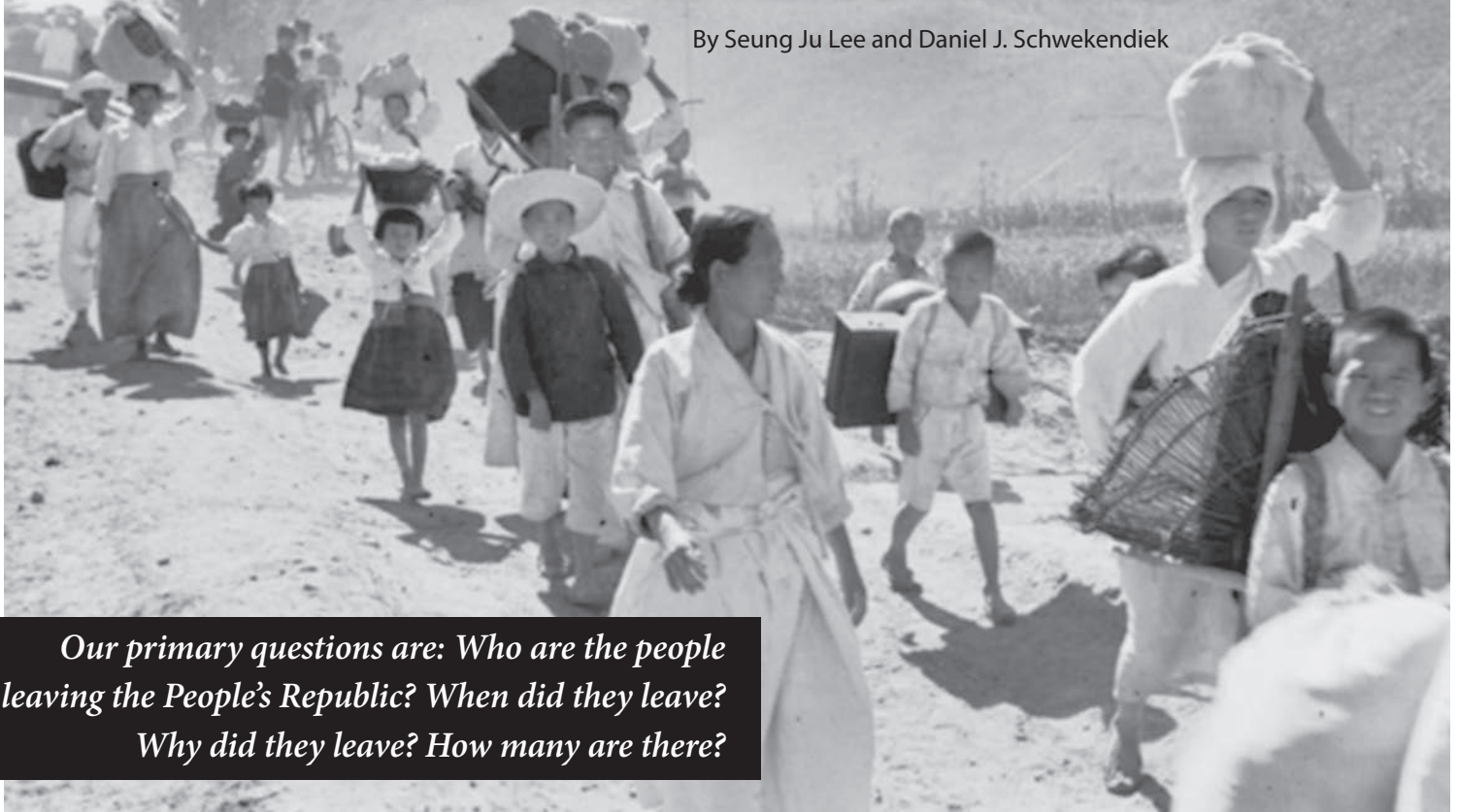


The People Who Left the People's Republic

A HISTORY OF THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA

By Seung Ju Lee and Daniel J. Schwekendiek



Our primary questions are: Who are the people leaving the People's Republic? When did they leave? Why did they leave? How many are there?

