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## North Korean defectors: their life and well-being after defection

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## **1. Introduction**

The major purpose of this study is to understand the situation faced by North Korean defectors in the north-eastern countries of Asia. In recent years, an increasing number of North Koreans have fled to neighbouring nations such as China and Russia. These defectors have fled from their nation not only as a result of political persecution, but also for economic reasons such as hunger, malnutrition and fear of starvation. However, their lives in these new countries have hardly improved and may even be worse. They continue to suffer from hunger and live in fear of arrest and forced deportation.

In spite of these hardships and miseries, the defectors cannot return to their homeland. Even those who crossed the border with the imminent threat of starvation and no political motivation fear that North Korea will consider them as political turncoats and thus national traitors. It has been reported that upon return they are sent to concentration camps, or, in some cases, executed in public.

The North Korean defector issue is a fairly recent one. Until the early 1990s, many defectors were by and large politically motivated. However, since 1995, when a historic flood engulfed North Korea creating many economic problems, especially food shortages, a massive number of North Koreans have crossed the border. Of course, some people, such as members of religious and civic organisations, have already expressed their grave concern about these refugees and attempted to help them, but they are short of manpower and other resources.

Although there have been many anecdotal reports and rumours about the way of life of these refugees, little systematic research has been conducted. This study attempts to investigate the living conditions of North Korean defectors in the north-eastern region of Asia: how they are treated, what problems they encounter, what coping strategies they have, what their future plan is, including their final destination, and so forth. In view of the fact that female defectors constitute three quarters of all defectors (Korean Sharing Movement International 1999), this study gives special attention to women's experiences.

## **2. Background to the research**

Most studies about North Korean defectors tend to focus on those who entered South Korea. Many studies have aimed to investigate the North Korean defectors' adjustment process in South Korea, focusing on their social, economic and psychological problems (Kim and Chung 1996 & 1999; Min and Chon 1997; Park, Kim and Lee 1996; Sung, Suh and Shim 1993). Some studies have been concerned with evaluations of existing governmental support systems for these defectors, looking for better social support systems to help their adjustment, on a governmental as well as civic organisational level (Kim and Yoon 1997; Lee and Song 1997; Lee and Kim 1996). At the same time, other research papers have dealt with South Koreans' attitudes towards North Korean defectors. For example, their degree of approval of the governmental support programs for North Korean defectors, their stereotypes of and social distance towards North Korean defectors, their prejudice and discrimination and so on (Chung 1997; Shim 1995; Lee 1997a & 1997b; Chon and Lee 1998).

These research papers help to understand North Korean defectors' situations in South Korea. However, it is hard to find studies about the living situation of North Korean defectors who are unable to settle yet in their final destination, and on the defectors' experiences before entering South Korea.

Even the estimated number of North Korean defectors living outside North Korea varies. The Chinese government, which is reluctant to address the defector issue in public, gives a number of 10,000 persons. Various non-government organisations come up with 100,000 to 300,000. The

South Korean government sits in between, with an estimate of 30,000 to 50,000.

Table 1 below shows the number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea by year. The number of North Korean defectors living in South Korea stood at 1,990 at the end of 2001. Of these, 616 defectors entered South Korea prior to 1990, with the remaining 1,384 defectors having entered since 1991. The annual number of defectors to South Korea has dramatically increased since 1994. Last year alone, 583 defectors escaped to the South. These numbers, however, are trifling compared with the estimated numbers of defectors living in the north-eastern region of Asia.

**Table 1: The number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea, by year**

Year	Up to 1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
<b>Number of defectors</b>	616	9	8	8	52	41	56	86	71	148	312	583	<b>1,990</b>

*Source: Association of Supporters for Defecting North Korean Residents (2002).*

To facilitate understanding this report, we present below two factors that underlie North Korean refugee issues: the North Korean situation and the North Korea–China connection.

## **2.1 North Korean situation**

In order to understand why massive refugee problems occur in North Korea, we should understand the North Korean situation. North Korea is infamous for running an extremely centralised economic system. Every sphere of economic activity, including production and distribution, is strictly controlled by the central government. As the Constitution (Article 20) says: 'Means of production shall be under the possession of the state and social cooperative organisation'. No private spheres of activity are allowed.

This is also true of the social system, which organises all people from 'the cradle to the grave'. Every person is organised into one or more social organisations such as Boy Scouts, Kim Il Sung Socialist Youth League, Labor Party, Workers' League and Women's League. Education, medical services and even daily necessities, including food, have been provided virtually 'free' of charge. Cultural diversity is not allowed — only Juche ideology is instilled.<sup>1</sup> Such a system was in place until the 1980s when the authorities declared North Korea to be 'a paradise on earth'.

However, contrary to the insistence of the authorities, the system has gradually deteriorated since the 1980s or even earlier. Production and consumption have decreased. Short-term and mid-term economic plans have failed several times. The economic growth rate, as estimated by the South Korean authorities, shows a dramatic turn in the North Korean economy. Table 2 shows the economic growth rates of North Korea in recent times.

<sup>1</sup> The major proposition of the Juche ideology is: 'The master of revolution and construction is people at large and the force to drive them also resides in people'. However, that ideology has been transformed into the means of instilling into people the legitimacy of the supremacy of one man, that is, Kim Il Sung, succeeded on his death by his son, Kim Jong-Il, in 1994.

**Table 2: North Korea's economic growth rates, by year**

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Growth rate	-3.7	-3.5	-6.0	-4.2	-2.1	-4.1	-3.6	-6.3	-1.1	6.2	1.3

Source: Korea National Statistical Office (various years).

