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The contradictory effects of South Korean resettlement policy on North Koreans in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the intersection of government policy and social status in a forced migration context. Specifically, I evaluate the influence of state policies on the social status of North Koreans in South Korea (*t'albungmin*). In positively discriminating in their favour while simultaneously treating them as welfare beneficiaries, I propose that South Korea's resettlement policy contributes to their social exclusion. *T'albungmin* receive greater benefits than other low-income earners, raising their fears of public backlash against their perceived privilege in a limited welfare environment. Resettlement policy also reinforces the image of *t'albungmin* as uneducated and low-skilled, contributing to discrimination they face when seeking skilled work. Although this policy suggests *t'albungmin* are homogeneously low class, I argue that *t'albungmin* retain elements of pre-migration class privilege after migration, with forms of capital associated with higher relative status in North Korea facilitating integration into South Korean society. However, in masking their class variation, and thus concealing the correlation between socio-economic background and ease of integration, resettlement support contributes to a perception that integration is a matter of personal effort. This case sheds new light on the role of state policies in inadvertently perpetuating social exclusion of the migrants it aims to support.

KEYWORDS

North Korean defectors/
refugees; government policy;
integration; social class;
exclusion

Over 33,000 North Koreans have arrived in South Korea since the *de facto* end of the Korean war in 1953. North Koreans who successfully reach South Korea (also known as *t'albungmin*¹) are entitled to South Korean citizenship, a right based on the South Korean constitutional claim of sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula. The South Korean government also provides *t'albungmin* with 'resettlement support' (*ch'ong-ch'ak chiw'ŏn*) in the form of financial aid, subsidised housing, educational assistance, and employment incentives.² However, despite their citizenship status and entitlement to government support, many *t'albungmin* feel inferior to southern-born South Koreans and excluded from full social participation (Hough 2022). They describe feeling pitied

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and treated as 'less-than' when interacting with South Koreans, and overlooked when applying for work, attributing this discriminatory treatment to prejudice.

This article analyses the intersection of government policy and social status. Specifically, I consider both the supportive and potentially exclusionary roles that resettlement support plays for *t'albungmin* attempting to integrate into South Korean society, taking into consideration their social status before and after they migrate.³ Although migrants often experience at least temporary downward social mobility upon arrival (Das-Munshi et al. 2012, 41), evidence suggests that, in the longer term, displacement does not cancel out the influence of their socio-economic backgrounds (Fernández-Kelly 2008). Thus, by exploring links between pre- and post-migration social status, I also address the degree to which forms of capital are convertible in different political-ideological contexts.

Like migrants around the world, *t'albungmin* arrive in a destination where social class structure differs greatly from their country of birth. Since the 1960s, the North Korean government has imposed a system of social stratification on its subjects, classifying every adult according to their level of perceived political loyalty (Collins 2012). This status designation theoretically determines every aspect of their quality of life, from eligibility for higher education and permitted employment, to benefits and housing, to the size of their food rations. In contrast, there is more debate about how to define social status in South Korea, although scholars agree that higher education plays a key role (Koo 2007; Grubb et al. 2009). Writing in the late 1990s, one economist described contemporary South Korea as a society undergoing such profound changes, with social class still in the process of formation, that it was difficult to apply to the country the 'classical' theories of Marx, Weber or Durkheim (Kim 1997). Japanese colonialism and the Korean War both had fundamental levelling effects before rapid industrialisation from the 1960s onwards. The aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis saw further instability, once again affecting power structures and the labour market. This is not to suggest that class differences do not affect South Koreans, but to emphasise that there is limited consensus on how to define class categories in the country.

While *t'albungmin* share certain characteristics with other migrant groups, a unique factor affecting their situation as North Koreans in South Korea is the co-nationalist context, both as one historic nation and given both North and South Korean official commitment (at least nominally) to future reunification. Consequently, *t'albungmin* fall between immigrants and natives, their treatment by South Koreans affected by this 'blurred boundary' (Alba 2005). Recent decades have seen tighter border controls and more highly selective immigration policies enacted around the world (De Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018), often accompanied by exclusionary political discourses (Waerniers and Hustinx 2019). In contrast, North Koreans receive South Korean citizenship upon arrival and resettlement policies aim to incorporate them into South Korean society, in line with discourses promoting belief in the Korean ethno-nation. Thus, on one hand, South Korea's interest in upholding the co-national principle justifies their exceptional treatment of North Koreans: not only do North Koreans receive far more than other migrant groups, including other co-ethnic Koreans, but the financial value of their benefits even exceeds that available to South Korean-born welfare recipients. On the other hand, the sense that North and South Koreans are co-nationals, born on either side of a long-standing physical border and political divide, underpins the sense

of competition between them, which South Korea's privileging of *t'albungmin* within the benefits system then heightens.

An additional factor underpinning the issues that *t'albungmin* face is the contradiction between South Korea's public commitment to ethnic nationalism and xenophobic sentiment towards foreign nationals, itself sustained by South Korean policies. Despite North and South Koreans being educated to see themselves as part of the same national unit, South Koreans consistently classify North Koreans as outsiders (Ha and Jang 2016; Kim 2016). Assumptions of ethnic and cultural homogeneity built into South Korean resettlement policy compound the issue, leading to the policy's failure to address issues of cultural difference (Kim 2016). Counter to South Korea's ostensibly inclusionary stance, both South Korean legislative terms (Chung 2008; Son 2016) and the resettlement system (Lankov 2006; Park 2016) also feed negative perceptions of *t'albungmin*. Meanwhile, South Korea's inconsistent application of descent in immigration and citizenship policies has ultimately reified differences of nationality amongst ethnic Koreans – for example, in granting work visas to ethnic Koreans from China (or *chosŏnjok*) but limiting their right to claim citizenship, while extending citizenship to almost all North Koreans – and entrenched the class-based status of groups like *chosŏnjok* as unskilled migrants positioned outside the nation (Chung 2020).

