From North Korean Migrant to "Unification Talent:" Neoliberalism and Future-Making in South Korea

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Visions of Korean unification draw not only on historical imaginaries of ethnic nationalism (Grinker, 1998) but continue to be shaped by South Korea's neoliberal values and aspirations for deeper integration into global market orders (Park, 2015). Despite projections that neoliberalism may be waning (Gerstle, 2022; Vallely, 2024), neoliberal logics continue to organize South Korean state technologies of governance that emphasize self-management. These late capitalist rationalities shape both how North Korean migrants are incorporated into South Korean society and the forms of recognition made available to them. Drawing on human capital theory (HCT), this paper examines how North Korean migrant youth are positioned through neoliberal frameworks of value, productivity, and future-oriented investment. Through interviews with North Korean migrants and analysis of state media and discursive artifacts, this paper argues that South Korean neoliberalism shapes the way state and civil society actors frame North Korean migrants as human capital to be cultivated for the anticipated project of national unification.

Keywords: South Korea, North Korea, unification, human capital theory, neoliberalism, migration

Introduction

Anthropologists of education have long shown that schools function as sites of cultural production, where models of the "educated person" reflect the subjectivities of dominant groups (Levinson and Holland, 1996, p. 24). Education, in this sense, is centrally concerned with the "production of futures" (Varenne, 2011), as pedagogic work reproduces cultural and political orders over time (Bourdieu, 1977). In contexts of migration and displacement, these future-making processes take on additional significance, as educational institutions play a key role in managing migrant incorporation and shaping projects of nation-building (UNHCR, 2017; Anderson, 1991; Green, 2013). Globally, schools increasingly operate as policy instruments for migrant governance through language acquisition, social and emotional learning, vocational training, and the cultivation of "academic and social resilience" (OECD, 2019; UN Migration Agency, 2018). Even in contexts where formal integration into the host state is not a primary objective, schools remain central sites where displaced youth develop a sense of belonging and imagine possible futures (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019).

In South Korea, these dynamics are particularly visible in alternative schools serving North Korean-background youth (*bukan ital cheongsonyeoneul wihan daeanhakgyo*),

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where education is closely tied to the state-making project of unification (*tongil*). Broadly defined, South Korean alternative schools are facilities, corporations, or other organizations that offer a curriculum that meets the different values, abilities, or aptitudes of their students (Lee et al., 2023). These may include youth from vulnerable families, youth with severe disabilities, or youth who left school (Korea Youth Policy Institute, 2025). Alternative schools for North Korean-background students[1]offer specialized instruction and support to address the particular social and emotional needs of migrant youth. These programs often include experiential learning opportunities, career exploration initiatives, seasonal English and reading camps, Korean language classes, financial advising, and a unification education curriculum.

These schools not only provide support for resettlement and integration but are also sites where migrant youth are socialized into the national imaginary of Korean unification. Visions of Korean unification draw on both the myth of an ethnically homogeneous and sovereign kingdom (Grinker, 1998) while being shaped by South Korea's neoliberal values and aspirations for deeper integration into global market orders (Park, 2015). Despite projections that neoliberalism may be waning (Gerstle, 2022; Vallely, 2024), neoliberal logics continue to organize South Korean state technologies of governance that emphasize self-management. These late capitalist rationalities shape both how North Korean migrants are incorporated into South Korean society and the forms of recognition made available to them.

Within this broader context, alternative schools emerge as key sites where state values are enacted. As institutions that are often the first sustained points of contact for North Korean-background migrant youth,[2] alternative schools play a central role in mediating incorporation. Arriving with few social ties, youth come to rely heavily on relationships forged with teachers and peers in these settings, which play a significant role in shaping their resettlement experiences, sense of social belonging, and imagined futures (Yoon, 2018).

Several scholars have conducted qualitative and quantitative research in South Korean alternative schools for North Korean youth on student satisfaction (Jones, Whitehead and Bang, 2023), multicultural education (Kim and Kim, 2023), and teacher perceptions of North Korean students (Kim and Yoo, 2018). While these studies have provided important insights into student well-being through clinical psychology or social work frameworks, they have tended not to foreground broader questions about how schooling is entangled with national futures, such as unification. Similarly, scholarship on Korean unification has largely focused on national identity and public opinion (Grinker, 1998), political economy (McKibbin et

[1] I use the term "North Korean-background students" to refer broadly to young people with a parent born in North Korea, including both North Korean-born and Chinese-born children. English-language scholars have yet to reach a consensus on how to refer to the North Korean-background community, partly due to South Korea's own constantly shifting set of terms to describe this population.

