

## **Becoming Human: ‘Talbukja’ – Displaced North Koreans in China and South Korea**

*Dr. Hyun Ok Park discusses the histories of displaced North Koreans and what they tell us about the role of ‘work’ and ‘nation’ in becoming human.*

*By Cynthia Yoo*

Displaced North Koreans in China have become a media spectacle. News reports tell of refugees escaping famine in North Korea, and risking their lives crossing the frigid waters that border North Korea. Once arrived in China, they find themselves at the mercy of Chinese police ready to deport them back to North Korea or of human traffickers who sell-off women for less than \$1000.

Stereotypes also plague North Koreans who have managed to escape to China and South Korea. They are described as beggars and swindlers who prey on the generosity and naivety of South Korean visitors. Whatever they extort from South Korean missionaries and NGOs, they spend on alcohol and cigarettes. They drift from place to place looking for handouts.

Hyun Ok Park examines these and other questions in a new soon-to-be published book, tentatively entitled: *From National to Market Utopia: History, Democracy and Transnational Korea*. Dr. Park came to the Centre for Korean Research to speak to a packed audience on her recent findings and theorizations.



Dr. Park debunked commonly-held assumptions about the migration of North Koreans into China. She does not consider them as “escapees from the draconian North Korean state and permanent outsiders of a North Korean society that is yet to join the free modern world.” Dr. Park draws up a far more nuanced picture of North Koreans who straddle different worlds through a complex process of border crossings and of “primitive accumulation mediated by the nation.”

Dr. Park states that the migration of North Koreans is an integral part of the new capital accumulation process in North Korea. It is known that many North Koreans who come to China are escaping criminal charges in North Korea for illegal market activities. One unexpected consequence of the recent food crisis in North Korea has been the rise of market activities. One of Dr. Park’s interviewees, a Mr. Cho, told her that the most profitable business in North Korea is to get the right to distribute aid goods donated by the Red Cross or other international NGOs. Other illegal market activities include currency trading and diverting domestic goods.

The t'albukja (displaced North Koreans) take advantage of the fluid borders in the Northern provinces (Hamgyong and Pyongan) which have become new regional trading centres. There are established relationships between North Koreans and the nearby Korean Chinese communities. North Koreans provide season labour for Korean Chinese farms and businesses. They often return to North Korea to avoid the Chinese crackdowns of illegal labourers in the Chinese holidays in October and January.

Dr. Park's interviewees told her that most North Korean migrant workers do not intent to defect to South Korea. "Rather, their multiple migrations between North Korea and China often render them unable to adapt to North Korean society."

The constant back and forth has meant that these North Koreans just can't return home again.

Then, what happens to these North Koreans straddling two different worlds, and belonging to neither?

Dr. Park has found revealing answers in her conversations with Lee Songjun. Lee was 26 years old when she met him Yanji in 2006. He had come to China with his father in 1996, when he was only sixteen years old. Lee visited North Korea in 2004 to bring his only sister back to China, but his mother decided to stay behind. Lee is fluent in Chinese and disguises himself as Korean Chinese. Although Lee feels attachments to both Koreas, he does not want to live in either country. Lee would prefer a hogu (residency) in China in order to find stable employment.

In their conversations, Lee related to Dr. Park a nuanced formulation of the distinctions between nara (country), kuka (state), choguk (mother country or homeland) and minjok (nation):

*My concept of the nation (minjok) transcends the country (kukka). Whether Han'guk (South Korea) or Choson (North Korea), they are all the same nation (minjok). The framework of the state doesn't fit well. We have to consider them the two Koreas, the same descendants of the Tanguk (the mystic founder of Korea) and their relations within the goal of unification...*

*The country (nara) and the homeland (choguk) are similar but different. For me, the country (nara) is China, while homeland (choguk) is Chosun. Nara and choguk are the same for people living in North Korea...I learn in North Korea that homeland (choguk) means the country where our ancestors lived,[despite] wherever one lives now. For instance, North Korea (Choson) is homeland (choguk) of Koreans who live in Japan (with or without North Korean citizenship).*

In these conversations with Lee and other North Koreans in China and South Korea, Dr. Park has found people developing their identities and self-realization even under extremely constrained situations.

Lee hides from the Chinese authorities by using three to four pseudonyms and by frequently changing his phone number. He uses email and SMS to avoid wire-tapping and his girlfriend is Han Chinese to further avoid police suspicion.

But even under these constrictions, as Dr. Park puts it, Lee is carving out his own way to become human.

Lee's actions and attitudes show "agency that's closer to some sort of utopia where the nation matters less." Dr. Park supposed that this might show "a way to envision individual liberalism."