

***Ordinary Interaction and Disconnection
- Relationships Between South Koreans and North Korean Refugees -***

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Abstract

This research focuses on what social relationship they form in the ‘contact zone’ where they interact with South Koreans and the social implication this has. The contact zone this study takes notice of is the ‘work place’, specifically the aspects between these people, and the attitudes of South Koreans on the refugees. And this study concentrates on the changes of the aspects of contact when they are moved from the ‘work place’ to places other than ‘the place’. During the ‘work hours’, everyday interaction occurs naturally, but ‘after work hours’ ordinary disconnection happens too nonchalantly. To conclude, we can’t assert that the testimony of the refugees analyzed here represents all the refugees, but through their testimony, we could figure out, though indirectly, the barren awareness order of South Korean society on the refugees. The dual attitude of South Korean society on these can’t be fully corrected only with the improvements of the economic indicators. Especially, inattention or expulsion of South Korean society reveals this society’s sterile democratic foundation.

Keywords: Ordinary Interaction, Ordinary Disconnection, North Korean Refugee, Contact Zone, Work Place

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I. Introduction

Professor Catherine Moon, the first Korea Chair in Brookings Research Institute, once pointed out, “How can we tell North Koreans that democracy is excellent, as long as the North Korean Refugees remain on the fringe of Korean society?”(Kyoung-hyang Daily, June, 6, 2014). What she was trying to announce was that while it is crucial to identify in which status 30,000 refugees are located in South Korea in dealing with the subject of the unification of Two Koreas, actually most of them are segregated and isolated outside the mainstream, which is a pungent comment.

As of Nov., 2016, North Korean Refugees in South Korea exceeded 30,000 and some of them became a government official and a Congressman. Yet, the majority of them have experienced the discrimination and isolation. In this situation, what national identity the refugees will form will demonstrate the democratic standard of Seoul society. Furthermore, it will be the issue of influencing the two Koreas’ internal integration after the political unification. This study begins with the kind of critical mind.

According to the factual survey on the settlement of the North Korean Refugees in 2016 by Korea Hana Foundation, the contentment level in South Korean life of the refugees was 67%, which increased by 4% in 2015 and their employment-population ratio was 55%, and their unemployment rate was 5.1%. Especially, the refugees’ employment-population ratio increased constantly to reach the better economic state(Korea Hana Foundation, 2016a) and through this I could identify that their standing inside South Korean society is improving. Still, the difficulty and the problem of social adjustment they confront leave something inexplicable, apart from the amelioration of economic indicators.

Then, what kinds of social relationship do the refugees construct with South Koreans. This research focuses on what social relationship they form in the ‘contact zone’ where they interact with South Koreans and the social implication this has. The contact zone this study takes notice of is the ‘work place’, specifically the aspects between these people, and the attitudes of South Koreans on the refugees. And this study concentrates on the changes of the aspects of contact when they are moved from the ‘work place’ to places other than ‘the place’.

If we look into the aspects of interaction revealed in the ‘work place’ between the refugees and South Koreans, then we can easily find the dual looks. If we pay heed to the character of the contact zone called ‘work place’, we can notice the dual aspects of contact between them during the ‘work hours’ and ‘after work hours’: the interaction and the disconnection. If we chase the answer for this problem, we might analyze the root cause of the dual attitude of the South Korean society toward the refugees and the reasons which produce or reproduce this attitude.

II. Methodology

This study defines the ‘work place’ where the interaction and the disconnection between the refugees and South Koreans arise as the contact zone, and examines the relationship between those people who construct social relationship in it focused on the spatial trait and the dual attitude of South Koreans on the refugees. For this

method, one of the researchers executed the in-depth interviews twice during the period from early July, 2016 to early April, 2017 on two refugees, and during the same period, performed thrice of in-depth interviews on the government authorities who had helped the refugees with settlement in South Korean society.

In this research, the age group and the sex of the interviewees amounted to the mid-40s and male, and they entered South Korean society in the mid-2000s. They didn't want to reveal their hometowns and identities except that they graduated from middle school. So, we are marking them as A and B in this study. In addition to this socio-demographic background, they had the common characteristics: they changed their works several times and they had difficulty in adjusting themselves in the previous works.

In the meantime, in this research, we executed the in-depth interview on the persons concerned who had helped three refugees with the settlement in South Korean society so as to examine closely the natures of the relationship between the refugees and South Koreans revealed in the 'work place' and social connotation they contain. Additionally, these three concerned kept intimate relationship with one of the researchers, so they have told the researcher the tough reality the refugees suffer and their serious opinions respecting the reasons apart from the in-depth interview. These three put forward the objective views concerning how the aspects of the interaction between the refugees and South Koreans in the 'work place' change from the 'work hours' to 'after work hours' and why that kind of change take place.

