

JONATHAN YAINISHET

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# ‘SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT’

ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND NORTH KOREAN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH KOREA

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Jonathan Yainishet

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## ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul, this paper examines processes of ethnic differentiation concerning North Korean migrants in South Korea. Making use of anthropological insights into ethnicity and ethnic boundary making, it explores how the notion of a unified, homogenous Korean people emerged historically and how the (post-) Cold War border regime on the Korean peninsula engenders an *othering* of North Korean migrants in South Korea through idioms of ethnicity, despite discourses on multiculturalism and a waning of ethno-nationalist sentiments in South Korea. I argue that the increased influx of North Korean migrants in South Korea provides the background not only for (re-) negotiations of ethnic nationalism but also of ethnic identity and ethnic unity in South Korea.

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*Basierend auf ethnografischer Feldforschung in Seoul, untersucht diese Studie Prozesse ethnischer Differenzierung nordkoreanischer Migrant\_innen in Südkorea. Mit Hilfe ethnologischer Erkenntnisse hinsichtlich Ethnizität und ethnischer Grenzziehungsprozesse, wird die historische Genese der Vorstellung der ethnischen Homogenität aller Koreaner\_innen beleuchtet. Außerdem wird untersucht, wie das Othering nordkoreanischer Migrant\_innen, im Kontext des Grenzregimes der koreanischen Halbinsel im Kalten Krieg (und danach), durch Idiome der Ethnizität ausgedrückt wird. Dies geschieht trotz Diskursen des Multikulturalismus und der Abnahme ethnonationalistischer Empfindungen in Südkorea. Es wird argumentiert, dass die vermehrte Migration von Nordkoreaner\_innen nach Südkorea den Hintergrund nicht nur für (Neu-)Aushandlungen des ethnischen Nationalismus, sondern auch von ethnischer Identität und ethnischer Einheit in Südkorea bildet.*

## NOTE ON ROMANIZATION AND TERMINOLOGY

All Korean words have been romanized according to the Revised Romanization of Korean system. Exceptions for recognizability were made for well-known terms or names of places and people, including names of authors cited, that commonly use a different spelling.

Korean names are written in the standard usage in Korean with family names preceding given names. Exceptions were made here as well for names which do not conform to this convention and authors who have widely published in English with their given names preceding their family names.

Whenever a term is marked by single quotation marks it is to highlight its controversial nature. For example, the term 'race' is accompanied by single quotation marks throughout this text unless it is used in a direct quote, then standard citation rules apply.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Similitude is a necessary condition of [...] differentiation.*  
(Sahlins 1999: 411)

In 2010 Gabriele S., who originally came from eastern Germany but had lived in the southwestern German city of Stuttgart for more than two decades, filed a lawsuit for being discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity when applying for a job and being turned down by a West German company. Upon rejecting her application, the company returned the application documents to her. While taking another look at her documents, Gabriele S. noticed that the company had left a note among her documents containing a minus sign followed by the term *Ossi*, a term used to denote people from former East Germany which is often used in a derogatory fashion. Gabriele S. concluded that she did not get the job because she was from former East Germany and thus filed a lawsuit for being discriminated against due to her ethnic origin.

She was able to do so because Germany's "General Act on Equal Treatment" (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*), passed by Parliament in 2006, aims at protecting people from facing discrimination on grounds of 'race', ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs or worldviews, disabilities, age, or sexual orientation. However, a lower German court rejected her lawsuit. The judge argued that the note could be regarded as discriminatory but *Ossis*, the court argued further, do not constitute an ethnic group as 'their' traditions, language, religion, clothes, or cuisine are no different from the rest of Germany and regionalism does not constitute ethnic discrimination. Therefore, Germany's anti-discrimination law does not apply to her case (Arbeitsgericht Stuttgart 2010). The whole issue was highly embarrassing for the company and they later reached an out-of-court settlement with Gabriele S. A few weeks later, the German anthropologist Thomas Bierschenk published an open letter on his department's website criticizing the court and the plaintiff's attorney for using an "18<sup>th</sup> century" definition of ethnicity. According to Bierschenk, contemporary anthropological concepts of ethnicity would support Gabriele S.'s claim because *Ossis* share a sense of "we-ness" (*Wir-Gefühl*) that excludes *Wessis* (people from former West Germany), and this, according to Bierschenk, is enough to determine ethnic belonging (Bierschenk 2010).

The plaintiff's as well as Bierschenk's position is supported by ethnographic scholarship on (unified) Germany that highlights that Germanness is not an unproblematic and self-evident category and that German national identity is open to constant renegotiation (Berdahl 1999; Forsythe 1989). Germany was divided for roughly 40 years in total and had been reunified for 20 years at the point of Gabriele S.'s lawsuit. Further, Gabriele S. herself had been living in former West Germany for over 20 years. Still, her potential employer

and she herself found that there was something about her that made her fundamentally different from West Germans, different enough to deny her a job and different enough to warrant a lawsuit.

Germany is not the only nation that was divided and caught within the Cold War logic for several decades after World War II. Vietnam and Korea are probably the two most prominent examples besides Germany. Unlike Germany, both Vietnam and Korea have experienced bloody wars during their time of division. However, both Germany and Vietnam experienced reunification while Korea remains divided. Korea was arbitrarily divided in 1945 by the USSR and the United States along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel (Cumings 2005: 187). Since then, two independent states have been established on the two sides of the demarcation line, defined by their respective political ideologies: Stalinism, communism, and *juche* ideology in the North and capitalism and – since the 1990s – liberal democracy in the South.

While the Berlin Wall is the symbol for a nation divided per se, Korea's division is in many respects more radical than Germany's ever was. First of all, the two Koreas engaged in an extremely violent war from 1950–1953 that reinforced negative attitudes towards the respective other state in ways that did not occur in Germany. Further, as a consequence of the war, the border between the two countries, the most militarized area in the world, has been and continues to be less permeable than the German border was. Movement of both goods and people between the two German states was possible, especially for West Germans visiting their relatives in East Germany. This strongly contrasts with Korea, where both states prohibit their citizens to engage with the respective other state through their security laws.

Further, while Germany was reunified in 1990, Korea's division is maintained despite the rhetoric of unification that marks the political discourse on both sides of the peninsula. Officially, both states, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK; hereafter, simply North Korea and South Korea respectively) consider the entire peninsula their territory and the respective other regime as lacking authority – all Koreans from the peninsula are considered citizens by each state; the South Korean national assembly, for example, upon its first convergence in 1948 had reserved one hundred seats for future representatives from the North, and South Korea still appoints government officials to administer the northern provinces (Shin 2006: 99).

The persistence of the idea that both halves of the peninsula and its people are part of one and the same nation grows out of Korea's ethnic nationalism which has been the dominant political ideology since Japanese colonization. Korean nationalism is defined by notions of common origin and the ethnic homogeneity of all Koreans as its most basic component and motivation for unification. The political theorist Ernest Gellner defined nationalism as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Gellner 1998: 1) and further argued that

nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfilment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind. (Gellner 1998: 1; emphasis in original)

This principle can be violated in four different ways. First, the principle is violated if the political boundaries do not include all members of a nation. Secondly, it is violated if the political boundaries include people that are not part of this nation. Thirdly, it can be a combination of the first and the second forms of violation. Finally, the principle is violated if the "rulers of [a] political unit belong to a nation other than the majority of the ruled" (1998: 1). Interestingly, all four violations apply to Korea during different periods of its history. The first violation is the reason and motivation behind unification discourse. Regarding the second violation, South Korea has seen an increasing influx of non-Korean immigrants in recent years and is trying to come up with a workable concept of a multicultural society. And since both the first and the second "violation" apply to the Korean case, so does the



third. The final violation, as I show in Chapter 4, was a principal factor in the emergence of ethnic nationalism in Korea during Japanese colonial rule.

The violation of Gellner's nationalist principle has now lasted for roughly seven decades, and Koreans on both sides of the peninsula have been living in vastly different social systems with virtually no cultural exchange or communication during this time. A far more open border regime in Germany allowed for the seemingly fixed categories of *Ossi* and *Wessi* to emerge and to outlast the border itself.

Given this background, the question of how collective identities in Korea are affected by the long-term division of the nation emerges. It is the aim of this work to examine whether and how collective Korean identities are being (re)negotiated, by asking what forms of social differentiation exist between North Koreans and South Koreans in South Korea and how they relate to Korean ethnic nationalism and notions of ethnic unity against the background of the rigid border regime on the Korean peninsula; this work aims at finding out whether perceptions of Koreans as "one people" (*danil minjok* or *han minjok*) are being contested in contemporary South Korea.

I argue against presupposing the notion of Korean ethnic homogeneity and instead show that differentiation according to (quasi-)ethnic criteria is a vital aspect of the negotiation of collective identities in contemporary South Korea. Discourses of difference between North Koreans and South Koreans in South Korea should not be considered as existing despite the notion of ethnic nationalism, but should rather be analysed through the lens of ethnic boundary-making in order to see how actors employ ethnic categories in their lives as a principle of social organization.

This study is limited to South Korea and does not focus on developments in North Korea. This is due to two reasons. First, meaningful ethnographic research in (or even "on") North Korea is virtually impossible. The anthropological work that has been done on North Korea relies on a mix of methods that do not set it apart from other disciplines such as general East Asian Studies, literary studies, film & media studies, or sociology (e.g. Kwon and Chung 2012; Ryang 2012a). This is not to deny these studies their scholarly, anthropological value; fieldwork and ethnography are vital parts of anthropology, but they are not all that anthropology entails. Archival research and various other methods are part of the anthropological repertoire as well, and as long as research on seemingly inaccessible places such as North Korea is conducted transparently in regards to the methods being employed, there seems to be no reason why it is not a fruitful endeavour.

But a study such as this relies not only on paying attention to discourses about 'other' people 'far away' but also on discussing social interaction – which brings me to the second reason this study focuses on South Korea: the presence of North Korean migrants<sup>1</sup> in South Korea. It is due to their presence that it is actually possible to witness how identities are being negotiated in a dialogue between both North Koreans and South Koreans. During my stay in South Korea I was quite intrigued by many of my friends and acquaintances who claimed they could recognize North Koreans instantly although they confessed to never having met a North Korean person in their lives. My research interest was sparked by these initial encounters. The perspective on and of North Korean migrants in South Korea is important to this study because it offers the opportunity to go beyond mere discourses by South Koreans about North Korea and North Koreans and to see how differentiation is played out in everyday life (see also Grinker 1998).

Further, the focus of this work lies on *North* Korean migrants in South Korea. Dynamics concerning other ethnic Korean migrants such as Korean Americans, *Goryeoin* from the former Soviet Union, Korean Chinese (*Joseonjok*), or Japanese Koreans (*Zainichi*) are not explored in detail here. This is not to deny their relevance in the renegotiation of ethnic identities in contemporary South Korea. Rather, the omission is owed to the diverse cultural, social, historical, political, and legal contexts that characterize each of these diasporas.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "migrant" instead of terms such as "defector", "refugee", or "new settler" in a non-normative sense. For the political implications of the terminology regarding North Korean migrants (in both English and Korean) see Chung (2008), Jung (2015), and Kim (2012).

Doing justice to them would go beyond the scope of this work. Nonetheless, some of the arguments put forth can be applied to other categories of ethnic Koreans as well.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I provide the reader with some background information by discussing the research context and methods for the data discussed in Chapter 7. Then, I provide an overview of theories concerning nationalism and ethnicity that help explain the emergence of (ethnic) nationalism in Korea as well as contemporary renegotiations of ethnic identities. In my discussion of nationalism, I contrast the constructivist, modernist approaches of Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]), Ernest Gellner (1998 [1983]), and Eric Hobsbawm (1991, 2010 [1983]) with primordialist accounts of the emergence of nations and nationalism by Anthony D. Smith (1986, 2000) and David Miller (1999).

The main theoretical background for my analysis of social and ethnic differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans in South Korea is based on the discussion of anthropological theories of ethnicity and ethnic boundary making. By reviewing the work of Fredrik Barth (1969) and combining it with the insights of Gerd Baumann (1999a, 1999b), Rogers Brubaker (2002a), Stuart Hall (1990, 2000, 2003), and Andreas Wimmer (2008), I obtain a workable, analytic conception of ethnicity that can be applied to the Korean case.

I make use of the insights gained in Chapter 3 to outline the historical development of ethnic nationalism in Korea from colonial times to the present in Chapter 4. Here I rely, among others, on the works of Henry Em (1999), Gi-wook Shin (2006), Han Kyung-Koo (2007), B.R. Myers (2010), André Schmid (2002), and Michael Weiner (2003).

In Chapter 5, I turn my attention to approaches that argue that new forms of nationalism are emerging in South Korea which do not emphasize ethnic ties to the same degree as ethnic nationalism. These approaches are also used to explain the increasing marginalization of 'ethnic' Korean migrants, such as North Koreans, in South Korea. I discuss three recent approaches by Dong-Hoon Seol and John D. Skrentny (2009), Emma Campbell (2015, 2016), and Gil Soo Han (2016). Since these studies are partially based on the premise of South Korea's newfound multiculturalism, which refers to the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of South Korean society, I also discuss the relation of Korean multiculturalism and ethnic nationalism by focusing in particular on the case of female marriage migrants. Here, I refer to the edited volume *Multiethnic Korea* by John Lie (2015a) as well as papers by Han Geon-Soo (2007), Kim Hyun Mee (2007), Andrew E. Kim (2010), and Timothy C. Lim (2009). I argue that South Korean multiculturalism should not be considered a sign of the decreasing importance of ethnicity in Korean nationalism but rather as adapting to certain economic and demographic needs while adhering to notions of ethnic homogeneity at the same time.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of North-South migration on the Korean peninsula and the changes that have occurred in migration patterns since the end of the Korean War. I further discuss how North Korean migrants find themselves increasingly marginalized within South Korean society and how this engenders transnational strategies by North Korean migrants. I rely mainly on the works of Chung Byung-Ho (2008, 2014), Jin-Heon Jung (2013, 2015), Andrei Lankov (2006), and Markus Bell (2014).

Finally, Chapter 7 shows that, similarly to multiculturalism, the marginalization of North Korean migrants should not be regarded as signalling the decline of the significance of ethnic ties in conceptions of nationhood. Rather, I show that the discourses that accompany the marginalization of North Korean migrants are immersed in rhetoric that suggests a renegotiation of ethnic unity rather than its declining importance, because North Koreans are differentiated from South Koreans according to 'ethnic' markers. I do so by consulting ethnographic literature that pays attention to the manner in which differences between North Koreans and South Koreans are marked and articulated, including papers by Soo-Jung Lee (2011), Hae Yeon Choo (2006), and Joowon Park (2016). The existing literature is supplemented by my own data, which I collected while conducting research with North Korean migrants during a 12 month stay in South Korea. I show how North Korean migrants themselves are actively involved in the negotiation of ethnic identities in South Korea. I discuss my research setting in the following section.

## 2. REMARKS ON RESEARCH CONTEXT

By exploring the issues set out above, I supplement the existing literature on North Korean migrants in South Korea by making explicit use of my own research findings in the later stages of this work in Chapter 7. I add to the existing body of literature where I see that my own research findings can help in clarifying issues, further elaborate on what is found in the literature, or go beyond the existing literature by either shedding new light on issues or contradicting what has been published so far.

I was able to carry out ethnographic fieldwork based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with North Korean migrants during a 12-month stay in the South Korean capital Seoul. The time spent in Seoul and the interaction with both North Korean migrants and ‘native’ South Koreans broadened my understanding and shaped my research questions. This work would not be possible without the insights gained during my time in South Korea. Thus, to better situate my own data and its use, I first give an overview of my research context and methods before detailing the theoretical and historical background of this work in Chapters 3 and 4.

### 2.1. Fieldwork Sites

From March 2015 to February 2016 I spent 12 months in the South Korean capital Seoul. I stayed in Seoul as an exchange student at Seoul National University while also undertaking ethnographic research on the issues outlined above.

Establishing links with North Korean migrants in South Korea is a difficult task to fulfil. First, North Koreans do not make up a visible community of migrants in South Korea in contrast to Korean Chinese, for example, who are visibly present in the Guro and Yeongdeungpo districts of Seoul (Chung 2014: 339). Secondly, North Korean migrants tend to be wary of meeting researchers, journalists, or foreigners who might just want “the latest sound bite condemning the Kim family, or a suitably heart-wrenching story to fill out the pages of the daily newspaper” (Bell 2014: 102). In order to carry out my research I volunteered at a NGO that offers integration programmes aimed at, although not exclusively,

North Korean migrants in Seoul's southwest, which has the largest concentration of North Korean migrants in South Korea (Chung 2014: 338).

I first started volunteering as an English teacher for elementary school children for which I held three-hour classes once a week. My initial plan was to approach the children's parents or acquaintances for the purpose of getting in contact with North Korean migrants. I intended to tell them about my research interest and ask them whether they were willing to share their experiences with me. However, apart from one child, none of the children in my class actually was from North Korea or had North Korean family. Therefore, the manager of the NGO suggested I get in touch with a former student of the neighbourhood centre who is now a university student in Seoul. She first inquired whether the student would be interested in meeting me and then provided me with her contact information.

Further, in June 2015 I started teaching English to a class of "mothers" in a new institution created for families run by the same NGO as the children's centre. I spent one afternoon per week with the women, teaching them English, sharing meals and engaging in conversations. Both South Korean and North Korean women attended the class. I taught the class together with another teacher (a South Korean and trained anthropologist) who helped me in setting up and translating the lessons. We also engaged in extracurricular activities such as occasional weekend trips for example. We were thus able to get to know each other quite well due to the nine months we spent together, before we conducted two sessions of formal interviews in February 2016.

## 2.2. Interview Methods

Apart from informal conversations, I conducted five formal interviews between May 2015 and February 2016; three interviews with the university student Mina and two with Bona and Sujin<sup>2</sup> from the English class I taught.

The interviews lasted between 90 minutes and four hours each. I experimented with different interview techniques. Since Mina was uncomfortable with audio recordings, I either relied on taking notes during the interviews or purely focused on the conversation. In both cases I always wrote a long-form protocol right after the interview had ended. Bona and Sujin encouraged me to record the interviews. Therefore, I recorded our interviews and transcribed them later verbatim (as translated to me). The interviews were formalized to the extent that we arranged a date and time to meet. I met Mina three times in the area of Seoul where she lived and attended university. We had coffee or a meal each time. We would usually meet in the evening, as both of us had to attend classes at university during the day.

My contact with Mina was limited to the interview sessions as well as staying in touch via text messages. We met three times during a time-span of five months. Mina is a university student in her early 20s in one of Seoul's universities. She first came to South Korea as a teenager. Her family also lives in Seoul. It was her grandmother, who had migrated to South Korea before them, that facilitated their journey to South Korea.

Bona and Sujin are both women in their early 40s who live in Seoul with some of their respective family members (such as children, parents, husbands, or siblings). Bona and Sujin hinted at the fact that North Korean migrants in South Korea are not a homogenous group by emphasizing during our interviews that they live relatively privileged lives compared to other North Korean migrants in South Korea and that I should not mistake their situation as being representative for all or the majority of North Koreans in South Korea. Nonetheless, I was able to gain valuable insight from the conversations with them. In order to conduct the more formalized interviews I met Bona and Sujin on two Friday

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<sup>2</sup> The sensitive nature of my research topic requires me to consider certain ethical aspects and make sure some security measures are met. Thus, the names of my interlocutors are pseudonyms that do not refer to actual people and their personal details are kept vague intentionally.

mornings before our English lessons. We met at the community centre where we held the classes. The surroundings were familiar to us and we were able to create a very relaxed atmosphere.

### 2.3. Interpretation: “Problem and Opportunity” or “Some Benefits of Incompetence”

Due to my then rudimentary command of the Korean language, I arranged an interpreter for three out of my five interviews. To my first interview with Mina I asked one of my university friends, Daeju, who has a basic training in qualitative research methods, to accompany me. His good command of the English language, his familiarity with the standards of qualitative research and his general cultural sensitivity and awareness of the issues North Korean migrants are faced with led me to approach him as an interpreter.

However, during our first interview it became apparent that Mina speaks English rather well (the interview was conducted in a mix of English and Korean). Therefore, in order to create a less formal research environment, I decided to meet her alone for the two other interview sessions.

I also conducted the interviews with Bona and Sujin together with an interpreter. Yebin, the colleague who taught the English lessons with me, supported me for this purpose. The familiar relationship I was able to build up with her, along with her knowledge as an anthropologist, proved quite useful.

There are, of course, apparent disadvantages to working with an interpreter. First of all, there is the semantic problem that translation is never a perfect reproduction of what has been said. Secondly, especially on-the-spot translation has the disadvantage that inaccuracies may distort the translation. Thirdly, the interviewer cannot directly engage with the interviewee; language is a barrier that slows down processes of understanding and empathizing. The researcher’s reaction to what the interviewee says is delayed, which disturbs the flow of the conversation. Most importantly, translation complicates the access to emic concepts, one of the main sources of anthropological knowledge.

