Living as Illegal Border-Crossers:
Social Suffering of the North Korean Refugees in China

Jang Soo Hyun

Abstract

This study aims to illustrate the hardships of the North Korean border-crossers in China from the perspective of social suffering. In particular, it examines how the stigmatizing narratives outsiders use to describe, diagnose, and treat these refugees can provide justifications for violence, exploitation, and other wrongdoing perpetrated against them.

These refugees have suffered great hardships. More importantly, due to their illegal status, they have become easy prey to all sorts of wrongdoing by local people. With a more people-centered perspective focusing on human suffering, we should make efforts to eliminate the structural conditions that abet and maintain these people's suffering. It is most urgent to make concerted efforts to change the status of the North Korean refugees in China from that of illegal immigrant to refugee.

Keywords: North Korea, China, famine, refugee, social suffering, stigmatization, narrative

* The research for this paper was funded by the Research Grant of Kwangwoon University in 2003. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 53rd Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies which was held in Chicago in March, 2001. A somewhat different Korean version was published in *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* (Korean Cultural Anthropology) (2001).

Jang Soo Hyun (Jang, Su-hyeon) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Chinese Studies at Kwangwoon University. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1998. He has authored "Contemporary Chinese Narratives on Korean Culture" (2003) and a number of articles in Korean including "Chinese Family under Socialism" (2001). E-mail: sjang@kw.ac.kr.

There is a growing concern about human suffering as a social problem. Suffering takes place in the individual, but it is often socially produced and maintained. As studies show, the apparently personal problems such as substance abuse, suicide, depression, AIDS, and poverty have a close linkage with societal problems. This is why some scholars use the term "social suffering" and call attention to the need to illuminate the social conditions that abet and maintain it (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). Such effort is not only important for understanding the nature of suffering, but will also help improve our thoughts on how to approach and solve the pertinent problems.

This study is an attempt to illustrate, from the viewpoint of social suffering, the enormous hardships of the North Korean refugees in China.[1] As numerous sources in the news media have reported, the severe food shortage since the mid-1990s and other related problems claimed many lives in North Korea and put huge numbers of people in a desperate situation.[2] The more daring people have crossed the border with China for survival. Concentrated in northeastern provinces where the great majority of ethnic Koreans currently live, these illegal border-crossers suffer enormously from unbearable living conditions and various forms of violence. In this study, I will explore the suffering of these dislocated people and discuss the conditions that reproduce it.

In particular, I will look at how the narratives outsiders use to describe, diagnose, and treat the problems of the victims of modern disasters are interrelated with the reproduction of human suffering. As I will show later, negative narratives about illegal North Korean

1. The data for this study was collected during my two short-term visits to Yanbian (Yeonbyeon in Korean) and other border areas in Jilin (Gillim in Korean) province. I and three other Korean scholars went there in the summer and winter of 1999 to conduct a collaborative research on the North Korean refugees. The illegal status of these people made our research a rather "guerrilla-style" investigation than systematic fieldwork under normal circumstances. Careful cross-checking of the information we gathered, therefore, was virtually impossible. Nevertheless, judging from interviews we conducted with recent escapees in South Korea, the information seems to be reliable.
2. According to a rough estimate, a few million had died by 1998 (KBSM 1998).

border-crossers circulating among local people stigmatize these famine victims and provide justifications for their maltreatments, abuse, violent treatment and exploitation.

To give an idea of how painful it has been for the North Korean refugees to survive in China as illegal border-crossers, I begin by illustrating some of the grave psychological scars and pressures that they have been undergoing.

Living in Distress

Interviewing the refugees was emotionally draining. They had so many tragic stories to tell about what they had undergone as dislocated people: bereavement, separation, abuse, violence, rape, exploitation, and so on. Not just a few times did I resent having to open painful scars by interviewing them. Yet, the more I did, the more I realized that they desperately needed people who would listen to their stories, for the weight of their personal tragedies was too heavy to shoulder alone.

More than anything else, so many of them had lost one or more loved ones. Of the 55 children we met in Yanji during our fieldwork, for example, eighteen had lost their father and twenty had experienced the grief of having lost their mother (Bak 2000, 203). I spent some time with six refugee children in a secret shelter run by a Christian church. All but one were orphans. They said they often saw their deceased parent, sibling, or close relative in dreams. I could only guess the gravity of their pain from their feeble voices, lowered heads, and darkened faces with which they answered my questions about their family.