This study reviews how are the aspects of the contact between the refugees and South Koreans in the contact zone called 'work place' and what kind of attitude South Koreans possess toward the refugees and analyzes in what context these aspects are made up. To be more specific, this research is to search the root cause of the dual attitude of South Korean society to the refugees and the ultimate cause which produce or reproduce these aspects.

However, this study also has the same problems as the other ones over the settlement process of the refugees in South Korean society. To be more in detail, the problem of the generalizing the experiences of the few refugees, and the problem that the refugees themselves don't expose their inner minds sufficiently. Accordingly, in this research, to complement the uppermost limit, we performed the in-depth interview on the three persons associated who had helped the refugees to settle in South Korean society with ample sense of the responsibility. We could capture the lives, patterns of behavior, experiences and memories of the refugees in the 'work place' in depth as well as the opinions of the persons concerned.

III. Ordinary Interaction and Disconnection in the 'Work Place'

1. Interaction during the 'work hours'

According to Korea Hana Foundation's social integration survey on the refugees conducted in 2016, those who said they had no experiences of being segregated or ignored (the cases of practical discrimination or disregard, verbally and physically) are estimated to be 75.5%. On the contrary, the same survey shows that the percentage of those who answered that they had any experience of discrimination or

disregard dropped 0.9% as 24.4% compared with that of 2015(Korea Hana Foundation, 2016b). To review only with the figure, we can distinctly confirm that the attitude of South Koreans on the refugees has been improved. However, we researchers found it hard to accept these investigation findings. Because so the great majority of the refugees with whom the researcher had contacted up to nowadays confessed that they had been ignored in the 'work place', and the 'community' simply because they were the refugees.

Having the question about which standard support the reduction of the experiences of the segregation or the disregard toward the refugees, the researcher met the three involved who had helped the refugees with their settlement in South Korean society upon the opportunity of the national research institute project and asked if the discrimination on these people had really decreased. To the question, concerned(C) who worked for the local adjustment center(Hana Center below) which supports the incipient settlement of the refugees replied that "apparently the diminution of the segregation in the 'work place' seems to be genuine". The concerned(b) beside him gave a similar answer as well. He expounded that "the segregation to the refugees seemed to have decreased dramatically, for the government authorities ceaselessly urged the company not to discriminate them".

In early July, 2016, the research met the two refugees with whom he had usually been on good terms, and asked if the frequency of "their being segregated or ignored diminished". The mid-forty refugee(A) responded that the frequency of "publicly using disregarding words in the work or saying that's because he is from North Korea" noticeably diminished. And the mid-forty refugee(B) also said that "in these days those who will be seen odder person inversely if they openly ignore us, so they don't dare to do so".

When I first came to work, they ignored too much. What had you done in North Korea without learning this? I came to employ you inevitably, for I can't find another worker easily nowadays. Otherwise, I wouldn't have recruited you. They treated like these. In these days, things became favorable to us compared with those of those days.(the refugee A)

Meanwhile, the research grew to know the fact that another researcher with whom he picked acquaintance during the process he went through for the project of Ministry of National Unification came from North Korea. Curious about what kind of person he might be who is the same young age group as him, he examined the article of his interview in the media.

The North Korean refugees come to confront the severe circumstances of unemployment and impoverishment. ... The situations of the refugees have been getting dreadful as to go beyond our imagination. They sought after their motherland and freedom, but thousands of them already 'escaped from South Korea'. And not a few of them are considering going back to North Korea and committing suicide. That is the unknown truth.(Daily Korea, 2016/8/22)

In early Jan, 2017, when he was preoccupied with the article of the professor from North Korea, he came to attend an overnight workshop with the three concerned who

had helped the refugees to settle in South Korean society, having met previously, taking the opportunity of the project for the national research institute. During the time, the researcher asked if they happened to know the researcher from North Korea.

Of course, the great majority of the refugees will not disclose lies absolutely. Still, You should not accept all their words as truths. As for my experience of helping them with settlement, I think it evidently true that they are better treated than before in the 'work place'. I don't know if he belong to those who interview with the press in overstatement saying they live a tough life. But a great number of the refugees do so.(concerned(b)

In early Jan, 2017, the researcher has a highly serious conversation with the three concerned after finishing the official schedule of a workshop. "Although I have served them to settle in our society at a close distance, I can't grasp them sometimes. To hear them speak, they say they are always disregarded. I think their coworkers are very considerate to them, though. I find it hard to descry which words to talk to them" said the concerned(A). This leaves something to ponder over.

