

The Silent Exodus – North Koreans in China

By

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The North Korean exodus into China has ebbed and flowed since 1995. Ever since, the phenomena has been assessed too often as if an isolated event. Similarly, observers too often have imposed their political and religious perspectives on the situation along the China-North Korean border. As a consequence, our comprehension of the actual situation and the motivations behind the migration have been blurred and distorted. No single study alone can rectify a decade of distortion, but it can initiate a process that will eventually bring greater clarity and understanding to this most recent of migrations in East Asia.

This exodus North Korea's migrants are not pioneers. If anything, they are but the most recent migration of people from their homeland in East Asia hoping to improve the quality of their life. They follow in the footsteps of millions of other migrants, and continue a legacy that trances back to the ancient Jews who followed Moses out of Egypt into the promised land. East Asia in the 20th Century has experienced wave after wave of migrations. These commenced after 1945 when Chinese left their homeland in search of the "promised land" in Hong Kong and Taiwan. South Koreans followed as they fled their war-torn and divided homeland for peace and prosperity in the United States. The long war in Southeast Asia between 1947 and 1977 sparked migrations from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. These culminated in the plight of Southeast Asia's "boat people."

Each of these migrations sparked intense political controversy. This was particularly true during the Cold War from 1945 until 1990. East Asia at the time was divided into "authoritarian communist" and so-called "democratic non-communist" nations. Only one of East Asia's "non-communist" nations, Japan, truly qualified for the label "democratic." The United States, being the dominant military and economic power in the region, reserved the prerogative to decide who was or was not democratic. Political realities within a given nation were relatively irrelevant. Of greater consequence was a whether a nation was or was not allied with the United States and whether it favored or opposed communism. Anti-communist US allies won the label "democratic" and "free" regardless of the true nature of their government.

self proclaimed champion of the "democratic non-communist" nations were The North Korean migration is no different. In each case, the rulers of the migrants homeland have been quick to label the migrants "outlaws" and worse. in East Asia,