[2] Most migration trajectories out of North Korea occur through China, where migrants may live for years or even decades as undocumented migrants under constant threat of arrest and repatriation. Many make multiple escape attempts before reaching commonly reaching countries such as Mongolia or Thailand, where they can seek asylum before resettlement in South Korea (Um-Lo and Jang, 2025).

al., 2017), ethnic nationalism (Shin, 2006), and capitalist integration (Park, 2015), with comparatively less attention paid to how North Korean migrants are framed as the actors through which unification imaginaries are enacted. As a result, the relationship between alternative schools as sites for North Korean migrant integration and South Korea's unification agenda remains underexplored.

However, this relationship warrants scholarly attention, given that all government-funded and accredited alternative schools for North Korean youth explicitly articulate some vision of "preparing for Korean unification" through the education of North Korean youth. One school, for example, defines its mission as "training North Korean defectors[3] to become workers for the restoration of free, democratic unification" and enabling "North Korean youth to advance and prepare for the unification of people." This study combines discourse analysis of state media and interviews with North Korean-background migrants to ask: *To what extent are North Korean-background migrants incorporated into the South Korean state project of unification, and how do these forms of recognition and governance reflect neoliberal logics?*

In the sections that follow, I introduce the conceptual framework of the study, the historical background, and an overview of my methods. I then analyze discursive artifacts, including presidential speeches, state labels, campaign slogans, and school visions and mottos, to show how North Korean migrants are framed in political terms as contributors to an anticipated state future of unification. Next, I examine how neoliberalism is entrenched in the discourse used to describe North Korean-background populations as "talents," "leaders," and forms of human capital for a future unified Korea. This article argues that South Korean neoliberal values shape the way North Korean migrants are framed by state and civil society actors as resources to be cultivated for the future state project of unification.

Conceptual Framework

This paper uses human capital theory (HCT) to analyze the ways alternative schools position North Korean migrant youth through neoliberal logics of value, productivity, and future-oriented investments. Human capital theorists conceptualize individuals as capital goods, managed not through direct exploitation but through the accumulation of knowledge and skills deemed economically valuable (Schultz 1961). Within this framework, education is understood as an investment in human capacities that can yield returns in the form of increased productivity and earnings.

Scholars have also critiqued human capital approaches to education, arguing they privilege economic productivity while obscuring structural inequalities. As Tan (2014, p. 430) argues, HCT is often used as an instrument to "deflect attention from the need for economic and social reform" while providing a "pretext for… justify[ing] education and social policies." Similarly, Klees (2016) critiques the

[3]According to South Korea's North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act of 1997, a "defector" is defined as a person born in the DPRK who did not acquire another foreign nationality prior to migrating to South Korea (Act No. 5259, 1997).

dominance of HCT in international and comparative education, noting its role in reducing education to measurable outputs such as attainment, skills, and market labor outcomes. These critiques highlight how HCT operates not only as an economic theory but also as a governing rationality that shapes how educational subjects are imagined and valued.

Building on these insights, this paper treats HCT as a lens for examining how North Korean migrant youth are constructed as future economic assets within South Korea's imagined future unified state. I analyze how discourses of "talent" and "leadership" position these youth as investments for a future unified Korea, framing their assimilation into a capitalist, neoliberal society as a civic duty and emphasizing their potential future utility in easing social integration of the two states. This framing illuminates how alternative schools participate in broader neoliberal projects that link education to national development and future state-building.

Historical Background

In 1945, at the end of WWII, the U.S. divided the previously Japanese colony of Korea into two occupation zones at the 38th parallel, which separated the Korean peninsula into a Soviet-occupied North and a U.S.-occupied South (McCune, 1947; Cumings, 1997). After a 1950 attack by the North Korean People's Army (KPA) on Seoul, the Korean War began, and though an armistice was declared in 1953, the two Koreas technically remain at war (Cumings, 2011). It is within this historical context that scholars have largely characterized unification (*tongil*) as the completion of the Korean War and the end of national division (Cha, 2012).

