

Living Dangerously in Two Worlds: The Risks and Tactics of North Korean Refugee Children in China

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Abstract

The Great Famine in North Korea, which began in 1995, has driven many people to cross the Sino-Korean border. The total number of refugees in China is estimated to be between 140,000 and 200,000, of whom about 5% were children under 20 years old. This paper examines the structural causes of the continuous influx of the North Korean refugee children into China from a comparative perspective. Many of the wandering children become habitual border-crossers in order to feed their families and to save themselves from a forced return. They develop transnational strategies and tactics to cope with the sharp contrasts in material conditions and cultural practices between the two countries. The childhood under such marginal conditions leaves them at serious risk, and many of them bear deep psychological scars as a result. However, by becoming independent at a young age, they function as active agents for social change with a critical awareness evolved from contrasting experiences in the two countries.

Keywords: North Korea, famine, refugees, children, human rights

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“We Are Happy”—the sign is posted on the entrances, walls, and halls of every North Korean kindergarten and child-care center. The children are supposed to live, or to at least believe that they are living, in a “Heaven on Earth”—the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Their hands are cold and their faces show signs of malnutrition, but they smile, sing songs of happiness, and do a dance of joy in a country of historic importance.

Their happiness does not hinge on material well-being. They all know that America, Japan and even China are better off than North Korea. However, they say that they are happy because of the love and gifts from the Late Chairman Kim Il Sung, and now from the Great Leader Kim Jong Il, who embodies righteousness and guiding morality in the long historical struggle of the Korean people. So, even though they face great physical and economic hardships, like the communist partisans who fought against the Japanese occupation, they say that they would betray their country for neither food nor a soft bed.

Everyday, North Korean students learn of the childhoods of the “Great Leader,” the Late Chairman Kim Il Sung, his son, “the Dear Leader,” General Kim Jong Il, and his mother, “the Beloved Comrade,” Mother Kim Jong-Sook. From an early age, the children learn to model themselves after these heroic figures. Beyond learning the content of the stories, they are encouraged to memorize the stories of the leaders word for word with exactly the same tones and gestures as their teachers. Educational institutions emphasize order and discipline as they help the children internalize the “Good Behaviors” of the Juche (“extreme” self-reliance) ideology. Liberal, individualistic attitudes are considered evil, while collectivist normative behaviors are lionized as the public ideal.

These are the official images of North Korean childhood that Pyongyang wants to present to outsiders. Talented children perform highly sophisticated skills while tens of thousands of children march and play mass-games in perfect harmony, symbolizing the educational ideal that North Korea wants to achieve. In spite of hard times, North Korea remains true to its educational ideals, striving to direct

its students and schools towards unity and excellence. However, in reality, most schools, other than a few elite schools in Pyongyang and other big cities, are no longer the powerful tool of socialization that they once were. They are no longer able to control not only the students, but also the teachers as tightly as before. In the peripheral provinces, absenteeism becomes a chronic feature of most schools. The presence of the North Korean children in China can be explained in part by the almost total collapse of the school system in North Korea.

North Korea’s Public Distribution System (PDS) was malfunctioning even before the Great Flood of 1995. Access to state-supplied food (domestic produce, relief supplies, and imports) is strictly determined by one’s status, with key military units, government officials and a few strategically important cities’ residents always outranking peasant farmers, miners and ordinary laborers in the periphery. In sum, the more important an individual is to the state, the better treated his family will be (Lautze 1997, 7).

In a city near the border, even in the most difficult famine period of 1998, schools remained open to all, but the unequal distribution of food still limited access to education. In this city, only about a fourth of the students (children of party leaders, or those with overseas relatives or gained income through trade with China) could afford lunch boxes. These children stayed in school the entire day and some still prepared for college entrance exams. Another fourth of the class stayed in school the entire day, but without any lunch. Still another fourth came to school for morning classes, which were ideology classes specially designated for learning the childhood stories of the Great Leader, the Dear General, and the Mother, mostly as a demonstration of their loyalty. The remaining children continue to be chronically absent, and some of them have already lost their lives (Chung 2001). The conditions of famine in a socialist country are not as equal as often imagined.