As the table shows, the economic growth rate was below zero during most of the 1990s. North Korean defectors testify that the distribution of food to the public was first disrupted in the early 1990s. At first the amount distributed decreased, then the schedule became inconsistent and since 1995 there has been no distribution at all. However, North Korea cannot admit this problem because it is a 'paradise on earth' created by its great leader Kim Il Sung.

The year 1995 when an 'unprecedented flood ravaged the whole country' was a turning point. The authorities had to admit that massive starvation was imminent and ask for international help. Hwang Jang-yop, who in 1997 was the highest official to defect to South Korea and who was known as the master of Juche ideology, insisted that 500,000 people died of starvation in 1996. The same number of people were expected to die in the year of his defection. Defectors in the late 1990s also testify that they witnessed people starving to death at home, on the streets, at railway stations — virtually everywhere. According to one survey of 1,383 defectors in China by a South Korean civic organisation, more than 75% of the respondents had one or more immediate family member who died of starvation (Commission to Help North Korean Refugees 2000). Although it is not known for sure how many people have died of malnutrition and starvation, it is clear that the North Korean economic system has failed to the extent that massive starvation poses a threat to the whole system.

As a result of the disruption to the economic system, the social system that North Korea had endeavoured to build since the founding of the regime also began to disintegrate. People began to find fault with the system and the leader. They stayed away from their workplaces, complaining of food shortages. They began to listen to foreign radio, which was strictly forbidden. Today, the number of people who engage in informal trading and private cultivation is increasing. A number of free markets or the so-called 'farmers' market' operate all over the country. Defectors say that the authority now tolerates such activities.

Moreover, increasing numbers of people engage in deviant behaviour. Those in charge take bribes to the extent that defectors say that North Korea is a country where nothing can be done without money while anything can be done with money. Ordinary people engage in trading and/or pilfering. Many youngsters spend time begging and stealing around the marketplaces.

What is alarming, even to North Korea watchers, is the prevalence of travelling. In North Korea, travellers are required to carry travel permits to move beyond the county line. Of course, these permits are rarely issued for personal purposes. However, as the government cannot provide daily necessities, it can no longer control the people as before. Nowadays, people can travel around almost as freely as they want. They can obtain travel permits more easily, buy them if they cannot officially obtain them or simply travel around without a permit. Since there are so many people moving around, the government can no longer control them.

Thus it can be argued that refugee problems are not a matter to be solved for the foreseeable future. Even though in 2001 there was an above average grain harvest, this was still not enough to feed the people.

## 2.2 North Korea–China connection

Most North Korean defectors are known to reside in China. One of the reasons that North Koreans prefer China is geographical. North Korea is bordered by China and Russia to the north, South Korea to the south and Japan off the East Sea. It shares about 90 per cent of its inland border with China and the remaining 10 per cent with Russia. Moreover, there are several spots on the North Korea–China border where the depth of the river is so shallow that people can easily cross by swimming or walking, especially in winter. Thus, geographically speaking, the chances of North Koreans getting into China are substantially higher than for them to get into Russia.

Of course, South Korea is another neighbouring country. However, the nature of the relationship between North and South Korea is such that they might hesitate to go to the South. In fact, there is a military demarcation line running 155 miles from the West Sea to the East Sea. This line is heavily fortified on both sides with barbed wire, foxholes, land mines and military personnel. In fact South Korea is one of the most difficult countries for North Koreans to enter.

In addition, China has been maintaining close ties with North Korea, both historically and socially. Just before and during the Japanese takeover of the Korean peninsula, North Koreans migrated to north-eastern China in mass, by crossing the Arok and Tuman rivers. Some people were pushed into fleeing through economic hardship and others left to stage an independence movement. Their descendants are still living in Jilin, Heilongjiang and Liaoning provinces located in the north-east of China. The number of Korean Chinese is approximately 2 million persons. In particular, Yenben of Jilin province became a self-governing district of Korean Chinese in 1952. These Korean Chinese have their relatives and friends in North Korea — they visit each other and maintain social ties. As a result, many North Koreans facing hard times due to food shortages hope to obtain help from their relatives in China.

Although North Korean defectors are concentrated in China, Chinese policies toward these refugees are unclear and ambiguous. In fact, China has never publicly declared official policy guidelines on these defectors. In principle, China takes the position of treating North Korean defectors as ‘simple cross-borders’ or ‘illegal immigrants’. In spite of international pressure, China has been very reluctant to give the status of ‘refugee<sup>2</sup>’ to North Korean defectors. It has insisted that North Korean defectors are not ‘political refugees’ but ‘economic floaters’, who are not qualified for legal protection.

One of the reasons for China taking this position regarding the North Korean defectors is because of a request by North Korea. North Korea has insisted that those refugees are not political refugees but simply criminals who illegally crossed the border. In fact, North Korean authorities are known to encourage their Chinese counterparts to keep ‘An Agreement on Repatriation of Border Crossers’ signed in 1987. It would be difficult for China, as North Korea’s closest ally, to neglect its request. At the time of Kim Jong-Il’s visit to China in 2000, for instance, the Chinese government intensified the search for North Korean defectors and repatriated at least 6,000 defectors to North Korea (US Committee for Refugees 2001). This hardline policy on North Korean defectors appears to be still in effect. It is reported that the Chinese government demanded that Korean Chinese and Korean religious and civic organisations in China not provide food or shelter for those defectors and that they report them to the authorities (Joongang Ilbo, 9 May 2000). If they do help North Korean defectors, they will be fined approximately US\$3,000 or more.