However, as Vincent Crapanzano has eloquently pointed out in his study *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980), conducting interviews with an interpreter does also have certain advantages – or better, offers a different perspective than working without an interpreter. Crapanzano lists, among other aspects, the slowed rhythm of the meetings, which allows for more time for the interviewee and the interviewer to think, as well as the possibility to discuss the interview afterwards with the interpreter. But most importantly, for both Crapanzano and me, interpreters can be regarded as cultural mediators in so far as they stand somewhere between the ‘culture’ of the interviewee and that of the interviewer. Crapanzano puts it as follows:

Lhacen, and other assistants in Morocco and elsewhere, also gave me access to the more immediate and, as I have said, more intimate world of my informants and friends, it was not *they* who had to give me access. Through Lhacen I had already had my “introduction” to Morocco (Crapanzano 1980: 146–147; emphasis in original).

In my case, as a German researcher with North Korean interlocutors, the interpreters were South Koreans. This helped immensely in that the interpreters were able to translate not only the content but offered their valuable explanations or interpretations and added comments when they or I felt it was necessary. Of course it was not only my interpreters who gave me ‘access’ to Korea. As I lived in Seoul for a year there were countless friends, acquaintances, and interlocutors who provided me with knowledge that a) my North Korean interview partners did not have to give me, and that b) facilitated communication with them. At the same time, it was possible to connect with the North Korean interviewees through the fact that we were both ‘foreigners’, although of course very different categories

of foreigners, in South Korea, so that there are things in South Korea we each found intriguing when first encountering them (see also Bell 2014: 102).

In particular, the interviews with Bona and Sujin rather resembled a dialogue between three or four people, as opposed to a formal interview where the interpreter simply translates what the interviewees or I said. I have to acknowledge that this also was a frustrating experience at times, when I felt that the translation was not accurate or that important information might have been omitted (a suspicion that, more often than not, proved to be incorrect after reviewing the interview tapes).

Furthermore, especially for me and my particular research interest, social and ethnic differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans, the possibility to have North Koreans and South Koreans at the same table for hours and discussing these issues was immensely valuable, as I could comprehend which issues were either surprising for one side or which were surprising for me but common knowledge for both my interview partners and the interpreters. This helped me in sharpening my research focus and formulating my research questions.

Quotations remain as true as possible to the originals (as translated to me) while making them easily readable. I removed repeated words and pauses when they were not relevant to the content and changed sentence structures to more naturally reflect what my interlocutors would have said had they had the chance to conduct the interview in their native language. Language is inherently enshrined in power relations, and since English is neither the native language of my interlocutors nor of my interpreters, I consider it both ethically and methodologically important to state as clearly as possible what they have said without obscuring their words. If I did so, the responsibility rests solely on me.



### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a theoretical starting point of this work, I give an overview of theories concerning ethnicity and the emergence of nationalism in this section. This is to provide a better understanding of ethnic nationalism in Korea and the way conceptions of ethnicity and nationhood are changing in contemporary South Korea, before I outline Korean ethnic nationalism in the following chapter.

The primary question is to what extent nations, nationalism, and ethnicity should be considered primordial facts of social life and to what extent they should be considered social constructions. While it is true that the studies of both nationalism and ethnicity are in their relativizing stages (Eriksen 1992: 11) and that primordial theories have been out of fashion for quite a while in anthropology, their influence on scholarship in other fields and everyday 'common sense' discourses, both past and present, should not be underestimated. It is therefore worth elaborating on these theories before outlining the development of ethnic nationalism in Korea in the following chapter.

In theoretical terms the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism is complex. Due to their conceptual similarity, implicitly or explicitly, theories of nationalism tend to presuppose a certain notion of ethnicity (Banks 2006: 121). However, the question regarding the exact nature of the relationship of the two remains unclear. Is it simply a conceptual similarity, in that they are both similar forms of collective identification where the most fundamental distinction between the two appears to be nationalism's relation to the state in that nations and nationalism require concrete political entities they are attached to, or is it rather a genealogical relationship that connects them? If so, is nationalism preceded by ethnicity or vice versa? For some scholars ethnic ties are the primordial roots nations and nationalisms are founded upon (see below), while others stress that ethnic identities are a result of people's relationship with nation states (e.g. Feischmidt 2007; Verdery 1994).

This problem cannot be dismissed by the common distinction between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, where "ethnic" nationalism is just one variant of at least two, if not many, forms of nationalism. Within this distinction ethnic nationalism emphasizes common ethnicity – whichever way ethnicity may be defined – while the latter emphasizes espousing and sharing certain political values over common cultural or ethnic ties. As Rogers Brubaker points out, this distinction is highly unsatisfactory because of issues

of definition related to both the terms “civic” and “ethnic” – they are either defined too narrowly and therefore no longer “exhaustive” or defined too loosely and are therefore no longer mutually exclusive; either way they lose their analytic value (Brubaker 2006: 139).

I put forth a social constructivist view that considers both nationality and ethnicity the product of social (inter-)action. I begin by discussing nations and nationalism in the next section, before outlining anthropological conceptions of ethnicity.

### 3.1. Nations and Nationalism: Between Constructivism and Primordialism

The most basic definition of the “nation” can be stated as the congruence between a country’s name, a fixed territory, and “a group of people who are considered citizens” of a political system that is supposed to work “in the name of the people” (Banks 2006: 124). However, defining nation(s) and nationalism(s) is an integral aspect of explaining their emergence and I therefore refrain from providing a universal definition here.

Nation states constitute a significant change from prior, feudal, forms of political organization in Europe to the extent to which nation states are marked by a clearly defined territory (or the demand for a clearly defined territory in the case of nationalist movements) where, ideally, everybody shares some sense of common identity. This must not necessarily be defined through common origin, but might as well, as civic nationalism holds, be defined through the commitment to shared values and laws. Feudal states were marked by decreasing authority towards their borders without the borders being clearly defined. Further, while there was a variety of different ‘classes’ of people within feudal societies, such as monarchs, aristocrats, clergy, or ‘commoners’, there was no sense of “a single identity shared” by all people within the territory that was anything else “beyond [the] allegiance to the monarch” (Banks 2006: 125; Sökefeld 2007). Political theory has made various attempts to explain this radical change of political organization (in Europe).

While nationalism holds that nations have deep historic roots, their connection to (European) modernity has been well established; it is widely accepted in historical and sociological scholarship that the nation state marks a particularly modern form of governance engendered by and engendering certain social transformations in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Ernest Gellner considers nationalism a by-product of industrialization in European modernity and a shift from vertical forms of social differentiation (e.g. classes) to horizontal ones (nations). While nationalism presents itself as “the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force”, it is the result of newly created public cultures through mass education, which in turn is necessitated by economic changes that require an educated and literate mass (1998: 48). The historically recent emergence of nations and nation states stands in contrast to nationalisms’ claims of a long and unified history. Eric Hobsbawm therefore labelled the nation an example of an “invented tradition”, i.e. traditions that “appear or claim to be old” but are in fact “often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm 2010: 1).

In his *Nations and Nationalisms since 1780* (1991) Hobsbawm more explicitly tackles nationalism itself. He traces the modern usage and sense of the word “nation” back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1991: 3) and claims that all objective definitions of nations based on criteria such as “language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin 1912 in Hobsbawm 1991: 6 fn. 11) are bound to fail because exceptions to them can always be found and the criteria proposed to define them ‘objectively’, such as language or ethnicity, are themselves “fuzzy, shifting, and ambiguous” (1991: 6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hobsbawm explicitly states that China, Japan, and Korea are exceptions to this rule “since these countries exist, more or less, within their historical frontier” (1991: fn. 27). He further states that “China, Korea and Japan [...] are indeed among the rare examples of historic states comprised of a population that is



Benedict Anderson stresses the importance of print capitalism in creating nations, which he labels “imagined communities”, defined as communities where people feel connected (and in fact are) to people they have never met nor will ever meet (Anderson 2006: 15). The spread of print capitalism is connected to both the increasing significance of (some) vernacular languages and the wide distribution of reading materials; it therefore helped in creating a wide readership that through the common use of one language at a particular point in time could imagine itself as a community. Anderson stresses that nations are *imagined* communities, not *imaginary* ones. He in particular criticizes Hobsbawm and Gellner for claiming that nationalism “*invents* nations where they do not exist” (Gellner in Anderson 2006: 6; emphasis in Anderson). This is a point worth noting, because for Anderson, an imagined community is not a fictive community in the sense of not being real. Nations are ‘real’ entities in the world. A point reiterated by Foucauldian approaches to state and power (Burchell, Gordon, Miller 1991) and recently by the social ontologist John Searle who says, albeit arguing that ‘things’ like citizenship, nationhood, and money are not of the same ontological order as mountains or gravity, that they are very real and do exist ‘objectively’ (Searle 2006). The philosopher Ian Hacking is another thinker in this mould; he argues that the fact that social institutions can be traced back in time genealogically does not negate their ‘real’ existence. Categories of people such as nations may be “made-up” but they do nonetheless exist (Hacking 1988).

There are, however, approaches that claim while nation states are fairly recent, nationalism and ethnic communities are not necessarily. Anthony D. Smith argues that nations grow out of “ethnies”, a nearly universal form of human communities marked by a common name, a myth of common descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, the link to a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986: 23–31, 2000: 65). He sees these less as objective features of groups, but rather as sentiments or ideologies that bound people together (i.e. rather the belief in common descent than actual common descent). However, he maintains that these communities are not historically recent, and that nations are a modern, territorialized version of ethnic communities based on common laws and “mass public culture” (2000: 65). While he is not a primordialist in the classic sense, since he does not espouse actual blood ties or historic relations among members of ethnic communities, Smith still (over-)emphasises the static character and stability of ethnic communities.

A similar view is expressed by the contemporary political philosopher David Miller. Miller defines a nation as “a community of people with an aspiration to be politically self-determining” (Miller 1999: 19) that grows out of ethnic groups, often ones that see their identities threatened. He defines an ethnic group in turn as “a community formed by common descent and shared cultural features (language, religion, etc.) that set it off from neighboring communities” (1999: 19). Apparently, there is a strong geographical, spatial dimension to his definition in that ethnic groups are people who share a certain physical space that can become the territory of the nation state at a given point. He further argues that there is no sharp dividing line between nations and ethnic groups and that they are phenomena “of the same type” (1999: 19). However, nations can, despite their originally “exclusive ethnic character”, be(-come) multi-ethnic as different ethnicities are included and “embraced” over time; he uses the United States as a prominent example (1999: 20). This implies a certain rigidity of ethnic identities and requires a more detailed look at anthropological conceptions of ethnicity, since neither Gellner, nor Anderson, nor Hobsbawm explicitly deal with ethnicity.

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ethnically almost entirely homogenous” (1991: 66). As discussed below, this notion, which appears to contradict Hobsbawm’s self-professed preference for Barthian notions of ethnicity, is problematic.

### 3.2. Ethnicity: (Re-)Organizing the Social

Anthropology has long abandoned such primordial notions of ethnicity. To the extent to which nationalism is a product of modern identity constructions, ethnicity should also be considered a social process. Although ethnicity does not have the imminent connection to industrialization and modernity that nationalism has, according to Gellner and Anderson, ethnic groups are not quasi-naturally given entities in the world, despite the fact that the ideological underpinnings of ethnicity are usually biological ties in the form of relatedness through common descent (Baumann 1999a: 63).

The insight that ethnic groups are not fixed, pre-existing entities is rather old even within the social sciences. Max Weber himself considered ethnicity, in analogy to Gellner's view on nationalism, to be a consequence of social processes rather than their cause. He argued that "it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity" (Weber 1979: 389). Beyond academic anthropology, these ideas are still part of a 'common sense' that holds that ethnicity is an actual 'thing' and is related to blood, descent, and nature in more than just a constructivist sense. Often common sense also holds that ethnicity refers to biology in a similar sense as its "discredited" predecessors "tribe" or "race" (Baumann 1999b: 295).

This is related to the problem of *reification* (Baumann 1999a: 63; Brubaker 2002a: 166), where social constructs become social forces because they are considered and treated as 'real'. Ethnic or 'racial' groups in America are a good example in this context; there the discourse on the existence of different 'races' actually fostered the establishment of ethnic or 'racial' groups or at least that of organizations<sup>4</sup> which stand for them and act in their name.

Primordial ideas of ethnicity within anthropology seem to have a "straw man" character and have more of a rhetorical function than anything else (Jenkins 2008: 49). Even the one anthropologist still credited for popularizing primordialist ideas, Clifford Geertz, upon closer examination, simply states that perceived primordial ties carry a great social significance (Geertz 1973: 261–266).

The contemporary anthropological thinking on ethnicity is shaped by *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), a collection of essays edited by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth. Barth's insights have had a lasting impact on the anthropological study of ethnicity and the post-Barthian concepts of ethnicity "remains arguably the best approach to the topic" (Jenkins 2008: 24).

Fredrik Barth's great contribution to the study of ethnicity was to create an understanding of ethnicity as a feature of *social organization* and a social process rather than some kind of essence (Vermeulen and Govers 1994b). Barth proposed to regard ethnicity not as a cluster of "seemingly 'objective' cultural traits" but as behaviour, "including 'cultural' behaviour that is socially effective in marking group boundaries" (Verdery 1994: 35). Ethnicity is an organizational feature of societies (i.e. the way people are categorized and social groups are built) rather than the sum of their cultural traits; therefore ethnicity cannot be studied by listing the cultural content of some group but by studying how ascription and self-ascription of ethnic group identities work (Barth 1969: 13).

Barth criticizes prior definitions of ethnicity because they imply that ethnic groups develop in isolation and that "history has produced a world of separate peoples" that developed "in response to local ecological factors" (1969: 11). His main point of critique of such a conception of ethnicity and ethnic groups is that it directs the scholars' emphasis away from questions of boundary maintenance. It assumes that boundary maintenance is "unproblematic and follows from the isolation which [...] itemized characteristics imply"; these characteristics include: "racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers, [and] spontaneous and organized enmity" (1969: 11). According to Barth, ethnic boundaries can and do exist within culturally homogenous groups. This

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<sup>4</sup> For the problematic relation of ethnic groups and organizations that (claim) to represent them see Brubaker (2002a: 171–173).

means that, for example, culturally or linguistically homogenous groups are traversed by ethnic boundaries, or that ethnic boundaries can incorporate culturally diverse people. Ethnic boundaries can include people that, when distinguishing according to the “cultural stuff”, one would consider to be different ethnic groups (Baumann 1999b: 58–59). Barth therefore argues that one ought not to pay attention to the “cultural stuff” that is enclosed by the boundary but to boundary maintenance itself. It is the boundary that defines the group, not the cultural content that it encloses. The process of ethnic identification cannot be understood by studying ‘an ethnic group’, ‘a culture’, or ‘a society’ in isolation. Rather, the study of ethnicity, as Barth correctly observed, encourages studying boundary maintenance. Barth considers the “common culture” of an ethnic group a result of the boundary maintenance rather than the other way around (Barth 1969: 11). Cultural features are important, but only to the extent to which the actors themselves highlight them and consider them important for the articulation of difference. There is no inherent a priori reason why one cultural feature should be highlighted rather than another one. It is up to the actors to decide which cultural features are important for the definition of in-group membership. From this follows that the actors’ perspective of ethnic groups and boundaries is more important than that of social scientists, who cannot simply define them according to certain cultural markers.

Another important observation Barth makes is that ethnic identities can change. He highlighted the potential of change in his ethnographic study of the boundary maintenance process in the Swat Valley in Pakistan between two ethnic groups, the Pathans and the Baluchs. He describes how individual Pathans could become Baluchs by switching their ethnic identity, and how this was not an irregularity but rather a systematic aspect of boundary maintenance (1969: 22).

Barth’s theory still serves as the departure point for much of the anthropological thinking on ethnicity. This is also due to the reason that the concept of culture lost much of its value as an analytical concept in anthropology. In the 1980s anthropological debates within anthropology centred to a great deal around whether or not and to which extent the term “culture” has an analytical use and whether it should not be abandoned altogether (to date, no consensus has been reached on this issue; see also Abu-Lughod 2006; Kuper 2000).<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2.1. *Ethnicity, Culture, and Descent*

The contemporary anthropologist Thomas H. Eriksen follows a Barthian approach in arguing that:

Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between persons who consider themselves as essentially distinctive from members of other groups of whom they are aware and with whom they enter into relationships [sic] (2010: 16–17).

Yet, what does this “essential difference” consist of, when the criteria – the “cultural content” according to which ethnic differentiation can take place – are virtually arbitrary? What is it that makes ethnic differentiation and ethnic groups different from other forms

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<sup>5</sup> This is true especially of American anthropology, where, due to its Herderian and Boasian roots, anthropology’s object of study was “culture” or “cultures” in the plural. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, especially in Britain, anthropology did not focus on the study of culture per se but rather on social structure and organization. The influence of Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown led to different developments within anthropological theory in Britain compared to the US or even continental Europe. In theoretical terms, the Barthian approach can therefore probably be considered both a departure from “culture centric” concepts of ethnicity and the application of British social anthropology’s approaches to ethnicity. This is highlighted by Barth’s praise and use of Edmund Leach’s insights on ethnicity and social organization from his studies in highland Burma (*Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 1954).

of identity, such as religion, for example? Here, an observation Benedict Anderson made in connection to nations applies to ethnic groups as well. Unlike religious communities, which often claim to be universalizing in that they try to include the entire world population into the realm of believers (at least in rhetoric), both nation and ethnicity are by definition identities built in opposition to other people who are necessarily the “out-group”. Edward Evans-Pritchard’s case of segmentary opposition among the Nuer in the Nile Valley (1940) works as a good example to illustrate this point. How the group is defined and who exactly is a member is determined by whom the group identifies itself against. The in-group is always identified against an out-group. Ethnicity cannot exist in isolation since it is “an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group” (Eriksen 2010: 16); ethnic differences are thus “the systematic distinction between insiders and outsiders; between Us and Them [sic]” (2010: 23).

Some authors argue that the role of “culture” and “descent” should not be disregarded when discussing ethnicity. They claim that Barth paid too much attention to ethnicity as a process of social organization and that he failed to see what makes ethnic distinctions important for actors. Eugene Roosens, for example, argues that self-ascription is not sufficient for determining ethnicity. What distinguishes ethnicity from other forms of identity and group belonging is the “genealogical dimension”; Barth did not fully disregard this possibility, he just did not pay much attention to it (Roosens 1994: 83). Roosens holds that ethnicity combines a source of *differentiation* (boundary) with an internal source of *identification* (1994: 84). Differentiation based on boundaries creates “out-groups” while identification based on origins creates “in-groups”.

Karl-Heinz Kohl (1999) agrees with Roosens when stating that the belief in common descent is a criterion for the definition of ethnicity, alongside shared culture and language. Although he agrees that the most important criterion is a sense of “we-ness” (*Wir-Bewusstsein*), a sense of belonging together, he claims that in order to speak of ethnicity, and not another form of social differentiation, ideas of common descent need to exist. But since Kohl follows Weber’s approach to ethnicity, he too sees that an ideology of common descent is the consequence of the *Wir-Bewusstsein* more often than vice versa. Kohl refers to the problem of reification, mentioned above, when stating that, even despite being founded upon “invented traditions”, ethnic groups turn into ‘real’ historical forces, and he further promotes a combination of relativistic and primordial models of ethnicity. Kohl argues that factors such as culture, language, and origin should not to be neglected but also should not be overemphasized, since there are cases in which ethnic differentiation occurs despite a common language and history (the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda as one example) and in which, despite different languages, common ethnicity is stressed (1999: 285).

Eriksen also stresses that culture is a not an arbitrary factor when it comes to the study of ethnicity. He calls for a return to a more prominent role of “culture” in studying ethnicity when stating that “cultural differences must be analysed as well, not only their articulation (boundary); they also matter” (Eriksen 1992: 30). Eriksen holds that taking “the cultural contexts of ethnic difference” seriously also “entails taking the representations of ordinary ‘lay’ agents seriously” (1992: 32), which is something that anthropology, post *Writing Culture* and its ethico-epistemological turn, has to take into consideration. Eriksen sees the strength of “formalist approaches”, such as Barth’s, in the fact that they do not have to “put up” with an analytic concept of culture (1992: 29). Formalist approaches do not have to deal with conceptualizing “culture” or “cultural differences” which are “elusive” and “cannot be measured” (1992: 33). Yet, Eriksen emphasises that the “cultural content” of ethnic categories is important because their development takes place within defined cultural and historical contexts. Actors have to employ and reinterpret preexisting cultural symbols. This limits the amount of possible categorizations and thus “the cultural continuity with the past which is emphasized by ethnic ideologists and national historians is not all make-believe and a manipulative invention of the past” (2010: 111–112).

At this point it is useful to introduce the old anthropological distinction between emic, ‘culture-specific’ concepts, and etic concepts, referring to the analytic, conceptual framework of the researcher. While origin and common descent as much as shared culture

might be important for certain actors and emic conceptions of ethnicity (as is the case in Korean ethnic nationalism), it does not mean that there are actual blood ties between all Koreans for example, or that all Koreans share the same culture. This is not to discount certain thinking against western scientific concepts, as in saying, for example, that Korean concepts of kinship and ethnicity are false and a scientific analysis shows that there exist no 'actual' ethnic ties between Koreans. There are multiple ways of defining kinship and relatedness and it is not the anthropologist's job to privilege one view over another (see also Sahlins 2013). Therefore, it is not important whether ethnic groups 'actually' exist, but that, no matter the 'actual' blood ties between people, social differentiation based on ethnicity can have enormous discursive power in certain contexts.