North Korean Children in China

The Great Famine in North Korea, which began in 1995, has driven many people to cross the Sino-Korean border. The total number of refugees in China was estimated to be between 140,000 and 200,000, of whom about 5% were children under 20 years old (Good Friends 1999, 13). This means that nearly 10,000 North Korean children live in China at any given time. Given that many of these youngsters become frequent border-crossers, as the brokers of a cross-cultural experience, their existences in two separate countries may have a greater significance than their numbers. The area that they wander covers most of the three north-eastern prefectures of China and stretches to Inner Mongolia, Beijing, and further down to the southern provinces. Some may cross the borders of Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar to Thailand, or penetrate the Sino-Mongolia border to find a route into South Korea.

As illegal immigrants, their life in China is marked by anxiety and fear. The threat of being caught by the Chinese police and being sent back to North Korea hangs over them constantly. For many, the threat becomes a reality, sometimes one which is repeated. Once captured, the immigrants search desperately for a means of escape. The horror of the corporal punishment awaiting them in North Korea motivates them to take great risks. There are many people, especially children, who have succeeded to escape from the Chinese police and even from North Korean authorities. After escape, their lives in China become even more desperate.

After the North-South Korean Summit in June 2000, many experts on North Korean refugee issues expected the number of border-crossers to decrease rapidly. Some even speculated that most refugees in China would eventually return as the food problem in North Korea eased. Many reports from Yanji reveal that even more North Koreans crossed the border after the Summit. Those already in China are gaining access to safer ways to move to Seoul. As things stand, the North Korean refugee issue has become a chronic problem.

Structural Push-Pull Factors

Push Factors: North Korean Famine and Collapse of the Social System

The North Korean famine has been attributed mainly to the natural disasters such as the Great Floods of 1995 and 1996. This kind of natural disaster theory is the basis for interpreting the North Korean refugee issues in China as a temporal, emergency problem. However, researchers on the famine in a global perspective understand famine as a process, not an event (Pottier 1999, 143). They agree that the causes of famine arise not from "Food Availability Decline," but from the "Food Entitlement Decline" (Sen 1981). These arguments suggest that the North Korean famine should be understood as more of a "Failure in Demand" caused by inequality, poverty, and other socio-economic problems rather than as a "Failure in Supply" that is merely the result of natural disasters (Devereux 1993, 71).

The "Food Entitlement Decline" of North Korea comes fundamentally from the collapse of the Communist Block Economy, in which North Korea took a role as an industrial manufacturer and received a large portion of its food and fuel from other communist countries. From the early 1990s, its entire economic system suffered from shortages of almost every resource. The half century of economic sanctions by the U.S. and its virtual exclusion from the world market economy made this situation completely intractable for the North Koreans.¹

After the floods in 1995 and 1996, the basic national food ration system collapsed. Everyone, other than a few in power, had to search for their own food and fuel. The once-proud free education and free medical system in North Korea reached functional collapse. Aside from a few elite schools in Pyeongyang and a few other major cities, most schools could not function properly since the teachers and stu-

1. Clark (1996) reports the devastating impacts of the economic sanctions on Iraq in his book *Children are Dying*. He also points out the inhumane nature of U.S. initiated sanctions against Cuba and North Korea.

dents alike abandoned their classes in order to search for food. Doctors without medicines or even basic medical equipment could not treat the increasing flow of patients resulting from malnutrition. The once tightly woven North Korean society lost control over the movement of its population.

During this time of extreme food shortage, the uneven distribution of resources became more visible along the lines of regional and class differences. Pyeongyang, the focus of international attention, gobbled up resources while trying to maintain an orderly posture to the outside world, even as industrial laborers and miners in the peripheral provinces suffered the most. While a vast majority of the North Korean refugees comes from the provinces near the Sino-Korean border, the food conditions were reported to be just as serious in other provinces.² This means that the people in the more distant provinces have the potential to join the crossing of the Chinese border as social networks and information from the outside world spread and social control mechanisms weaken.

