

# NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN SOUTH KOREA

## ARDUOUS ESCAPE AND DIFFICULT INTEGRATION

*Norbert Eschborn / Ines Apel*

"We can't live in North Korea because of fear, we can't live in China because of fear of deportation and we can't live in South Korea because of ignorance." This saying is widespread among North Korean refugees living in South Korea. It perfectly sums up the dilemma of a group of thousands of people who are no longer willing to live their lives under the totalitarian regime of the Kim family in North Korea. They therefore undertake an arduous and highly risky escape from their homeland – a journey that often takes many years – only to find they then have to face the many difficulties of integrating into the society of their final destination, South Korea.

The status of these refugees in South Korea is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, they are ideal subjects for official propaganda and it was not without a certain undertone of irony that South Korea's *Kore Joongang Daily* announced in February 2007 that the 10,000<sup>th</sup> North Korean refugee had arrived in South Korea on 16 February 2007, the 65<sup>th</sup> birthday of former North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il.<sup>1</sup> Since that day, the number of refugees has more than doubled. At the same time, their political status in South Korea is not necessarily that of refugees. A common South Korean description for such people can be translated as "someone who has renounced North Korea". Almost as pejorative is the term "defector", commonly used by South Korea's English-speaking press and which also appears in official



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1 | Cf. Myo-ja Ser, "10,000<sup>th</sup> defector arrives on Kim Jong-il's birthday", *Korean Joongang Daily*, 17 Feb 2007, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2872545> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

government documents. In this way, North Korean refugees find themselves stigmatised by native South Koreans. This is particularly true of the younger generation, who tend to feel totally alienated from North Korea and its people. How do North Koreans manage to escape and what kind of material and personal sacrifices do they have to make in the process? Is it worth it and what kind of prospects do these people now have?

### **REFUGEE MOVEMENTS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA SINCE 1945**

On 22 August 1910, Korea officially came under Japanese colonial rule and so became part of the Empire of Japan.<sup>2</sup> Japanese rule ended on 2 September 1945 following the country's surrender at the end of the Second World War. Korea was subsequently divided up along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by the USA and Soviet Union, the victorious powers in the Pacific War. After the division, some two thirds of the total population ended up living in the U.S.-controlled South. However, the industrial centers and most of the country's mineral reserves were in the North, which meant that for a long time the North's economy was superior to that of the rural South. Even before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the Soviet Union prevented the exchange of goods between the two Koreas and sent products manufactured in the North to the USSR instead.

**Before the official founding of the two states in 1948 around one third of North Koreans migrated to the poorer South, mostly people who had been forcibly displaced or politically persecuted.**

In spite of North Korea's economic advantage,<sup>3</sup> around one third of North Koreans migrated to the poorer South before the official founding of the two states in 1948. These migrants were predominantly people who had been forcibly displaced and made to work in the industrial regions of the North and Manchuria, along with those who had been politically persecuted in North Korea after 1946, including landowners, business people, followers of various religions and alleged political opponents of the

2 | As early as 1876, Japan had forced Korea to open Korean ports to Japan in Busan, Wonsan and today's Incheon. For more on Korea's recent history, see: Bruce Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun. A Modern History*, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.

3 | It has been documented that until 1970 North Korea's economic output was higher than that of South Korea.

Kim Il-sung regime. Only around 4,000 refugees moved in the opposite direction and settled in the North between 1946 and 1948, mostly out of political conviction. Relations between the two countries worsened, with repeated clashes at the border until eventually an attack by North Korea on South Korea heralded the start of the Korean War on 25 June 1950.<sup>4</sup> On 27 July 1953, an armistice agreement was signed after 4.5 million people had been killed during the hostilities.<sup>5</sup> No official peace agreement has ever been signed by the two countries.

**The conflict between the two countries turned into a war on 25 June 1950 with an attack on South Korea. Until the end in 1953, 4.5 million people had been killed.**

The country was divided by a four-kilometer-wide demilitarised zone. After the war was over, many prisoners of war saw the South as a more attractive option than the North. During the prisoner exchanges known as the Little Switch (20 April to 3 May 1953) and the Big Switch (5 August to 23 December 1953) a significant number of prisoners taken by the U.S.-led United Nations forces (7,604 North Koreans and 14,235 Chinese) chose not to return to their homelands. By comparison, only 347 prisoners of the North, among them 21 Americans and one Briton, opted to stay in North Korea.<sup>6</sup> In order to be sure that those involved had made their decisions of their own free will, a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission was set up and presided over by India to ask each individual about the motives for their decision.<sup>7</sup> Those who refused to return to the South mostly did so for political reasons: one black American non-commissioned officer, for example, claimed that race discrimination in his own country

4 | Particularly since the opening of the Soviet archives, it is now known that Kim Il-sung had been seeking agreement from Stalin for a military solution to the reunification of Korea for some time before the outbreak of the Korean War. Cf. inter alia Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin. Am Hof des roten Zaren*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2007, 692 et sqq.

5 | A more recent German-language account of the conflict has been written by: Bernd Stöver, *Geschichte des Koreakriegs: Schlachtfeld der Supermächte und ungelöster Konflikt*, Munich, Verlag C.H. Beck, 2013. Among the classic histories of the Korean War is Max Hastings, *The Korean War*, London et al., Pan Books, 2010.

6 | Cf. Stöver, *ibid.*, 125 et seq.

7 | Cf. James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the Korean War*, New York, William Morrow, 1988, 189.

motivated his decision.<sup>8</sup> However, not all repatriations took place voluntarily. Later – for example when the prisoners returned – it became clear that the majority of UN soldiers had been subjected to indoctrination and that some of them had been trained as spies.



Constant monitoring: North Korea's people are permanently controlled by the state for loyalty to the regime. | Source: Roman Harak, flickr ©📷📷.