### 3.2.2. *From Groups to Categories*

Similar to conceptions of "cultures" as separate, enclosed entities, the concept of "ethnic groups" can also be considered problematic. In the history of anthropology, ethnic groups are a conceptual successor of the discredited concept of "tribe" (Baumann 1999b: 295) and whether one highlights the cultural content of a given ethnic group or not, one still assumes that ethnic groups exist as distinguishable social entities.

Rogers Brubaker aims at providing a workable definition of ethnicity for analytical purposes, without positing the actual existence of ethnic groups as homogenous groups with a shared culture and common descent. He tries to – if one were to use Anderson's terminology regarding nationalism – reconcile the factual and philosophical shallowness of the concept of ethnicity with its social and political power in the world (see Anderson 2006: 4). To do justice to the discursive power of ethnicity, Brubaker suggests the social sciences ought to conceptualize "ethnicity without groups" and instead consider ethnicity a process of *categorization* (2002a). According to Brubaker, the concept of the "group" has been largely unchallenged within the social sciences. He argues that this concept can be regarded as a major theoretical flaw within the analytical framework created by social scientists, especially when studying nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnic conflict (2002a: 165).

Even the Barthian approach to ethnicity speaks of separate ethnic groups that might change or whose membership might change (a change of ethnic identity of individuals); yet the existence of the group as a group is not questioned in Barth's example. Brubaker calls this a "taken-for-granted concept apparently in no need of particular scrutiny or explication" (2002a: 163). He argues that taking the concept of "groups" for granted means presupposing groups as "putative things-in-the-world to which the concept refers" (2002a: 163). Brubaker labels as "groupism" the "tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life [...] and foundational units of social analysis" (2002a: 164).

As Brubaker is primarily interested in furthering the study of social, and in particular ethnic, conflict through a reworking of the concept of "groups", his main problem with groupism applied to ethnicity and nationalism is treating them as if they had "interests" or "agency", as if there was a plurality of bounded, homogenous groups that can be said to want, hate, like, or do something (2002a: 164). According to Brubaker, constructivist approaches within the social sciences have insufficiently deconstructed groupist tendencies. The term "class", as in "working class" for example, has largely been abandoned by scholars. Yet, the same cannot be said about "ethnicity" (2002a: 165). From "common sense" to even constructivist academic writing, "ethnic, racial and national conflict" tends to be termed as the conflict of "ethnic groups, races, and nations" (2002a: 165). Brubaker believes it is the social sciences' task to question these "common sense" notions of ethnicity and not perpetuate reifications that are part of everyday social life. He says common sense on ethnicity "is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*; it belongs to our empirical data, not our analytical toolkit" (2002a: 165; emphasis



in original). This, similarly to the distinction between emic and etic categories, does mean dismissing “vernacular categories”. However, it also means avoiding “categories of ethnopolitical practice” as scholarly “categories of social analysis” (2002a: 166). Yet, neither is it the scholar’s task to criticize the process of reification; instead one ought to analyse how practices of reification are actualized in social life (2002a: 167).

The most fundamental step in (re)conceptualizing ethnicity is to make the distinction between “groups” and “categories”, because ethnicity is better understood as *a process of categorization* rather than as “substances” or “entities” in the world. Ethnicity, like ‘race’ and nationhood, are not to be understood as “things *in* the world, but [as] perspectives *on* the world” (Brubaker 2002a: 174).

### 3.2.3. Ethnic Boundary Making

With the combined insight of Barth and Brubaker that ethnicity is a) a function of social organization and b) an active way of categorizing people rather than the simple act of describing some preexisting groups, we can gain a better understanding of how ethnic boundaries may change and how new ethnic categories may originate.

The anthropologist and sociologist Andreas Wimmer considers ethnicity a social category when discussing boundary making. According to him, Barthian approaches are rather “static” and are too focused “on the features of the boundaries themselves and the process of their maintenance”. Wimmer instead focuses his attention on the “making” of ethnic boundaries “by political movements or everyday interaction of individuals” (Wimmer 2008: 1027). Wimmer lists the options actors have in making and changing ethnic boundaries (2008: 1028). He situates his study within the wider trend of moving from structure to agency in the social sciences (2008: 1028; see also Ortner 2006). He offers a “taxonomy” of possible ways (“forms”) in which actors can change boundaries. The taxonomy is supposed to be comprehensive in that every logically possible form of ethnic boundary making is covered. Wimmer’s typology “classifies *forms* of ethnicity making – rather than types of ethnicity” (2008: 1028; emphasis in original). He explicitly challenges ethnographers, among others, to take up his taxonomy and “situate what they have observed within the larger panorama of possibilities” (2008: 1028). Further, Wimmer argues that there are four different ways of making ethnic boundaries:

I distinguish between strategies that attempt to change the location of existing boundaries (‘boundary shifting’) by ‘expanding’ or ‘contracting’ the domains of the included and those that do not aim at the location of a boundary but try to modify its meaning and implication by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories (‘normative inversion’), de-emphasizing ethnicity and emphasizing other social divisions (‘blurring’) or changing one’s own position vis-a-vis the boundary (‘positional moves’; 2008: 1031).

The expansion and contraction associated with “boundary shifting” can take on different forms. But Wimmer subsumes them largely under processes of *fission* and *fusion*, i.e. either more inclusive categories make existing boundaries irrelevant or new, “smaller” boundaries are drawn. “Normative inversion” or “transvaluation” can be divided into two subcategories: “normative inversion, which reverses existing rank order” and “equalization”, which, as the name suggests, tries to counter hierarchies by establishing equality. An example of the former is the Black Power movement in the US; the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. is an example of the latter (2008: 1037–1038). “Positional moves” also exist in two variants: The first is the individual change of ethnic membership (as Barth already observed). The second is “collective repositioning”; Wimmer lists Indian “caste climbing” and “crossing the colour line” in the US as examples. The latter refers to different “ethnic groups” that were considered “whites” while they had been considered “Jews”, “Italians”, or “Irish” previously. “Blurring”, as the final form in Wimmer’s taxonomy, “reduces the

importance of ethnicity as a principle of categorization and social organization" (2008: 1041). Blurring boundaries decreases their relevance and refocuses the emphasis from ethnic criteria to other forms of social differentiation such as regional or local identities (2008: 1042–1043).

According to Wimmer, all instances of boundary making can be subsumed under this taxonomy. This is due to the fact that he does not offer an empirical study of existing and observed cases of boundary making but rather tries to deduce all possible ways boundaries can be made. Wimmer admits that different forms of ethnic boundary making may all be at play at the same time and thus may be hard to differentiate from each other on an empirical level. Conceptually, however, they should not be confused (2008: 1043).

### *3.2.4. Ethnicity and Migration*

Processes of boundary maintenance and boundary making become especially visible in migration and diaspora contexts (Roosens 1994: 83; Sökefeld 2007: 45).

Gerd Baumann offers an insightful example of what such renegotiations might look like. He also contends that collective identities, such as ethnicity, are always being renegotiated and that these renegotiations of identities become most visible in contexts of migration. He argues that, especially in these contexts, history and collective memories are reinterpreted in a way in which adaptation to new situations as well as making sense of them is encouraged. He observed that diaspora communities are capable of maintaining different discourses surrounding their identity at the same time and therefore asks how it is possible for the same social actors to reinforce old ethnic and cultural distinctions in some situations while also creating new and alternative or hybrid forms in other situations (1999b: 288).

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among transnational migrants in Southall, London, Baumann claims that there is a "dominant" and a "demotic" discourse at work when it comes to the ethnic and cultural identity of diaspora communities. The interesting point about Baumann's distinction is that he found the distinction Brubaker makes between 'common sense' and scholarly analysis in his own empirical work.

According to Baumann, the "dominant discourse" considers cultural differences to be a reflection of pre-defined ethnic differences which in turn are reduced to biology (1999b: 288–289). Cultural differences are therefore made essential. Bauman notes that minorities are actively involved in this discourse, and it should therefore not be dismissed as simple chauvinism on the part of the majority (1999b: 289). The "demotic discourse" is the opposite of the dominant discourse. The dominant discourse considers cultural identity the reified property of any postulated group or community. The demotic discourse instead, according to Baumann, questions this equation of culture and ethnicity and dissolves it (1999b: 289). Therefore, it seems that, at least in Southall, common sense is not as common as Brubaker wants us to believe. Bauman claims, regarding Southall, that each and every migrant community could be defined along reified lines, but that none of them was immune to "alternate" forms of social differentiation. The unity of community and ethnicity is dissolved, or is at least being questioned, through the demotic discourse.

The cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall thought about identity along similar lines as Baumann. For Hall, inspired by his readings of Foucault, Butler, and Lacan, identification is never as unproblematic as reified notions of identities proclaim. For Hall, as for Baumann, postmodern, postcolonial, and diaspora contexts are loaded with renegotiations of identities (Hall 1990: 235). He claims that in these contexts "old identities are not as stable as they once were" and that notions of cultural identity that are based on the belief of "one shared culture" and a collective "true self", which is "stable, unchanging" and based on "shared history and ancestry", cannot be maintained any longer (1990: 223).

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think, perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact [which the new cultural practices represent] we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation (1990: 222).

To a greater degree than Barth, Hall is concerned with the relationship of power and identities. For him, identities are historically constructed and "emerge within the play of specific modalities of power". This makes them more the "product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than a sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity", which he describes as "an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)" (Hall 2000: 17).

Hall discusses "cultural" identity rather than "ethnic" identity. Yet, at first glance, it does not become apparent why his approach would not be useful for studying ethnic identity as well, since Hall argues against a primordial, essentialist definition of culture as Barth argues against a primordial, essentialist definition of ethnicity. Both concepts of cultural and ethnic identity – although not identical – seem to have developed along similar lines in that both can be discussed in similar terms today. Therefore, ethnicity should not be understood as a given, fixed entity that is the basis for social and cultural processes but rather as a vital and changing aspect of social processes itself.

In this chapter I showed that both nationalism and ethnicity are best understood as social constructs that are subject to constant renegotiations and should not be considered either static and/or primordial facts of social life. While nationalism's relation with the state makes it easier to recognize its modern, constructed nature, this is more difficult for ethnicity and ethnic categories. Yet they, like nationalism, are categories that can change and are changing. Ethnicity, like culture, is not "'something' that people 'have' or to which people 'belong'" but rather encompasses:

[C]omplex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and 'do' in their daily lives within which they construct an ongoing sense of themselves and an understanding of their fellows. Ethnicity, in particular, is best thought of as an ongoing process of ethnic identification (Jenkins 2008: 15).

With these insights in mind, the development of and changes to ethnic nationalism in colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary Korea can be better understood.



## 4. ETHNIC NATIONALISM IN KOREA

In this chapter I outline the basic tenets and history of ethnic nationalism in Korea. As the work of Anderson, Gellner, and Hobsbawm suggests, Korean ethnic nationalism (*minjokjuui*) is widely believed to be a historically recent phenomenon. Despite ethnic nationalism's own claim to an almost 5000-year long history, historians trace its development back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when China's power and influence declined and Korea was colonized by the Japanese Empire from 1910–1945.

Homogeneity is the basis for a “pure-blood nationalism” (Han 2016: 21) that is “deeply embedded in the Korean psyche” (2016: 21). Until recently Korean textbooks “still” taught the racial and ethnic homogeneity of Korea, despite the fact “that a large number of foreigners have settled and naturalized in Korea throughout its history” (2016: 21). The active promotion of the myth of common descent since the Korean War on both sides of the peninsula is the main cause for this widely held belief (2016: 30). Gi-wook Shin claims in his seminal study *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* (2006) that “68.2 percent of respondents in South Korea consider ‘blood’ the most important criteria for defining the Korean nation” (2006: 2). He also found out that “ethnic unity” is assumed to be shared on the Korean peninsula (2006: 3). These ties are so deep that South Koreans claim to feel closer to ethnic Koreans abroad, even non-citizens, than to non-ethnic Korean residents in South Korea (2006: 2–3).

The basic assumption of ethnic nationalism is the claim that Koreans are related through shared blood and descent from the mythical founder of Gojoseon, the first kingdom on the Korean peninsula, the semi-deity Dangun. Dangun is the son of the god Hwanung who descended to earth and had a child with a bear he turned into a woman (Seo and Lee 2000: 3).

Despite its popularity the origin of the myth of Dangun itself is fairly recent (Han, K.-K. 2007; Pai 2000). Dangun is believed to have founded Gojoseon, in 2333 B.C. but he is not mentioned in any document until the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (Pai 2000: 58). Furthermore, his significance was minor until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Korean identity was threatened by Japan's efforts to incorporate not only the Korean peninsula, but also its people into the Japanese Empire.

Japanese colonial policy introduced the concept of *naisen ittai* (Korea and Japan as one), which claimed that Koreans and (Yamato) Japanese are of the same origin, and that Korea used to be a part of Japan in ancient history. However, through the course of history Korea had lost its way, thus needing Japan's guidance. According to this concept, Japan should be understood as the big brother to Korea, who brings it back to purer, civilized, Japanese culture. Therefore, Japan's ideology of ethnic brotherhood, *naisen ittai*, was highly assimilationist in nature. Of course, the lofty discourse of ethnic brotherhood stood in stark contrast to the reality of ('racial') discrimination which Koreans experienced from the Japanese, both in Korea and in Japan. Koreans were practically excluded from many spheres of public life. Furthermore, the display of Korean culture and the public use of the Korean language were severely limited (Caprio 2009). More severely, forced labour and forced prostitution of Koreans occurred during Japan's colonization of Korea. Especially the latter is still an issue in the bilateral relations of the two modern nation states (Haberstroh 2003; Min 2003).

Korean intellectuals reacted to this by reinterpreting old Korean myths to highlight Korea's unique identity in order to differentiate it from Japan. They stressed the importance of Korean history, its cultural and ethnic homogeneity, and its unique language and alphabet (Robinson 1988; Shin and Robinson 1999). While Japanese historiography came up with theories that saw Korea as a part of ancient Japan that was "lost", Korean intellectuals used myths and historiography to highlight Korea's uniqueness.<sup>6</sup> Ethnic nationalism became the vital ideology of resistance that demanded a Korean state for the Korean people on the Korean peninsula and remained a vital force in public discourse in both political states of the Korean peninsula even after the end of Japanese colonialism. Ultimately, unification discourses, whether endorsing or opposing (swift) unification, can only fully be understood while keeping in mind that Koreans consider themselves part of the same historic nation which is divided due to political conflicts.

#### 4.1. Japanese Colonization and its Influences

The importance of Japan in the development of Korean ethnic nationalism is not to be underestimated. Japan's role in this regard was twofold. On the one hand, it encouraged the development of a distinct Korean identity by trying to (forcefully) incorporate Korea into its empire. On the other hand, Korean nationalism, although built in opposition to Japan's efforts, was *modelled after* Japan. Korean discourses on ethnic and national identity very much resemble Japanese discourses, with the small difference that they exclude Japan. Ironically, Korean ethnic nationalism mirrored Japanese nationalism in this aspect as well. Modern Japanese national identity was also constructed through opposition, but in this case against the West.

Contemporary notions of Japanese national identity date back to the Meiji period, where Japanese society and the state underwent significant changes and what is commonly referred to as "modernization". Japanese nationalism itself was influenced by German ideas of nationhood (Han, K.-K. 2007: 23). Although this distinction has been criticized, the study of European nationalism tends to juxtapose nationalist developments in France and England to the development of nationalism in Germany. While the former tended to emphasize political bonds, the latter put a greater emphasis on ethnic and 'racial' bonds

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<sup>6</sup> Of course this is a simplification, since, as citizens of the Japanese empire, many Korean intellectuals were employed in the Japanese administration and took part in efforts to incorporate Korea, for various reasons. Some saw Japan as truly superior to Korea and thought Japanization would be a way to develop Korea and catapult it into modernity. Han K.-K. notes that "even with animosity against the Japanese, Koreans were ready to study and learn Japanese institutions and policies, as well as their diligence and work ethic" (2007: 24).

(*Volk*) during their respective modern nation building processes.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of nation states and European modernity had a significant impact on the development of Japanese notions of nationhood. Similar to Korea, which developed its national identity in opposition to Japan, Japan developed its national identity in opposition to Western powers, while nonetheless adopting and adapting Western concepts (Weiner 2003c: 9). It was encounters with Western people and Western ways of living which fostered a sense of common Japanese identity, since the West was “more different” than all other differences (e.g. regional or class differences) in Japan (Lie 2001: 120).<sup>8</sup>

Japanese intellectuals combined Western ideas with Japanese elements to “forge” the Japanese nation (Weiner 2003c: 1). The nation was “narrated” (Bhabha 1994) as “a modern manifestation of a primordial community of which the citizenry had always been a part” (Weiner 2003c: 2). During the Meiji period the notion of a distinct Japanese people, a Japanese *minzoku*, first developed and gained popularity. *Minzoku* and the Korean word *minjok*, which is derived from it (as well as the Chinese term *minzu*), are notoriously difficult to translate. They can be translated as “nation”, “ethnicity”, or “people”. Even the term “race” is a possible translation, although there is another word for race in Japanese and Korean, *jinshu* and *injong* respectively (Schmid 2002: 172–173; Weiner 2003c: 2–3). The Japanese term *minzoku* was a neologism that entered the Japanese vocabulary for the first time as the translation for the European terms “race” and “nation” and came to stand for “ethnic nation” from 1890 onwards. It resembles the German terms *Volk* or *Volksgemeinschaft* (Em 1999: 337; Han 2016: 21). Translation is further complicated by the fact that none of these terms can be clearly defined in any European language, sometimes not even translated from one European language to the other, the German term *Volk* being a case in point (see also Banks 2006: 52–53).

Despite the semantic ambivalence of the term *minzoku*, it was loaded with racial ideology from its inception (Weiner 2003c: 2–3). As in Korea, ‘race’ and biological relatedness were expressed through the idiom of “blood”. Consanguinity was seen as the basis of kinship. This was accompanied by a conflation of ethnicity and culture, where ethnic unity was supposed to be signified by cultural homogeneity (Weiner 2003a: xiii).

When Korea first became a Japanese protectorate through the *Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905* and was then colonized from 1910 onwards, the Japanese brought their ideas regarding ethnicity and nationalism to Korea. Japanese colonial rule can be divided into three phases: the phase of military rule, the phase of cultural rule, and the assimilationist phase of the *naisen ittai* and *nissen dosoron* (Japan and Korea share the same ancestry) policies (Lee 2013: 6). *Naisen ittai*, despite roughly translating into “Japan and Korea as one” still had chauvinist implications. The syllable “*nai*” stands for the centre of the empire, Japan, and the syllable “*sen*” for the periphery, Korea (Em 1999: 353). Further, while assimilation was propagated due to similarity and relatedness, Koreans had an ambivalent status in Japanese racial ideology. Koreans were on the one hand deemed to have the same origins, but on the other hand they were not considered full members of the Yamato ‘race’. Koreans were generally second class citizens in Japan’s colonial empire (Kim, N. Y. 2008: 25–26).

In contrast to many other colonial regimes that primarily sought economic exploitation and political rule, Japan’s colonization of Korea was marked by “attempts to completely assimilate Koreans into Japan and to eradicate Korea’s ethnic and cultural identity” (Lee 2013: 6). Korea was to become an extension of the Japanese Empire rather than its mere colony (Kim 2013: 218). Assimilation of Korea and the Korean people into the Japanese Empire was seen as a project of “national reintegration” due to the tenets of assimilation

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison of nationalism and nationhood in France and Germany see Brubaker (2002b). However, Brubaker himself later retracted some of his claims and emphasizes the schematic and conceptually inadequate nature of opposing “civic” and “ethnic” forms of nationalism (Brubaker 2006: 136, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Lie argues that “blood” and mono-ethnicity became important in Japan only after the Pacific War, when the loss of Empire engendered a renegotiation of Japanese national identity (2001: 125), a claim that stands in contrast to the literature on Japanese nationalism I am familiar with (for a critique of Lie see Han, K.-K. 2007: 23; see also Doak 1996).

theory, which claimed that Japanese and Korean people had the same origins, shared a common, or at least similar culture, had the same ancestors (and therefore share the same 'blood') and a common history. Koreans were considered "Sinified" Japanese whose Sinification could be "peeled off" to reveal their original Japanese self (Isoda 1993:119 in Lie 2001: 123). This implied that the colonized did not have a distinct identity or history and therefore "deprived them of their right to claim independence" (Kim 2013: 218).