Pull Factors: The Economic Prosperity of China and South Korea

Sharp contrasts between North Korea and China can be easily observed by comparing the vegetation on both sides of the border. Prolonged famine and fuel shortage virtually destroyed the vegetation in North Korea. Croplands have been extended up to high slopes. People searching for fuel have stripped the mountainsides of trees, roots, and all larger undergrowth for tens of kilometers around the cities. This makes it harder to find fuel each winter and the resulting environmental damage makes flooding more serious each summer.

China, on the other hand, is going through its largest economic

2. A survey by Good Friends (1999) shows that nearly 80% of the refugees they interviewed were from Hamgyeongbuk-do (59.6%) and Hamgyeongnam-do (20.0%). It is also confirmed that the percentages of the refugees reaching South Korea are similar to those of the above. Many of them have relatives among the Korean-Chinese near the border area.

boom in its history. Food is abundant, as are clothes and other basic materials for living. In particular, the three prefectures closest to North Korea are the Chinese version of the American breadbasket. Corn, beans, and rice are cultivated in vast quantities in this region. This land of milk and honey lies just across the river from North Korea. The Dumangang (Tumen in Chinese) river to the East or Amnokgang (Yalu in Chinese) river to the West do not pose considerable obstacles. Several upstream sections can be forded between spring and fall, and during the long winter freeze people simply walk across the hardened ice.

The ethnic Korean-Chinese (total population of about 2.5 million) live in many villages and towns along the border. The Yanbian Korean Autonomous Region begins at the border and stretches approximately 300 km inland. Here the people speak Korean and many of them have relatives just across the river. In addition, they experienced their own version of a socialist famine during the Great Leap Forward Movement (1959–1962). During this time, some Korean-Chinese crossed the border into North Korea to find food. Many of them remember what famine was like and what an oppressive regime could do. They are the primary helpers for the border-crossers.

As Chinese citizens, they are allowed to visit North Korean relatives. Some engage in basic economic trade; mostly small-scale food items, medicine, and clothes. However, a growing number of professional smugglers seek greater profits among the desperate North Koreans. They smuggle forbidden antiques, precious natural resources, and, sometimes humans. Bribery of the guards on both sides of the river is quite common. The varying cost ranges for bribing North Korean military guards often becomes a topic of conversation among border-crossers. As the official surveillance along the border has been tightened, the unofficial routes through the border seem to have widened and solidified. The recent increase in the number of whole families crossing the border reveals the existence of these private routes.

In spite of the official Chinese government policy of arrest and deportation of the North Korean refugees, Chinese society in general

shows relatively indifferent attitudes toward North Korean immigrants. As they possess almost no physical difference from Han Chinese, they can be absorbed into this large multi-ethnic society without much trouble. With the rapid demographic changes in Chinese society in recent years, especially the large-scale migration from rural areas to urban centers, they create an even stronger pull for the North Koreans (especially young women) to come to many rural villages.

A large-scale international demand for labor provides a deeper structural explanation for the North Korean refugee phenomenon. The South Korean economy attracts hundreds of thousands of ethnic Korean-Chinese as illegal migrant laborers every year. Also, many South Korean business firms have extended into China, especially in the areas of tourism and service, absorbing even more Korean-Chinese, particularly young female workers from rural villages. These uneven labor demands and the resulting population circulation create a major demographic problem in thousands of ethnic Korean villages across the region. Most of them suffer from an extremely unbalanced male-female sex ratio among young adults. Forced marriages imposed on the female border-crossers become an almost inevitable solution for many men in the rural village.³

South Korea influences the Korean-Chinese not only with its industrial capital, but also with feverish support of a religion recently introduced to this region—Christianity. Many evangelical Christian missionaries propel the establishment of churches for the Korean-Chinese. They receive support from many big churches in South Korea and also from Korean-American churches in the U.S. Together, the churches have established universities and hospitals modeled after the practices of American Missions in late 19th century Korea.

