Escape from North Korea: Economic and Cultural Determinants of Female Refugee Migration Patterns Into China

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Abstract

North Korea faces a unique migration trend in that nearly 80 percent of those migrating to China are female. This paper synthesized existing scholarship to present a more holistic picture of the driving factors that cause this phenomenon. The food crisis of the 1990s initiated the first great waves of migration out of North Korea into China and it continues to be the greatest economic factor. In addition various economic ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors within North Korea and China specifically target women. The cultural factors however stem from deeply rooted ideological beliefs that merge ancient Confucianism with North Korea’s unique communist Juche ideology. The inherent belief that men are more valuable made men targets of strict government control, ironically leaving women with more liberty to seek other opportunities to ensure not only their own survival, but that of their family as well which translated in this case to finding work in China. Although some may argue women’s mobility and dominance of the marketplace lent itself to more equality in a traditionally hierarchal society, however I argue that women’s freedom was motivated not out of a sense of equality, but the failure of the government system in conjunction with the food crisis. Consequently, women seeking work in China can be seen as an extension of their domestic duties reinforced by North Korea’s ideological beliefs.
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Introduction

Global migration statistics have shown female migration patterns have been roughly equal to men. Historically, men have actually held slightly higher levels of migration than women in terms of labor migration (Zlotnik). Yet, in North Korea there is a unique phenomenon in the staggeringly high number of female refugees leaving to China: around 80 percent of refugees escaping to China are female. Today’s media coverage regarding North Korean refugees focuses primarily on the economic factors of migration that lure refugees into China. While these tend to be the most significant and primary causes of migration, the economic factors alone do not fully answer why women continue to significantly outnumber men. The underlying cultural ideology that exists in North Korea is a compelling factor that distinguishes women from men, however it is not frequently discussed as a driving factor. By addressing the cultural factors in addition to the economic ones, I hope to shed more light on this increasingly critical issue.

Given the limited visibility of the country, it is difficult to obtain accurate numbers and statistics regarding this and other issues concerning North Korea. Nonetheless various government and non-government organizations have concluded there are a disproportionately larger number of females escaping to China. The U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Person’s Report claims 70 percent of refugees in China are female, while Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), a grassroots organization based in America claims 80 percent. The Ministry of Unification in Korea claims upwards of 70 percent.

Although South Korea, with deep historical and cultural ties and shared language with North Korea would appear to be the more likely destination of escape for North
Koreans, it is China that continues to be the dominant haven for migration for North Koreans because of the DMZ. The DMZ border separating North and South Korea along the 38th parallel is the world’s most heavily fortified border, thus a direct route to South Korea is impossible to exploit. Consequently, China, North Korea’s neighbor to the North, became the only viable means of escape. From China, refugees then flee to other third countries, the most common being South Korea.

Official numbers of refugees living in China are hard to come by since it is difficult for organizations to conduct systematic surveys. In addition, many refugees remain in hiding for fear of repatriation back to North Korea where they will surely face harsh punishment. The Chinese official estimate is about 10,000. However, other governments, press, and activists suspect the number to be as high as 100,000 to 300,000. The North Korean government does not report migration statistics at all. The most commonly cited numbers in the media come from the United Nations with figures estimated to be between 30,000 and 50,000, with the majority of these refugees being women (Cha 179).¹

It is estimated that North Korea’s economic downfall began around 1990. The collapse of the economy also brought an end to the state run public food distribution system, which every North Korea citizen depended on for food rations. The ensuing food crisis initiated the first waves of migration into China. As the food shortage worsened the number of refugees in China who arrived in search of food and job opportunities began to rise. The movement of North Koreans into China likely began in the mid-1990s but probably did not peak until 1998 or 1999. It was during the worst times of the famine that

¹ Male numbers may be underestimated because they are in hiding to avoid repatriation.
the ratio between male and female refugees began to dramatically diverge. There are several reasons for this divergence, of which I will primarily be focusing on the economic and cultural factors.

The devastating effects of the food crisis are cited as the main cause of migration. Before the food crisis of the mid-nineties, the socialist system worked in conjunction with the age-old Confucian ideology to ensure the persistence of structured gender roles and mindset favoring males. A system of strict control and hierarchy through gender, age, and class is promulgated in every aspect of North Korean society as a means of maintaining and ensuring the consolidation of power within the elite. However the devastating results of the food crisis challenged the system. The family structure was one of the areas most affected by the change and resulted in adding more burdens for the women in the household. Despite the new roles of influence that women had to take on within the family, the mindset that favored male supremacy still endures. Traditional patriarchal societies typically consign women to home duties. However the crisis created a unique situation in which women seeking work outside the customary domestic sphere became acceptable and even encouraged leading to the mass migration of women into China.

**Literary Review**

It is important to note that statistics regarding North Korea are often limited and incomplete. In order to present the most unbiased, comprehensive figure on the percentage of women in China, I have gathered data from various organizations including the U.S. government, NGOs, the South Korean government.
For historical information regarding the food crisis in North Korea, I cite Victor Cha’s *The Impossible State: North Korea* and Soon Hee Lim’s book *The food Crisis and the Changing Roles and Attitudes of North Korean Women*. Victor Cha is an author and professor in Asian studies and was once the top advisor in North Korean affairs during the Bush administration. In addition I will be drawing upon books and interviews with Andrei Lankov, a Russian scholar and expert on North Korea and North Korean refugees who is now a professor at Kookmin University in South Korea. I also gathered information from online articles and journals published by the Korea Institute of National Unification.

