

Teach North Korean Refugees (TNKR) held its sixth speech contest

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This past Saturday, TNKR (Teach North Korean Refugees) held its 6th speech contest for refugees from North Korea. The venue was the Shin and Kim law firm in downtown Seoul. The title of the event and the topic that was given to the contestants was ‘A Women is a Flower. Seven young people, two men and five women, participated as contestants. In addition a panel of judges including the established actor and producer, Sean Richard Dulake, along with about seventy five observers turned out to support their effort.

Each of the seven contestants were given ten minutes to share their story. The truly astounding thing is that they told their stories to us in English. Each of them not only escaped from North Korea but have resettled in the south. For the most part they are working and going to school in their new home. For the past two and a half years they have been studying English with volunteer tutors introduced by TNKR. In addition, once they decided they were ready to speak out, they spent two months working with TNKR speech coaches to prepare for this day.

Although all seven speakers were working from the same theme, their stories were all unique reflecting their different experiences. Each had their own style, some very precise and analytical and others filled with passion and deep emotion. Due to security and privacy concerns, all except for official event staff, were asked to refrain from taking photos or recording the event. In order to convey the gist of the stories, I took some detailed notes. As for me, I was able to find several common threads that connected their stories together. The following is a digest of what I learned .

Unbeknownst to most of us, the theme ‘A Women is a Flower’ is well known to all North Koreans of a certain age. In fact it is the title of a song that was popular in the North during the 1990s. The song was composed in three verses each proclaiming that women were flowers.

A woman is a flower of life and by sacrificing herself she gives life to others. A women is a flower of happiness and gives happiness to others. A woman is a flower of the nation that uplifts the country through her loyalty. No doubt the words glorify women. It was said to be a favorite of Kim Ill Sung and with his urging it was played everywhere. It was useful as a propaganda tool to encourage the population, and in particular women, to overcome the great crises of the 1990s.

The great crises of course was twofold. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had always propped up the regime, North Korea was in severe economic straits. The floods and resulting famine of

the early 90s put the entire nation into a tailspin. The regime had no money and the people had no food. Rationing of basic food stuffs was not possible and the people starved. It is estimated that as many as 3,000,000 people died due to lack of food.

The resulting change in North Korean society and family dynamic was one of the threads that tied these stories together and was probably the catalyst that brought these people to the south. Starvation on a large scale is a terrible thing and people will do almost anything to survive. In the north, the means of survival fell to the women. Men were required to report to their jobs in factories, offices, and classrooms where there was no productive work and no pay. The old 'we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us' slogan became the reality. The women, who were housewives, had the time and motivation to keep their families alive. Many of them scraped and scrounged to come up with a scant surplus of produce and sold it to gain cash or other commodities. The underground market, black as the night, was born.

The women became the breadwinners as the men had lost their ability to earn. Of course, as in any free market economy, some were able to grow their business and others failed. Failure and or marginal performance meant starvation. Those who were successful expanded their business beyond the local market and over the border with China where the real hard cash was. Of course this was dangerous to life and limb and bribes were required. By bribing officials on both sides of the border, the black market became gray. The culture of corruption widened and deepened. If you could earn hard currency you could do anything you needed to do. Some were caught and sent to long terms of forced labor. Others died from starvation and disease, others from lead poisoning. Society was fundamentally changed.

In the family, the traditional Joseon Dynasty dynamic was also changed. The head of the house was the husband but he became a figurehead. The real power to keep family members alive fell into the hands of the woman who was successful in the market. Often, mothers encouraged and supported their daughters in following their dreams for a better life. This meant escaping over the border into China. Mothers paid the bribes. In the world of absolute corruption, abuse of refugee women was more the rule than the exception. Once over the border, women refugees were often sold from broker to broker and not a few ended up in human trafficking. For others, it was long periods of virtual slavery until they were able to pay off debts incurred or were rescued by groups working underground in the border areas.

The illegal market economy was the catalyst for these drastic changes in both the family structure and society. The ability to pay bribes drove the corruption upwards. Officials would turn a blind eye to many activities if there was something in it for them. The black market became gray. Even mid level bureaucrats were hungry and needed cash. Bribes allowed sons of lower class families to gain entrance to elite schools and government positions. For daughters, their way out was over the border into the waiting mouth of the tiger. The stories I heard opened for me a window on the reality of the class society in the north. The granddaughter of a POW captured in the south and taken to the north to labor in the coal mines, was herself condemned to the same labor until she was able to escape. The abuse of vulnerable women in the north, as refugees in China and even after they arrived in the south and a passionate call for educating women as to what are a woman's rights and what constitutes abuse was made.

More than several speakers recalled with great emotion and even tears the sacrifice of their own mothers that kept them alive in the north and continue to live as stars in the sky that are guiding them to overcome all obstacles in their new lives. Without a doubt these stories are genuine and authentic accounts of life in North Korea not often heard. I took away from this event the thought that there is change afoot. There is a crack in the wall and fundamental change has and is occurring on the inside of North Korea. The voices and experiences of these young people need to be heard by a much larger audience. Thanks TNKR for providing this forum.