



Suffering the Insufferable: *Experiences of North Korean Refugees as Political Subjects En Route to the Other Homeland*

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Abstract

This study argues that, from the standpoint of social suffering, the perspective that sees refugees in terms of their “bare life” (Agamben) over-represents the legal-political system and treats them as apolitical subjects. This study posits that when seen not only in the legal-political but also in personal-relational-social dimensions, refugees can be understood as political subjects during their transnational journeys from North to South Korea. In-depth interviews with North Korean refugees who have settled in South Korea are used to support this point. Other Asian states approach North Korean refugee migrations according to their own particular social and political circumstances and the refugees describe their experiences of exploitation and social dislocation as “bearable pain” or “temporary pain” in light of the hoped-for survival and legal asylum. While helpful in adapting psychologically or emotionally to adverse circumstances, such perceptions support the continuation of inhumane relationships and unjust practices in the formal and informal socio-economic arena made up of North Korean refugees and the local subjects who interact with them. The lived experiences and storytelling of refugees, however, expose contradictions in the social structure and demonstrate they are political subjects.

Keywords: Refugees, North Korea, forced displacement, Asia, social suffering, political subjectivity

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Introduction

The human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been a major concern since the mid-1990s as its reality—the poor living conditions of North Koreans and human rights violations—began to be made public through various channels (NHRC 2021, 280). Since 2005, the UN General Assembly has issued resolutions on the DPRK's human rights situation and voiced grave concerns on behalf of the international community.

The number of defectors from North Korea into South Korea rose during the 2000s, surpassing 1,000 in 2001, following a large-scale influx of North Korean refugees during the Arduous March in the 1990s.¹ It reached a peak of 2,914 in 2009, began to decline, and has not exceeded 1,600 per year since Kim Jong-un's succession in 2012 (Song 2021a, 26).

Since COVID-19, this number decreased to 229 in 2020, 63 in 2021 and 67 in 2022. The main causes for the stark decrease, according to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, were tighter border controls between North Korea and China and travel restrictions to other countries to halt the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur urged sanctions imposed by Security Council against North Korea be reviewed and eased in light of the worsening human rights situation and the humanitarian disaster as a result of COVID-19 lockdown measures (UN General Assembly 2021, 7). Haggard and Noland (2023) observed that sanctions are a contributing factor to “another cycle of humanitarian distress.” This issue raises the possibility that there may soon be a rise in the number of people fleeing North Korea.

North Koreans encounter struggles during their forced displacement. Due in part to the DPRK's policy of mobility restrictions as well as topographical, political, and diplomatic concerns, the process is recognized to be extremely perilous. China shares a border with North Korea. Many

1. Ministry of Unification (Tongilbu), “Bukhan italjumin ipguk inwon hyeonhwang” (Statistics on the Entry Status of North Korean Defectors), accessed November 18, 2023, <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/>.

North Korean refugees cross into safe countries via China or Southeast Asia. These socialist republics—China, Laos, and Vietnam—have attempted to strike a diplomatic balance between South Korea and North Korea. Only three countries from Southeast Asia—Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste—have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

Studies on the process of forced migration from North Korea to South Korea are underrepresented compared to other research topics within the huge amount of research on North Korea (Armstrong 2011; Em 2021; Song 2021b). The majority of research on this topic has been done on China (for example, Chang et al. 2008; Choi 2014; García 2019; Hyun 2003; Lankov 2004), or the Philippines (Dawe 2015). Even when previous studies analyzed migration routes, they have tended to concentrate on macro issues (Jeong 2020); or on the experiences of violence and health of refugees (for example, E. Kim et al. 2019; Taylor et al. 2017). Pain and adversity are not only private experiences, but are embedded in the social structure. To comprehend the significance of individual experiences, it is vital to link those experiences with structural factors.

This paper adopts Kleinman et al.'s (1997) perspective on social suffering, and critiques the “bare life” stance of Agamben (1998) that views refugees as apolitical subjects. This study analyzes how the fear experienced by North Korean refugees during their forced migration from North to South Korea is not limited to individual features but also linked to the structure of exclusion in North Korea and the Asian states they pass through. Next, this study reveals how, in Asia specifically, the negation of refugees by the state can be exposed as processes of social and moral exclusion. Their suffering and struggles are understood to be the result of structural violence in the process of displacement. This may serve to uphold the structural elements of forced displacement. The suffering of refugees, however, reflects a deeper anguish that exposes the paradoxes of structural violence.

This paper proposes a theory that the very social misery that North Korean refugees testified to proves the notion that they are political subjects. By examining their *bare life* from an individual, relational, and social

dimension, this article shows that refugees are political subjects. Even at the moment when refugees are excluded in terms of their *bare life* by the legal-political structure, they perceive themselves as political subjects that have been recognized as such in the past and will continue to be such in the future. They have long been socialized as political subjects, and others around them are aware of their personal and social dimensions (relational dimension). This study examines the shortcomings of the dichotomy that divides suffering from the political subject, as Renault (2017, 60) has discussed. Excluded from the legal and political system and suffering as if they were living animal lives, refugees agonize and embody the intolerable, remembering that they have been socialized as political subjects, building relationships with those around them, and speaking and acting to end social sufferings.

Political Subjects and Social Suffering

Kleinman et al. (1997) show that human problems are not only individual, but often closely related to societal problems, which also reveals the interpersonal basis of suffering; that is, “suffering is a social experience.” This viewpoint dispels dichotomies that “separate individual from social levels of analysis, health from social problems, representation from experience, suffering from intervention” (Kleinman et al. 1997, ix–x). Social suffering stems from the influence of political, economic, and institutional power on human beings. Furthermore, the way these powers influence the responses to social problems causes social suffering.