Korea, c. 1950. A stream of Korean refugees (whether from North or South is unknown) trudges along a dusty road away from the war. The refugees, mainly women and children, are carrying their possessions on their backs or in bundles on their heads. Source: *Australian War Memorial* website at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C294093>.

The word “diaspora” is derived from the Greek word *diaspeirein* (to disperse) and relates to “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland.”¹ What makes the application of this term special is that it is very emotional, as people indirectly associate it with the plight of Jewish or African slave communities forced out of their homelands. Researchers studying Korea have also applied this term, to the brutal colonization by Japan (1910–1945), the tragic political division of the peninsula into the Soviet-backed North and American-backed South in 1948, and the devastating Korean War (1950–1953) as a result of the emerging Cold War (1948–1991).² Indeed, one way or another, these dramatic events have resulted in massive migration movements from the Korean peninsula into other territories.

An even larger emotional challenge might be to discuss the diaspora history of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DRPK), widely known as North Korea. Perhaps the most repressive regime on earth, the DPRK survived the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, all the while letting hundreds of thousands of people starve during a famine in the late 1990s, caused in part by being cut off from fraternal aid after the Soviet Union's demise and also because of the North Korean regime's economic policy decisions. Even now, North Korea still imprisons and tortures anybody opposing the government, while lately threatening the rest of the world with nuclear brinkmanship and long-range missiles.

Nevertheless, like any other country in today's era of intense globalization, people have managed to leave. Thus, our primary questions are as follows: Who are the people leaving the People's Republic? When did they leave? Why did they leave? How many are there? In addressing these questions, it is appropriate to begin with a basic history of the North Korean diaspora. The post-World War II Korean diaspora is large, numbering

6.9 million (including both long- and short-term migrants) as of 2010.³ The political division in 1948 resulted in two Korean states, each of which has claimed the entire Korean peninsula and thus the total diaspora as its own. As South Korea represented two-thirds of the entire population of the peninsula at the time of division, while North Korea represented one-third, one might simply split the Korean diaspora accordingly. If so, the South Korean diaspora would consist of some 4.6 million migrants, as opposed to the North's approximately 2.3 million, but the North Korean diaspora numbers are far less than the artificial ratios just presented. The primary reason they do not exist is the virtual absence of freedom, including the freedom of mobility, in the DPRK.

There are other demographic challenges and, perhaps more important, political considerations that complicate statistics for the North Korean diaspora; South Korea tends to overcount, and North Korea does not release statistics.

However, this essay is not intended for demographers but for readers in a variety of fields who want to acquire a general understanding of the North Korean diaspora. We draw in part upon an important previous study that only considered people “who escaped from North Korea after the government was established” in 1948.⁴ Note that this classification also includes inter-Korean peninsula migrants, i.e., North Koreans escaping to South Korea—a topic perhaps of most interest to readers.

Overall, not many people escaped from North Korea in the past, as the government only selected loyal people to leave the country, while holding their family members hostage inside the DPRK. North Koreans abroad commonly travel in pairs in order to monitor each other, which also prevents defection. To illustrate, only some 600 North Koreans managed to flee to South Korea during all but two years of the Cold War era

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(until 1989), and these escapees were, for the most part, diplomats, border guards, fishermen, and pilots (see Figure 1 below).⁵