In 1969, the ROK established the Ministry of Unification (then, referred to as the National Unification Board), a state bureau dedicated solely to the preparation for unification. In the first decade, the state agency was tasked with conducting research, centralizing policy, facilitating inter-Korean dialogue, cooperation, and exchange with North Korea, all of which varied widely depending on the party in power (Ministry of Unification, 2025). At that time, defections were exceedingly rare (Um-Lo and Jang, 2025). After the fortification of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1954, migration between North and South all but ceased. Fewer than a thousand North Koreans defected between 1953 and 1998. In 1998, however, with a growing wave of survival migration following the famine (1995-1998), the work of the Ministry turned toward management of North Korean migrants, distributing aid, facilitating social services, and improving public perception of North Koreans. Since then, migrant governance and unification have been entangled pursuits. As referenced in a statement from the Ministry of Unification in 2001: "the settlement…of defectors from North Korea would be the touchstone that shows the government's will and capability for unification of Korea" (Ministry of Unification 2001, 157). By this logic, defectors' integration into South Korean society is converted into a measurable that the government leverages to demonstrate its readiness and capability for unification.

Methods

Data Collection

This study is part of a broader research project conducted from 2022 to 2025, which included 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork with North Korean-background youth, educators, non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, and community leaders across three alternative schools, two international NGOs, and a Protestant church community in the Seoul metropolitan area. In this project, I combined participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews, narrative inquiry, document and media analysis, and ongoing informal conversations in a methodological design that approached unification as an embodied, relational, and future-oriented project. This paper draws only on a subset of the data collected for the project, focusing primarily on state discourse and media, as well as relevant interviews from the larger study.

From August to November 2024, I concentrated my fieldwork at my primary field site, which I call Saebit School, where I taught a morning elective English conversation class and participated in daily school life by attending classes and spending time with students outside of class. Building on convenience sampling from a virtual phase of fieldwork and snowball sampling through school-based networks, I conducted 27 in-depth life-history and open-ended interviews with North Korean-background youth, primarily in Korean and English, depending on interviewee preference. Of these interviewees, 12 were born in North Korea, and 15 were born in China. I also conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with teachers across the three school sites, four interviews with alternative school principals, and four interviews with NGO workers. All names of the individuals and organizations used in this study are pseudonyms, and identifying details and backgrounds have been altered where necessary to protect interlocutors and safeguard family members who remain in China or North Korea.

In addition to interviews and participant observation, I collected a corpus of educational materials, including school textbooks, Ministry documents, curricular plans, student assignments, student artwork, and promotional materials. This triangulation ensured that insights generated through interviews and participant observation were supported across data sources. Documents, speeches, and media materials were collected through government websites, media databases, and ethnographic encounters, including school ceremonies and public events.

Data Analysis

Throughout the research period, I maintained detailed fieldnotes and produced bi-weekly analytic memos to identify and catalogue recurring themes and guide follow-up questions over time (Lareau, 2011; Birks et. al., 2025). Following participants across multiple settings allowed me to ask episodic questions in addition to the semantic ones posed in formal interviews, and to conduct follow-up interviews over intervals of at least one month. Although teaching one extracurricular class at the school allowed me to develop deeper relationships with the students, I recruited the bulk of my research participants outside of my course.

Furthermore, my class, which was an ungraded elective, only met one hour per week, and I spent an additional 30 hours per week at the school. Thus, my role as a teacher was secondary to my role as a researcher. I co-constructed informed consent with my interlocutors, personal relationships, and valuing them as collaborators in my research process (Shannon, 2007).

All materials were imported into NVivo for iterative coding. I first conducted open coding across interviews, fieldnotes, and institutional materials to open up the inquiry, stimulate thinking, and sort and order the data (Bazeley, 2013). I developed descriptive codes, attended to patterns of repetition across texts, and analyzed speakers' deictic and evaluative language in relation to their participant status and media type (Wortham and Reyes, 2015). Throughout the analytic process, I traced recurring idioms, narrative structures, and framings across schools, visual media, news articles, state ceremonies, and interviews. After this period, I organized my initial codebook, identified recurring patterns, and differentiated the descriptive codes from overarching analytic themes (Bazeley, 2013). In further microanalysis of the data, I focused on in vivo codes or emic terms, which emerged specifically in how interlocutors spoke of individual and national futures around unification.

