

North of the Border – North Koreans in China

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The exodus of North Koreans across the Tumen River in China over the past decade has become a highly politicized phenomenon since it commenced a decade ago. Information about the exodus' magnitude, the motives behind it, and the status of the individuals involved has swept up into the political clamor. Governments tend to discredit the claims of private humanitarian groups that advocate better treatment of the migrating North Koreans. This dueling over data has blurred the most apparent basic fact that reliable information is scarce. Similarly, the debate over these homeless North Koreans status – whether they are defectors, illegal aliens, criminals or bona fide refugees, while very important, blurs the reality that this North Korean exodus encounters in China.

Here we will concentrate this reality. Occasionally, when relatively reliable information is available, we will draw on this limited data base to project a fuller picture of who these North Koreans are and why they risk everything to go to China.

The Setting

Yanbian, China has been the primary destination this North Korean exodus. This is the name for China's Korean Autonomous Prefecture, a region in the southern part of Jilin Province. Jilin is a ninety minute flight northeast from Beijing. It borders Russia to the east and North Korea to the south. Yanbian covers the provinces southern quarter and shares a common border with North Korea.

Yanbian was officially established on September 3, 1952, several months before the Korean War had ended, as an "autonomous prefecture" for Koreans. Local government officials report to the central government via the Jilin Provincial Government. Yanbian's bureaucracy is staffed equally by ethnic Korean-Chinese and Chinese. The region is essentially bi-lingual. Both languages are taught in school, all government documents and reports are published in both languages and all buildings have signs in the two languages.

Yanbian's Capital - Yanji

The region's capital Yanji is home for about 400,000 people. Long an economic backwater largely ignored by Beijing, new multi story office and apartment buildings are sprouting like spring grass. Large areas of single story, dilapidated housing and shops have been removed to make way for the new modern, multi-story buildings. Once narrow streets have been widened and straightened into broad boulevards. The previously dark streets are now brightened by gaudily colorful neon signs of red and blue which decorate the fronts of numerous new restaurants, stores and entertainment

establishments. Hotels have multiplied to accommodate investors, businessmen and tourists from across Asia.

The traditional West and East markets, however, remain the centers of commercial activity for most residents. Crowded, dirty and chaotic, one can find virtually anything in the largest West Market. Located in the city's center, it occupies several dilapidated, unheated buildings spread over two city blocks. The air is full of pungent odors, the floor slippery with mud, and the gray window glass and dim lighting darken the interior. One building is devoted to food. Here one finds piles of frozen fish, various nuts and deer horn from North Korea. Also available are every kind of tropical fruit from south China. The second building provides a wide variety of clothing, kitchen ware, furniture and every conceivable kind of DVD and music CD. Adjacent to the market is a recently opened, modern department store full of colorful displays, the latest in casual fashion and loud music. It is the preferred shopping place for Yanji's youth.

Confirmation that Yanji is an internationally oriented city is evident in its largest bookstore located near West Market. Knowledge from around the world fills this large, dimly lighted but well heated, four story building. English and Japanese language dictionaries and study aids fill shelves on the first floor. School text books in both the Korean and Chinese languages are found on the second floor. Here too one finds study guides for the mandatory school admissions tests and the national examinations required for graduation from high school and college. Korean and Chinese language publications about literature, the social sciences, medicine, law, sciences and translations into the Korean and Chinese languages of foreign publications. An amazing variety of American, South Korean, Chinese and European music CDs and movie DVDs and video, including pornography from North America and Europe, fill the fourth floor.

Cultural Diversity

Yanji no longer is isolated from international "pop" culture. McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken share store fronts with Korean and Chinese fast food shops. Hotels cater to Chinese, Japanese, and South and North Koreans. About 4,000 South Koreans are registered as permanent residents, according to a leading figure in the resident Korean community. They augment Yanji's professional population, particularly in the areas of education, medicine, business management and technology.

The number of North Korean officials and legally resident North Korean citizens is difficult to determine, but the number is substantial. The North Korean government has built a large complex of buildings in Yanji's eastern suburb. The central building is a multi-story restaurant topped with a traditional style Korean roof. Buildings for lodging and meetings are adjacent to the hotel. North Korea's red, white and blue flag flies over the walled compound next to China's bright red banner. North Korean citizens, identified by the Kim Il Sung badge on the lapels of their dark suits and jackets, are a common sight in restaurants and hotels throughout the city. Many other North Koreans are affiliated with local universities or often attend academic conferences.

North Americans from the USA and Canada and Europeans, especially Russians, Germans and French, are in the minority. Most are long term residents who teach at local universities or represent the city's few but growing number of multinational companies.