After the foundation of the two Koreas, the first wave of emigrants from the North consisted of children who lost their parents during the Korean War. Excluding missing people, the war resulted in some 245,000 civilians and 226,000 soldiers killed in the South, as well as some 406,000 civilians and 295,000 soldiers dying in the North, in turn producing hundreds of thousands of orphans in both Koreas.⁶ Thus, the first wave of emigrants leaving both South Korea and North Korea were war orphans. While the South sent some 160,000 orphans to its Cold War allies in North America, Western Europe, and Australia as international adoptees, the North dispatched its orphans to its Communist brothers in Eastern Europe. For instance, even during the Korean War, some 2,000–2,500 North Korean orphans were sent to Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.⁷ These nations had already established official diplomatic relations with the DPRK in 1948 and also provided technical, medical, and humanitarian aid to North Korea during the war. In this sense, the orphan program became just another form of fraternal assistance to the DPRK. While the South Korean government's discourse about orphans sent out for international adoption has always been one of shame, the government in the North declared their orphans national heroes, as they were "children of the revolutionaries" who gave their lives for the Communist cause.⁸ Beyond humanitarian reasons, while the South utilized international adoptions to financially relieve its social welfare budget, the North had a more active economic interest in sending its orphans abroad. As nations in Eastern Europe were already advanced industrialized economies, the orphan program represented a unique opportunity for the government to raise its human capital stock by letting young people attend foreign schools and learn foreign languages. Although North Korea inherited most of the

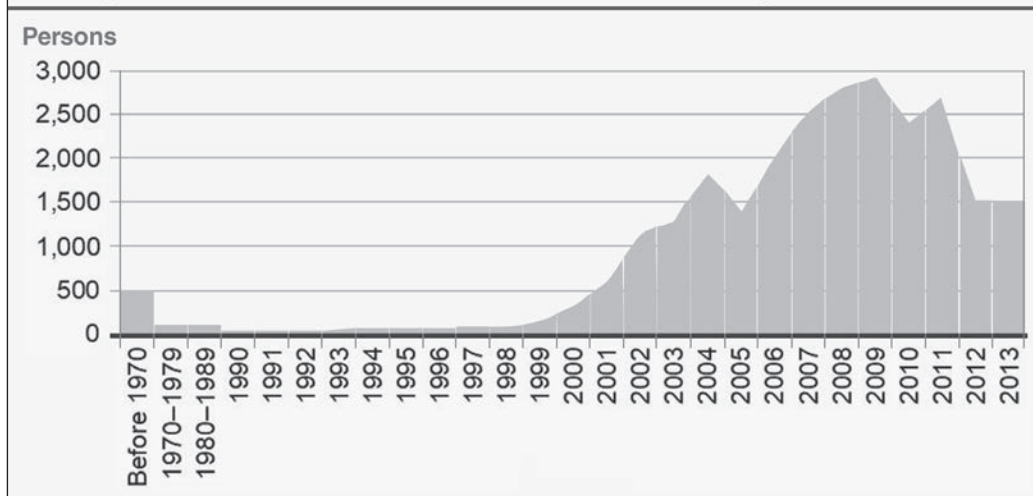


US Air Force Chaplain Lt. Col. Russell Blaisdell, left, and Lt. Col. Dean Hess, right, visit Jeju Island after saving nearly 1,000 Korean orphans in late 1950. Source: The article "Operation Kiddy Car: Keeping a Korean War Hero's Memory Alive" on the Stars and Stripes website at <https://tinyurl.com/y9gdnzs8>.

heavy industries imperial Japan established during colonization, few engineers, technicians, high-level educators, and administrators were actually Korean, leaving the North in urgent need of highly educated personnel. Beyond those 2,000 to 2,500 orphans sent to Eastern Europe during the war, some 30,000 orphans were sent to the aforementioned Eastern European nations, as well as to Mongolia, the Soviet Union, and China after the war.⁹ However, unlike South Korean orphans finding permanent homes in the West, in the late 1950s, the North Korean government called their war orphans home. This was likely the regime's preventive measure in light of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which genuinely challenged communism for the first time after World War II. As mentioned, the North Korean government's largest leverage against the political defection of its diaspora was holding family members hostage inside the DPRK. However, these war orphans had, by default, nobody to really care about in their birth country. Hence, the best way for the government to control them was by simply calling them back, which put a sudden end to the first wave of emigration from North Korea.