Another reason for China taking a hardline policy on North Korean defectors is the domestic social problems allegedly caused by the defectors themselves. China considers these defectors

<sup>2</sup> The 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees defines a refugee as ‘a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’ (UNHCR 2001).

as 'nuisances', engaging in social problems such as stealing, robbing, organised criminal behaviour, human trafficking of North Korean women and forgery of official documents such as passports and registration cards.

However, when it comes to dealing with these refugees publicly, the Chinese government tends to consider them on a case-by-case basis. For example, in cases such as those where the Jang Gil-su family sat in at the UNHCR office in 2000, and where 25 North Korean asylum seekers stormed the Spanish Embassy in Beijing demanding asylum in South Korea in early 2002, the Chinese government drove them out to a 'third' country from where they were able to come to South Korea. These cases show that the Chinese government may give in to international demands.

### **3. Research method**

As mentioned already, the aim of this study was to learn about the living conditions of North Korean defectors in north-eastern Asia, especially China. To fully achieve this aim, we should visit the area and observe what has been happening to the defectors. However, it is practically impossible to make such a visit with limited time and money. As a result, we decided to conduct preliminary interviews with refugees who had been in China but had now settled in South Korea.

To sample the interviewees, we considered criteria such as sex, age and year of entry. The result was that we sampled 15 persons, 12 of which were successfully interviewed. The characteristics of those interviewees are as follows:

Case #1: male, 41 years old, married with two daughters, graduated from high school, worked as a factory engineer, lived in South Hamkyung Province of North Korea, stayed in China from May 1997 to June 2000.

Case #2: male, 45 years old, married with a son and a daughter, graduated from a junior college, worked as a political entertainer, lived in South Hamkyung Province, stayed in China from 1997 to April 2000.

Case #3: female, 44 years old, married with one son, graduated from high school, worked as a military servicewoman in North Korea, stayed in China from October, 1998 to 2000.

Case #4: female, 43 years old, married with one daughter, graduated from junior college, taught in a kindergarten, lived in North Hamkyung Province, stayed in China from 1997 to 2000.

Case #5: male, 66 years old, married with two sons and a daughter, graduated from college, was vice-president of a community college, lived in South Hamkyung Province, stayed in China from 1996 to 2000.

Case #6: female, 65 years old, widowed, graduated from elementary school, worked as a barber in North Hamkyung Province, stayed in China in 2000.

Case #7: male, 32 years old, single, son of Case #6, graduated from high school, worked on a farm in North Hamkyung Province of North Korea, stayed in China in 2000.

Case #8: male, 39 years old with one daughter, graduated from college, worked as an engineer in Kangwon Province of North Korea, stayed in China from 1998–2000.

Case #9: female, 37 years old, wife of Case #8, graduated from high school, worked as a factory worker, stayed in China from 1998–2000.

Case #10: female, 52 years old, married with two sons and a daughter, graduated from high

school, worked in an office in Pyungan Province of North Korea, stayed in China between 1996 and 1997.

Case #11: female, 25 years old, daughter of Case #10, dropped out of college, defected as a student, lived in North Pyungan Province, stayed in China between 1999 and 2000.

Case #12: female, 32 years old, married, dropped out of college, lived in Hamkyung Province, stayed in China between 1995 and 2000.

To summarise the characteristics of our sample, our interviewees consisted of five males and seven females. Their ages spanned 25 to 66, with most in their thirties or forties. Their occupations were various, ranging from a barber to a vice-president of a community college. The time of defection from North Korea also varied between 1995 and 1999. All the interviewees except one graduated either from high school or from college. All of them had been living in provinces other than Pyongyang, which is the North Korean capital and a city where the more privileged live.

Each interview ran for approximately two hours. We recorded the questions and answers on tape and transcribed them. Each interview began with a semi-structured questionnaire containing:

- 1) Personal background, such as age, sex, level of educational attainment, occupation, level of living conditions, family status including marriage and the place of residence in North Korea;
- 2) Strategies for defection including motivation, the process of decision-making about defection and the preparation for escape;
- 3) The process of flight, such as the geographical path they followed and problems they encountered during the journey;
- 4) Life at their destination — this was the main point of our research so we asked about this in the most detail. The questions we asked included their first impressions on arrival at the new place, the first work they did, the people they received help from, the most severe problems during their stay, their average daily life, any special rumours they heard and their physical condition;
- 5) The process of entering South Korea, including the time they decided to go there, the reasons for having made such a decision, any persons who assisted in this process, the geographical path of entrance and any problems they encountered; and
- 6) Their current life situation, including their first impressions on arrival in South Korea, any difference between their first impressions and the actual living conditions and their overall evaluation of defection.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 Motives for defection**

Why do massive numbers of North Koreans leave their homeland behind? According to our interviews, these North Korean defectors can be broadly divided into three categories by motive of defection: simple cross-borders, economic refugees and political refugees.

The simple cross-borders are those who frequently cross the North Korea–China border. Their main reason for crossing the border is economic. Most of them are hungry themselves or their immediate family members are starving. They may engage in border trade, in temporary work or in whatever activities can provide them with food and money. Those who have their relatives or, in rare cases, friends in China may cross the border in order to ask for help. What these simple

cross-borders have in common is that they are willing to return if what they want is fulfilled. They usually stay in China for that purpose for as little as a week or up to several months. Accordingly, they have no intention of living in China permanently. They have no intention of leaving North Korea permanently either. They are not refugees in a true sense.

Of course, these simple cross-borders can change into economic or political refugees, or both. Even in our sample, there were some people who were simple cross-borders at first, but later became permanent defectors for economic or political reasons. Case #9 is such a case. She had crossed the border illegally with her father to visit her grandmother in north-east China. She had stayed with her grandmother for two weeks and then went back to North Korea as soon as she received help from her grandmother. After she married, however, she and her husband decided to leave their homeland permanently because their living conditions were worsening and it seemed that things would never improve.

