ABSTRACT

It has been more than a decade since North Korea was struck by famine and an outflow of refugees began. By 2007 about 10,000 refugees had settled in the South. Sixty percent of the new settlers are women. In face of the increasing visibility of refugees, this article aims to bring the ‘people’ back into the discourse. The identity of North Korean women has been constructed into a set of complex and contradictory categories: they have become the objects of romanticisation, victimisation and vilification. They are portrayed as the preservers of traditional feminine virtues, asexualised bodies, and sexual objects. The paper concludes by arguing that the unilateral imposition of identity in the South is harmful for the future social integration of the peninsula.

1 INTRODUCTION: WOMEN REFUGEES IN THE SOUTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) poses many different kinds of challenges in East Asia. The nuclear weapons it is said to possess are viewed as a potent threat to regional security. Widespread famine resulted in many human casualties. The North’s refusal to co-operate with the trans-border energy transportation system is an impediment to regional energy security (see Kim Mikyoung 2009). North Korea’s particular approach to human rights stirs concerns over its checkered records. Amid this multiplicity of challenges, the ‘people factor’ is often missing in the debates. The usual perspectives in international relations (IR) focus mostly on issues of war and order and of power and security, and seem to give scant attention to the cultural interactions of human agents, who may

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be uncritically assumed to be embedded in the institutions, or are relegated to the margins. In building up on the existing studies on inter-Korean relations, this article attempts to bring people back into the debate.

By 2007, 10,000 North Korean refugees had settled in the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea). While the famine of the mid-1990s initially served as the primary push factor for border-crossings, recent arrivals talk more about hopes for a better life and better jobs. As many as 300,000 refugees are estimated to be in hiding, mostly in China and other adjacent countries, and many of them are believed to be pressing onward towards South Korea. One striking aspect about the group is that women not only make up the majority of the refugees, but their experiences in the North and in transit also shape their gendered identity. When this empirical reality is combined with South Korean dynamics, which are cultural, political and structural in nature, a specific group of disadvantaged people emerges. North Korean women are subject to a perilous construction of social identity from the double workings of power imbalance and patriarchal norms. Concerns for their human rights are not limited to their precarious existence in the North and in China. A parallel situation, lesser in degree but probably similar in nature, is going on in the South as well.

The ‘South-South divide’, an ideological divide within South Korea, makes the refugee settlement process difficult, for there is little room for ideological compromise between the anti-communist conservatives and the conciliatory progressives. The refugees from the North have to move in divisive political waters, because most aspects pertaining to their Southern existence are open to debate: the causes of the famine (systemic mismanagement versus natural disaster), the utility of food aid (sustaining the North versus famine relief), motivations for escape (betrayal versus survival), their background (socially marginal people versus courageous victims), their trustworthiness (a self-selected group versus an ethnic camaraderie),

2 The older generations, with their memories of communist brutality during the Korean War, constitute the core of the conservatives, whereas the younger generations, who witnessed a democratic transformation, support the North as an equal partner. Before the Kim Dae-jung administration’s ‘Sunshine Policy’ of engagement began, the ideological divide was limited to the causes of the Korean War and the presence of US forces in Korea. Since the inter-Korean summit of 2000, the main issue of contention has become the stance towards the North’s regime.

3 The situation gives the conservatives a justification not to engage with the North, while the progressives are wary of antagonising the North Korean leadership.