Sometimes separation can give a sharper pain than grief. One interviewee in his forties was in severe anxiety after losing contact with his wife and three daughters. In North Korea his second and third daughter left home to find food, but never returned. As the food crisis worsened, he crossed the Sino-Korean border with his wife and the eldest daughter and settled in a Korean-Chinese village. One day

his wife and daughters suddenly disappeared. He was worrying that they might have been sold to Chinese men by women-traffickers.

One woman was concerned about the son she had left with her parents. Having lost her husband during the famine, she crossed the border with her daughter. When we met her, she was helping with farm work at an old Korean-Chinese couple's. She said that she was inclined towards marrying their old bachelor son, but not until she would have gotten her own son out of North Korea.

On top of the grave distress resulting from bereavement or separation, these border-crossers suffer great anxiety and fear caused by worries about police raids and deportation to North Korea.

To the Chinese government, the border-crossers are only a nuisance that causes trouble in its "blood" relationship with North Korea. Despite continuing pressure from the international community, it has not moved an inch from its original standpoint: North Korean border-crossers are illegal immigrants and should be sent home.[3] Such a "no mercy" policy engenders anxiety and fear among the border-crossers.

From time to time, local policemen launch roundups of the illegal border-crossers in their territory. According to the relief workers we met in Yanbian, local policemen had a pretty good idea of where these people were hiding. When orders came down from above, they raided suspicious places. If caught in police raids or regular inspection, they were first sent to the detention camps run by the Chinese frontier guards, and then sent from there to North Korea. There were

3. The refugee can be defined in different ways. The current institutional meaning of refugee includes three categories: the refugee as an activist, engaging in some anti-government political activity; the refugee as a target for the abuse of state power (an ethnic group, for example); the refugee as a mere victim of societal or international violence. In the sense that "the famine is itself a form of violence, as in the case of confiscatory economic measures or extremely unequal property systems maintained by brutal force, the inability to meet subsistence needs because of unsafe conditions, or the refusal of the state to accept international assistance" (Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo 1989, 33), I think the majority of the North Korean border-crossers in China are refugees and should be treated as such by Chinese government.

a few concentration camps in North Korea's frontier cities like Hyesan and Cheongjin. The deported were temporarily incarcerated in the camps, and after investigation were handed over to the public security officer from their home area. Many of them found ways to run away from the camps. The young in particular could escape relatively easily, perhaps because they were not tightly watched.

The deported refugees are labeled as "traitors" and subjected to punishments that vary considerably according to the age, sex, and the purpose of the border-crossing. According to reports, North Korean authorities take somewhat lenient attitude towards women and youth. Barring special circumstances, young ones are not kept long. Yet they usually receive a substantial beating during investigation. After returning to school, they often face corporal punishment and ideological struggles. Female violators are also relatively easily released, for the authorities believe that the purpose of their border-crossing is to seek food or money for the family. However, punishment of adult males is rather severe. They are heavily beaten and even tortured during investigation. Eventually they are sent to labor camps.

Regardless of age and sex, however, if the authorities judge that the purpose of border-crossing is a permanent escape from North Korea, not for a temporary relief from starvation, the deported refugees are subject to grave punishment. Those who escaped to China as a group and stay for a long time belong to this category. It is said that people caught engaging in missionary work or linked with religious organizations are most severely punished.

Rumors of horrible punishment floating among the refugees heighten anxiety and fear: some were shot to death in public; others were put into boiling water; and North Korean special agents raided refugee shelters and killed people there. Whether these rumors were based on true facts or not, the refugees seemed to take them as either real or highly probable. In particular, the refugees helped by religious organizations were in great distress, for they knew they would be the easiest targets for witch-hunting. Therefore, they desperately wanted to escape to South Korea or another foreign country.