Over time, the number of refugees heading to the South fell dramatically. This was in part due to the North's economic power but also because of the efficiency of the border control system that North Korea had put in place in the mid-1950s. Until the early 1990s, only five to ten people per year succeeded in escaping to the South, almost exclusively members of the North Korean elite. These refugees were not only in a position to give the South Korean authorities valuable information about the North, but they could also be used for propaganda purposes against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The South Korean government therefore tried to encourage people to defect, rewarding those who did with a significant amount of money and providing them with bodyguards for a while after their arrival.<sup>9</sup>

8 | Looking back, we can see that Germany also experienced voluntary migration to the communist East. Between 1950 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, some half a million people moved from the Federal Republic of Germany to the GDR. Cf. Stöver, n. 5, 140 et seq.

9 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, "Bitter Taste of Paradise. North Korean Refugees in South Korea", in: Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland (eds.), *The North Korean Refugee Crisis. Human* ▶

Seoul's policy towards the refugees changed in the 1990s when North Korea lost almost five per cent of its population in the crisis that academic literature refers to as the "great famine" (1996 to 1999).<sup>10</sup> Although certain external factors contributed to this outbreak of famine, including the collapse of the Soviet Union, (which had always provided essential support to North Korea), and the floods of 1995, (for which the North Korean government must take the lion's share of the blame), these were not the only contributing factors. The majority of the population relied on the national food distribution system, but this was clearly beginning to break down and the government was not doing enough to prevent its collapse.

North Korea's dramatic economic situation may have increased the freedom of some North Koreans to do business and travel, but it also created the ideal environment for corruption as a way for individuals to ensure they had sufficient personal supplies. The economic liberalisation of China that had begun in 1978 and the collapse of border controls between the two countries in the early 1990s allowed many North Koreans who wanted to flee the famine to escape to the People's Republic by crossing the Tumen, the river at the North Korean-Chinese border. The majority came from North Korea's three northern provinces, Chagang-do, Hamgyŏng-pukto and Ryanggang-do, which were the ones most affected by the famine. In China it was easy for them to find work as day labourers. The Chinese were initially well-disposed towards the North Koreans, as in the 1960s many Chinese had sought refuge in North Korea during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

According to a study carried out between November 1998 and April 1999 by the South Korean non-governmental organisation "Good Friends",<sup>12</sup> there were between 143,000

*Rights and International Response*, The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), Washington D.C., 2005, 55.

10 | Cf. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Hunger and the Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea*, HRNK, Washington D.C., 2005, [http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hunger\\_and\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hunger_and_Human_Rights.pdf) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

11 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2004, 856-873 and 859, <http://jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2004.44.6.856> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

12 | Cf. *ibid.*

**At the turn of the millennium, instead of privileged members of North Korean society, refugees were mostly poor farmers or workers who tried to find a way to South Korea.**

and 195,000 North Korean refugees living in Northeast China. Meanwhile, 34 North Korean refugees reached South Korea between 1990 and 1993, 306 arrived between 1994

and 1998 and 1,043 between 1999 and 2001. Instead of privileged members of North Korean society, these refugees were now mostly poor farmers or workers who were driven by hunger to find a way to China and then onwards to South Korea. As the number of refugees increased, their political value to the government in Seoul started to lessen. It felt that the dangers posed by communism were now significantly diminished after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The South Korean government reacted by no longer trying to encourage North Koreans to flee their country. The reason they gave for this change in policy was that they feared a worsening of relations with North Korea. At the same time, the fact that the social status of the refugees was now different led to the concern that North Koreans from a predominantly poor background would be unable to adjust to life in South Korea and would end up being a burden on the country's economy.<sup>13</sup>

## REASONS FOR FLEEING

### Social Constraints

Individual motivations for wishing to flee North Korea should be viewed against the backdrop of the DPRK's fundamental ideological principles. *Juche* is North Korea's state ideology and is often translated as "autarchy" or "self-reliance". At the core of this ideology, which was developed during the 1970s, is the requirement to put national interests and characteristics before all else.<sup>14</sup> The brains behind it is believed to be Hwang Jang-yop, who fled to the South in 1997. He is considered to be the highest-ranking North Korean refugee of all time on account of his former party function as chief ideologist.<sup>15</sup> Another key element of *Juche* is the idea that North Koreans are too innocent and pure to

13 | Cf. Lankov, n. 9, 55 et seq.

14 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, 67.

15 | Cf. "Highest-ranking N. Korean defector found dead", *The Korea Times*, 10 Oct 2010, [http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/10/113\\_74270.html](http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/10/113_74270.html) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

live in a world of evil without a father-figure to lead them. This role of the “Great Leader” and the “Eternal President” was assigned to Kim Il-sung.<sup>16</sup>

Another peculiarity of North Korea is the *songbun* system,<sup>17</sup> which classifies the status of individuals in terms of their loyalty and trust using three main and 51 sub-categories.

**According to North Korea’s ideology the people are classified into three social categories that represent their loyalty to the system.**

The main categories are called *haeksim*, *dongyo* and *choktae*. Members of the *haeksim* or “core” class are considered to be the most loyal. They enjoy significant advantages in all areas of life, including social welfare, educational opportunities, medical care, food supplies and the allocation of housing and job assignments. Next come the members of the *dongyo* or “wavering” class. The loyalty of this group to the government is seen as not necessarily guaranteed, but it is credited with being able to serve the regime through economic and political efforts. However, ongoing ideological indoctrination is necessary to maintain the reliability of this class of citizens. The lowest class is the *choktae*, the “hostile” class. Its members are seen as opponents of the regime and are discriminated against in the same way that members of the *haeksim* class are favoured.