Understanding the social suffering caused by the forced displacement of North Korean refugees allows one to determine if the suffering has social or moral justification. Asad (1997, 295) traces the process by which “inhuman” suffering is considered to be essentially unnecessary in Western society while suffering to become “fully human” is viewed as “necessary,” and against this backdrop, examines how reasons for enduring pain in the pursuit of the latter have been socially or morally justified. It is important to investigate whether there are any social factors in Asia that contribute to the

failure to end the agony of North Korean refugees despite assessments of their suffering as being cruel. The process of social or moral exclusion might be seen as the source of the refugee's suffering. This concept gives the justification for eradicating that suffering.

This study focuses primarily on exclusion by the state in its analysis of this suffering. Arendt's "paradox of human rights" ([1951] 1976, ch. 9) and Agamben's "bare life" (1998) are two main hypotheses explaining why refugees are excluded from the modern state. This study, in line with Owens (2009) and Williams (2014), questions whether "bare life," which is excluded from the juridic-political structure, can be reinterpreted as a political subject. Williams (2014, 119–121) argues that "refugees are not simply a 'bare life' removed from political life, but political subjects whose subjectivities are shaped by the politicizing social environments in which they live." Owens, following Arendt, notes the capacity for "bare life" to shape the public realm "if [...] bare life is repudiated and a new world community is formed around resistance to injustice: that is, when individuals begin to create a public space in-between them" (Owens 2009, 577–578).

By extension, Horst and Lysaker (2021, 81–82), following Arendt, emphasize the possibility of refugees as a "vanguard of their times." Given that individuals from refugee backgrounds may be restricted in public engagement due to their marginalized status in society, the political subjecthood of refugees can be extended beyond the narrow confines of speech, action, and the public sphere in Arendt's understanding of political action as narrative.

Assuming that the lived experience of a refugee constitutes the form of subjectivity, Nguyen (2019, 114) concentrated on the psychic, affective, and embodied components of refugee subjectivity beyond limiting it to a specific time, place, legal definition, or pitiful existence. This study includes this claim. However, this study differs from previous studies in that it focuses on the political subjectivities created during migration, specifically how refugees created political subjectivities while being excluded from the political and legal system. Additionally, this paper examines how refugee subjectivities relate to social suffering and focuses on the individual, relational, and social dimensions of analysis.

Why are refugees viewed as politically neutral subjects? Two hypotheses have been used by academics to approach this issue. First, the abstract approach to refugees has been criticized (Malkki 1996; Williams 2014, 122). Humanitarianism, universalism, and the abstract notion of human rights make refugees *speechless emissaries* and *mute victims* of decontextualized suffering, which de-historicizes and depoliticizes them. Refugees are political subjects who speak, tell their tales in the contexts of politics, history, and culture, and who develop their subjectivities in the political and social space of the camp after being exiled.

Previous studies on North Korean refugees have also explored their agency and criticized hegemonic Western discourses. Choi (2014), through examinations of narratives by North Korean migrant women in the North Korea-China borderland, criticizes discourses on North Korean human trafficking that depict them as powerless victims without agency, grounded in western liberal discourse of the universality of human rights. In her analysis of North Korean women who moved from South Korea to Western countries, applied for refugee status, and then returned to South Korea, Lee (2020) criticized the standardization and de-gendered victimization of their gendered experiences rooted in Western discourses regarding North Korean human rights.

Second, the dichotomous bias between suffering and the political subject has been challenged (Renault 2017, 60): suffering victims are characterized as passive and helpless, and sufferers are described as having given up actively engaging in politics.

In actuality, this is intimately tied to the constraints in the concept of the modern subject. What needs to be addressed are the hierarchical ontology and dichotomous epistemology assumed by the modern political subject, which serve as the foundations of power-based social structures and acts that increase vulnerability. In their analysis of issues of the ethics of care, Ghandeharian and FitzGerald (2022, 33–35) note that “politics in the neoliberal/modern/Western world is structured based upon the assumption that the political subjects are atomistic and self-sufficient.” This dichotomizes the contrasting characteristics of independent political actors vis-à-vis others who are dependent on relationships and vulnerable. It is assumed

that the former is desirable while the latter is not. This has (re)produced hierarchical relationships. On the contrary, the ethics of care, based in relational social ontology, highlights how “the political subjects are always-already vulnerable, dependent, and enmeshed in relational webs” (Ghandeharian and FitzGerald 2022, 42). This reasoning holds that refugees are political subjects who have embodied vulnerabilities and dependent relationships with others in their social life, not, as some might assume, that they have lost their political subjectivities as evidenced by their *bare life*.

Through the concepts of *social suffering* and the *political subject*, this study seeks to illuminate the political subjectivities of refugees in the individual, relational, and social dimensions. Refugees engage in storytelling and other social activities in order to improve their own lives as well as the lives of others around them. This narrative action is situated in historical-social settings and concrete relationships. Because they represent the very pain expressed in this narrative action, refugees are political subjects. On an individual level, refugees are shown to be political subjects. Refugees perceive and narrate their existences as political subjects in both the past and the future, even though they are excluded by the legal-political structure and reduced to a minimal existence (*bare life*). This self-politicization is possible because, in addition to this social dimension, there is a relational dimension of acquaintances that the people in the immediate vicinity are aware of in the individual dimension—that is, the existence of a subject who perceives themselves as a political subject—which means that refugees have been socialized in the past as political subjects, and this continues to affect the refugee’s present and future. These political subjectivities form the basis of a new politics for refugees.