Knowing that police raids can be carried out at any time, many refugees live in a state of intense worry. One refugee woman we interviewed, for example, revealed through tears that she could hardly sleep at night for fear of a sudden raid by policemen or traffickers of women. If she noticed any suspicious noises or movement, she immediately ran to a nearby cornfield and hid there all night; simply glimpsing the headlights of a passing automobile was enough to make her heart pound rapidly.[4]

Living secretly in a closed space heightens distress. Both the refugees and the relief workers take extra caution not to attract the attention of neighbors. This is especially important to the secret shelters run by religious organizations, for they are the main target for police raids. In a few Christian shelters we visited, for example, children were rarely allowed to go out. Since these children carried conspicuous physical and cultural traces of their refugee status, they would be easily noticed. They were, therefore, confined to the shelter all day. The distress such confinement inflicted on them was enormous. I noticed this when I personally observed the enthusiastic response these children showed to the opportunity to go outside.

One day I visited a Christian shelter in the periphery of Yanji for participant observation. Confined to a small apartment, the refugee children there ardently waited for such occasions as a haircut, bath, and Sunday worship. Most welcome were unexpected opportunities to go out for shopping, dinner, or other activities. Once, when I was teaching Chinese to the children, a church missionary called and asked the North Korean nanny in charge to help the children prepare for dinner outside and shopping. Upon hearing this news, the children began to shout hurrahs and moved around in great excitement. The small space was soon filled with their lively energy. This exhilarating scene made me realize how stressful it had been to live a confined life in the shelter.

The North Korean refugees live in constant lookout and caution.

4. These seem to match the symptoms of what psychiatrists would call "acute stress disorder."

When they are given the opportunity to liberate themselves from the tension of such self-control, their suppressed selves gush out like an water released from a dam. I observed this at a Christmas worship specially arranged by a local church for the refugees they had been protecting.

The special Christmas worship was held on 26 December 1999. All thirteen refugee families and two dozen or so children under the church's protection participated in the worship. Many regular church members (mostly ethnic Koreans) and invited guests were also present. The worship started with hymnals. To my great surprise, the refugees did not show any timidness, a sign that novice believers usually carry. From adult refugees to the teenagers, everyone sang enthusiastically, with hands clapping and feet pounding. Soon the singing had crescendoed into near shouting. Some started dancing excitedly, as if some unexpressed inner voices were transforming themselves into body movement. A few refugees sobbed and wept, being true to their feelings. As my eyes welled with tears, I heard the sounds of liberation that the suppressed selves of the refugees were making.

The Christmas worship provided the refugees with the opportunity to do what they were not allowed to in everyday life: shouting, singing, dancing, and other actions that might have attracted people's attention. The passion and energy that I saw that day were a good testimony to their stressful refugee life.

Blaming the Victims

Of the two rivers, Dumangang (Tumen, in Chinese) and Amnokgang (Yalu, in Chinese), that separate Korea from China, the great majority of the North Korean border-crossers choose the Dumangang river for two reasons: as this river is narrow and shallow, it is easier for them cross; across it lie Yanbian (autonomous region for the Korean-Chinese) and other border areas where a large population of ethnic Koreans live.

The Korean-Chinese in northeastern China have been instrumental in saving desperate North Korean border-crossers: some participated in organized efforts for relief; others gave out food, money, and clothes; still others offered shelters and jobs. It is also true, however, that many of them exploited, abused, and assaulted helpless refugees, taking advantage of their illegal status. They did it with certain justifications, employing images created from the negative narratives about the refugees. Below I will show how these narratives could contribute to the justification of maltreatments, abuses, violence and exploitation, hence maintaining human suffering.

Insecure Hiding and the "Taming of Wild Animals"

A large portion of the North Korean refugees in China are children, mostly male and in their teens. Some live in secret shelters run by religious organizations. Many more live a wandering life as a group. For a refugee child, these two life styles are interchangeable: a wanderer may choose to live in a shelter by seeking help, for example, at a local Christian church; he may also run away from the shelter when he finds its closed life unbearable.

Group life increases the visibility and the risk of being arrested, but it lessens fear and loneliness. For the majority of them, life as a drifter in a group is not new. Before crossing the border, they had wandered around in North Korea, moving from one marketplace to another. Wherever they went, they easily found peers and formed a group.