Although the information is not made public, most North Koreans know the class they have been assigned to. Of a population of 23 million in 2008, 28 per cent belonged to the *haeksim* class, 45 per cent to the *dongyo* class and 27 per cent to the *choktae* class. The North Korean Ministry of State Security holds a file on every citizen from the age of 17 onwards. The file contains details of their *songbun* classification and is updated every two years. It is not unusual for a person’s *songbun* classification to be downgraded, for example if a crime is committed. And if someone commits a political crime, they will not only have their classification downgraded to the lowest level, but are also likely to be sentenced to prison for life, a punishment that can also be meted out to up to three generations of their family. Marrying someone from a lower *songbun* level is unthinkable,

16 | Cf. B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters*, Brooklyn, Melvine House, 2011, 9.

17 | A detailed description of the *songbun* system can be found in: Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun. North Korea’s Social Classification System*, HRNK, Washington D.C., 2012.

as this too will lead to one's own level being lowered.<sup>18</sup> Improving one's *songbun* level is near to impossible.<sup>19</sup>

Even before the founding of the DPRK, there had been attempts to establish a system of social classes. The future leaders of the North tried to restructure the Confucian feudal system of the Korean Chosun Dynasty (1392 to 1897) and of the Japanese colonial system (1910 to 1945) in order to empower the working classes. The idea was that this would be at the expense of landowners, businessmen and followers of religion. The people of North Korea, 80 per cent of whom were peasants at that time, were generally positively disposed towards this policy. One of the first goals was land reform. The main targets were landowners, supporters of the Japanese colonial administration and followers of religion, who were basically excluded from the new society and had their assets confiscated. The result was that millions of people from these classes fled to South Korea. Their relatives who stayed behind suffered discrimination before being exiled to mountainous regions in the north of the country.

**Over the years, the gulf between the classes grew, because the job assigned to each person by the party is based on that person's *songbun* level.**

Following a three-year study, the citizens of North Korea were finally divided into the three classes mentioned above. While loyal citizens initially had little to fear from the consequences of the introduction of the system, the gulf between the classes continued to grow. This was partly due to the fact that the job assigned to each person by the party is based on that person's *songbun*, and this job allocation is binding for the rest of their lives. Someone with a low *songbun* level may have to work in the mines, while those with a high level would be given the opportunity to

18 | A good example of this system at work is the 1972 marriage of Kim Kyong-hui, sister of the dictator Kim Jong-il who died in 2011, to Jang Sung-taek, who later became a highly influential party functionary and was suddenly executed in December 2013. Rumour has it that the country's founder Kim Il-sung was vehemently opposed to the marriage of his daughter to Jang on *songbun* grounds. *Songbun* problems are also credited as being the reason behind the suicide of Jang and Kim's own daughter, as marriage to her partner of choice was deemed impossible due to his lower level.

19 | The only known example is that of a victorious Olympic athlete who was allowed to move to Pyongyang with her family after she won her medal. The capital is considered to be the best place in the country to live.



attend university. Using bribes in an attempt to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the *songbun* system are not uncommon but risky. In 2003 the Ministry of Public Security introduced the Chungbok 2.0 software to digitalise citizen registration data,<sup>20</sup> so the North Korean state security apparatus now possesses a copy of all *songbun* files.

### **The Attractiveness of the South and Modern Communications**

In the early days after division, very little information about the rest of the world made its way into the closed country of North Korea. But since the breakdown of the food distribution system and the emergence of new markets, it has become much harder for the government to control the flow of information into and out of the country. Today, for example, it is possible to find foreign DVDs, CDs and USB sticks on the black market.<sup>21</sup> In 2006 alone, 350,000 DVD players were apparently imported from China. By manipulating equipment, it is now even possible to receive foreign TV and radio broadcasts.

It is clear that North Koreans have become far too disillusioned with their country's own unrealistic propaganda to disbelieve all the things they hear about South Korea via these media. As a result, North Koreans are becoming increasingly aware of South Korea's economic superiority, to such an extent that, since the year 2000, government propaganda has stopped referring to impoverished South Korea and begun talking about a South Korea that is not unsuccessful economically, but one in which people lead unhappy lives because of their cultural oppression by American imperialists.<sup>22</sup>

Information also continues to flow into and out of the country via smuggled Chinese mobile phones, which many refugees use to keep in contact with their families in border

20 | Cf. Collins, n. 17, 26.

21 | Cf. Kim Yonho, *Cell Phones in North Korea. Has North Korea Entered the Telecommunications Revolution?*, US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2014, 7, <http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Kim-Yonho-Cell-Phones-in-North-Korea.pdf> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

22 | Cf. Lankov, n. 14, 103.

regions by taking advantage of Chinese phone networks.<sup>23</sup> In March of this year, there were reports that North Korea had introduced new detection systems to identify and punish those who receive foreign telephone calls. As a result, the number of calls made with foreign countries has apparently gone down.<sup>24</sup> It was also reported in the same month

**Besides the betraying of state secrets, the reception of foreign radio oder television might be considered an act of treason and could be punished by death.**

that five new paragraphs had been added to North Korea's criminal code making the following activities an act of treason: making illegal telephone calls to foreigners; watching South Korean soap operas or DVDs; listening to foreign radio broadcasts; using or selling drugs; transnational human trafficking; enforced prostitution; helping or inciting somebody to flee the country and betraying state secrets.<sup>25</sup> According to the law, harsh penalties will be imposed against those committing such offences, including the death penalty. Since the criminal code was amended, there have increasingly been reports of executions due to breaking these new laws. For example, it has been reported that a man was executed for contacting his family in South Korea;<sup>26</sup> as had two men for breaching the laws on prostitution. Prior to the changes in legislation, it was likely they would "only" have been sent to a re-education camp. It remains to be seen whether these executions are only intended to act as a deterrent or whether such crimes will continue to be so harshly punished in future. But it can be assumed that such activities would not have been criminalised if they were only considered to be minor issues.<sup>27</sup>

23 | Cf. Kim, n. 21, 7.