The central and local governments have invested heavily in education. Yanji hosts an impressively diverse number of educational establishments. Yanji's universities for medicine and the social sciences are held in high regard. Korean-Chinese dominate the faculties. South Korea's Christian community continues to support the joint Chinese government-Christian sponsored Yanbian University of Science and Technology whose president, James Kim, is a U.S. citizen. The Catholic Church has recently established a large technical college to train local residents in basic skills required in an increasingly technologically advanced economy.

Former residents of Yanji apparently are funding much of Yanji's building boom in Yanji proper. Several thousand Korean-Chinese previously migrated to South Korea where they have excelled in business and the professions. Others have migrated to Hong Kong, Beijing, even Japan and the United States. Professional and commercial success abroad has enabled them to invest literally millions of dollars annually to their home town. In 2004, local professional observers estimate such remittances have exceeded USD 180 million.

Beyond Yanji

Yanji's economic boom and role as the region's commercial and education hub have made it a magnet of opportunity. Agriculture, however, still dominates the area's economy, followed by commerce, tourism and industry which are centered in Yanji, Hunchun and Tumen. This means that the vast majority of Yanbian's residents live in deep poverty, a fact evident in the very poor condition of farm housing, the shortage of farm machinery and scarcity of modern appliances such as TVs, etc. in farm villages.

According to central government data, the income of China's rural residents is less than one third that of urban dwellers. In monetary terms, the rural population's per capital income averaged nation wide about USD 357.70 (Yuan 2,936, up 6.8 percent over 2003 according to Chinese government figures published in the February 1, 2005 issue of *China Daily* newspaper) while urban resident's per capita income in 2004 increased, on average, 7.7 percent to USD 1,135 (Yuan 9,422), which is more that three times higher than that of rural residents. Professional observers in Yanji believe the income gap between urban and rural residents of Yanbian is wider than the national average, while rural incomes are considerably below national income levels.

Outside Yanji, farming remains the primary livelihood. The serve winters prevent most cultivation from November to April. Some farmers, however, have built coal heated vinyl greenhouses to grow vegetables and flowers to fill the demand in the region's flourishing cities. But relatively high investment costs make such ventures rare. Most farmers simply survive the winter in their small, single room houses sitting on coal

heated floors while they repair farm tools or make handicrafts which their spouses try to sell in the local market or in a nearby city.

Herding livestock is another common winter activity. Cattle, sheep and pigs are a common sight. Cattle graze freely in frozen rice paddies while sheep explore hill sides for grass hidden behind a light, fluffy layer of bright snow. Pigs live in poorly maintained pens near farmer's huts, many which are still covered by thatch.

Yanji has become a magnet for the region's impoverished farmers because of the city's rising income level and construction boom. The migration of Korean-Chinese from farms to Yanji has quickened in recent years as young males seek employment in construction and young women find appealing the growing number of jobs in the service sector. Consequently, the swelling need for unskilled farm labor is creating new and appealing economic opportunities for migrants from North Korea where economic conditions remain much worse than those in the poorest areas in Yanbian.

Yanbian's People

The Chinese government claims Yanbian has a population of 2,185,700 as of the end of 2003. Forty percent of this number is said to be of ethnic Korean background. The vast majority of these Korean-Chinese (*Choson chok* in Korean) are descended from Koreans who fled the Korean Peninsula at the end of the 19th Century to escape Japan's colonization of the peninsula. Many Koreans in this original exodus into China trace their family homes to cities, towns and villages in the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. A second migration from Korea into Yanbian occurred during the 1930s. Koreans gathered in Yanbian to use it as their base of operations for waging guerilla warfare against the Japanese Imperial Army which had conquered northeast China in the early 1930s.

First war and then famine reversed the flow during the 1950s. Several thousand Koreans during WWII had joined the pro-communist forces of Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Xedong and Soviet backed forces to better resist the Japanese. When WWII ended in 1945, these Korean veterans were swept up into the fighting between the pro and anti-communist forces in China. No sooner did this fighting end than many of these Korean veterans were mustered into the new army of the People's Republic of China and dispatched to Yanbian. They soon found themselves involved in the Korean War.

The second exodus of Koreans from China into northern Korea occurred during the famine that swept China in the early 1960s. Many Korean-Chinese sought food and other aid from their kinsmen in northern North Korea.

One consequence of these multiple migrations was the division of families. Some Korean-Chinese soldiers captured by UN forces during the Korean War refused repatriation back to their homeland in Yanbian. Instead, they left behind spouses and children in China and sought to make a better life for themselves in South Korea. During China's most recent famine, some Korean-Chinese took up permanent residence in North Korea while other branches of the same family remained in China.

These kinship ties have endured war, famine, separation, and Korea's political and ideological division. Since 1995, kinship has been the magnet that attracted many North Koreans to China in search of kinship who might provide them food, medicine and other assistance. Kinship ties to South Koreans has motivated some Korean-Chinese residents of Yanbian to migrate to South Korea after China-South Korea relations were normalized in 1992.