It should be pointed out that our sample has no simple cross-borders in the true meaning, since we interviewed defectors who had entered South Korea. Accordingly, we do not have much information about simple cross-borders.

The second category of defectors are economic refugees. Economic refugees are those who have fled from North Korea in order to make a living outside the country. They are similar to simple cross-borders in that they have left their homeland for economic reasons. Economic refugees, however, are different from simple cross-borders in that they have no intention of returning home in the foreseeable future. Economic refugees may ultimately wish to return home, but not until the economic condition of the home country substantially improves and they are assured of physical security upon return.

Case #8 in our sample is a typical case. This 39 year-old man, who worked as a factory engineer in North Korea, planned to leave his homeland permanently. He said, 'I didn't have any specific plan about what to do in China until I left North Korea. One thing I was sure of was I wouldn't come back [to North Korea].'

Some refugees, especially women, use marriage as a strategy for economic survival. Case #12 is an example of this. She is a 32 year-old woman who dropped out of college. Her baby died of starvation and she left her husband after that. She decided to marry a Chinese farmer after all those hard experiences trying to make a living. She said:

*I was selling things at a free market of Musan, a border town. Since I don't have an official permit for peddling, I had to make secret sales. . . I continued to be pursued by the officials. I found it hard to even feed myself. At that time, I met an old man of Chinese descent. He was a peddler frequently crossing the border. He asked me, "why are you struggling so much to make a living here? If you go to China and marry a Chinese, you can live much better." And I thought my life right now is the worst. If I could eat rice enough and be treated by a husband with respect and love, I'll go.*

According to Case #7, another woman, who is 28 years old, also decided to leave her homeland to marry when she was told by her friend's father that she could make money if she went to China. As soon as she crossed the border, she met a Korean-Chinese man who was waiting for her and married that man's uncle. Currently she has a three year-old son. She guessed that her friend's father was paid a sum of money for selling her to her current husband.

The third category of defectors are political refugees, who fled from North Korea as a result of political persecution, either anticipated or real. Some refugees left their homeland because of economic hardship, but later become political refugees when they could not return home for fear of political persecution. Others have had political problems from the outset. The common thread between these political refugees is that they listened to the South Korean radio. Case #2, who is

45 years old and worked as a political entertainer in North Korea, is a case whose defection was motivated by anticipated political persecution.

*I was curious about how people live outside this world [i.e., North Korea]. People here die of starvation. . . Why do we live like this? I didn't know this truth. . . One day I bought a small cassette tape recorder to listen to music. I liked it. As I changed the dial, I happened to listen to the South Korean radio. The voice there was soft. I've never heard it. . . I continued to listen to the radio until I found it too late to have the radio registered. . . If we get a radio, we should register it within a week. Otherwise, we would not be tolerated. I feared it. . . I decided I should leave this damn country.*

Whilst anticipated political persecution was the driving motivation for defection for Case #2, for Case #5 political persecution was imminent. He was 66 years old and worked as a vice-president at a community college. He went with his wife to meet her relatives in China. On returning, he had a party with his neighbours. Prompted by his colleagues, he said, 'People in China live better than us, and eat pork and beef.' That remark turned out to be a political problem for him. When he went to work, he found himself being sought by an elementary committee of the Labor Party. Somebody must have reported his comments to the authorities.

There are some refugees who decide to leave their homeland due to North Korea's severe discrimination against and punishment of the family members of defectors. Case #11 is a typical example of this kind of political refugee. Her parents defected in 1997 with her two brothers. At that time she was a college student, living separately from her parents in order to study. When her parents secretly informed her of their plans for defection, she refused to go with them. She said, 'I didn't want to leave behind all my dreams. I thought I would be in the same place even when my parents left this country. I was very naive at that time.' Soon after the authorities found out that her parents were missing, she was expelled from college. For a while she was forced to visit her relatives and the border regions to find her missing parents, accompanied by a national security officer. After it became known that her parents had defected, her relatives and friends were afraid of contacting her and they humiliated her as the daughter of a national traitor. After her parents held a news conference in South Korea, she was deported to a labour camp. Her uncle and cousins were also deprived of their jobs and deported to the labour camp. She was forced to work like a slave. She realised that she could never go back to the position she had before, no matter how hard she tried. After ten months of detention in the labour camp, she escaped to China.

North Korea's punishment of repatriated defectors and their family members is notorious. They are regarded as national traitors and treated as such. In the past, political refugees used to be sent to political prisoners' camp or openly executed. Although punishments have become less severe in recent times, defectors must be ready to pay the cost once they return. According to one survey undertaken by the Commission to Help North Korean Refugees (2000), about 27% of defectors who were arrested were tortured and became physically disabled.

There are some refugees whose major motive for defection is family reunion. In these cases, they have family members living in South Korea, or other countries such as the United States, who are eager to get them out of the hunger-stricken country. Case #6 is an example. She was able to go to South Korea without any difficult experiences during her defection. After her two sons defected to China, she was living in economic hardship. She could barely make a living without help from her eldest daughter. One day a Chinese woman came to her and told her that her son had asked her to take his mother to China. She crossed the border with that woman. When she arrived safely in China, she received a call from her son telling her he was in South Korea. He then persuaded his mother to come to South Korea. In fact, what he had done was to hire a guide to help his mother defect from North Korea to South Korea. Later on, she was told that her son paid a sum of money to get her into South Korea.