24 | Cf. Mi Jin Kang, "Cellphone Use Drops as Detectors Close in", *DailyNK*, 4 Mar 2014, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=11592&cataId=nk01500> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

25 | Cf. Mi Jin Kang, "Criminal Code Inciting Border Fears", *DailyNK*, 21 May 2014, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=11885&cataId=nk01500> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

26 | Cf. Mi Jin Kang, "Hyesan Man Executed as Example for Rest", *DailyNK*, 22 May 2014, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=11891> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

27 | Cf. Mi Jin Kang, "Two Shot over Prostitution as Article 60 Enforced", *DailyNK*, 18 Jun 2014, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=11980&cataId=nk01500> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

### **Excursus: The Role of the People’s Republic of China in the Treatment of North Korean Refugees<sup>28</sup>**

In order to fully understand the North Korean refugee problem, it is important to look at the role played by the People’s Republic of China. The main escape route for North Koreans is across the border between the two countries which runs along the Yalu and Tumen rivers. Therefore China always plays the role of a transit country, even if it is not the final destination itself. The Chinese government considers the escapees to be illegal immigrants who are fleeing because of hunger, not because they fear persecution. They refuse to afford them refugee status, even though the People’s Republic of China is a signatory to the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, but also recognises that the DPRK has not itself signed the Convention. China therefore sees it as its duty to repatriate them. In doing so, Beijing justifies its actions by referring to a number of treaties and agreements it has signed with Pyongyang, such as an extradition treaty for criminals, agreements on border surveillance and China’s own law on the repatriation of illegal immigrants and anyone who crosses the border illegally.



Crossing borders: North Korea and China are geographically divided by the Tumen River. Strict controls on both sides are supposed to prevent the escape from North Korea. | Source: Roman Harak, flickr ©©©.

28 | Cf. Yoon Yeo-sang, Park Seong-cheol and Lim Soon-hee, *North Korean Defectors in China. Forced Repatriation and Human Rights Violations*, Seoul, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2014, 31 et sqq.

However, China only really began taking action against North Korean escapees in the 1990s, when it was specifically requested to do so by Pyongyang. Part of the reason may have been China's gratitude towards North Korea for supplying its neighbour with food aid during the 1960s. What was also evident at that time was that many North Korean escapees were returning to their homeland once they had increased their food and money supplies in China. However, with the North Korean famines of 1995 and 1996, the number of refugees and those who wanted to stay in China for a longer period or flee to another country rose once again.

### Penal and Prison Camps

**Caught refugees will be brought to police facilities. Their fate will be decided after long questioning, during which they are regularly tortured.**

People who are caught trying to escape to China or who are repatriated from China are interrogated in North Korean police facilities (*ku-ryu-jang*). Here they are questioned

about the reasons for their flight, where they stayed and what they did. Later they are questioned about visits to religious buildings and any activities relating to South Korea. Their fate will be decided after what may be several months of questioning, during which they are regularly beaten and tortured. Most are then sentenced without trial to a short period of forced labour in detention centers (*jip-kyul-so*), or in mobile labour brigades (*ro-dong-danryeon-dae*).

If their escape is considered to be politically motivated, then they may, in individual cases, be sentenced to life imprisonment in re-education camps (*kyo-hwa-so*) or in the "revolutionary zones" of the *kwan-li-so*, often referred to as "gulags" after their Soviet equivalent. Many of those who are repatriated from China end up in the *jip-kyul-so*, where they serve sentences of up to six months. The fact that the sentences are relatively short does not mean the treatment meted out in these prisons is any less inhumane. Many prisoners die before the end of their sentences from a combination of hard labour and starvation. Prison sentences in the *ro-dong-danryeon-dae*, which were originally set up to deal with the growing number of North Koreans repatriated from China, are even shorter than those in the *jip-kyul-so*. There, escapees who have been repatriated are separated from other prisoners to prevent them from

reporting on the relative freedom and prosperity they have witnessed in China. Many prisoners even receive some form of trial.<sup>29</sup>

Others are sent to the *kyo-hwa-so* penitentiaries that exist in every North Korean province. They are designed to re-educate prisoners and make them better citizens through hard work and indoctrination. They are forced to learn Kim Il-sung's speeches by heart and exercise self-criticism, particularly when it comes to fulfilling their work quotas. In contrast to the *kwan-li-so*, which are designed for political prisoners, the *kyo-hwa-so* handle all serious offenders or felons. An example of a "serious" crime is singing a South Korean pop song. Another difference is that prisoners know the "crime" they are accused of and their whole family is not arrested with them, as can be the case in the *kwan-li-so*. The families know where they are being held. Not all, but some prisoners are even given a trial to decide their sentence. However, conditions in these camps are so hard most prisoners die before completing their sentence,<sup>30</sup> which is why the *kyo-hwa-so* are also known as "death camps".

**Unlike political prisoners, felons are not arrested with their whole family and their sentence can be decided by a trial.**

Prisoners may be sent to a *kwan-li-so* for crimes (in the eyes of the regime) such as wrong-doing, wrong-thought, wrong-knowledge, wrong-association or wrong-class-background. People may be accused of wrong-class-background if their ancestors were aristocratic landowners. Practising a religion such as Christianity is also a serious crime that may result in imprisonment. This may be due to a historical fear on the part of North Korea's rulers, as before Korea was freed from Japanese colonialism Pyongyang was known as the "Jerusalem of the East".<sup>31</sup> At that time, 22 per cent of North Korea's population of 9.6 million

29 | Cf. David Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag. The Lives and Voices of "Those Who are Sent to the Mountains". Exposing North Korea's Vast System of Lawless Imprisonment*, HRNK, Washington D.C., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2012, 84 and 119 et sqq., [http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_HiddenGulag2\\_Web\\_5-18.pdf](http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_HiddenGulag2_Web_5-18.pdf) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

30 | Cf. Hawk, *ibid.*, 84.