These religious institutions are major sources of both economic and human capital for the relief activities for the North Korean

3. An informal sociological survey conducted by the scholars in Yanbian University reports a 14:1, male: female ratio among the unmarried age group after schooling in the rural villages in Yanbian Korean Autonomous region.

refugees. In training North Korean children to illegally proselytize in North Korea, they add greatly to the psychological tensions among the refugees. North Korean authorities view these evangelists as the ultimate threat to the regime. Proving any association with these Christian missions is a goal during interrogations by North Korean police.⁴

Adventurous Life in Fear

Crossing the Border

The idea of crossing the Sino-Korean border has become a popular topic among itinerant children's groups in North Korea known as the *kkotjebi* (fluttering swallows). These groups form a kind of refuge for male orphans and boys whose families have collapsed during the famine. Typically, the boys are between 12 and 18 years old and form a group of 10 to 15 members, though the number can grow as large as near 30.

In North Korea, they hang around train stations to tap into the shipments of goods, and roam around markets to beg or to steal food. Often times, though, they attack peddlers in groups. By simply hopping onto trains, which move slowly and frequently stop due to the irregular supply of electricity, they gain great mobility and can travel to almost every part of North Korea, except for Pyongyang, where special double check points guard the entrance. Some are able to penetrate into Pyongyang but are soon caught and expelled, left to brag about their trip to the forbidden Center of the Revolution. For these wandering children, crossing the guarded border out of their fatherland is merely an extension of their already adventurous domes-

4. In a fund-raising pamphlet, an ad-hoc Christian organization in South Korea declared that it would help to establish ten thousand "underground churches" in North Korea by training refugee youths as "special task force missionaries," in "secret seminaries" in China. A very offensive goal is clearly stated in a very militant manner.

tic journey.

Not all the children who cross the border come from the *kkotjebi*-life. The regions of North Korea near the Sino-Korean border are among those most severely hit by the famine, which makes the children all the more aware of the abundance just across the border. The children in these peripheral towns and villages cross the border to get food mainly for themselves, but some have dreams of gaining a fortune to help their families in North Korea survive. Most of them have experienced the loss of family members. Grandparents are the ones sacrificed first.⁵ Fathers become helpless⁶ and sick while mothers are often away, foraging for alternative foods, or engaging in informal trade to get food in the markets of distant towns. It is because of this kind of existence on the margins that youngsters, mostly in their early teens, choose to leave home to reduce the burden of food on their families.

The Sino-Korean border consists of two long rivers, 800 km by the Amnokgang river and 525 km by the Dumangang river. It is impossible to fully guard the entire area. Furthermore, North Korean border guards seldom shoot border-crossers because of strong appeals from the Chinese side. However, crossing the border is still not as easy as it might seem. Most of the areas upstream from both rivers are heavy mountain regions, impenetrable but for a few passes tightly guarded by soldiers. People must cross the border through areas under heavy surveillance, where guards stand watch every 50 meters. They prefer to cross at night, but wading in the darkness also increases the risks. The rivers look peaceful on the surface, but fast and

5. It is repeatedly heard that grandparents voluntarily reduce meals to feed their grandchildren. One 17 years old boy interviewed in Yanji said, "Grandmother had fed us *juk* (a porridge) with all kinds of roots and grasses twice a day while not eating herself for about two weeks and died. It was almost like a suicide."

6. It is the most frequent and, typical description of the conditions of the father among the refugee children. The collapse of the formal economic system makes many fathers who tend to identify themselves with the status and position assigned in the formal system helpless. Even in the absence of the supply from the PDS, they are still mobilized for the maintenance of the organizational structure. From the frustration, many seek drinking and smoking for escape.

powerful currents often run underneath. One wrong step on a slippery rock can cause an accident, and one cannot cry for help. The window of opportunity at dusk and dawn when the guards are being switched is the only remaining option.