The concerned(B) followed him. "I occasionally think these people desire too much. One day, I had a dispute with them on an analogous issue". Those concerned agreed with the argument that the refugees have a hard time living their lives in South Korean society and that to some extent they are ignored especially in the 'work place' by South Koreans. But they elucidated that kind of trend is ameliorated considerably. "In fact, in the space called 'work place' even South Koreans are not on good terms with everyone. And those who are from prestigious universities and splendid background disregard those who aren't. However, the refugees appear to think that kind of problem arises just because they descended from North Korea" said the concerned(C). His remarks were inscribed in the researcher's mind.

In the meantime, at the height of the drinking party, the researcher revealed the first time when he came to experience the North Korean refugees to the three involved. It was ten years ago when he met with a female refugee. She was in her mid-50s who had worked for his uncle's restaurant. He heard that she introduced herself to his uncle as a person from Chosun race. After two years' of work there, she managed to confess her real identity as a North Korean refugee to him. She said to the researcher, "I had a worry that my boss would regard me as 'a bad one' if he knew my birthplace, so I disguised myself as a Chosun race person. Otherwise, I could not have had a close relationship with him". The researcher said that her words echoed in his head.

"What we have been talking about all through the night was that the basic awareness on the refugees in South Korean society is improving and the treatment on them in the 'work place' got better. But the awareness of our society on the refugees still seems to be dual. I'm no exception" continued the concerned(B). "Though the treatment of our society on these is ameliorated and they find their jobs more easily, this is not enough to explain their situation. The situation after work hours in the work place seems to be totally different. As I know, the great majority of the refugees don't get along well with their South Korean comrades after work hours" followed the concerned(C).

The experience which the researcher had a talk with the three involved who had helped the refugees with the settlement in South Korean society in early Jan, 2017 intensified the breadth of his understanding on the refugees. On the other hand, however, the researcher's awareness on them became complicated. As examined previously, it is apparent that the treatment on them is improved and it is true that their employment-population ratio is getting better. Especially, the experience of segregation and disrespect on the refugees in the 'work place' is quite decreasing and South Koreans' attitude toward them is also changing. Yet, to take notice of the contact zone named the 'work place', we can perceive that the situation 'after work hours' is absolutely different from that during the 'work hours'.

2. Interaction 'after work hours'

According to the Korea Hana Foundation's social integration survey on the refugees conducted in 2016, we can identify that the number of the companions they can talk to when they are dejected or melancholy add up to 3.3.(Korea Hana Foundation, 2016b). As you can see with the figure, the refugees in South Korean society must be a distressed being in a existential solitude and loneliness in the crevice of the struggle for life. What kind of social meaning these solitude and loneliness have? Sungkyoung Kim thought that this problem arose from that South Korea simplified these refugees as objects of social integration without contemplation and poured out numerous policies and solutions(Hankyoreh, Jun 21, 2017).

What kind of social relationship the refugees form in the South Korean system which provides them with only limited space? The researcher met with two refugees with whom he had kept friendly relationship respectively. He asked them about their experiences, eating dinner. "It's okay during the time I work in the work place, but after the work, the relationship is disconnected" said the mid-40s-refugee(A). After listening to his words, the researcher couldn't continue his remarks. He added, "I want to have a bottle of soju with them, apart from the company dinner, but when the day's work is over, they just gather together and I am left alone and I just go home".

"After work, when I am left alone, I tell myself that I didn't have to come down. Due to this emotion, I can't respond to them freely the next day even though they greet me gladly" said the mid-40s refugee(B). His words gave me many thoughts. It is said that these are left alone 'after work hours' in the 'work place', and grew to feel a lot of loneliness. "Why don't you suggest a bottle of soju to South Koreans. You don't have to wait first" said the researcher. To that, the refugee(B) replied, "At first, I tried doing it. But, even when we had a bottle of soju after my request, the atmosphere felt like an ice. So, I just get out of the work place as soon as I finish my work".

The researcher met the three concerned in April, 2017 for project meeting and during the break time, talked about the loneliness the refugees suffered from, "We want to have a drink with comfortable people. Especially, after we work all day long in the work place, we are more likely to have a drink with those" said the concerned(B). "We can't tell those who work together with the refugees not to discriminate or ignore after work hours" followed the concerned(A). He added, "This kind of problem can't be solved easily, whatever policy the government suggests".

