

## North Koreans in South Korea: In Search of Their Humanity □□ 韓国 の北朝鮮人—人間性を求めて

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It is well known that tens of thousands of North Koreans have left their country to wander around China and vicinity, and if fortunate, to settle elsewhere, notably in South Korea. Most arrive via Southeast Asia or Mongolia, frequently aided by a South Korean Christian missionary organization. This scenario has been recognized in the new millennium as, and I speak with caution, a pattern. With caution, because after all, there cannot be a pattern for refugees or exiles to leave, travel, and settle, as their existence is inherently unsettling. This article highlights one such instance—North Koreans who reach South Korea. I do so by contrasting the representation of North Koreans on South Korea’s silver screen, or more precisely, the transformation of such representation, on the one hand, and the actual fate of former North Koreans who reach South Korea. In the following I re-visit two South Korean movies *Shiri* (1999) and *Joint Security Area*

(2000), both of which represented North Koreans in new ways and received critical acclaim as well as academic attention. While much has been said about these two, it is not what has been said that is important, but how it has been said, in connection with whom and at what historical juncture. In this regard, there is a perception gap between North Koreans depicted in film and North Korean neighbors who live next door. I shall first draw *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area* to the reader’s attention and present my own interpretation. Following that, I shall discuss a connection—or, more precisely, the lack thereof—that exists between these films and the current situation that North Koreans in South Korea face.

#### Humanizing North Koreans on the Screen

Referring to the feature films *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area* historian Michael Robinson wrote: “For the first time, North Koreans were presented as human beings [...] a huge first step away from the master narrative of the Cold War” (2005: 28). Korean film scholars agreed, with Kyung Hyun Kim writing: “In the popular media of South Korea, North Koreans have been

transformed from despicable enemies into characters worthy of redemption” (2010). Jinhee Choi concurs: “[W]ith the arrival of a civilian government in the early 1990s, North Koreans have been portrayed [in movies] in a more humane manner, devoid of anti-Communist sentiment” (2010: 38). Choi dubs the two films *Shiri* and *Joint Security Area* Korean blockbusters. Both were produced by directors belonging to the 386 generation—those born in the 1960s (the “6”) who were in their thirties (the “3”) during the democracy movement of the 1980s (the “8”). Choi connects their personal trajectories, including their participation in Korea’s pro-democracy movement, with a production style that resists Hollywood domination (Choi 2010: Ch.1).

Released in 1999, two years into the Kim Dae Jung administration at a time when South Korea was struggling to recover from the 1997 IMF Crisis, *Shiri* (director Kang Je-gyu) is a love story between North Korean spy Yi Myeong-hyeon and South Korean secret agent Yu Jeong-won. The true identity of the former character is Yi Bang-hui, a notorious assassin responsible for the deaths of numerous key South Korean government and military personnel. The movie begins with a scene in which South Korean secret agents have long ago lost track of the whereabouts of Yi Bang-hui. The viewer is to learn that Bang-hui has flown to Japan to undergo plastic surgery and take on a new

identity as Yi Myeong-hyeon who owns a pet fish store. As Myeong-hyeon pursues her mission from her North Korean headquarters, she comes up with the ingenious idea of implanting microphone listening devices into aquarium fish and sneaking them into South Korean intelligence headquarters.



**Yi Myeong-hyeon with her fish tank**



**Yi Bang-hui taking aim**

Through her romantic involvement with Yu, the South Korean agent, Myeong-hyeon succeeds in installing mini aquaria in the South Korean intelligence headquarters. (The reference to fish becomes important, as I shall show below.)

North Korean intelligence has recently obtained information about the South Korean scientific invention of an odorless and highly effective

liquid explosive known as CTX. In order to steal this substance, Bang-hui resumes her assassination activities.

Unlike Bang-hui, who is a ruthless precision killer, Myeong-hyeon is vulnerable and emotional. Yet, when Myeong-hyeon puts on her wig and leather coat, she becomes Bang-hui, the skilled assassin. Myeong-hyeon's deep involvement with Yu eventually gets in the way, however. For example, on one occasion Bang-hui clearly avoids killing Yu, despite his being well within range. Yu's partner, Lee, becomes suspicious. He first suspects Yu himself and steadily uncovers the truth, initially by discovering the listening devices inside the aquarium fish and then by tracing their source to Myeong-hyeon and identifying her as Yi Bang-hui. In agony, Lee tells her that his partner Yu truly loves her. The viewer is given a hint that Myeong-hyeon loves Yu too, yet she remains silent.

The movie ends in a stadium, where North Korean agents are attempting to use the CTX they have stolen from the South Korean scientists to kill tens of thousands of people. Yu and other agents try to prevent this from happening. During their skirmish with the North Koreans, Lee is killed. Yu nevertheless succeeds in locating the bomb. When Yu catches up with the North Korean agents, Myeong-hyeon appears in front of him. Thus, Yu has to shoot Myeong-hyeon, the woman he loves. Myeong-hyeon dies, staring at

Yu with wide eyes, her face covered in streams of blood. According to Jinhee Choi, *Shiri* cost just \$3 million to produce, while its gross profits totaled \$26.5 million (Choi 2010: 31). It sold two million tickets in the space of two months, eventually attracting 6.2 million box office viewers (Russell 2008: 51).

The theater release of *Joint Security Area* (hereafter, JSA; directed by Chan-wook Park) in 2000 was preceded that summer by the historic first meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung in Pyongyang. Reflecting the tone of Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy, under which South Korea adopted a lenient and more open stance toward North Korea, JSA was a popular culture counterpart to the government's appeal to the north. JSA shows two young South Korean soldiers crossing over to the northern side of the Joint Security Area by walking over a narrow concrete bridge known as the Bridge of No Return. This bridge, featured in the opening scene of the movie and more or less haunting the entire drama, is both a reminder of the physical proximity, indeed, contiguity of the territories of North and South Korea, and also of the power of Cold War ideology, which prevents anyone from performing a simple act such as walking a few feet to the other side of a bridge—yet this is exactly what happens in JSA.

