

# The Framing of North Korean Refugees in South Korean Media

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## Abstract

*As of 2013, South Korea's Ministry of Unification recorded more than 25,000 North Korean refugees living in South Korea, while upwards of 100,000 North Korean refugees await their passage to South Korea in neighboring countries such as Mongolia, China, Thailand, and Russia. The Korean War, though never formally having ended, caused the division between the two Koreas, resulting in the fleeing of North Korean refugees to the increasingly prosperous South. North Korean refugees' integration into South Korea and reception by South Koreans provides a lens for the "micro-unification" of the Korean peninsula, a glimpse into the possible pan-Korean identity that will be forged should the two nations reunite. The media, as a powerful agent of a society's public discourse, societal norms, and formation of national identity, is an integral tool to utilize in the study of refugee reception in South Korea. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which English language South Korean news media frames North Korean refugees. Although North Korean refugees are often referred to as "defectors," refugees will be defined as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion".<sup>33</sup> Articles pertaining to North Korean refugees will be collected from the two oldest, and most distinguished English language daily newspapers circulated in South Korea: The Korea Herald and The Korea JoongAng Daily. Articles published between 2012-2017 will be considered for analysis, as this follows the rule of Kim Jong-Un, the newest dictator in the line of the Kim regime. Practical implications of this study include further investigating the reasons behind the well-documented discrimination that North Korean refugees face in South Korea and providing an account of the South Korean response to North Korean refugees. Similarly to most media portrayals of refugees, North Korean refugees are likely to be framed in a negative light.*

## Introduction

The reception of North Korean refugees into South Korea is a glimmer of what the presumed reunification of the two Koreas could present: either an assimilation approach, in which those from the North must adopt the ways of the South, or a bidirectional social adjustment on behalf of the two sides. Entangled within the "micro-unification" that North Korean refugees living in South Korea present, is the forging of national identity and the social exclusion obstacles that North Korean refugees already face that may be exacerbated by negative public perception.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> North Korean refugees compose a vulnerable social group, with a secondary education dropout rate climbing ten times higher than their South Korean peers, a disproportionate burden of mental stress (87.3%), and unequal unemployment and underemployment in comparison to their South Korean counterparts.<sup>1,4,5</sup> Often, North Korean refugees are met with hostility, resentment, and discrimination, making their reintegration especially difficult.<sup>6,7</sup> Given the media's ability to create "out-groups," the media may play a role in further entrenching social exclusion.<sup>8</sup>

The South Korean news media, "situated

within societal norms, culture...and an audience to resonate with," and its portrayal of North Korean refugees presents a lens through which the unification of the two Koreas might unfold.<sup>9,10</sup> In a study of South Korean attitudes towards North Korean refugees, 40% of respondents indicated that the media strongly influenced their

personal views of North Koreans.<sup>2</sup> Although the South Korean news media provides just a singular view of the reception of North Korean refugees in South Korea, its place as a "data source from which inferences about public discourse can be drawn,"<sup>5</sup> make it relevant to the multi-faceted aspects of North Korean refugee reintegration into South Korea.<sup>9</sup>

Studies concerning the portrayal of refugees in Western media have largely been about ethnic minority refugees (such as Tamil refugees) or refugees fleeing conflict (such as Syrian refugees) into Western nations. Currently, this study is among the only to specifically analyze the framing of North Korean refugees in South Korean news media.

The purpose of this study is to explore the most salient frames created by South Korean English-language media of North

Korean refugees. In further exploring South Korean media, this study also seeks to find an explanation for the social exclusion that refugees face in many of the host countries they occupy, using North Korean refugees in South Korea as a case study. In addition, North Korean refugees living in South Korea pose a unique angle to the framing of refugees in the media, as the Korean people are historically considered one, although the manifestations of that reality are suspect.

## Literature Review

To guide the analysis of media frames of North Korean refugees, an intertwining of De Vreese's<sup>11</sup> theory of "frame-setting," and Lawlor and Tolley's<sup>9</sup> theoretical framework for their study of news media framing of immigrants and refugees will be used. De Vreese's<sup>11</sup> "Frame-setting" indicates that media framing is a communicative process, one that "affects learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events," so that the intended audience begins to mirror and reflect the frames presented in the media. De Vreese's framework provides a unidirectional pathway of the media to its audience, where the media activates the audience's individual attitudes about an event or group of people.

Similarly, Bos et al.<sup>12</sup> further the notion of a unidirectional media to audience framework, suggesting that “framing effects” result from frame-setting, shaping audience opinions, attitudes, and even behaviors. Lawlor and Tolley’s<sup>9</sup> study contests this unidirectional relationship between the media and audience, arguing that the media “does not exist in a vacuum, but is situated in societal norms and culture,” presenting stories “that are likely to resonate with the intended audience.”