I subjected the data to discourse analysis to interpret discursive artifacts, including speeches, ceremonies, policy memos, media reports, school promotional materials, as well as classroom and interview recordings. I chose this mode of analysis because of its emphasis on the "unexpected patterns and actions that emerge despite sociocultural expectations" (Wortham and Reyes, 2015, p. 180). In transcripts, I paid close attention to reported speech of earlier events, reference to a particular topic, and use of deictics (context-dependent speech such as here, there, I, you) that defined the subject in terms of their social positions through relationships with peers and others (Wortham and Reyes, 2015). With media, I used speech and spectacle events, and presented it back to participants for interpretation as an elicitation method that generated further data and aided in the analytic process (Galman, 2016). By inviting interlocutors into a collaborative analysis and interpretive process, I was able to pay closer attention to how discursive artifacts such as presidential speeches or campaign slogans are used and what they mean in a local context (Wortham and Reyes, 2015; Hull, 2008). Discourse analysis of multiple data forms allowed me to track change across events and account for the emergence of unexpected practices and behaviors.

Time-Making and Future-Making

In 2024, from a stage in a ballroom adorned in gold appliqué in South Korea's presidential Blue House, Yoon Seok Yul was inaugurated on July 14 as a national day for North Korean Defectors. "We are certain that the first North Korean Defector's Day will bring the 'Day of Freedom' and 'Day of Unification' closer," the former president declared to a room of 200 North Korean-background people, settlement support workers, local and state officials, and other unification apparatus[4] workers

[4] I use the term "unification apparatus" to refer to the wide, disaggregated body of South Korean state, quasi-state, non-governmental and international institutions and actors that manage, support, and govern North Korean migrants through "preparing" for unification.

(Ministry of Unification, 2024). At first, it struck me as odd that the creation of a new national day could somehow advance time. How would celebrating "North Korean Defector's Day" tangibly "bring the 'Day of Unification' closer"? Yoon's language suturing North Korean defectors to unification, however, was consistent with an ongoing assumption I had encountered throughout my fieldwork: that to support and educate North Koreans was to inherently prepare for unification, and thus accelerate it.

Perplexed by this assumed connection between humanitarian work and a contested national imaginary, I asked one educator how the two were related. She replied, matter-of-factly: "Well these students, who understand both North and South… They are the best ones who can lead unification in the future" (Interview, October 6, 2023). Similarly, the Vice Principal at Saebit School said in an interview, for North Korean-born students, the school initially did not do much around unification education "because [unification] was an obvious task for them" (Interview, October 24, 2024). Ministry of Unification Vice Minister Kim Sookyung echoed this same sentiment, positioning North Korean-background students as future national leaders at a Saebit School anniversary ceremony. Kim said, "Saebit strives to cultivate humble, honest, and courageous talents who will lead reunification and social integration as unified leaders of the future" (September 27, 2024). South Korean actor and director Cha In-Pyo added later in the ceremony, "Even if we desperately wish for it, unification won't happen tomorrow. And while we can't physically go to North Korea to help our brothers and sisters, there is something we can do now. There are many North Korean defectors right here, trying to settle and integrate into our society… Supporting and embracing them is what we can do today. Taking care of the 100 students at Saebit is like taking care of the 20 million people in North Korea" (September 27, 2024). Though the latter two statements occurred in the formal, performative context of a school ceremony, they reflect how North Korean-background youth are politicized in temporal terms ("*will lead* reunification," "leaders of the *future*," "something we can do *now*"), and how investment in their human capital in the present is framed as preparation for the state project of unification. Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to understand this indexical work – positioning North Korean-background youth as political and temporal agents whose labor will be utilized in the future – as a central organizing logic of the unification apparatus.

Though slightly broader, the discourse of state campaigns also advances this association between North Korean migrants and state futures. In 2024, Minister of Unification Kim Young-ho urged widespread public adoption of the Ministry slogan, *talbungmineun meonjeo on tongil* "North Korean Defectors, First to Come of Unification" (Park, 2024). This slogan *meonjo on tongil* is translated literally as "first to come of unification," but sometimes rendered in English as a "unification that has arrived" is commonly used to describe North Korean migrants. Translations of this phrase illustrate how North Korean migrants are positioned as embodied contributors to a state project actively unfolding and already underway. "First to

come," in particular, situates North Korean migrants and their adaptation to South Korean society within a teleological timeline that presumes the inevitability of the "rest" of the North Korean population following.

