



START OF TRANSCRIPT

Clement Paligaru

Hello, I'm Clement Paligaru. Welcome to Ear to Asia, the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In Ear to Asia, we talk to researchers who focus on Asia and its diverse peoples, societies and histories. In this episode, fleeing North Korea.

Most of us have read or seen stories in the media of people taking their lives into their own hands to leave their home country of North Korea. People have been fleeing North Korea since the Korean Peninsula was divided in two after the end of World War Two and into the aftermath of the Korean War in the early 1950s. Officially North Korean citizens usually cannot freely travel around the country, let alone travel abroad, yet the numbers of escapees has grown substantially since the 1990s. Their accounts are often harrowing as they don't just put themselves at grave risk but also the loved ones they leave behind. But

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what does life look like for them after leaving North Korea? Who were these defectors back home in North Korea and who have they become in their new homes outside?

Our guest on Ear to Asia today has spoken to many defectors and is well placed to put their backgrounds and current lives into meaningful perspective for the rest of us. Dr Jiyoung Song has been studying North Koreans abroad for almost 20 years and she's interviewed more than 500 of them now living in China, Thailand, South Korea and the UK. Dr Song's broader work includes research into human migration, trafficking and border policy across East and Southeast Asia. Jay, as she prefers to be called, is currently a senior lecturer in Korean studies at Asia Institute. Jay, thanks for joining us on Ear to Asia.

Jiyoung Song

Thanks for having me here.

Clement Paligaru

Now firstly the situation of North Korea is unique in our post-Cold War world, so what do we call the people who succeed in fleeing it? The term defector comes up, but words like refugee or asylum seeker also come to mind.

Jiyoung Song

That's correct. Defector is the the political term used in South Korea to refer to people who left North Korea. There are other terms used in South Korea in the past years. In the 1970s, South Koreans were calling North Koreans returnees to the good, from the bad in North Korea to the good in South Korea. In the 1990s until today, they're also called new settlers, meaning that they are settling in the new homes in South Korea. But North Koreans themselves in South Korea prefer to be called North Koreans living in South Korea, tae bok min.

Internationally speaking, they're also referred as asylum seekers or victims of trafficking, those who are in China, or those who are successful in making their asylum applications are called refugees in South Korea. I would call them as migrants or people on the move. The reason for fleeing North Korea has been mainly political in the past up until the end of the Cold War, but after the end of the Cold War, the reasons have become more diverse than before.

Clement Paligaru

So are you then saying that under existing international treaties and obligations, they are viewed differently according to the situations that arise or have arisen?

Jiyoung Song

There are some issues with the existing international legal treaties which - we mainly refer to the *1951 Refugee Convention*. But the problem is that China and North Korea are not party to this refugee convention, so they are not obliged to abide by the international standards. What they prioritise over this international standard is the bilateral treatment they have between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK or North Korea. So these two countries don't really respect international standards in terms of their principle of non-refoulement of those who are seeking refugees. These international treaties, we may call them asylum seekers or refugees or irregular migrants, but all these terms are irrelevant in this China, North Korea context.

Clement Paligaru

Why do many of these people actually choose to flee North Korea?

Jiyoung Song

In the Cold War context, when there were rivalry between the Western democracy and the Soviet, Chinese communism, it was portrayed as political repression. These are political exiles. These North Koreans are leaving North Korea for a political reason.

But after the end of the Cold War, the reason have been buried. It's not just the political reason but also economic, environmental, personal insecurity because some of them were saying to me that they'd been watching South Korean drama or a soap opera or they were listening to K-pop. And they're also attracted to the relative wealth in China, because just across the border, they could watch the Chinese doing some trade, although it's limited and it's relatively less than the Western economic achievement. But North Koreans have been interacting and communicating with the Chinese, so it's all relative terms. Chinese are economically better off than North Korea. In the 1990s, there were a series of natural disasters. There are environmental insecurity, economic insecurity, political insecurity and personal insecurity. All these multiple factors have been contributing to North Korean fleeing their homes in the North.

Clement Paligaru

There was famine as well. That's largely referred to in the media certainly.

Jiyoung Song

Correct. In the mid-1990s, there were big famine in North Korea. Also the end of the Cold War has contributed to the reduced humanitarian aid and economic trades between North Korea and the former Soviet Union and between North Korea and China, so they've been losing all their socialist friends so-called after the end of the Cold War. Famine, they couldn't receive enough humanitarian assistance from their neighbours and their friends, the socialist bloc. So it's political, economic and environmental insecurity has been the main reason since the end of the Cold War.

Clement Paligaru

Can you give us a demographic breakdown of successful defectors?

