

The Bloody Footprints of North Korean Refugees

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ABSTRACT

North Korean refugees first caught the notice of South Korea's National Intelligence Service during the 1990s when North Korea had to suffer an unprecedented famine. Since then the number of North Korea refugees had steadily increased until it started to fluctuate depending on the regulations of North Korea and China at particular moments in history (King, 2021). Although the initial motivation for the refugees was survival from hunger, later refugees left North Korea seeking basic human rights that were denied to them. Although these North Koreans know the punishment for getting caught while trying to escape from the North Korean regime was an undignified and slow death full of suffering, they still left their country to pursue a life where they could be treated as free and proper human beings. The journey to South Korea is an arduous and taxing one, and the refugees must navigate the dangerous checkpoints and border patrols in China lest they get caught and repatriated back to North Korea. Upon traveling from north China to south China, the refugees enter two transition countries, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand. Each country provides their own hardships to the refugees, before allowing them passage into South Korea. Once inside, the North Korean refugees are questioned and subsequently educated regarding the differences between North Korea and South Korea lifestyles. Upon finishing their schooling, the refugees are considered South Korean citizens.

Introduction

After the onset of the Korean War which started on June 25th, 1950, and still hasn't finished into the 21st century, the Republic of Korea had detected an increase in North Korean refugees starting from the 1990s (Bill, 2011; Robinson, 2000). This is in accordance to the North Korean Famine, or as North Korea officially states, the March of Suffering. During this period of starvation, the food supply dwindled and North Korea was forced to receive international aid. This was in direct opposition to their Juche ideology, which underlined the importance of self-sufficiency (Kim, 2017). Additionally, during this period, the food rationing process was not a fair one. The people important to the central party, and their associates, were first in line to receive food rations (Ford, et al., 2008). Coincidentally, all these people lived near the center of power, the capital Pyeongyang. The people who lived far away from the capital, and especially, the people who lived on the border with China, did not receive the appropriate services necessary to survive. The fact that the Soviet Union was collapsing at this point in time did not help the quality of international aid North Korea was able to receive.

The first North Koreans to cross the border did so of necessity (Reed, & Keely, 2001). Although North Korea has one the world's greatest draconic systems regarding citizen movement management, the North Koreans on the border were faced with the dilemma of starving to death on their home soil and secretly leaving their country to survive. A significant number chose the latter. The fate of the first refugees is not well documented. At that point in time, the number of people who left North Korea was very few, and most were considered to be spies by the South Korean government. Nevertheless, the trickle of refugees eventually became a leaking stream, and North Korean government was forced to increase the number of guards on the North Korea – China border, and implement a death penalty for the people who forded the rivers of the border

(Kang, 2013) .

As the nearest land border is with China, it is only natural that the initial journey of the refugees would start near the Yanbian region, and flow downward into the bigger cities of China. However, the dangers of being a refugee begin before crossing the border, as a broker is usually required for the refugees to be able pass through various checkpoints. However, this broker in question has the capability to betray his wards at his convenience, and so many refugees journey start at the border and then finish at a government prison even further inland of North Korea. For the people who do manage to reach the larger cities, a different but equally precarious situation awaits them. Considered outsiders, the refugees have a hard time finding stable jobs in China, and due to China being a close ally of North Korea, North Korea has several state funded agencies and personal working in China. The refugees are considered as a promotion package for the agents, as the refugees are labeled as traitors to the home country, and apprehending one is bound to bring gifts to the person who catches them.

Fortunately, not everything is dreadful for the refugees who have managed to make it the China's bigger cities. China, unlike North Korea, has numerous means by which the refugees can continue onward to their final destination. Be it by land, sea, or air, once the financial limitations are overcome, the refugees are free to pursue their lives in other countries. This manuscript will look into detail, the path taken by these refugee migrants.

China

The initial, and likely, the greatest hurdle encountered by North Korean refugees are their entry and travel through China. As stated before, North Korean law forbids people from one country to freely move to another. Contrary to most countries who have an autocratic central government, North Korea fields multiple armies and guards along its borders with neighboring countries. The 250 kilometer border North Korea shares with South Korea is arguably one the most well-fortified military border on Earth. In addition to military personnel on both sides constantly watching each other, the area between the guard posts is a minefield, and patrols from both countries stealthily enter the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Entering South Korea from its immediate border is possible only if the refugee in question lives near the area of the Korean Demilitarized Zone.