The idiom emerged alongside related labels used throughout the Ministry's history (1969–), including *tongil seongujadeul* (pioneers of unification), "harbingers of unification" (Lankov 2012), and *seonguja* (spiritual forerunners) (Kim 2023), that cemented the assumed politicization of North Korean defectors as national vanguards. Circulating through speeches, documents, and media [see Figure 1], the phrase *meonjeo on tongil* has acquired, as Das (2004) puts it, "a life in the practices of the community" (p. 234). Over time, the slogan has become both a policy idiom and a social fact, conflating North Koreans with unification. As Hirschkind (2006) notes, the circulation of such discourse aims to secure a "uniform model of moral behavior" (p. 105) — in this case, a particular South Korean vision for unification.

Figure 1. State, media, and civic uses of the phrase *meonjeo on tongil* (unification that is already here) in reference to North Korean migrants.[5]

Yet, in recent years, amid nuclear weapons testing, monument smashing, and other markers of intensifying North Korean hostility, a growing number of South Koreans regard unification as a stymied political project (Lee, 2020). Public perception, then,

[5] Top left: Marketing material from a YouTube series created by NambukHana Foundation that uses the entire phrase "meonjeo on jageun tongil iyagi" – conversation with the small unification to come first. (Source: NambukHana Foundation 2020); Top right: Minister of Unification Kim Young-ho delivering a speech at a state event at the Westin Chosun Seoul Hotel on November 27, 2023, discussing policy and economic activities for North Korean defectors. Source: Yonhap News 2023; Bottom left: Banner reads "First to Come Unification Family" behind Director of Public Administration and Security Bureau Bang Ju-mun, Secretary-General Tae Young-ho, Gyeongbuk Hana Center, Gyeongbuk Police Agency, Gumi City Hall, Gyeongbuk Governor, city and regional council representatives at the Unification Festival on November 16, 2024. Source: Saemul Library Daegu Branch; Bottom right: Still from a news report on the "first to come of unification." Source: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), November 11, 2023.

stands at odds with state discourse that claims it is "already here." One response to this paradox has been to locate unification in the present lives of North Korean migrants by framing their assimilation into South Korean late capitalist society as evidence that unification is actively underway.

"Ordinary Lives" of North Korean Migrants in South Korea's Neoliberal State

② Social Adaptation Training for North Korean Defectors

Number of Participants (Unit: People)

Class.	Number of Participants											
	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23
Female	1,002	843	1,018	785	904	807	726	788	260	38	15	74
Male	361	254	262	168	198	150	116	165	97	31	21	37
Total	**1,363**	**1,097**	**1,280**	**953**	**1,102**	**957**	**842**	**953**	**357**	**69**	**36**	**111**

Advanced training and vocational training (Unit: People)

Class.	Advanced Training			Vocational Training	
	Number of programs	Completed	Acquired License	Number of programs	Completed
'14	5	103	85	11	440
'15	6	117	72	10	521
'16	8	247	206	8	315
'17	7	291	251	7	290
'18	7	335	292	8	305
'19	7	385	314	8	247
'20	3	18	18	4	28
'21	6	42	40	4	128
'22	8	49	40	10	189
'23	23	195	177	5	130

Figure 2. Source: South Korea's Ministry of Unification White Paper 2024.

While neoliberalism is often understood as the promotion of individualism, free markets, free trade, and a strong state, I draw on Aiwha Ong's (2006) theorization of neoliberalism as a reconfiguration of governance and knowledge in which political problems are recast as technical ones. Writing on neoliberalism in the South Korean context, Dongjin Seo (2010) defines the expectations for self-management in the Korean economic arena to include the "mundane practices of consumption by individuals of a wide range of knowledge, techniques, commodities, agents, and experts in order to manage themselves through the mobilization of their own freedom, responsibility and autonomy" (84). Seo further demonstrates how post-IMF crisis reforms used the language of self-advancement and self-improvement. Education, as Byung-Chul Han (2018) argues, has also been cloaked by capitalist imperatives in a "language of freedom," shifting the responsibility for success onto individuals who must demonstrate *chagi kwalli* (self-management) and *chagi kyebal* (self-cultivation) to meet state-defined productivity norms (Song, 2009).

North Korean migrants in South Korea's neoliberal state are directly called on by state actors to self-manage and self-cultivate through enrolling in school, getting a

job, and becoming self-reliant subjects. These acts of self-management, as Secretary-General Thae Young-ho put it, are the way North Korean migrants can fulfill their civic duty and contribute to unification.