Jiyoung Song

Number of North Koreans living in South Korea is, as of 2017, just over 30,000 people. But before they arrive in South Korea, many of them spend their time in Southeast Asia, especially in Thailand and China for several years. And those numbers we only have estimate. Chinese authority will say 500,000. The US will say it's about 100,000. The civic society will say, when it was peak, it was even a million North Koreans living and scattered all across China. Currently there are 22 million North Koreans living in North Korea, so the number of arrival in South Korea is very marginal. It's a very small number.

And among these 30,000 North Koreans living in South Korea, about 75 to 80 per cent were women, so women are actually more mobile than men. But that's a dramatic change. Before the end of the Cold War, there were more men fleeing North Korea for political reason. There were some pilots who were fleeing with his country's aircraft. But since 2000, the proportion between men and women defectors in South Korea has dramatically changed. There are more women leaving North Korea, because they had an opportunity to do some trade with the Chinese. So they have more access strangely enough, because men are doing their national service back in North Korea. So they are less mobile whereas women are more mobile. They're in charge of the household economies. They're doing some black market economies.

So women are more mobile, so they cross the border to China. They learn about the Chinese economy and the different world outside North Korea. They also had a chance to meet some South Korean missionaries and other American missionaries living there,

running the underground churches. So the demography among these North Koreans in South Korea, they're largely women.

Clement Paligaru

And they sound opportunistic, but I'm curious about whether any of them are high-profile defectors at all.

Jiyoung Song

Very few are high-profile defectors. In the past five years, there are more high-ranking officials including Thae Yong-ho who was number 2 in the DPRK embassy in the UK. There are also some family members of the Kim defected the North Korea regime. But these are very marginal compared to the overall population of North Koreans living in South Korea. They're mainly working class or peasants. And also geographical origin is very important, because most who are fleeing from North Korea are living in north-eastern part of North Korea, because for them it's easy to cross the border to the Chinese side.

Clement Paligaru

And what are the risks involved to themselves, to their families?

Jiyoung Song

When they're leaving North Korea, they're leaving their family members behind, so those left in North Korea, they will probably had a severe surveillance by the North Korean authority. When North Koreans left their homes, their family members are sometimes arrested and are interrogated by the North Korean authority. They put them into jail and political prison and labour camps, so there are some big risk that these North Korean migrants are taking when they are leaving their homes.

Clement Paligaru

And despite that, they still do that. What are some of the more common ways of getting out of North Korea? And how organised is this process of escape?

Jiyoung Song

That's a very interesting question. What I gathered from my interviewees is that they have to cross the border to China first of all, because the border between North Korea and South Korea is highly and heavily militarised, contrast to the official term as de-militarised zone. So all these North Korean escapees, first of all, crossed the border to China. And in

the 1990s, they were going to the northern route which is to Mongolia and Russia. But then among this migrants group and also these smugglers and the brokers who are moving them from different location, they've explored the southern route, so they are bringing them to the southern border of China to Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. And they've - testing with different routes which is easier and which is more difficult.

And they found that the Laotian border is easier to cross geographically, because it's quite plain. According to the brokers I interviewed, they say it's easier to bribe those Laotian border officials whereas the Myanmar border is quite mountainous. So for North Korean migrants themselves, also brokers who are running it as a business, it's very difficult and physically challenging to cross the mountain border, although there is no border check and security check. So what they end up doing is to cross the Cambodian border which is both easy to bribe officials and also geographically less challenging. And from there, they use this Cambodia, Thailand route, so they've ended up making lots of success in smuggling these North Korean refugees to the southern border using Cambodia and Thailand.

It's highly organised. They used to use some criminal gangs who used to smuggle Chinese migrants into the southern border, so there were criminal gangs involved at the very beginning. But it's also evolved into small-scale family businesses or individual smugglers which also involve, controversially, missionary as well. So the missionary is also running this smuggling route, moving these North Korean escapees or refugees into the southern border, making them as defectors, refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand and all the way to South Korea.

Clement Paligaru

So it sounds quite methodical. To what degree does the North Korean government know about or even tolerate these unofficial movements across the border?

Jiyoung Song

It's not consistent. Sometimes North Koreans turn their blind eyes on them, those escapees crossing the border, breaking their national laws. Those North Koreans who are crossing the border are officially called illegal border crossers. So often they're arresting them and giving them hard times, putting them in political prison. But other times they just turn their blind eyes on them, so it's not consistent.

Clement Paligaru

And you did mention where China fits into all of this as well earlier on. Let's look a little more closely at the role of China. How does China view and treat the North Korean defectors who generally have to pass over the Chinese border to begin their journey to a third country?