Soon Hee Lim is a senior research fellow for the Korea Institute of National Unification. Her book entitled *The food Crisis and the Changing Roles and Attitudes of North Korean Women* (2005) is the only book in English that I have found that specifically addresses the plight of North Korea women during the time of the food crisis and the resulting consequences. I personally met with Soon Hee Lim and interviewed her regarding this topic. During the interview, Lim affirmed that Confucian ideology is strongly influential in North Korean society and does play a role impelling women to seek better opportunities in China. On average, her audience tends to have background knowledge regarding North Korea’s Confucian history. Therefore she does not detail just how deeply these cultural values influence women’s lives. By making this assumption, she overlooks what I believe to be a significant factor in the rational behind women’s relocation to China.

On the subject concerning the economic impact and implications of the famine on North Korea, I rely heavily on articles written jointly by Stephen Haggard and Marcus
Stephen Haggard is a professor at the San Diego Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies. He has been a consultant to AID, the World Bank, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Marcus Noland is a senior fellow and researcher at the Peterson Institute of International Economics. He is unique among American economists because of the extensive work he has done on North Korea and North Korean unification issues. Haggard and Noland have coauthored several articles relating to North Korean economic issues.

Regarding the cultural factor, I will be using testimonies from North Korean refugees acquired primarily in *Lives For Sale* a publication by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, and also from the Barbara Demick’s book entitled *Nothing To Envy: Ordinary lives in North Korea* (2010). *Lives For Sale* interviews seventy-seven female refugees living in China and gives personal accounts of some of the challenges facing women both in North Korea and in China. Demick, as a former bureau chief in Korea for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote extensively on North Korea and North Korean refugees in Chongjin, China. Her critically acclaimed book follows the lives of six refugees over a span of fifteen years and provides invaluable insight into the everyday lives of North Korean people. I specifically focus on the testimonies of the three women: Mi-ran, Mrs. Song and Oak Hee.

This paper critically analyzes and synthesizes a range of material. My goal is to present a more comprehensive picture of what specifically impels North Korean women to leave North Korea and migrate to China. This paper will utilize existing studies on
North Korean society based on interviews with workers supporting these refugees, many of whom have visited the country.

**Escape to China**

Given the heavy risks that refugees face from both North Korea and China, the final decision to escape is often a long and complicated process. Once a person decides to flee, the process of escape is dangerous and complex. Therefore it is necessary to have resources and set plans that usually involve the help of friends, relatives in China, experienced traffickers, and sometimes even religious or political organizations (Haggard and Nolan “The North Korean Refugee Crisis”18). At the peak of the food crisis, the main reason for defection was hunger and the search for food. However, other reasons for defection have since been cited. Loss of status, frustration over lack of opportunity, political persecution due to family history, and following those who had fled are all other causes of migration that are cited today.

**Legal Risks**

Before delving into the various causes of migration, it is necessary to understand the devastating legal repercussions refugees face both in North Korea and China. The circumstances that people endure in North Korea are so dire that it motivates people to escape into an unknown country, with little or no money. In addition people often flee in secret without telling their family members knowing they will face harsh punishment if they are caught.
For those refugees repatriated back to North Korea, the severity of the punishment given is dependent upon several factors including how many times they had been to China, their background, and whether they were driven by political motivations (Haggard and Nolan “The North Korean Refugee Crisis” 18). Those who are not deemed politically dangerous usually serve terms between three months and three years in labor camps. If women are found to be pregnant in China, they are forced to have abortions; at times even infanticide was practiced (Haggard and Nolan “The North Korean Refugee Crisis” 18).

Refugees who flee for political reasons are treated as traitors. Under North Korean law, those who defect or attempt to defect face a minimum sentence of five years of ‘labor correction.’ In more serious cases, defectors are subject to indefinite terms of imprisonment and labor, confiscation of property, or death. Even today, public executions are common. In North Korea, those who aid others in escape also face harsh penalties. They are subject to two to seven years in labor camps (Haggard and Nolan “North Korean Refugee Crisis” 18).

Refugees caught in China also face many dangers. Although China is a member of the UN Refugee Convention, it does not comply with its international obligations; therefore it is almost impossible for North Koreans to seek protection from UNHCR and gain refugee status. China cites North Korean refugees as ‘economic migrants’ thereby ignoring their commitment to the 1951 Convention of the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which it signed in 1982. Their policy on repatriation of refugees belies their claims that it is a country that follows international law (Robertson).
North Korea’s Food crisis

The North Korean food crisis of the 1990s was and continues to be the main factor for migration into China. In order to better understand the circumstances that drive refugees away from North Korea, it is necessary to first recount the history of what led to the food crisis and its’ enduring consequences.

In 1957, the North Korean government initiated the Public Distribution System (PDS) for all citizens. Excluding the farmers who worked on the collective farms, the rest of the population depended on the PDS for their food. Rations were allotted according to age, occupation, family background, regime loyalty, and the like (Cha 190).