The Exodus– Magnitude

No one can say for certain how many North Koreans have resettled in China. Accurate figures are impossible to obtain, but responsible observers estimate that upwards of 300,000 North Koreans may have entered China between 1995 and 1999. The estimated number of North Koreans living in Yanbian in recent years ranges from 10,000 to 50,000 and as high as 150,000.

About 89 percent came from North Korea's two most northeastern provinces (about 80 percent from North Hamgyong Province and 9 percent from South Hamgyong Province). This suggests only a small minority of the North Koreans reached China from North Korea's southern regions. Approximately 61 percent migrated from urban cities and towns while at least another 31 percent had been residents of rural areas. Males outnumber females by almost two to one. Factory workers outnumbered farmers almost three to one while an almost equal number were either unemployed or retired individuals. More than half had graduated from middle school with an equal number having completed either elementary or high school.

Knowledgeable observers believe that upwards of 10,000 North Koreans may have crossed illegally into North Korea each month, at least until the winter of 2000. This flow appears to have begun subsiding gradually in 2001 and 2002 because of the improving food supply. Economic reforms in 2002 sparked steep climbs in food prices and apparently increased the flow into China during 2003. In February 2005, observers estimated that the flow was again subsiding slightly relative to 2004.

An unknown number of these North Korean are repeat visitors, and a majority return to North Korea, either voluntarily or because Chinese authorities apprehended them and repatriated them to their homeland.

Legal Entry into China

A China-DPRK agreement in 2001 made visas available to DPRK citizens for legal but temporary entry into Yanbian. To qualify, however, a DPRK applicant must prove that they have a relative in Yanbian who will sponsor their visit, pay their travel expenses and provide lodging and meals during their stay in China. The initial length of stay is 30 days, but a visit can be extended up to six months. Those who overstay their visa become "illegal aliens" and are subject to arrest and deportation to North Korea. Legally, there are no official application fees charged by DPRK officials of DPRK citizens, but

“expediting” fees or “appreciation” gifts are normal, according to North Koreans temporarily staying in Yanbian. Chinese officials usually expect similar consideration, according to Yanji residents, but China does not officially charge any fees for the visas.

Nevertheless, North Korean migrants have continued to risk apprehension by entering China without a travel permit. For most, obtaining permission to leave the DPRK for a temporary visit with relatives in China is basically impossible because they lack the political connections in North Korea essential for winning permission. It is believed that the number of such illegal aliens equals or exceeds the number of legal entrants. Adding to the number of illegal North Korean entrants are those who overstay their Chinese visas.

(Chosun Ilbo, “Pyongyang Loosens Border Controls,” (March 15, 2004).)

The Exodus – Motivations

Survival is generally agreed to be the primary motivation for North Koreans to leave their homeland and enter China. Their first priority is to seek to food, medicine and at least temporary shelter and employment to secure enough to eat. This has been at least since 1993 when the shortage of food first became critical in North Korea. After torrential rains and flooding devastated the 1995 fall harvest and wrecked the agricultural infrastructure of large areas in North Korea’s main rice and maize cultivating regions, the flow of North Koreans into China climbed into several tens of thousands between 1995 and 1999.

(See: John Pomfret, “Famine Drives North Koreans to China,” *Washington Post* (February 12, 1999) A1; Shim Hae-hoon, “North Korea - A Crack in the Wall,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 29, 1999) 10-15; Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2001; Amnesty International, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Persecuting the Starving: the Plight of North Koreans Fleeing to China,” (December 15, 2000), www.reliefweb.int.)

The Center for Refugee and Disaster Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health has conducted a long term study of the North Korean population in Yanbian, China. These studies have concentrated on estimating the mortality rate among North Koreans during the years of peak food shortage, 1995-1999. Some findings have been published in the British academic journal *The Lancet* (“Mortality in North Korean Migrant Households: A Retrospective Study,” vol. 354 (July 24, 1999) 291-295). The result of this continuing research, however, has not yet been published.

This research has established some preliminary general characteristics about the exodus from North Korea.

The official response of concern governments has varied. d China is the focus of this

Background

Four times I have journeyed to Yanbian, China in search of information about the North Korean exodus. Mercy Corps, a US humanitarian non-governmental organization or NGO, invited me to join a small group that spent two weeks exploring the China-North Korea border in January 1998. We had read in the South China Post that upwards of 300,000 North Korean “refugees” were struggling to survive a bitterly cold winter in makeshift camps scattered across southern Manchuria. We did not find any evidence of such a large number of “refugees.” We nevertheless confirmed that a humanitarian crisis was underway and promptly worked with local authorities to force an alliance aimed at providing assistance to those in need, both from North Korea as well as the impoverished residents of China. That effort has since endured and expanded.

A year later, in the spring of 1999, I returned to Yanbian.

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