The second wave of emigrants consists of overseas laborers from North Korea. For all its oppressive policies, the North Korean government has never systemically engaged in active sex trafficking of its citizens, so the movement of workers abroad were for more conventional work. However, similar to sex trafficking, there is strong evidence for human exploitation regarding this diaspora group. For instance, labor migrants in Poland are receiving at the most US \$180 per month.¹⁰ About 90 percent of the wages of overseas laborers are taken by the government. Meanwhile, these labor migrants live without heating in the winter, and their North Korean employers supply them with a meager diet. In total, North Korea has currently dispatched approximately 46,000 overseas laborers to some forty nations. A rough estimate of total revenues from

Figure 1: Number of North Koreans Entering South Korea



Source: Adapted from Daniel J. Schwekendiek, "A Meta-Analysis of North Koreans Migrating to China and South Korea," in *Korea 2010: Politics, Economy, and Society*.

Currently, about 20,000 North Koreans are working in Russia. They constitute nearly half of the 46,000 total North Korean overseas laborers, making North Korean loggers the largest labor migration group.



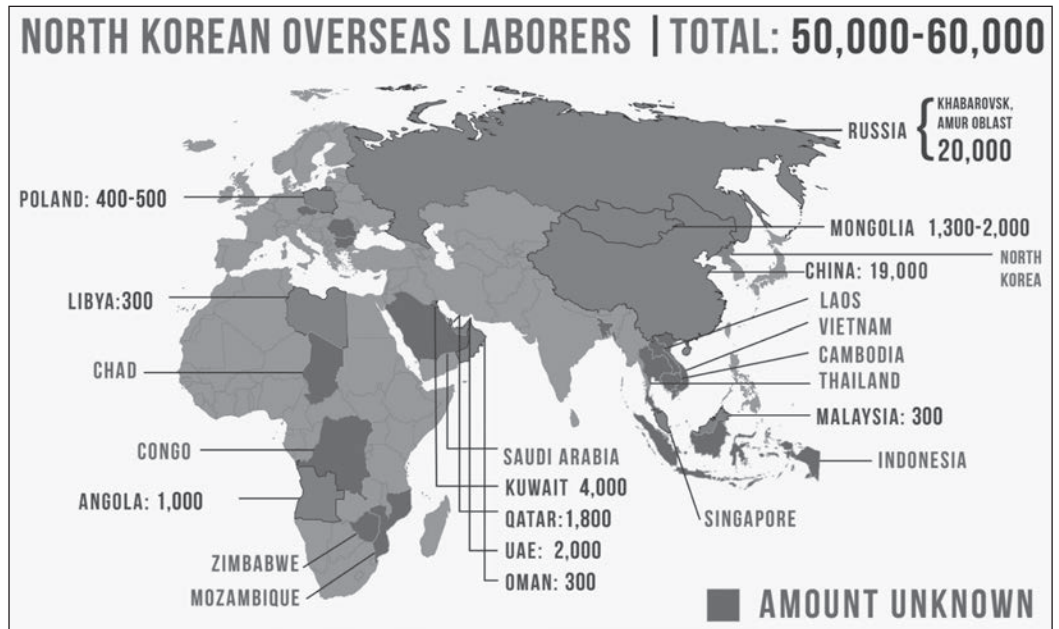
Screen capture of a North Korean laborer working in a Siberian logging camp. Source: VICE documentary *Cash for Kim: North Korean Forced Laborers in Poland* on the VICE website at <https://tinyurl.com/yafgtlow>.

overseas labor exportation ranges from US \$1.2 to \$2.3 billion per year.¹¹ Overseas labor migration from North Korea has a long history, dating back to the 1950s, but the outflow accelerated in the 1990s due to famine and economic collapse. The first North Korean overseas labor agreement was with the Soviet Union, when Moscow allowed North Korean loggers into Siberia after the Korean War. The Soviet Union benefited from the deal since it could not find enough Russians to work, given Siberia's harsh living conditions, whereas the government of North Korea saw an opportunity to obtain foreign currency after the devastating Korean War. Both sides probably regarded this agreement as a form of mutual cooperation during the Cold War rather than a systematic labor migration agreement. In fact, few North Koreans were willing to move to Siberia, which meant that Pyongyang mostly forced prisoners and criminals to work there throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