Methodology

The author conducted in-depth interviews from February through September of 2018. Convenience sampling was used, which involved research participants and field experts. The external validity of the study was supplemented as follows: the use of quota sampling, considering the

research participants' residences in the DPRK, their migration routes from North to South Korea, and the gender ratio of North Korean defectors according to Ministry of Unification statistics. The participants had lived in Ryanggang-do, Hamgyeongbuk-do, Pyeongannam-do, Pyeonganbuk-do, and Hwanghaenam-do in North Korea. Three participants have been in South Korea for less than 5 years, seven between 5–10 years, and five for over 10 years.

To preserve the participants' anonymity, confidentiality, and personal information, only a restricted amount of participant data is presented in Table 1. Their main worry was that if their identity were discovered, their families and relatives in North Korea might be put in danger. Prior voluntary consent was obtained for each interview. For taking part in the study, participants received an honorarium. The interviews were semi-structured, and inquiries focused on the reasons people left the places they called home, the migration process, their expectations for South Korea, and challenges they encountered in South Korea. The interviews were conducted in Korean and later translated into English. Thematic analysis was used to conduct the study. Although differences in the research participants' experiences were taken into account, the study's main objective was to identify commonalities in their hardships and other relevant experiences related to migration. Although this paper explored gender differences, this point needs further examination. Future research will need to analyze the variations in experiences based on generation and time of escape from North Korea. This study analyzed data on institutions, policies, and statistics.

Phenomenological anthropology is the source of inspiration for this study. In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Michael Jackson interprets Arendt's theory as phenomenological anthropology. Arendt examines the use of storytelling as a strategy for converting personal meaning into public meaning (Jackson 2013, 31–34). Storytelling is a form of restorative praxis that is ontologically empowered and connected to the world around us. The researcher was involved in the interaction of intersubjective processes, as were the research participants. As a methodology, phenomenology and social suffering provide a perspective that take into account personal agency as well as interpersonal and societal connections. This is not a list of the

countries that refugees have sequentially traveled through, but rather a reconstruction of their experiences over time and space. Their stories were told in a blend of past and present tenses.

When citing interview content in the text, double quotation marks are used when quoting the words of the research participants verbatim. All original meanings are preserved, but single quote marks are used if the author slightly re-wrote a passage. Ellipses indicate the research participants left the stories or thoughts unfinished, or stopped talking; [...] marks are used where the author has condensed the story to optimize content delivery; [] marks are used for the author’s speech or for additional explanations; () marks are used to indicate non-speech behaviors. Any emphases made by research participants are marked by italicization. The university’s IRB approved this study.

Table 1. Research Participants

Name(pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Previous Nationality	Current Nationality
Ms. Chun, E. H.	20s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Kim, J. A.	20s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Mr. Park, E. C.	20s	Male	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Yee, S. H.	30s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Cho, Y. J.	30s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Mr. Choi, H.	30s	Male	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Lee, S. H.	40s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Kim, J. H.	40s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Yi, J. W.	40s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Mr. Lee, H. G.	40s	Male	DPRK	RoK
Mr. Kim, C. Y.	40s	Male	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Kim, M. O.	50s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Kang, A. R.	50s	Female	DPRK	RoK
Mr. Kim, W. I.	50s	Male	DPRK	RoK
Ms. Choi, Y. S.	60s+	Female	DPRK	RoK

Source: Author.

“Life-Or-Death” Moments: From North Korea to Places of Refuge

My heart was pounding like a hammer. If I got caught, if I got sent back to North Korea, I would have to die, so I was truly terrified. (Ms. Lee, S. H.)

North Korean refugees flee North Korea for a variety of complicated reasons, including political persecution or the fear of persecution, economic hardships during the Arduous March and afterwards, discrimination in employment and educational opportunities based on social status (*chulsin seongbun*), restrictions on the right to choose one’s way of life, political awakening, etc.² These reasons are inseparably interlinked. Although the factors mentioned by the research participants were different, they all acted as motives for escape.

When they fled North Korea and traveled through Asian nations like China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand, they were subject to constant threats. A long-lasting fear that they carried in the depths of their souls was that of being caught en route to their places of refuge and forcibly repatriated to North Korea. They referred to forced repatriation as *buksong*, literally, “repatriation to the North.”

[In China] I got a call. This time, this time, a (police) ‘crackdown’ is coming to arrest you, those acquaintances warned. [...] If they used the Chinese word for ‘crackdown’! I *always* trembled with anxiety, I would go into hiding for a while. That’s how I lived. (Ms. Kim, M. O.)

[Leaving China and traveling through a third country] During the trying ordeal, the team ahead was captured and killed. No, captured, and it was said that they were going to be forcibly repatriated to the North (*buksong*). Anyway, people were now all... afraid, just horrified. (Mr. Park, E. C.)

Why were the refugees so frightened and anxious? Research participants said punishments such as detention, life review sessions (*saenghwal*

2. North Korean terms are indicated within brackets in italics; for this, the NHRC (2016) was referenced.

chonghwa) that involved self-criticism or mutual criticism, forced labor, torture, and/or execution awaited them in North Korea after forced deportation. They are subjected to criminal punishment because defecting from North Korea violates North Korea's penal codes for "illegal border-crossing" (*bibeop wolgyeongjoe*) and "treason against the nation" (*joguk banyeokjoe*). As a result, they run the risk of persecution if they return or are repatriated. According to a number of UN documents, North Korean refugees have the status of refugees or *réfugiés sur place*.³

[How dangerous was it being forcibly repatriated to the North?] Wow, it was...I would have rather died than go back. (Mr. Kim, W. I.)