31 | Cf. Andrei Lankov, "North Korea's missionary position", *Asia Times Online*, 16 Mar 2005, <http://atimes.com/atimes/Korea/GC16Dg03.html> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

were considered to be religious.<sup>32</sup> Kim Il-sung's parents were even thought to be Christians.

**Under North Korea's widespread belief in "three generations of punishment", not only the offenders, but also their families can be sent to the camps.**

In theory, the *kwan-li-so* are divided into two zones: one for prisoners serving a life sentence and one for those who have the possibility of release, as can occur on public holidays such as New Year or Kim Il-sung's birthday.<sup>33</sup> But there are no records of anyone being freed since 2007.<sup>34</sup> Under North Korea's widespread belief in "three generations of punishment", based on the penal practices of the feudal Chosŏn dynasty, not only the offenders themselves, but also up to three generations of their families can be sent to the camps.

In 2013 South Korea's Institute for National Unification (KINU) estimated the number of political prisoners to be between 80,000 and 120,000.<sup>35</sup> The North Korean government denies the existence of the camps, which sprang up in the 1950s when Kim Il-sung was consolidating his power, but eye-witness reports and satellite photos mean they can no longer be kept a secret. Many camps have gradually been closed down, but after the execution of high-ranking party official Jang Seong-taek, the uncle-by-marriage of ruling dictator Kim Jong-un, the Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shimbun* reported that the prison camps were being expanded.<sup>36</sup> Inside the camps food is a means of exercising power. Breaches of camp rules result in threats to reduce rations. Guards also use the promise of food or better working conditions to entice women into providing sexual favours. As this violates camp rules, these women are often executed if they get pregnant.<sup>37</sup> North Koreans

32 | Cf. Collins, 78.

33 | Cf. Hawk, *The Hidden Gulag*, 34.

34 | Cf. David Hawk, *North Korea's Hidden Gulag: Interpreting Reports of Changes in the Prison Camps*, HRNK, Washington D.C., 2013, 11, [http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/NKHiddenGulag\\_DavidHawk\(2\).pdf](http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/NKHiddenGulag_DavidHawk(2).pdf) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

35 | Cf. Chico Harlan, "Population of North Korea's gulag has shrunk, experts say", *The Washington Post*, 12 Sep 2013, <http://wapo.st/1v7pkWK> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

36 | Cf. also the South Korean report by: Song Sang-ho, "N. Korea expanding prison camps: Pyongyang appears to have locked up many arrested for connections to Jang Song-thaek", *Korea Herald*, 7 Apr 2014, <http://koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140407000982> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

37 | Cf. Hawk, n. 29, 31 et seq. and 34.

believe they are a racially pure people that is superior to all others, so unions with Chinese are treated as defilement. Women who are pregnant when they arrive in the camps from China are forced to have abortions.<sup>38</sup>

The camps are also home to informants, who tell the guards when other prisoners break the rules. This creates an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility. Escape attempts are punished by public executions, usually by hanging or firing squad. In general, executions are frequently held in front of other prisoners as a deterrent. Mortality rates in the labour camps are high because of the bad conditions, lack of food, hard labour, torture and poor safety in the workplace.<sup>39</sup> And it should not be assumed that treatment in the short-term prisons is any better than in the *kwan-li-so* or *kyowa-so*. The conditions in all these prisons are totally inhumane. There is some evidence to suggest that convicts with a good *songbun* background are favoured in terms of length of sentence and place of imprisonment.<sup>40</sup> Upon their release, prisoners are given a passport that allows them to be immediately identified as former convicts by the North Korean authorities.<sup>41</sup>

**Mortality rates in the labour camps are high because of the bad conditions, lack of food, hard labour, torture and poor safety in the workplace.**

## FIRST STOP: CHINA

After 1990, the once well-secured border between China and North Korea gradually began to open up. This was mainly due to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the economic crisis this triggered in North Korea. The country's worsening financial situation led to a huge increase in corruption, including among border soldiers and officials. These changes made it possible for refugees to flood into China, particularly when North Korea was afflicted by famine between 1996 and 1999. The three northern provinces of Chagang-do, Hamgyŏng-pukto and Ryanggang-do were particularly badly affected, and it is likely that the famine led to the deaths of one third of their population.<sup>42</sup>

38 | Cf. Hawk, n. 29, 95.

39 | For a comprehensive list of human rights abuses in North Korean internment camps (in German), see: *Nordkoreanischer Menschenrechtsfallbericht: Victims' Voices*, Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, Seoul, 2013.

40 | Cf. Collins, n. 17, 19.

41 | Cf. Hawk, n. 29, 35.

42 | Cf. Yoon, n. 28, 32.



Seeking refuge in the big cities: China is oftentimes the first stop after escaping North Korea. A metropolis such as Shanghai offers anonymity to the refugees, who, nevertheless, live in constant fear of being sent back. | Source: Riwan Erchard, flickr ©①⑤②.

At the end of 1998, non-governmental sources estimated the total number of North Korean refugees in China to be between 140,000 and 200,000. Numbers dropped off as the crisis began to ease – between 2001 and 2003 the figure was still at 100,000, but today it is somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000. Reasons for this trend included stricter border controls, the improved food situation in North Korea, the growing number of people successfully leaving China for South Korea and regular arrests and repatriations on the part of the Chinese government. In 2002, large numbers of North Korean escapees stormed various embassies in China seeking refuge. This led the Chinese authorities launching large-scale search operations in three provinces of Northeast China. According to press reports, these led to the repatriation of some 4,500 refugees and tighter border controls. The refugees had mainly gathered in China's north-eastern provinces, where a significant proportion of the population were ethnic Koreans. After the year 2000 they began to spread out to other regions, including Beijing, Qingdao, Shanghai and the Tibetan region of Western China. Today, the majority live in large cities or in areas where the population is predominantly Han Chinese. This resettlement seems to have occurred because of the heightened risk of being discovered in Chinese communities that have large Korean populations. Reasons for China's clampdown on refugees include the fact that North Korea is still a vital strategic partner. But it is also because of Beijing's fear of masses



of refugees surging into China, which could lead to the collapse of the North Korean regime. The aim of this stricter refugee policy is to reduce the number of escapees and the international attention they attract.