However, a comprehensive labor agreement with the Soviet government was reached in 1967, after which average (loyal) North Korean workers were recruited for Siberia.¹² As loggers initially received only 30–50 percent of the revenue from the timber they chopped, economic incentives were not sufficient to ensure relocation to Siberia, but this changed by the late 1970s, when loggers were rewarded with vouchers. Some of these vouchers could be exchanged for electronic items such as Russian refrigerators. Since only about seven in 100 households in North Korea owned refrigerators by the early twenty-first century, one can imagine their scarcity in the DPRK during the Cold War era.¹³ The voucher program caused many North Koreans to highly desire forestry jobs in the USSR. Currently, about 20,000 North Koreans are working in Russia.¹⁴ They constitute nearly half the 46,000 total North Korean overseas laborers, making North Korean loggers the largest labor migration group. Drawing on its positive experience from Siberia, the North Korean government started to utilize systematic labor exportation in the crisis years of the 1990s. As North Korea has never developed any competitive

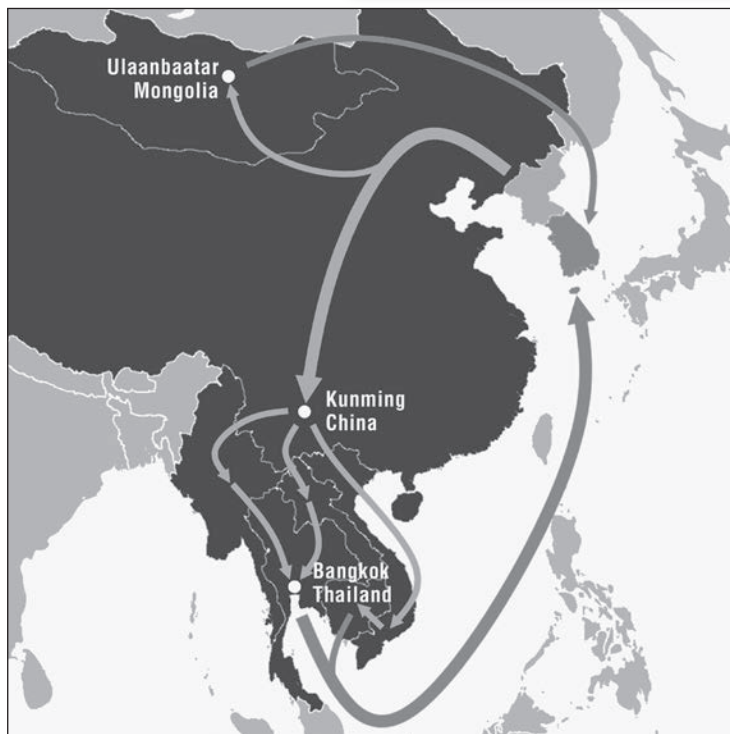


Screen capture of North Korean laborers boarding their bus after working eleven hours on a construction site in Poland. They work six days a week and are not permitted to leave the fenced compound where they live. Source: VICE documentary *Cash for Kim: North Korean Forced Laborers in Poland* on the VICE website at <https://tinyurl.com/yafgtlow>.



2015 infographic of countries that use North Korean laborers. Source: Broadcasting Board of Governors website at <https://tinyurl.com/ycyf7dap>.

export goods, labor exportation was one easy method to obtain foreign currency. At the same time, the government ventured into illicit drug exports, weapon trades, and counterfeiting, which were other questionable means to financially secure the survival of the regime.¹⁵ Regarding labor exportation, the second-largest number of North Korean migrant workers moved to China. Its diaspora size is estimated at about 19,000, which is a bit smaller than the diaspora in Siberia.¹⁶ The majority work in Beijing, as well as in Jilin and Hebei Provinces (both of which are near the North Korean border), where North Koreans perform unpopular 3D (dirty, dangerous, difficult) jobs in the forestry, construction, and restaurant industries. It is important to note that these workers are officially dispatched by the government, as a result of a Chinese–North Korean labor agreement. The situations of these laborers differ from the tens of thousands of (illegal)



Typical routes to South Korea by North Korean defectors are through China and Southeast Asia. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y7umr7z4>.



