

## Our Cherished Hopes - Volunteer English teacher coach North Korean Refugees

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One way that totalitarian governments control their population is by controlling what they say. Telling the truth is the enemy of totalitarianism and the lie is its fervent supporter.

As a volunteer English teacher and speech coach for TNKR (Teach North Korean Refugees) I've found a great deal of meaning in my life for this very reason. TNKR is an NGO headquartered in Seoul that was founded to give a voice to North Korean refugees who have escaped and now live in South Korea. TNKR matches teachers with refugees for one-on-one tutoring in English.

Why English? It's a good question. Recently one of my students told me the following story. After escaping from North Korea and sojourning through China, she expected life in South Korea to be idyllic. On the contrary, she found it to be no bed of roses.

She was intently aware of her status as a refugee. She felt she was discriminated against because she spoke Korean with an accent. In the beginning she tried hard to remove her North Korean accent but it was not easy.

One day at her church she became aware of a group of people gathered around two young men at the door to the cafeteria. At first she thought they might be some sort of celebrities. She went closer to listen and she heard the folks praising the young men because they spoke English so well. A light bulb went off in her head; these guys were admired for speaking English well. Of course it was the prestige language that many in South Korea aspire to master. She decided on the spot to stop trying to lose her accent and to focus on learning English. She has been quite successful.

Now days in South Korea, at least some degree of English ability is important for success. Many folks have made a lot of effort even from kindergarten on to acquire some English skills. In addition the modern day Korean language is littered with 'konglish' words that baffle most who grew up in North Korea. Many folks from the north that I have tutored started at the ABC level. For these reasons they say English is important to them.

Most meaningful for me are the English Language Speech Contests that TNKR holds twice a year. At each contest 7-10 refugees stand up in front of an audience and give a ten minute speech entirely in English. They talk about their lives in the north, their escapes, and their hopes and dreams for their futures.

You may remember the old American folk song 'If I Had a Hammer.' The words, in part, go like this;

It's the hammer of justice  
It's the bell of freedom  
It's the song of love for my brothers and sisters

When we tell the truth, we ring the bell of freedom. Who knows better than these folks the truth about North Korea? I'm proud to assist them in preparing and practicing their presentations. Along the way I've learned a lot.

There are 32,000 refugees from North Korea living in South Korea today. In addition there are as many as 20,000 trapped or for other reasons still living underground in China. There are clear reasons why so many risk their lives to escape. The human rights violations in North Korea are egregious.

They classify the population into three distinct classes based almost entirely on ideological considerations. The core class makes up 10% of the population. These are the ruling class, party cadres, and others who are judged to be politically reliable. The wavering class are 40% of the population. This class is made up of low-level managers, technicians, small scale merchants, and small farmers. This class also consists of the politically unreliable including those repatriated from South Korea, China, or Japan. The lazy, the corrupt, the bar girls, Confucianists, and the practitioners of superstitions like shamans and fortune tellers also belong to this class.

Finally there is the hostile class. These are the people assigned to dangerous and hard labor due to their class. They make up about 40% of the population. This class includes Christians, Buddhists, and Chondogyo members. Anyone arrested or imprisoned and their families, anti-revolutionary types, as well as many other conditions will get you membership in this class.

This system is entirely ideologically driven. The root of the human rights abuses can be traced directly to the extreme ideology that exists in North Korea. The great famine of the late 1990s caused starvation for the lower classes and forced the people to resort to a black market economy to survive. This also pushed people to cross the border with China in search of food and hard currency. This is the genesis of the mass exodus of refugees through China.

By cooperating with North Korea in returning refugees to the regime and the oppression that drove them to flee in the first place, China is in the position of an abuser of human rights. By denying the status of refugee to those fleeing the regime of political and ideological forced starvation, China is complicit in the human rights abuses suffered by refugees in its territories.

Most refugees fleeing the north, cross the rivers that mark the border between North Korea and the three northeastern provinces of China. The crossing is hugely dangerous and border guards have a shoot to kill order. The crossing is facilitated by smugglers, brokers, and human traffickers. The bribes necessary to cross were around \$300, a huge amount in the late 1990s. Today it will cost you \$10,000.

70-80% of those who flee North Korea are women. Once they arrive in China they often become the victims of human trafficking. They are not recognized as refugees by China. They have no legal status or papers. If they are caught by Chinese police they are returned to North Korea to face harsh punishment. Therefore they are vulnerable to the organized gangs.

Due to economic and social conditions there is a great shortage of women in the rural provinces of China. Korean women refugees are exploited to fill this need. The young women are sold directly to brothels and the older women are sold to poor farmers by the very brokers that they paid a fortune to in order to escape North Korea. The only hope to get out of China is to find and pay another broker to get you out. Sometimes this takes seven or more years.

In the early 2000s Christian missionaries, primarily South Koreans, became aware of the plight of these fellow Koreans and began to mount rescue missions to get them to South Korea. The brokers that knew the escape routes were for the most part ethnic Korean gangsters who demanded huge sums to guide the refugees out. The missionaries raised money to pay the fees and as much as possible made sure the brokers did what they were paid to do.

There were several main escape routes.

The best is to enter a foreign embassy in China and claim political refugee status. The Chinese do whatever they can to block refugees from reaching friendly embassies. If the refugee is caught in Beijing near the embassies they are sent back to North Korea.