Class-based discrimination is a component of anti-migrant sentiment in South Korea, affecting ethnic Korean migrants and non-ethnic Korean migrants more broadly (Kim 2009; Choo 2016; Ha and Jang 2016; Kim 2016; Chung 2020). Moreover, South Korean policies are a contributing factor. First, assumptions built into the policies associate certain nationalities with particular socio-economic status, reifying class-based international hierarchies and often presenting migrants as homogeneously low-class (cf. Hunkler et al. 2022). For example, policies towards (predominantly Southeast Asian) migrant brides construct them as foreigners of low socio-economic status burdening the welfare system (Choo 2016; Kim 2016). Second, in common with Japan and Taiwan, mass anti-immigrant sentiment in South Korea is directed towards specific migrant groups and the perceived 'special privileges' they receive from the government which are seen as inaccessible to the local population, including educational opportunities and social welfare benefits (Chung 2020). Such reactions are not limited to East Asia, with welfare policies designed to facilitate social inclusion also paradoxically fueling exclusion of refugees in Europe (Boeri 2010).

This article extends this analysis, building on scholarship on *t'albungmin* resettlement policy to explicitly consider the implications of class-based anti-North Korean sentiment for *t'albungmin* integration. I consider the intersection of policy outcomes with *t'albungmin* status concerns and develop the idea that inclusionary policies facilitate exclusion, illustrating how South Korean resettlement policy has unintended, adverse effects on their socio-economic integration. Specifically, I focus on several aspects of resettlement policy – such as the evolution of legislative terminology which compounds a sense of 'victimhood' and standardised resettlement support which masks class variation amongst the *t'albungmin* population – and I trace how each has built barriers to *t'albungmin* integration. Moreover, I provide crucial contextualisation of the South Korean limited welfare environment to illuminate why *t'albungmin* resettlement support attracts claims of unfair advantage, negatively affecting their reception by South Korean citizens. By taking account of both policy and social status, I provide a nuanced account of

migrant integration which sheds new light on the role of state policies in inadvertently perpetuating social exclusion.

This article is based on engagement with approximately 130 *t'albungmin* during three years of ethnographic fieldwork in Seoul in 2013–15 and 2018–19. After initially meeting *t'albungmin* by volunteering with two NGOs, I used snowball sampling to broaden my networks. These contacts facilitated long-term participant observation with *t'albungmin* in multiple community groups, and in two *t'albungmin* schools as a voluntary English teacher. I also interacted with *t'albungmin* in informal social settings and as an English conversation partner. Due to the nature of these settings, the majority of my interlocutors were students or recent graduates, aged between eighteen and forty. I supplemented participant observation with 45 semi-structured interviews, conducted solely in Korean, in which my questions focused on how *t'albungmin* understood their social mobility, asking about their personal, educational and employment histories and their social networks.

In the first section, I juxtapose the evolution of official terminology, which has shaped prevailing images of North Koreans in South Korea, with changes in class composition of *t'albungmin* over time. I then illustrate how specific resettlement support measures shape and reify South Korean public perceptions of *t'albungmin* as a group. Finally, I situate South Korea's resettlement support policies for *t'albungmin* in the broader context of the country's development of social welfare. I argue that the eligibility of *t'albungmin* for resettlement support politicises them in a limited welfare society and masks their diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In doing so, it contributes to their marginalisation by fuelling discrimination on two contradictory grounds: due to the predominant perception that they are low-skilled and uneducated, and simultaneously due to their privileging amongst welfare beneficiaries. Ultimately, while resettlement policy includes pragmatic measures to facilitate the economic integration of *t'albungmin*, the more complex effects of this legislation may inadvertently hinder their social integration into South Korean society.

1. From defectors to refugees

Large-scale migration between North and South Korea began in the 1990s with the collapse of the North Korean economy, when North Koreans started leaving in search of food and work. Prior to this time, less than ten North Koreans were arriving to South Korea each year, largely privileged elites with the resources to evade state punishment and ultimately defect. At that time, the North Korean state maintained strict control over large parts of the economy, able to assign employment, mandate attendance, and restrict privileged access to food to the most loyal classes through the public distribution system. Consequently, North Koreans from all walks of life could rely on the state to feed them, albeit with the size of rations dependent on one's region and occupation. However, the North Korean public distribution system broke down after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of subsidies from China in 1991. Facing chronic food shortages, exacerbated by severe flooding and drought, North Koreans experienced extensive and devastating famine in the mid-1990s, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. Scholars also estimate that tens of thousands of North Koreans left for China during this period (Haggard and Noland 2011, 2).

North Koreans started to trickle into South Korea in steadily growing numbers from the mid-1990s, including Ch'unmi,⁴ aged 41, who had lived in South Korea for twelve years when we met. She first left North Korea for China in 1997, seeking paid work to support her husband and young son. Over the course of the next six years, she crossed back and forth on foot over the relatively porous border, earning money in China and personally delivering it to her family in North Korea. She later decided to leave for South Korea, as circumstances grew more insecure for undocumented migrants in China. China considers North Koreans to be illegal immigrants rather than refugees, repatriating them to North Korea if caught. Consequently, North Koreans must travel through China and seek South Korean consular support in a third country (typically Thailand). They are later flown to South Korea where they face an intensive security investigation and twelve weeks of resettlement education, also becoming subject to South Korean resettlement policy (see Table 1).