Screen capture from the 2007 documentary film *Escaping from North Korea Is Only the Beginning* by Journeyman Pictures. The film follows a family of four, a family friend, and C. K., the South Korean who helped them escape from North Korea by crossing the Tumen River into China, then traveling to Laos and crossing the Mekong River into the safety of Thailand. In this scene, they are waiting in a safe house in China for the next leg of their journey. After eight years of helping 100 North Koreans escape, this would be the last trip for C. K.—the reason for this rare documentary. Source: YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/ycta9bgc>.

Many sought help in neighboring China, generally crossing the border in the northeast of the DPRK, where they found support from the *joseonjok* (a large Korean diaspora) concentrated there. While the vast majority of these migrants later returned to North Korea, about 80,000 remained permanently and illegally. Most strikingly, the largest number of illegal North Koreans in China are females, with many of them privately trafficked from inside North Korea to rural areas in China. Indeed, of approximately 80,000 illegal long-term migrants in China, about 50,000 (62 percent) are female marriage migrants, with the remainder working as farmhands or in restaurants.²⁰ China's infamous One-Child Policy of 1979, in combination with Confucian son preference resulting in the systematic abortion of female fetuses in the past, has created a high demand for women. Brokers and human traffickers filled that gap when the border to North Korea opened during the crisis years. A survey among about 1,400 illegal North Korean migrants in China in 1999 found that 85 percent of respondents heard of North Korean women being sold to locals, and 79 percent believed that North Korean women were raped.¹⁸ This strongly suggests the systematic exploitation of North Koreans in China. The average price of a bride from North Korea was estimated at about US \$240.¹⁹

The fourth and last wave is in part due to the third wave. Significantly, nearly eight in ten adult North Korean refugees arriving in South Korea are female. Moreover, the vast majority (73 percent) of all North Koreans entering South Korea have spent some three to four years in transit nations such as China before entering the South. Many of them are apparently married migrants who have succeeded in leaving the unequal relationships with their Chinese partners. As illegal migrants, these women (and their children) are not eligible for Chinese citizenship and visas, and will also be severely punished as traitors if they return to North Korea. If North Korean defectors reach South Korea, they are automatically granted citizenship after a mandatory three-month debriefing and orientation period. Only 27 percent of adult North Koreans arriving in South Korea have directly fled from inside North Korea.²⁰ This minority are often family members of native South Koreans or of North Koreans who previously defected, and both groups often hire traffickers. Indeed, with the right connections and sufficient financial resources, North Koreans can leave their hometowns and arrive in South Korea within just five days by boarding a plane with forged passports.²¹ As a result of remigration from China and other transit countries, as well as direct migration from inside North Korea, about 26,000 North Koreans had arrived in South Korea by the mid-2010s (Figure 1). As clearly shown, the vast majority arrived in the 2000s. By the early 2010s, migration rates declined as North Korea rigorously cracked

If North Korean defectors reach South Korea, they are automatically granted citizenship after a mandatory three-month debriefing and orientation period.

refugees entering China, described later in the essay. In addition, North Koreans also work in the Middle East, including most importantly some 3,500 to 5,000 construction workers in Kuwait, some 1,800 construction workers in Qatar, and about 2,000 soldiers employed in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷ As the Middle East and North Korea did not always establish close diplomatic relationships, North Korean laborers are generally employed by subcontracted companies from North Korea. In Southeast Asia, about 400 North Koreans are estimated to work in construction, mining, and restaurants since Malaysia allowed North Korean workers entry in 1996. Labor migration to Europe also began in the 1990s. North Korea dispatched about 400–500 workers to Poland (e.g., welders working at shipyards) and 300 workers in the Czech Republic (e.g., factory workers in the garment industry). Some of these programs were halted recently, as economic sanctions on North Korea were tightened due to its ongoing nuclear weapons program-related confrontations.

