MIGRATION EXPERIENCES OF NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES: SURVEY EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

Yoonok Chang, Stephan Haggard, and Marcus Noland

ABSTRACT

Chronic food shortages, political repression, and poverty have driven tens of thousands of North Koreans into China. This paper reports results from a large-scale survey of this population. The survey provides insight not only into the material circumstances of the refugees but also into their psychological state and aspirations. Many North Korean refugees suffer severe psychological stress akin to post-traumatic stress disorder. This distress is caused both by experiences in China as well as by the long shadow cast by the North Korean famine and abuses suffered at the hands of the North Korean political regime. These traumas, in turn, affect the ability of the refugees to hold jobs in China and accumulate resources for on-migration to third countries. Most of the refugees want to resettle permanently in South Korea, though younger, better-educated refugees have a greater inclination to prefer the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic food shortages, political repression and the continuing weakness of the economy have driven tens of thousands of the inhabitants of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) to cross the border into China’s northeastern provinces. A distinctive feature of this refugee experience is the particular inhospitality of the recipient country to which they have fled. The Chinese government has responded to this influx with intensified surveillance of the border and

---

1 Authors’ note: This research was underwritten by a very generous grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation; we would like to thank Allan Song for his co-operation. We would also like to thank seminar participants at Yale University and the Peterson Institute for helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper. Erik Weeks provided exemplary research assistance.

2 The precise number of North Koreans who have made this journey remains uncertain; estimates range from 20,000 to as high as 400,000. The high end of this range probably exaggerates the number currently in China (Refugees International 2005: 5-6). See Lee Keumsoon (2006: 18-19) for a summary of alternative estimates.
periodic crackdowns on the refugee community, while consistently refusing to grant North Korean refugees asylum or to establish a process through which their refugee status claims could be processed. As a consequence, most of these refugees are forced to undertake an arduous journey to third countries, abetted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and professional smugglers.

Yet we know from data collected by the government of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) that even those who succeed in getting out have often spent substantial time in China, many having fled during the peak famine years of the mid-1990s. Through individual testimony, open-ended interviews and more systematic survey research, we are gradually gaining greater insight into the life experiences of these refugees. This growing body of work considers the conditions that motivated migration in the first place, conditions in China, particular issues such as trafficking, and the subsequent ability of refugees to assimilate once they have reached a third country.

This paper extends this work by providing information from a large-scale survey of refugees conducted from August 2004 to February 2005 in China. A feature of the survey is that it provides insight not only into the material circumstances of the refugees but into their psychological state and aspirations as well.

A key finding of the survey, confirmed by more detailed clinical work in South Korea, is that many North Korean refugees suffer severe psychological stress akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This distress is caused in part by the precariousness of refugee life in China. As with refugees in other environments, including particularly post-conflict settings, the inhospitable nature of the initial host country is no doubt an important cause of the psychological problems we document. However, we show that for North Korean refugees it is also a result of the long shadow cast by the famine and abuses suffered at the hands of North Korean authorities. These traumas, in turn, affect the ability of the refugees to hold jobs in China and accumulate resources for on-migration.

Relatively few refugees want to remain in China: Most want to resettle permanently in South Korea, though younger, better-educated refugees have a greater inclination to prefer the United States as a final destination. These findings also confirm research on North Korean refugees in South Korea that points to substantial adjustment problems (problems that are a reminder of the difficult social and psychological issues that would attend any process of reunification).