## 4.2 Processes of defection

For North Korean defectors, it is a nightmare to escape from their homeland. Not only do they have to prepare themselves psychologically, but they also have to be cautious so they are not detected and arrested. It should be borne in mind that if they are caught in the course of defecting, they will be punished to an extent that we could hardly imagine. They will be humiliated, tortured, sent to political prisoners' camp or even executed in public. Accordingly, they have to think very carefully before making a final decision.

There are cases, however, where they have to flee overnight. This occurs when they believe that the authorities are chasing them. Case #2 is someone who ran away overnight, knowing that the security officers had come to his house to find him.

*I used to go to China for trading. . .I made a fortune by buying and selling flour wholesale. . .Rumour ran in the community that I defected. So the security officers came to my house and searched all over. They found the radio I used to listen to. . .I saw security vehicles parked outside my house. My wife was shaking. . .Fortunately, it was night when I arrived home. Otherwise I would have probably had my hair cut in the political prisoner's camp, or have been shot to death. . .My current fortune would have probably been like that. . .I found myself running, leaving all possessions with my wife and saying, 'I'll come back soon!'*

Some defectors make rather elaborate preparations. Case #8, for instance, after making a decision to leave North Korea, sold his house, saved some grain for food and made financial preparations. It is common for defectors to carry a knife or two. Some people, especially women, carry a deadly poison to kill themselves in case they are caught. Case #4, with her husband, hired a female guide to lead them to the border. Case #8 bribed an official for a travel permit. Case #5 sent his son to the border first in order to check the route.

No matter how carefully they prepare, it is not easy for them to make a safe defection. Border guards are stationed every 50 metres and transportation systems are in extremely poor condition. Thus it takes several days to get to the border, exposing the defectors for a long period of time. The North Korean system is such that it is very hard to find a place to hide, even just to stay overnight. It is truly life-threatening to cross the border, even to think of running away from their 'paradise on earth'. All our interviewees agreed on this point and confirmed that crossing the border carried a grave anxiety for all defectors.

How do they cope with the situation where they are detected by the border guard? One tactic is to simply run away. Case #5 is a good example. He and his son were crossing the Tuman River in the late autumn of 1996. As they crossed the barbed wire separating North Korea from China, a North Korean border guard noticed them. His son was at a loss as to what to do. 'Suddenly then,' he said, 'my son threw a bundle of corn stalks on the Chinese side to me so that I jumped on it and crossed the wire.'

Another tactic to avoid imminent arrest is to fight. Case #4, who crossed the border with her 45 year-old husband, carries a vivid image of being chased:

*I, with my husband, was crossing the Tuman River. About half of the way, we realised somebody was coming after us. It was dark. We couldn't tell who he was. I was afraid awfully. I came close to my husband. He looked back, on and off. We were even afraid of looking back, because that may be interpreted as running away. So my husband had to turn back, as if he were striking a match in the wind to smoke. We were moving. The guy behind us was coming. I was afraid. My husband told me, 'Don't worry. There is only one guy, it's sure. If we are on the verge of being caught, I will do the work.'*

### **4.3 Life in China**

Crossing the border, hard as it is, is not the end of defection. Rather, it is the beginning of another crusade: how to cope with the new environment. The problems that defectors have to tackle can broadly be divided into economic and psychological ones.

#### **4.3.1 Economic problems**

Most North Korean defectors stay in China for at least a couple of months to several years. Most of them, however, cross the border without any specific plan. Some flee overnight. Accordingly, their first concern on arrival is how to sustain themselves. That means they have to find food, work and shelter. How do they do it?

According to our survey, most refugees start their life in China by begging for food and shelter. Typically, they begin by contacting the local Korean Chinese who, in many cases, are willing to render help, although not for long.

Case #1, for example, knocked at the door of a Korean Chinese home soon after arriving. He introduced himself as a North Korean runaway who had come to see his friends in China and asked for food and shelter for a night, promising to return the favour. Similarly, Case #8, accompanied by his wife, was also able to receive help from several unknown Korean Chinese. They approached an old Korean Chinese woman living on a farmstead. They stayed at her house for three days. They were lucky enough to save extra money by working on the farm for a couple of days.

When it comes to a family, however, it becomes harder to obtain help. People in the local Chinese community may find it a burden to provide food and shelter for a family. They may be afraid of being reported to the Chinese police for helping illegal immigrants. According to Case #10, who defected with her husband and two sons, the old woman they contacted said, 'We are not rich enough to help you.' They were also overtly rejected by a man who said, 'If you keep asking, I'll call the police.' She says that they had several such experiences. Many families therefore have to split up to move around.

In some cases, North Korean defectors go to areas such as hotels and restaurants where South Korean businessmen and travellers frequently stay. They are usually given 100 to 200 yuan (Chinese dollars). This is not a small amount, considering that a typical Chinese worker earns 500 yuan on average a month. In our sample, three of the interviewees said they had such experiences. If they are lucky enough, they may be led to organisations that help defectors. Some defectors are able to stay at houses provided by local South Korean missionaries or church members. They study the Bible and work there if needed (for instance, cases #8, #9, and #10).

Begging is only a temporary solution. If their stay in China is prolonged, defectors have to find a way to get a job. How they do this is similar to begging. They may knock at the door of local residents. They may go to farmsteads and declare their intention to work. They may ask anyone they happen to meet. Since they do not speak Chinese, they rely upon either Korean Chinese or South Koreans for work. They usually engage in manual work that can be done with little skill. Typical work that North Korean defectors find relatively easily is helping farmers in cornfields, rice paddies and orchards. Such work is not too difficult to find since China is still a predominantly an agricultural society.