In May 2025, Thae told a group of North Korean-born university students at a Ministry of Unification summit that as the "first generation to achieve unification," their civic duty was to "promote reconciliation between the two Koreas" by "understand[ing] and overcom[ing] cultural and social differences" and "adapt[ing] well to South Korean society" (Han, 2025). At the same summit, Kim Dong-soo, the Secretary of Human Rights and Defectors Support Subcommittee, added, "Settling down well here is the way to contribute to unification." In these renderings, *jeongchakhada* (adapting well) and *anjeongjeong iju* (settling down) are cast as the "way [North Korean migrants] contribute" to the political project of unification.

When state actors say, "adapt well" and "settle down," what do they mean? One answer to this question lies in what the Ministry's annual white papers define "successful" settlement to be, through metrics such as job placement rates, school enrollment, vocational training completion, social adaptation training completion, and average wage increases [See Figure 2]. The Ministry of Unification's reliance on statistical data sets as performance indicators converts unification from a speculative horizon into a measurable, monitorable, and auditable entity (Ministry of Unification, 2024). Such practices reflect the late liberal audit cultures now standard across bureaucracies of global core states that govern populations through performance indicators.

Another answer can be found through analyzing how the Ministry prepares North Korean migrants for integration through its mandatory 12-week social adaptation program at Hanawon. Numerous scholars have described Hanawon's curriculum as totalizing, emphasizing migrants' moral obligation to become self-reliant and responsible citizens (Won, 2020; Yoon, 2022; Chung, 2009). Won's study (2020) demonstrates that the Ministry's disciplinary power is evident in the use of neoliberal keywords such as "resilience," "improvement" and "overcoming" within Hanawon curricula – terms that normalize meritocratic expectations while erasing the structural barriers and ethnolinguistic discrimination migrants encounter in South Korea's stratified society. These analyses of state curriculum for North Korean migrants reflect South Korea's broader neoliberal values of making self-responsible, self-managing citizens (Seo 2010). One way North Korean migrants have internalized this expectation for self-management is through a desire for "blending into the average" or living an "ordinary life" in South Korea (Cho 2023).

As defector Cho Kyung-il writes in *Reality and Unity* (2023), "North Korean defectors are fiercely determined to live an ordinary life. It's a yearning to be…'average' in every aspect – in their studies, their livelihood, their employment." In order to understand state expectations for North Korean migrants' self-management to "settle down" and "adapt well," we must first look at North Korean migrants' experience with pursuing an "ordinary life" in South Korea. Of course, what counts as "settling down well" into an "ordinary life" varies by generation. As I observed throughout

my fieldwork, older arrivals who have aged out of pursuing higher education often assimilate into working-class sectors such as construction or service labor, while younger migrants who attend university may enter middle-class professions like teaching or office work.

In a promotional video for Saebit School, the school pursues the "average" by documenting a day in the life of alumna and current Saebit teacher Lee Shimil, a North Korean migrant who spent years begging for food as a *kkotjebi* (homeless child in North Korea) before crossing the Tumen River into China at 15. Nine undocumented years in China kept him from school until, at 25, he arrived in South Korea and entered Saebit as a middle school student. Today, seventeen years later, he lives in a cramped suburban apartment with his wife and two daughters. The video follows him on a typical morning, brushing his teeth and drying his hair quietly in his office so as not to wake his children, before commuting to work through the early morning haze. Captions read: "17th year living in Seoul. 6:20 AM. An ordinary office worker who goes to work early." In the video, Shimil reflects, "I want to express gratitude for the ordinary life I have now, which I longed for so deeply during my long time in North Korea and China." When I spoke to him after the video was released, he explained that his hope for his students is that they similarly lead "ordinary lives" (Interview, October 25, 2024).

Though an ordinary life for younger migrants entails office work, many North Korean migrants I met complained of the hypercompetitive nature of South Korean office work culture. South Korea's *hangnyeokjuui* (credentialism) and, by extension, *seupeng ssaki* ("spec" accumulation) culture that favors quantification of skills reflect neoliberal values of self-management and contribute to a hypercompetitive and hierarchical work culture (Choi, 2021). One North Korean-born university student, Yoonmi, who was studying for a life insurance licensure examination, lamented: "Even after you get the job it's a competition. Because, say one person gets an 80% on their exam, then your supervisor compares you to someone else and says, 'Well this employee got a 90%, why can't you be more like them?'" (Interview, September 10, 2023). Inherent in the reported speech of Yoonmi's supervisor is the *chagi kwalli* self-management expectation that, as Han (2018) and Seo (2010) argue, normalizes a logic of constant self-improvement and measures it against performance indicators like assessments. Although these cultural norms are a part of a middle-class "ordinary life" in South Korea, they are also shaped by South Korea's position in the global hierarchy– an arbitrary metric produced through multiple international indices that claim to measure development, gender equality, and human progress.[6]

[6] With the world's twelfth largest economy, South Korea appears highly developed. Yet, as Nora H-J. Kim (2015) notes, its global position as a "middle country" has long shaped its developmental strategy and foreign policy approaches. Globalization initiatives under the Kim Young Sam administration (1993-1998), for example, exemplify Korean leaders' fixation on elevating the nation's standing in the international community commensurate with its economic status.