#### 4.2. The Development of Korean Ethnic Nationalism

However, one could say this ultimately backfired, since precisely features such as common origins, a shared culture, common ancestors, and a shared history are now the features of Korean ethnic nationalism. Koreans accepted Japanese assimilation theory to an extent, but excluded the Japanese from the in-group in what Wimmer would term "boundary shifting" (Myers 2010: 33–34; Shin 2006: 22). The assimilation policy had the opposite effect of what was intended: it "crystallized differences" between Japan and Korea (Shin 2006: 54).

Japanese scholars themselves undertook great efforts to "prove" and "document" historical and cultural ties between Korea and Japan, attempts that were classified under the label "colonial historiography" or "Japanese historiography" (Em 1999: 345). Korean intellectuals, too, were employed in this form of top-down nationalization where "elites" educated the "simple people" (Myers 2010: 34). "Korean historiography" or "nationalist historiography" arose as an intellectual counter movement already in the early 20th century, when China's influence on Korea was decreasing and Japanese influence increasing. Korean scholars such as Shin Chae-ho, Park Eunsik, and Kim Kyohong attempted to prove the distinctiveness of the Korean nation by documenting its unique history, which was shared among Koreans but not with the Japanese (Em 1999; Pai 2000; Schmid 2002; Shin and Robinson 1999). This, incidentally, led to a demotion of the role China had in Korean historiography (Schmid 2002: 55–100).

It is true that Korea has existed within relatively stable geographical borders and has most likely had a certain degree of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness from China and Japan. This is a point that is often made when trying to explain why it was so 'easy' for Korea to develop its ethnic nationalism (Lee, Ha, Sorensen 2013). According to this viewpoint, shared culture more or less existed across the Korean peninsula before Japanese intervention; it was just modernity and Japanese colonialism that turned it into a "nation" (see also Duncan 1998). However, another perspective is offered by Gellner's point that nationalism emerges in contexts where state or state-like structures already exist. In Korea, it is certain that the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, and even the pre-colonial political order of Korea with a refined bureaucracy and relative stable geographical borders for centuries, have contributed to the establishment of ethnic nationalism in Korea (Schmid 2002). This is highlighted by the fact that in South Korea, despite the heavy anti-Japanese rhetoric of the post-colonial Syngman Rhee government, Japanese colonial bureaucratic infrastructure was largely left in place (Shin 2006: 97).<sup>9</sup> Shin et al. argue in a similar direction by stating:

Korea was less 'feudal' or regionally differentiated in the Chosŏn period than Japan or China, and was simply smaller and less diverse than China. In light of all this, early modern Korean nationalists did not have to work as hard as those in Japan and China to produce a viable, homogenous ethnic national identity. In addition, as Korea lacked an autonomous state with which Korean nationalists could identify, they turned their attention instead to 'race thinking' (Shin, Freda, Yi 1999: 470).

<sup>9</sup> This was among other things due to the US military government's employment of Japanese collaborators in the interim government (Cumings 2005: 193).

It is nearly impossible for contemporary historians to show to what extent a sense of Korean (ethnic) identity among Koreans actually existed before the birth of the modern Korean nation. Korean historical research is bound to be, as is often the case in historical research, especially on the history of nationalism, a history of elites (Hobsbawm 1991: 78). However, even if there existed near cultural homogeneity on the peninsula, this is not enough to warrant notions of ethnic unity; as shown above, culture and ethnicity are not to be equated. Furthermore, the Kingdom of Joseon, which lasted until colonization, had close political, social, economic, and cultural ties to China. Even assuming that there was a shared 'culture' (disregarding the ambiguity of the term for a moment) it is highly unlikely that it could have been the basis for any kind of nationhood in the sense of a community of people that belong together, since social differentiation according to class, rank, and region was a common feature of social life in Joseon Korea (Em 1999, 338). Besides, especially for many Koreans elites, social and cultural distinction from China was not desirable, as Carter Eckert poignantly points out:

[T]here was little, if any, feeling of loyalty toward the abstract concept of "Korea" as a nation-state, or toward fellow inhabitants of the peninsula as "Koreans." Far more meaningful at the time, in addition to a sense of loyalty to the king, were the attachments of Koreans to their village or region, and above all to their clan, lineage, and immediate and extended family. The Korean elite in particular would have found the idea of nationalism not only strange but also uncivilized. Since at least the seventh century the ruling classes in Korea had thought of themselves in cultural terms less as Koreans than as members of a larger cosmopolitan civilization centered on China... To live outside the realm of Chinese culture was, for the Korean elite, to live as a barbarian [sic] (Eckert 1991: 226–227 in Em 1999: 338).

Up until the end of the Joseon Dynasty, history had been the history of dynasties and elites. It was historiography in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that sought to narrate Korean history as the history of the Korean *nation* for the first time. This included playing down the role of Chinese influence on Korea by relegating the role of certain historical and mythological figures and by elevating minor, but 'genuinely' Korean, mythological figures to the status of heroes and nation founders, as was the case with Dangun (Han, K.-K. 2007). Before Korea struggled under Japanese colonialism, Dangun was considered to be the *political* founder of Korea, not a biological ancestor (2007: 14). The actual myth of Dangun explicitly contradicts the claim that all Koreans can trace their descent back to him, since it refers to people who had already been living on the Korean peninsula before the arrival of Dangun and the founding of Gojoseon (2007: 15). The main function of the myth of Dangun was to provide Korea with a history that could match China's history in terms of its civilization and its historical span. Still, explicit differentiation from China was not sought in Goryeo or Joseon Korea, and notions of blood relatedness through common descent from Dangun were of no significance. This is exemplified by Gija being another celebrated figure in Korean mythology. Gija was a Chinese man who is supposed to have 'civilized' Korea after migrating to the Korean peninsula – while Dangun founded Korea (Gojeoson), Gija civilized it (2007: 15; see also Schmid 2002).

Yet, with the advent of ethnic nationalism, the relevance, meaning, and role of Korea's mythical figures changed and were adapted to present needs. Since Gija was Chinese and therefore a 'foreigner', the idea of him as "the Civilizer" became difficult to reconcile with a Korean nationalism that emphasized ethnic homogeneity; thus his role was diminished, and Dangun became not only the political but also the cultural and biological "father of the Korean people" (Han, K.-K. 2007: 24; Schmid 2002: 177–198). Han K.-K. further argues that not only the idea of being biologically related but also the very thought of Korea being "a state made of a single homogeneous ethnic group" is of recent origin and that the kingdoms on the Korean peninsula valued and emphasized cultural hegemony over ethnic purity; migration to and settlement on the Korean peninsula are historically well documented and were accompanied by pressures for cultural assimilation (2007: 13, 16–22).



#### 4.3. Postcolonial Ethnic Nationalism in Korea

B.R. Myers' *The Cleanest Race* (2010) is an analysis of postcolonial ethnic nationalism in North Korea. His primary concern is not the historical development of ethnic nationalism on the Korean peninsula, but what happened with ethnic nationalism in North Korea after the end of the Pacific War and Japanese colonialism. His basic argument is that, unlike the official state propaganda wants us (i.e. 'foreign', non-North Korean observers) to believe, proclamations of communism, Stalinism, or even North Korea's indigenous political philosophy of *juche* are but a lip service and exist to conceal North Korea's true "ideology" which is a "paranoid, race-based nationalism" (2010: 16). North Korean leaders were able to develop this ideology on the foundation the Japanese had built with their *naisen ittai* policy. Race based nationalism was not a foreign concept to Koreans on either side of the peninsula, it was just that North Korean leaders surrounding Kim Il-sung were able to combine ethnic nationalism with a leader cult. An interesting point about Myers' argument is that although chauvinism is a crucial part of North Korean nationalism, it does not claim that Koreans are stronger or smarter than other peoples or culturally and technologically more advanced, but rather that they are the 'purest race'. This is essential to understanding North Korea's leader cult, Myers argues. The very simple core ideology of North Korea is, according to Myers, that "the Korean people are too pure blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parent leader" (2010: 15). Due to their inherent pureness and vulnerability, Koreans rely on their "Great Leader" (and his successors) who is at least as much a protective mother figure as a father figure for the nation. North Korean ideology is supposed to be closer to European and especially Japanese fascism than socialism, and the North Korean leader cult resembles the Japanese emperor cult much more closely than the idolisation of socialist leaders in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (2010: 108).

The relevance of Myers' argument lies in his claim that the groundwork for this "paranoid nationalism" had already been laid and needed only to be utilised by North Korean leaders, due to the fact that "neither the Soviets nor the Americans saw a need to decolonize hearts and minds" in Korea (2010: 33). As a result, ethnic nationalism could further grow on both sides of the peninsula (see also Han, K.-K 2007: 24).

Myers goes so far as to claim that "Koreans in both republics generally agree that they are a uniquely homogenous, i.e. pure-blooded people whose innate goodness has made them perennial victims of foreign powers" (2010: 57). Myers' arguments have been subject to severe criticism, such as an overemphasis of North Korean propaganda, denying Stalinist, Maoist, and Confucian influences, an orientalist gaze on North Korea and the perpetuation of Western stereotypes, as well as overplaying the parallels between the Japanese emperor cult and North Korea's own leader cult (Armstrong 2011; David-West 2011).<sup>10</sup> However, Shin concurs to an extent with Myers by stating that while South Korean nationalism never took on the extreme xenophobic forms North Korean nationalism did, the nationalism that developed in South Korea shares similarities with North Korean nationalism (Shin 2006: 22). South Korea and North Korea differ in the political ideology they espouse, but they share similarities regarding their "view of the Korean nation [and] their use of nationalism in politics". After the liberation, a reinterpretation of nationalism took place in both states on the peninsula (2006: 79). Despite the vast ideological differences between the North and the South, ethnic nationalism remained a major source of identification on the entire Korean peninsula (2006: 99). In both North Korea and South Korea, postcolonial leaders were able to exploit nationalist sentiments for purposes of power consolidation (Shin 2006: 98; Myers 2010).

In South Korea, both Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee utilized and fostered ethnic nationalism for their respective agendas. Syngman Rhee's *ilminjuui* policy ("one peoplism")

<sup>10</sup> See also Kwon & Chung (2012) for an alternative, anthropologically informed account of North Korean leadership and politics that couples Weberian arguments concerning charismatic leadership with Confucian models of dynastic rule.

was a result of his commitment to anticommunism as well as a deep resentment of Japan, and it put great emphasis on Korea's ethnic homogeneity and uniqueness. Park Chung Hee's *joguk geundaehwa* ("modernization of the fatherland") – much like Syngman Rhee's efforts (and Kim Il-sung's efforts in North Korea) – was also an attempt to legitimise South Korea's existence in light of the existence of another state on the peninsula as much as their own undemocratic rule.

As in the North, colonial legacy wielded a major influence in South Korea. Japanese elements and colonial structures such as the state apparatus and bureaucracy were largely taken over (Shin 2006: 97). Furthermore, an ethnic nationalism which proclaimed "the purity, homogeneity, and eternity of the Korean nation" had a significant influence on postcolonial political thought (2006: 98). Leaders and intellectuals largely stressed ethnic nationalism's "anticolonial, anti-imperialist [sic]" and "anti-Japanese character" but did not pay much attention to "its fascist potential, which was actualized after liberation" (2006: 98). Shin argues that the ethnic nationalism that emerged during the colonial time built the foundation for the "authoritarian state ideologies" of Kim Il-sung (*juche*) and Syngman Rhee (*ilminjuui*; 2006: 98). It is no surprise, according to him, that both Koreas developed "nationalist, militaristic, and fascist" political systems during the post-war era, given the influence of Japanese nationalism and fascism (2006: 109). Unlike Germany for example, where a nationalism which (over-)emphasized ethnicity became unsustainable due to Nazi connotations and became viable only after reunification, ethnic nationalism always remained the major force of identification in Korea (Shin 2006: 99; Shin, Freda, Yi 1999: 472). While the opposition to the respective other political entity on the peninsula was termed in political vocabulary, their identity as brethren was not doubted. In fact, both governments considered and officially still consider the respective other as 'traitors' and illegitimate 'puppet regimes' and claim to represent the entirety of the Korean people as well as claiming authority over the entire peninsula. South Korea, for example, still names governors for the peninsula's northern provinces (Shin 2006: 99).

Park Chung Hee, who took power in South Korea in 1961, did, like his predecessor Syngman Rhee, embrace ethnic nationalism. Yet, Park added the element of "developmentalism" to ethnic nationalism. Park, who as was a military officer before taking power through a coup, lacked democratic legitimacy and therefore tried to legitimize his rule with economic success (2006: 103). South Korea's economy did in fact prosper during the years of Park's rule, and Korea would later become the first country that changed from a recipient of developmental aid to a donor. Economic development, however, was achieved by severely limiting individual freedoms and workers' rights. According to Shin, the modernization efforts under Park should not be understood as (primarily) aimed at making a contribution to people's living standards or as helping corporations, but in "collectivist, nationalist terms" as a way of achieving "a unified, self-sufficient Korea" (2006: 104). Thus, nationalism was promoted by the South Korean government, especially in the 1960s and 1970s (Yang 2004a: 3). The Park Chung Hee period was characterized by both rapid economic development as well as by a repressive political environment. The promotion of nationalism and developmentalism for economic gains continued until the 1980s, at the expense of human rights and individual liberties (2004a: 3–4).

The anti-communism of both Rhee and Park was justified with the claim that the communists were responsible for the division of the, until then, unified Korean nation and that they committed fratricide by starting the Korean War. The South Korean public was presented with a "false choice" between communism and authoritarianism (Shin 2006: 109).

It is noteworthy that the opposition to South Korean military rulers was termed in equally nationalist language. The *minjung* movement, which emerged as an oppositional movement in South Korea in the 1970s, argued that the aims of economic development and modernization led to excessive reliance on foreign capital and that the beneficiaries were the privileged ruling elites (Yang 2004a: 4). The *minjung* movement argued for a "proper nationalism" that functioned as a resistance movement against the authoritarian government. However, the nationalisms promoted by both the regime and by the resistance

movement were very similar in that they both promulgated ethnic nationalism and the belief in ethnic homogeneity (2004a: 4).

Postcolonial ethnic nationalism was not only marked by opposition to the North. Minorities within South Korea were severely discriminated against, and continue to be so until today. The power of Korea's pure-blood ideology is felt most severely by those who are the most visible arguments against it. These are for example the "Amerasians", children of usually South Korean women and (African-) American soldiers stationed in South Korea, as well as the Chinese (*hwagyo*) community in Seoul that was discriminated against and largely driven out of the country under Park Chung Hee. The Chinese minority residing in South Korea was deported to Japan, Taiwan, and the United States in order to reach Park Chung Hee's goal of a "pure' Korean nation" (Lie 2015b: 14). The so-called "Amerasian" or, derogatorily, *hyonhyeol* ("mixed-blood"), population of South Korea suffered and still suffers significant discrimination socially and legally (Gage 2015; Kim, N. Y. 2015). Therefore, "imagining" a pure Korean nation takes a lot of effort in making sure certain members of society stay invisible.

Park's successors tended to promote ethnic nationalism in a similar fashion. The 1980s have been labelled "the height of monoethnic and monocultural belief" in South Korea (Lie 2015b: 16). Chun Doo Hwan combined "economic" and "cultural" nationalism by promoting the consumption of Korean goods over foreign products.<sup>11</sup> Democratisation in the late 1980s and globalization, which initially had a severe impact on Korea in the form of the IMF crisis in 1997, did not put an end to ethnic nationalism. While globalization (*seggyehwa*) was government-promoted, this was done for highly nationalist interests, i.e. to make South Korea strong and prepare it for a highly competitive, neoliberal world economy (Lie 2015b: 18; Shin 2006: 204–222).

The widespread adoption of Korean ethnic nationalism thus was engendered by Imperial Japan's colonial aspirations of incorporating Korea into its empire through cultural assimilation, which in turn were influenced by European and, in particular, German ideas regarding nationhood. It developed further during Korea's postcolonial years and was important in establishing both political units on the Korean peninsula by providing a legitimisation for their existence and rhetoric for both the prospect of unification and opposition to the respective other state.

While this shows that ethnic nationalism is "not an integral part of Korean tradition" (Han, K.-K. 2007: 12) in terms of its history, this does not mean it is not a powerful concept. One should not equate the fact that an idea such as nation, ethnicity, or 'race' is recent or not 'objectively true' with the assumption that it holds no discursive power. But what this shows is the contingent nature of Korean conceptions of both the nation and ethnicity and the fact that notions of ethnicity and nationalism are not static but subject to change under certain historical and social formations.

The contingency of ethnonational forms of identification is underscored by recent studies that argue that South Korean nationalism is undergoing changes in the sense that notions of ethnic unity are becoming less relevant in contemporary South Korea and that South Korea is moving away from ethnic nationalism to other, new forms of nationalism. These approaches point to the constructive nature of nationalism and nationhood, yet do not give the same attention to notions of ethnicity and ethnic unity. These studies are related to the fact that substantial numbers of ethnic Koreans have now lived in various (nation) states such as South Korea, North Korea, Japan, the USA, China, and the former Soviet Union for several generations *and* to the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of South Korean society. I discuss three approaches that directly relate to this study in the following section.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For a study of "consumer nationalism" in South Korea see Nelson (2000).

<sup>12</sup> Of course the studies introduced here are not the only attempts to rethink (South) Korean nationalism and nationhood, but they are the ones most directly addressing the relation of ethnicity and possible new forms of national identity in South Korea. For alternative approaches see for example Jager (2003), Kim (2006), and Moon (2005).



## 5. BEYOND ETHNIC NATIONALISM?

These recent studies claim that there are new forms of nationalism emerging in South Korea that move away from the standard paradigm of ethnic nationalism (Campbell 2015, 2016; Han 2016; Seol and Skrentny 2009). These accounts have significant differences. However, when combined they imply that today ethnicity is neither a necessary (Campbell) nor a sufficient (Campbell, Han, Seol and Skrentny) condition for becoming a fully accepted member of the South Korean nation. These studies link the emerging forms of nationalism to the increasing diversification of South Korean society since the late 1980s. I first provide a brief overview of the most important aspects of these studies before discussing multiculturalism in South Korea and how it relates to the intersection of notions of ethnic homogeneity, gender, and patriarchy.

### 5.1. Ethnic Return Migration, Ethnic Diversity, and New Nationalism(s)

In an influential article Seol and Skrentny (2009) outline their concept of “hierarchical nationhood” and apply it to the South Korean case, where they find varying legal and social valorizations of ethnic Korean migrants from different countries. The stereotypes associated with these different groups tend to correlate to the general image the country they come from has in South Korea. Especially Korean Chinese (*Joseonjok*) are victims of discrimination and stereotyping. The hierarchy sees ‘pure’ South Koreans at the top, followed by Korean Americans<sup>13</sup> and Koreans from other Western countries, followed by Korean Chinese and North Koreans at the bottom.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For the ambivalent status Korean Americans enjoy in this taxonomy see Yang (2004b)

<sup>14</sup> Curiously, Japanese Koreans (*Zainichi*) are not mentioned in this taxonomy, nor are they considered in the other two studies discussed below. This is peculiar, since their legal and socio-cultural belonging in South Korea is contested and shaped by (post-)colonial and (post-)Cold War dynamics at least as much as that of other Korean diaspora groups; see Kim (2016), Lie (2008), and Ryang (1997, 2000).

Seol and Skrentny use the concept of hierarchical nationhood to describe circumstances where the ideally horizontal nature of the social structure of the nation – as opposed to that of feudal states, for example – is undermined. Yet, unlike inequalities within other nation states based on class, gender, ‘race’ etc., the concept of hierarchical nationhood is used to describe circumstances where hierarchical distinctions are made despite stressing homogeneity in the sense of common descent. Seol and Skrentny believe that their concept can be applied to many nation states, in particular those that define themselves through common culture or ethnicity, because of the phenomenon of “ethnic return migration”, which they define as “the movement of people to their ancestral homeland”. They argue that this is a particular type of migration context that “present[s] challenges to the horizontal understanding of nationhood” in so far as hierarchies between different categories of people within a nation state are established through legal and socio-cultural responses to the phenomenon of ethnic return migration. However, these hierarchies constitute distinctions *despite* (ethnic) identity and thus have to be articulated differently than contexts where hierarchies between the ‘native’ population and immigrants who have no claim to shared ancestry and nationhood exist (2009: 149).

Unlike this study, which is looking primarily at differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans, Seol and Skrentny are interested in the Korean Chinese community living in South Korea, and to a lesser extent the *Goryeoin* from the former Soviet Union. They argue that, despite the shared ancestral origins, which are denied by neither South Koreans nor Korean Chinese, Korean Chinese are discriminated against both legally and socially.

Korean Chinese migrated during the colonial period from the Korean peninsula to what is now Chinese territory. The reasons for their migration were manifold. Among them are the search for work, forced resettlement by the Japanese, and people moving to China (especially Manchuria) to organize resistance against the Japanese colonizers. Thus, Korean Chinese, unlike Korean Americans for example, left the Korean peninsula before the establishment of both the ROK and the DPRK.