When Ms. Kim, M. O. and her party were caught and deported back to North Korea, a member committed suicide because she expected that she would eventually die anyway, as the punishment was increased with repeated escapes and deportations.

(In a low voice) One friend, something went wrong, she died after taking poison. She said she had been caught and sent back six times. [...] 'If I'm sent back this time, I'll die' she said. (Ms. Kim, M. O.)

This refugee migration process brings fear, not only about the risk of persecution but about the "political and professional process" which Kleinman et al. (1997, xi–xii) have pointed out, which affects the intimate realm of North Korean refugees and regulates their psychological and physical dimensions. This is because refugees fear that they will be punished after deportation; what worries them more is that the punishment will be inflicted not only on themselves but their families as well. The interviewees endeavored to hide the fact that they were going to South Korea, which they referred as *hangukhaeng*, literally, "heading to South Korea," because their

3. See for example, UN General Assembly, "Situation of human rights in the DPRK," A/RES/72/188, 12 Jan. 2018; UN Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK," A/67/370, September 13, 2012.

families would be harmed if it were discovered. They were physically and mentally prepared for death.

[Did you worry you'd be sent back to North Korea when you were escaping?] When I was caught, and was about to be forcibly repatriated (*buksong*), yes. Well...I just wanted to die. [...] Because my family members and distant relatives would be slain for my attempting to go to South Korea (*hangukhaeng*). I would rather die on the spot than go back and get killed in front of my parents, or maybe they would be killed, too... (Mr. Choi, H.)

Throughout their displacement, they suffer numerous life-threatening circumstances, many of which are related to North Korea as well as the structure of exclusion in place in the transit nations.

States and Mechanisms that Facilitate Moral and Social Exclusion

State Negation Structures and the Specificity of Regional Contexts

So, our people...went to China and lived inhumanely...we lived like that without even registering a household. Here in South Korea, people give names even to beasts, to dogs; they're given a name, at least...Even when we suffered setbacks and needed help, we weren't human. We survived on nothing. (Ms. Kim, M. O.)

A refugee becomes a refugee as soon as the cause of the refugee arises. "Recognition of his refugee status does not therefore make him a refugee but declares him to be one" (UNHCR 2019, para. 28). However, North Korean refugees encounter barriers during migration that prevent them from receiving refugee status, forcing many to flee in order to avoid deportation. This demonstrates regional distinctiveness in light of Asian social contexts.

First, refugees theoretically enjoy human rights as members of the human community and receive protection from the international

community according to the international human rights regime. However, due to the reality of an international system made up of sovereign states, human rights are realized through citizenship (Dacyl 1996). To solve this conundrum, the international community has delegated authority to realize universal human rights within each sovereign state. In addition, a global multilateral mechanism has been activated to ensure that this is not nullified by the logic of non-interference in sovereign internal affairs.

However, this conundrum still exists in the refugee scenario. Refugees have been either directly or indirectly persecuted by their state of origin, or not protected by the state from persecution by non-state agents; they are *de jure* and *de facto* excluded from citizenship status. It is crucial to urge states to defend refugees' human rights in accordance with universally recognized norms. Among the transit countries in Southeast Asia for North Korean refugees, however, few have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. This is related to the contradiction between the definitions of a *refugee* and a *migrant*, since North Korean refugees have been forcibly deported while yet being denied refugee status despite their entitlements under international protocol.

One factor is that states take into account the status of their government's diplomatic relations with the DPRK, or lack thereof. The China has enforced a strict policy of forcibly repatriating North Korean refugees, which violates the principle of non-refoulement as stipulated in the International Refugee and Human Rights Act (UN Human Rights Council 2014, 10).⁴ Research participants said they were not recognized as refugees in transit countries. Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia allow North Korean refugees to migrate to South Korea or other safe countries, but they can also

4. The relevant agreements underlying the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees from China are the Escaped Criminals Reciprocal Extradition Treaty and "Protocol between the People's Republic of China Ministry of Public Security and the DPRK Social Safety Ministry for Mutual Cooperation in Safeguarding National Security and Social Order in Border Areas," both of the 1960s, and the "Mutual Cooperation Protocol for the Work of Maintaining National Security and Social Order in the Border Areas" of 1986, which was amended in 1998. This protocol remains valid today (Kwan 2017, 99).

forcibly deport North Korean refugees back to their homeland.⁵

This specificity gives shape to violence in the concrete contexts of the societies of China and Southeast Asia. The violence was directly or indirectly inflicted and made refugees vulnerable. This is seen in detail in the testimonies of the research participants.

Ms. Yee, S. H., and her mother crossed a river from North Korea to China to escape. They had to wait until the river froze because Ms. Yee was too young to get into the cold water. They entered the displacement process on their own without a broker, but her mother was able to get in touch with a Chinese relative of a friend. After crossing the border, they lost their way and walked several kilometers to the town where the relative lived, but the town was too big to find the relative. On a cold and dark night, they had no idea where to go.

My mother was afraid that I would freeze to death. She thought ‘We’ll go to any house that will take us’ and just started knocking on the doors, but no one answered. Because a lot of North Korean refugees had done the same. (Ms. Yee, S. H.)