The third wave of emigrants consists of refugees, most of whom settled in China and South Korea after the DPRK famine of the 1990s. The famine directly affected migration twofold. First, the Korean–Chinese border became permeable, as even North Korean border guards were no longer properly fed during the crisis years, while China did not carefully patrol the border. In particular, corruption has risen since the crisis, and border guards can now be more easily bribed. Second, whereas population movements were strictly controlled within North Korea in the past, the regime tolerated the fact that hundreds of thousands of famine and economic refugees left their homes to look for food when the public distribution system collapsed in the late 1990s.

down on broker networks, while China also started to more closely guard the border and more actively repatriate hiding refugees (Figure 1). Also, the ROK government modified the previously strong incentives for North Koreans to defect to South Korea.

As the number of North Korean refugees arriving in South Korea has dramatically risen in the 2000s (Figure 1), Seoul's stance has also changed accordingly "from a policy explicitly aimed at encouraging defection . . . to the policy of quietly discouraging it."²² Indeed, whereas the few North Koreans defecting to South Korea during the Cold War were celebrated as "heroes" and represented a unique source of information, the drastically rising number of newly arriving North Koreans has posed both a security threat and a financial burden to the South Korean taxpayer since the 2000s. As a reminder, any North Korean can claim a South Korean passport by law, yet the tricky part is to reach the southern part of the Korean peninsula to do that. The North Korea–South Korea border at the 38th parallel is probably the most fortified and guarded area in the world, making direct defections at that border into South Korea nearly impossible. Refugees thus have to cross the northern border of the DPRK. The governments of China and North Korea stop defectors, and nongovernmental humanitarian organizations operating in the region do not have sufficient financial resources to send massive numbers of refugees to South Korea. This leaves the field to commercial brokers, many of whom are former refugees themselves. During the Cold War era, newly arriving North Koreans received generous support from the South Korean government (about US \$33,500 in total) for ideological reasons.²³ However, in 2004, the government cut cash subsidies to newly arriving North Koreans by two-thirds²⁴ as well as total subsidies (cash and other subsidies such as housing support) by 53 percent, as these refugees tended to use their "welcome" money to hire a broker who would bring even more refugees.²⁵ The current policy of the South Korean government is thus a passive one, i.e., not providing active support to North Korean refugees in China and other transit countries while reducing cash subsidies to newly arriving North Koreans in order to curb chain migration. Instead, the government is now primarily paying attention to helping North Korean refugees participate in educational programs so they can eventually find employment in the South. Thus, if some of these integrated North Korean refugees hire a broker at some point in their later lives, they have to do this with their personal savings, meaning that the chain migration issue has been privatized and significantly slowed down.

To summarize, some 2,000 to 2,500 orphans were sent to North Korea's Communist allies during the Korean War and some 30,000 after the war, but were recalled in the late 1950s due to the Hungarian Revolution. About 46,000 North Koreans are presently working as overseas laborers in forty countries. This is primarily a result of the economic crisis of the 1990s, although labor exportation dates back to the 1950s. Further driven by the crisis, some 80,000 North Koreans illegally moved to neighboring China, while some 26,000 managed to arrive in South Korea. In total, the present diaspora of North Korea probably consists of some 150,000 to 160,000 people, including mostly overseas laborers and refugees. This number is much less than the diaspora of its counterpart in the South, which currently hovers around 6.9 million. It should be noted that our numbers in this essay, derived from scholarly sources, are lower than what various media sources report. Still, this essay has shown that North Korea is not an isolated nation at all, which is the way the media tends to portray it. The North Korean diaspora is in fact integrated into the world economy through formal agreements or shadow activities. In this sense, the people who have left the DPRK are, for better or worse, playing a role in globalization. ■

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