The legal hierarchy between Korean Chinese and South Koreans is based on the fact that Korean Chinese, generally speaking, have difficulties in obtaining South Korean citizenship or permanent residency. This clashes with the treatment Korean Americans (and Koreans from the West in general) receive. Strictly speaking the law does not discriminate between ethnic Koreans according to their country of origin, but according to the qualifications they have for the South Korean labour market in a way that it gives preferential treatment to those ethnic Koreans working in professional jobs (Lee 2010: 56–57; Seol and Skrentny 2009: 157). The Overseas Korean Act grants privileged settlement rights to ethnic Koreans. It originally explicitly discriminated between Koreans who left the peninsula before 1948, the year the ROK was established, and people who left after the establishment of the ROK. Later, due to a Supreme Court ruling, the law was changed to favour ethnic Koreans with certain skill sets, therefore still preferring Koreans from Western countries and educational background.<sup>15</sup> De facto Korean Chinese are targeted to contribute to the workforce as migrant labourers and have fewer opportunities to legally reside in South Korea permanently, while enjoying fewer privileges during their stay, whereas many Korean Americans can enjoy rights almost equal to South Korean citizens with the exception of voting and holding public office. In contrast to Korean Americans who usually come to South Korea as professionals, white collar workers, or English teachers, most Korean Chinese are labourers in the low-skilled labour sector, the so-called “3-Ds” (“dirty”, “difficult”, and “dangerous”) and largely work alongside ethnic (Han) Chinese migrants or migrants from Central and Southeast Asia (Seol and Skrentny 2009: 153).

Seol and Skrentny argue that hierarchization does not only consist of legal discrimination, but that social discrimination is an important element of hierarchical nationhood as well; citizenship does not automatically confer a higher standing within the nation’s hierarchy,

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<sup>15</sup> See Lee, C. (2012) for a more detailed discussion of the development of South Korean citizenship and immigration law.

something that especially affects North Korean migrants in South Korea (see below). Poll data shows that South Koreans express strong resentments against Korean Chinese. While the majority considers them and their immigration to South Korea more favourably than that of non-ethnic Koreans, some poll groups were found to oppose the entry of Korean Chinese to a greater degree than support it (2009: 160). Similarly to other, non-Korean, migrant labourers they are subjected to maltreatment and discrimination at work, such as violence and sexual harassment – lower wages and less worker's rights are only the government sanctioned forms of this discrimination (2009: 161).

Seol and Skrentny argue that the South Korean government's treatment of ethnic Korean immigrants, like that of other migrant labourers, is determined by economic interests – South Korea needs (cheap) labour and prefers ethnic Koreans over other immigrants for that work – and geopolitical pressures, such as China's discouragement of granting Korean Chinese full South Korean citizenship because that would undermine Chinese interests (2009: 165).

In her study of emergent forms of national identity in South Korea Emma Campbell criticizes the notion of hierarchical nationhood because it still assumes "some remnants of ethnic nationalism" and prefers her concept of "globalized cultural citizenship" (2016: 163). According to her, the concept of hierarchical nationhood fails to see that some ethnic Koreans are excluded while some non-ethnic Koreans are (or can be) included, because it only looks at ethnic Koreans in analysing South Korean nationhood. Campbell believes this is a common flaw in other studies of Korean nationhood and aims at making a contribution to a more holistic approach to understanding contemporary South Korean nationhood. Campbell argues that South Koreans, especially South Korean youths, defined as people in their twenties (*isipdae*), are increasingly moving away from ethnic nationalism and are finding new forms of national identification. Her study is based on interviews with 150 South Korean university students across South Korea on questions of national identity. She argues that a "new South Korean nationalism is emerging" that has "globalised cultural characteristics" (Campbell 2015: 483). Contemporary South Koreans in their twenties (and younger), she argues further, are "the first generation of *South* Koreans" – people that see their national identity as distinctly different from that of other ethnic Koreans (Campbell 2016: 3; cf. Grinker 1998).

Campbell's argument is based on both the discrimination ethnic Koreans receive in contemporary South Korea as well as the fact that in survey studies and her own interview study young South Koreans expressed the opinion that 'foreigners' – non-ethnic Koreans – could be part of *uri nara* and thus become full members of the Korean nation, if they appreciate Korean 'culture', accept Korea's social norms, learn the language and self-identify as Koreans – which is similar to what is expected of "foreign brides" in South Korea (see below; Campbell 2015: 492).

Campbell situates her work as a contribution to both Korean Studies as well as to theory building in political science, as she wants to break up the dichotomy of civic versus ethnic nationalism. She argues that Korea is developing a new kind of nationalism that is neither "ethnic" (anymore) nor civic (Campbell 2015, 2016). Her premise is that (young) South Koreans have increasingly tenuous feelings when it comes to questions regarding North Korea and unification. She uses the decreasing desire for unification and feelings of detachment from North Korea to "demonstrate a waning of ethnic nationalism" (2015: 485). There is a growing "indifference" towards North Korea and other ethnic Koreans in South Korea, such as Korean Chinese, for example. This indicates the "increasing irrelevance of ethnic ties" (2015: 485). Campbell is studying South Koreans' nationalist sentiments by asking them about their attitudes to North Korea and by inquiring who is included when speaking of "*uri nara*"; she explains this approach in the following passage:

The word '*uri*' exemplifies this, and it is used everywhere in Korean conversation. It may be used to refer to family members as in 'our' mother or 'our' family and is commonly used to refer to nation or country, in the same way that some English-speakers might use 'my'. When individual South Korean young people are asked about nation, the term '*uri nara*' is used to refer to 'my nation' although in the lexicographic sense *uri nara* means 'our nation' or 'our country'. In interviews, almost without exception, students stated that *uri nara* referred only to the South (2015: 488–489).

Campbell claims to have found that globalization and the competition, pressure, and precarious living conditions associated with global neoliberal forces are reshaping South Korean national identity in such a way that some ethnic Koreans, such as Korean Chinese or North Koreans, are excluded, while "non-ethnic Korean immigrants" are or at least can be included (2015: 490). She attributes this to, basically, modernity, perceptions of class and status, and globalized forms of consumption such as "education, travel and technology" that are "readily available to young people who have grown up in contemporary South Korea" (2015: 490). This results in a hierarchy because immigrants from certain countries that are of "comparable status to Korea" can potentially "be welcomed into such a nation" while ethnic Koreans from North Korea or China as well as immigrants from economically less affluent countries than South Korea have difficulties being integrated into the South Korean nation (2015: 490–493). This is mirrored by changes to South Korean citizenship law that allows dual citizenship for "highly skilled foreigners with exceptional talent" (Chung and Kim 2012: 214 in Campbell 2016: 159).

Campbell cites the ambivalent attitudes towards some groups of ethnic Koreans, the willingness expressed during her interviews to especially accept 'foreigners' from Western nations into the South Korean nation, and the "pragmatic attitude" South Korea has shown in incorporating foreign women into its families as a sign that "ethnicity as the only or foremost basis for expressions of nation and nationalism in South Korea [is waning]" (2015: 494). She therefore argues that while cosmopolitanism is a defining feature of this new South Korean nationalism, so are patriarchy (see below) and socio-economic class (i.e. migrant labourer vs. professional), which explains why not all immigrants are equally part of the imagined South Korean nation (2015: 484). To speak in Wimmer's terminology, according to Campbell a "blurring" of ethnic boundaries is occurring in South Korea – other markers are gaining relevance while the importance of ethnicity in determining in- and outgroups is slowly decreasing.

Thus, Campbell empirically found what Roy Richard Grinker hints at: that South Korea is moving from ethnic nationalism to different forms of collective identity, which he described as defined by the "political community"; from "*minjok*" to "*kukminjok* [sic]" (Grinker 1998: 250). Grinker not only describes these changes, but welcomes them to an extent. He argues that the belief in ethnic homogeneity, rather than an asset if unification occurs, can be a hindrance because it prevents people from seeing and addressing actual differences that could turn into social problems. Therefore, taking cultural differences into account could be helpful in accommodating both North Korean migrants and a future unification. Campbell argues exactly the opposite – the realization of cultural and economic differences between different groups of ethnic Koreans leads to a decreasing sense of social cohesion.

One aspect that is important to note is the relationship of Campbell's method and her results. The fact that Campbell's data stems largely from interviews makes it impossible to see how the proclaimed openness her interview partners expressed is played out in daily life. Another, more problematic, aspect of her method of data collection is the selection of her interview partners. Campbell exclusively interviewed 'native' (ethnic) South Koreans<sup>16</sup> and is thereby reifying the very existence of what she is denying. By choosing ethnic South

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<sup>16</sup> Campbell does not explicitly state that non-ethnic Koreans were not interviewed. However, she is transparent about other criteria concerning the selection of her interview partners (e.g. educational background) and the omission of any mention of non-ethnic Korean interview partners suggests as much (cf. 2016: 10–13).

Koreans as interview partners, she is reinforcing the hegemonic view of who is a (proper) South Korean and who is not. She is thereby reproducing certain power relations, as it is 'native' South Koreans expressing their views concerning certain minority categories within South Korean society. If South Korea's new nationalism is truly different from ethnic nationalism and ethnicity not a criterion for inclusion and exclusion, should non-ethnics not be among those taking part in this new discourse and co-producing South Korea's new nationalism?

Campbell's findings resonate with what Gil Soo Han labels "nouveau-riche nationalism" (2016) in his study of South Korean media discourses. He claims that South Korean nationalism is informed by a sense of cultural and economic superiority towards people from economically less developed countries. This attitude was fostered by South Korea's rapid economic development but founded upon a racial thinking that precedes it as well as hierarchical notions of success and social prestige. Historically, he argues, Koreans considered themselves, at least economically, less advanced and developed than Japan and the West, and looked up, albeit in a highly ambivalent manner, to these countries. According to Han, these attitudes are still prevalent to some extent. Yet with economic development, chauvinist attitudes towards people from less developed countries emerged and a hierarchy was established. The basic argument is that Koreans felt inferior during large periods of their history (mainly in the 20th century) to both Japan and the West and, now that South Korea has accomplished rapid economic development, South Koreans feel superior to other (non-white, non-Japanese) peoples and discriminate against them (2016: 22–23). Rapid economic development fostered a sense of having "the right to discriminate against others, both economically and beyond" (2016: 21). Han argues that especially Asian immigrants are victim to this fusion of discrimination based on 'racial' and economic grounds; this extends to African migrants, or in effect any person who might be perceived as African or coming from a country that is considered economically less developed than South Korea. He does not go as far as Campbell in arguing that South Koreans accept non-ethnic Koreans as members of the nation, but argues instead that attitudes towards 'foreigners' vary depending on their respective country of origin and their ethnicity or 'race'. Han, like Campbell, sees that it is easier for Western professionals to be accepted in South Korea than Southeast Asian labour or marriage migrants; in fact, non-white migrants are subject to severe discrimination in South Korea (Kim, N. Y. 2015).

The argument that ethnicity, and by extension 'race', is less relevant than perceptions of common culture in contemporary South Korea is cast into doubt by Han's findings that 'racial' stereotypes and discrimination are rife in South Korea. He argues that, in both professional and private life, people who are not Caucasian Westerners experience discrimination despite sharing many of the "globalized cultural" characteristics that should ease their path into becoming a member of the South Korean nation (Han 2016: 87–104). He shows, for example, that it is significantly more difficult for Africans and/or African-Americans to get a job as an English teacher in South Korea than for white Americans – or even white non-native speakers (2016: 94). Therefore, ideas about economic and social status of certain countries and people are based upon discriminatory ideas about 'race'. A hierarchy of 'races' which sees 'white' people at the top, 'yellow' people in the middle and 'black' people at the bottom was established in Korea under both Japanese and especially American influence and (still) influences how 'foreigners' are perceived in South Korea (Kim, N. Y. 2008).

Campbell argues that the inclusion of middle and upper class Westerners (or those perceived to be middle and upper class Westerners) rests on the fact that young South Koreans can more easily identify with their lifestyles and simply have more in common with a college student in the US or France, for example, than a migrant labourer working in a factory in a suburb of Seoul; i.e. the sense of community is fostered by a culture that is perceived as common in its cosmopolitan consumerist aspect. Han, in contrast, suggests that it is less a sense of mutuality and the sharing of certain characteristics than the fact that ('white') Westerners represent certain ideals such as economic development, success, a liberal society that South Koreans look up to and want to emulate, or at least incorporate



its useful aspects for personal success and the success of the country for nationalist purposes – most importantly the fluent command of the English language (Han 2016: 87–104).

Yet, what all three approaches cited above have in common is that they hold that (South) Korean ethnic nationalism is changing, and the most important sign for this is the treatment and stigmatization of ethnic Koreans in South Korea versus the inclusion of non-ethnic Koreans into South Korean society. Both Campbell and Han, in concurrence with Seol and Skrentny, observe that especially North Korean migrants and Korean Chinese labourers and marriage migrants are, despite the myth of ethnic homogeneity, socially marginalized. Common ethnicity does not guarantee access to full membership in legal, social, and cultural terms in contemporary South Korea.<sup>17</sup>

Combined, the arguments outlined above rest on two observations: First, that non-ethnic Koreans can be imagined as part of the South Korean nation and that, secondly, South Koreans have increasing difficulties imagining other ethnic Koreans as part of the nation. Therefore, to see if and how ethnic distinctions are becoming less relevant in contemporary South Korea and are being replaced by other categories of social differentiation, it is necessary to observe exactly how both ‘non-ethnic’ Koreans and ‘co-ethnics’ are included or excluded respectively. Thus, I look at the discourse surrounding multiculturalist changes within South Korean society in the next section before discussing how the exclusion of North Korean migrants relates to ethnic nationalism. The case of North Korean migrants is particularly illuminating, because unlike other ethnic Koreans they are automatically granted South Korean citizenship under South Korean law. Therefore, legal discrimination, or “hierarchization”, is less of a factor when it comes to North Korean migrants, compared to other ethnic Koreans.

## 5.2. Multiculturalism in South Korea

In this section, I provide an overview of the debate surrounding multiculturalism (*damunhwajuui*) in South Korea and its relation to Korean ethnic nationalism. As shown above, the notion that the Korean peninsula has been ethnically homogenous is, empirically speaking, false (even when disregarding the problematic nature of the concept of “ethnicity” for a moment). Yet, due to demographic changes within South Korean society in the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a discursive shift among scholars, government organizations, the media, and civil organizations that have led to South Korea being referred to as a multicultural and multi-ethnic society (Han 2016; Han, G.-S. 2007; Kim 2010; Lee 2010; Lie 2015a; Lim 2009). This is related to the increase of permanent residents in South Korea who have no claim to Korean ethnicity and/or citizenship, as well as government led attempts to diversify the country and raise awareness of this increasing diversity of South Korean society. The Korean government officially recognized the presence and the need for migrants within its territory for the first time in 2006, and thus formulated multicultural policies (Lee 2010: 59). This was the start of what some scholars and critics have labelled “state led multiculturalism” (Han, G.-S. 2007).

There have been two major types of immigration into South Korea since the late 1980s. On the one hand, South Korea has seen an increasing influx of foreign labourers into its borders, most notably from China, among them many Korean Chinese, and Southeast Asian immigrants. Secondly, there is the trend of inviting foreign brides into South Korea in order to create “multicultural families” (*damunhwa gajok*), consisting of South Korean men, women from abroad, and their children, which is actively supported by the federal

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<sup>17</sup> However, as Jaeun Kim (2016) shows, this is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. Membership of ethnic Koreans residing outside the South Korean territory has been determined by larger postcolonial political dynamics in East Asia. If anything, South Korean membership has been more open to, for example, Korean Chinese in the last two decades than in any other period since the establishment of the ROK.

and local governments. Also here, most migrants are Korean Chinese, (Han) Chinese, or are from Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup>

These changes are due to two sets of reasons. First, there is South Korea's increasing attractiveness for transnational migrants. Due to its economic power it has been highly desirable for migrant labourers to search for work in South Korea. Further, its increasing soft power due to *hallyu* (the "Korean Wave", i.e. cultural exports that are hugely popular in Asia and also, increasingly, worldwide) add to South Korea's appeal for transnational migrants. South Korea has changed from a country that exported migrant labourers to countries such as Germany or the Middle East to a country that labourers migrate to (Han, G.-S. 2007: 37; Kim 2010: 87).

Secondly there are dramatic demographic changes within South Korean society driving recent migration trends. South Korea has an aging society that will turn into an aged society due to low birth rates, whereby roughly 14 percent of the South Korean population will consist of people 65 years old or older by 2019 (Kim 2010: 90). Although this trend is not particular to South Korea, as many industrial and post-industrial states experience similar demographic changes, the pace at which South Korean society is aging is unprecedented (Kim 2010; Lim 2009).

This has consequences for the South Korean labour market. An ageing population leads to fewer people in a society's work force. This, in combination with the reluctance of many (well-educated) young South Koreans to perform work that is not professional white collar work, and the social stigma associated with doing blue collar work, leads to vacancies in the low-skilled labour sector (Kim 2010: 88). Therefore, since the 1990s labourers were, in schemes similar to Germany's guest worker program in the 1950s–1970s, encouraged to work in South Korea's manufacturing and blue collar sector. The government introduced so-called "trainee" programs where companies can hire foreign workers and employ them for up to three years with wages significantly lower and with fewer workers' rights than their South Korean counterparts. Often, their work is done in illegal or semi-legal contexts with little pay and under precarious conditions. Immigration and permanent residency in South Korea is heavily restricted for migrant labourers. Legally, most labourers are supposed to leave South Korea after the end of their trainee program; labourers that are either overstaying their visas or leaving their registered workplace to work for another employer (for higher wages but under more precarious conditions) are considered undocumented residents (Lim 2009).<sup>19</sup>

The second demographic factor contributing to immigration into South Korea, this time in the form of foreign brides, is the so called "marriage gap". The marriage gap is the difference in numbers between men and women within a certain age group. Due to son preference and selective birth control, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of men in that age group is significantly higher than that of women, which makes it difficult for many men to find a marriage partner. Heteronormative marriage ideology prevails in South Korea and not marrying can lead to social stigmatization (Kim 2010; Lim 2009). The effect of the marriage gap has not fully kicked in yet but will do so in the coming years (Kim 2010: 95). The reasons for the immigration of foreign brides until now are largely down to a form of gendered urbanization. The phenomenon of rural-urban migration of women who are highly educated and prefer urban life and the (career) opportunities it offers compared to staying in the countryside leads to a second marriage gap in rural areas. Many (low-skilled) bachelors stay in the countryside to inherit the farms and shops of their parents and families. These bachelors are increasingly unattractive marriage matches for many South Korean women. Much like the shortage of low-skilled

<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, the law does not discriminate and considers marriages between South Korean women and non-citizen men multicultural families too. However, public discourses usually focus on female marriage migrants.

<sup>19</sup> South Korean developments resemble developments in Japan in this regard. Also in Japan the government tried to counter demographic trends by encouraging the immigration of ethnic Japanese labourers from South America, see Creighton (2014), Tsuda (1998, 2010).

labourers among the domestic workforce, the marriage gap is only going to increase in the next years if immigration into South Korea does not continue.

Statistics show that the number of foreign long-term residents in South Korea has reached around 3% of the total population. However, this number is inflated to a certain degree because the South Korean government considers everybody a foreign long-term resident in South Korea who stays in South Korea for over 90 days, and therefore quite a few people that usually would not qualify as immigrants and/or long-term residents in other circumstances are included in this statistic. Among them are students, professionals, and migrant labourers that are legally required to leave after three years. Notwithstanding, more important than the change in numbers might be the conceptual shift that government agencies, parts of the media, and NGOs have undertaken in promoting the idea of South Korea as a multicultural nation, which could be the basis for nationalisms that diverge from the standard paradigm of ethnic nationalism in Korea (Kim, N. H.-J. 2015: 71).

Yet, upon taking a closer look, one sees that the immigration of foreign professionals is submerged in discourses of economic utility. They are regarded as necessary if South Korea wants to keep up in a hypercompetitive global environment where internationalization and especially the command of English are highly valued (Han 2016: 5). This is significant because this is the group most easily “imagined” as part of the community, according to Campbell, and the one least likely to be negatively affected by hierarchical conceptions of nationhood. Furthermore, a significant number of these long-term residents are ‘ethnic’ Koreans from China or the former Soviet Union. Thus, the number of non-ethnic Koreans is actually not that high for a ‘multicultural’ society, even compared to countries such as France or Germany. Further, of these migrants, the majority is made up by migrant labourers, who are legally not allowed to stay in South Korea permanently (although many in fact do). The South Korean government sticks to the “rotation principle” when it comes to migrant labourers. Low-skilled migrant labourers “are considered [a] temporarily hired workforce which is supposed to fill in the existing vacancies in the domestic labor market” and are supposed to return to their respective countries after their legal duration of stay, as defined by their work visa, has ended (Lee 2010: 50). Foreign labourers enjoy an ambivalent status of semi-visibility within South Korea’s discourse on multiculturalism. There are genuine efforts by government agencies to promote more tolerance and understanding for different cultures and promote a multiculturalism that is understood as the diversity of many ‘cultures’. Yet, full acknowledgment of migrant labourers as members of South Korean society cannot be given due to their legal status and the fact that they are discriminated against and excluded from public life. They are seen as a (temporary) solution to an economic problem (Han 2016; Han, G.-S. 2007; Lee 2010; Lee, S. 2012).