As much as wanderers do not enjoy much comfort, there is certainly greater freedom and life is much more exciting. They can sometimes enjoy the luxury of going to a fine restaurant or coffee shop, riding taxis, swimming in the river, and playing soccer games. Such luxury, however, comes at the cost of constant fear of sudden police raids.

During the summertime they usually sleep under the bridges, in deserted automobiles, or in building corridors. Wintertime is much more difficult to tide over. To survive the bitter-cold winds of north-

eastern China, they sleep in factory boiler rooms, cheap videotape theaters, and any such places that can keep them warm. Luckier ones can earn some money by doing chores at local restaurants or other shops run by ethnic Koreans. Many children beg in the streets to collect money for their starving family in North Korea as well as for themselves.

Some children are protected in secret shelters run by local Korean-Chinese churches, missionary groups, and other religious organizations, with financial support from Korea and Korean-American communities in the U.S. and elsewhere. Most shelters are set up in urban apartment buildings, but some are located in remote, mountainous areas.

Life in the shelter is certainly more comfortable than street life. Yet this comes at the price of confinement and conformity. The sheltered children are required to stay in closed space and follow strict rules imposed by the supervisor. Sometimes corporal punishment is used to secure conformity and maintain order. Living in the shelter thus is not always a happy experience and many children choose to return to the street life.

One common complaint that many local people raise about refugee children is the difficulty of taming them. For example, the minister and missionaries of a local church who had been running shelters for such children, professed that they sometimes wished the children to be arrested by the police, because that would liberate them from all the trouble the unruly children caused them. According to them, these children got so used to living a drifting life that it was difficult for them to follow the strict rules and schedules of the shelter; many of them simply ran away after a while, because they could not endure such a life according to rules; they were too tough and self-centered to live an orderly group life. In short, "taming the wild animals" was not an easy task for the relief workers.

The life paths of these refugee children are different from those of ordinary children. Many of them have experienced the bitterness of losing close kin—parents, siblings, or grandparents—to the famine. Having almost nothing to eat at home, they had to walk the streets to find food. They stole or robbed food from marketplaces. Strong competition for food often led to fist-fights. A keen sense of self-interest and the instinct for survival must have developed from such a life. Yet, the image of the untamed wild animal blinds us to the other side of refugee behavior. It ignores three important aspects of it, at least.

As previous studies on famine point out (Sorokin 1942, for example), a dire crisis such as famine can lead to the development of both self-centeredness and altruism. This was certainly true with the North Korean refugee children I personally observed at the "House of Hope," one of the secret shelters run by a local Christian church in Yanbian.

When I visited it in the winter of 1999 for the second time, there were 6 male children in the House of Hope. Their age ranged from 13 to 17 years old. An old North Korean nanny served as the supervisor and helped them manage daily life. To my great surprise, the seemingly unruly boys were practicing a rotational duty system. They took turns to carry out such housework as clothes- and dish-washing, meal preparation, and cleaning. The eldest boy of the group seemed to play the key role in keeping the system working. For example, when there occurred some disagreement as to whose turn it was to do dish-washing, he made the final decision. According to the supervising nanny, this system was not something that she had imposed, but a totally voluntary one. The boys wanted to help her, because they knew she had been laboring under a heavy workload and great pressure. This altruistic attitude runs counter to the image of the unruly and selfish figure with which local people characterize the North Korean refugees.

Secondly, the failure of the refugee children to adjust to the sheltered life is in part caused by the shelter's closed and Spartan lifestyle. Active, curious, and restless, the young ones can hardly be satisfied with the monotonous life in the shelter. Confined to a closed space, they have nothing exciting around them. They are instructed to pray, take Bible study lessons, sing hymn songs, and study such subjects as English, mathematics, and Chinese. There is not much they can do other than watch the street during breaks. This is repeat-

ed almost everyday. Even ordinary teenage boys, I suspect, would naturally cause trouble or even run away if they were placed under such circumstances.

Also, it should be remembered that violence is often used as a means of securing conformity and order in the shelter. Shelter supervisors sometimes resorted to corporal punishment in handling the refugee children, partly because they believed that these children could not be properly educated without tough treatment. During our fieldwork, for example, we met a boy who had run away from a Christian shelter. He said he had had a good beating by a church missionary for rule violation. His bruised, swollen face told us the story. He grumbled: "What kind of a Christian beats people like that?" This tells us that it is not always the unruliness and wildness of the children that make them run away from the shelter. Sometimes it is the rough treatment itself that they want to avoid.

