to the realities of life in North Korea, a new understanding between the two peoples may be forged.

Table 1: Annual Number of North Korean Defectors Arriving in South Korea										
Year	1950-92	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Number	633	8	52	41	56	86	71	148	312	583
Total		641	693	734	790	876	947	1,095	1,407	1,990
Year	2002		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number	1,138		1,281	1,894	1,383	2,018	2,544	2,809	2,927	2,376
Total	3,128		4,409	6,303	7,686	9,704	12,248	15,057	17,984	20,360

Source: Executive Summery, 2011 from ROK Ministry of Unification.

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