In light of this idea, a reciprocal relationship between the media and its audience can be reimagined, where the media is not simply a “textual artifact” from which the passive audience deduces their positions, but is rather “a data source from which to draw inferences about public discourse.”<sup>9</sup> For this study, the theoretical framework rests upon the notion of a reciprocal media

and audience relationship; the two entities draw upon one another, leading and following one another. The relevance of this reciprocal relationship between media and audience is clear within studies concerning the media’s framing of refugees. Indeed, the media has the ability to further perpetuate otherness, especially when refugees are juxtaposed against a strong national identity of the host nation, as they often are in the media.<sup>13,14,15,16,17</sup> Especially important to this study is the ability for the media to create an “out-group,” as well as a corresponding “out-group” response from the audience, a sociological term used to describe those who are barred from the “in-group” through lack of incorporation into the majority society.<sup>8</sup> North Koreans, as co-ethnics to South Koreans who share the same history and language, would seemingly appear to be members of the “in-group” with South Koreans. The media is a powerful tool that acts as a function of the intended audiences’ public opinion and has been analyzed extensively in its framing of refugees throughout the world in a variety of host country settings. In the following section of the literature review, the three most salient findings categorized as (1) refugees as a “crisis”, (2) refugees as a “moral obligation,” and (3) refugees as the “undeserving other” and their respective sub-themes will be analyzed and provide insight into potential results from this study’s analysis.

### *Refugees as a "crisis"*

When the word “refugee” is mentioned in the news, “crisis” often follows thereafter. The term “refugee crisis” as a media entity itself invokes a sense of panic, trouble, or even danger. Overwhelmingly, studies that have documented the media framing of refugees note that the portrayal of refugee arrivals as presenting a “crisis” to the host nation is pervasive.<sup>9,15,18,19</sup> The crisis theme was often

characterized by language that signified that refugees come in “floods,” presenting a security threat, crime, and a costly burden to the host nation.

### *Refugees as a "flood"*

In Lawlor & Tolley’s study of refugee portrayal in Canadian media, language such as “flood,” “deluge,” “wave,” “influx,” “flows,” and “masses” were often used to characterize refugees. Such language implicitly calls for harsher border control and security measures, subtly hinting at the lack of securitization in light of the “masses” of people who flow so easily through borders. For example, Mollard’s<sup>18</sup> analysis of Scottish media’s portrayal of refugees found that keywords such as “influx,” “wave” and “flood” accounted for 31% of negative press coverage. Importantly, this language “dehumanizes asylum seekers and shifts the focus of the debate away from the reasons why people are seeking asylum...towards how many people are applying for asylum.”<sup>18</sup> Such language appears to be reserved for refugees in particular, as immigrants, who tend to arrive more incrementally, yet are plagued by similar stereotypes as refugees, are rarely referred to as arriving in “floods.”<sup>9</sup> Importantly, many news articles when mentioning the seemingly large numbers of refugees, fail to mention their proportion relative to the host population.<sup>12,19</sup>

### *Refugees as criminals/terrorists that pose a security threat*

Many refugees, especially those fleeing war-torn nations are presented as linked to “sinister global networks of terror,” which ironically constitutes the main reason why many refugees flee their home countries.<sup>20</sup> The framing of refugees as portraying a security threat is also linked to their portrayal as criminals. Repeatedly, the literature has pointed to the media’s preoccupation with refugees’ crime rates. Headlines such as “Terror suspects claim refugee status,” cast terrorism as being inextricably linked to refugees, making the unethical error of connecting a singular crime to the existence of entire group of people.<sup>13</sup> Rather than terrorists, North Korean refugees are often regarded with suspicion in the rare case that they may actually be spies.<sup>10</sup>

### *Refugees as an economic burden*

The largest economic burden that refugees present is their case processing time and the expenses involved therein.<sup>18</sup> However, refugee use of social benefits, such as the cost of their housing or its alleged usurpation from natives, are often the focus of articles describing the financial burden

of refugees. Furthermore, most articles refuse to recognize that many countries have volunteered themselves to receive refugees.<sup>13</sup> When host nations focus solely on what refugees “take,” it questions what or if refugees will contribute anything in kind.

### *Refugees as a moral obligation*

In opposition to the “crisis” theme, is the media framing of refugees as a humanitarian obligation. A call to act, support, and become aware of refugee needs are often provoked by media images, such as that of Omran Daqneesh of Syria whose stunned and bloodied face signified the gravity of the situation in Syria to the world, as well as the indiscriminate nature of the conflict.<sup>21</sup> The moral obligation theme is mostly characterized by sentiments that create a sense of responsibility to refugees, focus primarily on children or women and other “innocents” involved in conflict, and cast refugees as victims. Unfortunately, the “moral obligation” theme is often short-lived in the media and often thrives on a narrative that does not credit refugees with strength, resilience, or other positive attributes.

### *Refugee reception is a humanitarian obligation*

Georgiou and Zaborowski<sup>22</sup> describe the media response to images of three-year old Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body washed upon Turkey’s shore as “ecstatic humanitarianism”. In their systematic year-long analysis of European media’s framing of refugees, Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) found that media accounts of previous preparations for refugee arrivals, including increased physical barriers, deportations, and increasing security presence ceased shortly after Kurdi’s images were circulated. The framing of refugees as a humanitarian obligation is often built upon portraying refugees as needy, desperate, and helpless.<sup>15,23,24</sup>

When the media frames refugees as a moral or humanitarian responsibility, the use of refugee women and children is often utilized.<sup>15,25</sup> Venir<sup>15</sup> describes how refugees have been referred to as an “entire generation of children” whose fate rests with the United Kingdom’s decision to accept more of them.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the mentioning of “families,” “innocents,” and “baby/babies” are terms with similar connotations, meant to emphasize the sympathy the reader ought to feel towards refugees. Rettberg and Gajjala<sup>25</sup> echo this finding in their analysis, revealing that in two contrasting images in the media (one of a naked child in the dust of a refugee camp, the other of men talking in a boat), although both of refugees, were labeled differently. The child was a “real refugee,” while the men on the boat were “soldiers of Islam”.