The average worker would be allotted 700g, 500g for each student, 350g for housewife to encourage them to work, and 100g for infants. It was the women’s job to collect the rations each month. Rice was a food of the elite so most of the grain given consisted of barley and corn (Lankov Interview). In addition, protein was so scarce that in an interview of defectors in 2011 by NGO groups, almost every respondent could tell the exact day when they had their last piece of meat.4

Starting in 1973 the government began to requisition four days’ worth of grain provisions claiming they had to maintain a “wartime reserve.” In 1987, the government seized another three days’ ration for “conservation.” Therefore, in reality rations were reduced by about 70-80 percent of regulation issue (Lim The Food Crisis 4). It was

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2 Since the farms produce the foods for the PDS, the farmers are allocated an annual stock of food directly from the farm.
3 Food was but one feature that was provided by the North Korean socialist system. It also included clothing, housing, education, and medical care. However, I will be mainly focusing on food rations.
4 Cited from (Cha 186). It was on rare national holidays, such as the anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birthday, when a small portion of meat would be added to the rations.
during the early 1990s that the number of defectors crossing the Yalu and Tumen River into China began to soar. The worsening condition of the food crisis reflected the diminishing rations distributed to the people. The North Korean food crisis began in the early 1990s and gradually reached its peak in 1997-1998. At the height of the food crisis, the PDS could only supply rations for six percent of the population (Lee 11).

The first signs of the food crisis probably appeared around the mid-late 1980s, but it deteriorated dramatically in the 1990s due to several factors. Although North Korea faced other food shortages in its history, it was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that they began to face real problems. The Soviet Union once served as North Korea’s main ally and supplier of energy, grain and fertilizer. As the Soviet Union began to face their own economic problems at the end of the Cold War, they began dramatically cutting imports to North Korea that resulted in sharply reduced supply of energy and raw material to the country. North Korea was no longer able to maintain their agricultural production, which led to the demise of the Public Food Distribution system (Cha 190). In addition, natural disasters such as floods, tsunami, drought, unusually cold weather, and poor rains all contributed to further exacerbate the food shortage (Lim 11). In 1995 and 1996, North Korea faced extreme flooding. Drought followed in 1996 and 1997. There was also a typhoon in 1997 (Cha 190).

North Korea’s geography also lent itself to further troubles. North Korea runs along the thirty-eighth parallel and often has to endure harsh winters and shorter growing seasons. Furthermore, North Korea is a very mountainous region that does not have much arable land. This geographical disadvantage combined with poor government planning that encouraged continuous planting and use of chemicals led to soil erosion. In hopes of
creating more arable land, deforestation was also rampant. As a result, there were no trees to deter the damaging effects of the great floods.

In order to deal with the deteriorating condition, the government began to promote various campaigns such as “porridge eating,” “two meals a day” and “tighter belt” campaign. Most people began to reduce daily meals to once a day; they cooked with grass roots and rice plants, tree bark, and grass to get more out of their meal. According to a survey from The Good Friends Association, defectors living in China from November 1998 to April 1999 survived on the roots of grass, rice plants or bark of pine trees (57.2%), peddling (46.0%), selling off their own furniture and possessions (40.8%), or with the help of relatives (19.4%).

The severity of the suffering depended on people’s occupation and their area of residence. The social stratification and tight control by the central government led to certain regions and classes of people experiencing the effects of the food shortage more severely. Major cities in the South, such as Pyongyang, were given the most amount of aid and thus seemed to suffer less, whereas people living in the large industrial cities of North and South Hamgyong suffered the most (Lim The Food Crisis 8).

Approximately 80% of refugees residing in China are from these Northern regions. There are several reasons why the majority of refugees come from this region. The first and most obvious reason is due to geography. The porous border of the Yalu and Tumen rivers lends itself to easy access into China. Yet, the main reason was that this particular region suffered the greatest as a result of the food shortage. Food rations were

5 Additionally, size of households, ones health, and availability and quality of labor, and support by relatives also contributed to varying degrees of hardship (Lim The Food Crisis 7)
6 The capital city of Pyongyang and its residents was at least relatively protected,
first reduced in these more remote areas in early 1990 and by 1994 rations were completely discontinued. As a result, the first signs of death and highest percentage of death by starvation came from this region.

The main cause of death was not necessarily starvation, but hunger-induced diseases and deteriorating health. Malnutrition, lack of clean water and soap, the poor quality of drinking water, and the overall unsanitary environment and other deaths indirectly or directly caused by starvation also contributed to the high numbers. The North Korean authorities estimate that approximately 220,000 people died due to starvation. However, South Korean government organizations estimate the number is closer to several hundred thousand to several million. The “most rigorous estimates put excess mortality as a direct result of the food crisis at between 600,00 and 1,000,000; 3 to 5 percent of the total North Korean population” (Cha 188). 7

**Economic Factors**

The greatest and immediate ‘push’ factor that impels North Koreans into China continues to be the food shortage. However, this factor alone does not explain why there are significantly more women making the perilous journey into China. This section will focus on the various ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors within North Korea and China that specifically target women. The modification of North Korea’s economic structure, spearheaded by a growing market system, emerged at the wake of the food crisis. The changes that were brought by this economic shift stems in part out of deeply rooted ideological beliefs existing in North Korea. These ideologies strongly favor men within

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7 Due to limited access, analysts are forced to project onto the entire population information derived from a limited and unrepresentative sample of refugees or defectors.
society. Ironically, the result of this unequal social system favoring men led to greater economic opportunities for women within North Korea and China. The ‘pull’ factors in China deal mostly with the circumstantial conditions within China that attract women, most notably the severe lack of females in rural China.

North Koreans face total restriction in freedom of expression, association, and information. The North Korean government heavily censors all cultural and media activities and individuals take great risk listening to foreign radio stations or watching smuggled South Korean DVDs. As a result of the strict control over media, North Koreans are very limited in their information regarding China, or any other country. Therefore, the most common method of transfer of outside information, particularly regarding China, comes through ‘word of mouth’ (Haggard and Nolan “The North Korean Refugee Crisis” 20). New technologies and information about the outside world first enter at the marketplace, since women dominate the market, it is women who are first exposed to the alluring stories of China and a world outside of North Korea.

