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PROJECT

Repertoires of Redemption: Migration, Asylum, and Religion in the Era of Involuntary Immobility

When the Trump administration made Christian refugees an exception to its so-called “Muslim Ban,” pundits wondered if this policy would require the government to assess who are real Christians. This kind of quandary is not new. The controversies over the Christian conversion of Muslim migrants from Iran, Afghanistan, or Syria have generated a similar debate in Europe. These controversies pose a set of intriguing questions. Does the state have the right or capacity to establish an individual’s religious identity? What types of actors are involved in refugee-making and with what motives? What kinds of practical challenges, legal intricacies, and moral dilemmas do they face, and how do they make sense of and respond to these? My book project explores these questions by drawing on long-term, transnational, multi-sited ethnographic research on the migration trajectories, legalization strategies, and religious conversion careers of ethnic Korean migrants from China to the United States, focusing especially on those who apply for refugee status as Christians.

My project moves beyond “seeing like a state,” to borrow James Scott’s much-celebrated term. It instead turns attention to how migrants see the state, or more specifically, how migrants experience the everyday working of immigration law and actively partake in the dialogical production of “refugees” from above and below. The project’s bottom-up view reveals how the migration-control regimes of affluent liberal democracies are centrally involved in the unequal distribution of life chances, honor, credit, and moral worth across the globe. It also shows how (aspiring) migrants’ extensive engagement with these regulatory apparatuses, long before their arrivals on the shores of affluent immigration states, informs their entrepreneurial approach to the asylum institution. Migrants’ encounter with immigration law is rarely unmediated, though. My project sheds light on the dense, transnational networks of for-profit and non-profit intermediaries that buttress, appropriate, modify, or contest the story that law tells about itself. By bringing together macro- and micro-level analyses, the project investigates how migration governance, transnational religion, and the politics of humanitarianism are navigated and negotiated on the ground with their full complexity and contradictions.

Recommended Reading

Kim, Jae Eun (2022). “Between Sacred Gift and Profane Exchange: Identity Craft and Relational Work in Asylum Claims-Making on Religious Grounds.” *Theory and Society* 51 (2): 303–333.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-021-09468-8>.

– (2024). “Seeing like a Church, Seeing like a State: The Church-State Relation in Religious Asylum Adjudications.” *Canopy Forum: On the Interactions of Law and Religion*. Posted on May 23, 2024. <https://canopyforum.org/2024/05>

/23/seeing-like-a-church-seeing-like-a-state-the-church-state-relation-in-religious-asylum-adjudications/.

– (2025). "Getting Saved from Illegality and Unbelief? Religious Asylum, Migration Dreams, and Christian Conversion." In "Mobile Temporalities and Political Possibilities," special issue, *Migration Studies* 13 (3).
<https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnafo41>.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Kim, Jaeun (Oxford,2025)

Getting saved from illegality and unbelief? Religious asylum, migration dreams, and Christian conversion
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1935530879>

Kim, Jaeun (Dordrecht [u.a.],2021)

Between sacred gift and profane exchange: identity craft and relational work in asylum claims-making on religious grounds
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=193553212X>

Kim, Jaeun (Stanford,2020)

Contested embrace : transborder membership politics in twentieth-century Korea
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Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center
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Kim, Jaeun (London,2018)

Ethnic capital, migration, and citizenship: a Bourdieusian perspective
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=173391580X>

Kim, Jaeun (London [u.a.],2018)

'Ethnic capital' and 'flexible citizenship' in unfavourable legal contexts : stepwise migration of the Korean Chinese within and beyond northeast Asia
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1733912428>

Kim, Jaeun (London,2018)

Migration-facilitating capital : a Bourdieusian theory of international migration
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725217325>

Kim, Jaeun (Stanford, California,2016)

Contested embrace : transborder membership politics in twentieth-century Korea
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1628105453>
Studies of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1628105453>

Kim, Jaeun (Cambridge,2014)

The colonial state, migration, and diasporic nationhood in Korea
Jaeun Kim
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1733913203>

Kim, Jaeun (Cambridge [u.a.],2011)

Transborder Membership politics in Germany and Korea
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1733907963>

Kim, Jaeun (Cambridge,2011)

Establishing identity : documents, performance, and biometric information in immigration proceedings
<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1725216949>
Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin