

## Lecture 11

## Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – North Korea

"There has been no discernible improvement in human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) since Kim Jong-Un assumed power after his father's death in 2011. The government continues to impose totalitarian rule..."

Although North Korea has ratified four key international human rights treaties and technically possesses a constitution with some rights protections, in reality the government represses all forms of freedom of expression and opinion and does not allow any organized political opposition, independent media, free trade unions, civil society organizations, or religious freedom. Those who attempt to assert rights, fail to demonstrate sufficient reverence for the party and its leadership, or otherwise act in ways deemed contrary to state interests face arbitrary arrest, detention, lack of due [legal] process, and torture and ill-treatment. The government also practices collective punishment for supposed anti-state offenses, effectively enslaving hundreds of thousands of citizens, including children, in prison camps and other detention facilities with deplorable conditions and forced labour." (from Human Rights Watch World Report 2014 – p369)

## The South Korean political left

- Predominantly constituted by the "486 generation" (formerly the "386" generation).
  - People born in the 1960s, active as students in the democracy protests of the 1980s, and today aged in their 40s (ten years ago aged in their 30s when the term was coined).
- This generation grew up without personal experience of the Japanese colonial era or the Korean War; they had access to education and food.
- Their formative experience was in opposing the dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan who both had ties with Japan and support from the American government/military.
- As a result they became left-wing and resented the influence of America more than the threat of North Korea.
- North Korea was the enemy of the South Korean regimes and America; those South Koreans who opposed Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, came to question official anti-Communist propaganda and felt some imagined sympathy with North Korea.
- Because travel to the North was illegal, circumstances of the country could not be verified and so it was easy to imagine that it was a better place than the South during the 1970s and 80s.
  - In 1989, student leader Lim Su-kyung (임수경 b.1968) illegally visited Pyongyang where she gave pro-unification speeches and met with Kim Il Sung; on her return she was arrested and imprisoned for 2 years (later pardoned by Kim Dae Jung).
    - She is now a politician and caused controversy in 2012 when overheard describing North Korean defectors as "traitors" (變節者 변절자).
- Another student activist, **Kim Young-hwan**<sup>1</sup> (김영환 b.1963) who tried to promote the Juche Thought (主體思想 주체사상 Juche-sasang) to the student movement during the 1980s, similarly visited Pyongyang in 1991 where he engaged with intellectuals on Juche Thought and met with Kim Il Sung twice.
  - Unlike Lim Su-kyung, Kim Young-hwan became disillusioned with NK after seeing the reality of NK and realizing that Kim Il Sung had no real understanding of Juche Thought (the philosophy he was credited with having invented!)
  - He since became a human rights activist helping refugees escape.
  - In 2012 he was arrested in China and held in illegal detention for more than 50 days during which time he alleges he was tortured.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/asia/korean-activist-kim-young-hwan-ex-supporter-of-north-plots-his-next-move.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/24/world/asia/korean-activist-kim-young-hwan-ex-supporter-of-north-plots-his-next-move.html?_r=0)

- The political left view the division of the country to be due to interference by foreign imperialist countries, namely Japan and then America.
  - In contrast to the South, North Korea has remained free of occupying foreign troops.
  - Although Russia established North Korea in 1945, its troops were entirely withdrawn before the Korean War; similarly Chinese troops, who participated in the Korean War (with great loss of life) were withdrawn afterwards.
- The left are **motivated by ethno-nationalist ideology** (民族主義 민족주의 minjok-ju'ui ) inclusive of their Northern brethren; they are politically anti-Japan and oppose the stationing of American troops in South Korea.
  - They are thus susceptible to North Korean propaganda which consistently denounces the South Korean government as a "puppet regime" (괴뢰정부).
- They strongly **adhere to the ideal of peaceful reunification**.
  - Or at very least, peaceful coexistence.
  - Under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations they strongly supported the Sunshine Policy of engagement.
  - They became so politically and emotionally invested in the Sunshine Policy (despite the lack of reciprocation from the North) that they were both unwilling and unable to critically appraise its failure.
- Militarily, they believe Japan and America to be more of a threat than the North or China.
  - They are therefore not particularly afraid of the North's nuclear (and other) weapons, understanding the logic that the North has developed them to bargain with America and insure its survival.
  - At the most extreme end of the ethnic-nationalist scale, many are proud that the North stands up against American imperialism (as the South has failed to do).
- Whilst rightly critical of the human rights abuses under Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, and issues of inequality and institutionalized corruption in South Korean society today, **they are in complete denial about the North's massive human rights violations**.
  - They reason that North Korea is a victim of history and geopolitics, that North Korea behaves the way it does (starving its own people) because of the threat from America.
    - This includes the circumstances of the mid 1990s famine and ongoing food crisis.
  - They choose not to know about the political prison camps.
  - They are uninterested in the plight of North Korean refugees.

### Waning influence of the left

- 2003 revelations of payoffs for the Sunshine Policy and summit meetings.
- With the election of conservative President Lee Myung-bak in February 2008, the left lost political power.
- 2009.5. suicide of previous left-wing president Roh Moo-hyun (1946-2009).
- Failure to field a single strong candidate in the most recent 2012 election, enabling Park Geun-hye to come to power.
- Younger Koreans in their 20s today who did not experience the South Korean dictatorships and 1980s democracy movement, and know of the North only from images of starvation and more recent provocations, do not have the same desire for reunification and are generally disaffected with traditional politics.

### Return of the left?

- Following the impeachment of Park Geunhye, Moon Jae In (b.1953) was elected as president.
- Moon previously served as Roh Moo-hyun's chief presidential secretary and has been closely associated with Roh's policies of engagement with NK.

- Against the current context of the North's nuclear and missile tests, Moon is limited in restarting such policies. Pyongyang also shows less interest in such activities.

### Japanese/American collaborators VS North Korean sympathizers

- The South Korean nationalist left denounce the political right as being of "pro-Japanese" lineage (親日 친일 chin'il) and today "pro-American" (親美 친미 chinmi).
- During the 1970s and 80s, the right referred to the left as pro-Communist "reds". Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, this has less resonance and recently (post-Sunshine policy) they are using the term "Northern appeaser" (從北 종북 jongbuk lit. "subservient to the North") instead.
- It is along these terms which South Korean politics is currently hyper-polarized.

### The Sunshine Policy (햇볕정책 1998–2008)

- Pursued over a decade by the consecutive administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-hyun.
- The principle was to effect positive change in North Korea through economic and social engagement.

Flagship projects included:

#### **Kaesong Industrial Complex** (개성공업지구 2004–2016)

- Began operating around 2004.
- SK companies exploit NK labour in the industrial zone just 3 hours drive north from Seoul.
- The problems is, the companies are insured and subsidized by the SK government (meaning tax payers money is being transferred to NK to fund weapons programs!).
- Wages are not paid directly to workers, but to the state; despite this the workers receive higher rations than average North Korean citizens so it is a good deal for them.
- After 10 years(?) operation SK companies have to pay tax to the NK government.
- Until recently, the Kaesong Complex has been a major source of cash for the NK regime.
- A positive effect is that it has employed around 53,000 NK workers giving them some exposure to South Korean companies, and source of economic stability which clearly isn't the NK state.
- South Korean companies permanently withdrew in February 2016.

#### **Mount Kumgang** (금강산) **and Kaesong** (개성) **tourist zones**

- Operated since 1998, Hyundai operated tours first by boat and then built an expensive hotel at Mount Kumgang ultimately bankrupting the company.
- In 2008 a SK middle-aged female tourist was shot dead by a soldier. As a result, all tourism was suspended and has remained so.

#### **Summit meetings between North and South leaders** (南北頂上會談 남북정상회담)

- 2000 summit meeting between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Il Sung.
- 2007 summit meeting between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Il Sung.
  - Both meetings were held in Pyongyang: Kim Jong Il never visited Seoul.

### Failings of Sunshine

- **Large shipments of un-monitored aid** were delivered which went straight to the regime and Pyongyang.
- The regime spent the money received on weapons programs and luxury goods at a time when its own population was suffering acute food shortages.

- Economic projects such as Kaesong failed to achieve any leverage over Pyongyang because the regime knew that the South government was politically invested in them and would not allow them to fail.
- **The engagement never addressed human rights.**
- Supporters of the Sunshine Policy argue that it was not given enough time to achieve its goal, and that it was hampered by the confrontational attitudes of America under George Bush and South Korean political opposition.
  - They are blind to the fact that, from day one, **North Korea did not reciprocate** and did not make any concession or move towards reconciliation which could not be reversed.
  - The 2010 revelations of a second uranium nuclear program (which had been carried on secretly throughout the period of Sunshine at huge expense) and the massive transfer of money from the South to Kim Jong Il are irrefutable proof of this.

## The nature of the North Korean regime

The NK government was set-up by Russians **along Stalinist principles**.

- Key features of Stalinism are: the personality cult, total state control, rule through terror, political purging and gulag prison camps.
- NK has been described by Andrei Lankov as "more Stalinist than Stalin".
- During the 1990s, however, the rigid social control broke down and so today it is best understood as a "post-Stalinist" country.

North Korea has also been strongly influenced by the **legacy of Japanese colonialism**.

- Very few North Koreans had experienced any other political system than Japanese Emperor worship.
- North Koreans with experience in Soviet Russia or China had nearly all been purged by the end of the 1950s.
- Native Korean Communists were similarly purged (and had mostly been based in the south), leaving only Kim Il Sung's personal "guerilla faction" in command; they were uneducated and untravelled.
- Race-based ethnic ideology which underpins the nation still today, was inherited from the Japanese.
- The Kim dynasty is given semi-divine status unparalleled in other Soviet countries.
  - There has been a greater need to exaggerate and mythologize Kim Il Sung because, unlike Mao Zedong of China, he had no real military achievements.

Today, the leadership of the NK regime is best understood as a **kleptocracy**.

- Meaning its only concern is its own survival, not the well being of its citizens.
- The leadership know they have no future in a unified Korea (SK maintains the death penalty).
- They are scared of their own people.

## Governing policies

Seon'gun (先軍 선군) "Military First" politics (1998 onwards)

- Through this policy the regime prioritizes the military over other departments of government.
- The military is the only force in NK with the capacity to effect regime change.
  - Seon'gun was successful in ensuring their loyalty and support as they benefit most from the current situation.

## Byeongjin Line (核·經濟 竝進路線 핵·경제 병진노선) 2013 ~

- **Simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and the domestic economy.**

### Population of North Korea

- The total population of North Korea is around 24 million.
- Thus it could absorb the impact of famine in which between 1-3 million may have died.

## The varied co-existing realities of North Korea

### 1. **Pyongyang** (平壤 평양 Pyeongyang)

- Bastion of the regime and showpiece of North Korea.
- Used to project North Korea's "brand image" overseas: Soviet kitsch of statues, military parades, Arirang mass games; traffic ladies and other such harmless appearing eccentricities.
  - The only part of the country most foreigners can visit.
  - Foreign journalists and tourists are allowed on controlled visits.
  - These may include a couple of model farms just outside of Pyongyang, and even the Panmunjom (판문점) border village.
  - Home also to the diplomatic community.
- Location of the regime and elite population.
  - Compared to the rest of the country, Pyongyangites live in relative comfort.
  - They have access to food, schools and functioning hospitals.
  - Except for during the height of the famine, Pyongyang has been protected from food shortages.
  - Pyongyangites are unlikely to be fully aware of the extent of suffering and depravation in the rest of the country.
  - Residency in Pyongyang is a privilege which can be revoked; the greatest threat for residents is to be expelled from Pyongyang.
  - They remain political loyal because they have the most to lose.
- Within Pyongyang there is an emergent nouveau riche class who enjoy the use of mobile phones, expensive cars, restaurants and luxury shops.
  - They are primarily the children of high officials who have close links with the Kim family.
  - Thus there is an emergent wealth gap even inside Pyongyang.
- At the middle to poorer end, conditions even in Pyongyang are basic.
  - Even in recently built apartments, there is lack of heating and unreliable water and electricity.
  - Many buildings are in a state of dilapidation.
  - Reports of pigs being raised inside domestic apartments to sell for meat.

### 2. **The rest of North Korea outside of Pyongyang**

- The greater part of the population, around 20 million, live outside of Pyongyang, in other cities or collective farming villages.
- This population was most immediately effected by the famine of the 1990s and continues to suffer severe food shortages and malnutrition still today.
- This North Korea is rarely, if at all, seen by foreigners; information primarily comes from defectors.

- NK is/was a fully urbanized industrial country, so more people live in cities than on farms.
  - This left the population particularly vulnerable to famine as the urban population was completely reliant on food rations distributed by the government through the Public Distribution System (PDS) – which gradually stopped during the early 1990s and, despite regular attempts, has never been fully resuscitated outside of Pyongyang.
  - During the mid 1990s famine and since, many urban families have had to rely on food sent by relatives working on farms.
  - Most of the population today is reliant on black markets, through which they trade for food and basic items.
  - This "marketization from below" scares the regime because it has made the population independent of the PDS which had been the primary means of social control for decades.
  - The regime regularly tries to suppress markets but has no alternative to offer.
    - In 2007 women under the age of 40 were banned from trading at markets.
    - At the start of 2013 women were re-banned from riding bicycles (apparently to stop them travelling to markets – they had previously been banned during the 1990s).
- Information on "the rest of North Korea" comes almost entirely from refugees, border crossers, and undercover sources who report from within North Korea close to the Chinese border with smuggled Chinese phones.
  - Most refugees come from the mountainous northeast of the country.
    - This is the harshest region to live in Korea, it has always been a least favoured region (a place of exile for yangban during the Joseon dyansty).
    - It was the first region to have food rations cut during the late 1980s; the population has been forced to fend for itself for the longest period of time, is least loyal to the regime and furthest from Pyongyang.
    - Its fortunes were somewhat reversed since the famine, as its proximity to China enabled many to escape and/or engage in smuggling of food, drugs and money across the Chinese border.
    - Most information on "life inside North Korea" comes from the northeast.
      - This possibly paints a biased picture of the more extreme conditions of food shortages and public executions associated with smuggling and border crossing.
    - Likewise, those living in the north receive most information about life in China and South Korea contributing to political subversion.
- Far less is specifically known about conditions in the rest of North Korea's interior.
  - Aid agencies are granted only occasional and highly restricted access to limited areas.
  - Food shortages are known to be severe even in the "rice bowl" provinces of the southwest as food grown is seized by the authorities and local military to feed Pyongyang residents.
  - These regions are further from China so cannot benefit from smuggling or contact with relatives abroad.

If food shortages are so severe, how does anyone stay alive at all? (circa 2014)

- A large proportion of the population relies on privately cultivated plots of land, called *sotoji* (燒土地 소토지 "scorched earth land"), visible on satellite photography.
- Through a system of bribery, these plots are tolerated by local officials even though they are technically illegal.
- *Sotoji* are cultivated on mountain slopes cleared of trees through "slash and burn" practice, as this is the only potential land not already designated for state farms.
  - They are necessarily hidden in remote areas far from villages typically requiring several kilometres' walking to reach.
  - Farmers, miners and former urban factory workers all engage in *sotoji* cultivation.
  - In 2002, the regime started trying to tax *sotoji* but most cultivators have found it cheaper to pay bribes to local forestry officials who will help hide their existence.

- Larger *sotoji* are also cultivated by former state owned enterprises, such as factories.
  - This has been justified under the state ideology of self-reliance.
  - In these cases, they may be able to use the better quality land of local agricultural cooperatives (state farms).
- Because the quality of *sotoji* land is generally poor, they are especially reliant on fertilizer which is either stolen from state farms or bought on the black market.
  - They also use human night soil leading to risk of parasite infestation.
- At least in the mountainous northeast, the area of *sotoji* is more than 50% of total land being cultivated.
  - *Sotoji* compete and out-perform state farms, because cultivators are able to keep the greater part of what they grow (either for immediate survival or to sell on the market) giving motivation over work on state farms from which the harvest is confiscated by the state.

The circumstances of these private plots is "...very different to China where agrarian reform in the late 1970s may also have begun spontaneously [without state approval or planning], but in 2-3 years was recognized and encouraged by the state. The North Korean state has not shown the slightest intention to accept or encourage the switch to the private agriculture, and still keeps private farmers outside the boundaries of the legal system and out of lands best suitable for cultivation."<sup>2</sup>

### Under Kim Jong Un the government has allowed and even encouraged market activities.

"North Korea has a population of just 25 million, but there are a least 387 officially sanctioned markets in the country, and a minimum of 600,000 people are legally permitted to trade from stalls within these marketplaces. It is also believed that, when added to those who trade in illegal locations surrounding official marketplaces, the number of retail traders deriving their livelihoods from market activities reaches one million. Because most traders support families, we can say that approximately four million North Koreans survive on incomes from market activities. Then there are the transport and service industries that facilitate commerce, and the many mid-ranking officials who supplement meager incomes from the bribes given by market participants. Our survey indicates that the number of North Koreans who make a living connected in one way or another to markets is greater than the number who subsist through centrally planned agriculture or functioning state industries. But even these latter groups are not isolated from the marketization phenomenon; they too have been heavily influenced by markets. Marketization has reached a point where it cannot be reversed. We conclude that the three core constituents of Kim Jong Un's North Korea are the market system, a functioning nuclear deterrence capability, and the economic influence of China..."

"...50,000 tons of food aid would once have been sufficient to buy dialogue and cooperation from Kim Jong Il, but things are different now. The North Korean government extracts rents from General Market merchants equating to more than 70,000 tons of rice each and every year. This is no longer a destitute dictatorship willing to accept help from anyone willing to give it."<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Heavy labour prison camps

There are four main types of prison in North Korea:

*Gwalli-so* (管理所 관리소) "management places"

- The political prison camps – gulags – containing "total control zones" from which very few are released.

<sup>2</sup> From "Relying on One's Strength: The Growth of the Private Agriculture in Borderland Areas of North Korea" by Andrei Lankov, Seok Hyang Kim and Inok Kwak.

<sup>3</sup> *The Creation of the North Korean Market System* (pp11-12)

[http://www.dailynk.com/english/data\\_view.php?bbs\\_code=ebbs1&bbs\\_number=64&page=1&keycode=&keyword=](http://www.dailynk.com/english/data_view.php?bbs_code=ebbs1&bbs_number=64&page=1&keycode=&keyword=)

- Extrajudicial: no trials or sentencing.

*Gyohwa-so* (教化所 교화소) "education places"

- Camps for non-political but serious crimes.
- Sentences between 1 year and life.

*Jipgyeol-so* (集結所 집결소) "collection places"

- Camps for less serious crimes.
- Sentences of up to 1 year.

*Rodong-dallyeon-dae* (勞動鍛鍊隊 로동단련대) "labour training brigades"

- Established to punish the large number of offenders of various economic crimes (crossing into China, illegal trading etc) in the post-famine era (late 1990s onwards).
- Sentences between 6 months to 2 years.

In all these prison camps, conditions are harsh including:

- Forced heavy labour.
- Starvation rations.
- Exposure to severe cold.
- Violence including beatings and public executions.

The *gwalliso* and other prison camps are known about through a large corpus of consistent eye witness testimonies collected from both former guards and inmates and corroborated with satellite photography.

The prison camp population is currently beyond help.

- The regime denies the existence of *gwalliso* and aid agencies are denied access.
- They are least prioritized for food rationing; starvation is high.
- Seoul and foreign governments have consistently failed to confront the regime concerning the camps.

"In an interview conducted in November 2013, Mr. Lee (full name withheld), who was a security official in *kwanliso* 16 in the 1980s until the mid-1990s, told Amnesty International of other forms of executions he had witnessed where inmates were forced to dig their own graves and then killed by hammer blows to their necks by prison authorities. In another instance, he had seen prison authorities strangling and then beating inmates to their death with wooden sticks. He also recounted that several women inmates disappeared after they had been raped by officials and he concluded that they had been executed secretly."<sup>4</sup>

Circumstances of the *gwalli-so* political prison camps (circa 2014)

- Last known prisoner release from any camp was in 2007.
- Until recently the total estimated population of the *gwalli-so* prison camps (not including other types of prison camp) was up to 200,000 people.
- In light of new information, the current number is estimated to be between 80,000-120,000.
- The previous estimate was not wrong, but based on information from prison camp officials who had defected c.2000, so referred to the situation during the early 1990s – before everyone died.

---

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International 2013 report *North Korea: New Satellite Images Show Continued Investment in the Infrastructure of Repression* page 6.



Overall the *gwalli-so* population seems to have declined.

- This is primarily because the rate of replacement (new prisoners) has not kept up with the death rate inside the camps. Reasons why:
  - After Kim Il Sung had consolidated political power (eliminating all rival factions), from the late 1950s until the 70s, large purges of the population occurred based on people's perceived political loyalty, determined through their family backgrounds (성분 seongbun).
  - During these purges, entire families were imprisoned and killed.
  - These purges were effective as the families were exterminated inside the camps.
- Even living under better conditions, many would have now been in their old age and naturally dying off.
- Since then, there have not been similar scale purges: more recently it tends to be individuals who are imprisoned, rather than the whole family – although the latter practice has not ended entirely.
- Ongoing food shortages from the late 1980s until today have caused mass starvation inside the camps.
  - Added to this are regular executions, deaths through beatings and accidents: all contributing to high death rates.
  - There are, though, various other heavy labour prison camps in North Korea so the total prison population is certainly much higher than 120,000.

Two recent case studies of *gwalliso*

**Camp No.22** (Hoeryong, North Hamgyeong-do province)

- Originally opened in the 1960s and expanded between 1980–90s.
- Located near to Hoeryong (회령시 Hoeryeong-si) in the far northeast, close to the Chinese border.
- Around 1990 it may have had a population of about 50,000 prisoners.

"Prisoners at Camp No.22 mined coal that was shipped to the Chongjin thermal power plant to provide electricity for the Kimchaek steel mills." (Hawk 2013:17)<sup>5</sup>

- It has been reported (by a defector) that due to food shortages (associated with the 2009 currency devaluation and poor harvest in 2009 and 2010), the camp population had rapidly decreased from 30,000 to 3,000 people.<sup>6</sup>
- Was closed down during 2012.
- This was possibly due to the apparent defection of the camp commandant and another prison official, as well as its proximity to China.
- Throughout 2012, nighttime trains moved the remaining prison population south, assumed to have transported them to other camps.

**Camp No.18** (Bukchang, South Pyeong'an-do province)

- First set-up in 1958; expanded during 1970s.
- Different to other *gwalliso*, it was administered by the regular police agency (under the Ministry of Public Security 인민보안성); other camps are administered by the State Security Department (SSD 국가안전보위부).
  - Employed civilians officials, whereas other camps are staffed by SSD officials.
  - Conditions inside the Camp 18 were marginally better than other *gwalliso*.
  - In the case of reward marriages for model prisoners, the prisoner could choose their partner.
- Children at the school were given regular school uniforms.

<sup>5</sup> Hawk, David. 2013. "North Korea's Hidden Gulag: interpreting reports of changes in the prison camps" [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/NKHiddenGulag\\_DavidHawk.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/NKHiddenGulag_DavidHawk.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/camp-11062012112837.html>

- Camp No.18 was the only political prison camp where a significantly number of prisoners was ever released.
  - During the 1980s and 90s entire "villages" inside the camp were de-commissioned as labour camps and the prisoners restored the status of regular North Korean citizens.
  - This process was referred to as *madang haeje* (마당해제 lit. "yard [inside a traditional home] release").
  - Although the former prisoners were free to travel inside the country and return to their hometowns, many chose to stay in the former prison villages as they had spent most of their lives inside the camp and no longer had connections to family elsewhere.
- In this manner, by the end of 2006, the entire camp had been dismantled.
    - Around 2,500 prisoners deemed unsuitable to be freed were transferred to another camp.
    - This process has been suggested as a model for how the gwalliso could be successfully dismantled.

## 4. Refugees

### Those hiding in China

The number of NK refugees in China is thought, at its peak during the 2000s to have been up to 100,000.

- The total number of refugees to have passed through China, or made multiple visits from North Korea will be higher.
- Many who are caught in China and sent back to North Korea return to China as soon as they can, if they survive their prison sentences.
- The majority of refugees are women.
  - They were the first to lose their jobs in NK whilst men were kept on at state jobs (even when there was no work or money) under stricter surveillance and social pressure to stay loyal to the regime.
  - It is easier for women to find jobs in China as domestic workers, better hidden from security agents; they are also trafficked and sold as brides.
- China refers to North Korean refugees as "economic migrants" and so denies them protection or access to the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency in China).
- Because China does not recognize NK refugees, they are extremely vulnerable to trafficking, being sold as brides to rural farmers or into the sex industry.
  - Many NK women are sold as brides to northeastern Chinese farmers.
  - Some are able to maintain a degree of happiness if they have families, but they are especially vulnerable to domestic abuse.
  - Children are unregistered and so cannot officially receive schooling (although some local authorities have allowed schooling and do not report the NK wives).
  - There is also constant fear of being arrested and sent back to NK.
- China actively cooperates with NK (allowing NK agents to operate inside China) arresting NK refugees, holding them at detention centres inside China where they are interrogated by NK agents, and forcibly repatriating them to North Korea where they face further torture and sentencing.
  - If they are suspected of having had contact with South Koreans or Christian missionaries (usually the same thing) they face execution.
  - If they are caught near the border of a third country (e.g. Laos or Mongolia), they face similar harsh sentencing as it is clear they are attempting to defect and cannot argue to being economic migrants.

- At least during the late 1990s and early 2000s, pregnant women were subject to forced abortions either through beatings, or induced labour after which the baby was killed in front of them.
  - This was justified on the grounds of the babies having mixed blood, even if the Chinese husband had been ethnic Korean.

### The reason they are refugees

- The motivation for the majority leaving North Korea is, at the first time, economic rather than political.
- However, crossing the border into China, is illegal under NK law and so, if caught and returned, they face certain harsh punishment including torture without any chance of a fair trial.
- For this reason, the moment they cross into China, North Koreans become "refugees sur place".
- For China to cooperate with NK and forcibly return these refugees, is against the international principle of *non-refoulement* that:

"No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." (1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees).

- It is more explicitly against the **1984 UN Convention Against Torture** which states it is illegal to return an individual **regardless of refugee status**, to "another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that they would be in danger of being subjected to torture."
- China is a fully ratified signatory to both conventions but chooses to ignore them.

### Current circumstances of refugees

- Since Kim Jong Un came to power in early 2012, punishments for border crossing have been enhanced, with "shoot to kill" orders given to border guards.
- China has more actively cooperated with NK agents in hunting down refugees, offering rewards to local informants and constructing electrified fencing along the border (though it is not known over how much of the border this currently extends).
- As a result it is now harder for North Koreans to escape, but as long as there are food shortages many will continue to try, especially as more information about conditions in China and South Korea has become available to them.
- In 2013, 9 NK children were arrested in Laos and returned to NK via China.

7

### North Koreans in South Korea

- Since 2000, around 30,000 refugees have reached South Korea.
  - The number of refugees entering South Korea peaked in 2009 at around 2,900.
  - This number has dramatically decreased since last Kim Jong Un came to power in 2012.
  - Since 2012 the numbers have been around 1,200~1,500 per year.
- They are commonly referred to as *talbuk-ja* (脫北者 탈북자 "one who has escaped the North") or, more PC *saeteomin* (새터민 "new [to our] land people"), a term created by the Ministry of Unification in 2004 but not particularly popular with NK defectors themselves.
- Despite a 3 month government integration programme that all refugees participate in, many struggle to integrate into South Korean society.
  - They lack education and are physically weaker than South Koreans.

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://us.cnn.com/videos/world/2013/09/30/north-korea-failed-escape-hancocks-pkg.cnn>

- Many suffer post-traumatic-stress disorder from experience of famine and torture, making it difficult for them to maintain stable jobs.
- They lack knowledge of English vocabulary which has become so prevalent in South Korean language.
  
- South Korean society is hyper-competitive and difficult even for many South Koreans.
- North Koreans feel resented and looked down upon by South Koreans.
  - Larger numbers of refugees began entering South Korea during from the late 1990s at the height of the Sunshine Policy – their plight and experiences were largely ignored by the government and media.
  - The South Korean public is largely indifferent to their circumstances and increasingly they are viewed as economic migrants.
  - The only support they receive tends to be from church organizations (starting from when they are in China).
- There are many success stories as well.

## Some recent articles and reports

“Where do the majority of North Korean defectors come from? 75% of all escapees in the South are from just two provinces”

<https://www.nknews.org/2017/10/where-do-the-majority-of-north-korean-defectors-come-from/>

Life Under Kim Jong Un: Recent North Korean escapees relate how the secretive country has changed under the “Great Successor.” By Anna Fifield

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/north-korea-defectors/?utm\\_term=.93a616286b69](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/north-korea-defectors/?utm_term=.93a616286b69)

DailyNK report: *The Creation of the North Korean Market System* (cited also above)

[http://www.dailynk.com/english/data\\_view.php?bbs\\_code=ebbs1&bbs\\_number=64&page=1&keycode=&keywor](http://www.dailynk.com/english/data_view.php?bbs_code=ebbs1&bbs_number=64&page=1&keycode=&keyword=)  
[d=](http://www.dailynk.com/english/data_view.php?bbs_code=ebbs1&bbs_number=64&page=1&keycode=&keyword=)