Dogs kept barking at the appearance of strangers. Finally, an old man came out of a house at the sound of barking, and stumbled upon them. He ascertained that these were people from North Korea and one was a young girl. He let them stay at his house. He provided them food and warm blankets. But they could not stay in the house for long. If they were found in the house, he would be fined. With the help of “the house,” they contacted the friend’s relative. But a human trafficker, ‘the phone number’s owner’s younger sibling,’ took them to a rural village, where they were trafficked into forced marriage.

They were not the only victims of forced marriage and human

5. Liam Cochrane, “Government ponders fate of North Korean defectors,” *Phnom Penh Post*, September 25, 2004; Chico Harlan, “For those fleeing N. Korea, new problems on obscure escape route through Laos,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2013; Min Joo Kim, “A Month after Hanoi Summit, Vietnam Starts Deporting North Korean Refugees,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2019.

trafficking. Some female research participants were trafficked and subordinated to a family system with Korean Chinese and Han Chinese as patriarchs (Ms. Kim, J. H., Ms. Lee, S. H., Ms. Yi, J. W. and Ms. Cho, Y. J.). Unwanted pregnancy and childbirth, domestic violence by the husband and his family, high-intensity labor, cultural isolation, limits on movement, and/or other human trafficking traps awaited them.

The population problem in China is one of the factors contributing to the increasing risk of forced marriage and human trafficking. The disparity in living standards between urban and rural areas has widened as a result of China's reform and opening-up policy. The country's one-child policy and cultural preference for sons have caused a major gender imbalance skewed toward males.⁶ These factors have contributed to the issue of *old bachelors*, particularly in China's rural regions. The demand for marriage partners and the problem of bride-trafficking are intertwined.

Despite the possibility of being repatriated to North Korea or subjected to violence, the female participants who found themselves in this social setting were accorded an unstable social standing as members of the family system. Male research participants, on the other hand, were not recognized as patriarchs or members of the Chinese family system. Mr. Park, E. C. crossed the border between North Korea and China with his companions. He could have traveled the distance in a single day, but got lost in the mountains for four or five days. After entering the haven, he collapsed from hunger and exhaustion.

[The broker said] To be honest, if you were a woman, I would sell you, but there's absolutely no market for men. (Mr. Park, E. C.)

Though Mr. Park, E. C., and his friends had believed they could live in China, they had to come up with an alternative solution given the country's policy of denying North Korean refugees even exist. There were few options: either get caught in a crackdown while hiding in China and be forcibly repatriated, or head to South Korea. Other male interviewees in their

6. Heather Barr, "China's Bride Trafficking Problem," *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2019.

situation faced a similar conundrum.

Despite gender disparities, it is a shared truth that North Korean exiles are always anxious and afraid of being discovered in China as a result of reports by those around them, censuses, and/or crackdowns, and subject to forced repatriation.

The research participants chose to go to South Korea even at the risk of their death. If they were apprehended en route to South Korea, North Korea's "political enemy," returning to North Korea would subject them to harsher punishments than traveling to China—a politically friendly country—and getting caught, repatriated and punished from there.

Some had always intended to move to South Korea, while others had intended to move back to North Korea after living in China but changed their minds. Sometimes it took a long time for the refugees to acquire knowledge about issues surrounding the legal status of North Koreans in South Korea.

In China, on the other hand, the North Korean interviewees were not allowed to travel freely since they were regarded there as undocumented immigrants. In inland China, crackdowns were a possibility because IDs are screened on buses and trains. When Mr. Park, E. C., was nearly arrested by authorities on the train, 'he tried to get away by jumping off. Whether he would live or die was a matter for fate to decide.'

Some research participants came to South Korea from China, but others passed through Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, or Thailand. The threat persisted in the movement from China into Southeast Asian countries. For example, Mr. Kim, C. Y. crossed the Chinese border into Vietnam and was captured by the Vietnamese army.

The Korean diplomatic or consular mission, or places connected to those missions, were the final destinations for North Korean refugees in Southeast Asia. Some interviewees were held in the immigrant detention center in Thailand, went into hiding, or spent some time in diplomatic missions abroad.

How North Korean Refugees Understand Their Pain in the Process of Forced Displacement

[In the immigration detention center in Thailand] What could I do? I couldn't run away, I couldn't fight back, and, well, I couldn't protest or anything like that. All I could do was... just 'tough it out.' If I can just 'tough it out,' I told myself...with the tiniest hope that one day I might make it to South Korea. Yeah, I just '*stuck to my guns*' there in the prison. (Ms. Chun, E. H.)

Contextualizing the structure of violence during the migration process brings the peculiarities of how refugees perceive their own suffering into clearer light. The pain turns into something they can or must put up with in order to live decently in the future. The relief they feel when they arrive in Thailand and are detained at the immigration detention center is not without irony. This is because their detainment symbolizes the imminent end of their negation by state structures.

In Thailand, we are safe, at least. [...] it's an immigration camp. Refugees are just, like, detained, you know? It's like a prison [...] From here, I'm now going to go through the steps [to go to South Korea]. (Ms. Chun, E. H.)

Why do refugees battle their way through the perilous travel routes to South Korea and find relief in the Thai immigration detention center? One of the reasons is South Korean law. The RoK (Republic of Korea; South Korea) Constitution's territorial provision, which establishes that the Korean Peninsula is the RoK territory and regards North Koreans as members of its own nation, is used by South Korea to deny the DPRK's status as a sovereign state. North Korean refugees abroad do not fully enjoy the right to enter and leave South Korea, unlike overseas Koreans (H. Kim 2021).