In the movie, Sgt. Lee Su-hyeok, a young South Korean soldier whose period of service is soon to

end, happens to befriend a North Korean soldier, Sgt. O. The background to their meeting is indicative of the precariousness of national partition itself. When Su-hyeok strays from his unit during a border patrol, his foot becomes caught in a wire connected to a mine. Su-hyeok is in a desperate situation. At this point, the North Korean Sgt. O and his partner, Pvt. Jeong, walk past. They recognize each other as soldiers from the North and South respectively. After exchanging a few words, the panicked Su-hyeok bursts into tears, crying for help. Sgt. O succeeds in detaching Su-hyeok's foot from the wire. From this point, a friendship begins to develop between the two. Initially, they throw letters to each other across the Bridge of No Return. One night, Su-hyeok decides to cross the bridge. Shocked, yet pleased, O and Jeong warmly receive him. Their nightly visitation ritual begins.

One night, their party takes an eerie turn. Another North Korean officer notices music coming from the guardhouse and opens the door. Panic follows: Everyone except O loses his cool and shoots indiscriminately, setting off the alarm system. During the crossfire, the North Korean officer who opened the door and Pvt. Jeong are killed. Su-hyeok crawls back to the southern side as southern soldiers prepare for an emergency, and is accepted as a hero who resisted enemy fire. This scene comes at the beginning of the story, and the movie takes the form of a retrospective investigation into what happened

that night near the Bridge of No Return. Throughout the movie, a few contradictory versions of the night's events are given, depending on who is interrogated, but by the end, the viewer has learnt exactly what took place.

What is important about this film is not, however, its detective story element. Rather, it is the way in which it seeks to allow viewers see into the minds of Su-hyeok and Sgt. O. As the investigation progresses, Su-hyeok is preoccupied with one concern—how to protect Sgt. O from punishment by the North Korean People's Army. Su-hyeok has become deeply attached to O, calling him *hyeongor* older brother and admiring his personal qualities. Su-hyeok must therefore stick with his original story that they are strangers, or indeed, enemies. Yet, when O appears in front of Su-hyeok at the joint interrogation session, Su-hyeok cannot contain his tears; he is overwhelmed by his concern for O and his pain at having to give up their friendship. Seeing Su-hyeok cry, O, who cares deeply for him, stands up and begins calling him South Korean scum and beating him in order to show the investigators that they are enemies, just as the rules of national partition dictate, and to prevent him from remaining a target of suspicion. Su-hyeok, understanding this, cries even harder. After this encounter, Su-hyeok learns that it was his bullets that killed Pvt. Jeong, his other North Korean friend. This

crushes him, leading him to commit suicide by shooting himself in the mouth at the end of the movie. *JSA* attracted more than 5.8 million viewers (Russell 2008: 63).



Film scholars often group *Shiri* and *JSA* together (Kim 2010; Kim, K. 2004). This is understandable, since they were the first two box office hits that effectively introduced an idealized North Korean figure who resonated with the romantic image of North Korea held by the 386 generation of student activists. For example, combined in the character of Myeong-hyeon are many of the ideal characteristics of a woman with a cause adored by males of the 386 generation: strength, beauty, vulnerability, extreme ability and skill, focus, and feminine sensitivity. Needless to say, contradictions are involved: Here is a woman at once sensitive to lives such as those of little pet fish, while at the same time an assassin with deadly accuracy; a woman who is beautiful and knows how to please men, yet can also act with determination. (This type of idealization of a “revolutionary” female figure had no place in the

context of the actual student movement of the 1980s where women were reduced to “coffee-makers” and “ramen cooks” and were often sexually harassed; contemporary South Korean feminism is critical of this [see Jeon 2008].) In this sense, it is also interesting to view Sgt. O as an idealized version of the North Korean male—in some ways, a more attractive revolutionary than the one so often depicted in North Korean films. Masculine, determined, and committed, yet humorous, caring, and attractive—these are the ideal features of the male revolutionary leader or fighter figure adored by the 386 generation.

While each reflects the ideals of this generation, in my view the two movies display subtle, yet important differences, particularly in the manner in which they invite, or more precisely, demand, viewers to assume either the position of witness (as in *Shiri*) or participant (as in *JSA*) in a ritual of communion. These two positions of engagement will become relevant when we look at North Korean refugees that are being settled in South Korea today.

### Witness and Participant

Giorgio Agamben writes of the witness:

In Greek the word for witness is *martis*, martyr. The first Church Fathers coined the word *martirium* from *martis* to indicate the death of persecuted Christians, who thus



bore witness to their faith.[...] [T]he concepts of “witnessing” and “martyrdom” can be linked in two ways. The first concerns the Greek term itself, derived as it is from the verb meaning “to remember.” The survivor’s vocation is to remember; he cannot *not* remember.[...]

The second point of connection is even more profound, more instructive.[...] The Church Fathers were confronted by heretical groups that rejected martyrdom because, in their eyes, it constituted a wholly senseless death (*perire sine causa*)[...] The doctrine of martyrdom [...] justifies the scandal of a meaningless death, of an execution that could only appear as absurd. Confronted with the spectacle of a death that was apparently *sine causa* [a reference to the Bible] made it possible to interpret martyrdom as a divine command and, thus, to find a reason for the irrational (2002: 26-27).

Here, Agamben is reflecting on his close reading of the accounts of Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor who inscribed his memories of Auschwitz in diverse writings but was ambivalent or even averse to thinking of himself

as a witness since, in his view, the true witnesses were those who had died in the camp. Levi wrote:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute [...] Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned [in the camp] would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy (Levi 1989: 83-84).