## *Refugees as one's fellow man*

Media that frames refugees as worthy and deserving of care were often likened to the reader, where a commonality was thread between the subject (refugees) and readers. Intrinsic to viewing refugees as deserving were keywords such as “hunger” and “hopeless,” feelings that the audience is likely to have experienced to some degree.<sup>26</sup> When refugees were directly quoted in interviews and other news pieces, the personal touch granted to refugees opposes the faceless “mass” or “flood” language, and portrays their humanity.<sup>15,22,26</sup> In addition, when refugees’ demographic characteristics, such as their name, age, occupation, and country of origin were named, they were portrayed in a more humanitarian light.<sup>22</sup>

## *Refugees as the undeserving other*

The lexicon of “boat people,” “queue-jumpers,” and “back door entrants” used to describe refugees not only egregiously misrepresents the plight of refugees but seeks to delegitimize their claims of persecution. Due to its ability to erase an out-group’s legitimacy, the media’s framing of refugees as illegitimate can jeopardize the very well-being of current and future refugees.

## *Refugees as queue-jumpers*

When refugees are referred to as “queue-jumpers,” and “back door entrants” it points towards “weak refugee policies and over

accommodation”.<sup>20</sup> Krishnamurti’s analysis of Tamil refugees in the Canadian media emphasizes that the use of the word “queue-jumpers” is meant not only to delegitimize refugees, but denotes an assault on Canadian values. “Queuing” is the epitome of Canadian politeness and orderliness, which refugees supposedly defy.<sup>14,20</sup> The “queue-jumper” frame is often justified with the supposed “evidence” of refugees who still maintain ties to their family and homeland.<sup>20</sup> The transnational ties that refugees maintain serves as fodder to deny their legitimacy, while in actuality, such ties are a testament to the longing for but impossibility of staying in their homelands.

## *Refugees are illegitimate*

Characteristic of the illegitimacy frame is the featuring of stories of deportations, failed asylum cases, and confinement of refugees.<sup>13,20</sup> The conflation of refugees with “economic migrants” was salient within the illegitimacy frame, which poses the danger of sending refugees back to their hostile home countries.<sup>18</sup> The illegitimacy frame portrays host nations as “subjected to” refugees. Host countries may portray themselves as victims of, rather than signatories to, international policies that protect refugees.<sup>13</sup>

Although there exists an extensive literature on the media framing of refugees, there exists only three studies that have focused specifically on North Korean refugees portrayal in South Korea. Most relevant to this study’s analysis is the

findings from Son’s<sup>10</sup> 2016 study, especially as they correlate with the findings from the literature previously reviewed. From 1997-2012, Son<sup>10</sup> documented some of the key influences behind changes to policy and perceptions regarding North Korean people in South Korea, using the media as part of its analysis. Findings conclude that an overall shift of viewing North Korean refugees as “heroes” to “welfare dependent migrants,” from “brothers/compatriots” to “foreigners” occurred. Three themes arose in Son’s<sup>10</sup> analysis: us, them, and multicultural framing of the South’s reception of North Koreans. The “us” theme labeled the separation of the two Koreas as a tragedy, especially due to the shared history and culture of the two nations. Words such as “co-ethnic,” “common destiny,” and “brethren” were common within this label. The “them” theme focused heavily on the growing presence of refugees in the South, presenting them as an imbuing threat. A focus on “re-defections” back to North Korea sought to delegitimize refugees in South Korea as a whole. The “multicultural” theme was the least common and was characterized by the bidirectional relationship that the two Korean people may share, one that is cognizant of the differences between the two without imposing a hierarchy of superiority. The social exclusion that North Korean refugees face in South Korea is well documented, which Mathieson et al.<sup>27</sup> argue is perpetuated by mass media. Indeed, hostility towards immigrants and refugees is often further entrenched by the media.<sup>27</sup> The foundation for social

### Results

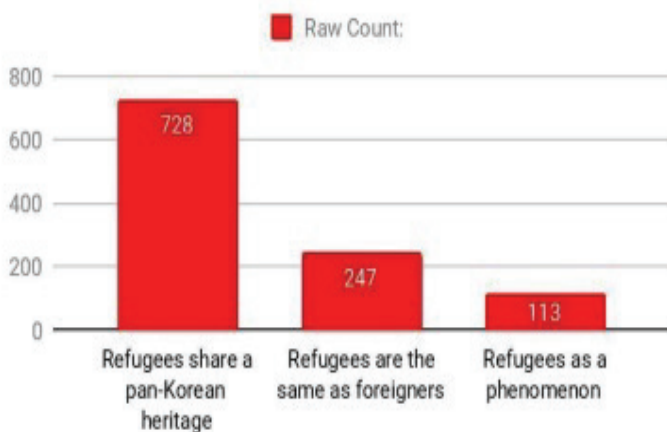


Figure 1: Raw count of all 1088 coded text and their corresponding themes.