According to Article 7(1) of the *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act*, "any North Korean defector [...] who intends to be protected under this Act shall apply for protection in person with the head

of an overseas diplomatic or consular mission, or the head of any administrative agency.⁷ In other words, they go directly to a place connected to a South Korean diplomatic or consular mission—or to South Korea—insofar as protection typically begins after they arrive at a location connected to a Korean diplomatic or consular mission, where they can inform the RoK of their intention to request protection.

Therefore, the fact that a person has suffered so much trying to cross from China to Southeast Asia, has come to the immigration detention center in Thailand, has declared they are a North Korean refugee, and has expressed their intention to be protected, means there is a high possibility this person is a North Korean refugee. At this stage, the RoK begins an investigation to determine whether the person is a resident escaping from North Korea or not.

The relief that they feel in the immigration detention center can be interpreted as a feeling of safety from the belief they will at some point go to South Korea, and therefore they feel able to endure whatever challenges will present themselves. On the one hand, this reflects how difficult life and migration were before they obtained asylum. This is by no means an endorsement of the conditions at the center, which are poor. The research participants called the immigration detention center such names as “international prison,” “Korea prison,” “refugee camp,” and “immigration camp/prison.” Here “Korea prison” refers to the section of the facility where only North Korean refugees were held.

7. “[...] *Provided*, That the same shall not apply where there exist the grounds prescribed by Presidential Decree, which make it impracticable for the person to apply for protection in person” (Article 7[1] of the same *Act*). North Korean applicants are guaranteed their status in cases where: A) there is a physical or mental disability, B) a member of the family applies on behalf of the rest of the family, C) where there are other urgent reasons (Presidential Decree, Article 10). Korea Legislation Research Institute (Hanguk beopje yeonguwon), accessed November 29, 2023, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=60748&lang=ENG.

It's difficult. It's very hot. It was December, but it was hot and packed, so it was very difficult. I got TB from that Thai prison. (Ms. Lee, S. H.)

This way of understanding pain and hardship has the potential to perpetuate the structural causes of forced displacement. It was anticipated that the suffering they would experience during their journey would subside once they reached South Korea: 'Let's be patient a little longer,' they thought. Insofar as their experience of 'enduring present pains for the future' implies a resignation or acceptance of their own suffering, their endurance can function as a catalyst sustaining their conditions of forced displacement. The negation of refugees by the state amounts to an implicit admission of state violence. The fact that they experienced this state violence during the migration process effectively proves that they are refugees. However, their experiences and stories both reveal and rupture the contradictions in the negating structure.

Refugees' Lived Experiences and Storytelling

Exposing the Structural Contradictions of Forced Displacement and Suffering as Political Subjects

1) Enduring Suffering

Participants in the study reported that while it was good to arrive in the RoK, a safe country, adjusting to the new society was tough, and their challenging migratory experiences persisted even after their migratory journey had ended. Their pain was not resolved; it was embodied in memories, perceptions, and trauma. Sometimes the suffering was felt more intensely than other memories, and it was sometimes brought back by circumstances in South Korea, including new challenges, everyday experiences, or changes in the environment or season, such as the transition from winter to spring.

So many black cars here [in the RoK]?! In China, only executives ride in those. But those black cars were all around us. So, *the trauma* (makes a clapping sound with her hands) *when a black car passed by -swoosh- affected my heart*. I came to the South and developed heart disease, so I took medicine for it. I couldn't sleep properly and *I saw them coming to catch me in my dreams [...]* *It was the same here as in China*. (Ms. Kim, M. O.)

While her description of her traumatic experiences is dramatic, it shows that her sufferings and the sufferings of other refugees derive from a deeper foundation and cannot be explained away as something that passes and can be tolerated. This demonstrates that the negation structure of states cannot be defended on the basis of politics. North Korean refugees carve out their lives amidst suffering. Refugees live as active participants and testify as survivors, illustrating the necessity of eliminating inhuman suffering and the mechanisms that support it. The escapes from North Korea, the displacements, and the testimonies themselves are all political acts and reveal the fundamental nature of suffering in exile.

2) Political Subjects

The stories and experiences of North Korean refugees revealed that even when they were being excluded as minimal existences (*bare life*), they saw themselves as political subjects in the past or in the future. Refugees were exposed to hazards as a result of their increased dependency on and vulnerability within social networks during the process of displacement, but there were also political acts brought on by that very dependency and vulnerability in specific socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts.

Individual political subjectivities among the North Korean exiles were made up of political awareness, political acts, and a sense of belonging to the Korean ethnic group. Interviewees had reservations or felt let down by the DPRK government. Despite ideological restrictions preventing them from exercising political freedom, they took the risk of covertly communicating with a liberal democratic regime and made plans to flee for the life they

desired. Mr. Lee, H. G. suffered hardship due to North Korean monetary reform, but did not lose sight of the big picture: 'I'm not the only one who underwent that reform.' 'We knew we mustn't give up.' He was given a plot of land approved by the state to undertake small-scale farming (*bueopji*). However, the following year, the land was taken away. 'His social status was low, and his eldest child couldn't go to college, so he made a decision to escape.' Mr. Kim, C. Y. pondered: "The world rolls on and on in the opposite direction from what we've been taught [...] Why is this happening?" He obtained a short-wave radio from the Korean Armed Forces in the underground market and used it to access outside news sources. This was the impetus for his escape.