According to Agamben’s reading of Levi, martyrdom needs to be experienced; yet, if experienced, one should already be dead and, therefore, unable to leave one’s testimony as witness. Levi survived Auschwitz—by his “prevarications or abilities or good luck”—yet his survival itself disqualifies him as a true witness, rendering his words as proxy for those of the

dead, those who have seen the bottom, those for whom the self died before the body, and those who did not have the language to tell and retell their stories of extreme abjection, absurdity, meaningless death, and the unimaginable reality of the concentration camps.

At the same time, not to tell the stories of the camp is too painful for the survivor—and it would not be right, either. For, that would be to confer “the prestige of the mystical” on the extermination that occurred in the camps, according to Agamben, who recalls one critical response to his article on concentration camps that claimed his article ruined the unsayable character of Auschwitz; unsayable due to its extreme atrocity, which challenges human comprehension. “But why unsayable?” writes Agamben, “Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?” (2002: 32). The irrational violence and deaths that took place in the concentration camps challenge the ability of language. Yet, not to tell, not to write about the camps risks turning the absurdity and extremity that prevailed in them into something sacred. Thus, in order to avoid conferring “the prestige of the mystical” on what took place in the camps, proxy witnesses that are survivors of the camps—such as Levi—must continue telling the story.

Who are the witnesses in *Shiri*? And to what do they bear witness? Anyone who has seen the movie will recall the scene in which an employee

at South Korean intelligence headquarters is going around collecting the little aquariums attached to each analyst’s work booth. The employee, in a rather lethargic and monotonous voice, repeatedly chants that today is Wednesday and the little fish need to have their tank water changed. There is also the scene in which Myeong-hyeon and Yu are taking refuge from the rain as they make their way back from the opera. They find themselves in front of a fish tank installed on the wall of a building. And, toward the end, there is the scene in which Yu’s partner Lee uncovers Myeong-hyeon’s true identity as the notorious assassin Bang-hui in Myeong-hyeon’s own pet fish store, in front of fish tanks lined up on the shop floor. Fish are the witnesses to this story, a story of the determination of a North Korean spy and killer, her love, and her death. Fish are also the witnesses to another story, the story of the love of a South Korean intelligence agent, his friendship, his faith, and his loss. The plot, in which the liquid explosive CTX which North Korean agents have stolen from South Korean scientists is said to be just like water—odorless and colorless—is an additional point of interest alongside the symbolic role of fish, as if to suggest that our silent witnesses can also survive in this deadly substance, only to perish when the South Korean capital is destroyed by a North Korean plot.

The references to water can also be linked to the theme of national partition. Recall the Imjin

River, which flows across the DMZ from North Korea to South Korea, a river sung about with envy by both North and South Koreans, as it is able to flow freely across the Military Demarcation Line. Myeong-hyeon herself is a fish: Her codename is *swiri*, the name of a freshwater fish (leading one to poetically imagine a scene of *swiri* swimming across the Imjin River) that is also the title of the movie—the translated version having taken on the more English-friendly spelling of *Shiri*. With Myeong-hyeon's death, her fish lose the person that cared for them. Without her, they will die sooner or later. In the film, Myeong-hyeon gives a pair of love fish, *kissinguram*, to her lover, Yu, asking him to take good care of them. The two *kissinguram* may have survived, but they have no language; when they open their mouths, only bubbles come out. So, who should tell the story on behalf of the silent fish—and what will that story be?

The film compels the viewer to bear witness on behalf of the silent fish that see everything from beginning to end. What the fish see is the story of a woman who has seen the bottom, in the words of Levi: “Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned [in the camp] would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves” (Levi 1989: 83-84). Yi Myeong-hyeon, the North Korean assassin, is a drowned

fish, an impossibility or an anomaly (since fish cannot drown). Here, it is important to remember *Shiri*'s opening scene depicting a North Korean special unit in training. Faceless behind identical uniforms, men and women train in sweat and blood, stabbing and beating to death people presumed to be prisoners and criminals who have been brought to them to serve as training fodder. As they stab people, blood splashes everywhere, including onto the faces of the men and women of the special unit, covering their eyes and mouths. The men and women do not speak in an ordinary sense, as if having lost the language; the only words they utter are formulaic slogans pledging eternal loyalty to the fatherland, North Korea. They have lost the power of language and the ability to express themselves—as human beings. In reference to the views of Agamben and the sensitivities of Levi noted above, they are drowned; they have died before their bodies died.

Suppose a North Korean assassin such as Yi Myeong-hyeon really existed. She would come from the family of a party cadre, her father possibly also having been a spy, having died or been killed during an espionage mission. She would have been given special training from an early age, learning foreign languages, mastering the chemistry of explosives, thoroughly familiarizing herself with diverse kinds of poisonous substances, developing a proficient knowledge of South Korean culture and South



Korean variants of the Korean language, and becoming a master shooter. Her mission would have taken over her personal existence. By the time she was ready for an assignment, she would no longer be in possession of her self. Then, perhaps unexpectedly, she would fall in love; of all people, falling in love with a South Korean intelligence agent who may well end up as one of her assassination targets. This is where the story of espionage becomes derailed. Even fish do not know what love will do to a person who has lost her self—does it lead her to recover her humanity or is love a cloak of some sort, a means by which she may better penetrate her target? Myeong-hyeon does not talk about this anywhere in the film. Without leaving words describing her true feelings, she perishes at the hands of the man she loves. Just as Levi's recognition that being a survivor does not make him a witness, the viewer realizes that having watched the story of Myeong-hyeon's love does not make him or her into a witness, since the testimony of a viewer will never be that of Myeong-hyeon. There is no reliable or verifiable testimony relating to her love, her humanity. Yet, just as Levi assigned himself the mission of speaking on behalf of the perished witnesses of Auschwitz, the viewer finishes the film with a sense of responsibility—a responsibility to remember and tell the story of Myeong-hyeon and the many other North Koreans like her.