### Results

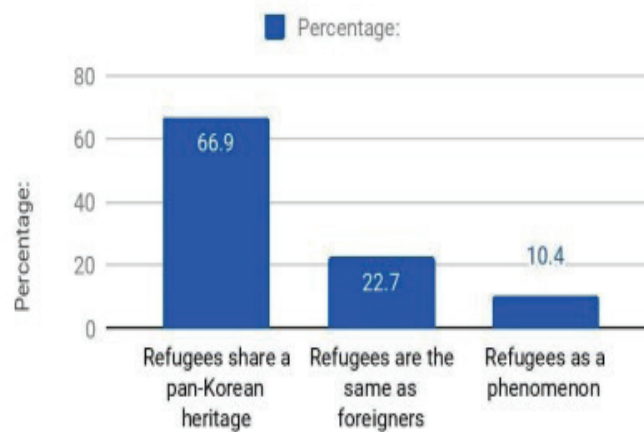


Figure 2: The 1088 coded text and their corresponding theme by percentage.



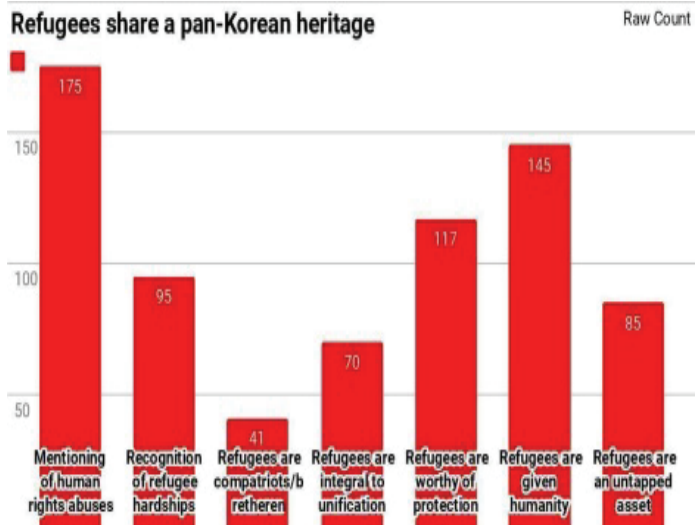


Figure 3: The first theme, “refugees share a pan-Korean heritage,” contained seven different codes. The above bar graph illustrates the raw count of the theme’s seven codes.

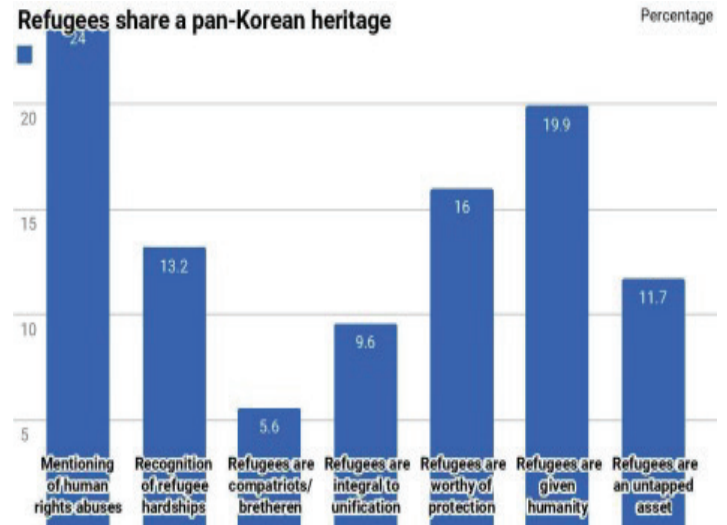


Figure 4: The first theme, “refugees share a pan-Korean heritage,” contained seven different codes. The above bar graph illustrates the theme’s seven codes by percentage.

exclusion of North Korean refugees lies also in their characteristics that mark them visibly, verbally, and culturally as a separate ethnic group.<sup>4,8</sup> The “years of disconnection has created a culture, a value system, and an accent that clearly distinguish North from South Koreans,” while a history of malnourishment and famine has created stunted growth in some North Koreans, marking them outwardly as different from South Koreans.<sup>28</sup> A “wide linguistic gap” has occurred due to the many years of separation between the two Koreas, one that leaves refugees “unable to comprehend the South Korean language” according to Kim<sup>2</sup>, while Ha & Jang<sup>8</sup> add that such a gap serves as “the principal impediment to their job acquisition”. South Korean media has the potential to further propagate the social exclusion that North Korean refugees face, serving as a tool to further entrench existing negative stereotypes. The media’s power to create “dissimilarity/otherness,” means it “can take an active part in the processes of stigmatization of minorities and thus become an instrument of social exclusion of their members.”<sup>29</sup>

In a national poll, it was found that almost half of South Koreans were overall apathetic to the needs of North Korean refugees.<sup>8</sup> Refugee accounts and satellite imagery testify to the systematic imprisonment of repatriated refugees to political prison camps, human trafficking at the China/North Korea border, and the lack of provision of basic needs in North Korea and are among some of the human rights abuses that North Korean refugees face. In South Korean social studies textbook the mentioning of “human rights violations happening in Darfur, Sudan and Guantanamo camps” were found, while

none mentioned North Korean human rights abuses. Park<sup>30</sup> concludes that a “prerequisite to stronger action [against North Korean human rights abuses] is raising public support through awareness,” in which the media can play an integral role.