Women and Marketization

Prior to North Korea’s economic collapse, their economy maintained a classic centrally planned economy, marked only by the severity with which markets were suppressed and autarchy from the world economy was pursued (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 3). Since the economic failure of the 1990s, the increasing importance of markets has grown, not out of reform, but out of state failure, particularly the famine. The state’s “inability to fulfill its economic obligation unleashed an unplanned, bottom-up marketization of the economy resulting in the alteration of social
and political relations among the populace” (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 4).

The collapse of the economy and the PDS was in effect directly correlated to the rise of markets (Cha 14). Once the government halted the PDS, people began to seek other methods to acquire food. In addition to gathering wild vegetation, families also began engaging in illicit trade and barter in exchange for food. Although the government banned these activities, nonetheless markets continue to grow and capital which once had little value in North Korea’s socialist state became the vital means of obtaining goods.

North Korea can be viewed as a post-socialist country where most of the population makes a living in the growing private sector. North Korea differs from other post-socialist European countries because it has a distinctly female face (Lankov “Women in North Korea”). More women have been cast out of the state run enterprises than men, consequently there have been greater numbers of women gravitating to market oriented occupations. At least three-quarters of North Korea’s market vendors are women. In addition, women constitute a majority of owners and managerial positions of the workshop and private service industry. This newfound capitalism shifted the traditional role of household breadwinner from men to women.

North Korea’s underlying patriarchal ideology is germane to the rise of this unique phenomenon. Although the North Korean government has for decades emphasized equal work participation of men and women, the state has taken the role of men more seriously. Virtually every able-bodied man is expected to report to his designated state-run workplace. This is because state run employment is highly favored and considered “man’s work.” Consequently, as state jobs began to scale back, it was
women who were disproportionately shed from employment (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 5).

During the beginning of the famine, both men and women participated equally in gathering food and money. However as the state socialist system began to deteriorate, it appeared that families decided it was more important to retain the male head of household under state employment. In addition, more stringent laws on work participation were placed on males, rather than females. In this way, families had access to the benefits of the social system, however limited, while women had freedom to seek other opportunities outside the state, “opportunity entrepreneurship” or lost their jobs as state industry downsized, “necessity entrepreneurship” (Haggard and Nolan 6, 2011).

Since 2004-05, the state has banned men from working in the market. In 2007 the state also prohibited young women from participating in the market. Thus, older women hold a distinct advantage in the emerging market.

As the market system emerged, it was women who surprisingly faced significant social changes. While it was mandatory for men to continue showing up to their work posts that were undoubtedly functioning below initial capacity, if at all, women were able to take a more active position and began engaging in the new grassroots economy. 8 Women could make little goods at home to trade and cultivate small plots of land without unnecessarily attracting the attention of the authorities. However, to ensure safety and clearance to work in the market required bribery. Corruption in North Korea, especially

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8 Men must continue to show up to their work facilities, despite there being nothing to do because the monitoring system is centered on the workplace and the government believes that men must be kept under monitoring (Lankov Interview).
surrounding the market, is rampant. Bribery of officials and policemen are commonplace and necessary if one expects to work and thrive in the market.

I should note however that given the illegal nature of work in the marketplace, in addition to the social stigma of not following work regulations, market work was originally not an occupation that was desired by the populace. One went to work at the marketplace out of desperation. Soon, however, attitudes towards the market began to shift as people began to see the benefits of capitalism. The hard realization of the government failure in providing stable income and food led to people seeking other opportunities in the market. A common example would be like the story of Mrs. Song from Barbara Demick’s *Nothing to Envy*. Mrs. Song was an older woman with three grown children who held a prominent position within her neighborhood. She was a proud supporter of the Party and the ‘Dear Leader’ Kim Il Sung. However, once she saw that her factory was not operating fully and eventually stopped giving wages, Mrs. Song stopped reporting for work and sought other opportunities at the marketplace. No one questioned her motivations, since all the other women at the factory had long left before she did. Eventually Mrs. Song settled on making cookies to sell on the streets, with whatever ingredients she could scrounge. The money that her cookies made had to sustain both her and her husband.

A study by Stephen Haggard and Marcus Nolan examined woman’s condition within North Korea’s transitioning economy. It concluded that in other settings, this newfound freedom experienced by women in the marketplace might be somewhat empowering and liberating from the surveillance of the workplace and traditional patriarchal relationships rooted in the household. However in contrast to other developing
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countries, “where the informal sector is allowed to play a central role in both urban and rural employ, the North Korean regime has taken an ambivalent if not actively hostile posture toward the market, and thus toward the woman who populate it” (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 1). The survey of 300 North Korean women concluded that although woman are aware of the growing levels of inequity and corruption, they do not or are not willing to voice their concerns. According to Haggard and Nolan, women represent a very vulnerable group amidst North Korea’s transitioning economy. Women’s primary concerns are of survival. Despite a few small, sporadic acts of protest, women appear to both lack the tools and social influence to improve their status. Woman hold a slight advantage in the greater physical freedoms they are allowed participating in the marketplace, however they continue to face many forms of both physical and mental oppression from the men who oversee the market activities. Facing these realities, women are more willing to take a chance on the hopes of bettering themselves in China, rather than the assured hardships of life in North Korea.