Over the years, the number of refugees has fallen, but their profiles and preferred destinations have also changed. During the 1990s, men and women were leaving the North in equal numbers, but now the majority of refugees are women. One of the reasons for this is the one-child policy, which has created a severe gender imbalance in China. This has resulted in a trade in women, and North Korean women often become victims of trafficking who will be sold on to China. Traffickers can earn between 1,000 and 10,000 yuan (120 to 1,200 euros) for every woman they deliver to a buyer.<sup>43</sup> If these women are living with Chinese men, then it is certainly easier for them to stay hidden in China and find work, often in the service sector, but they are still illegal immigrants. They enjoy no legal protection because their marriages are not recognised by the Chinese authorities. Women who manage to escape these kinds of forced marriages generally end up doing casual jobs to earn a living, including prostitution. Their wages are far below those of the local population – if indeed they get paid at all.

Of those who make it to China, only a small proportion dares to try to reach South Korea. In China there are no legal channels for them to seek refuge in South Korea, so they have to try to enter via a third country. Brokers offer to smuggle them into South Korea for a payment of 10,000 U.S. dollars. The broker's fee is around 10,000 U.S. dollars, a sum that normally can only be raised by people who have relatives in South Korea. In 2000, half of all refugees who made it to South Korea already had family there. As refugees, North Koreans who present themselves to the authorities in South Korea receive South Korean citizenship and financial assistance.<sup>44</sup>

43 | Cf. Hae Young Lee, *Lives for Sale. Personal Accounts of Women Fleeing North Korea to China*, HRNK, Seoul, 2009, 9, [http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Lives\\_for\\_Sale.pdf](http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Lives_for_Sale.pdf) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

44 | Cf. Lankov, n. 11.

## LAST STOP: SOUTH KOREA

### Social Familiarisation

People who successfully flee to South Korea have to submit to a hearing. Depending on their status and background, this can take as long as 180 days.<sup>45</sup> It is followed by a comprehensive program of social familiarisation (revised in April 2012). This lasts for over twelve weeks and involves more than 400 hours of instruction. All refugees are placed on a central register and complete this program in Anseong, a city 80 kilometers south of Seoul.

**Through comprehensive programs in South Korea the refugees should regain their physical and emotional strength, learn about South Korean culture, and receive career training.**

The *Hanawon*, a facility run by the Ministry of Unification, is designed to help refugees settle into South Korean society. Upon completion of the program, they receive a family register and become citizens of South Korea.

According to the Ministry of Unification, the aim is to help refugees regain their physical and emotional strength, give them a better understanding of South Korean culture, provide career advice and training and familiarise them with the government's settlement program.

The program is divided into 123 hours of instruction on South Korean society. Participants learn about the political concept of democracy and the market economy and attend history and language classes.<sup>46</sup> They are also taken on field trips to learn how to deal with everyday situations. In addition, refugees have to attend a 49-hour program to help them with emotional stability and health issues. There is another 51 hours of instruction on government assistance for refugees, along with training on how they can become more independent. Other courses include bookkeeping and gaining a driving licence. *Hanawon* even has its own small clinic.<sup>47</sup>

45 | Cf. Chico Harlan, "In South Korea, high-profile defector is accused of spying for the North-by his sister", *The Washington Post*, 18 May 2013, <http://wapo.st/1pB3e9A> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

46 | Language classes are necessary because experts estimate that, since Korea split in two, some 3,000 different terms have emerged in every area of life. These have to be learned in order to understand the colloquial language of South Korea.

47 | Cf. more details on integration courses in: *White Paper on Korean Unification 2013*, Ministry of Unification, Seoul, 2013, [http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/index.do?menuCd=DOM\\_000000204001001000](http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/index.do?menuCd=DOM_000000204001001000) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

The *Hanawon* in Anseong only has space for 200 people, but the actual number of refugees had grown to 400. So on 5 December 2012 a second *Hanawon* was opened in Hwacheon, 90 kilometers from Seoul, with a capacity of 500. This *Hanawon* is designed for male refugees only, whereas the facility in Seoul will house women only. South Korea still has a very traditional view of gender roles, as evidenced by state regulations that make courses gender-specific. Cooking courses are restricted to women, whereas only men can learn to become car mechanics.<sup>48</sup>



Arrival with obstacles: Integration into South Korean society is not easy for refugees from the north. In addition to looking for jobs and getting oriented in a city like Seoul, they face the problem that many South Koreans know very little about the refugees and their situation. | Source: Mark Goh, flickr ©①③③.

The 2012 revision of the program was sorely needed. In “Eyes of Pyongyang”, a column for North Korean refugees on the website of the North Korean Strategy Center (an organisation that works to promote democracy in North Korea), a young woman writes how she was unable to cope when she was released from *Hanawon* and had to travel

48 | For more details cf. Tongil baekseo, *Unification White Paper 2014*, Ministry of Unification, Seoul, 2014, [http://www.unikorea.go.kr/index.do?menuCd=DOM\\_000000105003005000](http://www.unikorea.go.kr/index.do?menuCd=DOM_000000105003005000) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

alone on the subway for the first time.<sup>49</sup> Many refugees also complained they were already familiar with 50 to 60 per cent of the subjects on the curriculum. They also said it was difficult to really concentrate on the classes, as they were worrying about the family and friends they had left behind and simply wanted the program to be over as quickly as possible.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of the program, the refugees receive help to find accommodation, often close to family members. Each refugee also gets a payment in instalments totalling seven million won (in the region of 5,000 euros at current exchange rates). Additional financial assistance is available to seniors over 60 years of age, people with physical or psychological illnesses, people who need long-term medical care and children with only one parent.<sup>51</sup> Other assistance includes an easing of recruitment requirements for refugees and tax breaks for companies who employ refugees.<sup>52</sup>