*JSA* is different. To begin with, the Bridge of No

Return symbolizes contiguity between North and South: Whereas fish and water work to evoke the penetrability of the impenetrable, this bridge directly shows that the two, north and south, are separate, yet connectable. There is no need to use fish cunningly implanted with listening devices and no need to bring in a water-like substance like CTX, the odorless colorless substance which would have devastated South Korea. The bridge simply connects North and South. It is just that no one is supposed to cross it. When a transgression is committed, the time-space continuum in the Joint Security Area is reconfigured: The night becomes a time of reverie, liberation, and mutual discovery, while the pretense of national partition is maintained during the day. Just like during a festival or carnival, when normally prohibited acts become permissible, Su-hyeok's and Sgt. O's nights are marked by the exchange of hitherto prohibited elements: emotions, cares, smiles, friendship, love, and mutual respect—things that northern soldiers and southern soldiers are never supposed to exchange.

The viewer watching this realizes that the more Su-hyeok and Sgt. O recognize each other's humanity, the more difficult it becomes for them to quit. How are they going to manage their exit? The end of the ritual is sobering. If a ritual surrounds its participants with a formulaic set of rules, also presenting them with an otherworldly experience, its end is marked by a departure

from the radically altered order and a return to the ordinary. Afterwards, however, the participants realize they have gone through a transformation—how profound this transformation is depends on the participants and their degree of involvement. The after-effects of ritual take Su-hyeok and Sgt. O in quite different directions: The former is unable to bear the burden of having entered into a friendship with a North Korean soldier, ending up shooting another North Korean soldier and committing suicide; the latter, as far as the viewer can see, successfully protects the former from possible suspicion and, therefore, is able to carry on living.

Nevertheless, has not O undergone a transformation too? Faking “enemy” fire, O shoots at a fellow officer, enabling Su-hyeok to make a safe return across the bridge. This kind of behavior would not be acceptable according to North Korean ideals of integrity, yet O, a seasoned soldier, gets away with it, simply because he has come to love Su-hyeok more than he loves his own comrades. Responsibility for having met the other, known the other, registered him as a fellow human and a fellow Korean, and loved him, rests as squarely on O’s shoulders as on those of Su-hyeok. One way or another, O will learn of Su-hyeok’s suicide. He will remember and bear witness to Su-hyeok’s life, as Su-hyeok has lost his ability to communicate using language. The manner of Su-hyeok’s

suicide—shooting himself in the mouth, the gun pointed down his throat—is extremely indicative: It deprives Su-hyeok of his voice, ensuring that his vocal chords are destroyed and cancelling out any possibility that he will retain access to language and become a witness. By contrast, Sgt. O retains both the voice and the will to tell the story when the appropriate time comes, in order to speak on behalf of the dead. Thus, in contrast to *Shiri*, where the witnesses are silent, voiceless fish, *JSA* gives the audience a witness in the figure of Sgt. O.

Having stayed the course through Su-hyeok’s and O’s journey of mutual discovery, the viewer is faced with the need to exit from it when the movie comes to an end, just as O and Su-hyeok had to exit their ritual, each according to different methods and different paths. In other words, the viewer must come back to ordinary reality, having participated in a nightly ritual of prohibited friendship. How does the viewer achieve this? By becoming someone who has experienced a transformation. This transformation is primarily the result of Su-hyeok’s sacrifice: The logic of the story is that his death could have been avoided, because he had been accepted as a hero by the South Korean military due to O’s last minute strategy of faking enemy crossfire. His suicide, therefore, can be viewed as an example of martyrdom—as shown by Agamben, a meaningless death, or at least, an unnecessary one. The death of the one that had

crossed the bridge, the one that had seen the other side—this is none other than martyrdom, the sacrifice of a man whose life could otherwise have been saved. After Su-hyeok shoots himself by firing a gun down his throat, his body lies in a pool of blood, the deep red liquid quietly spreading under his head and shoulders. This scene assails the unguarded, as viewers are not quite prepared for it: *JSA* could have concluded with a happy ending, with both Su-hyeok and O surviving. The spreading blood almost feels as if it is about to touch the viewer, overflowing from the screen and implicating the viewer as an accomplice in this act of sacrifice.

The viewer leaves the film unable to shrug off national partition as just an accident of history; instead, he or she is filled with the urge to do something—even if only something infinitesimal and insignificant—after having participated in the nightly ritual that cost Su-hyeok and others their lives. It is uncanny to remember that the Korean translation of the word “joint,” *gongdong* can also be translated as “communal,” reminding us of communion; as such, it would not be off the mark to think of the film *Joint Security Areas* as an attempt at presenting a communion—albeit an ephemeral one—between the North and the South, although the ritual of communion in the end is aborted.

Acting as a witness to the national tragedy created by the absurdity of partition and participating in a ritual that defies the partition in

an unconventional way—these are stances that the films *Shiri* and *JSA* create. The effect is significant in that, under the post-totalitarian, neo-liberal government, in a society where military dictatorship is no longer perceived as a possibility, the consumers of popular visual cultural products demand a positionality with respect to the nation’s past, present, and future. These are the effects that the recent humanization of North Koreans in the South Korean movie theatre have on South Korean viewers. However, as I shall argue in the following, once these consumers are faced with real North Koreans, specifically with North Korean refugees who have been settled (or are trying to settle) in South Korea, their political engagement vanishes; for these former North Koreans look nothing like Yi Myeong-hyeon or Sgt. O. Faced with the reality of having to accept their poor Northern brethren, sections of South Korean society assume positions that are almost the polar opposite of those of witness and participant, their positions veering toward those of disinterested bystanders at best and xenophobes at worst.