*Pull Factors*

North Korean men and women are highly sought after as laborers in China. North Koreans have a reputation as being diligent workers. In addition, they can do little to protest against harsh working conditions or low wages given their precarious situation in China and employers often take advantage of their vulnerable positions. While men are in greater demand predominantly for physical labor, women serve more diverse sectors in China’s economy and are in greater demand compared to men. Thus woman are not only more desired in China, but also more easily available to reach.
The market place is a hub for marriage brokers and traffickers looking for desperate women. They will lure women with stories about food and job opportunities in China. If women are not immediately trafficked or sold for marriage to Chinese or ethnic Korean/Chinese men\(^9\) across the border, women most commonly find employment in restaurants as servers or cooks and personal nannies (Lankov Interview). Given the gendered nature of their work, women are targeted for these domestic positions. Again, due to their unstable status in China, North Korean women face constant threats to their personal security. Ms. Heo’s story is one example of victimization.

**Case 27 Ms. Heo in Jilin Province, born in 1968**

“I had a husband and one daughter born in 1994 in North Korea. I was divorced from my husband and lived with my parents. Because my parents were not well, it was very difficult to live. I decided to go to China and crossed the Tumen River alone in May 2004. I went into a house near the river where an old couple was living. There was a 17-year-old North Korean girl there who had also just come from North Korea. I realized they were going to sell us, so that girl and I ran away from the house when the couple was asleep at night. I went to Yanji where I got some help from church people. I got a job as a domestic helper. Later, I was introduced to a new job as a cleaner in the kitchen of a karaoke bar and I am still working there. I work almost 15 hours a day and earn 700 yuan per month. I sent 1,000 yuan back to my home in North Korea once, but I am not sure if it ever was received.\(^{10}\) When I have saved 20,000 yuan, I want to go back to North Korea and start something there with my money” (Lee 36).

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\(^9\) China is home to the largest number of ethnic Koreans outside of the Korean peninsula. The ethnic Korean/Chinese men that North Korean women are sometimes forced to marry are technically Chinese citizens.

\(^{10}\) North Koreans send money back to their families in North Korea through brokers who are paid to take money back into North Korea. However, it is unsure how much of the money is actually received by the family.
Trafficicking of Women

According to LINK statistics, seventy to ninety percent of North Korea women are trafficked almost immediately after they cross the border into China. It is easy to identify recent North Korean female migrants because of their outdated style, their small, thin frames and general awed expression (Lankov Interview). Therefore, it is easy for marriage brokers and pimps who are involved in trafficking to identify them. A typical story of a victim would be like that of Ms. Kang:

Case 1 Ms. Baek in Heilongjiang Province, born in 1974
“"My mother was the sole bread winner since my father had left us when I was young. We were very poor. One day in February 1998, a couple who lived in our village suggested I go to China with them to earn money. They said I would be able to earn 600 yuan per month if I worked in a restaurant. They said not to tell my family about going to China, and even though I knew nothing about China, I went with them. We crossed the Tumen river and, and after walking all night, arrived in Yanji. As soon as I arrived in Yanji, I was turned over to an ethnic Korean man in his 40s. I shouted at the couple who had convinced me to go, accusing them of lying and selling me off. The woman began to cry, saying she had also lost her daughter who left for China and they were on their way to Heilongjiang Province looking for her. I didn’t know what to say, and begged them to be nice to me. After one week, I was taken to Heilongjiang Province by train. My current husband’s sister came to pick me up. It was then that I learned that my husband had paid 3,000 yuan for me” (Lee 28).

With China’s one child policy and their preference for males, the country has been facing acute shortages in marriage-age females, especially in rural areas. Marriage brokers will provide North Korean wives to farmers for varying sums of money. Prices vary depending on age and whether she is encumbered by dependents. Young, single women fetch the most amount of money. However, having a Chinese husband does not
secure personal safety. Oftentimes, women face many kinds of physical, emotional, and mental abuse in their new homes, but they are not able to report these instances out of fear of repatriation (Haggard and Noland “The North Korean Refugee Crisis” 23). In addition, the Chinese government does not recognize children born to these couples making it almost impossible for these children to get proper education without legal documents.

**Cultural factors**

If we examine the phenomenon of why there are more female refugees in North Korea purely from an economic standpoint, then we are only looking at the issue with a limited lens. For an issue where so little is known, the cultural factors provide more depth and understanding. In order to get a more complete picture of what impels these women to risk their lives to reach China, we have to address the inherent cultural factors within North Korea. Despite attempts by the North Korean government to rid itself of traditional ideologies, evidence of a culture rooted firmly in Confucian principles exists in many aspects of North Korean society. It is the juxtaposition of the old Confucian ideology with the more modern, socialist Juche ideology that inadvertently work together in providing women better access to other opportunities. Ironically, the devaluing of women instigated by the two ideologies also give women more incentive for escape.

North Korea is home to a unique ideology that meshes traditional Confucianism with North Korea’s own communist ‘Juche’ ideology. The most apparent conflict between Juche ideology and Confucianism lies in their opposing views on society. While traditional Confucianism stresses strict hierarchal order based upon gender, class, and
age, Juche ideology emphasizes equality on all levels. Juche is hailed in North Korea as “Kim Il Sung’s original, brilliant, and revolutionary contribution to national and international thought” (Oberdofer 19). Juche can be loosely translated as “self-reliance” and its tenets rest in the central view that “man is the master over all things” (Oberdofer 19). The unique ideology that exists in North Korea is a meshing of both the modern Juche and traditional Confucian ideologies. These seemingly opposing ideologies work in conjunction to govern every aspect of North Korean life. Therefore it is essential to have a basic understanding of both these ideological concepts.

