

Reflections on North Korean Community-Based Research

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Abstract

I reflect on my year-long experience as a South Korean researcher conducting a community-based oral history of North Korean migration during my master's degree. Against an historical backdrop of two warring countries and numerous divides between my interlocutors, the academic establishment, and me, I explore the methodological significance and challenges of conducting a North Korean oral history. In the hopes of greater solidarity and reflexivity, I discuss the lessons learned through this process and the need to keep resisting against established ways of researching and knowing.

Introduction

My master's thesis was slightly atypical of much of what is written about regarding North Korea and its people. Scholars have long pointed out the essentialism of North Korean historiography, painting North Korea as a "frightening and demonic foe of freedom, rationality, and basic human goodness" (Em 1993). Archival bias from North Korea's state documents have played a role in historical scholarship about North Korea. Before the advent of large-scale migration opening the availability of sources, the archive was largely dominated by state-published documents, leading to the reproduction of the propaganda and the significance of the state security apparatus within historical research (Schmid 2018; Em 1993). Within the context of the enduring Korean War (1950-1953), inter-Korean relations have also shaped representations of North Korea, most significantly through the rise of a human rights framework after the North Korean famine in the 1990s, which began the rise of more significant numbers of migration out of North Korea. Since then, migrant testimonies emphasized accounts of suffering and trauma. As such, both historical scholarship and the dominance of the human rights framework contributed to a one-sided representation of North Koreans, indicating the need to "reframe the archive" (Hong 2013).

I used a community-based oral history method to explore the relationship between places and identities and the role of and narratives produced by borders. From the beginning, I was aware that my research is on the margins of what might be considered valid academic knowledge production. I used research as a space to tell and legitimize people's stories; as a social project to recover, reclaim, and restore subjugated knowledge, power, and justice; and to build peace between warring communities. It is true that the

researcher has the power to speak in an authoritative voice, and I wanted to use that opportunity to do research in a way that no one would fund or sanction.

Borders, Past and Present

From a myriad of interests, I thought long and hard about which topic to spend the next year researching and writing about, and in particular which topics I *could* speak about. I didn't want to be one of those clichéd students studying international development who helicopter into a country they know little about and write an ethnographic account of a people they met for a couple weeks. As a person of color and first-generation immigrant researching in a European institution, I was already only limited to studying my own culture, even though the same rules don't apply to white researchers. But then I thought, who else, if not from the freedom of disinterest in a master's thesis, could write about a community-based oral history of North Korean migrants in the United States that challenged both the institution of research and historically produced inequalities? Not many, I realized, as I began to see how I could contribute to the need for post-positivist research in North Korean studies.

I began my fieldwork in early 2020, leveraging my own identity as a South Korean migrant in the United States to reach North Korean migrants living in Southern California. I was the co-ethnic outsider, occupying a liminal transnational space between the Korean peninsula and the United States. It was the deep history of the continuing Korean War and discrimination against North Korean people across the world that formed the lines of division between us – borders that weren't there when my grandparents were born.

The division of the Korean peninsula has its roots in the era of Japanese colonization (1910-1945) and the subsequent Cold War. After the Japanese surrendered to Allied forces in 1945, ideological contestations over the future of a post-colonial Korea fractured the country (Stueck 1995). The inter-Korean border we know today began forming in 1946 through the separate occupational zones of the Soviet Union in the north and the United States in the south. The Korean War ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.¹

Since then, we have lived as two countries at war, separated by a highly militarized border even as both Koreas still claim sovereignty over the entirety of the Korean peninsula. Though I came from a privileged position that could never understand the lived experiences of my interlocutors, I was also positioned to listen across the lines that divided us and project them onto the English-speaking world. There were elements that connected us, such as the feeling of being a foreigner in a new place and the undefinable complexities of migrant identity. My narrators engaged with my research with interest, noting that no one had ever approached them to listen to their version of the story and on their own terms. I aimed to explore the relationship between people and places by centering North Korean oral histories of migration and comparing them to social and historical discourses about North Korean identity.

¹ For further reading about recent Korean history and the division of the Korean peninsula, see also: Aaltola 1999; Armstrong 2010; Byman and Lind 2010; Chubb 2014; Kwon 2003; McEachern 2019; Park 2010; Seth 2010.

Community-Based Research

I used community-based research in recognition that, too often, research has not served the interests of the communities it aimed to study. Much of my inspiration came from the work of indigenous scholars, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, for whom research continues to be a form of colonialism, and who are still struggling to transform the institution of research and its operating logic. Tuhiwai Smith introduces their formative book, *"Decolonizing Methodologies"* is concerned not so much with the actual technique of selecting a method but much more with the context in which research problems are conceptualized and designed, and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities. It is also concerned with the institution of research, its claims, its values and practices, and its relationships to power" (Tuhiwai Smith 2010, xi).

Although indigenous and North Korean studies may seem worlds apart, the concept of decolonizing methodologies provided me with the words to articulate my approach to research as a site of contestation and change, and to question the way things always have been, a way that has reinforced power relations between the researcher and researched across distinct geographical boundaries. One of the biggest human rights violations on the Korean peninsula is the continuing Korean War, as Christine Hong (2013) has argued, and one of the biggest perpetrators is the spectators of academia, tending towards ahistoricity from a normative moral framework. I heeded the calls to explore the subjectivities of North Korean migrants (Lee 2011; Bell 2014) by conducting an oral history that revealed multiple ways of remembering and relating to places. I built my relationships with my interlocutors over time, building trust, and though inadequate, researching with, rather than on, my interlocutors.