Another way is to reach Mongolia where they can be sent on to South Korea. In order to reach Mongolia a refuge must cross both internal and external borders closely guarded by Chinese border police. Again, if caught, it's back to the gulag. Then the refuge has to cross the Gobi desert, a life or death journey itself.

The third way is to pass through the Chinese mainland and reach Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, or Myanmar and eventually Thailand who will send the refugees to South Korea.

All three ways are dangerous and expensive and never sure. The first two routes are no longer viable and today, most go south. Along with the Christian groups there are also other South Korean NGOs working on the ground in China to rescue refugees and get them to South Korea to be resettled.

The stories I've heard of the human rights abuses originated by the extreme Korean nationalism practiced in North Korea and the politically motivated indifference of the Chinese policy towards the refugees are horrific. The work being done by the missionaries and NGOs to rescue those trapped in China is heroic. The effort being made by the South Korean government and NGOs to resettle the refugees in South Korea is an example of humanitarianism in action. That being said, I can't help thinking that the human rights crisis as it pertains to the refugees is only the tip of the iceberg. There are 25 million folks living in North Korea and to one extent or another are suffering human rights abuses. If they all or a significant number decide to escape, it would overwhelm the resources of any nation or group to help. The only solution is to address the ideology of the North Korean regime that has led to this situation. In the final analysis it is the extreme Korean nationalism of North Korea that needs to be dismantled. This worldview and its extreme manifestation has its roots in Korean history and can be understood. The human rights issues can't be separated from the nuclear weapons and ballistic missile issue. They have one root cause. In the short

term, regime change may be needed.

There are market forces at work inside North Korea that, given time, can produce regime change from the inside. Have you heard of Jangmadang? This is the Market Generation and describes the lifestyle and mindset of the generation that came of age in the 1990s.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of its huge subsidies had just about brought the small communist nation to its knees. By the mid 1990s the cash and government rice rations had run out and people began to starve. How many died of hunger and its resultant diseases is controversial but after the first million it becomes a moot point. Everyone knew someone or had relatives who had starved to death. Then there were those who were simply shot for stealing food. Many recall being forced to watch public executions as the government struggled to maintain control of the population.

Funny thing is, those who were the best communists and were most loyal to the Kim regime in word and deed, died first. The rebels, the sceptics, and the adventurers turned to the markets and survived. One of these was Kim Hee Soon (of course, not her real name) and this is her story.

Kim Hee Soon's mom was one of the market pioneers in their home town in the northeastern hinterlands. After watching her own father turn into a bag of bones and pass away, her mom determined that she and her children would survive. It began small with five pitiful looking half rotten sweet potatoes. She had unearthed them almost accidentally when digging an outhouse. But they were edible and so worth their weight in gold. She boiled two and feed them to her ravenous kids for an unexpected evening meal. The other three she bartered to a neighbor for three cups of oil and a large handful of barely. It was a revelation and a way forward. By hustling around she began to not only feed her kids but also to build up a surplus. She bought an old bicycle with a basket and was able to move around the villages in the district, always with an eye out for anything that could be sold. Several bicycle vendors would met up at a crossroads, lay out their wares on blankets spread on the ground, and people would come. Of course, someone would always watch for the police. When the coppers approached on foot, the entrepreneurs would throw everything onto the bikes and pedal off.

Some, like Hee Soon's mom, were naturals at it and they branched out into used clothing, shoes, alcohol, and anything that there was a demand for. The markets expanded and sprung up like mountain mushrooms after a spring rain. The local authorities did their best to suppress this decidedly ideologically polluted activity but a full belly trumps ideology every time. It was dangerous and if caught, a marketer faced severe punishment. A bribe into the right hand often mitigated that.

Hee Soon began helping her mother early on and she found that she also had a talent for buying and selling. How wicked, she thought. Before long she initiated her own enterprises. Her specialty was hooch, a kind of homemade alcohol. She scrounged for the basic ingredients which were some kind of fruit, sugar, and copious amounts of water. It was close to rotgut but had the desired effect and there were always customers.

For a twelve year old girl the effect was powerful. By engaging in her own business activities she became liberated. She made her own choices and would live or die by the results. She was freed from the thought control imposed by the Workers Party of Korea and the ruling Kim family. She began to think for herself and it was exhilarating. On top of that she ate every day and she and her mother became the saviours of their family and many others in the neighborhood. She and the other marketers her own age became the 'Market Generation.'

Today it is the markets that feed the people and drive the economy of North Korea. Surprisingly, I learned that much of the capital that fuels these markets comes from North Korean refugees living in South Korea who work hard and send money to loved ones left behind.

Most refugees that I've talked to and also prominent formerly highly placed defectors say the same thing. Never lift the economic sanctions. The regime and the Workers Party are broke. They desperately need hard currency to continue in power. Whatever humanitarian aid they receive from abroad goes directly to prop up the party and the third largest standing army in the world. Through the markets people are thinking for themselves and eating well. Don't give the regime anymore money and they will collapse.

The winds of change are blowing across the Korean peninsula now days. We have been treated to images of leaders meeting, shaking hands, and making promises. I'm reminded of the Korean folk song Our Cherished Hopes are for Unity. Hope abounds. Without a doubt many people are sincerely longing for unification but the devil is in the details. Most folks I've talked to who were born in North Korea are saying we need to focus more on the people of North Korea in their efforts to be free than the promises of leaders with their own agendas.

Let's tell the truth and continue to ring the bell of freedom for the people of North Korea.