Confucianism and women’s right

Confucianism became ingrained into all aspects of Korean society during the five hundred year period of the Choson Dynasty spanning from 1392-1910 (Park 528). Under Confucianism, people had to adhere to rigid social laws based on age, sex, and class. Confucian ideology in Korea severely limited the rights and roles of women. During this time women were expected to conform to these Confucian ideals and attain Confucian values, which stressed filial piety, loyalty, purity, and the like (Park 528).

The inequality of the sexes was stressed from a young age. From the age of seven, boys and girls were segregated. Through teachings, girls were taught to obey men. In childhood, they would obey their father; in marriage, their husbands; in old age, their sons. Women had no say in their marriage, it was arranged by their parents. Women’s

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11 Kim acknowledged the idea was not original to him, however this fact is rarely mentioned in North Korea. In fact, Juche was originally called a “creative application of Marxism and Leninism” (Oberdoer 19).
identity revolved around the male in their life. This is evident in that women did not even have names; they were addressed according to their husband’s name. In addition, women were forced to move to their new husband’s family and essentially became a stranger to her old family. Women were confined to the inner house, while the men resided in the outer part of the house. She was not allowed to own personal property nor was she allowed to work outside. If she did travel outside, she had to wear a veil to cover her face. Any children that women would bear would be under her husband’s family registry. No girl could carry on the family line. If a women’s husband died, the widow was not allowed to marry. In fact, she was expected to commit suicide as an act of loyalty to her husband. Although these behaviors were more strictly enforced on the upper class women since common women had to work to support the family, women of all classes faced patriarchal oppression in varying degrees (Park 534).

Communism and Women’s rights

The Communist revolution under Kim Il Sung wanted to bring to an end the traditional social structure. Kim Il Sung believed women were an integral part of the successful state building and socialist regime he was seeking to build. Therefore, immediately following liberation from Japanese occupation, Kim Il Sung implemented various campaigns and reforms targeted at reinventing the family and land laws that would grant women more freedoms.

The Law on Land Reform, Law on Sex Equality, the Labor Law and the Law on Nationalization of Essential Industries promulgated this social change. The Law on Sex Equality announced on July 30, 1946 greatly challenged the traditional attitude toward
women and their roles. The law encouraged equality in all aspects of life. Women were free to marry and divorce, they were granted rights to inheritance, and share property in the case of divorce. It made polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, buying and selling of women, and the professional entertainer system illegal. The Labor Law granted mothers and pregnant women maternity leave with full pay, paid baby feeding breaks during work, prohibition against overtime or night work for pregnant or nursing women, and the transfer of a pregnant woman to easier work with equal pay (Molyneux 48). Finally, the Law on Nationalization of Essential Industries helped to bring an end to the economic power of the patriarch. This law was the beginning of the end of private property and business in North Korea.

In 1946, the Democratic Women’s Union of North Korea was established under the covering of the Korean Workers Party (KWP). In 1947, North Korea succeeded in abolishing the patriarchal family registry system and replaced it with a new citizenship registry. These dramatic changes had a profound impact in North Korean society and family life. Clans eventually disappeared, the family genealogy system was destroyed, and a nuclear family system began to emerge (Park 533). In addition, the Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in 1949 and the Socialist Constitution of 1972, and several other legal guarantees were evidence of North Korea and the KWP’s claims to bring an end to the centuries-old patriarchal system and bring equality to women. Until this point, Korean women never experienced this degree of equality.

The second stage of women’s emancipation involved shifting the focus from women achieving equality and liberation from tradition to ‘liberation through labor.’
The framework for equality had already been established, however true equality could only be gained through loyalty to the regime’s task of building a socialist Korea. Women were expected to equally engage themselves in the workforce. Women were encouraged to play a role “as one wheel of a wagon in the work of nation-building” (Park 535). To mobilize women away from the family housework, the regime began to implement reforms that socialized housework. In 1970, the Fifth Congress of the KWP made this a top priority of the party. Article 62 of the Socialist Constitution of 1972 is evidence of their attempts to realize this goal. It provided benefits to women in the workforce such as maternity leave with pay, free kindergarten and day care, reduced work hours for mothers of large families, etc. At the same time, the 1976 Law on Nursing and Upbringing of Children and the 1978 Socialist Labor Law stipulated that women with three or more children under thirteen years of age receive eight hours of pay for six hours of work (Park 536). These laws made it clear that it was the responsibility of the government and society to protect working mothers and rear children. One Women’s Union member stated: “Children are brought up at the state expense. If there is pressing and ironing it goes to the laundries. The foodstuffs industry has been developed, so food can be bought at any time. So what is there left to do in the family” (Park 536)? Although her statement is clearly exaggerated, we can still glean from her statement that the new reforms targeted at relieving women from domestic duties were implemented to some degrees seemingly illustrating a dramatic shift from the traditional patriarchal culture.

See Park (1992) for more on Friedrich Engels concept of sexual equality.
The Changing Roles

Although on paper it seemed that women were gaining unprecedented levels of freedom and independence, in reality these new radical laws faced fierce opposition from a society that had been deeply ingrained with an age-old hierarchal system. Thus, real evidence of women’s newfound freedoms are harder to come by within North Korean society. The authoritarian culture of the nation made the concept of ‘equality’ alien to both men and women (Park 534). Evidence of women’s ongoing subjugation despite the rhetoric of gender equality can be seen in the low-status and low-income occupations women are continuously placed in compared to their male counterparts.