Finally, an altruistic cause may be involved in their returning to the street life. Refugee children worry about their family at home and want to do whatever is necessary to help them. They are safer and more comfortable in the shelter than in the streets. But if they stay in the shelter, they give up the opportunity to collect money through work or street-begging. The easiest way to earn money is to beg in the streets. The main targets are South Korean tourists and businessmen. They frequent such places as Korean restaurants, Karaoke bars, and coffee shops, where they can meet many sympathetic South Koreans. Bolder ones try hotels, tourist spots, train stations, department stores, and even airports. Once they have accumulated enough money, they cross the border to see their family, taking the risk of being arrested.

Leaving a shelter is a major decision for the children. The shelter provides safety and comfort. By running away from it, they have to carry out battles with hot summer weather and annoying mosquitoes; they need the courage to cope with the chilling winter weather without a thick blanket; sometimes they must fight against hunger, fear, and a future without promise. Yet, since freedom and family are so important for them, they choose to suffer such hardships. The narrative that likens them to the untamed wild animal ignores this altruistic self.

The Cultural Logic of Exploitation and Contempt

The hope of getting a stable job is very slim for the North Korean border-crossers. The great majority of them do not possess specialized skills and therefore usually rely on manual labor for survival. Most common is manual labor in rural areas, often in remote and mountainous places. Males are usually hired for mining, quarrying, felling trees, and tending pigs, which require a men's strength and stamina. As there is seasonal labor shortage in rural communities, it is not difficult for both refugee men and women to find temporary farm work. Some women work for local shops, restaurants, or even Karaoke bars.

The North Korean refugees in China are an easy target for exploitation. What usually happens is that the Chinese employers keep on delaying payments and ultimately report their illegal employees to the police without making payments. As illegal border-crossers, the refugees are not given any legal protection and there is nothing they can do about the payment delay other than complaining and brawling with the employer. This leaves painful scars in their hearts. Since those who exploit them are usually local Korean-Chinese people, their compatriots, the scars are even more painful.

Even if the refugees are paid by the employer, their wage is far less than that of Chinese workers. According to a Korean-Chinese woman involved in relief work, North Korean workers could only blame themselves for their low wages. She argued that the refugees were not unfairly treated. They were underpaid because they were not as good and diligent as Chinese workers. She roughly estimated that their work efficiency was less than a half of the Chinese worker's. According to her, this was not the problem of particular individuals, but had something to do with the system. Unlike China, where collectives had been dismantled, North Korea still maintained its col-

lective system. Under the collective system the work ethic tended to be bad, because there always was the free-rider problem. Since hard work received little material incentive, few wanted to work enthusiastically. Likewise, the North Korean refugees in China had a bad labor ethic.[5] Yet, this narrative does not consider the fact that, hoping for a long-term employment, many refugees wanted to show their worth by working hard, and that the sluggishness could have been a reactionary response to the habitual underpayment, payment delay and refusal, or bad treatment by the employers.[6] Such negative characterization, thus, deeply hurts the self-esteem of the refugees. They felt that they were discriminated against, ignored and despised. Contrasting the hard life of the refugees with the prosperity of their fellow Korean-Chinese, one former North Korean refugee, a woman currently in charge of a refugee shelter expressed her hurt feeling as follows:

> Some say, "although they have been spending tremendous amount of money to educate their own children, they refused to help the refugees."; others say, "they were poor in the past, but after they became rich they took a hostile attitude towards their own people - the refugees." Missionaries are different. They say, "we are people of faith, so we help poor North Koreans; others cannot even help their own relatives." Then, I think, "they are real servants of God." But, sometimes I think differently. When they put a child in another shelter, they gave 500 yuan. But, when they sent a child to this shelter, they gave us far less. My faith was weak at the time. I got selfish and said "you send him to another shelter, if not, let him go wherever he wants, I don't want him."