Oral History Methods

Oral history was an attractive methodology to approach via community-based research for many reasons. Today, it is imbued with critical and feminist perspectives that pay attention to the very unequal power relations between researcher and interlocutor. As a research methodology, it allowed for an exploration into the subjective experiences of my narrators, how they constructed their migration journeys and engaged with the wider social and historical narratives told about them; in particular, oral history's purpose of speaking across lines, as Alessandro Portelli (2018) describes. It provided the opportunity to explore what my narrators found meaningful enough to speak about, which included how they remember their lost homes and the confinement of their identity within fixed national borders. As I wrote in the conclusion of my thesis, "Even though it is not enough, I hope this thesis demonstrates that speaking across lines is possible, if only one is willing to listen."

As a researcher on the margins, however, there were several other lines that I had to shout across as my research continued, such as race, gender, and accepted academic practices of knowledge production. Because I addressed not only my research topic – an oral history of North Korean migration – but more broadly, the institution of research and its methodologies, my "field" extended beyond my interview locations and into academia. I was warned by many academics and community members that my research would be no easy feat, and many questioned whether or not I would be able to find participants willing to open up to me without the levels of compensation commonly utilized to gain North Korean participants.

Researching Across the Divide

Finding participants and listening to their oral histories was one of the least difficult aspects of the whole process. Despite what I was warned, connecting with my interlocutors and gaining their trust was not as difficult as my own struggle for recognition within academia. I thought I was prepared for the pushback – not only from the established academics used to doing things a certain way, but the institutional pushback questioning things that would perhaps not normally be criticized in other research. Gatekeeping is one thing; the emotional toll of having to explain why your research is valid in the first place and why it is a topic deserving of attention is another.

I aimed to explore the significance of the inter-Korean border, which formed the basis one of the three “meta-narratives” in the oral histories of my interlocutors, not only in their narration of border crossings but of the consequences of bordering practices: othering and exceptionalizing. My interlocutors acknowledged these meta-narratives, simultaneously reproducing, refuting, and engaging with them. These results, inevitably imbued by my own experience as a transnational researcher, and from my observations about the marginalization of North Korean people, were perhaps too subjective for comfort, even as I demonstrated exactly how I came to those conclusions from my interlocutors’ words. It is true that my framework was somewhat pre-decided; I set out to question the things taken for granted, to challenge normally held assumptions about my interlocutors’ lives. I drew my literature from similarly critical sources, choosing to critique the canon of Euro- and Ameri-centric perspectives about migration and, in particular, North Korea.

From my experience, doing research on the margins makes one more vulnerable to criticism, and being a person from the margins even more so. This is not to say that I am immune to criticism just because of my intentions and identity, but I found that challenging the systems and structures of academia itself were unwelcome – not in obvious ways, but through microaggressions. What was more draining was the constant barrage of white male subjectivity masquerading as Objectivity, which tended to focus on the “what” of research and not necessarily “how” and “for whom” it is done. More established scholars questioned of what concrete value an entirely oral historical method would have, resigning my research as a “cute” effort rather than a serious academic endeavor. I provided no useful statistics for public policy nor fundraising fodder for activist organizations, my writing style was too colloquial, and my conclusion provided no recommendations for change other than lingering and listening. I was lucky, however, to find mentors, advisors, and interlocutors supportive of such endeavors.

Lessons Learned

Research, in its current form, does little to benefit the people whose entire lives are summarized into words on a page. We must do more, and we can do more. Research has the power to produce knowledge, to border, to other, and to exceptionalize people. It is not only the subjects of our research, but our methods and the basis of our knowledge, that require critical examination and questioning. Sometimes, academia is critical about everything but itself, its own contributions to relations of power, or its disconnect from the world that it purports to study. We deal with human lives, some more directly than others, and with that comes responsibility.

I believe in research as social justice: to reclaim and recover the power and knowledge that has been taken away from us previously. I have a social responsibility as a researcher to decolonize and build peace, to positively impact the people that made my research possible, to share power, and to be accountable at all stages of the research process. Unfortunately, such research isn't as common or easy as we might hope. There are many of us who feel a fatigue that sets in deeper in our bones. We are tired of the struggle, from swimming against the tide.

I am sharing my experience of going against the grain in the hopes that the next person who stops to question methodology and the purpose of research might be better equipped with proper comebacks for those who don't realize the need to change the way things are done. We must become more trans-disciplinary, listen more radically, and research back in solidarity. When space is not easily given by those in power, we must come together, along with the communities we aim to serve, to make a space of our own. Now at the crossroads of continuing a non-academic professional career and considering a doctoral program, I would be bolder, less apologetic, and reach out more to communities of like-minded researchers. As Tuhiwai Smith implores, we must question the logic and methods of research. We need to critically examine what is currently taken for granted, because change is the willingness to stop and question everything.

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About the Author

Chae Yeon Kim is a climate communicator by day and a researcher-writer by night. As a bilingual, transnational Korean American, she is interested in work at the margins, embedded in communities and with respect to diverse forms of knowledge. She cares about global inequality, quiet voices and forgotten histories. Her writing has been featured in Mochi Magazine and Riksha.

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