The migration process itself is an act of criticizing the system, namely, political involvement, and is therefore a highly precarious form of resistance for the refugee. As was previously discussed, refugees would be subject to criminal penalties if sent back to North Korea. This represents the continuing and intensifying of systemic criticism and demonstrates migration as a form of resistance, which itself turns into political action. Also, for North Korean refugees to reach a South Korean diplomatic or consular mission or South Korea territory and request protection, is essentially claiming RoK national membership, which is a political action.

The political subjectivities of North Korean exiles were also shaped by their sense of community as ethnic Koreans. They felt a sense of belonging to the imagined community of *one ethnicity* within the long history of Korea, despite the fact that Korea is divided. This imagined community has power since it is present not only in the abstract, but also in their family histories and relationships. Mr. Kim, W. I.'s father had attended public middle school in Seoul and was influenced by leftists. He fought in the Korean War as a volunteer and retreated to the North following General MacArthur's Incheon landing operation. He describes himself as the son of a South Korean. In his words, 'My father is South Korean, so I'm as good as a natural-born South Korean.'

I can't think of being a South Korean or North Korean. It is all my country.
[...] 'It's only the hometown that's different,' I said. (Ms. Lee, S. H.)

Ms. Lee, S. H.'s family had lived in North Korea for generations, but she has considered both South and North Korea as "my country."

However, their Korean ethnicity does not automatically entitle them to membership in South Korea's legal-political structure. As mentioned earlier, they lacked adequate information about "heading to South Korea" (*hangukhaeng*), been doubtful whether RoK would accept them, or worried about what would happen if they were not recognized as North Koreans during the screening process. They were not included in the system of legal and political protection during migration. They existed in a state of minimal existence (*bare life*), where they had to risk their lives to escape their oppression and pursue their dreams. The sense of relief felt by the refugees in the Thai immigrant detention center is evidence of this.

The point is that even though refugees fled from North to South Korea and experienced exclusion from state legal and political structures, their political consciousness, political actions, and sense of belonging as ethnic Koreans did not diminish. In other words, the self, which in North Korean culture is socialized as a political subject but has ambitions for a better life, is not exuviated simply because it is not included in the legal-political apparatus. Rather, the suffering endured during the migration is a metaphor for enduring the consequences of the political act of going to South Korea.

In the relational dimension, this leads to political engagement. The personal characteristics of the political subject were encouraged because the people they met during their displacement recognized them as North Koreans and knew that they were risking their lives in carrying out the political act of escape for a more decent human life. Exile is a life-threatening act of political resistance. If caught, everyone who helped them at any point could be put at risk, yet people still helped. North Korean refugees supported each other. People hid them or helped them look for a way to South Korea, and refugees escaped successfully thanks to these relationships. Mr. Choi, H. was able to reach Korea from China with the help of an elderly Korean-Chinese woman. Ms. Choi, Y. S. was old and it was difficult for her to cross the mountain and walk the off roads en route to a refuge.

'Leave me and go. Leave me and go.' I said. [...] But a companion carried

me on his back for ten hours. (Ms. Choi, Y. S.)

They helped each other and lessened the menace, even if only slightly, in the face of institutions behaving consistently in violation of human rights.

In the social dimension, the fact that North Korean refugees were socialized as political subjects in North Korean society makes it possible to interpret their political behaviors at that time. They lived in North Korea as citizens of North Korean nationality. They could comprehend the political significance of their acts as social beings as North Koreans. Parents, siblings, relatives, and friends who made them themselves in the process of their socialization remain significant others to them. Research participants said they escaped North Korea to save themselves, their families, or friends. 'Their suffering is my suffering. I wish I could put their suffering on my own shoulders.' Repatriation, which was previously discussed, is an extreme example. Mr. Choi, H. said that it would be better to commit suicide, and even attempted it, in the face of repatriation. This is a courageous act of defending family members from political persecution, and shows determination to protect the dignity of life rather than suffer repatriation to North Korea and inevitable punishment.

The desire to be a part of a better society can also be seen as a social expression of the political subject. The self, with the desire for a better life, is not exuviated by being excluded from the legal-political system. Subjects with this sense of self were nonetheless engaged actively in social interactions. Through these connections, they engaged in exile and escape as political actions. They harbored a longing for a new beginning and a new belonging to a better society in the future. This counted as one of the reasons they were able to withstand the arduous displacement process.

These political subjects continue to exist in the RoK, the country of their current nationality, as engaged citizens who yearn for a better life and develop ties with those around them. Research participants struggle to fit into their new society even if sometimes life does not live up to their expectations. Some people wanted to improve South Korean society by getting involved in charitable work, volunteering, or giving; they have spoken up for North Koreans, sent aid and/or information to loved ones in

China and North Korea, and some research participants even brought those loved ones to South Korea; in other words, they have taken an active political role.

The characteristics of North Korean refugees as political actors might be discussed in this context. The word “political” has a deeper meaning when viewed as an antithesis of *bare life*, which can be broadly defined as human freedom, activity and autonomy. The experiences and memories of North Korean refugees, however, have an ambivalent effect on political subjectivity. As discussed in the section “Enduring Suffering” above, it may enable or facilitate political subjectivity, but it may also limit human freedom, activity and autonomy.