Since 1945, South Korean policy approaches towards border-crossers have been particularly sensitive to the political orientation of the ruling administration. For much of this period, during successive South Korean military dictatorships between 1962 and 1993, resettlement support fell under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence. Influenced by the broader international context of the Cold War, North Koreans were financially incentivised to share military secrets, rewarded with enough money to guarantee them a middle-to-upper-class lifestyle in the South (Chung 2008, 8).⁵ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and perhaps anticipating an influx of North Koreans, the newly elected civilian government in South Korea significantly amended resettlement support legislation. The 1993 act transferred authority to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and considerably reduced the value of support to 7 million won (approximately US\$6,000) in resettlement money and 8.4 million won (US\$7,200) for housing. The reduction in support led to an immediate and dramatic increase in the unemployment and poverty rates among *t'albungmin* until the act was reformulated in 1997.⁶ Concurrent with the 1993 shift in resettlement policy and the increasingly visible struggles of North Koreans in South Korea to find employment, a further factor playing into the public image of North Koreans at this time was growing international awareness of famine in North Korea, fostered by humanitarian campaigns publicising North Korean poverty and starvation. In addition to legislative terminology, the term *t'albukcha* ('North Korean escapee/defector') emerged in popular discourse in the mid-1990s.

Policy attitudes are reflected in official terminology, which has alternated between emphasising the patriotic act of defection to foregrounding the sense of North Koreans as victims (see Table 2). The 1993 legislation marked a further shift in emphasising 'protection' (*poho*), rather than 'relief' (*wõnho*). Despite the act retaining the term 'defector,' these factors both signalled a move away from the former image of a reward for war

Table 1. South Korean legislation covering North Korean resettlement.

Year Enacted	Name of Act (in English translation/transliterated Korean)	Responsible Ministry
1962	Special Relief Act for Patriots, Veterans, and North Korean defectors <i>Kukka yugongja mit wõllam kwisunja t'ũkpyõl wõnho põp</i>	Ministry of Defence
1993	Act on the Protection of North Korean Defector Compatriots <i>Kwisun pukhan tongp'o poho põp</i>	Ministry of Health & Welfare
1997	North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act <i>Pukhan it'al chumin õi poho mit chõngch'ak chiwõne kwanhan põp</i>	Ministry of Unification

Table 2. Legislative terms for North Korean border-crossers (Source: Author's own compilation).

Period of Usage	Term (in transliterated Korean)	Term (in English translation)
1945-1950	<i>wöllammin</i> <i>p'inanmin</i>	('defector to the south') (refugee' or 'evacuee')
1950-1962	<i>sirhyangmin</i> <i>isan kajok</i>	('displaced person') (separated families')
1962-1993	<i>kukka yugongja mit wöllam kwisunja</i>	('patriots, veterans & defectors')
1993-1997	<i>kwisun tongp'o</i>	('defector compatriots')
1997-	<i>it'al chumin</i>	('escaping residents', 'refugees')

NB The unofficial term *t'albukcha* ('escapee') emerged in the South Korean media in the mid-1990s. The South Korean government also adopted *saet'omin* ('new settler') between 2005 and 2008.²⁶

heroes to more closely resemble social welfare (Chung 2008). The current incarnation of resettlement support has reinforced this shift. Since 1997, this act has officially designated North Koreans as *pukhan it'al chumin* ('Residents Escaping North Korea'), or 'North Korean Refugees' in the official English translation, removing all mention of the agentive act of political defection and emphasising their status as victims in need of support.

Although my interlocutors occasionally used official terms such as *pukhan it'al chumin* or *saet'omin*, they more typically referred to themselves as *t'albungmin* or used euphemistic phrases including *uri kat'un saram* ('people like us'), *kohyang saram* ('hometown people'), and *kutchok saram* ('people from over there'). They rarely used *t'albukcha*; North Koreans are broadly opposed to the term, with my interlocutors describing the *-cha* character as a 'disrespectful' way to refer to them.⁷ Yet, while there is no consensus on how to refer to North Koreans resident in South Korea, *t'albukcha* remains in common usage among South Koreans, compounding the predominant sense of them as akin to refugees.

Since 1997, the standard support package for *t'albungmin* has consisted of a basic resettlement payment, subsidised housing, and educational and employment support. North Koreans typically arrive with few belongings, and the basic resettlement payment provides them with money to cover living costs as they establish themselves in South Korea. The exact value of the package depends on the year in which they enter South Korea and their family circumstances.⁸ Each *t'albungmin* family is allocated up to 16 million won (\$13,800) to use as a housing deposit, while *t'albungmin* are eligible for priority provision of public housing issued on a long-term loan basis, for which they pay a heavily subsidised rate (MOU 2020a, 30). The educational and employment components of resettlement support are designed to meet the evolving needs of the growing *t'albungmin* population.

There have been distinct shifts in North–South Korean migration over time. The majority of *t'albungmin* now travel overland to South Korea via China, and since 2002 women have outnumbered men, now constituting over 70 per cent of North Koreans in the South (MOU 2020b).⁹ Moreover, the primarily elite defectors arriving before the 1990s have been replaced by North Koreans coming from a much wider range of socio-economic backgrounds. However, these statements elide other dimensions of the shift in composition of *t'albungmin* which relate to increasing marketisation in North Korea over the last three decades.