Social marginalization, in combination with the fact that South Korean government policies do not consider them a (long-term) element of society, speak against the argument that the numerically largest group of immigrants is currently a challenge to the dominant notion of ethnic homogeneity and ethnic nationalism in South Korea.

Apart from NGOs that aim at speaking for migrant labourers, run either by native South Koreans or by organizations set up by the migrant labourers themselves, discourse surrounding South Korea’s new multiculturalism is aimed at and related to foreign brides, because they are the only category of migrants that is legally allowed to stay permanently and has a clear path to South Korean citizenship. Of course individuals, regardless of gender, can apply for permanent residency and even South Korean citizenship, for example through marriage, but foreign brides are the only category of migrants targeted by the government as a whole to become members of the South Korean nation. Thus, since foreign brides belong to the only category of migrants that is supposed to stay in South Korea permanently, and therefore the only category really addressed by the state’s “multiculturalist” policies, it is worth taking a closer look at their case in order to discuss what changes ethnic nationalism might be undergoing.



### 5.3. Foreign Brides, Patriarchy, and Ethnicity

By 2010, roughly one out of 10 marriages in South Korea was an international marriage (Kim, M. 2015: 281). In rural areas the quota was even higher, at 35,2% percent in 2009 (Kim 2010: 93). The number is likely to increase due to the marriage gap explained above.

It is worth noting that multiculturalism is a contested issue in contemporary South Korea and that different social actors have different, competing narratives of and visions for a multicultural South Korean society (Han, G.-S. 2007; Kim, N. H.-J. 2015; Lim 2015; Park 2013). However, while there are voices calling for 'true' multiculturalism in the form of valuation of diverse cultural backgrounds within society (a notion that is problematic in itself, see Bhabha 2003; Eriksen 1991), foreign brides, as the only category of migrants that is to settle in South Korea permanently, are, "ironically subject to the strongest and harshest demands for assimilation into Korean culture" (Han, G.-S. 2007: 45).

When local governments started supporting rural farmers in marrying foreign women through financial incentives, the wives tended to be Korean Chinese brought to South Korea through broker networks (Kim 2007). Marriages with ethnic Korean migrants were preferred, due to the belief that there would be less problems caused by cultural difference (an attitude shared by many employers of migrant labourers; most employers tend to prefer ethnic Korean migrants to non-Korean workers; Seol and Skrentny 2009: 158). Recently, international marriages in South Korea have included a large number of (Han) Chinese and Southeast Asian women. There usually is a significant age gap between the wives and the farmers. The farmers are considered hard to "marry off" by Koreans standards, due to their age, educational background, income, lifestyle, disabilities, or the fact that some of them have already previously been married (Kim, M. 2015: 283; Lim 2009).

For many (Korean) Chinese and Southeast Asian women, marriage to a South Korean man constitutes a case of "global hypergamy"; i.e. marriage migration into an economically more developed country (Constable 2005b: 10). Yet, in fact, foreign brides' expectations often clash with reality after arriving in South Korea, for they are presented with a romanticized version of their future lives in South Korea with their highly idealized prospective husbands before they arrive in South Korea. Brokers as well the popularity of South Korean cultural exports associated with the Korean Wave contribute to the women's desires to migrate to South Korea and to their ideas of what life in South Korea will be like (Freeman 2011; Kim 2007; Kim 2010; Kim, M. 2015; Kim, N. H.-J. 2015). They are not prepared for being discriminated against and marginalized within South Korean society because of both their countries of origin and due to the economic and social status of their husbands (Kim 2010; Lim 2009). This form of global hypergamy might in some cases constitute cases of personal relative hypogamie, where the wife's socio-economic status in her country of origin was higher than her status in South Korea (e.g. through a university degree and a well-paying job; Constable 2005a; Freeman 2011).

Critics argue that, despite the fact that the South Korean government and civil society seem open to the migration of non-ethnic Korean women to South Korea, the government and the families the women are marrying into expect total cultural assimilation and expect the women to get rid of their 'cultural markers'. For example, government support programmes for "multicultural families" include an introduction to Korean culture in the form of Korean language, customs, and cooking classes for the wives. Further, the use of the Korean language at home and in public spaces is encouraged by public and private actors as much as the use of the wives' native language is discouraged (Kim, M. 2015). The display of the wife's 'culture', in terms of language or food, for example, is often discouraged by the most intimate people surrounding her, such as her husband or her parents-in-law (Han, G.-S. 2007: 46).<sup>20</sup> These are all attempts to "eradicate cultural differences within a multicultural family" (Kim, N. H.-J. 2015: 71). Ties with the wives' families are usually kept to a minimum and only a small fraction of South Korean husbands has ever met the

<sup>20</sup> See Kim Yi (2001) for a discussion of the tensions between especially mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in South Korean families.

families of their wives. This is caused, among other factors, by Korean family ideology, where, upon marriage, women are considered a part of the husband's household, as well as by the limited economic means many of the multicultural families have (Kim, M. 2015). Further, children of these multicultural families usually carry (only) Korean names.

The South Korean government's attitudes should not be misunderstood as being completely assimilationist; rather, competing narratives and discourses co-exist. Sometimes well-meaning directives from the central government are just badly translated by local officials due to a lack of 'cultural sensitivity' also exhibited by the wives' in-laws in many cases (Han, G.-S. 2007: 35). For example, the teaching of the wives' language to their children has been encouraged by the government recently – however, it is still widely accepted that the husbands need not make any efforts to learn their wives' languages (Kim, N. H.-J. 2016a; Kim 2007; Kim, M. 2015). Interestingly, the insistence on assimilation resembles the approach by pre-colonial, feudal Korea. Ethnic purity was not a priority for the rulers of Joseon Korea, yet a deep sense of cultural superiority prevailed and new settlers were to assimilate into Korean culture as smoothly as possible (Han, K.-K 2007).

While the presence of labourers and other non-permanent residents such as professionals is taken as evidence of South Korea's increasing diversity, the government backed incorporation of foreign wives into South Korean families is sometimes seen as a decline of ethnic nationalism. The "ethnic" aspect is perceived as being replaced by a sense of cultural superiority, as evidenced by the pressure on the women to assimilate culturally. This would mean that South Korea is turning, if not into a multicultural, at least into a multi-ethnic society (Han, G.-S. 2007: 40; Kim, N. H.-J. 2015: 59), because:

Multiculturalism in Korea is [...] used as a counter concept to Korea's violent mono-ethnicity, rather than its general meaning of recognizing or having mutual understanding of cultural difference. (Kim 2007: 103).

This is certainly true in purely descriptive terms, since there are increasingly more non-ethnic Koreans residing in South Korea. However, when focussing closely on the intersection of ethnicity, gender, patriarchy, and patrilineal kinship ideology in South Korean "multicultural families", one cannot be sure whether ethnic nationalism as a sentiment is really on the wane; paying attention to the intersection of these categories also helps explain why the marriage of South Korean men to 'foreign' women is seen as less problematic in relation to notions of ethnic homogeneity than the marriage of Korean women to 'foreign' men (Kim 2007: 106; Koo 2015).

In Korean family ideology, descent is traced back through patrilineage. Furthermore, women, upon marriage, are considered part of the husband's household and are expected to end, or at least limit, their ties with their family of origin (of course in modern, urban Korea, these tendencies have decreased to a great extent, although they do exist). Patrilocality, the wife moving in with her husband and her in-laws, is the traditional form of matrimonial residence in Korea, and still much practiced among rural multicultural families, although after a while many couples tend to find their own home near the in-laws' house (Kim 2007: 109). Foreign wives' status as legal permanent residents in South Korea and access to government benefits is not only tied to their marital status but also to their status as mothers of South Korean children, i.e. children with South Korean fathers (Kim 2007: 109). Their "utility" for the South Korean state is twofold: First, they ease the burden on the rural male population (and as critics muse, relieve the government of long-term measures to counter the decay of rural areas in a globalized economy; e.g. Kim, M. 2015: 284). Secondly, they are supposed to counter the low fertility rate in South Korea and contribute to the continued biological existence of the South Korean people. Thus, marriage migrants are considered "mothers who produce future Koreans" (Kim 2007; Lee 2010: 60).

The fact that the mothers are not of Korean ethnicity is not as relevant as one might think, because descent is largely defined through the Korean father (Gage 2015: 252), and therefore the child can be considered Korean. This is not to deny that both actual discrimination as well as the fear of discrimination their future children might receive due

to their status as “mixed-blood children” might constitute burdens for migrant wives (Kim 2007: 116). For this reason, some transnational couples decide not to have children, which again makes the situation of the migrant wives all the more precarious, since it is their ‘job’, as defined by the government and by Korean in-laws, to procreate. The fact that male marriage to foreign wives is more accepted – and government supported – than South Korean women marrying foreign spouses is related to the fact that ethnicity and nationhood in South Korea are connected to patriarchy in a way that allows for the inclusion of non-Korean females, but makes it more difficult to include non-Korean males (Kim 2007: 106; Koo 2015; Lim 2009).<sup>21</sup> Minjeong Kim agrees with this assessment when detailing that foreign wives are not only expected to assimilate culturally but also ethnically into South Korean society (Kim, M. 2015: 295). In fact, she goes so far as to argue that marriage migrants are the targeted group for assimilationist policies exactly because they do not pose a threat to Korea’s ethnic identity (2015: 279).

One cannot deny the fact that South Korea is becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, and most likely will become even more so due to economic and demographic pressures. Yet, minorities are barely visible in public discourse; migrant labourers and professionals are considered temporary fixes for demographic changes and economic pressures caused by increasing globalization (Lee 2010: 36). Further, multiculturalism largely means assimilation for those non-ethnic Koreans that are supposed to permanently settle in South Korea. This leads one to suspect that ethnic nationalism and notions of ethnic homogeneity are still a vital force in contemporary South Korea.

Thus, the incorporation of ‘foreign’ women, due to a combination of gender, patriarchy, and kinship ideology does not necessarily represent a more open view regarding ethnic identities on the Korean peninsula. Furthermore, the insight that both professionals and labourers are considered temporary residents, whose presence is a function of particular economic and demographic needs and aspirations, rather than full members of the South Korean nation, sheds doubt upon Campbell’s claims regarding the inclusiveness regarding (young) South Koreans. What speaks for Campbell’s argument is the fact that “young” South Koreans are not the ones dominating media or policy discourse, and therefore multiculturalism and a weakening of patriarchal notions of ethnicity might be a feature of South Korean society in the future.

Yet, the argument that the force of ethnic nationalism is waning rests on two observations. First, that (certain) ‘non-ethnic’ Koreans can be imagined as part of the nation and that secondly, (young) South Koreans have increasing difficulties imagining other ‘ethnic’ Koreans as part of the nation. Therefore, to see if and how ethnic distinctions are becoming less relevant in contemporary South Korea and are being replaced by other categories of social differentiation, it is necessary to examine how exactly ‘co-ethnics’ are excluded. Since legal forms of discrimination do not apply to North Korean migrants to the extent they do to other ethnic Koreans, because they are considered South Korean citizens upon their arrival in South Korea, it is especially insightful to look at their case in the next chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> Perceptions of ‘race’, their relation to patriarchy, and questions of power certainly play a role too, since most of the foreign brides are, if not ethnically Korean, at least (East) Asian. After the Pacific War the majority of the children of South Korean women and foreign men were the result of ‘interracial’ relations (i.e. South Korean women and ‘white’ or ‘black’ men, usually connected to the US military presence in South Korea). The children resulting from these relations were considered a sign of humiliation for the Korean nation because they were seen as a sign of a foreign, occupying power “taking” Korea’s women. This of course resonates with colonial times, where sexual exploitation of Korean women by Japanese men did occur. Further, stigmatization due to the suspicion of prostitution accompanied these children and relationships. Amerasian children were suspected of being the result of the relationship of American soldiers and South Korean sex workers (Kim, N. Y. 2015: 215; Moon 1997). Of course the trope of “foreign” men taking “our” women is not confined to the Korean peninsula. One only needs to consult certain *Stammtische* or right-wing European internet forums these days to be confronted with similar rhetoric, despite a completely different political and historical background.

## 6. NORTH KOREAN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH KOREA

It is against this background of ethnic nationalism and the changes occurring within South Korean society since the late 1980s, influenced, among other factors, by South Korea's democratisation and the opening of the country in a capitalist world system, that the (history of the) migration of North Koreans to South Korea should be discussed.

The increasing marginalization of North Korean migrants in South Korea has been noted in the literature (Chung 2008; Lankov 2006; Yoon 2001). In order to provide some context, I will give an overview of the North-South migration and the changing perception and social status of North Korean migrants in South Korea. I outline the migration of North Koreans from North Korea to South Korea after the end of Japanese colonization until the present to show how perceptions of North Korean migrants have changed. I continue by showing how North Korean migrants are increasingly economically and socially marginalized within South Korea, and the transnational strategies North Korean migrants increasingly employ to improve or escape their social status in South Korea.

### 6.1. From North to South, Then and Now

Migration from North Korea to South Korea is not a recent phenomenon. After the victory of the Allied forces and the Soviet Union over the Japanese Empire at the end of the Pacific War and the division of the Korean peninsula that followed Japan's surrender and withdrawal from its colony, movements from North Korea to South Korea (and vice versa) were quite frequent (Chung 2008). Migration was motivated particularly by political allegiances (i.e. preferences for either a communist, Soviet-backed state, or a capitalist, American-backed state) or religiously motivated, due to religious intolerance in the North.

Especially the North-South migration of Christians was a common phenomenon, since North Korea was home to the majority of Christians in the pre-Korean War era – Pyongyang used to be called the “Jerusalem of the East” (Rivé-Lasan 2013: 124) – but turned hostile towards Christians with the introduction of socialist rule. The *wolnamin*, migrants that left North Korea for South Korea after the end of the Pacific War, became quite influential

in South Korean religion, politics, and economy. They influenced the establishment of South Korean Christian churches and at the same time contributed to the anti-communist and anti-North rhetoric that was to dominate South Korean public discourse for decades (Chung 2008; Kang 2004; Rivé-Lasan 2013).

However, migration from North to South after the Korean War (1950–1953) had an entirely different dynamic. First of all, there were very few migrants; usually not more than 10 people per year arriving in South Korea was the norm until the 1990s (Chung 2008; Lankov 2006). Secondly, migrants that arrived in South Korea after the Korean War were considered “defectors”; they tended to be high-ranking military or party officials and were very welcome in South Korea. They received high financial rewards for defecting, which varied according to the value of the intelligence or goods, such as weapons or other military technology, they were able to bring from North Korea. In most cases defectors tended to be able to live at least an upper-middle class life in South Korea. The most prominent case is probably that of a fighter-pilot who defected to South Korea in 1983 in his jet-plane and was awarded 1.2 billion Won, which was then approximately 480 times the average annual income per capita in South Korea (Chung 2008: 8). Further, these “defectors” tended to be employed by the government and the media for anti-North propaganda purposes. This included giving ‘inside’ accounts of the deficiencies, failures, and evils of the Northern system and touting the advantages of the South (Jung 2015: 149). This was particularly useful when it was not foreseeable that the economic development of both states would be so dramatically different, as Chung Byung-Ho explains:

For the two competing Korean states, a person’s migration from one state to the other is a symbolically significant act. It can be interpreted as evidence of the political legitimacy of one state over the other. The particular questions of who moves where and why become the topics of hegemonic discourse, and individual acts of migration are interpreted as deep evidence of the overall superiority of one system over the other. Even when only a handful of people migrates into one country, these migrants are a symbolically important social group in the politics of division (2008: 5).

These migration patterns changed during the 1990s. The number of people migrating from North Korea to South Korea increased to roughly 1500 people per year beginning in the early 2000s (Table 1). Furthermore, the social background of the migrants has changed too (Chung 2008; Jung 2015; Lankov 2006). While in the past, the “defectors” were usually male, high-ranking, elite North Koreans, mostly military personnel or diplomats, they now tend to be female labourers and farmers from North Korea’s Northern provinces bordering on China.

These changes are down to several factors, relating to internal affairs in North Korea as well as in South Korea. First, the economic crisis that led to famine in North Korea in the 1990s, which was worsened by Kim Jong-il’s “military first” (*songun*) policy that privileged the military in the allocation of resources, forced many North Koreans to migrate to find work and food, mostly to China (Chung 2003; Jang 2003; Jung 2013). However, many people decided to move to South Korea from China; the most common form was chain-migration, where one family member after another, or groups of family members, migrates, financed by family members already living in South Korea or another, third, country and facilitated by a network of brokers (Bell 2014; Chung 2008, 2014; Lankov 2006; Yoon 2001). This dramatically increased the number of migrants as well as affecting their social background. Starting from the 1990s mostly people from lower social strata from North Korea’s most Northern provinces bordering on China migrated to South Korea, rather than the North Korean elite.

Another reason is the end of the Cold War and, with it, the declining appeal of Cold War rhetoric. Despite the fact that the Cold War has strictly speaking not ended on the Korean peninsula (Kwon 2010), democratisation in South Korea led to more moderate attitudes towards North Korea, although this varies with political convictions and with which party is in power in Seoul. The fact that North Korea is considered a “failed Stalinist utopia” today



(Lankov 2013), has the effect that the competition between the two states has decreased. North Korea today is considered a security threat rather than an alternate, competing political system.

Furthermore, the democratically elected governments of South Korea relied less on anti-North Korean rhetoric for purposes of power consolidation than did their military dictator predecessors. Especially for South Korea's liberal presidents, reconciliation and rapprochement with North Korea was sought, embodied by Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" (*haetbyeot jeongchaek*), which had, if not speedy unification, peaceful coexistence with North Korea as its explicit aim. Therefore, it became less interesting for the South Korean government to attract high-profile military defectors. It tried to more or less actively discourage migration from North Korea to South Korea, since it could damage the already strained relations with North Korea, and thus the growing "stream of defectors [...] coincidentally occurred just as the political need for them began to diminish", Andrei Lankov observes (2006: 110).

Year	Men	Women	Combined	Percentage of Women
until '98	831	116	947	12%
until '01	565	478	1.043	46%
'02	510	632	1.142	55%
'03	474	811	1.285	63%
'04	626	1.272	1.898	67%
'05	424	960	1.384	69%
'06	515	1.513	2.028	75%
'07	573	1.981	2.554	78%
'08	608	2.195	2.803	78%
'09	662	2.252	2.914	77%
'10	591	1.811	2.402	75%
'11	795	1.911	2.706	70%
'12	404	1.098	1.502	72%
'13	369	1.145	1.514	76%
'14	305	1.092	1.397	78%
'15	251	1.025	1.276	80%
'16	302	1.116	1.418	79%
Combined	8.805	21.407	30.212	71%

Table 1: Number of North Korean migrants in South Korea by year.  
Source: Ministry of Unification (2017).

These changes in migration trends were accompanied by several changes in government policies designed to assist the integration of North Korean migrants in South Korea by the South Korean government (Chung 2008; Kim 2012). The reward-system on which the financial compensation of defectors was based was reformed several times (Chung 2008: 7–13). Although there were some readjustments over the years, since the reforms were regarded as too harsh, there was, overall, a significant reduction of the financial support migrants receive, as well as a partitioning of the payments, so that the settlement money is no longer paid as a lump sum. Therefore, despite the fact that North Korean migrants receive more financial benefits than any other category of refugees in the world (Chung 2008: 10), it became financially less attractive for high-ranking North Koreans to migrate to South Korea. Middle-class North Koreans would risk a relatively stable life in North Korea for a financially and economically marginalized life in South Korea (Lankov 2006: 115). More significantly, there are serious security concerns for the migrants themselves and for those family members that stayed in North Korea.

The security concerns are aggravated by the journey North Korean migrants have to undertake in order to get to South Korea. This usually involves crossing the border to China, followed by at least one more country, usually Mongolia or a Southeast Asian country, to reach a South Korean embassy. Life in China is marked by insecurity, vulnerability, and



precariousness due to the migrants' lack of legal status in China (Haggard and Noland 2011). The most common route for migrants from North Korea to South Korea is via China:

North Koreans staying in China temporarily without permission suffered from a constant fear of forced repatriation and punishment, and began developing migration routes that pass through many countries in East Asia to get to South Korea. Developed in the early 2000s, this so-called "Underground Railway" ("Seoul Train") passes over several thousand kilometers of China and former socialist countries such as Russia, Mongolia, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia, before finally arriving in Thailand, where North Korean migrants can be internationally recognized as refugees and earn the right to come to South Korea (Newsweek 2001). At present, it is an operation that draws in many diplomats, secret agents, religious organizations, and NGOs, an enterprise that attracts numerous multinational brokers (Chung 2014: 335).