One of the major problems associated with this kind of work is that defectors usually end up being exploited: their payment is much lower than the average Chinese worker. Some defectors are working full-time just for food and shelter, with no payment. At worst, their employers refuse to pay them and threaten to report them for illegal residence. Case #10 witnessed various cases of exploitation of North Korean defectors. She herself and her husband worked on a farm. They

were paid only 30 yuan per day. Chinese workers are usually paid 50 yuan or more a day for the same kind of work. She said that a defector she met was working on the farm with no payment at all except for food and shelter. She also mentioned another case: after working for a couple of months in the cornfields in spring, a worker asked for their wage. The employer replied, 'We are short of money right now. Come and get it in the fall when we harvest the corn.' When he asked for just half the wage, his employer told him, 'I would report you to the police so that they catch you. It's illegal for you to work here!' He had to give up.

Since these refugees feel exploited, they try to adopt other strategies. Case #1, who worked as a factory engineer in North Korea, had to deliver traditional candies. He bought these candies wholesale, divided them into smaller amounts and delivered them from door to door. The couple in Case #10 cut firewood in the mountain and sold it. Since both types of work are illegal in China, they could not do this work for long.

In the case of women, marriage can become an instrumental way of making a living. According to one field survey, more than 80 per cent of the respondents knew or had heard of North Korean women who have been sold to the local Chinese (the Commission to Help North Korean Refugees, 2000). Some of them agreed to marry Korean Chinese or Chinese even before they left North Korea. There are matchmakers and human traffickers who want to make money by selling North Korean women to the local Chinese. These may be Korean Chinese peddlers regularly going back and forth between North Korea and China, or they may be Korean Chinese who live near the North Korea–China border. They tell hunger-stricken North Korean women that they will be better off if they marry a Chinese man. There are a number of Chinese men who are willing to pay to marry North Korean women. In rural areas of China there is shortage of young women as they are likely to move to cities or overseas for employment. It is therefore hard for single men to find a bride, so the age at which they marry has increased, especially in remote countryside. There are also some Chinese men who want to buy North Korean women and use them as hostesses in bars or as prostitutes.

Let us take the example Case #11. After crossing the Arok River, this woman walked into the fields to seek help, when she met a middle-aged woman. When she asked her for help, the woman told her to hide herself until she returned. When she came back with her husband, she brought Chinese-style clothes and took her to her home. She stayed at her house for a couple of days. She told them that she wanted to go to the Korean Embassy in Beijing. Since her parents were in South Korea, she believed the Korean Embassy would help her to join them. However, the couple told her that it was too far to go to Beijing and that they were very sceptical about whether the Korean Embassy would help her. Instead, they persuaded her to marry a local Korean Chinese man. Since she did not speak Chinese at all, she could not help but accept their suggestion. The couple took her to a remote area and introduced her to the Korean Chinese man. He was over 40 years old and was not able to get married due to poverty. The couple received a sum of money from the man.

Case #12 is another example of a female defector being sold. This woman crossed the North Korea–China border with an old Korean Chinese man, who told her she would live better if she married a Chinese man. After he took her to a Korean Chinese man, he went back to North Korea. She stayed at the Korean Chinese man's home under his surveillance. He then raped her before he sent her to marry another Korean Chinese. Less than two months later, her husband found out that she was pregnant before she married him. In fact, she was pregnant from the rape. A couple of months later, he sold her to a Korean Chinese pimp. She was forced to become a prostitute under strict surveillance. She was almost beaten to death when she was caught trying to escape. With help from a generous Korean client, she was set free from prostitution. However, she could not find work because of language problems and her illegal residence status. She therefore had to marry an old Korean Chinese man who was mentally disabled. At that time she thought that marriage was the only option left open to her.

### 4.3.2 Psychological problems

Apart from economic problems, North Korean defectors suffer from various psychological problems. One of these problems arises from the status of being a defector — they live in constant fear of arrest and repatriation. They say that if they were sent back to North Korea, they would be humiliated, tortured, sent to prison camp or even executed in public. They therefore utilise various tactics not to be arrested. One tactic is to live in the mountains. In fact, many North Korean defectors are known to live in makeshift camps and ‘mud caverns’ near the tops of mountains. Case #4, for instance, had to live on one side of a mountain whilst her husband lived on the other side, so that they could collect more information. If they heard that the authorities were coming to the mountain where they were living, they would move to another mountain. ‘One day,’ she said, ‘we heard the Chinese police coming. Everybody around stood up and ran away each in different directions.’ It turned out later that the orchard owner had spread a rumour in order to drive out defector workers without paying them for their work.

Another tactic utilised by defectors in order not to be arrested is to move further from the Yenben area, where there are large numbers of defectors. In recent years especially, the Chinese government has been urging the local citizens to report ‘any suspicious people’ to the police for a bounty. Case #2 described how he wandered from city to city:

*The Chinese police are roaming in Yenben. They come and knock at door after door. They search the house all over. . .It's becoming more difficult to live there [in Yenben]. The Chinese police don't chase people in Chungdo, Shanghai, and like this unless it is reported that this man is a genuine North Korean defector. . .In my case, I really lived quietly there. . .If I'd been arrested like this, I'd be a dead man. . .I took absolute care to be careful.*

Discrimination and prejudice against defectors by local citizens is another source of psychological stress. The Chinese tend to treat North Korean defectors as if they were beggars. The problem is that in a sense they are beggars. They wear worn-out clothing, they look dirty and they do actually beg. However, these defectors think differently about themselves. In spite of their current appearance and behaviour, they believe they deserve to be treated with respect.