Paradoxically, the outbound crossing is relatively safer than the return journey. Guard posts along the Korean side of the river, and it is difficult to know where the guards are hiding from the Chinese side of the river. At the same time, the guards tend to pay more attention to intruders who tend to carry food or money from China. After being caught, bribing guards in remote locations is not uncommon. As border crossings became frequent, the price for safe passage had settled at around 150-200 yuan (about US\$20-25) as of the winter of 1999.

Children usually form groups of three to five to cross the border. These tend to be boys, but girls often cross to join their siblings or families. Stunted growth and legs weakened from famine make children more vulnerable when wading across the river. Some have lost friends while crossing. A 16-year-old boy at Yanji said, "Three of us waited until sunset. We started to cross the river. We waded on the slippery rocks. In the middle of the stream, I thought I heard something but I could not look back. When we arrived at the other side, we realized that we were missing one person. We waited for him in the dark for a long time. We searched for him down stream but he didn't come out. We could not even make a sound to find him. I don't know, but he probably drowned there." Completely soaked and exhausted, they arrive in China with empty stomach, on a barren riverbank with no one to be seen.

Wanderers

Not knowing the Chinese language, the border crossers find their first shelter in the Korean-Chinese villages near the border. There they get food and information, and sometimes clothes that help them pass as Chinese. Then they move on to the towns and cities deeper inland. They move mostly on foot, unless they are lucky enough to get money

for the bus from the people in the village, or to meet a generous truck driver. They must still pass Chinese border patrol checkpoints along the mountain pass on foot, which can take days to detour.

Along the way, some of them find loggers and slash-and-burn farmers in the mountains who offer them shelter in exchange for help with the chores. Also, Korean-Chinese villages are scattered through the remote areas, functioning as shelters for the wanderers to hop between as they progress to the deeper and safer inland cities. Once they arrive in the cities, the children head to the markets, where they often find gangs of other North Korean children. They introduce the newcomers to the various skills of surviving in the foreign country. Doing chores for the restaurants and the shops in the market, or collecting paper boxes and other recyclable materials for very little money are the immediately available ways to get by.

Some find begging from South Korean tourists more appealing. Even though begging is taught in North Korea as an unthinkable crime, it is the only way in which they can get a large enough sum of money to go back to their families with the means (children usually say their goal is around 200 yuan—about US\$25) to help them from famine. It is also a highly risky act. They have to go the fanciest tourist spots with visibly ragged clothes in order to gain the sympathy of the South Koreans. In these tourist spots, they become easy targets for the Chinese police. Also, undercover police occasionally disguise themselves as tourists to trap them.

Korean-Chinese eateries in the market function as an emotional center for these troubled youths. Generally a single proprietorship run by an *ajumma* (auntie), a middle-aged woman, these eateries provide cheap meals (rice and soup for 3 yuan) and will often feed the wandering children on credit. The *ajumma* even hold money for the children to protect them from the Chinese gangs on the street. These *ajumma* develop into a sort of private bank supplying food, clothes, information, and sometimes motherly emotional support. A 17-year-old boy who managed to escape from North Korea after being deported remembered how he visualized the life in China as he crossed the border at the second time.

During the days of interrogation and torture, they did not feed me anything. I escaped from the holding area with my very last strength I could muster. As I was crossing the river, I stepped on a slippery stone and was caught in the rapid stream. I tried to swim but I was completely exhausted. I thought I was going to die. At that moment, strangely, I saw *ajumma* and the wantons that she used to make for us. I tried hard not to lose the vision and I was able to swim across the river and came back here.

After crossing the border, the first thing they have to do is to change clothes to look like the children in China. Used clothes are abundant in China, since the country is going through its version of rapid development and change in fashion. They get used clothes from the people in the Korean-Chinese villages and can buy better ones in the market. There is a clear distinction between the “(North) Korean clothes” and the “Chinese clothes.” They soon become conscious about trendy clothes, but they are not fully comfortable with the clothes with American symbols and those that are distinctively South Korean. Some children with more experience may hold onto their old ragged clothes for the return trip to North Korea.