The elite North Koreans who constituted the majority of defectors prior to the 1990s were members of the highest social strata in North Korean society, as determined by the

state-imposed *söngbun* ('social status') system. Since the 1940s, this starkly delineated social-political hierarchy has classified every North Korean over the age of 17 according to their level of perceived political loyalty, theoretically determining every aspect of their quality of life from permitted employment, to benefits and housing, to the size of their food rations.¹⁰ However, rations had dried up for the majority of the population by the early 1990s and, in the wake of the collapse of the state-controlled economy, there was a proliferation of informal 'black market' and tacitly accepted 'grey market' activity. Initially driven by desperation and hunger, marketisation was able to spread due to limited state punishment against transgressors and enabled North Koreans to access alternative food sources and generate personal income, sometimes for the first time.

Although good *söngbun* is still required for bureaucratic careers in North Korea,¹¹ *söngbun* no longer plays the deterministic role affecting one's quality of life that it did between the 1960s and 1990s, owing to loosened state control over the economy and increasingly non-elite accumulation of economic capital. *T'albungmin* who worked as businessmen in North Korea report that bad *söngbun* did not significantly restrict them; North Koreans are now able to accumulate significant capital through private enterprise or by funnelling resources into the country from China or South Korea (Lankov et al. 2017, 56–57). They can then bribe officials to overcome certain restrictions related to poor *söngbun* (Collins 2012, 5). Even as *söngbun* remains nominally influential in North Koreans' lives, the contemporary plurality of financially solvent economic actors, able to make economic decisions that impact their lives, destabilises the notion that *söngbun* retains its former importance.

The decoupling of government-ascribed social-political status, in the form of *söngbun*, from one's ability to generate an income has also impacted the *t'albungmin* population. Over time, the defection process itself has become subject to the same marketisation forces extending through North Korea, evolving into a more routinised (and, crucially, more expensive) system of brokers and assorted middlemen, including missionaries and NGO workers. The socio-economic backgrounds of *t'albungmin* have diversified as a wider cross-section of North Koreans have gained access to economic capital, providing them with means to gain influence and override 'bad *söngbun*.' Consequently, not only were elite defectors largely replaced in the 1990s by North Koreans escaping starvation but, I argue, a more recent shift favours *t'albungmin* with the financial resources to broker their way out of North Korea – a feature common to other migration environments (e.g. Boeyink and Falisse 2022). Yet, South Korean terminology for *t'albungmin* masks these differences in their socio-economic backgrounds, instead predominantly emphasising a sense of victimhood.

2. Masking classed backgrounds

Although *t'albungmin* from diverse class backgrounds now journey to South Korea, resettlement support measures shape South Korean public perceptions and promote a collective image of *t'albungmin* as low class. *T'albungmin* typically arrive in South Korea lacking the education and skills necessary to compete with South Koreans and become fully integrated into the South Korean economy. In response to their mismatched skillset, the South Korean government offers educational and employment incentives, including an allowance for undertaking vocational training, and financial

rewards for remaining in the same workplace for at least six months.¹² Thus, on one hand, these policy measures are a pragmatic response to aid their economic integration, not least because of the heightened risk that North Koreans could potentially become an underclass in South Korea and remain dependent on social welfare. The North and South Korean economies differ significantly,¹³ while the job prospects of *t'albungmin* are further hindered by stark variation in educational standards and bureaucratic processes, and even the expectation that they adopt South Korean accents (Hough 2022). On the other hand, the nature of specific resettlement support measures contributes to the image of *t'albungmin* as uneducated and unskilled, fuelling discrimination which impacts on their social integration. Moreover, by masking the classed elements of their backgrounds that can ultimately aid their integration, these policy measures promote a false image of resettlement as an endeavour based solely on individual effort and hard work, contributing to the demonisation of *t'albungmin* who struggle to integrate, based on the incorrect assumption that they are personally at fault. In this section, I use excerpts from relatively privileged *t'albungmin* to build a picture of how well-intentioned resettlement support measures have negatively impacted their integration by feeding class-based discrimination.

Regardless of their class background, most, if not all, *t'albungmin* need some degree of support to adjust to life in South Korea. For example, Ch'ölchin was a 32-year-old man who had attended university in North Korea. Yet, despite his relatively privileged background, he elaborated on the complex effects of being an object of support when he said, '[South Koreans] have this idea that North Korean people have to be helped. Of course, we generally do need help, but that does not mean every person needs it.' While Ch'ölchin was unusually explicit in articulating this position, other interlocutors corroborated his viewpoint when they emphasised to me that, despite wide disparity in their needs, South Koreans often look down on them as low-class, unskilled, uneducated, and requiring government support to survive, an image fed by the type of support for which they are eligible. For example, the emphasis on educational support within resettlement policy signals that *t'albungmin* are generally in need of education, whereas 17.1 per cent of *t'albungmin* had attended either university or technical and professional colleges in North Korea (MOU 2020b).

The predominance of monetary incentives within the welfare provision system implies that *t'albungmin* are solely driven by economic motivations (Lankov 2006). Moreover, the structure of the resettlement system feeds the impression that *t'albungmin* are largely unskilled and unreliable, requiring financial inducement to, for example, arrive at work on time (Park 2016, 8). For example, Hyangmi was a 34-year-old woman who had lived in South Korea for three years. She had attended a technical college in North Korea, training and working in accounting, before leaving for China where she developed fluency in Chinese and continued doing similar work. Despite years of professional experience, she struggled to find work in South Korea, attributing her difficulties to the perception that North Koreans were ignorant. Her suspicions were seemingly confirmed when she was hired after she started saying she was Chinese. Other *t'albungmin* also told me they suspected that this perception of their ignorance, more than an objective assessment of their abilities, fed prejudice against them and hindered their chances of employment.