Women faced the dual role of preserving traditional family culture in the domestic realm, however they are also expected to promote women’s place in the working field alongside men encouraged by the Juche ideology (Jung 749). In order to assist women with these added burdens, Kim Il Sung declared in a speech to the Fifth Congress of the Korean Workers Party that “women would be liberated of their heavy household duties via technological change: gas or oil instead of coal cooking, access to appliances such as refrigerators and rice cookers, and greater provision of processed foods” (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 3). Although the goals of the speech were ratified in the 1972 Constitution, like many other circumstances, the rhetoric did not live up to reality.

It seems that inherently and culturally, society valued the age-old ideas of women at home rather than at the workplace. During the mid-1980s, as signs of economic decline began to surface, resources that were designed to relieve the double burden of women, such as nurseries and other institutions were eliminated (Haggard and Nolan “Gender in Transition” 3). In addition, married women continued to drop out of the work force and
stay-at-home mothers became a norm for many regions (Jung and Dalton 750). As the economy further deteriorated in the 1990s, aspirations of gender equality became increasingly illusory, so much so that in 1998 the government dropped the clause in the constitution stating that the state “shall liberate women from the heavy family chores” (Park 535).

Burdens on women increased significantly during the famine. Although more and more women chose to stay at home rather than report to their workplace, it did not mean women became idle. ‘Staying at home’ meant that women had more mobility and access to find food and other sources of income to ensure survival away from the prying eyes of the state. Although men contribute to the family by helping with daily duties, they cannot contribute much in terms of income, as jobs stopped providing wages with the decline of the economy.

After the economic failure and the emergence of a market system, capital became the key to survival. Those with money are able to purchase food and other necessities, which were previously provided by the state. With the freedom to ‘stay at home’ women have more opportunity to seek jobs that will provide income either in the marketplace or China. Women’s accessibility forces them to become the breadwinners and thereby the main source of food for their entire family.

Even though women face more burdens as a result of this new position as breadwinner, women found newfound power and freedom with this shifting of roles. The traditional Confucian ideology that was designed to keep women in the home and in an economically dependent and subservient position, inadvertently laid the grounds for a market system that would be run by women. With this new economic leverage, women
had more influence over their own life and that of their families. The increasing rate of divorces and extra marital affairs by women are just some evidence of these new freedoms experienced by women. Before, although divorce is legally permitted, it involves complex legal processes and occurs very rarely. In addition there is a great social stigma against divorced women, even if it was due to the husband’s indiscretions. Unfortunately, another contingency spurred by patriarchal society is that in case of divorce, the father has full custody of the children. Nevertheless, since the onset of the food crisis the rate of divorce has been increasing. The reasons for divorce by women include wife beating, husbands’ poor economic capability, and husbands’ extra-marital affairs while wives were out for work (Lim 49).

However, it is difficult to ascertain just how much this physical role reversal has impacted society’s mindset regarding the traditional role of women, if at all. While these new roles of influence in the marketplace may reflect some increased power for women and in effect the lessening influence of the patriarchy, there are critics who state that despite some of these improvement, women still remain highly vulnerable. As Haggard and Nolan state in “Gender in Transition,” “the increasingly male dominated state prays on the increasingly female dominated market” (15). Women dominate the market in which the government attempts to limit and criminalize. Women are not prone to arrest or face worse punishment than men, however their higher levels of participation in the market make them more susceptible to the dangers surrounding the marketplace.

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14 According to Lim Soon Hee although women had new opportunities to extend their freedom, the idea about traditional roles and the patriarchal features continued to persist in North Korean families.
15 North Korean markets engage in trade of diverse goods ranging from rice and other foods to illegal South Korean DVDs and Chinese cell phones (Lankov Interview).
According to their survey of North Korean female refugees, women are cognizant of the levels of inequality and corruption in the marketplace, however they do not voice their concerns or talk about it with their peers. Women’s goals are toward survival. Their vulnerable position puts them at a disadvantage in this transitional economic change.

Through interviews with escaped North Korean women we can see that traditional mindset regarding women and the importance of preserving gender roles is still highly valued. According to a study done by Park Hyun-son some 80-90% of North Koreans still held on to the notion of the importance of preserving traditional gender roles. In another study by Kim Young-ran and Kim Hei-young, 61% of North Korean women defectors in China were supportive of the patriarchal family structure (Lim 34). From the statistics, we can glean that in North Korea the idea of patriarchal dominance still prevails. The deep-rooted supremacy of this ideology places women in devalued positions and effectively casts an invisible cloak over them. In North Korea, it is the value and importance placed on males that allows women to go unnoticed thereby granting them more freedom to seek food and income where it exists, China.

The extreme challenges that were triggered by the food crisis in conjunction with the rigid legal system constraining males demanded a changing of roles between men and women for survival. However, these circumstances did not necessarily demand the same kind of change in attitude and mindset. Women go out and seek other jobs not out of a desire of gaining equality; rather their actions stem the despondency of their situation. Even during desperate times the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes prevail. There are many such examples of women taking on this traditionally male role of breadwinner, while in effect preserving the idea and value of patriarchal dominance in the family. For
example, during the famine, it became acceptable for women to lower themselves by selling homemade snacks and goods on the street and market. At the beginning, working in the market was reserved only for those in the direst circumstances. While women were expected to sacrifice one’s image and lower themselves by partaking in such activities, men would not be seen participating in ‘lowly’ work (Lim Interview). Even in the direst circumstances the dominance of the “male superior, female subservient” idea would not allow such behavior.