Many of them have visible signs of malnutrition in their faces and the bodies, and most are very short for their age. Many are also afflicted with various skin diseases. There are some extreme cases, such as one 16-year-old boy who was only 132 cm or an 18-year-old youth whose voice had yet to change. While nutritional conditions for these children improve drastically in China, their sudden rapid development often results in rather unbalanced physical features in the face, arms and legs. These physical changes are so pronounced that they can actually become a sign of having crossed the North Korean border.

The wanderers are young and look much younger than their age, making it hard for them to find jobs other than occasional chores. Most of them end up wandering the streets homeless. During the long and harsh winter, they sleep in abandoned huts, in piles of straws, in the basements of apartment buildings, in vinyl covered huts attached to shabby Chinese houses (for 3 yuan a night), and in

24-hour video showing rooms (for 5 yuan a night). In the summer, they sleep under the bridges, in the abandoned automobiles, on the emergency stairs of buildings, or in any available storage spaces. The life in the summer is relatively easier than the struggle against the cold in the wintertime. It is in the summer, however, that they have to endure severe mosquito bites.

These young wanderers usually move around in China in groups of 5-7, and sometimes as large as 12-15. As the size of the group increases, so does its visibility and the risk of being caught, but it lessens the fear and loneliness. It is the center for communicating information and experience. Also, it is the place for learning strategies for survival. Sometimes, Korean-Chinese orphans join these North Korean children's groups for the chance to get a large sum of money from the South Korean tourists. As they have no risk of being captured by the Chinese police, they often function as scouts to test out the tourists. They also perform the role of translators and language teachers for the North Korean children.

As a voluntary association, the group has a lively and independent lifestyle. They talk to each other all the time. They take naps together; swim in the streams, and even play soccer games with the local Chinese children. Each individual child keeps his own money and belongings, even though there are always some minor feuds about stealing from the little ones. They gather together and scatter into several sub-groups as they feel like it. It seems like a free existence on the surface, but the fear of arrest permeates and governs the group's life. No matter what they are doing, they are always on the watch and ready to flee in different directions if the police arrive. The fear pushes anyone who decides to leave the group into the inland cities to find another group or go back home.

Some Korean-Chinese Christian churches in the cities near the border provide lunch boxes for these wandering children with the funds from South Korean or Korean-American churches. One Buddhist group helps them regularly with food, medicine and clothes, and more importantly supports them psychologically by assigning a female helper on a long-term basis. It is a risky activity for those

institutions. If caught, they can be fined 5,000 yuan by the Chinese authorities. In spite of this penalty, many religious organizations have gone a step further and operate secret shelters for children in danger.

Secret Shelters

The secret shelters in the city typically take the form of large rental apartments with 3-5 rooms to house 8-12 children. They are located mainly in Han Chinese residential areas, since the Han Chinese are relatively indifferent to their neighbors, and urban living, as it is in any other societies, provides more privacy and security. The shelters in rural villages are often located in a house in mountains or foothills set slightly apart from the village. While some shelters accommodate refugee families, others protect only young border-crossers.

Living in the shelter means that the refugee children do not have to worry about what to eat and where to stay. But, instead, they are confined to a closed space. This is particularly difficult for young refugees who have become accustomed to the free wanderer's life. As wanderers they did not have much comfort, but there certainly was great freedom and life was more exciting. Now, except for Sunday worships and a few special occasions, they are not allowed to go out and experience the world outside, since a careless individual action could invite even greater danger for everyone in the shelter and for the institution itself.

To stay in the shelter, they also have to endure a severe, monastic lifestyle imposed on them usually by very pious evangelical Christians. According to the fixed daily schedule, they pray, sing hymns, and take Bible lessons. Each day they are required to memorize certain Bible verses. Failure to do so often incurs harsh penalties, including corporal punishment.⁷ Unable to adapt to the monastic life

7. A missionary made clear about the goal of his shelter by saying that, "Children are not as red as adults. You can easily paint them with other colors."

in the shelter, many children choose to run away. In one shelter in a city, only 8 children were “selected” to remain among the 40 who had been there within a six-month period in 1999.