Many *t'albungmin* also suspect that South Korean employers and co-workers discriminate against them if they are known to be from North Korea.¹⁴ For instance, one man recounted his experience of looking for part-time work when he was a student, and having all his applications rejected, even for low-skilled work as a waiter. He came from a privileged background and had attended university in North Korea, currently attended a good university in South Korea, and otherwise had a strong CV. He slowly realised that his rejections likely related to being from North Korea, which was evident from his North Korean educational credentials and identifiable accent. In acknowledgement of this type of discrimination, and in an effort to combat it, the government has incentivised South Korean companies to employ *t'albungmin* by offering a temporary 50 per cent wage subsidy.¹⁵

The South Korean government credits high investment in their employment support schemes with reducing unemployment from the highs seen in the 1990s (MOU 2015, 3; 2020b). However, while the unemployment rate amongst *t'albungmin* is falling, it remains significantly higher than the South Korean average, reflecting their employment difficulties.¹⁶ The quality of their employment also continues to raise concerns among support workers, given that *t'albungmin* tend to be employed in industries suffering from labour shortages that offer poor working conditions (Kim 2011). Thus, despite government policy initiatives,¹⁷ *t'albungmin* continue to face difficulties finding secure and regular employment, working longer average hours for less average pay than South Koreans.¹⁸ *T'albungmin* most frequently told me that they hid their North Korean roots due to fear of discrimination, itself fed by South Korean ignorance of their diverse class backgrounds, despite *t'albungmin* arriving in the country from across the social spectrum.

Public depictions of *t'albungmin* as uniformly unskilled and poverty-stricken not only fail to represent their classed backgrounds and differing abilities, but dominant discourses omit any acknowledgement that integration is generally easier for North Koreans from privileged backgrounds. For example, Park Yeonmi is a prominent *t'albungmin*, known for speaking publicly about North Korean human rights issues. Since first appearing on South Korean television in 2012, she has gained an international profile, giving speeches in both Korean and English, and publishing an autobiography with Penguin Random House in 2015. She is championed in the domestic and international media for her achievements since leaving North Korea, and many *t'albungmin* cited her as an example of someone like them who had made a success of themselves. However, they also showed awareness of the risks of taking her as a representative example of what any *t'albungmin* could potentially achieve if they simply made enough of an effort; specifically, it creates unrealistic expectations by failing to take her privileged background into account. In the words of one of my interlocuters, it is 'poison' to suggest that *t'albungmin* will succeed if they simply work hard enough, because this ignores the structural barriers they face. In Park's case, her father was a government official, while she has spoken publicly about wearing imported clothes and her mother owning a Chanel handbag before they left North Korea. Arriving in a country where *t'albungmin* are encouraged to assimilate by becoming indistinguishable from the average South Korean, to the extent of feeling pressure to speak in South Korean accents, Park most likely possessed the education, adaptability, and social skills – in other words, the social and cultural capital – to ease her integration into South Korean society. However, this emphasis on integration via assimilation combines with

a discourse of meritocracy that emphasises individual responsibility, ultimately placing more pressure on incomers themselves, who are personally blamed for not trying hard enough if they struggle to adapt.

3. Deservingness and productive welfare

Local resentment of incoming migrants or refugees is often rooted in perceived inequitable distribution of national economic resources (Chambers 1986; Boeri 2010). Similarly, *t'albungmin* were keenly aware that the relative generosity of their resettlement packages negatively affected perceptions of them as a group, repeatedly describing to me the feeling that South Koreans implicitly judge them as undeserving of state support. However, in countries which promote an assimilationist and individualist model of integration, migrants face additional criticism if characterised as failing to make sufficient personal effort, sometimes simply on the basis that they are unemployed, which compounds the sense of them as undeserving. Yet, this criticism masks class-based discrimination given that migrants' social and cultural capital – in other words, their class background rather than individual effort – is often the key factor facilitating their eventual employment.

At first glance, the perception of *t'albungmin* as undeserving appears incongruent with official terminology that emphasises their victimhood as 'escapees' and 'refugees.' Yet, increasing numbers of North Koreans started arriving in South Korea at a time of social and economic uncertainty, soon after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Economic restructuring in the wake of the crisis has been accompanied by increasingly prominent discourses of deservingness, after both state and non-state actors started promoting productive welfarism as official policy (Presidential Secretariat 2000; Hwang 2006). To take resettlement support as an example, in one sense removing entry barriers to education and incentivising certain training and employment choices are pragmatic measures to increase the financial security of *t'albungmin* and ultimately reduce the likelihood of their prolonged dependence on social welfare. Many *t'albungmin* rely on this support to gain the skills and education to fully participate in the South Korean economy. However, from another perspective, training and employment incentives are evidence of South Korean state implementation of productive welfarism within resettlement support, mandating work in return for financial support. Moreover, widespread application of the logic of productive welfarism since that time has resulted in intensified discrimination between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' subjects (Song 2009).

South Korea was severely affected by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and agreed to take a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, in exchange for instituting significant financial reforms. These measures increased flexibility in the labour market in the face of increasing competition from developing economies. The overhaul of laws that formerly protected labour rights resulted in job insecurity and intensified competition for jobs in the public sector, conditions which continue to the present day. Unemployment rose from 2.6 per cent in 1997–7 per cent in 1998 (World Development Indicators 2020), highlighting the absence of a social safety net and the urgent need for welfare reform. What South Koreans call the IMF crisis was thus a catalyst for major social change.

In common with other East Asian 'developmental states' which have prioritised economic growth over social protection, South Korea has historically spent little on social

welfare, relying instead on traditions of family support, high rates of employment, and social insurance issued through the workplace. Prior to the 1997 crisis, there was little public call for increased social security in an environment where self-reliance was encouraged and the notion of state provision of welfare as a guaranteed social right was weakly developed (Goodman and White 1998, 14). However, the crisis significantly shifted public consensus as South Koreans increasingly called for an expansion of state welfare provision (Shin 2000, 93–95, 103–104), and over the next decade the South Korean government instituted widespread reforms.