For instance, when Case #11 refused the couple's suggestion to marry a Chinese man and insisted on them helping her get to Beijing, she was accused of being ‘stuck-up’ with no consideration of her status as a ‘North Korean woman’. She heard Chinese people making fun of North Korean women as being the kind of people who would do anything in order to eat a bowl of cooked rice.

Even when North Korean women are married to Chinese men, and give birth to a baby, they are still not treated as ordinary family members. In most cases, the men who marry North Korean women have to pay large amounts of money to the broker. As a result, the woman's husband and her family-in-laws try to utilise her to the maximum as a worker. She has to work hard in the fields as well as in the home.

The experience of Case #12 is another good example. Even after she married a mentally disabled old man, this woman's family-in-laws did not appreciate her. Instead, she had to work ‘like a slave from day to night’. Her in-laws did not trust her and continued to keep an eye on her.

In fact, these defectors have good reason to have high self-esteem. Their average educational level, for instance, is higher than that of the local Chinese residents. All our interviewees received a high school or higher education, except for one old woman. Six of them had some college education and five were high school graduates. As Case #4 said, ‘If we hadn't wasted time [3 years] in China and had come earlier [to South Korea] . . .my husband would have earned as many as ten doctoral degrees.’

Perhaps the most serious psychological stress faced by defectors is concern about their family members left behind in North Korea. It is well-known that North Korean defectors are labelled 'national traitors who deserted the care of their great Master and betrayed the motherland'. Their remaining family members are treated as 'family of the national traitor'. Case #11, as mentioned before, is a good example, where she had to leave the country simply because she was the daughter of a defector. Under these circumstances, it is natural for defectors to be anxious about their family left behind. One interviewee (Case #4) asked not to be shown on TV just before the interview started, mentioning the safety of their family remaining in North Korea. This kind of anxiety is one reason why defectors leave the country as a family unit.

Defectors also undergo psychological stress through missing their family. Whenever it came to questions about family relations during the interview, our interviewees became serious. Case #1, who had been talking 'heroically' about his defection, almost burst into tears. 'I'm sorry, especially for my elder daughter,' he said. 'I often wake up with cold sweat running down my back. My daughter asks, 'Where are you, Daddy?' in the dream.'

Case #5, who is now working as a cook in a restaurant in downtown Seoul, also became tearful and murmured:

*I'm sorry for them. I hope they understand me. Some day, they will understand their daddy, why I had to leave them behind. . . I try to forget them, not because I don't miss them, I am also a human being. If I think about them time and again, I won't accomplish what I had dreamed of. . . In case of the occasion when some day we will meet together, I will try to stand a proud father before them.*

#### **4.4 Process of entry into South Korea**

To reiterate, there are about 100,000 to 300,000 North Korean defectors living in the north-eastern region of Asia. Of these, about 30,000 to 50,000 are known to want to settle in South Korea. However, the number of people who accomplish this desire is very low. According to South Korean government statistics, 'only' slightly over 1,000 defectors have successfully entered South Korea since 1994, while others are still struggling to do so.

How then can these defectors enter South Korea? In fact, the ways they can get into South Korea are limited and the routes they utilise are difficult and dangerous to follow. According to our survey, the routes by which they enter South Korea can broadly be divided into three.

First, the way that appears to be the easiest is to visit the South Korean Embassy and Consulates in China. Although visiting these Korean agencies is easy, most interviewees agree that these agencies in China are of no help. As soon as they meet an official there, they become frustrated. If they visit them, they are given about 500 yuan with lip service such as, 'You may be having a hard time. I'm sorry I can't help you in other ways.'

One reason why these South Korean agencies hesitate to offer help is related to the policy of the Chinese government. As mentioned before, China does not regard these defectors as refugees but as 'economic floaters' to be sent back to their home country. China is also negative about international agencies that engage in help and rescue efforts for defectors. It is known that the Chinese police have begun a full-scale operation to find and deport these 'economic floaters'.

On the other hand, Korean Embassies and Consulates in 'third countries' such as Thailand and Vietnam appear to be more willing to offer help. The problem with this route is crossing the Chinese continent, which stretches for over 3,000 miles. The time and money needed is enormous and even that does not guarantee entrance into South Korea. A typical entry in this way is portrayed by Case #3:

*I, with my husband, decided to cross the border between China and Myanmar. We hired a guide. . . We went there [to the border]. We walked mountain after mountain. The mountains are so high, the guide says, more than 2,000 metres. . . The guide disappeared. . . We walked and walked three nights and four days, until we were captured by Myanmar policemen. We couldn't talk to them. They couldn't talk to us, either. . . We bribed them a bit. . . The police searched our bodies and took extra monies and sent us back.*

Case #5 also decided to get to South Korea by way of a third country. There were four of them. They lived in different areas in China, as families do in order to both make a living and avoid detection. One day, they got together and discussed how to get to South Korea:

*We talked and talked. We couldn't come up with a good idea. . . After a long while, I jumped to a conclusion. . . I said to my son, 'Go south, to Saigon. There are American Embassy, British Embassy. . . Go there.' My son insisted that I should go with them. . . I said, 'I am old enough. I am ready to die here. But you have a long life ahead. You, go first. If you succeed, please tell us.'*

According to him, his son and daughter had a similar experience. They were crossing the border when the Vietnamese police captured them. They had their money confiscated and were handed over to the Chinese police. They were lucky that the Chinese police set them free on the spot and told them to go home. They tried again. They were fortunate because they had enough money sent by their relatives in South Korea. The couple in Case #5, on the other hand, had to earn money by working for several months along the way. These two families, although they had been rejected by the Korean agencies in China, received great help from them in the 'third countries'.