More often than not, the refugees who successfully escape from North Korea are the people who have pierced the 1,400 kilometer North Korea – China border. Once inside Chinese territory, the refugees have to rely extensively on a professional broker, who is usually Korean Chinese, or even a former refugee, who is capable of taking care of Chinese security checks. The former operates on financial value while the latter's goal is to help people who wish to escape the North Korean regime. However, due to the nature of the transaction, the relationship between the refugee and broker is not like an employer and mercenary relationship. The broker has all the power to betray the refugee without any consequence, and as a result, this transaction is prone to exploitation on the side of the broker (Thompson & Freeman, 2009). The monetary amount the brokers charge per person, while it may seem questioningly small to some people, is astronomical when seen through the eyes of a North Korean refugee. Brokers are known to “charge anywhere between US\$1,250 and US\$19,950 per person to either accompany individuals across the border or to inform them of where and when it is safe to cross,” and when one considers a house in North Korea's northern provinces cost approximately US\$2,000, the amount is staggering (Tanaka, 2008, An, 2021). The numerical value indicates that people well above the average North Korean living standard are the ones you are able to purchase the means to escape (Haggard, & Noland, 2007).

The reason behind the constant Chinese border patrols and security checks is the China-North Korea Bilateral Border Control Agreement, which states that entry into China is forbidden to North Koreans (Human Rights Watch; Rickerd, 1999). If a refugee is intercepted by the patrols, they will be repatriated back to North Korea, where a grim fate awaits them. The punishment for North Korea refugees who were caught trying to

escape from the draconic state is one of misery and suffering. The recaptured refugees are initially instituted within North Korea's police facilities, and their family members are also captured and brought to other police institutions. Here within, they are interrogated and tortured. Female members are subject to systematic rape. After the grueling initiation process, the captured members are sentenced, without any legal trial, to force labor in various camps and fields. Refugees and defectors recount their episodes they experienced at the labor camps. Ahn Myung-chul, a North Korean defector who worked as a prison guard shared his chilling experiences (Free Library, 2013). He and his coworkers would summon people who worked in the labor camps and use them as human sandbags to practice their martial arts skills. They deliberately targeted their victims' weak points and left them for dead if the victims could not get back up. He stated he lost count of the number of murdered detainees.

Even faced with this bleak future, North Koreans near the border plunge deeper into China, past the border patrols and cities. Once they arrive at a safe house, they must decide their next action. Staying in China is a dangerous choice because the Chinese government actively seeks out North Korean refugees to repatriate back to North Korea (Albert, 2019; Jeon, 2016). This action is one of political machinations. By providing good will in regard to the political atmosphere of North Korea's government, China ensures that it stays on amiable terms with the otherwise isolated country. There was a short period of two years, during 1999 to 2001, when Beijing was on tolerable terms with the South Korean government in regards to the North Korean refugee situation. (Lankov, 2004). The number of refugees who crossed the border to survive from starvation had caught Beijing off-guard. As a result, Beijing initially allowed the South Korean government to retrieve these refugees. However, this warm current was short-lived.

A break in by North Korean refugees into the Japanese Embassy in China forced China to rethink their stance regarding North Korean refugees. After this incident, China has been actively seeking North Korean refugees for repatriation. A thief in a street vendor was an issue China could pretend did not exist. A brazen break-in into a national embassy projected the North Korean refugee issue from inside China into the global stage; China was forced, or had obtained the perfect excuse to initiate a harsh crackdown on the North Korean refugees within its borders. North Korean refugees in turn, sought out transitory countries for both safety and future investment. North Korean refugees who managed to journey into China's southern Yunnan Province would soon enter the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Lao People's Democratic Republic

The Lao People's Democratic Republic serves as an immediate destination to Thailand, which is approximately 90% of all North Korean refugees' final transitory destination. The political climate in Lao People's Democratic Republic is dependent on China, and as result of this interaction, Lao People's Democratic Republic sometimes aligns its interest with that of China, and to a lesser degree, the government of North Korea (Ku, 2016). The initial apathy of the Lao People's Democratic Republic's authorities' regarding North Korean refugees had helped foster a notion that the Lao People's Democratic Republic provided safe travel to North Korean refugees who set foot on Lao People's Democratic Republic's soil. Arguably, this statement is not false. Aside from one critical incident in 2013 regarding young North Korean refugees, most North Korean refugees are able to bribe their way safely into Thailand (Kurlantzick, 2013; Hu, 2016).