Jiyoung Song

Their official policy is to prioritise the bilateral agreement between China and North Korea. So when they found, detect and arrest North Korean escapees who they consider as illegal migrants, they repatriate them to North Korea because of the bilateral agreement. And it's the same with the North Korean border guards. When they detect them around the border areas, they repatriate those North Koreans they capture in the Chinese soil back to North Korea.

Clement Paligaru

And they do face interrogations and the like when they go back, don't they?

Jiyoung Song

Severe punishment, yeah. When they are returned, they will be interrogated for any contacts with South Koreans. And it will be against their national law, because South Koreans are considered as anti-government affections or even terrorist group or anti-North Korean regime. So contact with the enemies is a severe crime on the North Korean laws.

Clement Paligaru

I'm Clement Paligaru. On this episode of Ear to Asia, we're talking with migration and border policy expert, Dr Jay Song, about the people who flee North Korea and how they fare in their lives abroad. Now Jay, part of your work has been also to examine the approaches to human rights in North Korea. And you have broken these down into post-colonial, Marxist and Confucian perspectives, so we're going to go into a bit of theory just for a moment. Can you give us a rundown on what these are and why they're important?

Jiyoung Song

Many of us think human rights is a Western or very alien concept to North Korean understanding. This is something I did for my PhD thesis, so I've been looking at North Korean understanding of human rights, whether they have such concepts. If they have some, what are they? Because they must be contextualised in their own political, cultural

and historical grounds. So I've been looking at the works of Kim Il-Song, works of Kim Jong-Il and their daily newspaper, *Rodong Simun* - which is *Workers' Daily* - and their magazines for party members.

And what I found since 1948 is that the beginning of their foundation - national foundation, they are using very strong anti-Japanese elements in understanding human rights, so it was anti-Japanese, immediate post-colonial elements that was the basis for their understanding of human rights. So anything against Japanese, it's a protection of human rights, so it's okay to arrest all the pro-Japanese Korean collaborators or smash into these Japanese colonialist. In North Korea, that was all justified, so there was no universal human rights that everyone is entitled to when they're born. But then it's moved on to the Marxist understanding of human rights - prioritisation of socio-economic rights over political rights so right to eat, right to housing, right to education; free education is more important than freedom of expression, for example. And that was during the 1970s.

But again after the end of the Cold War, they went back to their traditional philosophies of understanding human rights, which is duties are more important than rights. There must be some benevolent leader who's giving the citizens the full realisation of human rights. It's totally different from the Western understanding of human rights.

Clement Paligaru

Jay, the numbers of defectors actually reaching that point of defection has actually declined, I understand. Why is that?

Jiyoung Song

That's correct. The annual number of North Korean arrivals in South Korea was over 2000 annually, so number was going up and it was peaked in 2005 or 2006. It was up to 3000 a year. And since then, the number of North Korean arrivals in South Korea has declined like you said. There are a number of reasons. First of all, maybe they have more strict border security between China and North Korea on both sides as Chinese authorities also putting more people in the border area so that North Koreans don't enter their territory. But also on the North Korean side, they need to control their population; this illegal crossing shouldn't be continued. It's border control has been strengthened, the number 1 reason.

But the other reason - which is more interesting - is that there are enough North Korean who have escaped North Korea already. I've been hearing from the North Korean brokers

and also the Korean-Chinese brokers that they've been looking for their clients in North Korea. But people in North Korea, they don't want to leave their homes, because they hear about North Korean living standards in South Korea and the co-ethnic discrimination against North Koreans, against their country of origin. Because they are North Korean, they are discriminated in South Korea. And also the poverty rate among North Koreans in South Korea is quite high. Suicide rate is also high. They're not really integrated into the mainstream South Korean society. And this information is acquired from their North Korean families in South Korea. And it's delivered to North Korean families in North Korea, so they know that North Koreans are not doing well in South Korea.

So when these brokers or smugglers are looking for their clients in North Korea, they said, no, I don't want to go to South Korea. I'm actually happy here. If my North Korean family members in South Korea are giving me enough remittance or money, I'm just happier. This is my home. The only power I have to submit to is North Korean authority, but in South Korea or in the West, there is not just the government, there are also businesses, a very competitive market, capitalist system, there are also media and there are also other various interest groups in civic society. They're all competing for the same limited resources or power. And it's quite challenging for North Koreans who've been so accustomed to living in this socialist, central planned system which has only one source of power.

Clement Paligaru

You've also spoken to some of these people. What about the testimonials that have come to you? Do they reinforce these views people have about life in South Korea?