"Shamelessness" is another negative label that local people often attach to the refugees. This emerged as a popular topic in my interview with local ethnic Koreans engaged in relief work. These relief workers candidly expressed their discontent and disdain about the refugees' unending demand for help. For example, one church minister in Yanji told us that his church members had become sick and tired of the refugees' complaints about insufficient support. Two missionaries in charge of the church's refugee shelters expressed the same disgust. They said they harbored a sick feeling about the "thick-skinned" North Koreans who repeatedly asked for help, ignoring the limited financial capability of the church.

These relief workers felt their sincere relief effort was not appreciated by the refugees. Running secret shelters, they were taking great risks. If caught hiding refugees, they did not only have to endure sharp criticisms by the authorities, but they were also fined a hefty amount—5,000 yuan in 1999, which is more than US$600. To get involved in relief work could be costly even for a church with outside financial support. This was why one Korean-Chinese church in Jilin City we visited had stopped providing long-term help to the refugees. Considering all these situations, relief work for the refugees in China was a very demanding task.

Citing the same problem in pre-reform China, the relief workers I interviewed attributed the shamelessness to the cultural psychology that the rationing system in North Korea had given rise to; North Koreans had gotten so used to receiving things for free that they did not much appreciate relief effort. The refugees themselves, however, had a different idea.

One North Korean refugee in charge of a children's shelter, for example, argued that the shamelessness had something to do with the marginal conditions of refugee life. They simply lacked many basic necessities that they needed in order to maintain minimal human dignity; it was only when the refugee children badly needed certain things or services that she asked the church to provide extra help—for example, when their clothes were badly worn out, when they needed medicine for a disease, or when there arose the need for a bath or haircut. From her point of view, then, the demand of the

5. Illegal foreign workers in South Korea suffer a similar fate. Underpayment is justified by the cultural explanation that emphasizes the laziness, low productivity, and unreliability of the workers (Yi 1996).
6. James Scott (1985) calls this one of the "everyday forms of resistance" by the weak.

refugees was not excessive.

A suspicion about the distribution of relief fund and materials sometimes lay behind the complaints. Those who received less than what they believed their rightful share to be often raised issues. Some suspected that relief organizations improperly managed outside relief fund. With rumors of fund embezzlement being circulated among the refugees, many believed that relief work was simply a means of making money for certain individuals. The "unending" demand of the refugees, then, was perhaps a disguised expression of distrust.

Runaway Brides

Another negative narrative about the North Korean refugees is related to the phenomenon of runaway brides. During our field research we found that there was a widespread suspicion that female refugees married local men only for money, and that they would sooner or later run away with money and valuables.[7] Such suspicions led the groom's family to closely watch the bride and sometimes limit her movement.

Although fraudulent marriages often occurred, not all runaway brides were swindlers. To properly understand it, we should carefully look at how the refugee woman entered into a conjugal relationship with a local man and what kind of married life she managed.[8]

For a refugee women, marriage with a local bachelor or widower could provide a convenient escape from the worst hardships of refugee life. Some females, therefore, voluntarily chose it. But, the great majority of such marriages were not truly voluntary. When a refugee woman came to seek help, local people usually suggested marriage as the only viable choice for her long-term survival in China. Sometimes a long persuasion was needed to persuade her.

7. As is well reported by mass media, a similar suspicion exists regarding the "true" motive of the Korean-Chinese brides marrying South Korean men.
8. This kind of marriage is a *de facto*, not *de jure*, conjugal relationship, for the refugee women are illegal immigrants.

Emphasis on the grim prospect of refugee life put her in anxiety and fear. In many cases, this was enough to induce her consent.

Yet, there were also forced marriages by professional matchmakers. For a go-between, matchmaking could be a lucrative business. The introduction fee varied greatly according to the bride's age and look. But, ranging from a few thousand yuan to more than 10 thousand, it was a large amount of money for ordinary Chinese people. There was a good reason, therefore, for the matchmaker to force refugee women into marriage. He pretended to be sympathetic and understanding, but, when they refused or were reluctant to accept marriage offer, he used threats and violence. A common threat was that he would report her to the police. Without any legal protection, she cannot but consent to the marriage. In extreme cases, the matchmaker resold his prey to another local man, either by deceiving her into believing that she would have a much better partner this time or by threatening to take her to the police. According to the relief workers we met in Yanbian, woman-trafficking was increasing in number and tended to turn into an organized business.[9]

One thing I should mention here is that some local people portrayed matchmaking in a positive light. Any matchmaking involving money was legally prohibited in China as human trafficking. Yet, some interviewees argued that money was not the ultimate purpose for most go-betweens, and that these people simply wanted to help pitiful refugee women. Without comprehensive data, it is hard to estimate the ratio of innocent matchmaking to woman-trafficking. But, the local people were certainly insensitive to the problem of woman-trafficking and the cruel realities it imposed on the refugee women.