2013 was a period of bilateral talks between the Lao People's Democratic Republic and North Korea. Coincidentally, 2013 was also the same year the Lao People's Democratic Republic apprehended North Korea refugees. There is some suspicion that these particular 9 individuals may have been used as a diplomatic chip during the Lao People's Democratic Republic foreign minister's visit to North Korea (Harlan, 2013). However, aside from this apparent incident in 2013, there have not been any other happenings of significance on the international stage.

Although the Lao People's Democratic Republic had strengthened its bond with both China and

North Korea following the repatriation incident in 2013, reports of repatriation regarding both North Korean refugees and Uyghurs who left China have not increased in frequency (Ku, 2015; Bridges, 2017; Lee, 2020). Due to its close proximity to China, the Lao People's Democratic Republic is also part of China's Belt and Road initiative, and therefore is also economically tied with China. One request of China was the repatriation of Uyghurs who escaped from China's southern provinces. Likewise, although North Korea strengthened diplomatic ties with the Lao People's Democratic Republic with a bilateral treaty, news of additional North Korean refugee repatriation ceased after the 2013 incident. For the moment, it seems the Lao People's Democratic Republic pathway can be considered safe.

Thailand

While North Korean refugees generally hide in the shadows and either run in the other direction or bribe when confronted by law enforcement and government agents, they take a new approach when entering Thailand (Ferrie, 2019). The relationship between North Korean refugees and Thailand officials is far from benign. Yet the treatment the North Korean refugees receive at the hands of Thailand officials may be akin to receiving a warm blanket when compared to the treatment received by government related personnel in both China and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. As such, upon entering Thailand, the North Korean refugees will approach Thailand's officials and law agents to be incarcerated. According to Thailand law, North Korean refugees are considered illegal personal, and as such must serve a one month term in Thailand's foreign personal jail. It is during this one month that a subtle chain can be observed regarding the treatment of North Korean refugees.

Under the pretense of honoring a special policy which dictates illegal immigrants are deported back to their country of origin, the Thailand officials expatriate the North Korean refugees back to Korea. Keen readers will see that the policy does not specify which Korea. Both South Korea and North Korea state that the entire Korean peninsula is their respective territory. This approach is accepted by multiple nations as South Korea and North Korea are still at war. The beforehand mentioned Korean War which started in 1950, is still ongoing. A ceasefire was written by the two sides, but they never agreed to a final peace treaty.

The blurred specifics regarding the arriving destination of the North Korean refugees are a deliberate action on part of the Thailand government (Medeiros, et al. 2008). Leaked United States documents indicate the presence of an obscure arrangement between the governments of Thailand and South Korea (Ferrie, 2019). By incarcerating the illegal immigrants and forcing them to serve their sentence for one month in their immigration Jail, Thailand, when compared to Lao People's Democratic Republic, seems to be having properly function protocols regarding illegal immigration. What happens during the one month the North Korean refugees are serving their sentence underlines the relationship between Thailand and South Korea. As the North Korean refugees are serving their sentence, the Thailand government contacts the government agents at the South Korean embassy. Because there is a one month period between incarceration and expatriation, South Korea has time to prepare for North Korean refugee transport.

South Korea

Most of the North Korean refugees who make it to Thailand and turn themselves over to the immigration police officials are eventually placed into the custody of South Korean government agents who are trained to pick out any potential North Korean spies and are specialized in escorting North Korean refugees until they are properly introduced to South Korea society. The initial encounter between North Korean refugees and Korean National Intelligence Service agents is colored by distrust and silence. Although the North Korean refugees have risked their lives to escape from North Korea, decades of indoctrination reveals itself as a natural cautiousness on part of the North Korean refugees, while the Korean National Intelligence Service agents have to

consider the North Korean refugees as potential spies until their records can be cleared. A phrase Korean National Intelligence Service agents say to North Korean refugees during their questioning is “We have to hear your words to see if ‘you’ really exist in there.” This is to tell the North Korean refugees that they have to be truthful during the questioning period to expedite the process. Once the screening process has been satisfactorily conducted, the North Korean refugees are transferred to another educational institution where they stay for three months.