### **The Other North Koreans**

In November 2010, South Korea welcomed its twenty-thousandth North Korean refugee—a forty-one-year-old mother with her two sons. The number of refugees from the north has increased markedly since the beginning of the new millennium, reaching 23,000 in 2012. There have been ten thousand arrivals since 2007 alone

(Branigan 2010). Beyond these figures, there is little reliable data allowing us to grasp just how many North Koreans have fled their country, mostly to China, but more recently to Mongolia and countries in Southeast Asia. As of 2002, an independent report estimated that 100,000 to 300,000 refugees were living outside North Korea (Ko, Chung, & Oh 2004: 68). In 2006, the US State Department estimated the number to be between 30,000 and 50,000, which UNHCR also uses as a working figure (Mergesson, Chanlett-Avery, & Bruno 2007: 4). South Korean NGOs generally use 100,000 as a base line (Jo & Kim 2009: 18). The numbers fluctuate, and it is difficult to determine the scale and location of North Korean refugees. Many are repeat migrants, entering and exiting North Korea. Others live in hiding, with the largest number to be found in China. This makes it particularly challenging to estimate their number, given that China does not recognize them as refugees.

North Korean refugees have also exhibited shifting patterns of movement. During the 1990s, when North Korea was experiencing famine and serious food shortages, massive numbers of people crossed the Chinese border. In recent years, however, there has been a slowing of border-crossing activity following a forty-six percent increase in migrants during 2006 (“S. Korea” 2009). This change has been attributed by some to the introduction of informal market activities in North Korea, a slight easing in the

food supply situation, as well as the effects of Chinese crackdowns. It is also possible to note that women refugees outnumber men. Since 2002, more North Korean women than men have settled in South Korea. While women accounted for fifty-five percent of North Korean migrants to South Korea in 2002, the figure had risen to sixty-six percent by 2008 and seventy-seven percent by 2009 (Yi 2010: 280). Women frequently bring their children with them. Moreover, growing numbers of children are arriving in South Korea unaccompanied by an adult relative (Jo & Kim 2009: 24-25, 218-219). Typically, they take the Southeast Asian route, traveling from northern China to Burma, and crossing the Mekong on their way to Thailand, where they make contact with human rights agencies if they are lucky. By contrast, hundreds of children have been detained and held by government authorities in Thailand (“North Koreans” 2009).

For North Koreans who have been resettled in South Korea, whose number currently stands at 23,000, resettlement is not easy; far from feeling as though they have been repatriated to another motherland, they are typically made to feel estranged, ostracized, and alienated. Their stories remind us of the profound differences and cleavages consolidated by the sixty-five-year partition of the peninsula. In this section, we shall look at how North Koreans are treated after their arrival in South Korea, in contrast to their representation in recent movies.

Once accepted by South Korea, former North Koreans receive significant government support. During the first three months they are housed at Hanawon, a government-operated rehabilitation facility, where they undergo a crash course in South Korea's domestic social, political, economic, and cultural patterns, as well as learning about the world beyond the Korean peninsula. Established in 1999, Hanawon offers programs that can be broadly divided into two components: socio-cultural adaptation and vocational training. In addition, the facility offers psychological evaluation, counseling, and other forms of therapeutic support. School-age children used to be sent to nearby schools, with Hanawon providing support; in 2009, a school opened inside Hanawon, offering education based on the idea of age-appropriate adaptation (Korean Minjok Leadership Academy 2009).



**Hanawon Center**

Upon completion of the rehabilitation program (entirely at government expense, including room and board), migrants are given support funds to help cover costs associated with housing, job

training, education, and so on, as they start new lives in South Korea. As of 2007, settlement support was set at \$17,000 per individual, increasing to \$42,000 for a family of six and \$45,500 for a family of seven or more. These figures included an initial settlement allowance, a follow-up payment, and housing subsidies. As of 2005, each North Korean adult received close to \$1,800 per month for six to twelve months as a job-training subsidy (Jo & Kim 2009: 39). For the first six months after leaving Hanawon, each migrant receives around \$400 per month toward living expenses. If they fail to secure employment during this period, payments can be extended (Kang 2010). In addition, after leaving Hanawon, they are assigned social workers and helpers, in some cases (high-profile North Korean defectors), even personal security guards to shield them from possible North Korean retaliation. The annual total of government funds paid to North Korean migrants was a little over \$2 million in 2006 for 160 persons, \$900,000 for 583 persons in 2007, and \$2.14 million for 1,141 persons in 2008 (Jo & Kim 2009: 39). In 2009, the government spent \$5.6 million on subsidies to employers to encourage them to hire refugees, as well as \$1.8 million on college education subsidies for them and their children. Meanwhile, operating costs for Hanawon in 2010 totaled \$77.4 million (Lee 2010). With the increase in the number of migrants in recent years, Hanawon extended its facilities to three other locations in the Seoul area, and is able to



accommodate nine hundred persons at one time (Jo & Kim 2009: 32).



**Teens and young adults from North Korea attend class at Hangeore school in Anseong, 2010**

Nevertheless, despite this commitment from the South Korean government, many refugees experience difficulties. Once outside of Hanawon, many become bewildered and overwhelmed by feelings of being marginalized and discriminated against. A survey of literature and news reports shows that many feel fear and uncertainty about their futures in South Korea while continuing to be plagued by a sense of guilt at having left family members behind. Other factors contribute to a worsening in their mental state, such as their high level of unemployment, experiences of prejudice, and differences in socio-cultural norms and values. A 1998 survey of migrants who had entered South Korea since 1990 found an unemployment rate of 39.2 percent (Jo & Kim 2009: 77), while a 2003 survey of migrants who had entered South Korea since 1993 found an even higher rate, 41.5 percent (Yi et al. 2003: 26-33). Even when they do secure

employment, this is often only temporary, with many frequently changing workplaces and holding insecure jobs, such as day laborer. In a 2008 study, 67.8 percent of the North Korean migrants surveyed had held their jobs for less than one year, and 60.2 percent expressed discontent that their incomes were substantially lower than they had expected (Jeon et al. 2009: 128). Many refugees carry debts incurred to brokers and others who helped them move from China to a third country, such as Mongolia or Thailand, where they could apply for asylum at a South Korean embassy or consulate. Fees for such services typically range from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per person (Lankov 2010). Some pay more—one refugee who entered South Korea in 2005 paid smugglers \$10,000 (Onishi 2006), while another source cites smuggling fees ranging from \$5,500 to \$6,000 (Harden 2009). Many of these refugees have left family members behind in North Korea and continue sending money to them drawn from their meager incomes, often by illegal means, further increasing their hardship in South Korea.