Government authorities send urgings and guidelines continuously lest South Koreans should segregate or disregard the refugees. Coworkers are severely cautious during the 'work hours'. However, the authorities cannot tell South Koreans to have a drink and share their leisure with the refugees. If so, there will occur a counter-effect. I've seen many cases.(the concerned C)

It seems evident that South Korea shows gestures for cohesion and co-existence toward the refugees in legal and institutional dimension, but in everyday life, disrespect and expulsion on them still survives. The refugees live a life of "others deprived of the nature of others" or "others who deprived themselves of the nature of others", but generalized others in South Korea recognize them as "others having the nature of others"(ChunHeung Mo·Soochul Kim, 2016: 119-120).

"They would like to enjoy leisure, but practically their standard of living is not so high that they couldn't enjoy easily. It happens so much. These days, you can't do anything without money" said the concerned(B). It means many things. If you examine the actual survey result of expenditure for leisure activities of the refugees, 'no' expense response adds up to 36.4%, which is the highest, next, '10,000~100,000₩' 29.3%, the following, '100,000~500,000₩' 24.1%, and '500,000₩~', which is the lowest. In particular, as the age group went higher, leisure activities expenditure grew scarce(Korea Hana Foundation, 2016b).

But the survey on the leisure activities expenditure was just a survey. "I don't care if I pay. I'm not a beggar and I don't want to be treated every time. However, When I drink with South Koreans, they just pay, saying, 'I know you have little or no money. I'll pay for you'" said the refugee(B). It left something meaningful. It means that disregard and expulsion of South Korean society on the refugees are still internalized. Kim Sungkyoung's metaphor, "the refugees are not able to make some space in South Korean society, and are floating without being hospitalized enough as a member of a society" was correct(Sung Kyung Kim, 2017: 210).

The researcher said to the refugee(A), "Although it is not satisfactory, you can have a drink fellow refugees, can't you?".

No way. In the atmosphere that the awareness of the refugees are not so favorable, if we meet together and have a talk, they would even loathe us. So, we don't meet each other so often these days. And actually there are many cases of exploiting between ourselves, we avoid each other.(The refugee A)

The researcher had a doubt about the survey result that the refugees trust South Koreans more than their fellow refugees, but after listening to the refugee(A) the suspicion faded away at once. But, the remarks of the concerned(C), "the situation during the work hours and that after work hours are totally different" struck researcher's head once and again.

To take notice of the nature of the contact zone called the 'work place', during the 'work hours' there was no problem in ordinary interaction between the refugees and South Koreans. But 'after work hours', the 'work place' turned into the space where

everyday disconnection arises between them. Problem is that due to the everyday disconnection which occurred ‘after work hours’, the refugees came to shrink during the ‘work hours’.

What is the fundamental reason for this problem? Sungkyung Kim’s argument that “the refugees try to construct their own room at the settlement where they arrived after crossing space, but the place is ‘divisive’, and ‘regressive’” demonstrates it. That is, the refugees live an uneasy life in which they will overcome the division at the place which is chained with the ‘past’, restoring the continuity of time from the context of their own lives, and dream the future escaped from the division(Sung Kyung Kim, 2017: 210). To be brief, in the contact zone named ‘work place’ everyday interaction and disconnection take place between the refugees and South Koreans yesterday, today, and in the near future.

IV. Conclusion

Though there is no answer when we deal with the minority including the refugees, what is certain is that when we face the minority, it’s not desirable to use the nature of others as the mechanism of discrimination and disrespect (ChunHeung Mo·Soochul Kim, 2016: 146). But, we can’t say that the refugees are not excluded and ignored ordinarily in the ‘contact zone’. Why? This is because “South Korea is still ‘pure’ and ‘silly’, so it expects the refugees to accept the status of second-rate citizen ‘with thanks’, which is a queer phenomenon derived from the low awareness level of South Korean society”(Hankyoreh, June 21, 2017).

This study examined what kind of social relationship forms between the refugees and South Koreans in the contact zone and what kind of social meaning it has. Ordinary interaction and disconnection arises continuously between those due to the spatial characteristic in the contact zone called the ‘work place’. During the ‘work hours’, everyday interaction occurs naturally, but ‘after work hours’ ordinary disconnection happens too nonchalantly.

We can’t assert that the testimony of the refugees analyzed here represents all the refugees, but through their testimony, we could figure out, though indirectly, the barren awareness order of South Korean society on the refugees. The dual attitude of South Korean society on these can’t be fully corrected only with the improvements of the economic indicators. Especially, inattention or expulsion of South Korean society reveals this society’s sterile democratic foundation. Because they are suffering from the existential solitude and loneliness because of the dual attitude of South Korean society on them in the contact zone named the ‘work place’.

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