Not every North Korean (initially) migrates to China with the intention of migrating to South Korea. Back and forth migration between North Korea and China is quite common, for purposes of finding food and work. Since China does not consider North Koreans refugees, Chinese police send North Korean migrants back to North Korea when they are found in China (Jang 2003: 215). Back in North Korea, legal punishment awaits them, especially adult men. The fact that adult men are more severely punished than women and children has to do with the fact that back-and-forth migration for women and children is not an uncommon phenomenon (Chung 2003; Jang 2003). My interlocutors from North Korea suggested that men are usually employed by the North Korean government and their absence is noted more quickly than women's; thus they do not have the possibility to migrate to China as easily as women or children. Since men are employed by the government with low salaries, in rural North Korea women tend to be the breadwinners by engaging in border crossing and business activities in China. This would, at least partially, help to explain the gender imbalance among North Korean migrants in South Korea.<sup>22</sup>

The presence of a large Korean Chinese population in the Yanbian area (the *Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture*) bordering North Korea makes it easier for North Koreans to establish social relations in China. Korean Chinese often work as intermediaries, e.g. for finding work or housing, for hiding from the police, or for establishing contact with (South Korean) Protestant churches and missionaries in China (Jung 2013). Further, Christian churches and NGOs, as well as the large number of Korean Chinese living in the Chinese-North Korean border area, established a support system for North Koreans. However, since North Koreans in China cannot turn to the police, they are very vulnerable to (economic) exploitation and crime. Labour without pay, forced marriage, and prostitution are among the issues North Korean migrants have to face (Jang 2003). There exists a hierarchy between ethnic Koreans in China, with South Koreans at the top, Korean Chinese in the middle, and North Koreans at the bottom (Jung 2013: 160), mirroring the hierarchical nationhood observed by Seol and Skrentny in South Korea. The role of the Christian (usually Protestant/evangelical) churches goes beyond the role of simply providing material help. It is accompanied by proselytization and efforts to convert North Koreans from "Kimilsungism" or *juche* ideology to Christianity which is presented as South Korea's equivalent to North Korea's state sanctioned ideology (Jung 2015). These proselytizing efforts are so successful that roughly 80% of North Korean migrants arriving in South Korea declare themselves to be Christians (although this number tends to decline the longer migrants stay in South Korea; Jung 2011).

The journey from China to South Korea is usually facilitated by family members already in South Korea or another third country with the help of brokers that try to bring the North Korean migrants to a third country where they can claim asylum (or rather citizenship) at a South Korean consulate (Bell 2014; Chung 2008; Lankov 2006).

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<sup>22</sup> Although it is not certain that the gender imbalance in South Korea necessarily correlates with a gender imbalance of North Koreans in China, see Haggard and Noland (2011: 21).

## 6.2. Socio-economic Marginalization and Transnational Agency

The changes in government policies designed to help North Korean defectors settle in South Korea reflect changes in both public attitudes toward North Korean migrants as well as in the living conditions of North Korean migrants in South Korea. The relatively comfortable middle-class life of earlier defectors is now a rarity for North Korean migrants (Chung 2008: 18–21; Lankov 2006: 120–125). Today, North Korean migrants are marginalized and stigmatized within South Korean society to a great extent. They have gone from being “heroes” to being “burdens” (Jung 2015).

After arriving in South Korea, migrants are initially screened and interviewed by government security officers and receive South Korean citizenship before being transferred to the *Hanawon* centre (Chung 2008: 15). *Hanawon* is a government institution established in 1999 where North Korean migrants are supposed to learn the basic skills they need in order to live in South Korea. The curriculum has been revised several times, but generally offers “socio-cultural adaptation” and “vocational training” as well as counselling services (Ryang 2012b). These include an introduction to engaging in a capitalist economy, an introduction to South Korean ‘culture’, and gendered education programs, such as cooking for women and technical skills for men.

After three months, North Korean migrants are able to move into government subsidized apartments and receive their settlement money in instalments; this money is then often used to finance chain migration or sent to family still living in North Korea. There are some further programs for integrating North Korean migrants into the labour market, such as monetary incentives by the government for vocational training or scholarships, and the possibility to enter some of South Korea’s most prestigious universities without a South Korean high school degree or without passing the competitive university entrance exam. However, these programs can be criticized as poorly designed, and they often fail to actually foster North Korean migrants’ well-being (Chung 2014: 337). Further, it is argued that the splitting up of the government benefits, and the education received at *Hanawon* and the local *Hana Centers*, is designed to turn North Koreans, who until then have limited experience with a full blown capitalist market economy such as South Korea’s, into neoliberal citizens by providing financial incentives for work. It is part of becoming a “cultural citizen” in South Korea (Chung 2008; Park, S. Y. 2016). As is often the case with the allocation of government resources to certain groups designated as ‘special’, the financial and logistic support for North Korean migrants is challenged. The government support has been the cause for criticism from South Koreans because, it is argued by some, it provides North Korean migrants with unfair advantages in South Korea’s highly competitive education and labour market (Campbell 2016: 62; Lee 2011: 96).

Yet, while North Korean migrants are introduced to South Korean upper-middle class life at *Hanawon*, and despite the government benefits they receive, North Koreans tend to occupy lower socio-economic strata than South Koreans, comparable to the situation of Korean Chinese in South Korea’s hierarchical nation (Chung 2014; Seol and Skrentny 2009). North Korean migrants especially have a hard time in South Korea due to the particular (post-)Cold War dynamic that for decades saw, and continues to see, North Korea and South Korea antagonistically opposed. Further, their association with communism and the Northern regime leads to perceptions of them being lazy and not hard-working (Choo 2015: 125–126). Therefore, finding permanent employment is quite difficult for North Korean migrants. Their skills, if they received their education in North Korea, or due to years of wandering and hiding in China, lack of formal education, are not valued in the South Korean labour market. Many North Koreans are not prepared for the highly competitive job and education sector in South Korea, and, even if they are, they have difficulties finding stable employment due to the lack of a social network in South Korea, as Lankov points out:

Getting and keeping a good job is difficult even for those who, strictly speaking, are qualified. The ever-present system of informal connections (alumni connections, known as *hakyeon*, and regional connections, known as *jiyeon*) normally excludes outsiders, and the defectors are outsiders by definition: with few exceptions, they did not graduate from “good” South Korean universities. As an older defector remarked, “I am not sure whether my son will ever be able to break through the wall of *hakyeon* and *jiyeon* and achieve success in Korea (Lankov 2006: 122).

North Korean migrants also face prejudices such as suspicion of being a spy from North Korea, or of being heartless and not trustworthy, since they left their family and friends behind to live in South Korea – which is quite ironic, given the fact that chain-migration is the most common form of migration from North Korea to South Korea today.

Many defectors exhibit what could be termed “adjustment problems” (Yoon 2001) in so far as they are not able to live a stable life in economic terms and are socially marginalized. While economic precariousness is a hallmark of neoliberal economies, and in particular of post IMF-crisis South Korea, where particularly young people have increasing difficulties finding stable employment and gaining the associated advantages, such as being able to move out from home, marry, and have a family, North Koreans are affected more severely than South Koreans. There are fewer jobs available to North Korean migrants, and those available are not professional or white collar jobs, but rather low skilled jobs in the labour and service industry, due to North Koreans’ educational backgrounds. Thus, they tend to live under precarious economic conditions with unstable jobs and relatively low wages (Bidet 2009; Ryang 2012b).

Their economic difficulties are accompanied by social stigmatisation and marginalization. North Koreans’ social and economic problems are attributed to their incapability to adapt to life in South Korea due to their North Korean “origins” (Choo 2015: 125). Rather than an asset in Cold War times they are considered a financial burden in economically tough times, thus the switch from “heroes to burdens” (Jung 2015). In a time when South Korea’s economic and welfare policies are mainly directed by neoliberal attitudes and questions of utility, North Korean migrants are of little ‘value’ (Ryang 2012b).

Furthermore, the public (and private) labelling of North Korean migrants has shifted from “heroes” or “defectors” to (economic) “migrants” or “refugees”. North Koreans are thus less considered brethren with an inalienable right to South Korean citizenship but rather as people that deserve South Korea’s help due to their poverty and vulnerability. The discourse on the issue of North Korean migrants is shifting from an emphasis on national unity to one on human rights and aid. North Koreans are thus less members of South Korean society by virtue of their Koreanness, but by virtue of the hardships they experience (Kim 2012). This is partly an explanation for the changes in the monetary compensation North Korean defectors receive as well as changes of the responsible government ministries. Responsibility for North Korean migrants has moved from the Ministry of Defence, to the Ministry of Health and Society, to the Ministry of Unification over time (2012: 102–107).

All this combined has effects on the mental health and general well-being of North Korean migrants in South Korea, who have already had traumatic experiences during their migration. North Korean migrants are “typically made to feel estranged, ostracized, and alienated” in South Korea (Ryang 2012b; see also Jeon 2000; Min 2008; Yoon 2001).

In the absence of sufficient support by the South Korean state and a social network within South Korean society, other institutions have taken up the role of building up a support system for North Korean migrants, most notably NGOs and Protestant churches (Bell 2013). Given the decrease in government support for North Korean migrants, Christian churches have become a major source of support for North Korean migrants not only during their journey, but also in South Korea. This support is of both financial and spiritual nature as well as providing a social network. While North Korean migrants were caught within the Cold War logic for a long time they are now (also) caught within the discourse of (South Korean) Christianity versus (North Korean) communism and *Jucheism*. A decreasing interest of the state in North Korean migrants was countered by an increase of the interest of Christian churches that consider North Korean migrants the

“first unifiers”; the people best prepared to bring about unification and to be helpful in the event of unification due to their experience in both states (Jung 2011, 2013, 2015).

In search of class mobility that is denied to most North Korean defectors in South Korea, transnational migration is being increasingly employed as a strategy (Bell 2014; Chung 2014).

Because of discrimination and difficulties in acquiring middle class status in South Korea, due to the competitive nature of the South Korean economy and education system, North Korean migrants, similar to (upper) middle class South Koreans, consider (semi-) emigration to a third country, usually located in Western Europe or North America, a viable option. North Korean migrants are thereby accumulating “transnational capital” in an attempt to improve or escape their position in South Korea’s hierarchical society. Transnational aspirations are also a part of the lives of many South Koreans, often for educational purposes (i.e. to learn English or to study at a prestigious anglophone university). North Korean migrants, otherwise marginalized in South Korea, lacking the same connections and resources to assure their or their children’s (as is the case for many South Korean families) “success” in South Korea, are pursuing their transnational aspirations by employing their identity in a strategic way, by making use either of their South Korean citizenship, which makes it easy to travel, or their status as North Koreans to emigrate as refugees (Bell 2014; Chung 2014).

Advantages of emigration, such as skills acquired in a third country, especially English language skills, as well as better social welfare systems in, for example, Western Europe and the fact that they enjoy a certain anonymity and are not caught in the Cold War rhetoric as either defectors or refugees, seem to outweigh the importance of ethnic homogeneity in South Korea.

It is estimated that roughly 10% of North Korean migrants in South Korea emigrate to a third country. It is assumed that this number is going to rise in the future due to the increasing difficulties of North Korean migrants in South Korea and the effects of chain migration (Chung 2014: 332). Going abroad is for many North Koreans in South Korea the only way to climb the social ladder (2014: 334). However, transnational practices are not limited to migration. The flow of information, money, and goods through telecommunication and remittances (usually through brokers) even into North Korea are, despite its illegality, among the activities North Korean migrants engage in.

The marginalization of North Korean migrants is striking against the background of ethnic nationalism and the notion of Koreans as one people (*danil minjok*). While this notion is enough to legally guarantee citizenship rights for North Koreans in South Korea, it is not enough to protect them from marginalization. The studies discussed above see this increasing marginalization as a function of a change in South Korean nationalism, as a move away from forms of national identification dominated by ethnicity. These studies argue that ethnic nationalism as a sentiment has lost much of its force, and that North Koreans and other ‘ethnic’ Koreans such as Korean Chinese or *Goryeoin* are excluded because a sense of ethnic unity is (no longer) enough to be considered a full member of the South Korean nation. However, as I showed above, (patriarchal) notions of ethnicity are a vital aspect when it comes to the immigration of people who are not of Korean origin. In the next section I will discuss how ethnicity and ethnic forms of differentiation are crucial when it comes to the ways North Korean migrants are viewed and view themselves in South Korea. I show that at least as much as ethnic *nationalism*, notions of ethnic *unity* are being renegotiated in contemporary South Korea.

## 7. CONTESTING ETHNIC HOMOGENEITY

The approaches discussed in Chapter 5 argue that sentiments of ethnic nationalism in South Korea are in decline and that the political force of common ethnic ties is becoming less relevant. However, I showed that, when looking at the discourse surrounding multiculturalism in South Korea, ethnicity is still a vital force. As I show here, the marginalization of North Korean migrants in South Korea (and, by extension, that of ethnic return migrants such as Korean Chinese) is accompanied not only by a decline in the force of ethnic nationalism but by challenges to the notions of the ethnic unity of all Koreans. I will show this by discussing how North Korean migrants are involved in the negotiation of collective identities in contemporary South Korea and pointing out the implications for ethnic nationalism and the notion of Koreans as one people.

### 7.1. North Korea(ns) as Other

Upon taking a closer look at the discourses surrounding North Korean migrants in contemporary South Korea, one sees that the marginalization of North Koreans is not simply entrenched in rhetoric concerning their educational background or affected by their maladjustment to work life in South Korea in a time when immigration policies are largely directed by questions of economic utility, but also accompanied by rhetoric highlighting their difference in terms of ‘culture’ or ‘mentality’, which is the cause for their adaptation problems (e.g. Min 2008).

In fact, nowadays especially young South Koreans find unification with North Korea a daunting prospect not only because of the economic burdens associated with it – quite interestingly Germany functions as a negative example rather than a role model for many South Koreans in this regard – but also because of perceived cultural and social differences between North Korea and South Korea. This is due to North Korea’s political ideology, which is perceived as incompatible with South Korea’s liberal democracy. Further, North Korea is orientalized as South Korea’s *other* (Lee 2011). It is considered the more truly traditional and more backward Korea that has to change if unification ever were to occur.



The othering of North Korea has the effect that South Koreans tend to identify themselves as the opposite to the, usually, negative North Korean other – the othering of North Koreans is part of South Korean self-identification and tells us at least as much about the self-image of South Korea and South Koreans as about North Korea and North Koreans (Grinker 1998: 7–8; Kim 2012: 96–97). North Koreans have to be made visible as North Koreans. Since they are the other against which South Koreans define themselves, they are the ones who are ethnically marked, not vice versa, in orientalizing definitions of the self through ‘descriptions’ of the other (Grinker 1998; Said 1978).

While settlement policies of North Korean migrants are informed by the “rhetoric of unification and ethnic homogeneity” (Kim, N. H.-J. 2016a: 185), North Korean migrants are viewed as the negative other and as a past image of South Korean society. North Koreans and South Koreans are juxtaposed as representing the “nation’s past, poor and underdeveloped status” and its “future as [a] developed, globalized, and civilized” nation respectively (2016a: 189–190). Settlement and integration measures designed by the government do, in contrast to measures designed for foreign brides and multicultural families, assume an essentially common culture between South Korea and North Korea, but regard North Korean cultural development as inferior. The settlement policies are designed to make modern, neoliberal citizens out of North Korean migrants, who are treated like “incompetent, needy welfare recipients” (2016a: 189).<sup>23</sup>

While the South Korean Ministry of Unification acknowledges cultural differences between North Koreans and South Koreans and considers them “unnatural” and “superficial” due to their common history (2016a: 192), South Korean youth think differently. Campbell reports that many of her interview partners expressed discomfort with the idea of sharing a nation state, or even personal relationships, with North Koreans and Korean Chinese because they are perceived as too different – especially in the case of Korean Chinese, whose stigmatization through being portrayed as violent and criminal is prevalent (Campbell 2016: 3). This is an impression that I got as well during my time in South Korea.

The sense of difference between North and South Koreans has increased with prolonged division. The homogenous nation could be imagined during Cold War times despite heavy anti-communist propaganda precisely because there was limited exchange. However, increased opportunities to meet North Korean migrants or to see them and be confronted with their stories in the media helped foster a sense of difference. While one could point out the irony that lies in the fact that the sense of difference was actually fostered by the increased influx of North Korean migrants into South Korea (cf. Campbell 2016: 59), it seems perfectly in line with theories of social and ethnic differentiation that hold that boundaries are made and maintained with people one is in (close) contact with rather than with strangers (Eriksen 2010: 16).

## 7.2. Gendered Dynamics of Othering

The othering of North Koreans has highly gendered dynamics and has different manifestations for North Korean men and women (Choo 2006; Epstein and Green 2013; Park, J. 2016, 2016). Both are considered traditional in a sense, yet for men tradition is associated with being “backward” and therefore has negative connotations. The status of North Korean women is more ambivalent.

North Korean men are regarded as more traditional, conservative, violent, and patriarchal than South Korean men in particular and South Korean society in general. North Korean men are therefore, and also because of their often low economic status,

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<sup>23</sup> See S. Park, S. Y. (2016) for a detailed analysis of the way South Korean public and private organizations are trying to turn North Korean migrants into “self-sufficient”, neoliberal citizens.



unattractive marriage partners for South Korean women (or, as Choo suggests, even for North Korean women in South Korea; Choo 2006: 600).

North Korean women face victimization and stigmatization of a different kind. This relates to issues of human trafficking and forced marriage and prostitution of North Korean women in China. North Korean migrants are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of legal status in China. Their (imagined) ambivalent past makes North Korean women subject to suspicions regarding their occupations in both China and South Korea. Further, their alleged past in China, where they already could have a husband and/or children whom they are waiting to bring to South Korea, raises suspicions among potential spouses and their families, and this decreases their chances of finding a partner (Choo 2006; J. Park 2016). However, they are also sexualized as the ideal Korean wife and are considered more traditionally Korean, feminine, pure, beautiful, hardworking, and obedient than South Korean women. Some of these are features are considered attractive on the South Korean marriage market. Due to the marriage gap in South Korea and the gender imbalance among North Korean migrants in South Korea, match making agencies are trying to actively promote North Korean women as the ideal marriage partner and stress the advantages they have over 'foreign', non-ethnically Korean, women (Park, J. 2016: 218).<sup>24</sup> Therefore, while young South Koreans express increasing unease at the prospect of marrying North Korean migrants, the gendered dynamic of the othering of North Koreans means North Korean men are considered "more" foreign and less adaptable to South Korean society. This has a parallel in the gendered nature of work life. While unskilled North Korean women have the possibility to find employment in traditionally female sectors (e.g. working as cleaners or as waitresses), North Korean migrant men find it more difficult to find employment, since they lack the skill-set for occupations that are considered the men's domain in South Korea, such as computer or foreign language skills (Choo 2006: 594–595).

These findings suggest that the effect of collective identity constructions in the Korean border context is a decoupling of nationhood and ethnicity based on the fact that North Koreans are culturally too different despite sharing the same origins and ethnicity as South Koreans. They are not part of the South Korean "us" because their culture, behaviour, and thinking are considered too different from South Korea's and also different in a way that is not valued highly. This is underscored by North Korean migrants' efforts to circumvent the polarization of North Korea and South Korea and establish new, pan-Korean identities and senses of belonging for themselves, by, for example, defining the Korean peninsula as their homeland instead of either of the two states on it. This frees them from the pressures to choose between North Korea, towards which they have ambivalent attitudes and for which they cannot freely express their feelings of nostalgia, and South Korea, where they enjoy legal citizenship but socio-cultural marginalization (Lee 2011: 107).

Therefore, it seems that Seol and Skrentny's, Han's, and Campbell's observations were correct in that new forms of nationalism, either "hierarchical", "nouveau-riche", or "globalized cultural citizenship" are emerging that are not based on the notion of ethnic homogeneity. Yet, when taking a closer look at how exactly the differentiation between North and South Koreans is negotiated, it appears that the role of ethnicity cannot be neglected in the formation of new collective identities on the Korean peninsula.

### 7.3. Ethnic Markers of Social Differentiation

As shown in Chapter 3, the relationship between 'culture' and 'ethnicity' is a problematic one. This is partly due to the fact that each term in itself cannot be defined precisely. What is important, however, is that culture and ethnicity cannot be equated. Thus it is,

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<sup>24</sup> This gendered dynamic predates the division of the Korean peninsula and is encapsulated by the Korean term *namnambugnyeo* which describes the origin of each partner in an idealized heterosexual relationship (*namnam* standing for "southern man" and *buknyeo* for "northern woman"; Epstein and Green 2013).

hypothetically, possible that in Korea, due to the highly racialized notions of ethnic homogeneity, there could be a decoupling of culture, ethnicity, and nationhood. This would imply that the differentiation of North Koreans (and other ethnic Koreans) occurs against the background of ethnic homogeneity and a lack of ethnic distinctions.

However, this presupposes taking for granted the notion of ethnic unity in Korea, a notion that is, as has been shown above, itself the result of particular historical and social formations on the Korean peninsula. Instead of presupposing ethnic unity, one should examine how new social contexts, in this case a 70-year long division of the peninsula and an increasing influx of North Korean migrants in the time of an increasing diversification of South Korean society, affect notions of ethnic unity. Thus, in Korea and elsewhere “ethnicity should not be understood as a self-evident unit that shares a homogenous identity, but rather as a product of the complex social processes of boundary making” (Jung 2015: 142). And it appears that contemporary forms of differentiation are quite ‘ethnic’ indeed.