### Integration – Problems and Assistance

**In order to reach South Korea, many refugees use a broker who helps to get to a third country from where they can legally apply to emigrate to South Korea.**

Refugees say one of the main problems they face until they leave *Hanawon* is the fact that they live in a constant state of dependency and supervision. This not only applies to the time spent in the reception center and during their hearings in South Korea, but also to their journey up to this point. In order to reach South Korea, many of them use a broker who helps them to get to a third country from where refugees can legally apply to emigrate to South Korea. But this process can take a long time. Then there are the long-drawn-out hearings, as previously mentioned. Since 2010, a government ruling means that refugees from the North

49 | "My most Shocking Moment in South Korea", NKSC, 13 Feb 2014, [http://nksc.co.kr/english/bbs/board\\_view.php?bbs\\_code=bbsIdx9&num=9825](http://nksc.co.kr/english/bbs/board_view.php?bbs_code=bbsIdx9&num=9825) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

50 | Cf. Hak Min Chung, "To become the Hana Center that defectors need", NKSC, 31 Jul 2013, [http://nksc.co.kr/english/bbs/board\\_view.php?bbs\\_code=bbsIdx9&num=9779](http://nksc.co.kr/english/bbs/board_view.php?bbs_code=bbsIdx9&num=9779) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

51 | Cf. n. 47, chapter 6.

52 | Cf. Ministry of Unification, "Press Release: A revised law on protection and resettlement support for North Korean defectors promulgated", 26 Mar 2010, [http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/board/view.do?boardId=BO0000000090&menuCd=DOM\\_000000201002000000&startPage=1&dataSid=220127](http://eng.unikorea.go.kr/board/view.do?boardId=BO0000000090&menuCd=DOM_000000201002000000&startPage=1&dataSid=220127) (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

can now be held in detention centers during their hearing for twice as long as before – 180 instead of 90 days. This is due to the growing number of arrests of alleged spies. During their hearings, refugees are kept under constant surveillance (video cameras in their cells) and are also questioned at night without a lawyer in attendance. Activists have criticised these practices as being a legal grey zone.<sup>53</sup>

An assessment of the psychological pressures placed on refugees, not only during their long and dangerous journey to South Korea, but also after their arrival, shows that they find it difficult to get used to and enjoy their new freedoms. According to a survey by the Yeon-Myung School,<sup>54</sup> 60 per cent of North Korean refugees felt insecure and 30 per cent of respondents displayed symptoms of depression. It also revealed that 60 per cent of students suffered from diabetes and anaemia as a result of their escape. They receive help during their stay at *Hanawon*, but this is not enough for refugees to recover from their trauma and overcome their worries about family members left behind in North Korea or China.<sup>55</sup>

After they have completed the *Hanawon* program, refugees can seek help from one of 32 *Hana* centers throughout the country. These centers offer an intensive three-week program which helps refugees to find jobs and to learn about medical care and training opportunities. After completion of the program, the centers offer ongoing regular consultations for up to one year and recommend other help organisations. In contrast to *Hanawon*, which is run by the Ministry of Unification, the *Hana* centers are run by private contractors on behalf of the government. In 2012, 95 per cent of refugees attended a *Hana* center, and 92 per cent completed the program.<sup>56</sup>

53 | The sister of accused spy Yoo Woo-sung describes how she was verbally abused, humiliated and forced to make false statements during her time in the detention center. She claims she was forced to stand in front of other North Korean refugees wearing a sign stating "I come from China". In the end, Yoo Woo-sung was cleared of being a spy after it was proven that the South Korean secret service had falsified evidence. Cf. Harlan, n. 45.

54 | This school is based in Seoul and works to integrate young North Korean refugees into South Korean society.

55 | Yeon-Myung School brochure.

56 | Cf. n. 47, chapter 6.

In South Korea, huge emphasis is placed on obtaining a good education and it is difficult to get a good job without attending one of the country's elite universities. So it is not easy for North Korean refugees to enter the labour market. A job center was set up in 2012 to help them find work. There are also monthly job fairs where refugees can find employment with small and medium-sized companies.<sup>57</sup> From January 2010 to December 2012, 4,800 refugees took part in these job fairs. 1,632 of these received job offers, which were accepted by 312 people (19.2 per cent). This kind of government initiative is vital, as 20.7 per cent of refugees only do casual work. It is true that this figure has fallen by 32.2 per cent since 2011, but it is still high. This also explains the pay gap between North Korean refugees and employees of South Korean descent. With a weekly average of 47.9 hours, North Koreans tend to work harder than their South Korean colleagues (by 7.9 hours), but their wages are well below the national average. Unemployment among former refugees stands at 9.7 per cent compared to just 2.7 per cent among South Koreans.<sup>58</sup>

**Monthly job fairs offer a chance for refugees to find employment. Almost 5,000 attended those events so far.**

In an attempt to prevent high staff turnover, the South Korean government rewards North Korean refugees who stay in the same job for a year or more. In 2009 this amounted to 5.5 million won (approximately 4,000 euros). There are also financial incentives to complete training courses and gain qualifications. The money that refugees are given when they complete the foundation course at *Hanawon* is often used to finance the escape of family members left behind in North Korea or China.<sup>59</sup>

57 | Although it cannot be empirically proven, it seems fair to assume from this that major South Korean conglomerates never or only rarely take on North Korean refugees. Small and medium-sized companies in South Korea still do not have a good reputation as employers, partly due to their poor pay and conditions.