This institution is dedicated to helping the North Korean refugees understand South Korean society and functions, and more importantly, the main differences in regards to economic sustainment and taking care of oneself in South Korea’s cutthroat society. Once the 3 month education process is finished, the graduates are legally considered South Korean citizens and are given their respective social security numbers and other governmental IDs. From this point on the North Korean refugees will be named as North Korean defectors. If they wish for it, the North Korean defectors are provided governmental housing and job procurement opportunities.

Unfortunately, some North Korea defectors are not able to integrate into their new country successfully (Yang, 2018; Park, et al. 2018). Unable to catch up with their South Korean counterparts in regards to occupational opportunities and financial management, these brave men and women who risked their lives and more during their trek across Eastern Asia, simply gave up (Lankov, 2006; Lee, 2017). These North Korean defectors had hope and purpose during their journey, but they did not think past their initial goal. This is in no perspective, the fault of the North Korean defectors. They could not formulate a future after reaching South Korea because they did not know what to expect aside from the propaganda fed to them by the North Korean regime and the South Korean dramas that were smuggled to them from the North Korea – China border. Some North Korean defectors choose to seek new countries, a process known as onward migration.

United Kingdom (Onward Migration)

As mentioned above, failed integration was one of the main reasons North Korean defectors chose to pursue a life in western countries. In addition to the inability to compete with their Southern born countrymen, North Korean defectors are sometimes considered a second class citizen (Kim, 2012). The different mannerisms and upbringings often lead to a chain of misunderstanding and verbal clashes. Unless a systematic education reform is conducted on both sides, proper integration of the North Korean defectors into South Korean society will never come to fruit. The North Korean defectors who grew disillusioned with South Korean society sometimes choose to travel once more.

The United Kingdom houses one of the largest North Korean defectors populations outside of Asia (Pardo, 2018; Schofield, 2022). The city of New Malden is the place many North Korean defectors choose as their place to settle. Although the language barrier serves as a detriment to easy transition, North Korean defectors who are in New Malden state they are treated differently than in South Korea (Song, & Bell 2018).. Here, in a small city in England, there is no North Korean or South Korean, but just Korean. Being part of a small Asian population in a foreign country has given two wary populaces the gentle push needed to work together. Although the North Korean defectors initially struggle upon reaching New Malden, the English proficient South Korean population actively helps their Northern counterparts, as they perceive the North Korean defectors as hard working people. Nevertheless, like all new immigration populations, both Koreans must work together to integrate themselves properly into the British society lest they become an island on an island.

Conclusion

Fear of a stagnating life with little hope of release is the greatest driving factor behind the migration of North

Korean refugees. A constant life of spying on neighbors and families, public executions and beatings, and the removal of any social upward movement has caused certain members of the North Korean population to grow discontent with their life. These phenomena can be seen in great detail in the borders between North Korea and China, where the Juche Ideology has stagnated from its original form to “every man for himself.” Capitalism is rampant near the border, and more often than not some North Koreans are able to accumulate wealth to a faster degree than before because of this (Joo, 2010; Schwekendiek, & Xu, 2020).

Nevertheless, their serenity is occasionally broken by the lack of human rights in North Korea, and these people leave their home country in hope they can pursue a free life in the country their smuggled videos showed them. The start of the journey at the border between North Korea and China is the most dangerous part due to the sheer number of government related parties actively trying to detain the would-be refugees. Once they cross the border and travel to southern China, they breathe a sigh of relief. Compared to China the Lao People’s Democratic Republic is a less scrutinized area, where bribes carry more weight than the law. Upon passing the first two countries, the refugees are able to properly rest in the immigration jails of Thailand before they are transported to South Korea for social integration. Nevertheless, as soon as their journey ends, another journey which holds equal uncertainty awaits. Hopefully they are able to navigate this new and untested water, just as well as they did during their trek through Asia.

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