The question is: how can people express their freedom, activity, and autonomy in the face of violence, or in a situation where these things are constrained? This query sparks conversations about how to deal with or oppose violence. Remembering the “double possibility of human beings to become the subject or object of a destructive force” (Crépon and Worms 2017, 5) is important at this point. In this situation, I think that rejecting the idea of becoming the perpetrator and victim of violence is the key to human freedom, activity, and autonomy in the face of violence. Although North Korean exiles who took part in the study engaged in both large and petty clashes or disagreements while migrating, they decided not to destroy themselves and the people around them.

The political subjectivities of North Korean refugees in terms of personal, relational, and social dimensions, as previously analyzed, are what led to this choice. The refugees had been politically socialized. They recognize their existence as political subjects even though they are not included in the legal-political system. They wanted to protect those who mattered most to them, such as family and friends, and they aspired to belong to a better society by being politically conscious and active. Due to their vulnerabilities, they were subjected to violence during the migration process, but developed bonds where their vulnerabilities were accepted while building empathy for their pain. Those around them provided assistance at their own peril. This allowed the research participants to seek safety in shelters or areas where political-legal systems existed. They helped

both themselves and others in this process. In other words, even in the face of violence, they were able to realize their desire to be part of a better society, seeking to avoid harming themselves and those around them because their imaginations and dreams are contextualized in these specific societies, histories, and relationships.

This analysis's preliminary findings offer a critical perspective on the ongoing debates, discussed above, over refugees as apolitical subjects, as de-historicized and depoliticized social voids, and passive and powerless sufferers. In the context of current assumptions which see North Korean refugees as depoliticized social voids and helpless, decontextualized victims, this study challenges this view, as well as the social institutions which, as a result of these assumptions, increase the refugees' vulnerability. Through the testimonies of North Korean refugees, this study highlighted the structure of states that exclude North Korean refugees in relation to individual experience and socio-political contexts. The socio-political environment of Korea, and the Asian region more generally, dictates that this exclusion process is applied to North Korean refugees with a particular level of violence. The experiences of forced migration are understood as *bearable pain* or *temporary pain* that has an end in order to survive or communicate their refugee status. As a result, the contradictory structure of forced migration is sustained. However, by demonstrating that their agony is sometimes momentary but also sometimes persistent, the narratives of North Korean refugees highlight the contradiction of the social structure that underlies their suffering. This is made possible by the testimonies and other acts of refugees who have endured forced migration. The vulnerabilities of the refugees and their reliance on local actors during migration can also be interpreted as constructing political subjectivity, instead of simply being undesirable and susceptible to hierarchical relationships based on the assumptions of the modern political subject. The narratives of contextualized suffering emerging from their storytelling make it clear that Korea's—and more generally, Asia's—unique sociocultural, historical, and political contexts play a significant role in the construction of North Korea exiles' political identities.

Conclusion: Political Subjects Being Individual, Relational, and Social

Using the lens of social suffering, this study examined the hardship and challenges that North Korean refugees faced when migrating. This study criticized the view of refugees as marginalized existences a view which over-represents the legal-political structure and assumes refugees are apolitical *bare life*, and proposed an extension of perspectives to look at their *bare existences* from the personal, relational, and social dimensions, as well as the legal-political structure. Refugees recognize themselves as political subjects even as they transition into the *bare life* of a refugee. Refugees self-identified as political subjects in the past and desire to do so in the present and the future. This is understood by both refugees and those around them.

In other words, refugees have been socialized as political subjects, their past experiences have already been embodied in their individuality, and their experiences and individuality are shared in relationships. These political subjectivities do not instantly vanish just because individuals are excluded from the social structure. Agamben overlooks the fact that these experiences have been built up for a long time and form political subjectivities, and continue to do so in the present, even in the state of being marginalized.

In this sense, refugees feel suffering because they are political subjects. The refugee's voice cannot be limited simply to the voice of the political subject whose rights have been violated and who suffers in that condition. The testimonies of the North Korean refugees bespeak the pain of suffering from structural exclusion, and the sorrow that human beings should not be treated like animals. Pain as a bare existence was what refugees felt as subjects with a sense of belonging in the past and future. They desired a respectable way of life and wanted a place in the legal-political system both now and in the future. On the other hand, if someone is not only excluded from the legal-political structure but also dehumanized with the loss of the individual, relational, and social dimensions of the political subject, this indicates the necessity to hear the stories of the person and the people surrounding them, as well as to understand the process by which the person has reached the present. This is because their present state may not be seen

as either a starting point or a final destination, as it may be a part of the process of change that the political subject is undergoing. The important thing is to explore the rupture that occurred following specific political repercussions after which the person became a marginalized subject.

Morris (1997, 40) pointed out that “we do not acknowledge the destruction of beings outside our moral community as suffering” and emphasized the need to extend the boundaries of the moral sphere. In order to end the brutality that refugees endure when fleeing their country, it is essential to broaden the morality in Southeast Asia and East Asia to create a system of asylum rights for North Korean refugees. States and processes that support the social and moral exclusion discussed earlier, exposed the weakness of the international human rights regime. The international community needs to take these regional differences into account and incorporate specific action plans for advancing their human rights.

Crépon and Worms (2017, 5) stated, “as much as vulnerability and inevitable death, the double possibility of becoming a subject or object of a destructive force is inscribed in human life.” The North Korean refugees make it through their ordeals and narrate the violence and suffering they experienced. This storytelling broadens our understanding and alerts us to the possibility that any of us can become both the perpetrators and victims of violence, and can decide to counter destructive forces before us. Now, the responsibility for violence rests with us who have been told these stories. To put it another way, we have a chance to understand the plight of North Korean refugees, share their stories, and recognize our potential, as a moral community, to shape the political realm together.

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