### Research Design

Media was limited to the South Korean English-language press only, as it is “an excellent source of data for the examination of the construction of refugees and asylum seekers,” due to its reciprocity between reader and material,” as well as its vast “selection, frequency, extent, and nature of reporting”.<sup>15</sup> Articles pertaining to North Korean refugees were collected from the two oldest, and most distinguished English language daily newspapers circulated in South Korea: The Korea Herald and The Korea JoongAng Daily. Articles published between 2012-2017 were considered for analysis, as this follows the rule of Kim Jong-Un who came to power in December of 2011 and is the newest dictator in the line of the Kim regime and ends with the six months following the election of South Korean president Moon Jae-In in May 2017.

### Research Methodologies

In order to garner themes surrounding the framing of North Korean refugees in the South Korean media, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis does not seek to quantify codes as a means of proving a theme’s salience. Rather, thematic analysis relies upon providing a rich, complex, and saturated story of the data collected.<sup>31</sup> Within a thematic analysis, the researcher is expected

to create codes that eventually crystallize to a larger entity, theme, or overarching sentiment that characterizes the majority of the dataset. Borrowing from Braun & Clarke’s<sup>31</sup> five-step system to thematic analysis, this study’s analysis was tailored to the framework that Braun & Clarke have created.

The first stage of thematic analysis is the (1) familiarization phase, which entails the immersion of the researcher into the universe of the data. Familiarization includes reading an initial twenty-five articles from each English Language Journal selected (The Korea Herald and The Korea JoongAng Daily), in order to generate keywords (“North Korean refugee”, North Korean defector\*), a coding scheme or sketch of preliminary codes, as well as a general idea of events surrounding refugees during the selected time period.

The second phase involves (2) the systematic generation of initial codes. At the micro level, small pieces of information that are even potentially meaningful were coded. All data that fell within the 2012-2017 time period was selected for initial coding. This initial coding phase involved both semantic and latent codes. Semantic codes, described as “surface level” take words at face value. If refugees are described as “naïve,” a semantic code could be created which simply means that refugees are characterized as naïve. Latent codes search for “hidden meaning” and would take the characterization of refugees as “naïve” to deduce that refugees are framed as childlike, feeble, or inept. A preliminary set of codes were generated as a product of the familiarization and generation of initial code phases. No new codes were added after this phase.

The third phase casts a broader focus for analysis and is considered to be (3) the

“searching for themes” phase. Analytical judgments were used to identify meaningful, important, and broad themes that both answer the research question and encapsulate the most salient codes that were already created. The themes must create a coherent and analytical story. Within this phase, a candidate set of themes were produced in order to proceed to the step of reviewing themes. This phase ended not only with a set of candidate themes, but also the “collation of coded data relevant to each theme,” as well as a “sense of connection/relationship” between the themes.

The fourth phase is (4) reviewing potential themes, which entailed the evaluation of themes to ensure that they were substantial, coherent, and well organized. The researcher must evaluate whether themes work in (1) relation to the coded data and (2) in relation to the entire dataset.

The fifth phase of thematic analysis involves the (5) defining and naming of themes. A detailed definition of each theme were created that tells a “rich, nuanced, conceptually informed interpretative story about the meanings embedded in and beyond the surface of the data”.<sup>31</sup> In addition, informative and engaging names should be given to each theme. By the end of this process, a final set of themes were gathered.

The final phase of creating a thematic analysis is (6) producing the report. By the time the report is drafted, the analysis has been fully conducted. However, the report phase involves integrating literature into findings, as well as convincing the reader of the researcher’s interpretation.

## Results

In conducting the initial familiarization and generation of initial code phases, a total of fifteen codes were generated, not including child codes of the larger codes. The codes were then named, defined, and evaluated for their comprehensiveness. The article universe initially included 314 articles from *The Korea Herald* (113) and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* (201), but as repeated and irrelevant articles were removed, the final article universe comprised of 294 articles from the *Korea Herald* (110) and *The Korea JoongAng Daily* (184) published between January 2012-December 2017. After reviewing the entire article universe/data set and applying the 15 codes and child codes, two additional codes that were initially child codes emerged as salient enough to be separate codes. A total of seventeen codes emerged from the review of the data set.

Upon reviewing the data set in its entirety with the seventeen codes applied throughout, themes were generated from the data that

were built upon the initial codes. The three themes that emerged from the data include (1) refugees share a pan-Korea heritage, (2) refugees are the same as foreigners, and (3) refugees as a phenomenon.

Two layers of analysis were involved in this study: (1) the descriptive numerical summary of the most prevalent codes and their corresponding themes of the data and (2) the interpretative story that the themes capture of the data. The first layer of analysis will remain in the results section, while the second layer will be detailed in the analysis section. Among the 294 articles coded and analyzed, there was significant overlap in the number of codes that appeared within one article. Therefore, the number of excerpts of individually coded text, rather than articles, will serve as a more useful measure for understanding the manifestation of the codes and themes. In total, 1088 excerpts of text were coded. Of the three themes, “refugees share a pan-Korean heritage” appeared 728 times within the data set (66.9%). The “refugees are the same as foreigners” theme was coded 247 times (22.7%), while the “refugees as a phenomenon” theme was coded 113 times (10.4%). Graphic 1 and 2 as shown below detail the raw count and percentage makeup of each theme.