Although marrying Chinese men could free them from the immediate difficulties of refugee life, married females continued to have

9. This kind of woman-trafficking is not limited to the North Korean refugee women. With the increasing regional economic inequality in the reform period, women-trafficking has become a widespread phenomenon in China as a whole. The movement of these females is mostly from southwestern provinces to northeastern provinces, from mountainous peripheries to central plains.

worries and problems. Since this socially approved marriage did not change her legal status, her fear of police raids and compulsive deportation remained. Childbirth only deepened her worry, for the child born of this marriage was an illegal resident like his/her mother.

Also there were cultural problems. When married to Han Chinese, communication itself was a great pain. Differences in the lifestyle also bothered the refugee women. For them, the unsanitary living conditions of the Chinese houses were especially unbearable.

In many cases, those who wanted to marry refugee woman had had difficulties in finding his spouse or leading a harmonious marriage due to a serious mental or physical problem. Included in the list were alcoholics, wife-beaters, sexual perverts, the handicapped, the mentally retarded, habitual gamblers, and so on. Domestic violence was a particularly serious problem in these marriages. Our female interviewees, for example, cried in terror when they told us about their husbands' violent behaviors; forced sex was not infrequent, as well.[10]

Considering all these problems, it is not surprising that many refugee brides chose to run away. But, the tragedy is that running away could not completely free them from the agonies of refugee life. After running away, some of them fell into the hands of the woman-traffickers again. Others failed to find other alternative to marriage. In this way, the cycle of marriage and escape was repeated.

The male-centered narrative of the "runaway bride" reveals nothing about the tremendous suffering that domestic violence and other problems inflicted on the refugee women. This is nothing other than blaming the victims, and it only aggravates their suffering.

So far, I have illustrated some of the narratives that local people and relief workers used to characterize the North Korean border-crossers. These narratives highlighted certain negative aspects of refugee behaviors and attributed them to the personal or cultural

10. Many North Korean refugee women, including young girls, were rape victims. The traumas such horrible experience left in them need to be more carefully studied (see Agger 1992; Cole, Espin, and Rothblum 1992).

problems of the refugees. In this way local people and relief workers could justify maltreatments, abuses, violence and exploitation. This is exactly what Erving Goffman defined as stigmatization:

> [W]e may perceive his defensive response to his situation as a direct expression of his defect, and then see both defect and response as just retribution for something he or his parents or his tribe did, and hence a justification of the way we treat him (Goffman 1963, 6).

As I explained before, many of the negatively portrayed refugee behaviors are defensive responses to harsh circumstances. Yet, many outsiders perceive them as direct expressions of inner defects of the refugees or culturally transmitted problems. Such stigmatization provides them with the moral justifications for their hostile treatment of the North Koreans and hence contributes to the reproduction of social suffering.

Concluding Remarks

I want to finish this article by emphasizing two important points. The first one regards the need for a concerted effort to eliminate human suffering. The other has to do with some stereotypical images of the refugee.

Considering the gravity of the suffering among the North Korean refugees in China, it is necessary to develop a more people-centered approach that puts the alleviation of human suffering ahead of political, economic, and other strategic considerations. We should make a focused effort to get rid of the structural conditions that abet and maintain their suffering.

Our priority, I think, should be given to changing the legal status of the North Korean border-crossers, for their suffering has a lot to do with their status as illegal immigrants. Owing to the Chinese government's tenacious refusal to provide legal protection, they become easy prey to abuse, maltreatments, violence and exploitation by local

people. If the Chinese government would soften its position, however, much of their immediate, acute suffering could be effectively eliminated. Therefore, we need to make a concerted effort, both domestic and international, to persuade Chinese government into acknowledging the border-crossers as refugees.