Prominent among these welfare reforms was the South Korean government’s introduction of a public assistance scheme designed to guarantee a minimum standard of living to low-income earners. Implemented in October 2000, the national basic livelihood security (*kich’o saenghwal sugŭp taesang*, or NBLS) scheme is a means-tested form of productive welfare raising claimants above the poverty line if they engage in training and job-seeking activities. This scheme marked a turning point as the first time the South Korean government recognised welfare as a social right and acknowledged its responsibility to protect people from poverty (Jung 2009, 60). More generous than previous livelihood protection initiatives, NBLS has both allowed the (previously ineligible) able-bodied of working age to claim social support for the first time and redefined the official poverty line based on the minimum cost of living (Jo 2008, 198). However, South Korean public expenditure on social welfare remains amongst the lowest of OECD member states, at just 11.1 per cent of GDP in 2018 (OECD 2020b), despite a poverty rate of 43.8 per cent amongst South Korea’s elderly,¹⁹ and youth unemployment hovering around 11 per cent since the IMF crisis (OECD 2020c). Strict criteria limit low-income earners’ ability to access public benefits (Jo 2008; Jung 2009), suggesting that the consistently low proportion of NBLS recipients does not accurately reflect current levels of need for public assistance.

T’albungmin are clearly entering a society where social welfare support is relatively limited. Yet, as South Korean citizens, *t’albungmin* whose earnings fall below a certain income threshold are eligible for public assistance,²⁰ in addition to the resettlement

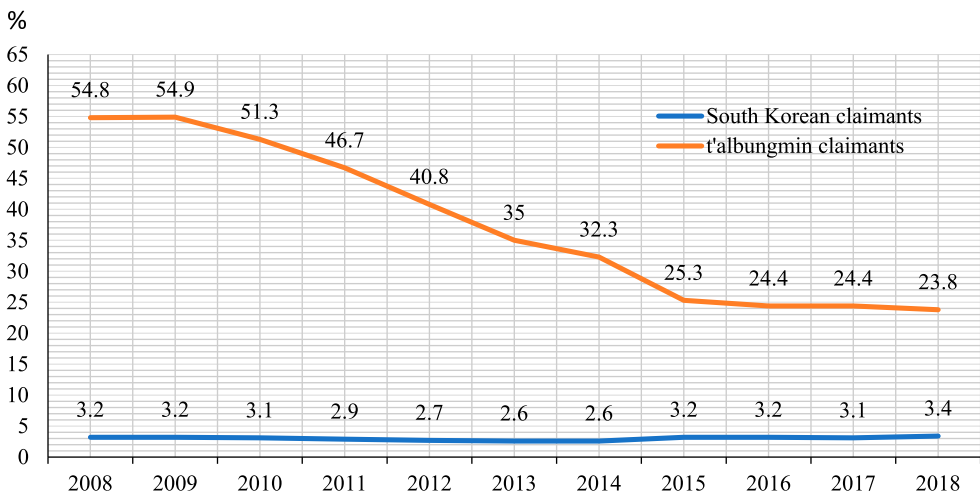


Figure 1. Proportion of *t’albungmin* and South Koreans claiming NBLS low-income support (Source: MHW 2020; MOU 2020b).

support they receive as North Koreans.²¹ A large proportion of *t'albungmin* claim NBS (see Figure 1) and are more likely than South Koreans to meet the criteria for eligibility, given that the majority arrive without significant assets and a proportion also lack dependents or family members in the country. Thus, *t'albungmin* are not only politicised in the context of North–South Korean relations but also in a South Korean welfare environment that depicts social benefits as a ringfenced resource for only the most ‘deserving’ citizens – defined as either the poorest of the poor, as indicated by strict eligibility criteria, or as those engaging in labour in exchange for government support, according to the notion of productive welfare.

T'albungmin spoke in ways that highlighted their awareness of discourses which depicted them as undeserving of social support. In conversation, they regularly referred to the country’s high elderly poverty rate, suggesting that as welfare beneficiaries they felt implicit comparison to the elderly as a group. Many people agreed in sentiment with Yŏngjŏl, a 29-year-old university student who had left North Korea four years before, when he said, ‘I feel that South Koreans don’t consider us the right target for support. Here it’s only for people living in real difficulty ... people who really can’t work, like the homeless or disabled.’ Another man, Chisŏng, aged 35, added:

If people saw someone like me receiving government support ... they would think of me as a bad person because I have the capacity to work. They don’t try to understand [why] the government has given us this huge opportunity to improve ourselves. But it’s true that the situation is unfair because South Koreans don’t have this opportunity, so right now we can’t help that some of them will not view us positively.

Both Yŏngjŏl and Chisŏng felt open to criticism that they were undeserving on the grounds that they were of working-age, highlighting their awareness of the logic (if not the name) of productive welfarism. Consequently, one inadvertent effect of resettlement support is that *t'albungmin* anticipate negative judgment if they are perceived to be unfairly privileged over other low-income earners, particularly in the current welfare-limited environment.