The seventeen codes were categorized so that they became the substance of each theme. The theme, “refugees share a pan-Korean heritage,” contained seven different codes: (1) the mentioning of human rights abuses (raw count: 175, 24%), (2) the recognition of refugee hardships (95, 13.2%), (3) refugees are compatriots/brethren (41, 5.6%), (4) refugees are integral to unification (70, 9.6%), (5) refugees are worthy of protection (117, 16%), (6) refugees are given humanity (145, 19.9%), and (7) refugees are an untapped asset (85, 11.7%).

The theme, “refugees are the same as foreigners,” contained six of the seventeen codes: (1) the idealization of South Korea (31, 12.6%), (2) North and South Koreans are inherently separate (21, 8.5%), (3) refugees are inherently lacking/inept/deprived (48, 19.4%), (4) refugees are distant others (339, 15.8%), (5) refugees are cast as objects (67, 27.1%), and (6) suspicion towards refugees (41, 16.6%).

Within the theme, “refugees as a phenomenon,” four codes were contained within it: (1) focus on non-refoulement over refugee status (37, 33%), (2) North/South Korea relations are jeopardized by refugee arrivals (14, 16%), (3) refugees are a bargaining tool between China and South Korea (10, 9%), and (4) China/South Korea

relations are jeopardized by refugee arrivals (50, 44%).

## Analysis

The “refugees share a pan-Korean heritage,” theme interweaves the notion that refugees deserve further protection, bolstered by the idea that refugees can be a viable part of Korea’s rise as a regional power. Articles that fell within this theme were cognizant of refugee hardships as being exacerbated by the prejudice that some South Koreans have towards them. For example, the discriminatory treatment of refugees as “second class citizens,” contributed to their rejected or immediately discarded job applications upon the employer discovering their North Korean background as described by the press. Instead of being framed as a signifier of refugees’ ineptitude, the mentioning of refugee hardships pointed to the failure of South Korean integration systems and implored the South Korean public to do more for refugees. Another means of imploring the audience to have more sympathy towards refugees found within this theme, was the discussion of the shared ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and historical pasts of the two Koreas. Articles that mentioned the Japanese occupation of Korea, the literal description of refugees as “brothers and sisters,” and the idea that the “5,000 years of Korean history,” outweighs the “short moment” of the recent seventy years of separation fell within this theme. Because of the ties between South and North Korea, the articles that fell within the theme portrayed the divide between the two Koreas as a tragedy. Refugees were framed as a natural part of this tragedy, since the two Koreas are “technically still at war,” given that a truce, rather than a peace treaty ended the fighting. As a counterpart to the tragic divide, was the “shared dream of the two Koreas” to eventually reunite. Refugees were framed as the “groundwork” and “literal living representation” of reunification, with one article referring to the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, originally from East Germany, as a hopeful example of what refugees could become in South Korea.

While such framing of refugees literally demarcates refugees as integral to unification, it also implies that unification is deeply social, not simply political. As instruments of reunification, refugees were portrayed in other ways that cast them as untapped assets, which also fell within the theme. Articles that referred to North Korean refugee poets, doctors, activists, and students sought to expose that refugees are not huddled victims, but rather contribute to South Korean society. The *Korea JoongAng Daily*

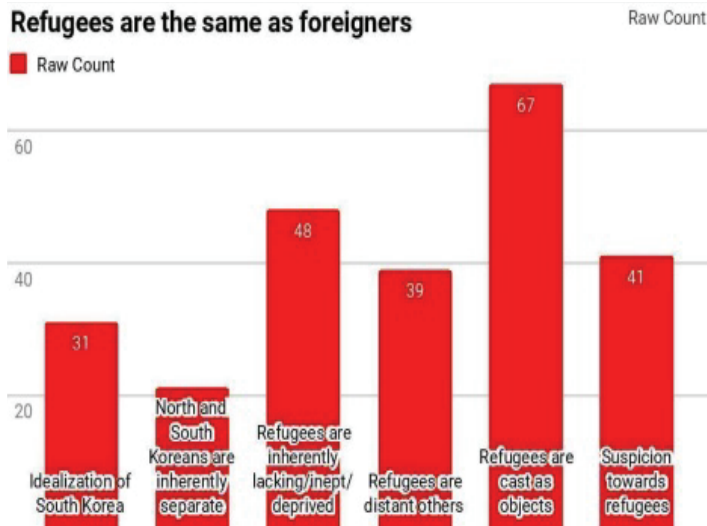


Figure 5: The second theme, “refugees are the same as foreigners,” contained six different codes. The above bar graph illustrates the raw count of the theme’s seven codes.

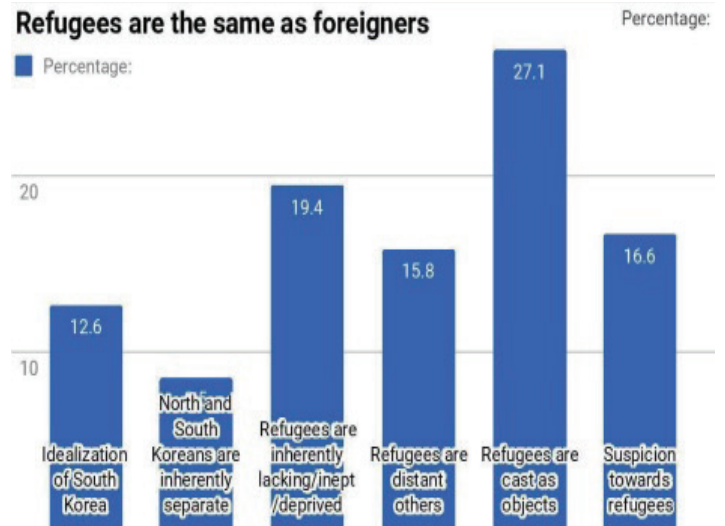


Figure 6: The second theme, “refugees are the same as foreigners,” contained six different codes. The above bar graph illustrates the theme’s six codes by percentage.