Producing "Unification Talents" (*Tongil Injae*) as Human Capital for the Future

The biopolitical terms used in state and civil society discourse to describe youth–*injae* (talents) and *tongil injae* (unification talents)--reveal how the unification apparatus figures them as investable instruments of its nationalist project. Within an HCT framework, individuals are understood as forms of capital whose value lies in their skills, knowledge, and capacities to generate economic returns (Becker, 1964). The Korean term *injae*, translated as "talents" or "human resources," reflects this logic by framing subjects' productive capacity as discipline, competitiveness, and achievement. This is evident in phrases commonly used in Korean educational policy and university mission statements, such as *gukka injae yangseong*, "cultivating national talent/human resources" (Ministry of Education, 2022). Cultivating "talent" in these framings is tied to producing labor market-relevant skills and thus contributing to South Korea's economic transformation.

Neoliberal logics are so deeply embedded in South Korean society that even actors positioned at its margins reproduce them. One alternative school principal, Choi Ok, herself a North Korean migrant, articulated this orientation in an interview with Radio Free Asia, describing her primary goal as cultivating "talent for unification:"[7]

> North Korean defectors and youth are invaluable in preparing for unification. They have experienced both the South Korean and North Korean systems, so when unification occurs, they will be able to go to North Korea and clearly tell what is right and what is wrong. They will be able to explain why North Koreans are poor and starving. These students are the future of unification. That's why we need to produce many talented individuals among North Korean defector students. While we've focused on supporting North Korean defectors in difficult circumstances so far, I believe we also need to focus more on nurturing talent for unification… I have mentored many excellent students in North Korea, and my dream is to see many of them enter prestigious universities in South Korea. (Yang 2009)

Here, Principal Choi's emphasis on "nurturing talent" reflects a human capital logic in which investment is directed toward those whose capacities can be developed into high-value assets for a future unified Korea. This value is indexed through elite educational attainment, particularly admission to prestigious South Korean universities, which function as sites for the accumulation and certification of human capital. In this context, education is less a social good than a mechanism for producing competitive subjects capable of generating returns within an imagined post-unification educational and labor market.

[7] The development of "talent" for society is a distinctly South Korean value not unique to alternative schools – present in other South Korean public and private high school's educational missions. For example, one public school has as its mission: "To educate creative talents who can contribute to the world." By contrast, international schools in Seoul with British or American curricula have more individualistic-oriented educational philosophies. For further reading on South Korean neoliberalism and education, see Abelmann, Park, & Kim (2009); J.S.-Y. Park (2010); Song 2009; Park & Abelmann (2004).

As John Patrick Leary (2019) argues, "talent" functions as a positivist catchall that collapses labor, education, and health into a single metric of value, deeply entrenched in late capitalist constructions of individualism and human capital. From an HCT perspective, investments in migrants' "knowledge, skills, health, and habits" render them legible as future economic actors whose worth is tied to their anticipated productivity and contribution in a post-unification economy (Leary, 2019, p. 111). The category of "unification talent" thus functions as a technology of valuation that aligns individual development with national economic futures.

So central is this idea of developing "unification talents" that the Ministry of Unification launched a "Unification Talent Academy" in 2020. The program recruits North Korean migrants to participate in a series of lectures and community service activities framed as preparation for future unification leadership roles (UniKorea, 2021). Early cohorts attended lectures by South Korean university professors on international relations, diplomacy, philosophy, and life in North Korea. By 2024, participation in the Unification Talent Academy conferred formal credentials, including "Research Member" status at the Institute for North Korean Studies and opportunities to serve as guest reporters. Similarly, the Hana Foundation has hosted a "Future Unification Talent Day" since 2023, awarding North Korean university students identified as having "excellent capacity-building" and strong performance in online English education programs as "unification talents" (Kim 2025). At the same time, these neoliberal state vocabularies of "unification talent" and "ordinary lives" frame social and cultural assimilation into South Korean capitalist society as both civic duty and economic necessity. In doing so, they obscure the extent to which North Korean migrants' futures are structured through an HCT logic that ties their potential labor to the state's unification project.