Researchers and specialists studying migrants report low levels of self-esteem, a general sense of pessimism, high incidence of poor health, especially mental health, and feelings of being marginalized, excluded, and treated with bias in South Korean society. The number of patients receiving psychological treatment at the hospital designated by Hanawon for this purpose rose

from 110 in 2007 to a staggering 7,467 during the first eight months of 2010 (“We Must” 2010). Children and young adults are the victims of the most direct expressions of prejudice and ridicule at the schools and play groups they attend. Some sixty-two percent of North Korean students try to hide their origins for fear of being bullied by their classmates (“We Must” 2010). Although they have successfully entered South Korea, many North Korean minors are quickly evaluated as undereducated, with up to twenty-four percent having received no formal education. As of 2004, only 6.6 percent of high school age migrants were attending high school, only 49.1 percent of middle school age migrants were enrolled in middle school, and only 85.7 percent of elementary school age were attending elementary school (Jeon & Jo 2009: 111-112). Of these, 12.8 percent of young adult migrants dropped out of regular school in 2004 (Choi, Park, & Joungh 2010: 140). Specifically, eight out of sixty-four North Korean middle school students dropped out of school in 2004; the figure was eleven out of sixty in 2005 (Jeon & Jo 2009: 112).



Refugee children at Hanawon

When asked why they did not like South Korean schools, North Korean children responded that they got teased for being shorter and smaller than South Korean children, for speaking with a northern accent, for not keeping up with recent fads, and for being unsophisticated. They voiced discontent that their pride was hurt whenever the subject of North Korea arose in the classroom, and mentioned that teachers were indifferent to them, even when they were bullied by South Korean classmates (Jeon & Jo 2009: 132-133). Based on reporting by *Radio Free Asia* UNHCR *Refworld* notes that their lack of academic background in North Korea as well as their years of wandering in China and Southeast Asia led many North Korean children and young adults to be placed in much younger grade classes than those attended by their South Korean age peers, with seventeen or eighteen-year-olds frequently being placed in elementary schools (UNHCR 2007). In one such case, in 2002, a seventeen-year-old youth who had migrated to South Korea alone was placed in the sixth grade of an elementary school; before long, he dropped out, passing through a series of unstable jobs before ending up being killed in a motorcycle accident one year after arriving in South Korea (Chung 2009). In their isolation and marginalization, they often reminisce about North Korea: “Getting around and having food on the table were always a problem in North Korea, but leaving that aside, there was never such intense competition as we encounter in the South,” one

such student said (UNHCR 2007). Other children even wish to go back to North Korea, because they find South Korean children cold and deceptive, and impossible to befriend (Jeon & Jo 2009: 132-135; see Koh & Baek 2002). According to one researcher, North Korean children are disappointed by how little interest South Korean children have toward North Korea (Min 2001: 247-248; see also Jeon & Jo 2009).

It is important to register that the complex nature of prejudicial treatment meted out to North Korean migrants reflects South Korean society's own moral ambiguities. For example, South Koreans are critical of North Korean migrants who are unwilling to take up so-called 3D occupations: dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs (Suh 2002:76). Behind such criticism lies the logic that these are the kinds of jobs North Korean refugees deserve, the assumption being that they should consider themselves fortunate even to be alive, accompanied by feelings of disbelief that they dare to shun this type of work. Another factor encouraging disdain toward migrants is the assumption in some sectors of South Korean society that migrants expect permanent financial support. In addition, the fact that many have left their families behind and betrayed their country is seen as a sign of a personality defect and a lack of moral integrity (see Jeon 2000). Such assumptions place weaker members of the refugee population in an even more vulnerable position. For example, a young woman working

part-time as a waitress at a restaurant to help her parents pay her school fees is often approached by customers who assume that she is available for prostitution due to her "culturally inferior marker as a North Korean defector" and the associated assumption that she would do almost anything in order to get a little more money (Yi 2010: 283).

A random sample of five hundred South Korean citizens included in a survey conducted in 2008 revealed South Koreans to be unsympathetic and guarded toward North Koreans when asked specific questions, such as "How would you feel about your children befriending a refugee youth?" or "How would you feel about employing a North Korean?" The survey's findings substantiate the fact that few South Korean citizens are willing to become personally involved with refugees (Rhee 2008). They are seen as parasites, an unwelcome burden, and a group of unwanted sojourners who drain South Korea's welfare system (Herskovitz 2007).

Furthermore, whenever North-South relations worsen, refugees are made to feel defensive or even personally endangered. Consider the aftermath of the sinking of the South Korean submarine, the Cheonan, in March 2010, in which forty-six sailors died. With the South Korean government and the press charging North Korea with attacking the submarine without provocation, many refugees felt ostracized at their places of work and in their neighborhoods

and were even made to feel personally responsible for the incident. A well-known refugee art troupe had seven out of its nine performance contracts cancelled, while in some districts, migrants informed each other not to take certain routes after dark in light of rumors that some individuals were planning revenge attacks (“Talbukjarago” 2010). Again, following the November 2010 artillery attack by the North Korean military on Yeongpyeong Island, in which two South Korean civilians and two soldiers were killed, many refugees were made to feel ashamed and responsible. One refugee remarked: “I’m terrified thinking of how I’m going to live in South Korea in the future” (“The Distance” 2010).