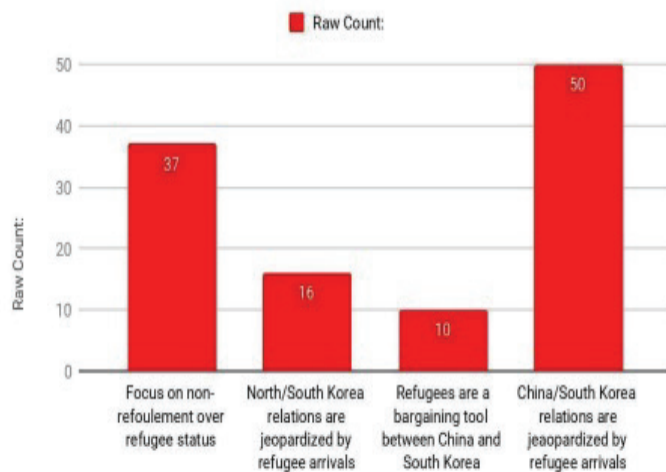
even created a “hidden defectors” collection of stories that highlighted refugee success stories to counter the narrative that refugees are “incompetent parasites who can never succeed in their adopted country.” Conversely, the theme “refugees as foreigners” emerged as counter to the theme describing refugees as sharing a pan-Korean identity. Within this theme, refugees were framed as inherently separate from South Koreans, with emphasis placed on the seventy years of separation between the two Koreas. The two nations were presented as antagonistic to one another, unable to reconcile their differences. Several articles within this theme made reference to the “Stalinist State” from which refugees hailed, juxtaposed with the “Capitalist South,” which served to delineate how far removed refugees are from South Korean society. Reference to the cultural, linguistic, and sometimes even physical differences between North and South Koreans were frequently mentioned in text excerpts that fell within the theme. For example, one article described the way the South Korean diet has evolved such that standard tofu dishes, which are “more than enough to satisfy” refugees, are “too plain and simple” for the South Korean palette.<sup>2</sup> Linguistically, refugees “take a long time to comprehend the words used in everyday life,” and even though they speak the same language as South Koreans, it sounds “weird.”<sup>2</sup> Even physically, refugees are “notably smaller” and darker skinned than South Koreans, according to text that fell within this theme.<sup>2,11</sup> Semantically, such descriptors serve to enumerate the many differences between North and South Koreans, but also serve to describe the rift between the two as almost too great to

overcome. Refugees are portrayed as unable to thrive in the “cutthroat competition” of South Korea’s “already saturated job market,” which implies that even if there were less competition or more job opportunities, refugees have little to offer. To prove how disparate the two societies are, text often relied on accentuating the incompetence of refugees, which was especially noticeable in comparison to the affluent and digitized South. Even for refugees that come from privileged and educated backgrounds in the North, their skills were described as “non-transferable” and irrelevant to the South. Similarly, some articles described refugees as using government aid as a crutch and their only means of becoming successful. Several findings from this analysis echo the findings of Ha and Jang’s<sup>8</sup> analysis that found that North Korean refugees were generally regarded as an outgroup. Within the theme “refugees are the same as foreigners,” refugees were both objectified and met with suspicion. Articles that objectified refugees within this theme, used dehumanizing language such as refugees being “rounded up,” and coming in “swarms” and “surges”, which renders refugees devoid of any human characteristics.<sup>18</sup> Such words that frame refugees as an out-group were compounded by suspicion towards refugees. References made to the “big hole in [the South Korean] intelligence capabilities for screening out spies” and the “weaknesses in defector management” present refugees as a security threat. According to the articles that fell within this theme, “it is hard to tell the difference between North Korean defectors and ethnic Koreans in China,” which alludes to the both the separation and suspicion between refugees and South Koreans.

In the final theme, “refugees as a phenomenon,” refugees were portrayed almost as an event that has the capability to alter or taint South Korea’s relations with both China and North Korea. The classification of North Korean refugees has been hotly debated, although refugees can be defined as any person “owing to the well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who...is unwilling to return to it.”<sup>32</sup> Given that the majority of North Koreans fall within the “hostile” political class based on their perceived lack of loyalty to the North Korean government, many North Korean refugees rightly fear political persecution, punishment, or even imprisonment for “infractions” such as watching foreign films. Even if North Korean refugees maintain characteristics of economic migrants, they can be classified as “refugees sur place” who may have exited their home country as economic migrants but face public execution and torture if they were to be repatriated.<sup>33</sup> Within this theme, the South Korean media largely focuses on repatriation of refugees instead of refugee status. For example, the primary argument against China’s repatriation of refugees was that “the South Korean Constitution stipulates South Korean territory covers the Korean Peninsula...so thus, North Koreans should be seen as having South Korean nationality”. The argument that refugees are actually South Korean citizens by South Korea’s constitution allows South Korea to argue against the repatriation of refugees without having to urge China into recognizing North