North Koreans’ eligibility for educational support is a further factor which can attract criticism, given the symbolic importance of education in South Korean society. Education serves as one of the most sensitive social registers, with educational achievement historically acting as a means of maintaining or improving one’s social position (Sorensen 1994; Abelmann 2003, 100). Yet, levels of educational achievement in North and South Korea differ starkly, with university attendance restricted to North Korean elites whereas the majority of young South Koreans attend university. In recognition of difficulties facing *t'albungmin* due to differences between the North and South Korean education systems, the South Korean government extends tertiary educational support to *t'albungmin* under the age of 35 who have graduated from high school in either North or South Korea.²² These benefits include preferential admission to university, an exemption from the College Scholastic Aptitude Test required of South Korean university applicants, and a tuition fee reduction or waiver (MOU 2020a, 109–111).²³

It is often only due to these educational concessions that *t'albungmin* are able to attend university at all, as most would struggle to pass the college entrance exam or afford the fees. At the same time, a number of *t'albungmin* conveyed to me their sense that South Koreans did not view them as legitimately deserving of such levels of support, while the

perception that they are profiting from an inequitable welfare system compounds their sensitivity when talking about benefits in front of South Koreans. For example, Ŭnhyang was a university student in her mid-twenties who had lived in South Korea for ten years, who went so far as to say, ‘They [South Koreans] think we are stealing their taxes, so they don’t like it and we can’t talk about it.’ She continued, ‘People haven’t been openly hostile but if I say that I couldn’t have come to university without a government scholarship, they get upset and ... some say they face reverse discrimination because they have to pay fees and we don’t.’ Just as Chisŏng said above, the South Koreans made little attempt to emphasise or show understanding of Ŭnhyang’s situation. Exchanges like these hinted at the difficulty of talking to South Koreans about the sensitive issue of government support, particularly in the context of expensive tuition fees and high unemployment among South Korean youths who were largely ineligible for government support.

Beyond the significant financial support that *t’albungmin* receive towards their education, preferential university admission is a further sensitive element of resettlement policy. Many *t’albungmin* I met viewed a university degree as a basic requirement for any kind of secure employment, particularly given increased job insecurity and casualisation since the IMF crisis.²⁴ However, while unemployed graduates have displaced school leavers in less-skilled jobs, competition for the best universities has intensified. Scholars suggest that tertiary education has come to function as a mechanism for class reproduction (Koo 2007; Grubb et al. 2009), with parents’ capacity to pay for tutoring strongly influencing which university their children subsequently attend.²⁵ This poses obvious difficulties to *t’albungmin*, who – while they come from varied class backgrounds – largely arrive with limited financial capital and without access to resources accumulated over multiple generations, all of whom are the first- or second-generation of their families in South Korea. Through educational support, the South Korean government thus offers *t’albungmin* a means of improving their social status. However, it is also clear how their educational benefits – including preferential admission to highly ranked universities – could generate hostility amongst the South Korean public, worsening discrimination which already constitutes a significant obstacle to their social integration.

Conclusion

Despite a lack of consensus about how to define class categories in South Korea, this article establishes that ‘classical’ notions – of capital and class markers (Bourdieu 1986), and of the relationship between resources and life chances (Weber 1978) – do provide a means of understanding the position of *t’albungmin* in South Korean society, and a frame of reference to use to speak about social class and migration. By directly affecting the material circumstances of *t’albungmin*, resettlement support influences their access to resources and their class position in the Weberian sense as determined by their position in the market. Resettlement support also contributes to the ascribed social class of *t’albungmin*, by shaping dominant perceptions and markers of *t’albungmin* which are interpreted in particular ways by themselves and others. Moreover, the experiences of *t’albungmin* largely align with the broader literature, with access to capital affecting who has been able to leave North Korea, and, I have suggested, socio-economic background influencing ease of integration in South Korea.

In this article I have analysed the intersection of government policy and social status to argue that South Korean resettlement policy promotes an inherently contradictory image of *t'albungmin* – as both poverty-stricken victims and undeserving beneficiaries of state support – which negatively affects their prospects for social mobility in South Korea. The strong shift in official terminology from defectors to refugees since the 1990s has contributed to a framing of *t'albungmin* that emphasises their vulnerability, passivity, and victimhood. Yet, even in the immediate aftermath of the North Korean famine, this inaccurate image masked the varied socio-economic backgrounds of *t'albungmin*. At the same time, by positioning North Korean incomers within the South Korean welfare system, resettlement policy presents *t'albungmin* as one group amongst many in need of support – yet unique in meeting eligibility criteria for support despite being of working age – all of whom are competing for limited resources. In doing so, this policy contributes to discrimination against them in a limited welfare environment.

One consequence of policy measures which promote an image of all *t'albungmin* as inherently disadvantaged and mask differences in their socio-economic backgrounds is that there is little recognition that integration is generally easier for *t'albungmin* from privileged backgrounds, with education and social skills acquired in North Korea constituting social and cultural capital that can facilitate social integration upon arrival in South Korea. Instead, South Korea continues to be seen as a meritocracy where integration is solely achieved through personal effort. When a select few *t'albungmin* do manage to seemingly integrate, the masking of their privilege can contribute to more intense discrimination being felt by the majority who continue to struggle. Although these tensions are rooted in the unique co-nationalist context of the Korean peninsula, the masking of migrant class variation and the blaming of incomers for failure to integrate is not limited to South Korea but also seen in other countries which promote assimilationist and individualist models of integration. This case thus contributes to improving our understanding of the role of state policies in inadvertently perpetuating social exclusion of the migrants they are ostensibly designed to support.