Not all of the shelters are purely for proselytizing to children. Nor are the children like blank sheets waiting to be painted. Some function as schools by teaching the children Chinese, English, math and other subjects with the help of local Korean-Chinese volunteer college students. A few shelters try to find ways to send the children to local Chinese schools with faked documents and bribes. Children are not simply indoctrinated passively. Many of them do not believe the new religious formula, but still want to desperately embrace it as a way to ameliorate the trauma of having lost loved ones, and find a beacon of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. Among them, a few indeed receive the blessing of being selected to be sent to South Korea.

Their long journey to Seoul is phrased among the missionaries as “riding the Seoul train,” symbolically named after the “underground railroad” that smuggled the Black slaves from the South to the Free Northern States.⁸ Beginning in the summer of 2000, North Korean refugee children with and without family members started to arrive in South Korea in such large numbers⁹ that adapting these free spirits to the competitive school system of South Korea and socialization in general became a moral as well as logistical nightmare.

Living Dangerously in Two Worlds

For the people in North Korea, crossing the national border is not a simple act for better living. It is considered as an ultimate resistance

8. *Newsweek* (Asian version, 5 March 2001) covers the long journey of those North Korean refugees from China to South Korea via Mongolia and Russia to the North, and via Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand to the South to get asylum from South Korean government.

9. In the year 2000, 40 North Korean children arrived in South Korea. The number increased to 115 children in the year 2001, and 200 in the year 2002.

to the regime, on the same order as suicide.¹⁰ The state has indoctrinated the population rather successfully up to the level of a quasi-religious community. Thus, crossing the border means an act of secession, an act of betrayal, and the ultimate crime. If discovered, the consequences go beyond the individual who committed the crime. Family members and relatives share responsibility for the traitor.

It is natural for the North Korean border-crossers to have extreme fear of capture and deportation. It is not a concern only for themselves but for their family members and loved ones. Fear is compounded by feelings of extreme guilt. In the few moments that they feel safe and well fed, many refugees express acute sense of guilt and shame because of the loved ones they left behind. Furthermore, some children show guilt over betraying their home country. Many are concerned that their act of border-crossing may be viewed as a cowardly betrayal. By taking risks to return home secretly, they try to normalize their life in North Korea. For a long time after migrating to China, children still tend to view their future in a North Korean context.¹¹

For the children, life in China is full of adventures. Though it is hard and dangerous, North Korean children discover not only material well-being, but also the freedom to search for different things that they wish to have or do. They shop for clothes and shoes, and sometimes even toys. They can choose to eat a variety of foods at the eateries in the market or, if they find someone sympathetic to their situation, they can even dine at a fine restaurant.

No school, no homework, and no adults control their move-

10. Suicide in North Korea is considered as an act of resistance to the regime. During years of extreme famine, many families committed collective suicide. However, it is repeatedly reported that some of them left notes behind to the authority that their suicide was not an act of resistance nor out of complaints to the regime. Out of concern for their living relatives, they confessed in the note that they commit suicide because of the lack of ability to maintain lives even though the state took care of them dearly.

11. Many of them would say that their future dreams are becoming soldiers or teachers in North Korea.

ments. They mainly walk where they need to go, but, at times, they can ride taxis or even take a train to go to unknown cities far away. They have no authorities to regulate their interests. Some of them engage in adult life at an early age. Hotel rooms, coffee shops, karaoke bars, and nightclubs are places where they often get lots of money from drunk South Korean tourists. Cheap video viewing rooms also provide them with shelter for the forbidden pleasures of the popular culture of the outside world. Watching TV programs and movies from Hong Kong and South Korea becomes one of their favorite pastimes.