Let us recall the character of Sgt. O, the main North Korean protagonist in the movie JSA discussed above—an affable individual, deserving admiration for his great integrity. In one scene, Su-hyeok, suggests that he defect to the south. O flatly refuses, declaring that he would prefer to contribute to making his fatherland, North Korea, as strong and appealing as South Korea. This North Korean man, who refuses to cross over, is filled with dignity; North Koreans who have crossed over to the South, on the other hand, are portrayed as unworthy of respect. This judgment appears to underpin current views held toward North Korean refugees in South Korea.

### **Banishment of North Koreans**

North Korean refugees are not a new phenomenon in South Korea, and their number today is small compared with the millions of North Koreans who fled American air raids and crossed the 38th parallel to become refugees during the US-Korean War. Individuals sporadically attempted crossings of the DMZ after the 1953 armistice—many losing their lives in the process—in order to escape North Korea. During the Cold War, defectors—especially those with high profiles, such as scientists participating in conferences in Eastern Europe, former diplomats, government officials, and military officers—received heroes’ welcomes in South Korea. For example, a Korean People’s Army pilot who defected in a MiG-19 fighter jet in 1983 received a red carpet welcome and 1.2 billion Korean won (approximately \$11.5 million), a sum that was 480 times greater than the average annual South Korean income at the time (Chung 2009: 8). A small but steady succession of such high profile cases followed, including the 1997 defection of Hwang Jang-yeop, former President of Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang and the mastermind behind the creation of North Korea’s Juche Ideology. It is important, however, to note that such cases constitute an extreme minority of migrants (Yoon 2001: 1).

As Cold War tensions began to wane in Korea (although, in contrast to Eastern Europe, still keenly felt), refugees from other sectors of North Korean society began to emerge—the poor, the

starved, the unskilled, and the minimally educated. Byung-Ho Chung refers to them as the “New Settlers” (Chung 2009). Predominantly arriving in South Korea after 2005, these New Settlers differ from earlier defectors, whose life histories and childhoods often became the subject of publications that were translated into many different languages, serving as an extremely effective propaganda tool for the South Korean state (e.g. Kang 2001; Kang 2007).

In the eyes of many South Koreans, however, the New Settlers have little to offer. Especially now, as more North Korean women and children reach South Korea, many South Koreans view them as an increased burden on tax payers. Moreover, North Korea is no longer of very great interest to South Koreans. Specifically, South Koreans today are no longer interested in the possibility of national reunification; reunification figures prominently neither in their daily lives nor in their visions of the future. During the years of military dictatorship, a period characterized by severe Cold War tensions, and right up until the late 1980s, anti-government student and labor movements reserved a place for the discourse of reunification. As a focus of hope and as a kind of utopian notion, this discourse provided momentum for anti-government, anti-American political action. Today, under a civilian government, the passion of South Koreans across the political spectrum no longer concerns reunification. Rather, monetary gain, material

success, financial security, and improvement of status and looks, are much more urgent concerns for most Koreans. Accordingly, the value of North Korean defectors has fallen, even as the cost of their maintenance has risen.

My use of language commonly associated with the market—terms such as value and cost—is deliberate. For, adopting a view of refugees based on their commodity value and seeing fluctuations in this value as a reflection of changes in the political needs of South Korea in the context of global politics is helpful in understanding their position within (or outside) the boundaries of humanity in South Korea today. It is ironic to find North Korean refugees so heavily dependent on government subsidies and welfare at a time when prevailing neo-liberal social norms in South Korea require self-sufficient, independent persons to be financially self-supporting. In this sense, being a burden on society, and lacking even some form of birth right, places North Korean refugees in an extremely ambiguous position: they are not quite foreigners, in that they are classified as Koreans, members of the same ethnic group as South Koreans; yet neither are they quite South Korean nationals, in that they behave unconventionally, fail to adapt to South Korean norms, and long remain dependent on the contributions of South Koreans. Their existence runs counter to the prevailing neo-liberal ethic in South Korea, because they do not contribute toward society’s



wealth on the one hand and are unable to assume responsibility for their own well-being on the other. Not only do they fail to obtain and hold jobs, but many do not stay in school, complete high school or college courses, become rich or successful, and become proper South Koreans by participating in a competitive social environment.

From a slightly different angle, I would characterize the state of North Korean refugees or immigrants in South Korea today as one that is racialized. Recall that refugee children are ridiculed for being short and having poorer physique. In South Korea, the maintenance and improvement of one's appearance often involves costly interventions, such as cosmetic and plastic surgery (Na Im 2010). At a minimum, it requires the regular purchase of cosmetic and grooming-related products, adherence to regular bathing habits, and maintenance of a healthy diet and life-style. South Korean sensitivity regarding height is particularly striking. Many parents spend substantial sums on height-stretching treatments, in addition to special exercise programs and dietary regimes for their children, in the belief that taller individuals are more likely to be successful (Choe 2009). The bullying of short children (i.e. North Korean refugees) is compounded by additional factors, such as an unfamiliar accent, unfashionable clothing, a less-developed physique, and skin appearance that is the product of years of malnutrition and

irregular eating. On top of all of these factors is the stigma associated with being housed in segregated residential areas, a common occurrence. Social attention to the physical appearance of North Korean refugees has the effect of inventing a "North Korean race" in South Korea.

This is the beginning of a process of dehumanization of North Korean refugees in South Korea today. In stark contrast to recent depictions of North Koreans in the cinema, such as in the movies *Shiri* and *JSA*, real, human North Koreans that have managed to reach South Korea in search of better lives are typically viewed with disdain or, at least, with deep ambivalence as to whether they should be acknowledged as fellow Koreans—indeed, as fellow humans. Beautiful assassin Myeong-hyeon and cool, dignified Sgt. O are, as it were, examples of "other Koreans" that are acceptable. By contrast, the poor, malnourished, and minimally educated North Korean refugees are examples of "other Koreans" that South Koreans have a hard time accepting.