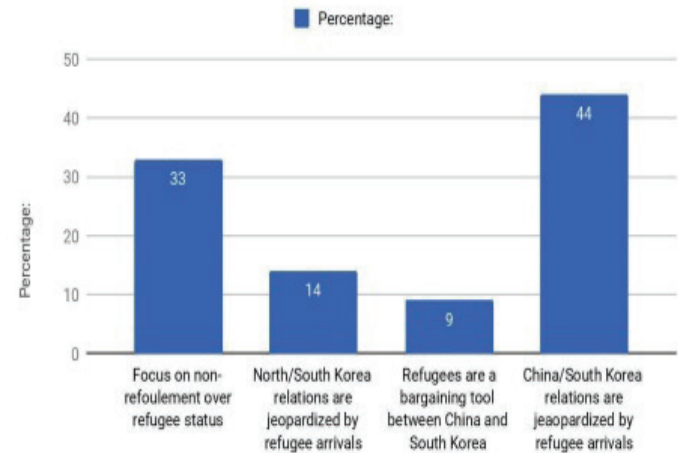


Refugees as a phenomenon



Graphic 7: The final theme, “refugees as a phenomenon,” contained four different codes. The following bar graph illustrates the raw count of the theme’s four codes.

Refugees as a phenomenon



Graphic 8: The final theme, “refugees as a phenomenon,” contained four different codes. The following bar graph illustrates the theme’s four codes by percentage.

Koreans’ refugee status. To do so would be China’s blatant admission of the considerable human rights abuses of North Korea, as well as a soured relationship with North Korea. Another facet of South Korea’s “ginger” stance towards China in regards to refugees, was its desire to maintain its strong economic relations with China as both a major investor and tourist market for China. Similarly, this theme was characterized by the ability for refugees as a phenomenon, to taint North/South Korea relations. Oftentimes, articles mentioned how North Korea refers to South Koreans as “human trafficking agents,” and refugees themselves as “abductees” who were deceived or payed into defecting. South Korea retorts that the North’s claims take the tragic repatriation of North Korean refugees and turn it into a “propaganda coup” whereby repatriated refugees are made to publicly denounce South Korea. Additionally, this theme contained the underpinning idea that refugees can be used as bargaining tools among China, South Korea, and North Korea. For example, the South Korean press often alludes to the effectiveness of sanctions on North Korea as being a trade off with an “exodus...of the world’s most sequestered people” who suffer economically with increased sanctions. Likewise, the return of illegal Chinese fishing boats found in South Korean waters is often mentioned in text about South Korea urging China against refugee repatriation, often as a compromise used to appease China. When refugees are portrayed as bargaining tools, it alludes to their relevance in political strife, but their simultaneous irrelevance, as they are merely objects to be freely traded for favorable political conditions.

## Discussion

Overall, the findings from this study demonstrate that the portrayal of refugees in the media is mixed. As expected, the negative portrayal of refugees was enshrouded within already existing stereotypes surrounding refugees: that refugees are actually spies, that they are inept and lazy, and language that regarded refugees as statistics and faceless swarms, rather than people. Positive framing of refugees explored the South Korean public to do more for refugees, including acknowledging their prejudices, becoming more aware of human rights abuses, and seeking the likeness and humanity that they share with refugees. Unexpectedly, refugees as a phenomenon was a new finding that appears to fluctuate greatly with the international climate in regards to refugees and gives insight into how the dynamics among South Korea, North Korea, and China relations are shaped by refugees.

## Limitations

Limitations of this study include the sole use of English-language media, excluding all Korean-language news outlets that are not published in English. In addition, the use of South Korean media produced in Korean (as opposed to English) would mediate the translational pitfalls that may lack the cultural nuances, unique phrasing, and intended meaning that the original Korean articles provide. Another potential limitation of this study is its inability to triangulate the data gathered through the thematic analysis of South Korean media, with interviews with North Korean refugees nor South Koreans.

The difference in the framing of refugees in the two journals and their respective slants were not analyzed, which serves as another limitation. In addition, there was only one researcher involved within the analysis of data collection, so intercoder reliability was not upheld. However, an outside evaluator reviewed the comprehensiveness of the created codes; the codes themselves were organized in a chart used as a reference so that codes maintained consistency throughout their application.

## Recommendations for further study

Limitations of this study include the sole use of English-language media, excluding all Korean-language news outlets that are not published in English. In addition, the use of South Korean media produced in Korean (as opposed to English) would mediate the translational pitfalls that may lack the cultural nuances, unique phrasing, and intended meaning that the original Korean articles provide. Another potential limitation of this study is its inability to triangulate the data gathered through the thematic analysis of South Korean media, with interviews with North Korean refugees nor South Koreans. The difference in the framing of refugees in the two journals and their respective slants were not analyzed, which serves as another limitation. In addition, there was only one researcher involved within the analysis of data collection, so intercoder reliability was not upheld. However, an outside evaluator reviewed the comprehensiveness of the created codes; the codes themselves were organized in a chart used as a reference so that codes maintained consistency throughout

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