58 | For more details see: Eun Ju Moon, "Defectors in SK Report Incomes Half National Average", *DailyNK*, 13 Feb 2014, <http://dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01501&num=11504> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

59 | Cf. n. 47, chapter 6.

## How Happy Are They with Their New Lives?

Existing studies on whether North Korean refugees are happy with their new lives in South Korea have given rise to some interesting points. 54.2 per cent of respondents say they are happy and 20.3 per cent even describe themselves as very happy. This suggests that three quarters of respondents believe – at least publicly – they made the right decision to flee their homeland. Reasons given include the fact that they are now paid more appropriately for their work, along with economic freedom and the lack of constant surveillance and controls. Those who claim to be unhappy cite financial difficulties (70.2 per cent) and discrimination against refugees (33.6 per cent) as the main reasons.<sup>60</sup>

**According to a survey, three quarters of respondents believe – at least publicly – that they made the right decision to flee their homeland.**

65 per cent of refugees live in Seoul because it offers better opportunities for jobs and education. Since 2012, North Korean refugees are also allowed to work for provincial authorities and the national government.<sup>61</sup> Although the assistance given to refugees by the South Korean government is portrayed in a positive light, the time they spend at *Hanawon* is simply too short to prepare them for life in a totally different country. And it is not only the refugees who need to learn about life in South Korea. In turn, South Koreans need to learn more about North Korea and its refugees. Many of them still seem to have little understanding of the refugees' situation. Since 2011, South Korean broadcaster *Channel A* has been running a program on Sunday evenings in which North Korean refugees talk about their lives in North Korea and the difficulties they face in South Korea. But discrimination or perceived discrimination remains a problem.<sup>62</sup> According to the Yeomyung School, six out of ten students conceal their origins because they fear discrimination.<sup>63</sup> The constant use of

60 | Cf. Moon, n. 58. The value of the survey results are somewhat limited because of the strong imbalance between male and female respondents (almost 1 to 3).

61 | Cf. n. 47, chapter 6.

62 | Cf. "Gu Ga-in, [Saturday sketch] Channel A, 'Let's go and meet them', episode 100...Conversations that could not be held by beautiful refugee women" [author's translation], dongA.com, 4 Nov 2013, <http://news.donga.com/NewsStand/3/all/20131101/58630761/1> (accessed 20 Jun 2014).

63 | Cf. n. 55.

borrowed English words in the South Korean language also causes communication problems. Perhaps this is another reason why five out of 100 young North Korean refugees drop out of university, compared to just one in 100 South Koreans. It also seems that short-term psychological help is not sufficient. The terrible ordeals they have endured in North Korea and during their escape mean that many need long-term help.

### **NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES – FOREIGNERS IN KOREA?<sup>64</sup>**

After completion of the familiarisation program at *Hanawon*, North Korean refugees are given a South Korean passport. However an intensive three-month course and an official document are not enough to turn them into South Koreans. It is not possible to simply erase or overwrite their former lives and the experiences that have shaped their personalities. Both Koreas still officially uphold the myth of “one Korea” and “one people”. But in reality the people of the two countries are becoming increasingly estranged from each other as time goes by. This is not only because of the considerable disparity between the living conditions of the two nations, but media reporting on both sides serves to ramp up mutual distrust. This is another reason why it is a mistake to believe that having Korean origins is enough in itself for North Korean refugees to integrate smoothly into the South.

South Koreans have many reservations about their Northern compatriots. This is because of the refugees’ ideological indoctrination in the North Korean system and the fact that many have lived illegally in China. Many South Koreans believe the things they had to do to survive are immoral and barely legal. This is why South Koreans tend to be suspicious of North Koreans and why an invisible gulf divides them. South Koreans are also worried about North Koreans “taking their jobs” and are envious of the fact that it is easier for these new citizens to gain access to the coveted places and scholarships at elite universities in Seoul due to more relaxed entry requirements, while South Koreans have to work hard and take an entrance exam.

64 | The information provided in this article is the result of conversations between the author and young North Korean refugees. The interviews were organised with the help of the Yeo-Myung School.





Credibility and compassion: If the South was more open-minded it would help to give credibility to the inter-Korean dialogue of President Park Geun-hye, here at a commemoration on 6 June 2014 in Seoul. | Source: Jeon Han, Korean Culture and Information Service, flickr ©①②.

As long as the North Korean regime is in existence and people continue to seek asylum in South Korea, it is necessary to forge a basic sense of understanding and actively work to reduce prejudices on both sides. The *Hanawon* program seems to be a good start for helping refugees to settle into their new home. But is this the only and best way of achieving successful integration? When it comes to familiarisation, it should be noted that South Korea differs hugely from North Korea and the refugee's transit country of China. Despite many thousand years of common Korean history and the same basic language, the cultural, political and technological gap yawns so widely that they would seem to need more than just a three-month stay at *Hanawon* to prepare them for their new lives.

Based on the experiences of German reunification, it can be concluded that North Koreans need to learn about the South, but in turn South Koreans need to learn about the North. They need to gain a better understanding of the people, daily lives and culture of their neighbours. However, this requires easy access to such information from the government in Seoul – particularly via new media channels – but this is being prevented by Seoul's prevailing legal climate. Greater openness on the part of the South

would help to spark the interest of young South Koreans in the issue of reunification and lend credibility to President Park Geun-hye's policies on Korean rapprochement. North Korean refugees would also benefit from this, as there is still one element that is really lacking in South Korea: compassion.<sup>65</sup>

65 | Cf. in this respect the speech given by President Park Geun-hye at Dresden University of Technology on the occasion of her state visit to Germany on 28 March 2014: "An Initiative for Peaceful Unification on the Korean Peninsula", 31 Mar 2014, Korea.net, <http://korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=118517> (accessed 28 Jul 2014).