Alternative schools for North Korean youth are particularly concentrated sites where this logic becomes visible, as educational success is translated into both economic promise and political worth. Nearly every school references unification in its mission statement, explicitly positioning North Korean youth in both neoliberal terms as human capital for unification and in temporal terms as laboring bodies toward a future national condition. Across school mission statements, students are repeatedly described as future workers, talents, leaders, and builders: "*workers* for the restoration of free, democratic unification," "*leaders* for the unification era," "*talents* who *will achieve* unification of the world," "*talents* who *will lead* the change of the times," "*leaders* who *will contribute* to Korea's future as a unified nation," "person who is *used to build* a unified Korea," "*leaders* who *will play* central roles in the future of a unified Korea," "*future leaders* for unification," "*future leaders* who *will inherit* the destiny of a unified nation, joining North and South together." The recurrence of terms such as *lead, talent, cultivate, adapt, achieve, next generation, grow,* and *future* reflects what Leary (2019) identifies as "the moral vocabulary of late capitalism," which celebrates self-investment and human capital while cloaking labor extraction in moral and religious language (p. 6). This, I argue, is a distinctly human capital approach, which Klees (2016) argues "turns education into… an investment that makes one more productive," (2016, p. 659).

Such solution-oriented approaches to education pivot on technocratic questions: How will unification be funded? How can it be made economically viable? How will North Koreans adapt to South Korean society? These questions rest on the assumption that complex social problems can be resolved through technical solutions, and particularly through education (Leary, 2019). In this framing, unification becomes a manageable scenario, addressed through the production of adaptable and productive North Korean-background subjects. Phrases in the future tense, such as "*will* achieve," "*will* lead," "*will* play a central role," "*future* leaders," and "*will* inherit" directly tether students' worth to a deferred state horizon. Within this logic, the language of human capital relies on North Korean-background students' capacity to articulate their future contribution to the unification project.

Settlement policies and alternative schools thus operate through a shared logic that elevates a select few students as "unification talents," making recognition contingent on conformity to South Korea's neoliberal norms of achievement and productivity, and to legibility within a future-oriented temporal order. In drawing these boundaries, the state produces migrants simultaneously as emblems of unification and as governable forms of human capital.

Relevance and Further Research

This article has shown how South Korean state and civil society actors frame North Korean-background youth as forms of human capital to be cultivated for a future unified Korea. Through analysis of interviews and discursive artifacts, including state speeches, policy discourse, media, campaign slogans, and school visions, I demonstrate how categories such as "unification talent" and "first to come of unification" position North Korean migrants as investments whose value lies in their anticipated contributions to national development. In this way, alternative schooling spaces participate in broader neoliberal projects that link education to economic productivity and future state-building.

By foregrounding HCT, this study contributes to comparative and international education by illustrating how education systems function as sites where migrant youth are differentially valued. The case of North Korean migrants extends existing critiques of human capital approaches by showing how they function not only in labor market policy but also in projects of state-building in conditions of protracted conflict. The findings from this study are relevant to global contexts of migration, displacement, and crisis, where states frame marginalized populations as potential human capital to be developed for national and global economies (Spring, 2015). Such framings can cloud ongoing inequalities by shifting attention toward future-oriented state projects rather than present conditions of exclusion. By attending to how social adaptation initiatives—particularly those that emphasize self-management, "talent" and "leadership-- function as technologies of governance, this paper offers a critical lens for examining how migrant populations can be valued and recognized beyond human capital terms.

This analysis has focused primarily on state and institutional framings of North Korean migrants within policy discourse, media, and schools. Future research might

complement this state-centered perspective by centering migrant youth's own temporal imaginaries and aspirations, including how they negotiate, resist, or reconfigure these state-imposed futures. Longitudinal research following North Korean-background youth beyond institutional settings would further illuminate how forms of conditional citizenship shift as migrants pursue transnational futures over time. More broadly, extending this analytic framework to other contexts marked by stalled political futures, unresolved conflict, or migration crises may reveal how states' positionality within global orders governs the everyday experiences of migrants in the present. Attending to time as a political technology invites renewed attention to how states govern not only populations, but also the futures toward which people are expected to orient themselves, even when those futures remain uncertain or unrealized.

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