Notes

1. *T'albungmin* (literally, 'person/citizen who has escaped the north') is a relatively neutral term which many North Koreans use to refer to themselves after they become South Korean citizens. I have transliterated Korean words according to the McCune-Reischauer romanisation system.
2. In this article, I use the term 'resettlement' as used in South Korean resettlement policy, to refer to the act of settling down in a new place of residence.
3. Throughout this article, I refer to the socio-economic backgrounds of *t'albungmin* in North Korea (comprising both their state-allocated socio-political status and their access to economic capital) and their perceived social status after arrival in South Korea.
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. For example, a pilot who defected in 1983 received a payment of 1.2 billion won, constituting 480 times the average South Korean income at that time (Chung 2008, 7–8).
6. Following the 1993 policy change, unemployment jumped from 17.6 per cent to 53.1 per cent, while the proportion earning average monthly wages of above 1 million won fell from 47.1 to 13.6 per cent (Chung 2008).

7. The strength of North Koreans' hostility towards '*t'albukcha*' suggests to me the possibility that it also evokes the predominantly negative images of North Koreans that were circulating in the 1990s when this term emerged.
8. In 2020, the first *t'albungmin* in a family to arrive received a basic resettlement payment of 8 million won (approximately \$6,900), distributed in four payments spread over their first year in the country. Subsequent members of the same family who arrive in the South receive a reduced basic resettlement payment.
9. Both push and pull factors have contributed to this trend. Although every North Korean has a state-assigned job from which absence is punished, leniency towards married women (who are legally permitted to be housewives) has translated into high rates of female engagement in private enterprise, allowing women to accumulate significant economic capital (Lankov and Kim 2014). Circumstances in China also favour women: most notably, a gender imbalance resulting from the one-child policy has led to high demand for North Korean wives.
10. Initially presented as social restructuring along communist lines, *söngbun* ostensibly revolutionised pre-1945 Korean class structure by empowering the formerly marginalised (Collins 2012). Yet, it quickly emerged as a means of controlling the North Korean population, with only members of the elite 'core class' enjoying privileged access to state resources.
11. One's exact *söngbun* is rarely known because this information is not publicly accessible. Consequently, most North Koreans simply deduce that they either have 'good *söngbun*' or 'bad *söngbun*,' based on opportunities and restrictions they face throughout their lives. For example, my interlocutor Ch'unmi said her government-assigned job, performing quality-control checks in an iron ore mine, indicated that she had 'bad *söngbun*.'
12. For example, in 2020 *t'albungmin* who worked continuously in one workplace for between six months to three years were rewarded with payments of up to 7.5 million won (\$6,620) (MOU 2020a, 32).
13. Economic production in North Korea is concentrated in mining and agriculture, with approximately 60 per cent of North Koreans working in industrial production (Bank of Korea 2015; CIA 2019a). In contrast, the export-oriented South Korean economy specialises in electronics and telecommunications, with over 70 per cent of the population employed in service industries (CIA 2019b).
14. For example, in a 2016 National Human Rights Commission survey, 34.4 per cent of 480 *t'albungmin* respondents reported that they had been discriminated against by employers or co-workers due to their North Korean origins (NHRCK 2017).
15. This wage subsidy has since been abolished for newly arrived *t'albungmin* but remains in place for the approximately 27,000 *t'albungmin* who arrived in South Korea prior to November 28, 2014. Employers who hire (pre-2014) *t'albungmin* employees receive up to 500,000 won (\$430) as a monthly subsidy to cover half of their wages, for up to four years (MOU 2020a, 90).
However, a 2011 study of 100 companies with *t'albungmin* employees found that the single most influential incentive for hiring them was the government wage subsidy. This incentive exerted downward pull on average wages, by limiting the maximum wage they could be paid while taking advantage of the scheme to 1 million won (Kim 2011).
16. The unemployment rate among *t'albungmin* was 6.3 per cent in 2019, compared to the South Korean average of 3.7 per cent (MOU 2020b; World Development Indicators 2020).
17. In fact, one element of resettlement policy itself hinders integration by exerting downward pressure on their wages; specifically, the fact that *t'albungmin* are only eligible for state financial aid until their income surpasses the minimum cost of living – according to the current system, a *t'albungmin* working part-time and claiming a government subsidy to cover the minimum cost of living could earn more than a full-time employee (Park and Kim 2007).
18. 29 per cent of those surveyed in 2019 worked as temporary or day workers, compared to 23 per cent of South Koreans; moreover, the average monthly wage of 2.047 million won (\$1,808) for *t'albungmin* was 596,000 won less than the South Korean average of 2.643

million won (\$2,335), despite them working an average of 46.5 h per week compared to the South Korean average of 37.8 h (Korea Hana Foundation 2020, 50, 51, 55).

19. South Korea's elderly poverty rate is the highest in the OECD (OECD 2020a). The poverty rate is defined as the proportion of people whose income is less than half of median household income.
20. The monthly social security payment for a single person in 2020 amounted to 527,158 won (\$465) (MHW 2020).
21. Additional funds are available for *t'albungmin* who are severely disabled or chronically ill, elderly, or in single-parent families (MOU 2020a, 31).
22. If required, *t'albungmin* under the age of 24 are eligible to attend mainstream middle or high schools to earn the accreditations necessary to attend university (MOU 2020a).
23. *T'albungmin* students receive a tuition fee waiver for state universities and a 50 per cent reduction on tuition fees at private universities (MOU 2020a).
24. Since the financial crisis, the number of irregular workers has increased – generally, temporary workers earning 60 per cent of regular wages with no recourse to benefits or unionisation – who constituted more than half the active labour force in 1999 and the overwhelming majority of the newly employed (Koo 2007, 5–7).
25. According to the Korean National Statistics Office, 74.8 per cent of students in 2019 participated in private education, with average monthly expenditure of 429,000 won (\$379) per student (Statistics Korea 2020).
26. Briefly adopted in response to North Koreans' complaints about *t'albukcha*, North Koreans also criticised the term *saet'omin* for being too euphemistic, eliding their specificity as ethnic Koreans (Haggard 2011).

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