According to the interviews with women new settlers from Lim Soon Hee’s book, women were aware of the pervasive traditional gender roles in North Korea, however they generally did not have any problems with it. Women believed that supporting their husbands as the heads of household was the best way of maintaining peace within the family. One female refugee stated that, “Only when the husband stands firm, the family is peaceful, the nation safe, and the society healthy. So, I believe we should respect his authority. This is not a traditional social virtue, but also a policy of the Party” (Lim 35). It is the preservation of this attitude regarding women’s place and role within the domestic sphere that allows women to even attempt to go to China.

In some ways, women seeking work in China can be seen as an extension of their domestic duties. According to traditional patriarchal society, it is the women’s duty to take care of the household. Women went along with the prevailing social atmosphere that assigned all household duties to women, including maintenance of a livelihood (Lim 34). Before the famine, when people relied on the PDS for food, it was the women’s duty to collect the allocated food rations at the distribution center for the entire family. However, when the PDS ended women still had the same obligation to provide food for the family.
This sense of obligation stems out of deep-seated ideological beliefs. The despondency incurred by the famine made selling goods on the street, prostitution, or even running away to China, things which under normal circumstances would never happen, an acceptable norm.

The idea of motherhood and sacrifice of oneself is a common theme and highly valued in women in traditional patriarchal culture. In my interview with Lim Soon Hee, she states that in some ways these concepts are even more strongly upheld in North Korea compared to other Asian countries with a history of Confucian culture because of the enclosed nature of North Korea. There are many testimonies of women seeking work in China to earn money for their family. One example is a refugee in Barbara Demick’s book *Nothing to Envy* named Oak-hee. Oak-hee and her husband lived near the Chinese border and like many families in these region prospects of starvation was an eminent reality. Out of desperation for herself and her children, Oak-hee secretly ran away to China and was willingly sold as a wife to a Chinese farmer just 10 miles off from the border. Her hopes were to gain enough money to send to her children. Oak-hee lived with the Chinese farmer for two years and later returned to North Korea to get her children.  

Testimonies such as hers are not rare. Evidence of such acts of sacrifice for the sake of one’s family is the action of a good mother according to Confucian culture.

The onset of the food crisis also led to increased cases of sexual abuse for women. Scholarship has shown that women at home continue to face abuse from their husbands including beating and rape. When victims would seek help from the police or the law, they would often not receive proper legal protection or care because it was deemed a  

16 However she was later caught and sent to a prison camp. Later when she was released, she was unable to find her children and bring them back.
‘family matter’. This practice of turning a blind eye toward domestic abuse cases is characteristic of a patriarchal society that values the superiority of ‘male superior, female subservient’ pattern. When facing these kinds of abuses and opportunities to escape arise, it is not surprising that women would want to flee. Another reason for women escaping to China stemmed from the rising accounts of domestic abuse and the indifference toward women the legal system displayed.

Although on the surface there is a complete role reversal for men and women and thus some may argue this role reversal is a reflection of a changing and modernizing society that is distancing itself from the age-old Confucian society, however the changing actions in this case are not an accurate reflection of the changing mindset. Although this is not to say that women are not experiencing some level of increased influence and power. Nevertheless, North Korean society still values the idea of preserving the traditional family system that puts the males at the head of the family.

**Conclusion**

While North Korea continues to be a country shrouded in mystery for most of the world, the issue of female migration is one of growing transparency. The economic causes of migration continue to be the driving factor is often highlighted in the media. However, inherent cultural factors also play a significant role in women’s exodus to China.

The greatest and most pressing economic cause of migration continues to be the lack of food in the country, forcing people to seek other opportunities and methods of obtaining food. The market system, which emerged from the failure of the state created
an atmosphere where women are given more power and authority than the traditional domestic role, which they were previously accustomed to. At the market, women are able to obtain income and provide for their family when the state system failed. They also learn about other opportunities elsewhere, predominantly in China. Women are granted this freedom to participate in the marketplace despite its illegal nature, not out of ideals of gender equality, but rather a failed attempt at social repression. The inherent belief that men are more valuable made men targets of strict government control, ironically leaving women with more liberty to seek other opportunities to ensure their family survival. For women, China is seen as a source of relief and escape from the despondency of life in North Korea.

There are various pull factors within China that specifically attract women stemming mostly from China’s skewed gender ratio. This issue leaves China with a predominantly male population in dire need of women in more rural regions. North Korean women provide relief in areas of traditionally gendered occupations as cooks and maids. In addition, their vulnerable position leaves them as easy preys for human traffickers willing to sell them as brides to rural farmers or as sex workers.

In addition to the economic factors, North Korea is home to a unique ideology that combines both Communist and Confucian ideologies that ensure the continued authoritarian reign of the Kim regime. Despite rhetoric of gender equality, North Korea is a country whose Confucian ideology is still deeply ingrained in their social structure. Even before the famine, women faced the dual burden of meeting the demands of the party as a loyal citizen and that of an obliging mother. However, the onset of the food crisis further exacerbated their burden by adding the role of breadwinner. According to
Confucian beliefs, a good woman devotes herself to the needs of her family no matter the costs. However, amidst a food crisis and entrenched with this mindset, and given the restrictions placed on men, women are forced to pursue nontraditional livelihoods. Therefore women are not only given more opportunity for escape, but also are more willing to subjugate themselves in China in hopes of bettering themselves and their family.
Bibliography