Case #8 and his wife got as far as Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic in Central Asia, and received help from the Korean Embassy there. Just before entering the country, he was stopped and questioned by the Kazakh police. He disguised himself as a South Korean traveller. He was handed over to the Korean Embassy, where he was questioned again. However, since he could not give his registration number, which is given to every South Korean, he had to confess that he was a North Korean defector. 'I feel sorry for trying to tell a lie,' he said, 'but I am lucky to have had unexpected help.'

The second way to enter South Korea is to take advantage of the boats used for smuggling. There are many smugglers on the West Sea (the Yellow Sea), transporting goods and workers between South Korea and China. Of course, it is not easy to board these vessels. For most defectors, the cost is insurmountable. Those that possess lots of money, or whose South Korean relatives have guaranteed to pay for them, can take this route. The number of these illegal migrants is small. Even though they can financially afford to take this route, it is nevertheless very risky for them.

Case #1, who is now working as a lighting assistant at Korea Broadcasting System, told his story:

*I lingered around Taeryun port for three months, seeking a chance to get a smuggling boat to South Korea. . . One day, I was able to contact an agent. We bargained but I didn't have enough money. . . We finally agreed to pay 7,000 yuan (Chinese dollar). I gave them all the money I had at that time in advance, and promised to pay the rest after arrival. I got aboard and . . . we spent a week on the high sea. We had to hide in a fish cell, where we ate, slept, and urinated, squalor all around. . . Finally, our boat began to move into the South Korean sea. After a while, we were noticed by a South Korean patrol boat, maybe a revenue cutter. The boss of the smuggler said, 'Throw all you have into the sea.'*

Case #12 underwent a similar experience. She went to China to get married, persuaded to do so by a human trafficker. Her marriage failed and she tried to escape. She was caught on the run

and was sold as a prostitute. She had to work in a small restaurant waiting on men.

*I didn't even think of coming to South Korea. . . One day, a client from South Korea came in and he treated me very well, I told him my story. . . later he rescued me from there and set me free. Since then we have kept in touch off and on. After my second marriage failed, I asked his help. . . He suggested that I come to South Korea. . . He was so kind and lent me a large amount of money. He also introduced a broker. . . I got aboard a smuggling boat.*

The third way to enter South Korea is to receive aid from family members or relatives already there. Case #11, whose parents defected first and settled in South Korea, is such a case. When she told her mother that she was in China, her mother forged a passport and brought her to South Korea by aeroplane. Case #6 is a similar example. It should be pointed out that those who have entered South Korea in this way are very reluctant to make specific statements about how they got there. This may be because they have violated the laws of South Korea, where they have to live from now on.

## **5. Conclusion**

The major purpose of this study was to understand the situation faced by North Korean defectors in north-east Asian countries, especially China. More specifically, we attempted to research what strategies these defectors employ to survive in foreign countries, ranging from motives for defection through to the coping strategies they adopt for entering South Korea. To this end, we interviewed twelve defectors who have already settled in South Korea.

The major findings of this study are summarised below. First, North Korean defectors can be broadly divided into three categories by their motive for defection: simple cross-borderers, economic refugees and political refugees. Simple cross-borderers are those who frequently cross the North Korea–China border. They are ready to return to their homeland as soon as they have accomplished whatever they wanted. Economic refugees are those who escape from North Korea for the purpose of making a living outside the country. They are the ones who wish to live outside North Korea for a long time. They may turn out to be political refugees in view of the nature of the North Korean system. Political refugees are those who flee from North Korea due to political persecution, either anticipated or real. They are the ones whom North Korean security authorities pursue the most.

The second set of findings are related to the process of defection. Our survey shows that some defectors flee overnight, especially when they realise that the authorities are pursuing them. More commonly, though, they tend to make elaborate preparations. They may sell their houses, save money and obtain travel permits from the authorities. They may possess a knife or deadly poison in case of arrest. In fact, some of our interviewees said that they encountered border guards. In these cases, they simply ran away, engaged in fighting or bribed them.

The third set of findings are related to life in China. After arriving in China, North Korean defectors are faced with various types of economic and psychological problems. According to our survey, most North Korean refugees started their life in China by begging for food and shelter. While many local Korean Chinese are ready to help them, some feel it is a burden to do so. Defectors experience increasing difficulties in receiving help from local residents. Most of the work they find is not well-respected employment. They may work on a farm or in a restaurant. North Korean women in particular may marry a local Chinese man as a means of survival. In some cases, women are sold into marriage or prostitution. Even though they can find a job relatively easily, they tend to become exploited. At best they are paid less than half the wage that local Chinese men receive, or at worst, they are not paid at all.

Apart from economic problems, defectors suffer from various psychological problems. They live in

constant fear of being arrested and deported. They may have to move constantly, often living in the mountains, watching out for the police. Prejudice and discrimination by local citizens against defectors is another source of psychological stress. Defectors feel that the Chinese treat them as if they are beggars. Perhaps the most serious psychological problem faced by defectors is concern about their family members left behind in North Korea. All our interviewees were very anxious about their family members left behind, and missed them.

Many defectors wish to enter South Korea, but only a small number of them succeed. They may get to South Korea with the help of Korean agencies in third countries, or they may take advantage of boats that engage in smuggling or they may enter South Korea with help from their relatives or family members who have already settled there.

It should be pointed out, however, that our study is preliminary and exploratory in nature. Many of the questions we intended to address at the beginning of this study have not been fully researched. Instead, we developed only general ideas regarding the situations faced by defectors. Further research should be conducted, therefore, including visiting the scene, to substantiate our findings. We hope this study can be utilised as a stepping stone to developing more detailed research.

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