North Koreans are othered mostly on the basis of their appearance, their (fashion) style and their dialect(s). Language is probably the most important and commonly cited factor in situations where difference between North Koreans and South Koreans (and Korean Chinese for that matter) is discussed. This is not an issue of pure social construction. There are (by now) marked differences between North and South Korean variants of the Korean language, because cultural exchange between the two nations has been virtually impossible for roughly seven decades. The use of mostly English loan words in the South Korean variant of the Korean language is the biggest differentiator.<sup>25</sup> North Koreans tend to have difficulty understanding and learning the significant number of words and phrases taken from English, an effect of American cultural imperialism since the end of World War II on the world in general and South Korea in particular. The use of Chinese characters (*hanja*) in South Korea is a further difference. Postcolonial North Korea was more radical than its southern neighbour when it came to getting rid of Chinese and Japanese linguistic and cultural influences. Chinese characters are not used in contemporary North Korea, and therefore North Koreans have difficulty reading and understanding them when coming to South Korea. However, these are rather descriptions of difficulties North Korean migrants have with the South Korean language; they are usually *recognized* because of their accents and dialects. While there are various dialects in North and South Korea, all variants are grouped together into two groups, a South Korean (which usually means Seoulite) and a North Korean version. This is strikingly similar to Germany, where, despite an abundance of various dialects, a stereotyped version of the East German dialect exists.

Interview partners, including my own, confirm that the accent is what marks them out when talking to South Koreans, which can be a hindrance in finding employment or establishing social relationships (Jung 2015). When asked where they are from, North Koreans often claim to be either Korean Chinese or from Gangwon-do, a province in the north east of South Korea where a dialect that resembles some of the North Korean variants is spoken. One of my interview partners, who was able to almost completely get rid of her North Korean accent (but is able to switch easily) told me that she learned to do so by studying for six months, paying attention to how newscasters speak, as well as continuously recording and correcting herself with the help of a tape recorder. The importance of language as a marker of North Koreanness was recognized by the staff at *Hanawon*, and South Korean language and pronunciation lessons included into the curriculum, after North Korean migrants expressed the necessity to learn it.<sup>26</sup> South Korean missionaries, who are actively involved in the migration process of North Korean refugees, also express the importance of learning the standard Seoulite language to integrate into South Korean society (Jung 2015: 157).

<sup>25</sup> In the literature I am familiar with, the lack of English loanwords in North Korea is highlighted, yet the presence of loanwords from other languages, most importantly Russian, is not mentioned. Therefore, academic literature tends to perpetuate the discourse of North Korea and North Koreans as “lacking” and South Korea as the norm.

<sup>26</sup> Children, too, are subject to the same pressures and discrimination and are especially vulnerable in school settings, where indiscreet teachers can reveal their North Korean origins (Lee 2011: 102).

Language is not the only way North Korean migrants are made visible. Their *bodies* function in a similar way and are loci of cultural and ethnic contestations (Choo 2006; Park, J. 2016). As stated above, my South Korean interlocutors claimed to be able to recognize North Koreans upon *seeing* them. At first I was intrigued and considered it simple discrimination and othering on the part of my South Korean friends. However, my North Korean interlocutors not only confirmed this, but even claimed that they were better at recognizing the difference than most South Koreans. When I asked Bona and Sujin whether they were able to recognize the difference between Korean Chinese, North Koreans, and South Koreans, they replied:

Yes, we can tell who is North Korean, Korean Chinese, or South Korean by looking at people's faces. South Korean people have white and smooth faces for example. Korean Chinese have white and rough faces, because of the cold and rough climate. South Koreans can divide too, but they cannot tell the difference in accent between North Koreans and Korean Chinese. But we can tell the difference even before hearing people speak, because the facial shape is different. Also, the clothes are different. Korean Chinese usually wear very strong colours, red or blue. South Koreans usually wear different colours. Korean Chinese also tattoo their eyebrows. You can recognize them like that. We can tell the difference between South Koreans, North Koreans, and Korean Chinese like we can tell if somebody is Japanese.<sup>27</sup>

As with dialects, this is not all make-believe. As research shows, there are now, due to malnutrition in North Korea and China, physiological differences between North Koreans and South Koreans, most notably in height (Choo 2006; Chung 2003, 2008; Lie 2015b; Pak 2003; Park, J. 2016). Yet, while there might be general physiological differences, due to health issues and malnutrition, between South Koreans and many North Koreans, and both South and North Koreans claim to be able to tell the difference, it turns out that people are quite often wrong when guessing where somebody is from (Choo 2006: 588). Nevertheless, *the notion that the difference is easily recognizable* is very strong.

Also here, gendered dynamics exist. For North Korean men height is the main problem. In South Korea (male) height is highly valued and associated with success. Short men are supposed to have less success in romantic and professional life. Many adult North Korean men try to alter their height by taking medical supplements, hormones, or even undergoing surgery. However, these attempts are ultimately doomed to fail (Chung 2008; Park, J. 2016). The bodies of North Korean women are subject to the same pressures as are South Korean women's bodies. South Korea is the "plastic surgery capital of the world" where advertisements for plastic surgery are virtually omnipresent (Park, J. 2016: 222). For North Korean women, undergoing plastic surgery is associated with norms of 'South Korean' looks, beauty, and success. Markus Bell (2014) and Joowon Park (2016) report how their female interlocutors saved up their settlement money for plastic surgery because they consider it a first step in becoming a successful South Korean citizen. The body is therefore engulfed in neoliberal practices aiming at self-optimisation for economic and social success.

Despite these perceived "hard" physiological markers, I learned during my own interviews that the difference between North and South Koreans is observable but not always describable. Despite the discourse on malnutrition and resulting physiological differences, it seems that what differentiates North Koreans and South Koreans are less actual differences but the belief in differences, which points at the socially constructed nature of ethnic distinctions. This statement by one of my interview partners, Mina, after being asked *how* she recognizes the difference between North Koreans and South Koreans, highlights this point:

People [North Koreans] can *just* tell if someone else is from North Korea.

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<sup>27</sup> Yebin, my interpreter, commented that South Koreans tattoo their eyebrows as well. Nonetheless, it was identified as a clear marker of differentiation by my North Korean interlocutors.

Yet, the same interview partner was able to break down what distinguishes North Koreans from South Koreans while maintaining that they share the same ethnicity.

M: I can accept discrimination from white people due to ethnicity, I but cannot accept it from South Koreans, because we are the same people.

J: How did they [your classmates] know that you're from North Korea?

M: They somehow found out because I look different.

J: What do you mean by "different"?

M: South Koreans can just tell, even without talking [to me]. There are facial differences. North Koreans have more angular faces. Also there's a different aura as well as a different body shape and size and appearance.

Daeju, my research assistant, agreed with her statement. However, the ambivalence of this statement is noteworthy. North Koreans share the same ethnicity *and* are easily distinguishable. This suggests that the differences are far less feasible than height or the fact that somebody underwent plastic surgery or not. It is also far more essentializing than that. The difference is something between hard, describable facts such as facial features and something that cannot be described but is undoubtedly present, an "*aura*". The differences could also be divided into two categories: First, as differences in *habitus* (Bourdieu 2010 [1979]), where social markers of differences, such as dialect, style, or fashion (see the first quote, where my interview partners mixed facial features and fashion choices as markers of group belonging), are embodied and where an "*aura*" represents belonging to a certain category. Secondly, as differences in hard, quasi-'racial' markers such as facial features.

These categories are by no means fixed – the attitudes North Koreans and South Koreans have regarding each other are too ambivalent. Identity and difference are expressed almost simultaneously; as indicated by my interview partners Bona and Sujin upon being asked whether they can tell the difference between North Korean and South Korean children in South Korea:

When they just come, just arrive in South Korea, we can tell them apart, because they don't get enough to eat and they are a little shorter than South Koreans and their clothes are a little bit different too. But after a year or more we can't tell the difference anymore.

This resonates with the ambivalence of ethno-national identity noted in the literature on North Korean migrants (Bell 2014; Campbell 2016: 67; Choo 2006; Epstein and Green 2013; Jung 2015; Kim, N. H.-J. 2016b; Lee 2011; Son 2016). It is this status of ambivalence that makes life in South Korea hard. Their 'integration' is expected to be quick and smooth due to notions of common ethnicity, but at the same time North Korea is *the other* per se and North Koreans are confronted with extreme versions of orientalization. They are 'same' and 'different' at once. And neither civil society nor the state is sure whether to treat them as 'just' another category of migrants or to grant them a privileged status as co-ethnics. While North Korean migrants have a right to South Korean citizenship and receive financial support no other group of migrants receives, they are denied the support multicultural families receive. Multicultural families are supported through so-called *Multicultural Family Support Centers*, where services from language education to counselling are offered due to the government's assumption that foreign spouses will have difficulty 'integrating' into South Korean society (Kim, N. H.-J. 2016a). This point was stressed by my own interview partners, who would welcome a similar interest in and support for them and their families by the South Korean people and the South Korean government. She, however, stressed that they do not want to be considered 'multicultural citizens' due to their shared ethnicity. This implies that North Korean migrants, despite their privileged legal status as 'co-ethnics', are in competition with other categories of migrants for state resources – which itself can be a catalyst for further differentiation along emerging ethnic lines (Eriksen 1991).

Another important point is that it is not just an othering of North Koreans on the part of South Koreans. North Korean migrants are actively involved in this process too, in contrast to the observation Choo made:

[The] sentiment that there was “no difference” was a specifically North Korean point of view; those who thought there was a difference were working to reduce or eliminate it. By contrast, South Koreans were eager to identify difference and discussed the settlers from the North as a separate, distinctive group, which is what I term “ethnicizing” them. (Choo 2006: 588)

I found that North Koreans are not only actively involved in the discourse of differentiation but claim to have a better expertise at it than South Koreans. This is in line with what Stuart Hall observed about postcolonial and diaspora contexts:

Not only, in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as ‘Other’ (Hall 1990: 225; emphasis in original).

Choo correctly notes that North Koreans are not only re- or co-producing these differences, they are also “working to reduce or eliminate” them, either by pursuing social mobility, engaging in neoliberal forms of consumption, learning the Seoulite language, or undergoing plastic surgery (Chung 2008; Park, J. 2016). This is not surprising, as J. Park notes with reference to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), power imbalances between North Korean migrants and the South Korean majority population make North Koreans see themselves as deficient and “exercise symbolic violence in becoming complicit in their own subjugation” by adopting, sometimes through actual pain, as in the case of cosmetic surgery, markers of South Korean identity (2016: 223). This is related to hierarchical forms of identity which reflect power relations. North Koreans are trying to change their position within this (quasi) class system. Being South Korean is more highly valued than being North Korean; therefore, strategies of becoming South Korean are a way of improving one’s own position within this hierarchical system of ethno-national differentiation.

These positional moves can also be temporary in nature, as Sujin tongue-in-cheek explained:

I’m always asked “where are you from?” Chinese people [she lived in China for a few years] also recognize that I am not Chinese, but they don’t ask me where I’m from. But South Koreans always ask me “do you come from China?” Or “are you Korean Chinese?” They recognize my accent. But I always just answer that I am from Vietnam.

#### 7.4. Remaking Ethnic Boundaries

Yet, despite statements like these, differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans is considered “pseudo-ethnic” (Choo 2006) or “quasi-ethnic” (Jung 2015) and markers are supposedly established in the absence of *real, genuine* ethnic differences. Of these two terms, “quasi-ethnic” is preferable to “pseudo-ethnic” because it does not imply a distinction between “real” and “imagined” ethnic differences, but rather emphasises ethnicity in the making and the contested nature of ethnic distinctions. This statement from Hae Yeon Choo’s otherwise illuminating article is a case in point:

Although no tangible ethnic or linguistic differences between the two Koreas exist, settlers from the North are ascribed certain pseudo-ethnic characteristics (Choo 2006: 581).

Thus, according to this statement, there is a distinction to be made between real, “tangible” ethnic differences and the mere ascription of ethnicity. Yet, as shown above, ethnicity is



always a matter of (self-)ascription and categorisation, not a primordial, pre-existing fact that precedes or predates social life. Kim too proclaims that “North and South Koreans ironically share an identity based on common ethnic origins, language, and (at least objectively) to some degree a collective memory” (Kim 2012: 97) and that it is thus possible that contradictions between North and South Korean *national identities*, due to North Korean’s marginalization in South Korea, and a shared pan-Korean *ethnic identity* can arise (Kim 2012: 103).

Yet, ethnicity is a product of social interaction and therefore subject to change and constant renegotiation. Neglecting this fact constitutes reifying folk notions of ethnicity and using them analytically. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) introduced the notion of “methodological nationalism”, which they describe as the tendency to take for granted the nation state as the basic unit of analysis in the social sciences without questioning. While forms of collective identity such as nationhood or citizenship are questioned by scholars studying North Korean migrants and nationalism in South Korea, ethnicity, as a category, seems to be taken for granted. That is not to say that the “nationalism” part of ethnic nationalism does not undergo any changes. There is a powerful argument to be made that belonging to the Korean “ethnie” alone is not enough to gain full membership in legal, social, and cultural terms in contemporary South Korea. Therefore, it appears that the category of ethnicity is “blurring” and becoming less relevant, while other categories such as economic status, educational background, and the perception of the status of one’s country of origin relative to South Korea are becoming more important. Yet, as this chapter suggests, this process is accompanied by changing perceptions of ethnic boundaries as well. Notions of ethnic homogeneity are being contested in so far as the blurring of ethnic boundaries seems to be accompanied by “boundary shifting”, to use Wimmer’s terminology; the ethnic boundaries of both South Koreans and North Koreans are detracting and excluding the respective other.

One might object that the perspective of ethnicity is not the right approach to analyse the phenomena described above. What distinguishes emic conceptions of ethnicity from other forms of collective identity are not just simply appearance, behaviour, or ‘culture’, but the idea of a common origin, especially in Korea’s emic conception of ethnic unity. There is no different origin story for South Koreans than for North Koreans. Yet, as Max Weber already knew, the origin story is more often the result of differentiation than its cause. Therefore, and this is highly speculative, we might be at the beginning of something resembling ethnogenesis in South Korea. Eriksen outlines how a historical approach towards ethnicity would study “ethnic groups”:

[A]n historical approach would describe how the phenomena which are, analytically and at the level of social intercourse, labeled ‘ethnic groups’ or ‘ethnic categories’ are the products of long-term processes of social differentiation where relevances of cultural differences are invoked or created under shifting social circumstances, and where the result is a form of discourse justifying a particular social order (Eriksen 1992: 22).

Perhaps it is the job of a future historian of Korea to analyse how it could come to new formations of ethnic identities on the Korean peninsula in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the notion of “one people”. But perhaps better than speaking of ethnogenesis, of new, stable identities and the emergence of distinct ethnic categories of South Koreans and North Koreans (and other ethnic Korean migrants), one ought to look at how the respective categories are reified in the constant renegotiation of unstable identities that is part of postmodern identity construction according to Hall – and has been part of cultural identity construction long before postmodernity, according to Marshall Sahlins (1999).

Further, one could object by pointing to the fact that individual North Koreans can become full members of the South Korean nation by pursuing markers of South Korean identity through economic success, neoliberal practices of consumption, and cosmetic alterations to their bodies, to prove that North Koreanness as an ethnic category does not exist. However, while it is generally doubtful that these attempts at “positional moves”



can be successful, their existence proves rather well that categories of North Koreanness and South Koreanness are being established through mutual (self-)ascription and that individuals have to pursue positional moves to cross ethnic boundaries.

Another argument against employing the theoretical framework for ethnicity here might be that the differences are not clear cut, i.e. the boundaries are too diffuse to be considered ethnic boundaries. North Koreans' status is highly ambivalent: on the one hand it is readily admitted by themselves and South Koreans, including the government, that they are part of the same ethnic group, while at the same time their difference is emphasized. The difference between South Koreans and North Koreans is certainly not the same as the difference between 'ethnic' Koreans and 'non-ethnic' Koreans. Yet, as Eriksen shows, there are different ways of making ethnic differences. He distinguishes between "analog" and "digital" principles of exclusion (Eriksen 2010: 78). "Digital" differentiation takes place when there are only absolutes at work, e.g. one either belongs to category A or B – and it is clearly defined which one belongs to. "Analog" differentiation occurs when the differences are more ambiguous; it allows for degrees of "more or less foreign" and there are some outsiders that are more similar than others. This, too, seems to fit the Korean case quite well.

Baumann's concept of dominant and demotic discourses as competing and complementary discourses on collective identity categories seems to fit the Korean case to a certain extent. While he argued that there is a dominant discourse that relies on reified notions of ethnicity and culture and a demotic discourse that dissolves these notions, it appears that in Korea both discourses – Koreans as one and Koreans as different depending on their country of origin – rely on reified, essentialized notions of being.

It appears therefore that the Korean diaspora context dissolves certain notions of ethnic identity to create space for alternative identities that are based on markers that are framed in ethnic, almost 'racial', vocabulary as much as the former ones (Ryang 2012b). This is best illustrated by the point Sujin and Bona make when telling me that the difference between Korean Chinese, North Koreans, and South Koreans is as easily recognizable as the difference between Koreans and Japanese. It is after all the Japanese against whom notions of a distinctly Korean ethnic identity were established. What does it mean for the notion of *danil minjok* when Koreans can be told apart as easily as Koreans and Japanese, as my interview partners suggest? More significant than being actually able to tell the difference in individual cases is the emergence of these categories, North Koreanness and South Koreanness, as distinct categories of (self-)ascription.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In this work I showed that the (post-)Cold War migration context of South Korea provides the context for a renegotiation of collective ethnic identities by differentiating North Koreans from South Koreans according to (quasi-)ethnic markers.

By approaching both nationalism and ethnicity from a constructivist perspective that highlights their context-dependent nature as well as the fact that both ethnic and national identities are not fixed but depend on larger socio-historical settings, I showed that the notion of ethnic unity of Koreans cannot be taken for granted. Instead of analysing marginalization of North Koreans and differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans in South Korea against the background of ethnic homogeneity, I showed that it is ethnic homogeneity itself that is contested. These findings are relevant for 'ethnic' Koreans from other countries as well, such as Korean Chinese, *Goryeoin*, Japanese Koreans, or Korean Americans. Yet, their situation cannot be equated, due to the vast political and historical differences that shape their experiences and the different economic situations, legal statuses, and political rights each category enjoys in South Korea.

I think it is vital for both scholars and policy makers to properly understand processes of social differentiation, given the increasing diversification of South Korean society due to the increasing number of immigrants that do not claim common ethnic ties. As I showed in this work, multiculturalism in Korea cannot be properly understood without paying attention to prevalent patriarchal notions of ethnicity. Simply stating that ethnic ties are not relevant anymore when it comes to defining membership of the South Korean nation, because 'ethnic' Koreans such as North Koreans or Korean Chinese can be excluded while 'non-ethnic' Koreans such as foreign brides or professionals can be imagined as members of the South Korean nation, misses the point.

Ethnicity (still) has a huge discursive power as an idiom of difference in South Korea, so much so that (former?) 'co-ethnics' find themselves on the wrong side of (quasi-)ethnic distinctions in South Korea. I suggest that the marginalization of North Koreans is less a sign of the decreasing significance of ethnicity in social differentiation and collective identities than a sign of its continuing relevance. As of now, one can say that the differentiation between North Koreans and South Koreans takes place not despite the notion of ethnic homogeneity but is itself a sign of the contested nature of ethnic homogeneity. While ethnic

nationalism was born out of a particular historical context, certain cultural markers that distinguished Koreans from Japanese (and are often taken for ethnic markers by “common sense”), such as different languages, were a given. Thus one might think that the modern, colonial emergence of ethnic nationalism does not imply that Korean ethnic nationalism and notions of homogeneity are easily open to change. Yet, ethnic distinctions can emerge relatively quickly and in seemingly homogenous contexts. Further, the 70-year-old division of the peninsula and the social and cultural differences that are a result of this division, as well as decades of anti-North Korean propaganda that older South Korean generations were attuned to, a distant sense of unbelonging among younger generations, and class-like distinctions between North Koreans and South Koreans in South Korea, offer fertile ground for the remaking of ethnic boundaries. Thus, North Koreans’ aspirations to full membership of the South Korean nation are not (only) denied because the force of ethnicity in Korean nationalism is declining, but because their status as members of the South Korean ethnic category is increasingly ambivalent.

Looking ahead, the renegotiation of ethnic identities in South Korea might very well lead to an increasing irrelevance of ethnic ties due to young South Koreans’ attitudes and the increase of immigrants from diverse backgrounds. However, as Korean history itself suggests, diversity is not a hindrance to notions of homogeneity. Further, increasing ethnic diversity does not necessarily lead to a decrease in the relevance of ethnic ties. In contrast, as the examples of both North Korean migrants and multicultural families show, diversification is related to the allocation of state resources and can lead to the emergence of new groups that define and organize themselves along ethnic lines to compete for said resources (Eriksen 1991; Verdery 1994; Williams 1989). Ethnicity might become less relevant as a marker of collective identities on a national level, but it might instead gain significance on a subnational level in a multi-ethnic Korea.

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