Jiyoung Song

In South Korea, we have something called *National Security Law* which is prohibiting any kind of communication between North Korean and South Korean people. We are not allowed to speak to North Koreans freely. So for the first time in my life as an early researcher in South Korea, 1999, sitting down with North Korean defectors was first of all very emotional. The first interview was two North Korean ladies who are in their mid-30s. They were telling me about how difficult their life is in North Korea. But mainly their witnesses were their economic difficulties rather than the political repression, because 1999 when we had a massive number of economic migrants rather than the political exile

in South Korea. The economic difficulties was a major driving factor for them to leave North Korea.

But the last interview I had was in London. There's a small Koreatown in New Malden. I interviewed a family of five who, first of all, defected through Hamgyong in North Korea and then China through Cambodia, Thailand and South Korea. But they defected South Korea to go to the UK, so they are living in Koreatown in New Malden. And they were saying it was not economy, it was not political repression in North Korea, but it was that social discrimination against North Koreans in South Korea. They were aspiring to improve their lives in more advanced countries like the UK. The evolution of North Korean migration from the mid-1990s until today for the past 20 years, there has been a massive evolutionary process among this North Korean migration from a severe political repression to something called symbolic prestige.

Clement Paligaru

Jay, you did mention people speak to you when you're in different countries, but how comfortable are these people speaking to you and telling you about their experiences and the like?

Jiyoung Song

Most North Korean defectors living in South Korea, they are comfortable, because they are arranged by some research institution and they also get paid. So they are comfortable. But when it comes to North Korean brokers or Korean-Chinese brokers in China or Thailand, they're very difficult to interview. They are not comfortable at all. So it takes me at least two years to gain their trust and then they're talking about their techniques and their smuggling networks. So it takes a bit of time to gain their trust and making them comfortable in their own space and their own pace.

Clement Paligaru

One aspect of your research looks at human trafficking in East and Southeast Asia. By that term, we're talking about illegally transporting people usually for the purposes of forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation. To what extent does human trafficking fit into the North Korean situation?

Jiyoung Song

Initially North Koreans were fleeing from North Korean political repression. They were what we call refugees. But some of the North Korean migrants are also trafficked by the criminal individuals, the traffickers into Chinese exploitation. It could be sexual exploitation. It can be labour exploitation. So they were sold to, for example, Chinese farmers or Chinese husbands who are physically or mentally disabled. So there are many North Korean women who are trafficked to the domestic slavery, sexual slavery or forced labour in China, so that's human trafficking aspect of this North Korean migration.

Clement Paligaru

And do they usually remain in those situations?

Jiyoung Song

Some remain in those situations, because they have no other means to escape from the exploitative conditions. But others made contact with South Korean missionaries and Korean-American missionaries who are running the underground churches in China. They learn about this asylum seeking and refugees. And they also get help from their church members who will fund those smuggling, as I said a smuggling route. There are not just the criminal gangs involved but also what I call altruistic smuggling of refugees involved in this sort of second phase of North Korean migration. So they are smuggling refugees. They are essentially refugees. Some of them turn into victims of human trafficking, but others are smuggled outside China where the international humanitarian norms are respected, for example in Thailand.

Clement Paligaru

Let's talk about the return home. About eight per cent of North Korean defectors choose eventually to return to North Korea. What do we know about why they make this decision?

Jiyoung Song

So these are very small number of North Koreans who make that decision. As I said before, there are about 30,000 North Koreans living in South Korea. But this eight per cent, it's not just those who are returning to North Korea but who are defecting South Korea. Those who are leaving South Korea, some of them will go back to North Korea. Others will make another secondary asylum seeking somewhere in the Western countries, including Canada, US, UK, Germany and Australia.

Clement Paligaru

Jay, what are some of the challenges of researching this area?

Jiyoung Song

Access to data. As a researcher, I have been suffering from not having accurate data, reliable data and up-to-date data in terms of the North Korean migration population in society. That's the biggest challenge I have as a researcher. I think I can probably advocate for freedom of information for my South Korean government. As a South Korean citizen, we are restricted by the *National Security Law* and also the *Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Law* that prohibits any communication or access to the country and its people. And that's been the biggest challenge.

Clement Paligaru

Jay, thanks for joining us on Ear to Asia.

Jiyoung Song

Thanks for having me. It was a great pleasure. Thank you very much.

Clement Paligaru

We've been speaking with Asia Institute human migration specialist. Dr Jiyoung Song, about the plight of North Korean defectors outside their homeland. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on iTunes, Stitcher or SoundCloud. And it would mean a lot to us if you'd give us a generous rating on iTunes or like us on SoundCloud. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media. Ear to Asia is licensed under Creative Commons, copyright 2017, the University of Melbourne. I'm Clement Paligaru. Thanks for your company.

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