The emergence of two different kinds of "other Koreans" is a cryptic demonstration of how one's humanity is no longer clear once one has crossed the DMZ: As long as North Koreans are North Koreans—be they loyal soldiers or spies—they are humans in the context of today's post-Cold War South Korean imagery, and as long as South Korean theater audiences are comfortably watching them in action on the silver screen, they

are worthy of attention and respect; when North Koreans actually come to the South in an attempt to regain their humanity, risking their safety and sometimes even their lives, often spending years wandering across China and Southeast Asia, they are met with reluctance, their membership within South Korean society remaining ambiguous. For South Korea, a nation that has overcome a brutal thirty-year military dictatorship and a terrible economic downturn, a nation that now thrives on a neo-liberal ethic of individual survival in which, in theory, everyone strives to become richer, better-looking and more successful, a large-scale influx of uneducated and unskilled North Korean refugees is an uneasy and unhappy event.

In contrast with Myeong-hyeon's dramatic life and death, her love affair with a South Korean intelligence agent and her love of fish, we can argue that the scenes of North Korean refugees arriving in the South are not worthy of attention, so to speak. Unlike the compassion that Sgt. O's personality creates in the audience's mind due to his pride in being North Korean and his admirable commitment to his country, recent North Korean refugees are perceived as traitors to their own country—another Korea—and often seen as lacking in integrity. They are seen, therefore, as likely to betray their new motherland, South Korea, as well. Far from becoming co-participants in the rituals of their lives, South Korean classmates, work colleagues,

and neighbors remain indifferent toward them, at times assuming a hostile and contemptuous attitude. It is indicative that refugees as defectors are exempted from universal compulsory military service in South Korea ("North Korean Defectors" 2011). Military service is unpopular in Korea and most would consider themselves fortunate to be exempted. The fact that North Korean refugees are exempted, however, is a sign of the lack of trust by the state. It is precisely because South Korea's military dictatorship has been replaced by a civilian government, the nation entering the ranks of neo-liberal, competitive, and capitalist nations, that national partition has become someone else's business. In the process, as bearers of this awkward reality, refugees find themselves placed outside the range of social and national concerns in South Korea today, while their place in the realm of South Korean humanity remains unclear. The irony could not be clearer: North Korean refugees who risked their lives to escape the north face the real possibility of losing their humanity in the south.

### **Postscript**

I am not suggesting that shunning and discrimination against North Korean settlers are the only attitudes found in South Korea today. I am personally acquainted with many individuals, especially young people, who are committed to improving the new settlers' livelihood and assisting them to re-start their

lives in South Korea. Similarly, in film production, more complex, even subtle representations of North Korean settlers in South Korea have appeared in recent years, as seen in *Dance Town* a part of Town Trilogy by Kyu-hwan Jeon (2011), which depicts the despondent reality that North Korean refugees experience in South Korea. Yet, the fact remains that too little has been done for North Korean refugees not only in South Korea but elsewhere, including North Korea. Even when North Korean resettlers are “accepted” in South Korea, in the current situation, we do not find a framework that goes beyond one-dimensional definitions such as *talbukja* (those who got out of the North) or *saeteomin* (new settlers), which practically function as labeling, rather than providing the bearers of these labels with an enabling point of departure and self-esteem. It must not have escaped the reader that I myself am hesitant about how best to categorize them, whether as refugees or migrants. For, in my view, North Koreans who have reached South Korea remain unlocated or unlocatable in social-scientific discourse.

Currently, an increasing number of researchers (particularly Western researchers) are gaining access to North Korean refugees in South Korea, resulting in studies on their lives, encompassing a wide array of genres and topics, touching upon their stories of misery, their memory of famine, their painful family saga, religious conversion,

and sometimes, small success stories in the South. It seems that we have entered a new phase in bringing the lives of North Korean refugees into the arena of academic and journalistic discourse, compared to, say, a decade ago (e.g. Demick 2010; Fahy 2011). This is all the more reason to ask, then: Who are North Korean refugees? The increasing number of academic and journalistic books on North Korean refugees in South Korea and elsewhere continue to consolidate the image of their role as witness of something, be it disappearing totalitarianism or crafty survival skills. Amidst this type of representation, who these North Koreans are is not really explored—are they refugees and if so, what is the most appropriate framework to assess their experiences? Or, are they in exile, in diaspora, or in displacement? Are they to remain as carriers of the old, rather than becoming creators of the new? Will they continue to function as an “access point” to reveal some kinds of “truth” about North Korea? This process inevitably renders them into the object – I hope this is borne in the minds of researchers dealing with them. At the same time, I wonder: Will North Koreans begin telling their own stories, will they find the language to do so, that is, will they cease to be the object and become the subject?

A distant acquaintance in Japan told me a story of the experience of his niece. She was born to his cousin, a repatriate to North Korea from Japan in

the mid-1960s, and the cousin's wife, also a repatriate. The niece, then eighteen years of age, was traveling to a nearby town on a crowded bus, mostly carrying young male passengers. When she returned home after this trip, she looked as if she had experienced death. She was no longer the same woman. She stopped talking and refrained from eating, except the bare minimum. After many months of silence, she killed herself. With the fragments of information, the family learned that she was gang-raped on the bus. She was among some 99,000 Koreans repatriated to North Korea from Japan between 1959 and 1979, most of them originating from the southern provinces of Korea. Thousands of the repatriates perished in concentration camps. Their stories are yet to be told. I cite this story, because it reminds us of the reality that North Koreans (in or out of North Korea) do not have, as it were, the language, i.e. they are silent—just like the fish in *Shiri*. In the story above, the witness is dead, rendering no word available from her mouth. But unlike *Shiri*, there was no audience for this woman. She alone experienced what she had and was unable to live. At least she avoided the fate of double objectification by not having to testify to researchers—that is to say, she avoided interrogation about her loss of humanity. Banishment of North Koreans in South Korea needs to be referenced with the reality in which the subjects do not possess their own language, or, the moment they tell their stories, they become the objects of

interrogation—the process which inevitably puts their humanity to examination, thereby further removing it from them.

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