As time goes by, North Korean children in China inevitably develop a sort of ideological awareness that is counter to what the North Korean regime imposed. At first, it takes the form of mild cynicism toward the North Korean regime. Later, it becomes an oppositional view to the earlier ideological indoctrination. It throws their world view into chaos. America becomes their dreamland, much hated Japan becomes a country that is livable, and going to South Korea is seen as a viable option. This happens mostly at the level of images and, without any systematic or reliable method for learning, their knowledge of the outside world is highly limited. Most of them do not know the location of Europe nor Africa. Many of them think that Japan is a tiny island country while Cuba is as big as America. They know that China and Russia are massive countries, but, as their fate is determined by those countries, they have difficulty conceptualizing the world beyond them.

Through hardship, the refugee children develop many skills and strategies for survival early on. They become young adults, independent life managers. Many of them participate in illegal trade of all kinds across the border. By accumulating money, often a very small amount, in China, they try to fully utilize in North Korea to help their families there. Still very young in age, most of them cannot separate themselves fully from their families unless extremely dangerous circumstances force them to do so. However, many of them know when to beg and when to fight tooth and nail against the Chinese police, and some of them know how to bribe and hide money from North

Korean border guards. They repeat their trips across the border, until repeated failures or undue attention labels them as “dangerous regulars.” They are in fact dangerous to the North Korean regime. By simply speaking of the existence of a different world, they may have already become agents of social change in North Korea.

The experience of living repeatedly in two contrasting worlds naturally encourages them to develop “compartmentalized” behavioral attitudes up to a level that not many adults in most societies can possibly obtain. Concerned relief workers often criticize these attitudes of survival as immoral. Aggressive and obsessive behaviors and lies that these children must internalize to get through dangerous situations become distinctive psychological problems when these children try to adapt to societies like South Korea. Most of them have had the traumatic experiences of losing loved ones during the famine years and in the process of crossing the border. Guilt from these traumatic experiences adds psychological wounds at another level.

Among the children who arrived in South Korea, we found that some had experienced far more serious psychological trauma from being raped, confined, and beaten while they were in China without any legal protection. They also have the physical scars of malnutrition. It is most visible in their relatively shorter heights as compared to South Korean children of the same age group.¹² A long life of wandering in China also takes away a chance for formal education. This makes it even harder for them to adapt to competitive South Korean school system. In light of grand speeches and dreams for the future reunification of Korea, the very existence of these children reveals the urgent need for emergency relief and structural change to fill the gaps between the two Koreas.

12. At the age of seven, the average height difference between North and South Korean children is about 12 cm in 1998. In a few extreme cases among North Korean youths, it is suspected that there are serious gaps in their physiological and natural age. Pak Sunyoung (2000) examines the sociocultural implications of the difference in heights.

Concluding Remarks

This paper examines the structural causes of the continuous influx of the North Korean refugee children into China from a comparative perspective. Many of the wandering children become habitual border-crossers to feed their families and to save themselves from a forced return. Under extreme hardship and fear, they develop transnational strategies and tactics to cope with the sharp contrasts in material conditions and cultural messages between the two countries. The childhood under such marginal conditions leaves them at serious risk, and many of them bear deep psychological scars as a result. However, by becoming independent at a young age, they function as active agents for social change with a critical awareness evolved out of contrasting experiences in two worlds.

Children are to be fed, protected, and educated at all times. North Korean children in China enjoy none of these basic human rights. Their conditions need to be understood by the international community and by those who are concerned with human rights issues. Children need to be free from the fear of arrest or deportation. International human rights communities need to find the ways to prevent the Chinese government from taking coercive actions against them. The first step is to acknowledge their refugee status internationally.

Furthermore, it is necessary to make the North Korean government aware of the seriousness of human rights issues when it engages in negotiation with the outside world. In the mean time, the children who are presently trapped in international conflict must be rescued through the collective efforts of international organizations and specialists such as lawyers, physicians, counselors, and educators. North Korean children in China should not be ignored nor dismissed as a local problem tucked into a deep corner of the Sino-Korean border.

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