For such efforts to succeed, it is important for all related parties (including government, parliament, NGOs, and media agencies) to set their eyes primarily on the elimination of human suffering. They should be careful not to allow the refugee issue to develop into a politicized debate. Open criticisms of human rights problems in North Korea and China in treating the refugees, for example, can complicate and jeopardize reform efforts as a whole. We need to be more practical and flexible in approaching this problem, so that the suffering of the refugees can be removed as soon as possible.

Another point I would like to stress is that we should be suspicious of certain fixed images of the refugee. All too often we conceive refugees to be a helpless, socially impotent, and passive group. Since they live in horrible conditions, they do not know what to do and absolutely need our help and care; hence they will and should follow our guidance. Overwhelmed by the gravity of their suffering, we are tempted to believe that they simply want to survive, that they will absolutely listen to us, and that human decency is still a luxury for them.

Problems emerge when we come across certain refugee behaviors that do not match our preconceptions. The relief workers in Yanbian, for example, got irritated, angry, or even felt betrayed, when the refugees demanded more, refused to show conformity, and so on. Such behaviors, when viewed in a wider context, were certainly justifiable. But the relief workers could not accept them, because they did not fit in with their expectation.

Refugees are not powerless and possess their own kind of agency.[11] They have dreams for future, the will to change the world

11. On this, see articles by Uehling, Krufeld, MacDonald, and others in Krulfeld and MacDonald (1998).

they are living in, and fury at injustices. Those who are involved with refugees—whether it is as relief worker, administrator, or researcher—should keep that in mind. They are also not culture-less. They have their own ideas about what and how to solve problems. Empowerment of refugees, therefore, is critical for our effort to get rid of the structural conditions that reproduce suffering. Without their active participation, any effort for refugees will encounter serious problems. It will not only fail to achieve what they set out to do, but perhaps will also aggravate human suffering.

REFERENCES

Agger, Inger. 1992. *The Blue Room: Trauma and Testimony among Refugee Women.* London: Zed Books.

Chung, Byung-Ho (Jeong, Byeong-ho). 1999. "Bukhan eorini gia-wa hanguk illyuhak-ui gwaje" (The Starvation of North Korean Children and the Tasks for Korean Anthropology). *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* (Korean Cultural Anthropology) 32.2.

Cole, Ellen, Oliva M. Espin, and Esther D. Rothblum. 1992. *Refugee Women and Their Mental Health: Shattered Societies, Shattered Lives.* New York: Harrington Park Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Jang, Soo Hyun (Jang, Su-hyeon). 2001. "Jungguk nae bukhan nanmin-ui sahoejeok gotong" (The Social Suffering of the North Korean Refugees in China). *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* 34.2.

Kleinman, Arthur, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds. 1997. *Social Suffering.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Korea Buddhist Sharing Movement (KBSM). 1998. "Bukhan singnyangnan-ui siltae" (The Current State of the Food Shortage in North Korea). Unpublished Report.

_____. 1999. *Gukgyeong jiyeok nanmin bogoseo* (Report on the Refugees in the Border Areas). Seoul: Jungto.

Krulfeld, Ruth M., and Jeffery L. MacDonald, eds. 1998. *Power, Ethics, and Human Rights: Anthropological Studies of Refugee Research and Action.*

Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
Pak, Sunyeong (Bak, Sun-yeong). 2000. "Bukhan singnyang wigi-ui janggi-jeok yeonghyang pyeongga" (Assessment of the Long-term Effects of the North Korean Food Crisis). *Hanguk munhwa illyuhak* 33.1: 240-270.
Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
Sorokin, P. A. 1942. *Man and Society in Calamity*. New York: Dutton.
Yi, Uk-jeong. 1996. "Oegugin nodongja: pyeon-gyeon-gwa jeohang" (Foreign Laborers: Prejudices and Resistance). *Tongildoen ttang-eseo deobureo saneun yeonseup* (Attempting to Live Together in Unified Land). Seoul: Alternative Culture Publishing Co.
Zolberg, Aristide R., Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo. 1989. *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.